

Postscripts



THE A TO Z OF FANTASTIC FICTION

FEATURING

Peter Atkins

Chaz Brenchley

John Grant

Lisa Tuttle

T.M. Wright

and others

AUTUMN 2008

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Peter Atkins is one of the good guys . . . an ex-pat Brit now domiciled in LaLaLand and working in the movies but one whose refreshing scouser humour and generosity (he hails from Liverpool, so both of those attributes go without saying) has never been diminished. He's also an absolute star for delivering the following piece around one month late—when we called him to ask where it was—he having totally forgotten that he'd agreed to do it. Thus, let it be said here and now, whenever we ask for something from him then we're going to make sure he doesn't even think about starting it until the deadline has been and gone.

Along with Glen Hirshberg and Dennis Etchison, Mr. Atkins is a founder member of The Rolling Darkness Revue which tours the west coast of America every Halloween bringing original ghost stories, live music and theatrical effects to bookstores and libraries. His new novel, Moontown, has just been published; his latest movie, Catwalk, is in pre-production; and a collection of his short fiction is tentatively scheduled for next year. Meanwhile, watch out for Angus Mackenzie's upcoming Spook City anthology from PS this winter, being a celebration of Liverpool's worthy position as cultural city of the UK for 2008 and featuring work from him plus the rest of the ABC that is Liverpool's contribution to our genre, Messrs. Barker and Campbell. Now settle back and let's turn those lights down . . . the moon's full out and there are things out there knocking on doors that are not wearing masks—and wasn't that door closed a few minutes ago?

Thank You, Mrs. Phillips

Peter Atkins

Halloween is when we're allowed to dream in public.

Sure, there are other outlets—bragging to your mates about shit you'll never do, painting your face to feel like you're actually part of the winning team instead of just another idiot in the stands, pressing three red buttons on a plastic guitar and thinking that makes you Jimi fucking Hendrix—but Halloween is the one that gives special leeway to our wilder imaginings. Not 'what if I could play the riff from *Voodoo Chile*?' Not 'what if I could bend it like Beckham?' But the deeper darker dreams: What if death is not the end? What if this *isn't* all there is? What if the world is infinitely stranger and richer than it appears to be on the morning commute or another evening down the pub?

Halloween is when we talk to the dead. We don't really *believe* that anymore, of course. Not literally. We don't lay out food on ritual tables for the returning dead the way the Celts did at Summer's End (or Samhain), and if we did we'd be more than a little surprised if they showed up and ate it. But every year on that single special night we open the door to them still—the door of imagination at least—and

the ghosts walk with us, not as haunting revenants, not as unwelcome midnight visitors, but as invited and honoured guests.

When I was a kid in the 1960s, Britain didn't celebrate Halloween as openly and as fulsomely as did the United States. Costuming and trick-or-treating were known to me only via American movies or books. I gather (I've been an exile for nearly twenty years now) that that's changed over the last decade or so and that these days the darkening hours of any October 31st find the streets of Liverpool and London just as full of midget demons and miniature Draculas as those of New York or Los Angeles. But that just wasn't the way it was when I was growing up. Best I could hope for was a quick game of duck-apple and a bullshit session on a home-made Ouija board.

And then came Peter Phillips' Halloween party.

Creepy little bastard that I was, I was already deeply in love with horror by the time I was eight or nine. The thanks for that go to the usual suspects when it comes to my generation; *Famous Monsters of Filmland* magazine, the *Pan Book of Horror*, *Mars Attacks* bubble-gum cards, and Castle Films' 8mm movie-digests (Oh, much-loved 50 foot. extract of *Son of Kong*, where are you now?). But in 1964 I was still two years away from my first reading of Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, so the thanks for Halloween—at least as the special and spectacular holiday that it could be for my particular kind of misfit—go to Peter Phillips' mum.

Thing was, I didn't even know Peter that well. We were in the same class at Heygreen Road County Primary and were friendly without being close friends—didn't hang out, never been to each other's houses, you know what I mean—so it was a surprise when he invited me to his party. I like to think, in retrospect, that his mum had told him only to invite people who were likely to appreciate it, but I've really no idea. Pretty small group, though; the only invitees were me, Lynne Robinson, and Barry Armour (Yeah. Armour. I know I make shit up for a living, but that was really his name. Honest.)

The Phillips family lived in a flat above a glazier's shop on a corner of Picton Road. To this day, I haven't a clue what the flat looked like in real life, because it certainly couldn't have looked like it did that night.

I'd pressed the bell on the door on the side street quite some time before it was finally opened. It wasn't Peter. It was a woman dressed completely in black.

"Welcome," she said, not smiling. "There are no lights."

Which, I suppose, explained why she was holding in her hand the kind of flaming torch I'd only previously seen in stills from *Ghost of Frankenstein* in the pages of *Famous Monsters*.

Yeah, alright, it was a black rubber Woolworth's flashlight with crumpled orange tissue paper wrapped around the bulb housing but, trust me, it was fully and magically convincing to my eight year old eyes.

The street door gave directly on to a narrow staircase which led up to the door of the flat itself. “Upstairs,” said Mrs. Phillips—at least, I *think* it was Mrs. Phillips; she never broke character all night, God bless her—and turned to lead the way.

Oh. Little aside to those of us past puberty. I’d love to tell you that this was like following Morticia Addams upstairs but the truth is—with all love and respect to Mrs. Phillips—she was actually more Margaret Rutherford than Carolyn Jones. Sorry to rain on that particular parade. But anyway.

The staircase was steep, narrow and dark and the light emanating from the flat doorway was yellow and dim and, as I made my way toward it, I was deliciously, fabulously, terrified.

The flat was a cave. A black cave. Mrs. Phillips must have bought up every sheet of black craft paper in Merseyside and taped them to the walls and ceilings. There were broomsticks too, and witches’ hats. And pumpkins and candles and pictures of black cats.

Sure, there was also a table arrayed with sandwiches and sausage rolls and bottles of pop. And Mr. Phillips was sitting in the corner watching the evening news on a depressingly normal telly. But none of that mattered. This was a Halloween House and I’d never seen anything so wonderful in all my life.

Peter was there, and Barry and Lynne, and I’m sure we played games, ate like pigs, and did whatever else eight year olds do at parties. I can’t remember the details. All I remember is that, whatever we did, we did it in the shadowed confines of a witch’s cave, overseen by the lady in black and her flaming torch.



Coming Soon In Postscripts

In our next issue, a splendid variety of goodies: “*The Camping Wainwrights*”, by World Fantasy Award winner Ian R. MacLeod, quite unlike anything he’s ever written before; “*Rain Flower Pebbles*”, a feast of lyrical supernaturalism from master fantasist Marly Youmans; “*The Gala of Implausible Songs*”, a superb mix of prose and image from Rhys Hughes, Wales’s answer to Jorge Luis Borges; another World Fantasy laureate, Jeff VanderMeer, in mythic mode, explaining “*Why the Vulture is Bald*”; and Adam Roberts’s trenchant fable, “*A Prison Term of a Thousand Years*”. Plus new tales from Al Robertson, Vaughan Stanger, Douglas Smith, and others . . .

*“I don’t know quite when or how it started to happen,” writes John Grant, “but over the past few years I’ve become intensely interested in film noir and noir fiction. As a first consequence, my little book *Noir Movies* came out in 2006; I’m currently working on a much larger book on the subject . . . with an even larger one than that at the planning stage. So far as fiction is concerned, while I’ve been playing with a noir novel, more immediately I’ve found myself producing, at shorter length, what could best be described as, I guess, a fantasy writer’s response to noir. One manifestation of this has been the novella *The City in These Pages*, which PS is to publish soon; the other is the longish story ‘Will the Real Veronica LeBarr Please Stand Down?’ This may well be my own personal favourite among all my short stories; it was certainly one of the most demanding to write. What finally triggered me to set it down was the discovery in casual reading that there were once *bordellos* of this sort (and there may still be, for all I know), but ‘Ronica’s story, with her ever-shifting memories, had been germinating for a long while before that.”*

Will The Real Veronica LeBarr Please Stand Down?

John Grant

Tweezers in hand, I look in the mirror to check the last errant eyebrow hair has finally succumbed to my manipulations, and see the real face of Veronica LeBarr.

One of the real faces of Veronica LeBarr, anyway. She has several. Or, to be more accurate, there are several Veronica LeBarrs, all of whom share the same face. It’s hard to tell which of the real Veronica LeBarrs really is the *real* one.

But the face I see in the mirror is as authentic as my artifice can make it. The long straight fall of black hair that declines to ruffle itself when it reaches my shoulders, instead dividing itself neatly so that some drops behind and some runs down to curve itself over

the contour of my bosom. The severe line of those eyebrows, not a hair of them out of place—not now, anyway—as if they’d been pencilled on, but I use no pencil, nor any other makeup except when I must, on the movie set. The high forehead that you’d expect to find on a rather earnest sociology or political-science student, not a movie actress. The fine, rather thin nose. The lips that would be prim were they any smaller but, as they are, issue a promise that there’s a sensual treasure-chest that might be unlocked if only someone could ever find the key, which possibly no one ever so far has. The cheekbones that could have been borrowed from Katharine Hepburn.

And most of all the eyes. The irises are so dark that it seems I have none, just very wide pupils. This, I think, is the major part of my face's allure. The rest could be plain as an aluminium siding, and still that perpetually absorbed gaze of mine would draw you.

One face, three women—at least three women. Who's the real Veronica LeBarr?

Is it the Veronica LeBarr you've seen on cinema screens, billboards, television, videos, DVDs? She's made only five movies, but in four of them she's been the headliner. In the first movie she did, *Lost Client*, she had only a single scene, as one of several junior prosecution lawyers surrounding the Assistant DA (Tommy Lee Jones, of course) as he faced off in his office with Keira Knightley (Keira Knightley, no less!), who as a defense attorney was trying to explain to him that her client had vanished and that, if he was guilty (which was something she was unsure of, as she kept telling Tommy Lee), he might be out there killing more teenagers. Veronica had just fourteen words to say, the rest of the while shuffling papers and nodding her head, and for most of the scene she was partly out of focus, seen over somebody's shoulder. But she stole that scene and came damn' close to stealing the movie.

After this, she starred. No one ever questioned her entitlement to do so. She was—she is—the perfect ice princess, the one whom you never see melt

but dream might do so just for you once the doors were closed to keep out prying lenses.

Or is it the Veronica LeBarr you've read about *in extenso* in all the tabloids and all the glossies, in *Cosmo* and *Vanity Fair* and *GQ* and even *Readers Digest*, the Veronica LeBarr who started life as plain old Janice Gascoigne in Tadcaster, Yorkshire, England, the one who took the government's university grant and spent it on a plane ticket to La-La-Land in search of fame and fortune, even though her only theatrical experience had been a student production of *The Beggar's Opera* and the loss of her maidenhead? Is she the real one? The Veronica who was renamed by Robbie Greenberg, the agent who spotted her tending table in a Burbank coffee shop (a profession marginally more respectable than tending kerbsides in West Hollywood) and decided she had something the cameras might like if only she weren't called Janice Gascoigne? Veronica LeBarr, m'dear, because it's an old-fashioned-seeming name and you have a face that'll make people think back to the classic days of Hollywood, to Veronica Lake, although you're nothing like her, to Hedy Lamarr, where there's more of a resemblance . . .

Robbie's a throwback himself to the classic days of Hollywood, an agent who can pick people out of crowds and when he says he can find them a job in the movies really means it. He earns his percentage.

Is the reconceived Janice Gascoigne the real Veronica LeBarr?

Could be.

Or is the real Veronica LeBarr the one who sits here in the penthouse of Holly Wouldyou's, the select establishment that never advertises, never publicizes, to which men come through word-of-mouth recommendation so they can pore through the photos in the catalog, pay their money, and imagine for a night they're sharing wild, uninhibited passion with a star?

Is *she* the real Veronica LeBarr?

It says in the catalog she is, but then it says the real Judy Garland—who, far from being dead these many years, is twenty-four going on thirty but looks as if she's just stepped off of the set of *The Wizard of Oz*—can be found on the floor below mine. A very significant floor below, because there's a two-grand difference in the fees Holly charges for us. Judy and I don't talk much. She had the penthouse before I came along. Barbara Stanwyck doesn't talk to either of us. Most of the rest of the girls are okay, though, when we see each other—we don't socialize much, hardly at all. We're like a clique that never quite got around to becoming a clique, a choir made up of all soloists.

Robbie Greenberg would have a fit if he knew his precious star was sitting here in the penthouse of the most exclusive little whorehouse in town, waiting for her next john to arrive.

The intercom buzzes discreetly at my elbow. Everything is discreet at

Holly Wouldyou's except the name of the place.

"He's on his way," says Holly. I think she probably is genuinely called Holly. I don't think there ever was a Mr Wouldyou or a Mrs Wouldyou, though. I think she made that part up, like Robbie made up Veronica LeBarr.

"What's his name?" I say.

"Dominic."

"Will I recognize him?"

"I don't think so."

"What does he like to be called. Dom? Dommy? Sir?"

"Dominic."

I practise the name a few times, rolling it languorously on my tongue, relishing its taste like a lover should.

"Dominic."

"That's what I said." Holly sounds a little waspish. She often does. Judy thinks it's because Holly yearns for the time thirty years ago when she was doing what we do, not stuck with admin and accounts and customer liaison the whole time. I think it's because Holly reckons we're pains in the ass to deal with, and is probably right.

"Good-looking?" I say. Most of them are. You have to be well heeled to spend a few grand for a night here, and Tinseltown doesn't generally bestow its wealth on second-raters unless they're good-looking, while most of the first-raters would rather stay at home reading a book than have a fuck they'd paid for, even a fuck with the real Veronica LeBarr.

"Pretty good," says Holly, her voice now turning dry. "And his pants-leg is

too tight halfway down to the knee. If I'd been given the opportunity I'd have had him myself."

I laugh. It's one of Holly's traditional jokes, and she likes you to laugh at them.

"Guess I'm in luck, then," I say.

"You don't know the half of it, girl." She clicks the intercom off.

I check one last time in the mirror to make sure it's the real me looking back at me, and then the buzzer sounds at the door.

"Just coming," I say in the voice that belonged to the lawyer's assistant in *Lost Client*.

Holly was right about Dominic being handsome. In another life, just looking at the polished, almost metallic sheen of his blue eyes and the easy grin he's put on to cover up his insecurity, I could have . . .

Yeah, right.

Besides, he looks to be younger than me. Far too much younger.

I'm far too decorous to check his pants-leg.

"Dominic," I breathe, putting my hands up to his lapels as if they need straightening.

"Ronica." The name that only those who were very close to me ever used comes out of him like a long-held-back exhalation, like this is the moment he's been waiting for all his life. Perhaps it is.

When I sense he's just about to take me into his arms, I turn away abruptly and head for where a pair of armchairs sit opposite a Victorian chaise longue.

There's a low table like a fence between them.

"A drink?" I say.

I sit on one of the chairs.

He expected me to sit on the chaise so he could be beside me. He dithers for a moment then sits on it himself—but not in the center: at one end, so I can join him when I'm ready.

"A drink?" I repeat once it's clear he's forgotten I asked him before.

He settles himself, but not restfully, looking around as if there's something missing. A comfortable old basset hound, perhaps, chosen to go with the genteelly faded carpet and the blood-colored wallpaper with its lines of gold fleur-de-lys.

"A Jack Daniels, if you have one," he says, clearing his throat after he's spoken, then looking down at his hands, embarrassed he got things the wrong way round.

"Of course," I say, picking up the little silver bell from the table in front of me. The bell is in the shape of a shepherd girl, her smock ballooning out.

Almost before I have time to set the shepherdess down again, Lettuce is at the door. She's black, and probably the most beautiful woman in the place; why someone didn't make her a supermodel is something I'll never understand. If she had the good fortune to look like an identifiable movie actress I'd be out of the penthouse as soon as Holly could change the name on the door, and likely quicker than that. And probably all the rest of us would be out of work. So Lettuce is our maid, in her

pretty little white maid's apron and her long black skirt, which shocks the few liberals that come by but pleases the wingnut jerks with what they see as the situation's fitness. We get a lot of wingnut jerks. As you'd expect. Think about it.

Jayne Mansfield gets them most of all.

Lettuce (and I'm pretty sure that's not her original name, either) earns almost as much as the rest of us do, through tips. She's the only person here I ever think of as my friend. And she's beautiful—did I say that? Good God, but she's beautiful. On the rare occasion a john can persuade her to supplement her income by joining in a threesome with us, I think I enjoy it more than he does, even though I don't generally swing that way.

Holly keeps reminding me I shouldn't call them johns. I shouldn't even *think* of them that way. They're clients, or gentlemen friends.

They're johns.

Tonight's john, Dominic, looks at Lettuce like maybe he made the wrong choice out of the catalog as he asks her for his Jack on the rocks. I ask for a G & T, easy on the T, which is what I always ask for and which will arrive as mainly T, with just enough G that the john can taste the alcohol on my lips.

Lettuce goes.

We make small talk, not about much. I'm still in assistant prosecutor mode, which is what drives the johns wild. I'm the ice queen of the screen and I'm also this prudish legal eaglette with the ac-

cent that tells of England but most certainly not of Tadcaster—alas, poor Tadcaster, I forget thee well, as well as if I had never seen you—and inside whose pants nobody has probably ever gotten.

Lettuce returns with the drinks on a tray—glasses and almost-full bottles and an ice bucket—and Dominic looks at her yearningly again and for a moment my hopes rise. Hell, I'm probably looking at her yearningly too. But then she's gone and it's just him and me.

We drink. I pretend the booze loosens me a little, uncross my legs, stop smoothing my skirt down over my knees. Say, maybe Little Miss Writ ain't so bloodless after all . . .

Dominic helps himself, at my gesture, to another Jack, this time without the rocks. He's building up his courage. This past week or so it all seemed so simple to him—he'd just hand over his check and the next thing he knew he'd be fucking Veronica LeBarr—but now it's getting a whole lot more complicated than that. This bluestocking (they're actually sheer black) in front of him, she's not just someone who looks like Veronica LeBarr any longer. She's the *real* 'Ronica, the one he's freeze-framed on his DVD player the only time you get to see anything of her between the shoulders and the knees. That was the bathroom scene in *The Jackals of the City*, when the peeping tom and psychopath Slythgoe (played by Martin L. Stonemeer in one of his final roles) was watching Veronica strip for her bath. You saw her entire, then, right down to the chastely trim pubic

triangle, but Ridley, like the genius he is, managed to remove every last scintilla of eroticism from the display: the nakedness was innocence in every eye but those of the furtive watcher outside the window. Robbie threw a fit when he heard a nude scene had been added to the screenplay, but calmed down a bit when he was told how much extra they were willing to pay for it. Even just his own percentage was enough for him to buy himself a new holiday home—Saudi Arabia, for example.

“You seem tense,” I say to Dominic, lolling a little more in my chair, easy familiarity in my voice. “Anything the matter, darling?”

I can see the relaxation taking effect on him immediately. He knocks back the rest of his whiskey in one and puts his empty glass down on the table with a smack, licking his lips like guys in movies do to show they’ve just consumed strong liquor.

“Everything’s fine,” he says. “Just fine.”

He lets his eyes run up and down the length of my body, taking it all in. He finishes off at my face, and sees I’ve been watching what he’s been doing.

“Tell me,” he says, “are you *really* Veronica LeBarr?”

I smile at him with my best bright smile, as if this is a wholly original question and not one I’ve heard from approximately one hundred ten percent of the johns who’ve been through here.

“That’s for you to judge,” I drawl, “isn’t it?”

He grins. “Typically evasive.”

“How do you mean?”

“In all the interviews I’ve seen with you—with Veronica LeBarr—you answer only the questions you want to answer. You respond to the others by answering a different question from the one that was asked or with a new question of your own. You do the same in other conversations, too.”

“Those are the oldest tricks in the book,” I say dismissively.

“And you’re a past mistress of them. Eh, Veronica LeBarr is,” he amends himself yet again. “How on earth could I judge whether you were really she or not?”

I nod toward the television set half hidden by a shell-blue chintz curtain in the corner of the room, by the door to the bedroom, the door that has deliberately been left open wide enough to offer a casual glimpse of the great four-poster bed with its gray-green gauze hangings and white silk sheets. The TV screen is the latest 48-inch flat plasma model, so that watching something on it feels almost like being in a cinema.

“There’s always the bathroom scene in *The Jackals of the City*,” I say. “You could compare one with the other.”

This sparks his interest all right. A new gleam comes into those curiously metallic blue eyes of his. “You would undress in front of me?”

As soon as he’s spoken the question he realizes how foolish it is. That’s what he’s come here for, isn’t it? That’s what he’s paid a small fortune for, isn’t it? To do a lot more than watch me take my clothes off.

Only about one hundred nine percent of the johns ask this same question, so I smile confidentially at him even as I give him no reply.

“Show me, then,” he says, his voice beginning to sound dry. He glances at his whiskey glass. I lean forward obligingly, reach out for the Jack Daniels, pour him a good-sized measure. As he picks up the drink I get to my feet and walk across to the television, making sure my hips roll enough to draw his attention to them.

The DVD player is placed on a low shelf below the screen so that I have to bend down to switch it on and load it. This draws my skirt taut over my rear, and he realizes the material of the garment is quite a lot thinner and snuggier than he first thought it was.

I make a fuss over the controls of the DVD player as if, in girly fashion, I don't really know what I'm doing. Sure enough, after a few moments Dominic comes across to join me, squatting down at my side and gently brushing my fumbly hands aside as he takes the remote from me. The screen lights up with a little implosive pop. His breath smells heavily of booze. He switches on the DVD player, inserts the DVD, and then betrays himself by immediately calling up the right chapter, Chapter 17, of *The Jackals of the City*. He's done this a thousand times before. He doesn't look me in the eyes as he hands the remote back.

“Just like in the movies,” he says in a low voice, sitting back on his haunches, looking up at me as I stand.

I stare meaningfully toward the screen, reaching out to take his hand and pull him to his feet too, then draw him back with me in the direction of the chairs. I push him softly in the chest until he sits down on one of them. From where he is he can watch both me and the screen at the same time.

FX: There are cicadas singing in the night, but louder than they are, even though you know it's barely audible, is the sound of dried grass being crushed under Martin's feet as he creeps toward Veronica LeBarr's bathroom window. She hasn't drawn the drapes over it. Is this provocative of her? No, because the space is covered by a closed venetian blind; the window is an eye shut to the darkness. Yet there's a flaw—and how is Veronica to have known this?—there's a flaw in the hanging of the blind, so that one slat is canted up at an angle to the one beneath it, leaving a dagger-blade triangle of yellow light which the impassioned mind of Veronica's stalker believes she has engineered solely for the purpose of letting him spy upon her intimacy.

The camera is his eyes now as he sneaks the final distance to that triangle of light, until at last he—and we—cannot see the obscuring umbrae of the skewed slats, can see only the glow of Veronica's bathroom, the air steamy as she leans over the edge of her tub and stirs the water with her hand.

She stands up straight and eases her white towelling bathrobe back off her shoulders. Louder than the cicadas now, louder than anything, is the leaden

rasp of the peeping tom's—of your, of Dominic's—breathing, as the maid-only white cloth pools itself beneath her shoulder blades, as she arches backward, fumbling with the knot at her waist, her eyes looking at the ceiling as if there were something there to see.

The knot comes undone. She pulls open the garment's front. She lets the garment fall in a slithering rush to the floor. She steps out of its puddle.

The stalker sucks in air at the sight of the curve of her rear—not large, almost boyish, yet unmistakably female. Her spine is a long shallow sine wave from the nub of bone at the back of her neck to the top of the crease of her rump.

She shrugs. Why? The moviemaker does not tell us. Veronica LeBarr does not tell us, for it is clear that at this moment it is no longer Ridley who has full control over what is going on. This is an act of love—of carnal yet asexual love—being performed between Veronica LeBarr and not the watcher outside her window, not the cameraman, not the director, not the audience of distant millions, but between Veronica LeBarr and the screen.

One moment she is facing away from the window, toward the steam rising up from her bath, and the next she is facing the gazer full on. She has small breasts. The nipples are little wild raspberries not yet quite ripe; you know their pinkness even though you cannot discern it in the poorly lit room. Her belly is flat, her pelvic bones a prominent cradle, her pubic hair thicker than you would

have expected as it shields the last of her privacy from your eyes.

Veronica LeBarr smiles as if she can see you, although you know she can't. She can't see anybody, not even the now unbreathing stalker peering through the gap in her venetian blind. Who is she smiling at? Why did she shrug? Only she understands the why of these actions.

She turns away again and lifts one leg like a ballet dancer carefully performing a movement that must be perfectly executed, and she steps into the water. A moment later, all you can see of her is her head above the porcelain rim, her bare arm lying along the cold white. She pouts her lips and blows a kiss at the lover she sees through the ceiling.

And the screen fades to black as I stand fully naked in front of Dominic.

"Am I her?" I whisper to him. I still have the remote in my hand; I touch the button and the DVD's hum dies. Lettuce, from outside, has dimmed the lights in the penthouse. "Am I her?" I say again.

Dominic can't speak. I've been watching him out of the corner of my eye, and I know that his gaze has been fixed the entire time not upon the real woman unveiling herself in front of him but on the ice princess, the two-dimensional illusion of reality, innocently disrobing behind the window of the plasma screen. He came here to fuck the real Veronica LeBarr: that was to be his big thrill, the experience of a lifetime that maybe someday down the line he'd brag to his friends about, laughing

with pride, even though downstairs Holly has a signed paper from him saying he'll never tell anyone what happens here tonight. Just like all the other johns, though, the Veronica LeBarr he truly wants isn't the one made of flesh and blood, who has warm limbs and a soft wet core and who'll sweat as he screws her; the Veronica LeBarr he belongs to is the one he can never fuck except in his imagination, the one who is eternally pure and un-sullied, whose touch upon his body is lighter than no touch at all.

Not Janice Gascoigne, because who knows what she got up to in the Burbank days until Robbie Greenberg saw her tending table, or even before that, back in Yorkshire? Who wants to fuck Janice Gascoigne when they can have the ecstasy of not fucking Veronica LeBarr?

At last his gaze drifts toward me. I watch his eyes come into focus on me. There is just enough light left by Lettuce that he can tell my nipples are the same pink he couldn't quite see through the misted window between him and 'Ronica's dimly illuminated bathroom.

"You're her," he says.

I half turn my back on him, practisedly keeping all coquetry out of the movement.

"You sure?" I say over my shoulder to him. "Don't you think my butt's maybe a bit fatter than hers?"

He just hisses his displeasure at the question.

"My smile maybe not quite so pretty?" I say, curling my lips in the way

that brings a dimple to one cheek only, the smile of Veronica LeBarr's that has conquered the heart of anyone who's ever seen it many times lifesize on the great screen of the temples where her worshippers congregate.

I run my fingers down through my pubic hair as I face him once more. "And this," I say, "isn't it perhaps curlier and coarser than Veronica LeBarr's, not so well kempt. What do you think, Dominic?"

"Quiet, 'Ronica." His words sound as though he speaks only with pain, as if he *wants* the act of speaking to hurt him. "Don't run yourself down like this. Don't pretend you're not who you are. I've seen you enough times before. I know you. I could close my eyes and see every pore in your skin. You're real. I recognize the *smell* of you."

I hold my pose, and keep my smile easy, comfortable. Other johns would be going nuts by now, their hands and mouths all over me, their fingers jabbing up into my crotch. But Dominic's passion is greater than all their frenzy, and it's keeping him pinned in place.

"The smell of me?" I say, teasing. I produce the Veronica LeBarr patented pout. "I'm not so sure I like the sound of that."

By way of response he just lets a long, slow, angry breath hiss out between his lips. His gaze is roving my body, but not with the customary lasciviousness of the men who come here eager to extract every last cent's worth of value from their investment. No, he's staring at me in a way I find at first difficult to identify.

And then I recognize it.

Familiarity.

He wasn't kidding when he said he knew my body well. He must have studied that scene in *The Jackals of the City* until it was seared into him, recorded in his mind with even greater clarity than the DVD could achieve. There, it's taken on aspects of the other senses. He has seen that sequence so well, so completely, that he knows the scent of the heavy steam in the bathroom, the clinging, flowery odour of the oils I'd sprinkled into the hot water. And even, as he says, the smell of my naked body, of my womanliness.

I try not to shiver. Obsession is the cold gleam of a sharp blade unmasked into the light.

"Sit down," he says so quietly that for a moment I don't take in the meaning of the words. "Opposite me."

Feeling as if there's a draught coming from somewhere that I can't escape, I slide across to the chaise and perch on its very edge, almost primly, my knees together and my hands on them, my back straight as if it were an upright dining chair I sat on. I've never had any shyness before about displaying the full extent of my nakedness in front of a man—I could hardly nurture demureness in this profession of mine, could I?—but now I'm experiencing washes of modesty pulse through me, making me wish I could cover myself. Was this how I felt when I bared myself for the cameras in the bathroom scene? Veronica LeBarr, that most private of women, revealing herself to the public gaze for

the first and only time? Glad, after the single take, to let herself be shuffled into her robe so she could flee back to the protective womb of her trailer?

I can't remember. I can remember so little about that other life of mine. There's a gauze curtain between me and it. All I see are vague shapes, ill defined masses, moving about their unfathomable purposes.

This time the shiver overtakes me before I can stop it.

Dominic doesn't seem to notice. He's watching me too closely for that.

The way Martin L. Stonemeer watched me through the bathroom window in the movie. He was plain Marty Steinmeier when he came to Hollywood, but the studios thought that sounded too Jewish so they changed it, and then they gave him a middle initial as well to add a touch of class. That was long before my time, of course, because Marty was a decade and a half older than I was, though that didn't stop him becoming my only studio lover. I called him Martin or sometimes even Mr Stonemeer when we were in public or on the set; I yelled his name, Marty, when, in greatest secrecy, we were entwined.

"Show me all of yourself, darling," says Dominic casually, relaxing back into his own chair. Familiarity again. "Let me see you the way you always showed yourself to me."

There's the sound of a switch being thrown in my mind.

"We've been like this before?" I say, not moving.

"You know we have."

I do.

"Your name isn't Dominic, is it?"

He grins the way a fond parent does when a child has been slow but has finally reasoned things through.

"No," he says. "But yours is 'Ronica, isn't it?"

"Where did you learn to call me that?"

"In your arms. Where better?"

I can sense he's speaking the truth. In that world behind the gauze curtain, he and I . . .

"What *is* your name?" I say.

He shrugs and makes a little fending-off gesture that I recognize, even though just a few minutes ago it would have meant nothing to me.

"Say it yourself, 'Ronica. You don't need me to be your lips for you."

I mouth his name. I dare not let it sound. Mimed, it has no real presence in this room even though both of us have heard its silence.

He nods, grins again. "And now you have nothing to fear from showing me yourself."

I suppose there must have been a few around the studios who knew. However well kept a secret is, somebody always knows it. And ours wasn't just a temporary passion, born only to be forgotten with a new season. For years we pleased each other amid the thrill of the clandestine whenever circumstances allowed us to be together. I kept no servants—I liked the echoes of my tawdry Tinseltown mansion when I was alone there—but he had an English

butler called Henry and a French cook called Marie and a domestic bursar called Fiona who would have given anything to be his illicit lover and perhaps, when I wasn't around, was, and a host of maids and bootboys who didn't have names at all. Servants see and hear everything, even though they wear their daily uniforms over the secrets they've learned. So, yes, our liaison wasn't known only to ourselves and our gods; but at the same time the world understood we were no more than friends. Good friends. Close friends. A niece and her uncle, almost.

It was fitting that I went to his funeral. Far from causing tongues to wag as I wept behind my veil, my presence was accepted, would have been cause for comment had it been an absence. "Screen siren Veronica LeBarr was as close to Martin Stonemeer as anyone ever could be," murmured the broadsheets. "Ice Queen Sobs For Lost Mentor!" shouted the tabloids. His widow mourned alongside me, her arm around my shoulders as we crumpled against each other.

I forget her name, like so much else.

"I want to reclaim you, 'Ronica," he says carefully.

"Did it hurt when you . . . went?" I say. I'm still for some reason reluctant to open myself to him.

Again that little flip of the hand. "You must know, 'Ronica, that I . . . Do you remember the promise we made each other in Geneva?"

No, but "Yes," I say.

And then, as I utter the word, I *do* recall. It was one of those evenings that happen only in movies, when the full moon is half-high over still water so that it paints a silver sword for the lake to wield. We talked the nonsense lovers talk and screenwriters script about how nothing could ever take us apart from each other, not even the ending of our lives. Both of us believed our words implicitly even as we both disbelieved that they held any literal truth. There is no life after this one. There are no returns to the world in new bodies. I know this as well as anyone can. We both knew it then. But that didn't stop us believing what we said.

"I don't think I . . ." I begin.

"Don't think what, 'Ronica?" He's sitting forward now, reaching across the idiotic little sham-elegant coffee table to cup his hand over mine where it still holds my naked knee.

"This can't be," I say.

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not really Veronica LeBarr."

"How can you know that?"

I ignore the question. "And you're not really Marty Steinmeier."

He inclines his head gravely. "I concur in that, ma'am. I'm Martin L. Stonemeer. Marty Steinmeier drove his car off the road into a canyon when he was coming home drunk after the preview of *Lord of Laughter*, the comedy that no one found funny until its star made it a masterpiece by dying so tragically. But they were wrong to say he died. That's what happened to Marty

Steinmeier. It was Martin L. Stonemeer's fault for refusing a limo because he wanted to be alone after those long, dreadful, restless silences in the preview theatre. Even so, unjust though it might be, it wasn't Marty Stonemeer who paid the price for his own stupidity. It was Marty. Poor Marty."

"And poor Janice Gascoigne," I say wistfully, even though I don't mean it, can't mean it. Janice Gascoigne was invented by Robbie Greenberg when he discovered the wonderfully beautiful girl he'd spied in the diner didn't know where she'd come from or how she'd got there. Someone else is working my vocal cords now.

"Poor Janice," Martin agrees.

No, not Martin. He was Marty to me. It was Marty Steinmeier who was my lover. Sometimes I wonder if Janice Gascoigne really did exist after all, if she and her whole past sprang into reality as soon as Robbie created them on that anachronistic old Olivetti typewriter he insisted on using. Is it Janice Gascoigne I see moving around, living and loving, behind the gauze curtain?

"Please," Marty/Dominic says, making a movement with his hands like someone trying to keep closing subway doors open. "Please, let me see you."

"Is this cunt-craziness of yours a new thing, Marty?" I say drily. "There's the rest of me here as well, you know."

He grimaces at me. "You know it isn't that, 'Ronica. I want to see our secret mark."

Our secret mark. I remember it now. I suppose it *was* ours. Other women

might have tattoos crafted in places only lovers can see. Nature rather than artifice performed this task for Veronica LeBarr. She—I, perhaps—own a tiny birthmark, her solitary skinly flaw, in the centre of the little hollow at the top of the inside of the thigh, resting snug against her pubis. It has the form of a tiny straw-brown inverted heart. Marty discovered it one day early during the love affair and rejoiced in it ever thereafter. No other man has remarked upon it. Perhaps none has noticed it. I'm not sure I have it any longer. I'm not sure I ever did, or if it was Veronica LeBarr's exclusive possession. I can hardly, now, just stand up and go into the bathroom to check.

I change the subject.

"What have you been doing all this time, Martin, since . . ."

"Since Marty's death, you mean? Don't be frightened of saying it, 'Ronica. It doesn't hurt me any more."

I compromise. "Since the accident."

"I've been . . ." He hesitates, puzzled. Until I asked him the question he was secure in his memories. Now that he tries to focus on them, they've become elusive. I watch a sly inspiration strike. "I've been, I've been *waiting* for you, 'Ronica."

No need for me to say any reply to that: I just arch an eyebrow.

"But why are we talking like this?" He moves uneasily, shifting his gaze from mine to look at the vase of flowers by the door as if it had suddenly become interesting. "You're making me feel as if there's some kind of test I should

pass, 'Ronica. I don't like that."

Marty's little-boy petulance reminds me of something else I've forgotten, softened and smeared as it was behind the misty curtain of memory. His temper. It was something he never really could keep fully reined in, sometimes even with his beloved 'Ronica. He never marred her beauty, though. Bruises heal quickly enough. And he never hit her in public, except the once. She wore a black veil at his funeral not to shield her grief from the world's eyes but because of the slowly fading blotch on her cheekbone.

I must not provoke him now. Lettuce would come running, of course, and in a couple of minutes at most Jeke would be here from the door, but Lettuce would be scarcely safer than I was and Jeke might be too late. No, I must keep Marty calm.

So I open my legs wide.

He stares. Men, of course, always do, but in Marty's instance I'm unsure if he's staring at my birthmark, or at my lack of a birthmark, or at what all the rest of the Johns gawp at. Which ever, I notice cynically that he's becoming just a John again to me. I want to get the fucking over with and him out of here so I can take comfort in my solitude again. Yet how can I be truly solitary when there are several of me and I can never decide which of me I am?

"You told me you weren't Veronica LeBarr," he says at last.

"Yes."

"You lied."

My response refuses to come immediately. "I don't think I did."

He snorts, and looks away from me, saying something bitter under his breath that I can't distinguish.

"What did you say, Marty?"

"Martin."

"What did you say?"

"You always had only a casual acquaintanceship with the truth, 'Ronica. It wasn't that you were actually a liar, *per se*. More that you just had a hard time recognizing that the difference between truth and untruth was a fundamental one. You were like someone who's woken from dreams and has to be told that what's happened in those dreams didn't happen in the real world."

"Who's to say they didn't?"

"That's what I mean. The rest of us know the difference. Most of us. You don't. It's not dishonesty, just honest confusion."

He looks directly at me again. "It made you very hard to be around, sometimes."

I put my legs together while his attention is on other things. His eyes don't register my movement.

"You never told me this, Mar . . . Martin. You never told me this"—I clench my fist, seeking the word I want—"before."

"I did. You just weren't able to hear me."

I let that pass. "Why do you say you're so certain I'm Veronica LeBarr?"

He gives an ironic laugh. "You're good, 'Ronica, real good. You put on

an Oscar-winning performance. Right up to the last moment I wasn't a hundred percent sure it was really you. You'd have made a wonderful impersonator,

if ever you'd thought to choose that career. Only, where an impersonator tries to *be* someone, you were trying *not* to be someone. But I saw the heart, there, on your thigh. Our secret heart."

Now, shame forgotten, I open my legs again and paw at the soft flesh of my upper leg. I can see no heart. Unlike Veronica, I've never had a birthmark there. She's never had it removed, I know. I was right in being unable to remember it. Martin is seeing what he wants to see. Unless it's that I'm not seeing what I *don't* want to see.

I can't sit here any longer on the chaise. My nerves are too taut. I get up and start pacing. I wish Lettuce would come back into the room, as she sometimes does, peeking in secretly to make sure all is well. Anything to distract me from the cloud of tension that's building up in me.

"The other women here, they're all impostors, aren't they?" says Martin. "Frauds. Pretenders. Barnum & Bailey specials. Lookalikes."

"What do you *think*?" I say impatiently. "Garbo's dead, for god's sakes. Garland too. Stanwyck. Brigitte Helm. Veronica Lake. Fay Wray. Grable. Crawford. All of them for a long time dust and worms. What do you think the girls here are? Zombies risen from their graves? Succubi? Wraiths who've taken on material form? Of *course* they're

doubles—and some of them aren't even very close matches, although naturally the Johns don't want to notice the discrepancies. All dead. They made an exception for me, because of who Veronica LeBarr is, the effect she has on people. I'm the only one of them who's still al—"

I stop, feeling suddenly breathless. I've fallen into the trap he set.

"I mean, I'm the only one whose original is still—"

He holds up both hands in front of him as if to ward off the words that in fact I don't say.

"If you're not 'Ronica, how can you remember"—he stresses the word, teasing it out like a wheel spinning yarn—"so much about our time together?"

I shake my head, disoriented. "I—I don't *remember* these things. Not really. I must have read so many biographies of . . . of . . ." I don't want to say "of me", although that's the only phrase that seems to make sense. "I've read so many star biographies that the details of my life have lodged themselves in my brain, that's all. It's like I know them so well they've half-become memories. I can see the Gascoigne family going out on Sunday to their local church in Tadcaster, Janice reluctant to be there but being told by her parents it's the family thing to do, it's her duty to her younger brother and sisters. I can 'remember' this even though it never happened. Even though Janice Gascoigne never existed until Robbie Greenberg invented her and her family—and, for all I know, Tadcaster—that day back in

Burbank. How can I tell what's a genuine memory and what isn't, if a memory I know for a fact to be false is still so real to me? The only way is to put the ones I know *cannot* be true in one pile"—I mimic with my left hand, as if I'm a child heaping up wooden bricks—"and all the rest in another." My right hand starts adding bricks to a different stack. "You see?"

"There could be false memories in among the ones you think are true," he observes.

"Isn't that the same for all of us?"

He starts to say something, stops. "Yes," he murmurs eventually, "I suppose it is."

"For you too."

"Yes."

"So what do you know about the memories you think you have of me?"

"That they're real."

"You *think* they are."

"I guess. But—"

"Yes, Martin?"

I smile forgivingly and relax on the chaise. Who cares how my legs are splayed? I don't know, and he's no longer noticing. He's blinded by his attempts to read his own mind.

Then he snaps his fingers. "I know what I know," he says. "You're just trying to bamboozle me, get me all tied up in knots. That was another thing you've always been good at, 'Ronica. Making a man so confused he doesn't know which way was up."

"Is that why you hit me, the times you did?" I draw the breath to correct myself, to say "her" instead of "me", but

then I see my error has this time passed him by.

"I didn't hit you," he says, looking at his hands in his lap as if challenging them to gainsay him. "Not ever but once. Right at the end."

Veronica LeBarr wore a veil at his funeral. It wasn't to hide the redness of her eyes, though there was that as well. Someone had punched her in the face. Who else could it have been but Marty?

He doesn't say anything.

"Who hit me before the funeral, Marty? Your wife? She had reason to hate me, if she'd ever discovered about . . . us."

He mutters.

"What's that, Marty?"

"I said you *were* my wife."

I screw up my eyebrows, trying to make sense of this. "You mean I was more of a wife to you than she was?"

"I'm not speaking figuratively, 'Ronica." He puts his hands on his knees, gripping. His lips make a tightly clamped line. He lets a long breath out through his nose.

"You think you married me?"

"Isn't that what it told you in all those Hollywood biographies you said you'd read?"

"But you were already married when I met you. It's just I can't remember her name."

"I can't remember it either," he says, "because she didn't exist. Before I met you I'd spent decades playing the Hollywood field. Hardly a week went by when I wasn't on the front page of the *National Enquirer* for breaking up, or

cheating, or finding the love of my life, or being seen drunk at a party with the latest hit rock singer or the freshest starlet. I wasn't the marrying kind, 'Ronica. Not until I met you. Not until the times I disappointed the starlets became more often than not, and I realized I was getting old. I was the prize stallion who couldn't be relied upon any more. I was paying through the nose to hush up all the kiss-and-tell stories that threatened to break. I needed a companion, a beautiful companion."

Just a moment ago I had words I wanted to say. Now I've lost them. I face him with an empty stare.

"You were my wife. And not," he adds, hurriedly seeking to reassure me, "in name only. The old stallion found a new vigour through you. You had the beauty. You had the allure that made you a goddess of the screen. For the first few weeks of our marriage we were like teenagers. I couldn't get enough of you. What drove me on was that same screen persona of yours: you were the unattainable one, the virgin goddess, the ice queen. Can you imagine what it's *like* for a man to know he's the guy who's melted that ice? Can you conceive of how it feels to be the only one who's where so many millions are at that very moment fantasizing they might be? It's not just lust that washes through a man, but *power*. Not power over the ice queen, but power over all the other men in the world. I could see nothing else but this dominion I possessed. It made me a Priapus, a Pan. I could hardly sleep—and neither could

you, because I kept waking you up for more of you. I thought I was becoming immortal. My universe was your body, and my constantly repeated capture of it.

“And when the shutters began slowly to open from my eyes. I began to realize that *you* were in bed with me, not just your body, not just the pliant flesh I worshipped and fucked. And you . . . you . . .”

To my amazement, he has to wipe at his eyes with the back of his hand.

“You were unchanged,” he says. “You were still the same as you’d always been. You were the Veronica LeBarr of the screen. It had been only my illusion that the Veronica LeBarr of the off-screen world was different from her screen self. For all that I had done to you, what I thought we had done together, you were still unattainable. No matter how much I tried to goad you into responding to my lovemaking, you were just an actress performing her role. Deep behind your eyes you were unmoved, a distant observer. I had thought I’d pierced the shell you wore for the world, and all I’d done was discover it wasn’t a shell. It was the real you.

“And so the old stallion, finally, turned himself out to pasture. His glory days were done. There wasn’t any life left to him: just the anticipation of dying.”

“That wasn’t,” I say, very quietly, “Veronica LeBarr’s fault.”

“That,” he replies, “is what I told myself. I told it to you, too. I told you to

go get yourself some lovers—you were a young woman, and I’d not have held it against you if you’d sought out others to give you what your ageing husband couldn’t. But you weren’t interested in that. You weren’t interested in the pleasures of the flesh at all. I began to think what you were was just a pattern of light and dark, colour and tone, meant to be playing on screen but somehow broken loose to walk around independently in the world of people. It wasn’t just that you had no flaws. You were two-dimensional, was what it was: you lacked the third dimension that’s the home of emotions, of feelings, of passions.”

“Then I’m not Veronica LeBarr,” I say. “That’s not me you’re describing. You want to see passion, Marty, Martin, Dominic, whoever you are? You want to see raw passion like you’ve only ever read about in books? Huh? You want me to engulf you in the lava of me? You want me to drive you insane with lust? You want me to . . . ?”

He shakes his head wearily. “Those are lines out of movies, ’Ronica. They’re not how real lovers speak. You’ve been well trained, or perhaps you’ve trained yourself. It’d be hard”—he gestures around him at the old-world furniture, the opulent fixtures, the carpets that bespeak quaint measures of gentility—“not to learn something from all the hundreds of men who’ve paid to be here. Whatever the case, you’ve learned how to put on the performance of your life every night. I’m sure it convinces most audiences—

if they've paid their money they'll do everything they can to persuade themselves they're enjoying the show. But it doesn't convince this one."

I recline on the chaise longue's arm, letting every angle of my stretched-out body portray casualness, and I drawl, my heart racing but my skin cold, "Is that your cynicism in your pocket or are you just pleased to see me?"

He gives a little self-conscious laugh. "That? Yeah, you've had an effect on me. It's been a long time. How could you not? But it doesn't mean much. A man can get drunk on pure ethyl alcohol but it's still not champagne."

"Why did you come here?" I say. "Just for my interest, why did you come? Not to fuck me, that seems for sure. Just to talk to me? Just to try to screw around with my memories so I'd no longer be certain who I am? Just to play with Veronica LeBarr's history so I'm no longer certain who *she* is?"

"I came because I can't die without you."

It takes me a few heartbeats to hear what he's said. I've lost count of the number of Johns who've said they can't live without me. This is the first who needs me for him to die. When the meaning finally penetrates, when I first see the knife in his hand, I start looking around me as if there should be others here in the room with us. There are buttons to push, of course, and cords to pull. Lettuce could be here in seconds, Jeke not too far behind her. But they'd be expecting to save me from a John turned vicious, not from one trying to

kill himself. And we can't have a suicide here. The scandal that'd be brought down on Holly Wouldyou, with the cops hanging around and asking us questions—not the cops we know and pay for, but real cops. And the news vans on the sidewalk outside, with Barbies chirping into their mikes about how "behind this dignified nineteenth-century facade who could have known that . . . ?" and "the manageress of this establishment denied all comment". And would we ever be able to get the blood out of the carpets?

"Stay where you are," he says as I start to push myself up off the chaise. "Stay—where—you—are, 'Ronica."

The nearest buzzer is only a few feet from me, but I freeze.

"Good girl," he says. The friendly but stern schoolteacher signifies his approval. "Did you ever pause to wonder, 'Ronica, why it was I hit you that night at that dismal party when we all tried to pretend the audience had rocked in their seats during *Lord of Laughter*? Why I left there before the festivities, if you can call them that, had properly begun? Why I rushed out into the night alone? Why I waited for my corner and then drove the car over the edge?"

"I don't know why you did any of that," I say. "If I were Veronica LeBarr, perhaps I might. But—"

"It's because you're Veronica LeBarr that you don't know," he says.

"I—"

He disregards me, addresses what he next says toward the high cornice at the far end of the room. I'm no longer here

with him. It's as if he's rehearsing the speech he wants to give to Saint Peter as he comes to the Pearly Gates. He knows better, does Martin L., than to fill his lines with rhetorical flourishes, to intone the words as if to imprint them on the audience's mind. He's not Spencer Tracy as Clarence Darrow in *Inherit the Wind*. His voice is hardly above a whisper.

"She told me she was going to leave me. There wasn't someone else, or anything like that—there never would be, never could be. I could have forgiven her if she'd been deserting me to run into the arms of a lover, but no. I could have forgiven her, too, if there'd been any sense of bitterness, compassion, guilt, regret, even misplaced anger in her as she told me. I could have forgiven her if this had been something a long time brewing, if it was only now that she'd found the right time or the courage to break it to me that our marriage, our companionship, was over. But no. It was a spur-of-the-moment decision, the kind she never goes back on. The failure of *Lord of Laughter* would reflect badly on her career, she said. Producers would hesitate before calling her for the very best roles when they thought ahead to the publicity nightmare of promoting an actress who was shackled to a washed-up failure as her husband. She bore me no ill will . . . No, she didn't say that. She said nothing about how she felt towards me at all. It was only later, in the car, that I began to wonder why she hadn't said it—it's the called-for platitude, you

know—and it seemed as if I could see those lips of hers mouth the words. Those lips I'd kissed. Those lips that had touched every part of me. Now they couldn't even stir themselves to speak a platitude, to offer me *something* to balm my pain. She couldn't think of me. She couldn't even think of herself, not really. All she could think about, as eternally, was the immortal image who moved across the screens of cinemas and minds. It was for the sake of *that image* that she was severing the cord that joined us together. It was for Veronica LeBarr. Not for my wife."

He turns his gaze steadily back toward me. I see pain behind his eyes, a long tunnel of tortured screams that will extend for ever.

"I hit you then," he says, "believing I was putting my fist through an illusion of projected light. That my knuckles hit flesh and bone was an astonishment to me. I had not believed there was such a person as you."

"It *wasn't* me," I say, my throat sand. "It wasn't me. I'm not Veronica LeBarr."

"No one ever was," he says.

A clock ticks. It has a digital mechanism in the casement behind the Victorian face, so the clock does not need to tick. You pay extra for it to do so.

My body feels heavier than it has ever done before, as if someone were pressing me down into the chaise's upholstery. "Then who am—?"

"You're Veronica LeBarr, 'Ronica, the image who lived only inside people's minds." The yellowed lamplight makes the knife blade shimmer as if it were

organic rather than metal. Yet it's also a gap in the blind on a bathroom window. "You've wrapped flesh around yourself to deceive the world. Perhaps you've even come to deceive yourself. But really all you are is the shadow that's called Veronica LeBarr. That's what I understood—at *last!*—at the party. I knew I had to . . . *end* you. Kill you? The idea didn't make any sense. What difference would destroying your body make? You'd still be alive for ever, inasmuch as you lived at all. The only way you could die—again the word is wrong—the only way you could be finished with, at least in part, was if my mind was no longer there for you to inhabit. *That*, 'Ronica, is why I destroyed a perfectly good year-old BMW and, in the process, myself."

I lean forward, my hands together. Despite my nakedness, I'm the earnest young assistant lawyer again, trying to explain something to a client who doesn't want to believe me. "But you're here. You haven't died. You're alive. Marty died in that . . . accident. I saw the remains. You can't be Marty."

"I'm not. I told you."

"Dominic?"

"No. Martin. Marty died but Martin couldn't. Martin had to live on through the purgatory of existing only so that *you* could continue to exist."

Why can't I make myself stretch out a hand for the buzzer? Now that I'm sitting forward like this, it's within reach. But my arm won't move.

He leans forward too. Our faces are only inches apart.

"I was wrong," he says, "when I thought that destroying your body wouldn't affect you. Maybe in the minds of the rest of the world you'd have persisted, like a ghost that cannot be exorcised, but you'd have ceased in *my* mind. I'd have seen your body lifeless at my feet. Wherever you still were, any picture that I still held of you inside me would have been demonstrably false. I told you, 'Ronica: I cannot die without you."

"But I'm not—" I begin as the knife stabs upward into me, plunging up beneath my ribcage toward my heart. There is no pain, although my body must be feeling agonies. There is no sensation at all. There is only the shock of invasion. "I'm not—"

He pulls the knife away, smiling. Though bloodied now, the blade is still the silver of the screen, and I imagine it covered in countless carefully framed shots that together are the story of my life, or lives. In the act of plunging his dagger into my flesh he has made a movie of me.

Released from my control, my hand gropes for the hidden buzzer, pushes it. Lettuce's footsteps and her yell sound almost at once outside the door, a lifetime away.

Dominic, Marty, Martin—the john—still smiling, draws the blade across his throat to give himself another smile, a broader one, one that he will bear until his flesh rots.

Lettuce is hammering on the door. I can hear the hinges beginning to splinter away from the frame. The new smile

the john has is the comico-serious leer of a clown's mask.

Ridley would have filmed this so much better than real life is doing.

I try one last time. "I'm not—"

Except that perhaps I am. I don't know any longer. Someone's dying, and I don't know who it is. Is it a whore called Veronica LeBarr who pulls johns

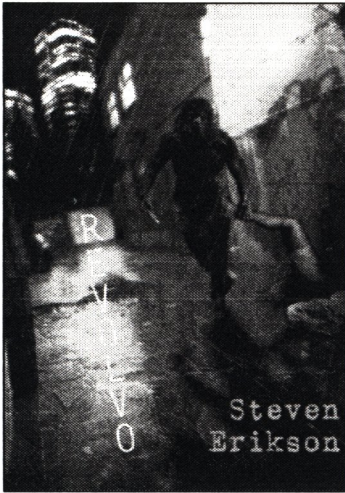
like no one else could? Is it an actress the mention of whose very name can stir the air, fill rooms with the tension of before the storm's breaking? She's called Veronica LeBarr, too. Is it her who's dying?

Or is what I'm seeing just the fading from the screen of a pattern of projected light and dark? ☒

NEW FROM PS Publishing

a novella by

STEVEN ERIKSON



In the fictitious country of Canada the arts scene is ruled by technocrats who thrive in a secret, nepotistic society of granting agencies, bursaries, awards and peer review boards, all designed to permit self-proclaimed artists to survive without an audience.

In *Revolvo*, self-proclaimed "hack genre writer" Steven Erikson provides a daring expose of creative skullduggery in the wilds of a country suffering an interminable identity crisis. The names of plenty of real people have been changed and all specific details of the

setting have been messed with, so if anyone guesses a certain prairie city in the middle Canada, where the author used to live, well, you'd be plain wrong. Besides, it was a long time ago and his memory is not so good.

Signed Hardcover £25.00 and Hardcover £10.00

This story shares raw material with Will's first Postscripts contribution, "Something Borrowed, Something Red"—though now in a more urban setting. The author would like to remind everyone that the best defense against the evil eye is to make rock 'n roll horns with your fingers while reading film theorist Laura Mulvey. Other helpful tips are online at www.willalex.net.

Clockwork Iris

William Alexander

Thomas has eyes that never agree. He squints, using just one, taking turns between them. With his right eye he sees a segmented and articulate world, ticking according to its own internal laws. This is the eye he uses in his workshop, careful to keep an eye-patch over the other one.

Every day, and only once a day, he moves the patch over his right eye and looks with his left for as long as he can stand it. He can never stand it for very long. His fingers shake when they shift the patch back again.

This is not the beginning. The story begins in the clock tower, when Thomas first saw her.

Thomas hung upside down by a long rope harness. He had one leg wrapped around the rope, and kept the other braced against a wooden beam. He held a piece of stained glass and worked down the edge of it with a curved iron file. The glass would have been gold-colored, if there had been any sunlight to shine through it.

Thomas blew on the edge, and tested it with his thumb, and ignored Hamon.

"It's dark," Hamon said, again, from three stories below. "It's dark, and late, and I'm hungry."

"Go," Thomas said. "I want to finish this."

"I'm not going to leave you up there."

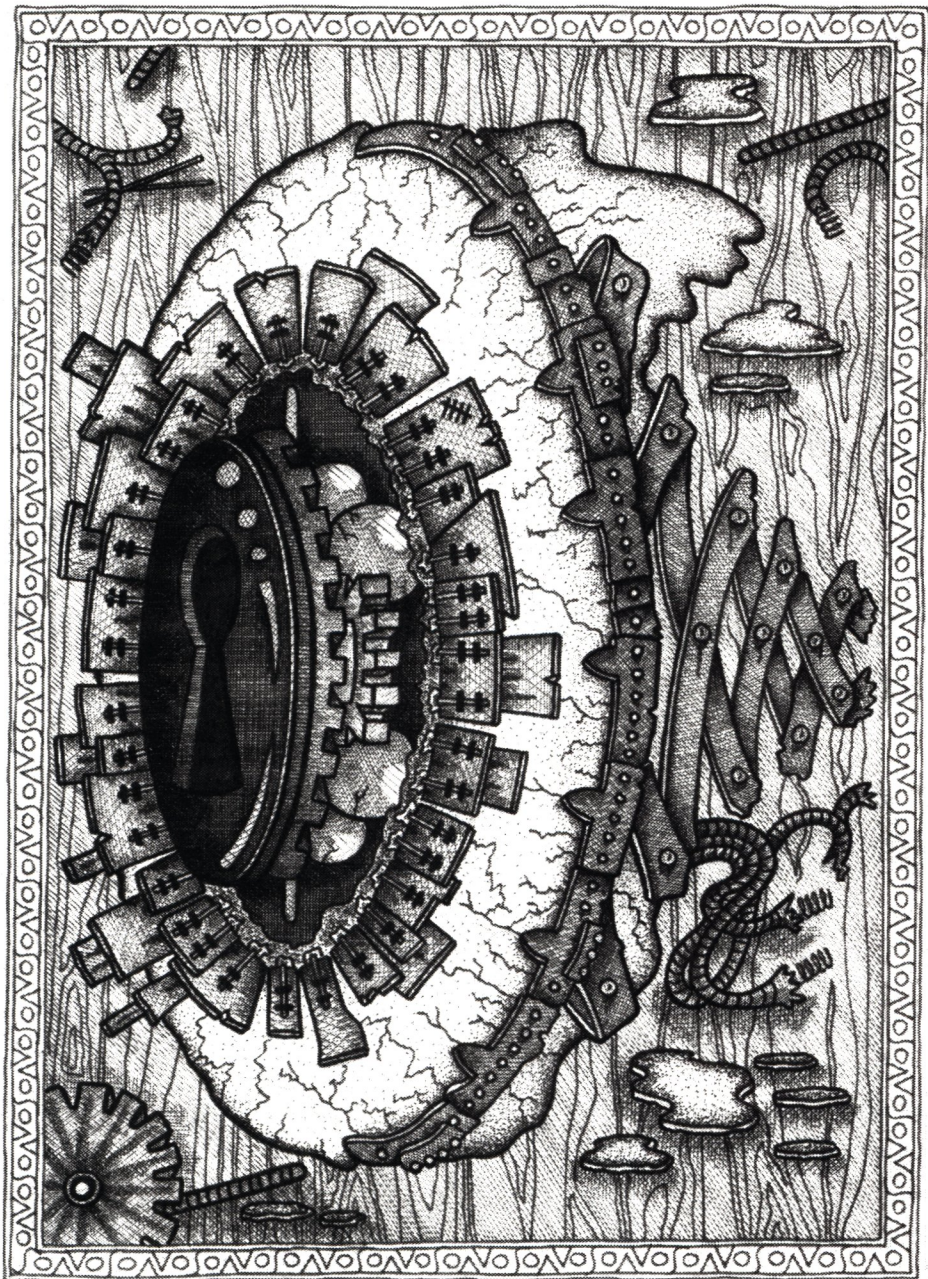
"Go," Thomas said. Iron and glass circles spun behind the clock face, showing the season and the position of the planets and the phase of the moon. The clock showed that the sun had set, or at least that a sun-shaped hole had set. Thomas tried to fit the glass in his hand to the open space. "Almost," he said, and filed at the edge.

Hamon was still talking. "I'll claim a table at Anna's, order the food and come back for you."

"What's that?" Thomas asked.

"Food. I want it. You need it. I'll come back soon and bring you to it."

Thomas fit the sun into the sun-shaped hole, put the file in his mouth, and held the sun in place with one hand while he reached around behind him with the other. The harness rope



creaked and twisted. When he tilted his head, looking at the ground far below him, Hamon was already gone.

He found the fusing torch by feel, wound up its gearwork with just the one hand, and took it down from the ledge. Then he scorched the sun into place, squinting, trying to hold his breath as glass and metal melted together. The smoke stung at the back of his throat.

Once the glass sun was fixed in the glass firmament, Thomas let himself spin slowly in circles while putting away files and cleaning out the torch. Gears and levers surrounded him. Clockwork figures stood at attention beneath him, waiting for their daily noontime march. He couldn't see them clearly. The fire from the fusing torch had spoiled his night vision.

One moved. One figure glided away from the others, its motion entirely unlike clockwork. Thomas shut his eyes and opened his eyes again.

The figure moved across a long wooden beam to one pale plaster wall, and put her bare feet to the plaster and walked down the vertical surface of the wall as though gravity held her there. Her hair trailed down in front of her like a pennant without any wind.

Thomas stared. She vanished behind three copper gears the size of tabletops, and reappeared again as she took one single step from wall to floor. She brushed her hair aside, and Thomas caught a glimpse of her shoulder and collarbone. Then he dropped the torch.

She flinched, and looked up to the place where he was spinning slowly in the dark, upside down. He looked away.

"Thomas!" Hamon called from below. "Are you alright, or are you only an idiot?"

Thomas craned his neck to look back at the floor. Hamon held the torch in both hands.

"Well caught," Thomas said. He looked for the woman. She wasn't there.

"Thank you," Hamon said. "Now please come down. And please, *please* don't set the clock on fire as you come."

Thomas pulled himself upright, and swung to the closest ledge. There he held onto a beam and waited for his head to sort out directions, and how much blood it should have in it, before undoing the harness buckles.

"Did you see the woman?" Thomas asked.

"Woman?"

"She left as you were coming in. You must have passed each other."

"How long have you been hanging upside down, exactly?"

Thomas snorted. He unhitched the harness, passed between two clockwork figures and found the back stairway.

"Hurry," Hamon called. "Anne might hold the table for me, but she won't hold it long for you."

Anne's daughter Julia brought them two mugs and a bowl of bread crusts. She was plump and pale and always nervous. She had twice tipped

over a mug of ale into Thomas' lap, and once done the same with a bowl of hot, scalding soup. Thomas silently made sure that she remembered this, watching her as she bent forward to carefully set two mugs on the table. He watched her trying not to notice him. Her skin changed color, beginning somewhere underneath her neckline and creeping upward by blotchy degrees until her face and scalp were both glowing red. She straightened, met his gaze and glared back at him. She still looked away first.

Hamon cleared his throat, hummed a tune, and dipped bread in his ale. He said something to Anne's daughter before she left. She smiled, but it wasn't a happy smile.

"You are not making yourself any more welcome here," said Hamon after she was gone.

"I suppose," said Thomas. He sipped his beer, wiped foam from his upper lip, and watched the room. A loose-skinned fisherman was drinking alone. Two powdered magistrates spoke in well-enunciated whispers by the hearth, which was the only source of light; Anne hoarded her candles. The alewife herself stood in the kitchen doorway, rubbing flour-dusted hands together.

Her plump daughter handed her three empty mugs, took off her apron and left publicly, by way of the front door. She did not look at Thomas.

"Are you even listening?" Hamon asked.

"Of course," said Thomas. "Ask again anyway."

"Are we ready? He might arrive tomorrow. Are we going to be ready?"

"Of course."

"I remember the last time the clockmaker came," Hamon said. "I was apprenticed in the gearwork shop, and I remember the panic. 'Mikulas is coming,' the master said, over and over. 'Mikulas is coming.'"

"He's an old man," Thomas said. "He must be. And every piece of that clock has been replaced by now, since he first built it. It isn't even his, not anymore."

Hamon grunted, and took a large mouthful of ale, and swallowed. "Mikulas is coming," he said. "Stop staring at people and eat. You need to work tomorrow without dropping anything."

Thomas picked up a piece of bread and smelled the warmth of it without actually taking a bite.

The woman from the clock tower walked by the door, just outside. She paused as if his eyes held her. Then she moved on.

"That's her," Thomas said. He was already out before Hamon could say anything. He followed the woman uptown, passing the dry, cracked fountain in the center of Market Square. He followed her into the clock tower, and then lost sight of her. He ran up the stairway in the dark.

"Stop," she said, somewhere above him.

He stopped at the top of the stair, breathing hard.

"You should not be able to notice me," she said. "Please try not to."

"I'm sorry," he said. This was something he had never said before. He wondered if he actually was.

"Good," she said.

He caught movement above, and looked, and remembered to look away.

"You repair Mikulas' clock," she said.

"You know him?" He looked for her. He tried not to.

"I know his clockwork," she said. "One of the High Families commissioned a magnificent clock from Mikulas once. They were so pleased with the result that they put out his eyes, after, so he would never build another one to rival it."

Thomas sat on the top stair and concentrated on gazing resolutely down. "Is this the clock?" he asked. "The one he lost his eyes for?"

"No," she said. "He built this afterwards." She spoke from directly behind him. He did not turn. He did not look. "I like to watch the figures move," she said. "There are archers who shoot roses into the Square. An owl flaps its wings and bites the head off a mouse. Red ribbons trail from its beak."

"I have to replace the ribbons every few days," Thomas said. "The colors fade."

"Thank you," she said. "It really is lovely."

Thomas turned around. He stared at the floor and the wall behind her. He focused on the edge of her clothes. A dress. White, and ankle length. He let his gaze focus hard on everything up to the edge of her, searing an empty space

the size and shape of her into the back of his eyes.

"Go," she said. "Please. It's almost midnight. The figures march at noon and at midnight, but it is much too bright at noon for me to watch. I would rather see them alone."

He bowed, and turned away. He was halfway down the stair when she spoke again, standing directly above him and upside down. The tips of her hair hung down across his face.

"I felt the color of your eyes on my skin," she said. "You should know that. It is now a familiar blue to me, and if I ever feel it again on my collarbone, or on the curve of my neck, I will know the eyes are yours. It will burn, and I will know. I will take them out of your head with my teeth."

He took a breath, and smiled. "Is your hair as sensitive as your skin?"

"No."

"Good." Thomas reached up to brush her hair out of his way, and went downstairs. He imagined that she watched him go. He was not certain that she actually did.

Hamon scrubbed at rusting gears. Thomas replaced cracked panes of glass. He flinched whenever Hamon spoke to him. He did not drop the fusing torch, but he did drop one of his files and the sharp end buried itself in a wooden beam far below him.

He wondered if she were somewhere overhead in the darkest corner of the clock, waiting for sunlight to fade.

He expected Hamon to try to take him back to Anne's for supper. He had his excuses ready.

Sunlight faded.

"You shouldn't set foot in Anne's place," Hamon said. "Not for a while."

"I don't think I will," Thomas said. "Wait. Why shouldn't I?"

Hamon was standing above him, cleaning gear grease from his hands with the edge of his shirt. "You don't know," he said. "You haven't heard. You're very selective in the things you chose to notice."

"What haven't I noticed?"

"Last night you chased Julia from her mother's alehouse with a look, and she hasn't been seen since that moment. Not by Anne, not by anyone else."

"Oh," Thomas said. "Is there anyone searching for her?"

"Of course someone is searching for her. I'll be joining them now. If the clockmaker wasn't due tomorrow—*tomorrow*—I would have joined the search this morning. But I don't recommend that you join up. I don't think you'll be welcome."

"Oh," Thomas said.

Hamon shook his head. He didn't look at Thomas as he left.

Thomas climbed up to the top of the tower. "Hello?" he said, and no one said anything to him. "Were you outside Anne's place when her daughter left?" he asked. No one gave him any answer.

He waited. He sat down in the dark and he watched the ground level, waiting to see if she would return to this spot. He waited a long time.

Then the woman opened the double doors and came through. Thomas looked around her, and his eyes throbbed from the effort of not watching her directly. He saw her hair, and her dress. He saw the small boy she pulled by the wrist behind her.

Anne's daughter Julia followed, laughing. Julia pushed the boy down and bit into the back of his neck.

Thomas stared, trying to be sure it was Julia. Julia flinched under his stare and looked up at him. She dropped the body and leapt.

Thomas ran. He could hear the girl running up the underside of the stairway as he stumbled down. He made it as far as a platform on the third level when she caught up his coat from overhead, swung him forward, and dropped him onto his back. The impact knocked the breath out of him. He closed his eyes.

"Hello, Thomas," Julia said, drawing out every vowel in her high voice. Her hand was on his throat.

"Hello, Julia," he whispered, his voice almost crushed by her fingers. "Everyone's looking for you."

Julia laughed. Thomas felt everything inside his ribcage constrict.

"Let him go, child." Her voice. She was here. The woman was standing nearby. "We've both fed already. It isn't polite to take more than you can finish."

"Oh, I'm not thirsty," Julia said. "I just want him to be afraid of me. I want him helpless. I want to watch him run. I want him to know that I'm watching him. I want his skin to burn with

the knowledge that I'm coming after him. Then I'll hold him down. I'll hurt him before I let him run again. Maybe I'll get thirsty, if we do that for a while."

Thomas tried to pry away her hand. Her skin was cold. Her fingers tightened around his neck, and he coughed. He opened his eyes.

Julia flinched. He glared at her, holding her in place by looking.

"That hurts," she said. Her grip loosened. Thomas stared, and Julia's skin began to blister underneath the weight of his stare. The girl snarled, letting go of him and backing up against the plaster wall. Thomas watched her as her skin burned. He stared until her corpse stopped writhing.

The woman stood behind him, and let out a low hiss. Thomas waited for her to kill him and he hoped she would speak to him first.

"Well," she said. "That . . . is a shame. It should not have . . . you should not be able to see us at all."

"I'm sorry," Thomas said, which was very odd. He was sure that he meant it. "I see well in the dark."

The woman bent down to touch Julia. She was wearing a red ribbon in her hair. Thomas stared at the ribbon. His eyes hurt.

"Why did you Change her?" he asked.

"Oh, it's always easier to hunt in good company," she said. "And she looked so upset. She was crying when I saw her. I wanted her to feel better."

"Oh," Thomas said. "And what happens now?"

"Now I clear away the remains of supper, and leave you to scrub whatever stains are left. Mikulas will be here tomorrow." She stepped over the edge of the platform. Thomas followed by way of the stairs.

"Hello, Master Thomas," the clockmaker said. "You do fine glasswork. Very fine work. It is true, however, that you leave too many bubbles in the glass. Weakens it, yes? You'll have to replace the panels more often. But I admit that they do break up the light nicely, so if you don't mind the extra work then I can't very much fault you for it."

"Thank you, sir," Thomas said. He was not listening. He was watching the clockmaker's eyes. The old man's irises ticked and turned in a small circle, each one a gear carved out of glass. He must have used copper oxide for the green tint.

"Now, Master Hamon, show me your metalwork. Show me your taps and your weights and the teeth replaced. I have heard excellent things about the rooftop finial. Excellent things. That was your making, yes? Or your predecessor's?"

"Mine, sir," Hamon said, grinning like a sheepdog.

"Up we go, then. Up we go." Mikulas took a bell from his waistcoat pocket, rang it a couple of times and put it back. The two of them took the tower stairs, and Thomas followed only as far as the scrubbed spot where Julia died.

He was still there when Mikulas and Hamon returned. Thomas wondered how long he had been standing there. He had no idea. He hadn't slept very much the previous night.

"Very good, Master Hamon," the clockmaker said. "Very good. Will you come again tomorrow morning? In the meantime Master Thomas and I must speak of glassware. We have tinting technique to discuss, and the placement of panels on the clock-face. They may need adjustments. I've not yet decided."

"Yes, sir," Hamon said. "Thank you, sir." He patted Thomas on the shoulder and left.

Mikulas took out a metal turnkey and pushed it into the surface of his eye. The glass made a clinking sound. He turned the key, telescoping his eye on thin clockwork filaments. When his pupil stuck out as far as the tip of his long, sharp nose he took out the key and considered the plaster wall.

"Who burned here?"

"What do you mean?" Thomas asked, his voice level and calm.

"Young sir, you have been hovering around this precise spot like one of those fluttering fire-worshippers around a candle. What are they called?"

"Moths."

"Yes, moths. I love watching moths. I wrote an opera about them once. One little hero sings about bringing fire back to his people before immolating his own wings. He makes it halfway across the stage before he dies. The next little hero doesn't care about

bringing any god-gifts home to the moth village. No, he just loves the flame and does not mind if he dies by it. I have never produced the show, unfortunately. Opera houses are ever so squeamish about fire."

Mikulas scraped at the plaster wall with a penknife, rubbed soot between his fingertips and tasted them. He pointed his long, extended eye at Thomas. The iris ticked and turned.

"Someone burned here, Master Thomas. Someone recently Changed. Now, I am accustomed to finding Changed people in the rafters of my clocks, gnawing on the bones of small children. It is simply a part of the clock-making profession to find them and kill them, or chase them away. But they rarely die before I arrive."

Thomas sat down, and rubbed his eyes. "Why do they hide in clocks?" he asked.

"I don't know why," Mikulas said. "I *suspect*, however, that the Changed are fascinated by strict measurements of time. They move so smoothly between moments, you see, and hardly ever age. Little fluttering time-worshippers. It is only because my eyes take such articulate measurements of the visual world that I can see them at all." He stuck the turnkey in his extended eye and wound it back in. "Can you see the Changed, Master Thomas?"

"Yes," Thomas said. "I can see them."

"How very interesting." The clockmaker squinted and rubbed his eyelid with two fingers. "I wonder why that should be the case."

Thomas shrugged. "I just have good eyes," he said. "I've never lost a staring contest, and once I knocked a drunk man over backwards just by glaring at him. And I see well in the dark."

"Aha," the clockmaker said. "Then please tell me what you saw in the dark last night. And afterwards tell me where I might get something to eat. Yesterday I traveled very far, you see."

"You can eat at Anne's," Thomas said. "You can. I can't, but I'll take you there."

"Very well. Why are you unable to join me?"

"Because I killed Anne's daughter with a look. Anne doesn't know it yet, but I did it. Twice."

"Aha," the clockmaker said. "Tell me about this, young sir."

Thomas told him on the way to Anne's, and then waited for him at the dry, cracked fountain in Market Square. The clockmaker returned with bread and a cold sausage, sat beside him on the fountain wall and gave him the bread.

"The Changed prefer to hunt in pairs," Mikulas said with his mouth full. "Fitting that we should do the same, yes? We can prevent any more Changes, and avenge that pretty barmaid tonight."

Thomas made a noncommittal noise.

"Now, did you . . . did you get a glimpse of the other? The one who turned your local girl?"

"A glimpse."

"And?" The old man was trying very hard to ask the question casually.

"A woman. Long dark hair. White dress." Thomas closed his eyes, and watched the seared edges of her outline. His eyes hurt. They no longer seemed to fit inside his skull.

"Aha," Mikulas said. "Aha."

"You know her?" Thomas asked, very casual.

"Oh, I've driven that one out of a few of my clocks. Last month in Ridgemoor I set fire to a young fellow she had turned. That's a good clock, the Ridgemoor clock. It has held up well over the years, in spite of a few wretched caretakers."

"Glad to hear it." Thomas chewed his crust.

"And you, you and Hamon seem to take good care of my clock tower here. Very good care. Thanks for that."

"You're welcome. I do replace the ribbons every week."

"Good, good. They tend to fade."

"But this isn't your clock."

"No?"

"No." Thomas chewed a mouthful of bread, and swallowed. "Every part of it has been replaced since you built it. I'm sure of that. Every single piece. And some of the marching figures are completely new. Hamon designed three of them himself. It isn't your clock. It isn't the same."

"I see. Yes, I see. And if I were to cut off your arms and legs, are you less yourself when they grow back again?"

Thomas coughed crumbs across the pavement. "What? Are they likely to grow back?"

“Oh, maybe not. Maybe not. But you take my point, I hope. Do you take my point?”

“No.”

“Good. Now, how are you with a gearwork bow?”

“I have no idea.”

“Good, good.” The clockmaker took his bell from his pocket, rang it once, and put it back. “Now, I do have things to see to, while I’m in town. But I will meet you back here at the fountain by dusk. I’ll bring all the necessaries. Are we agreed? Will we avenge the pretty barmaid?”

Thomas wanted to see the woman. He wanted to fill the empty outline of her. He wanted to commit every nuance of her skin to memory before it blistered and peeled under his gaze.

“Agreed,” he said.

Mikulas was late. Thomas came to the fountain at dusk and sat there, waiting. Townsfolk moved through the Square. Anne walked by and did not look at him. Thomas watched the clock’s glass sun pass underneath a glass horizon line.

“There you are,” the clockmaker said beside him. “Hold these.” Thomas turned and accepted an armful of bow quarrels. “Good. Now wait just a moment.” The old man took two gearwork charms from a leather case, wound them both, and put them back again. Then he took his silver bell from its waistcoat pocket and rang it twice.

“What is that?” Thomas asked.

“This? This is just my grave bell. I ring it for luck.”

He showed Thomas the inscription on the side: *Please exhume if bell rings. Thank you very much.*

“Have you ever heard moans in a graveyard?” Mikulas asked. Thomas shook his head. “No? Surprising. Sometimes it’s just a haunting, of course. Sometimes it is a pair of morbid young people trying to prove that they are less dead than everyone else in the place. I do wish they would do that elsewhere. Certain bodily fluids can create the most appalling things when mixed with grave dirt. In any case, sometimes the moans and screams are just ordinary folk who have had the misfortune to sleep very deeply and wake up in a coffin. Premature burials are not at all uncommon, you know. It helps to have a bell dangling from your gravestone, one with six feet of pull-chain and a nice, friendly ring. People are more likely to dig up something that rings a friendly little bell than something moaning and screaming, don’t you think?”

“Probably,” Thomas said. “Shall we go in?”

“Yes, I believe we should.”

They carried sacks and cases into the tower, and shut the doors behind them. Mikulas stuck his gearwork charms to the back of each door. “These won’t prevent her from coming in, if she is out,” he said. “They will, however, prevent her from going out if she is in.” He gave Thomas a gearwork bow, and

showed him how to load quarrels and how to ratchet the springs.

“Guard the door,” the old man whispered, extending both eyes with his turnkey. “I will creep up to the very top, and keep watch there.”

Thomas nodded, and hid underneath the staircase. He could hear the charms ticking on each door. He set his bow on the floor beside him.

He waited for a long time.

“Have you ever had a conversation with a Changed wolf?” the woman asked him from somewhere nearby.

“No,” he whispered. His heart felt larger than it should be, and it beat as though beating his lungs into submission. “I haven’t.”

“They don’t meet your eyes, not usually, not unless something violent is about to happen to at least one of you. Anything they could judge by facial expression or gesture, any nuance of emotion they will have picked up already by your smell, pooling up in the pores of your skin. They smell it long before you can shape the feeling into words. They can smell intentions on your breath. They can smell lies and ironies.”

“Sounds horrible,” Thomas whispered.

“I find it very sweet, actually,” she said. “Why aren’t you holding the bow?”

“Because I don’t need it,” he said. “Why aren’t you out hunting?”

“Why should I be?” she said. “You’re already here.”

Thomas looked for her. She wasn’t there.

He heard Mikulas shouting in some arcane language, far overhead. The clockmaker’s bow clacked as it fired.

Thomas ran up the winding staircase. “Wait!” he called ahead of him. He had to reach her. He had to look at her before she died.

Wheels turned around him. Gear teeth meshed together. Weights shifted. Clock hands twitched on the other side of the face glass.

“Mikulas!” Thomas called. The clock tower chimed midnight, drowning out any response the old man might have given.

He climbed and searched. Gears turned, and their turning was the only movement he could see.

Hatches opened in the tower wall, and clockwork figures began marching. The duelers dueled with pistols. The dancers spun. The owl caught its mouse.

Thomas saw the clockmaker slumped behind four clockwork soldiers. The soldiers waved spears and muskets as they marched, and Thomas had to wait for them to pass before crossing the track.

“Mikulas?” Thomas pulled the clockmaker up by his stained waistcoat. Both of the old man’s eyes had been broken off. “Did you kill her? Did you?”

The clockmaker coughed, and tried unsuccessfully to blink. “No,” he said, rasping. “Try not to shake me so much, if you would. She’s here. She is somewhere hereabouts.”

Something moved above. Thomas looked. He left Mikulas behind the

track and stepped out into the middle of a platform.

He heard a noise behind him, soft and unlike the clacking of gears. He spun.

“Where are you?”

She put a hand on each shoulder and pushed him down to his knees, standing behind him.

“Here,” she whispered.

“I just . . .”

She reached around and brushed his lips with one finger. “Hush,” she said, her breath on the back of his neck.

“I just want to look at you,” he told her.

Her grip tightened. Then she let go, and stood, and walked around him. She knelt. He saw her face. She flinched. Her skin reddened as she leaned forward.

“I’ll only take this,” she whispered, smiling. She tilted her head, leaned forward and bit into his eye.

Thomas woke in his home with a bandage wrapped around one empty socket. He asked for Hamon, and Hamon came to lead him outside and out of town. They found the eastern crossroads where Mikulas had already

been buried, and they dug him up when the bell began to ring.

“Did she Change you?” Thomas asked. “Or are you just a deep sleeper?”

“I’m really not sure,” Mikulas said, and smiled.

Thomas and the clockmaker spent the next month in the glass workshop, making eyes for each other. They could never perfectly match the tint of Thomas’ new eye to his old one. Blue is a difficult color to make.

Mikulas left for the northern towns. He had other clocks to inspect. “Maybe she’ll be in one of them,” the clockmaker said. “Maybe she’ll be waiting.”

Thomas shrugged.

He took to wearing an eye-patch, because his two eyes could never agree. One eye clearly defined and set apart each thing and every moment. The other saw what was blurred in-between and underneath.

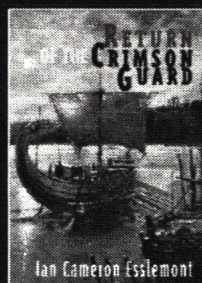
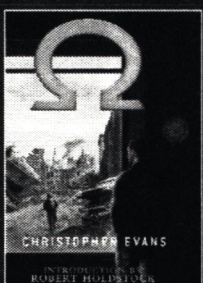
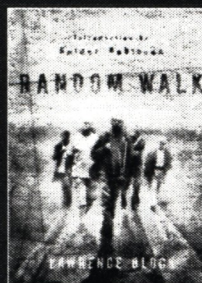
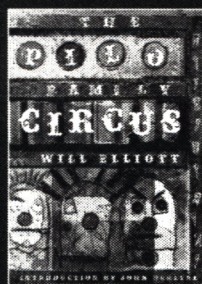
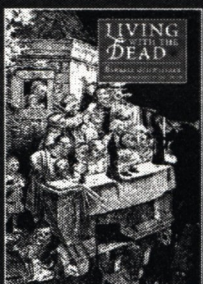
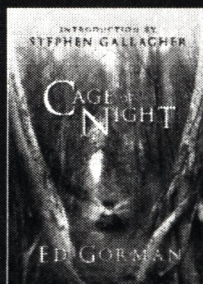
He watched for her with both of them, but only with one at a time. He was never certain he would recognize her with the clockwork eye, so once every night he searched for her with the other one. Every night he shifted the eye-patch over, and looked for as long as he could stand. ☒

COMING SOON IN **Post**scripts

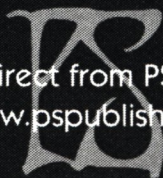
Don't miss Issue 17, Ian R. MacLeod, Jeff VanderMeer, Rhys Hughes, Adam Roberts, and Marly Youmans . . .

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"The Sea of Dead Around Her" is the third in a series of short stories set in the city of Silas Bay. This story takes place directly after the story in Postscripts #14, "The Ghosts We Have Become", and involves survivors who wander around after the bombing of the once great city. "I was inspired by news events and footage from recent wars and occupations of different countries," the author tells us. "I wanted to show the view of war from the ground, from someone who was not a hero." We reckon he's been eminently successful. You can read more about Mr. Jessup and his upcoming Showcase book Glass Coffin Girls at <http://pauljessup.com>.

The Sea of Dead Around Her

Paul Jessup

Lynn sat under the skeletal remains of her house, her photographs scattered across the ground around her. To her left lay her homemade pinhole camera underneath a pile of stone dust and scattered piano keys.

Lynn shuffled the pictures into a neat pile and dusted off her camera. Everything is lost, she thought, everything has changed. She wished she had been able to save more photographs, been able to save more images of the city from before.

Outside she heard the sounds of black dogs barking, their voices like the breaking of glass to her ears. It was the Yellow Coats. They were out, hunting for survivors, for slaves in rebuilding the city in their image. They have done this to us, Lynn thought, they have destroyed us. And now they want to remove any evidence that we have ever lived.

Lynn grabbed an old sack from the floor and shoved the camera inside, as

well as several of her remaining photos and some photo paper. On top of that she placed a bag of some green tea leaves, and a few bottles of darkroom chemicals she had left.

Her husband's body was in the basement. She hid it down there long ago, after the first week when the Yellow Coat army stormed in and fired on civilians, dragging some of them from their houses and firing at point blank into the back of their heads. This was before the bombs were dropped, and the rest of the city fell to chaos.

Lynn felt a pang of regret when she realized she would have to leave his body here. She wanted to give him a proper burial, wanted to be able to grieve for him without fear. She realized that she didn't even have a proper photograph of him, to remember him by. They were all destroyed when her house was bombed.

She crawled into the basement, careful not to fall through the cracks in the concrete stairs that led down. She saw

his body propped up over in the corner, surrounded by sacks of flour and a scattered assortment of rain damaged books on maps. Sunlight filtered in through the cracks in the ceiling above her, a fine mist of ground stone making the room hazy.

Lynn only hoped this was enough light. She pulled over a few wet boxes and stacked them to about eye level. The sunlight landed directly on her husband's face, illuminating the cold grey of his dead skin. She placed the camera on top of the boxes. She moved the camera about until she got a perfect position, and then pulled back the flap, exposing the spiraling concentric rings of the zone plate to the dim sunlight.

She heard barking upstairs, in her house, and the muffled voices of strangers. The voices sounded musical and discordant—like the sound of a broken music box. She wanted to run, to flee, but she had to wait a few more seconds or else the picture would not be exposed long enough and be ruined.

Lynn held her breath. Footsteps near the basement door. All they would have to do would be to look in the holes and cracks in the floor, look down and see her and her husband's corpse. It wouldn't take much.

Someone shouted from outside, closer to the street. Footsteps echoed above her, and the sound of dogs whimpering as they were being dragged outside against their will. A moment later and the world above her was silent.

She placed the flap back down and shoved the camera into her bag. She would have to remove the paper and reload the camera later. Her darkroom had been annihilated in the bomb blasts of last week, and she didn't want to ruin the exposure.

She tiptoed over and kissed her husband goodbye. His skin was clammy against her lips. It tasted like a fish. She ran quickly upstairs, leaving his body in the basement. She hoped he was safe down here, safe from wild animals or the Yellow Coats. She wanted to be able to return to him, to give him a proper burial someday.

For now she had to be happy with just his picture.

A week went by, and Lynn learned how to hide and how not to be seen. She kept a map in her back pocket of places where she could find food, where there was shelter, and where she had seen other people hiding like herself.

One special symbol on her map marked out places she had used to create hidden darkrooms, so she could develop her pictures in private and without the fear of being found and ruining the image. She had taken well over fifty pictures—images of what the city looked like now, and then either kept them in her sack or left them scattered around the city for others to find.

She could overlay the photographs with her mind's eye image of what the

city had once been—overlay these images with the ghosts of the city she had once known. The Silas Bay of her youth. The city felt foreign to her now—foreign and empty.

The only living people she had seen she avoided. She did not want to be a slave. She did not want to be shot. Being in a large group like that would only draw attention from the rebel army, only make it easier for them to find her and destroy her.

The pictures she kept for herself were all pictures of corpses. Something about them struck her as different—whether it was the effect of the camera or the arrangement of the bodies she wasn't sure—but they looked translucent and in motion. It was as if the film had caught them moving for a moment, the dead momentarily alive once again.

Lynn crawled across the bones of a fallen zeppelin, its architecture like ribs in the horrid heat of the sun. She had completely lost track of the days, and had no idea how long she had been out here, just trying to survive.

It didn't take her long to reach the top. When she did she pointed the camera down and into the great bones of the war machine. She then removed the flap and started exposing the picture. She felt sweat trickle along her back, the sun blistering against her skin.

No clouds today. Just the hot sun making the corpses stink in the city streets around her. She wondered if anyone was going to clean up this place,

or if the Yellow Coats were just going to let it stay a ruined mess.

She counted backwards from eight hundred under her breath. From behind she heard barking again, and then a snap of metal chain. Part of her wanted to run, to take off down the street and hide before they caught her. This was too important though, she thought, these pictures. If I run now and ruin this exposure, what would I have left?

Some things aren't worth running from.

Ninety nine, she counted as she heard shouting in that distorted Yellow Tongue from down the cobblestone street. She kept counting backwards as they got closer and closer. Soon it was ten, then it was nine.

A voice now, directly behind her. Shouting in that strange foreign language. She finished counting down and pushed the flap back onto the camera and then turned around. Four strangers wearing long yellow coats stood there, a barking black dog chained to each owner. The haze of the heat made her stomach queasy and sick. Like it was filled with wet stones, splashing around in her intestines.

One of them pointed at her, his dog barking. He then motioned to twin shadows from under the zeppelin. Two girls walked into her line of sight. They both wore oversized Yellow Coats, but had the dark mahogany skin of someone who had lived in Silas Bay.

Lynn also saw the reflected sparkle of clasps around each of their necks

and an iron chain that connected them to each other. Dogs, Lynn thought. They are treating our children like dogs.

“He wants to know what you are doing up there.” The little girl on the right asked her.

Lynn laughed. “Taking pictures,” she said.

The girl on the left turned to the four men and then spoke in a quick and broken series of musical notes. The men nodded, restraining their dogs with their rocklike fists. One of them pointed at Lynn and said something musical and angry.

“He wants to know why you are still here. Why you haven’t gone further north. To a free city.”

Sensing she was in danger Lynn hesitated with her answer. I could climb down, she thought, and then run and try and get away. Or I could stay up here and make them come for me. Maybe when they were climbing I could jump down and escape some way.

The sound of a gunshot scattered her thoughts. She looked down and saw one of the Yellow Coats smiling at her with a revolver in his hand, the pale skin on his face pink from sunburn. “He says,” the little girl on the left recited, “That you answer him when he asks you a question.”

Lynn nodded. “Art. For my art. I am here because I need to be here. I need to take these pictures. I have nothing else. I don’t need anything else. It is what I am.”

The girl on the right translated. Her eyes were dark and dead. Lynn won-

dered if the rebels had drugged them, to keep them submissive and honest. One of the men laughed and signaled for her to come down.

She shimmied down the giant rib of the zeppelin, the air around her stark and dry. She felt her dress get caught on a nail, and had to try and wring it free before finishing the climb. When she hit the bottom one of the men pointed at her satchel and then held out his hand.

“He wants your pictures. You are to give them to him, and you are not to speak. Understand?”

Lynn nodded and then opened her satchel. She pulled out her stack of photographs and handed it to the man. She felt so vulnerable in that moment. No one had seen these pictures except for her, and she didn’t like being that naked in front of a stranger.

The man flipped through the pictures with a look of horror on his face. He showed some to the other men, and they began to shout at her in their strange language. The girls waited for a break to translate, their faces sleepy and relaxed, their eyelids closing into sedated slits.

When they stopped talking one of the men spat on her. She was too afraid to wipe the spit from her face, and instead let it slide down her cheek. “He says you are a terrible human being. You have no right to do this to those who died honorably in war. He then called you a journalistic snake, feeding on the miseries and deaths of others for the sake of art.”

Lynn laughed. She couldn't help herself. They had seen her naked and then called her the pervert. This world was far too strange for her. She felt her knees go out from under her as one of the men kicked her in the legs.

Holding back the dogs they took turns hitting her and kicking her, knocking her head against the cobble stones until she was dazed and bloody. For a moment she was afraid that they would rape her.

Instead, they lifted her up by the shoulders, and then shoved a mug of foul tasting liquid into her mouth and moved her throat forcing her to swallow the fluid. The pain ebbed out of her body, all feeling and all care ebbed out of her body, pooling on the ground beneath her.

They clasped a chain around her neck.

A dog, she thought. I am just another black dog to them now.

Lynn watched the sea outside of Silas Bay breathe in and out against the beaches from her small window. She was chained to a honeycombed remain of a stone wall, her ragged and tattered clothes covered in pools of sweat from the sun. She knew this place. It had once been a hotel, before the war and before the bombing.

She heard two pairs of footsteps and then saw the twin girls approach her room. They were still connected at the neck, shackled to one another. The sun reflected lightly off of their brown skin,

and in their hands Lynn could see a flask of muddied brown water.

They tossed the water at her. She twisted the lid off and drank deep, the stagnant water clinging to her stomach, coating it. When she was done they sat down on the floor in front of her. "Do you know why you are here?"

Lynn nodded. "Because our city was destroyed."

The twins shook their heads no in unison. "You are on trial for what is known to the Yellow Coats as Soul Theft. You have stolen the image of the dead. If you are found guilty, they will kill you."

Lynn nodded, wiping the remains of the foul water from her chin. "And if they don't find me guilty?"

The girl on the left laughed, while her sister stared on, slightly drugged and very serious. "You will be found guilty. Your pictures are the only evidence they need."

"But," the girl on the right said between chuckles, "But! There is a way they can work out a deal with you. Underground and in the sewers there are some survivors from the war. We want you to take a camera and go down below the surface and get pictures from there. See what they are up to. If they are planning a rebellion."

Lynn looked at the two of them. Drugged puppets. Nothing but dogs. They wanted her to be a good dog like them, do whatever her new owners said. Sit. Play dead. Be a spy against her own people. "What if I say yes?"

The girl on the right pulled out a

stack of the pictures and heaped them onto the ground in a large pile. She pulled out a matchbox. "Then we burn the images right now, and there is no proof of the deed you have done."

Lynn nodded. "Ok," she said, "I'll do it."

A snap of the match against the matchbox and a flame bit the air. It smelled of sulfur. The girl tossed the flame down onto the pictures, the air filling with a chemical smell as they burned and curled up into a black mess. That was the last of me, Lynn thought, the last of who I was. Her personality burned away with that same bright flame and she thought I am Lynn no longer. I am just a stranger in Lynn's skin. A dog wearing her flesh like a mask.

One of the men who had beaten her handed her a complex and foreign looking camera. It was strange and cold looking, full of gears and clockwork machinations. She missed the warm wood of her homemade camera, and desired to use it once again.

He explained to her that it was built specifically to be used underground and as a tool for spies. It was the greatest in Yellow Coat technology, a fine example of brotherhood and leadership.

"I want you," he said as the little girls translated, "To take many pictures. And if you can make a map of the underground world, do so. Also, let us know if they have anyone that knows any occult sciences. Or any soldiers. We want a full report."

The stranger that wore Lynn's skin walked out of the hotel in new clothes and a brown satchel slung over her back. She followed their directions, went right downtown and through some alleyways, always searching for what she needed. In some moments she felt the tug of Lynn's memories and the tug of Lynn's personality. But she shoved it aside, keeping Lynn locked away.

Eventually she found the gate going down. Outside a trio of musicians played a funeral dirge, and a tall brown skinned man in a black coat handed her job duties for her new life underground. She was surprised at first, to see that they had lighting below the surface. She was also surprised at how fast she got used to the stink of the sewers and the sweaty, itching skin caused by infections of lice and other insects.

For a moment the stranger in Lynn's skin forgot about the burning images. She saw the man who gave her the instructions, and felt a pull towards him that she hadn't felt in ages. His name was Karac, and it rolled off of her tongue and into her heart. They called him the Sun Bringer. The Alchemist. The God Catcher.

Lynn became Lynn again, the stranger who wore her skin buried deep down inside. She took pictures, but not for the Yellow Coats. She took pictures for herself, pictures that she enjoyed. They let her hang her prints along the long hallways and walls

where they lived, and she became the official photographer of the underground.

Lynn forgot about the Yellow Coats. About her promise to be a spy for them. She hung out with those below ground, and flirted with Karac, even though he was married. She felt him pull towards her as well, and even his sister confided in Lynn that Karac was falling in love with her. Lynn felt bad for Karac's wife, but happy in her own new found bliss.

On the third week things changed. Karac's wife went above ground and found the city to be empty. She thought that all of the Yellow Coats had left, and told everyone it was safe to go up to the surface and rebuild the city.

Lynn remembered what the stranger who wore her skin knew. She knew that the Yellow Coats were still there, waiting for them to surface once again. She tried to warn her friends. Tried to tell them to stay below ground where it was safe. But she could not explain how or why she knew this without betraying their trust. And she could not do that—she could not be lonely again.

Lynn stood in the outside world, the sun in the sky blinding her, the heat in the air making her stink and sweat once again. She grabbed Karac's hand with hers, their sweat mingling briefly. All along the street were pillars of corpses on fire, and the air smelled like burning meat.

"We need to go back down. If the Yellow Coats are gone, then who stack-

ed these bodies, who set them on fire?"

Karac ignored her, pulling his hand free and walking up behind his wife. His sister was behind them, standing in front of the crowd of subterranean people and holding her Morrow Blade sword ready for a fight.

Lynn felt a tremor in the air, felt her body tense up. She saw figures moving in the shells of the houses, the glint of yellow coats in the frames of the honey-combed ruins. She yelled out, tried to warn them, but Karac was too obsessed with freedom. Too obsessed with rebuilding the city and becoming a hero in the eyes of the people.

From all around them came the sound of footsteps. Yellow Coats climbed out of the buildings, came out from the alleyways, stormed the streets with black boots and ready for war. Countless rifles pointed at them, and countless bodies fell as the sound of guns echoed like the rapping of knuckles on stone.

Lynn instinctively pulled out her Yellow Coat camera and began to take pictures. Click, whirr. She took pictures of Karac being riddled with bullets and falling to the ground. When he hit the ground, the placement of his limbs reminded her of her husband. Click. She took a picture of his sister, sword in hand, running directly into the line of fire and dying while still running. Click. His wife on the ground. Click. More bodies falling. Click. Like ballerina movements, graceful, dancing. Click. She snapped a picture of a mother trying to shield

her daughter from bullets. Click. She took a picture of a man trying to make his shirt into a white flag, gunned down while waving it in the air. Click. She took a picture of people scrambling, running, screaming, trying to escape, trying to return back underground and being shot in the back and falling into an abstract pile of limbs and dead faces.

Click. She watched them pile up, the dead upon dead, while she still took pictures. She took pictures of the piles of the dead and of the Yellow Coats as they poured gasoline on the bodies and lit them in new flames. Click. She took pictures of the flames. Click. She took pictures of the enemy even as they sang the Battle Hymn of the Yellow Coat Republic. Click.

When she was out of film, she held the camera to her chest and stood still, holding her breath. The sounds of gunfire ceased. Only a few others stood with her, waiting. Survivors like her, amazingly unscathed by the hail of death around her.

The twin little girls came out from the crowd of the enemy army. They walked up to Lynn and held out their hands for the camera. Always the obedient dog, she handed it to them, her hand still slick with sweat. They smiled at her as they held it, looking her over with a curious glint in their eyes. "Why do you feel the need to exploit the

dead," they asked her, "Why did you take these pictures, even though you knew that pictures of the dead are a crime?"

Lynn laughed and fell to her knees, her head in her hands. "I can't help it," she said, "It was so beautiful. I had to capture it forever. Please, please don't destroy it. Develop it. Display it. Even if you kill me. Show the world. The world has to see this. The world needs to see this. We can't keep censoring what we are and what we do. We need to show the world what we are all capable of."

The little girls laughed and opened up the back of the camera, unspooling the film and exposing it to sunlight. Lynn felt nothing. She was nothing. She was no longer Lynn. She was once again a stranger in Lynn's skin, an obedient dog to be whipped and broken. The girls snapped a collar to her, and chained her to them. She was to be a good little dog, a happy little dog with its brand new owners.

They weren't going to put this dog down, not now not ever. It was too easy to control her. All they had to do was hand her a camera, and threaten her when she made art. Nothing could be easier. They tugged on her chain, and she followed on all fours, crawling over the sea of dead around her.

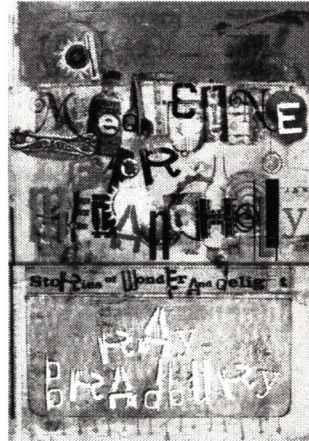
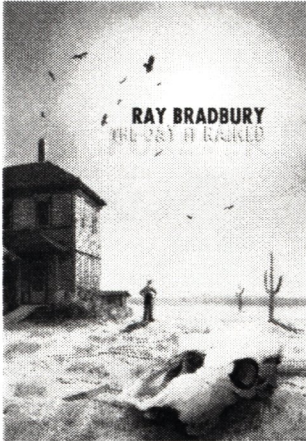


Postscripts

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RAY BRADBURY

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This two-volume Ray Bradbury deluxe gift set includes both *The Day it Rained Forever* and *A Medicine for Melancholy*. Pete Crowther explains the significance:

"As I'm sure you'll already know, *Medicine* and *Rained* were essentially the same book re-titled for the split between UK and US audiences . . . but with four stories different in each title (ie. there are four in *Rained* that are not in *Medicine* and four in *Medicine* that are not in *Rained*). This 100-copy special two-book set will be signed by Ray Bradbury and Caitlin Kiernan, who has written the Introduction."

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Tim Lees, former warehouse worker, film extra, musician, schoolteacher, lithographer, conference organiser, and much besides, is the author of some of the edgiest and most original short fiction around. Here, he again breaks taboos and ventures into unexplored literary territory, in a daring theological odyssey . . .

Tim Lees has been a warehouse worker, film extra, musician, schoolteacher, lithographer, conference organiser, and worked on the secure ward of a psychiatric hospital. Over the last few years his stories, features and reviews have been appearing regularly, to considerable acclaim. Tim Lees has been a warehouse worker, film extra, musician, schoolteacher, lithographer, conference organiser, and worked on the secure ward of a psychiatric hospital. Over the last few years his stories, features and reviews have been appearing regularly, to considerable acclaim.

Gumps

Tim Lees

They're down there. Any moment and I'll see them. Any moment now.

And so I lift the rifle, sight, pick out a big old tree a thousand feet below, swing left: a step, a stone . . . a sudden shock of movement and I tense, but it's a bird, that's all, it's just a bird.

They'll come. Tomorrow, or the next day, or in two hours time. They'll come, and I'll be ready when they do.

There must be hundreds of them now. The birth rate will be exponential, factoring in deaths and variants in litter size. I could devise a formula, perhaps . . . though what it really means is this: they eat each other and they shit each other out.

That's it. That's all there is.

The door's behind me, tight shut, just as it's been since we arrived. I notice how it seems to hold the sunlight, shining with a warm, syrupy glow, and every now and then, a little pulse will rush

across the surface like a ripple, or like some celestial neuron, firing off a message to the world.

That's when I pray.

Oh God, I pray, dear God, please God, oh God, oh please.

The slightest change in light could be a sign, the smallest sound, an omen. In this place every part contains the whole. Here all things interlink: the pattern of the shadows on the wall, the flicker of an insect's wing, the way the stones lie scattered on the slope; like fractals, endlessly repeating, on and on.

I crept up in the darkness, gun across my shoulder, pack upon my back. Elaine and Gordon are both long gone now. I won't see them again. For days I cursed them for betraying me, abandoning me here. Yet now I hardly think of them. They're gone. Irrelevant, just like Elaine once said. My life's come down to simple things, to right and

wrong, to good and bad, the way it was when I was young.

It's funny, how we'd quarrelled over weaponry. All the debate, the hair-splitting and pedantry, the so-called experts we'd brought in . . . Would it be wrong to carry firearms here? Would it be sin, would it be blasphemy? We'd settled on a hunting gun at last, a Lazzeroni. Hunting was sanctioned, went the rationale; hunting was Biblical.

I'm hunting now.

It's ten days since we first broke through. Ten days. Back then I was a different man, with different aims, ambitions and beliefs—a smaller man, I like to think, a petty man, caught up in petty squabbles, too busy quibbling over trivia to ever see the bigger picture. But that's done with now. It doesn't matter if I get promoted over Gordon. It doesn't matter if I pay the mortgage or the child support, or if I eat today. None of it matters. Not unless I get this right.

Already now, it feels as if I've been here years, just watching, waiting . . . Half my life, at least. But that's another name for this place, isn't it? *Eternity*. It's timeless here.

We punched a hole straight through the universe. We opened up a gate.

Ten days ago. Just ten days back.

The gradients were steep, as we'd predicted that they would be. Fierce winds tore through the gap, as if our own world would have sucked the life from this one, gulping down its greater

substance, its more intense reality, the way a vacuum gulps in air. And yet no sooner had it opened than the gate began to close. The edges softened, melted, ran together like a wound trying to heal. The universe was re-adjusting, re-forming round the breach. Within a minute, it had shrunk to half its former size. We hesitated, perched upon the edge, loaded with gear, then Gordon shouted, "Now!" and we were running, falling, tumbling through, to fetch up in a heap upon the ground, half crushed beneath the weight of our own packs.

The gateway shut behind us like a kiss.

We found ourselves in rugged country, beautiful yet oddly desolate. A velvet warmth hung in the air. Great black and yellow butterflies went skittering among the trees, and little, rusty-coloured flies buzzed everywhere. Two small villages were visible up in the hills, but even at a distance it was clear that they were long deserted, falling into ruin. Beyond, the land rose steeply, through forests into mountain slopes where white clouds hung.

The clouds were all we saw at first. It took a while before our eyes became attuned to the peculiar qualities of light here—to its *density*, if I can call it that. We set up camp among the trees near to the shore, busying ourselves with preparations. Then Elaine—who'd spent some minutes staring upwards, shielding her eyes

against the glare—said, “Can you see something . . . ?”

She couldn’t put it into words. The clouds looked like a wall of light. Their brilliance was almost painful to behold, a whiteness mirroring the sun; though neither Gordon nor I saw anything unusual in that: another meteorological phenomenon, to be recorded and collated with the rest.

I checked our packs. I sorted through equipment. Elaine snatched up the camera. She moved around, agitated and intense, her lens aimed at the peaks. A moment later, and she’d seized the laptop, rigging up the leads.

She called to us. “Here, here!”

And that was how we saw it for the first time, on a little screen no bigger than a postcard: the great white citadel of God.

We’d speculated that it must be here, of course. We’d chosen the location carefully. And yet to actually see the thing, even like this, pixels on plastic . . . It took your breath away.

The video seemed to have cued us. Our eyes adjusted quickly after that; within the hour, all three of us could make out something of the vast white walls that soared up, high above the cloud, their tops seeming to blend in with the sky, arching over us and melding with the blue . . .

“I want it all recorded. All of it.” Gordon was in officious mode; “fluster and bluster,” we called it. “I want equipment in a place of safety.” He flapped his arms towards the beach, the woodland—it wasn’t clear just where he

meant. “We stay together. No-one out of sight at any time. Unless I say so. Understood?”

I eyed him sideways. “Nervous, Gord?”

“Cautious, that’s all.”

Elaine and I swapped looks. “Nervous,” she said.

We’d been here just a few hours and already we were sniping at each other. Today it seems impossible that such a thing could happen without consequence . . .

In Cabalistic thought, they reckoned ten created worlds in linear descent, each one a bit further removed from grace, a bit more shoddy than the last. Yet we’d detected more than twenty levels before we’d found a place divinity might manifest. Twenty levels, separating us from God.

There’d been trouble with the project from the start. Funding, politics, resistance from religious groups; the usual knot of rivalries, careerism and score-settling. I’d come in late, with no illusions as to why. By rights, my place should probably have gone to Chen, the theologian, or to Campbell at the Institute, but Gordon’s deft behind-the-scenes manoeuvring had cleverly excluded both. With either one on board, he’d have been forced to give up leadership; I, meanwhile, was seen as anodyne—useful, yes, but far from threatening. In Gordon’s eyes, I was a flunky, little more. Yet I was watching him. Gordon had enemies. He wasn’t

liked, and if he blundered here, which wasn't so unlikely, then it seemed to me that I could only stand to gain from the result.

Elaine was much harder to read, more of an unknown quantity. Rumour was she'd had a fling with Gordon in their Cambridge days, and they'd remained pragmatic allies ever since. To some, she was another of his satellites, there at his beck and call, but it was clear she'd got more bite than that, and, like the rest us, was quietly pursuing some agenda of her own. I found it difficult to picture them romantically involved; and yet the way she needled him, her carping and her often cruel remarks, carried a sense of intimacy, like the bickering of an old married couple. Ex-lovers may make powerful allies, but they don't always make easy ones.

The night thrummed with cicadas. There were bird calls, too, especially a long, low whooping cry we were unable to identify. Initially, at Gordon's prompt, we'd planned on taking watch, but this was soon abandoned. The place was just too peaceful. It felt like nothing here had changed in centuries. At some point, though, I can remember waking—the sky was turning light—aware that Gordon and Elaine were no longer in camp. I looked around; by moonlight, I could see them, faint shapes through the pines, close together, whispering. This troubled me at first—too much a sign of

Institute conspiracies—but then she laughed, a startling, girl-ish giggle that put very different notions in my head. Were they lovers still? And what would that mean, here, in this proto-Eden? The scene was like a dream. I found myself too tired either to interrupt or eavesdrop, and when next I woke, the sun was up, the coffee on. I crawled out of my sleeping bag, said good morning, and strolled the few yards to the spot we'd designated as a toilet area. After that, deliberately defying Gordon's rules, I lit a cigarette and took a detour to the beach. It was the sort of thing I used to do when I was young, a student back-packing in southern Europe. The beach had always been my first—in this case, second—place of call.

The light out in the open was already fierce, but the temperature was mild, softened by a faint sea breeze. The sea itself lay slack and calm, no further shore in sight. It was impossible, though, not to speculate. Might there be people here, in other lands? Keeping a healthy, awe-struck distance from the Lord?

I finished off my cigarette. I dug my toes into the sand.

Elaine's voice cut the air like razors. A shout, a shriek—

I turned, and ran.

Back in camp, a full-scale row was going on. It made my vision of the night before, with all its tenderness, seem foolish and delusional.

"It's not a case of cowardice," Gordon was saying. "You will persist in reading your own moral judgements into everything, won't you? This is much more—"

"Cowardice is your word," said Elaine. "The word I used was *caution*. A word that, I recall, you used your-self, just yesterday. And it's plain absurd to waste time chasing the sort of trivia that any idiot can track down in the follow up. Where's your curiosity? Your basic, human need to know?"

"Believe me, I'm as curious as anyone. I'm just saying—"

"You know that if we miss this chance, that's all we'll get? Someone else'll be here next. They're queuing up for it. And if we're not the first, then you can guess what that will mean. Career-wise."

"And if we muck it up, then you can guess what *that* will mean—*career-wise*," he sneered. "I want an organised, responsible approach. If you see that as cowardly—"

"Your word, again."

"That's what you mean, though, isn't it?"

Gordon was flustered, red in the face. Elaine, by contrast, after her initial outburst, seemed to have the situation well in hand. "Let's put it this way, shall we? Who was the first man on the moon?"

"Quiz night, is it?"

"Just answer me. I'm trying to make a point."

"Aldrin. No, no—Armstrong. So?"

"And who was first to circumnavi-

gate the moon? Who scouted out the territory? Who prepared the ground?"

"That's irrelevant."

"Yes." She smirked. "And so will we be, if we don't go back with something pretty fucking big. We'll be like all those lost explorers who never found the source of the Nile. We'll be foot-notes. That's all we'll be."

Gordon looked down, sully as a little boy. His lower lip stuck out. "I'm talking about one day," he said. "Two, at most. Scout round, get the lie of the land. Make sure it's safe. After the warnings—"

"And I'm talking about now. Today." She looked up, nodded to me, though I wondered if she wasn't just alerting Gordon to my presence. She told him, "Let John see what you've found."

He'd set the laptop on its fallen log again. He clicked a switch and powered it up.

"This will knock your socks off," said Elaine.

The icons flickered into view. Gordon leaned over them, blue light gleaming on his face.

"I've done enhancement on the stuff we shot. I think you'll find it . . . interesting." He touched the screen. The player skin flashed on, and we were looking at a view of hills, panning upwards to the ghostly luminescence of the palace wall itself. He touched again and froze the scene.

"See here? There's some sort of approach road, right? A path, at any rate. You see?" He touched the upper corner,

zooming in. He fiddled with the contrast.

“Looks like stairs,” I said.

“The point is,” said Elaine, not giving time for me to think, “dear Gordon here, out of some admirably misplaced reverence—if that’s what it is—believes we should delay the main point of our mission for a charming little hike around the hills and some impromptu sightseeing. Stop at a bar, perhaps. He knows a lovely little restaurant—”

“Shut up, will you?” Gordon switched off the machine, conserving power. He turned to me. “As I was trying to tell her majesty here, the chances are we’re dealing with a powerful force—*ultimately* powerful, I might say—about which we know very, very little. In a place about which we know very, very little. There’s been habitation here. There may be—I don’t know, people here, natives, or visitors like us. The possibilities have been discussed, the policy was clear, we are therefore—”

“Oh, come off it, Gord. A force about which we know a very great deal.” Elaine wrinkled her nose at him. “A force which probably shaped human evolution, which raised us from the apes, which gave us hands to grasp and brains to think with. Some of us, at least.”

“A force which, by most accounts, has proved ambivalent towards humanity, and on occasion even—”

“God is love!” she spat back, angrily.

“Yes. And He is also vengeance, wrath and justice. Do you want to face a just God? *Truly* just? A God who’ll

judge you, everything you’ve ever done, every thought you’ve ever had?”

“Catholic bullshit.”

“You’re the Catholic,” he told her. “Lapsed, as I recall.”

I stepped between them, forced to act as referee. I told them they were both right; we needed to fulfil objectives, it was true, only we had to do it safely. I talked at length, trying to smooth things over. When I’d done, Elaine looked up at me.

“Diplomat,” she scoffed, but there was something just a bit flirtatious in the way she caught my eye; and she made sure that Gordon saw it, too. “Good job you’re here,” she said.

We compromised. We would, of course, investigate the stair-way; but today, it would be strictly for reconnaissance. On our way, we’d make a brief inspection of the nearest village. Any danger signs (pillars of salt, we joked, or curses writ in blood), then we’d revise our plans. To me, though, danger still seemed very far away.

Elaine chivvied us on. I’d never known a woman so impatient, so intent on getting her own way. I remembered a remark she’d made during our training, weeks ago: “The Lord can be petitioned,” she’d announced. It had all seemed innocent enough back then—some bit of doctrine dredged up from her childhood. Now, I wondered if she hadn’t something special in her mind, a lobby of her own to press. No wonder she was keen to make the trip.

We walked out to the nearest village, delving in the ruins. Gordon shot video. It was a sad, derelict place.

"You notice," said Elaine, "no ornament. Good, sturdy structures, but no decoration. I was hoping, perhaps, if we were lucky—"

"What?" Gordon put the camera down. "Pictures of God?"

"Yes. Why not? Why the hell not?"

I said, "Perhaps they didn't need the pictures. Perhaps they had the real thing."

"We wouldn't need them either," she said, glaring at Gordon, "If certain people hadn't got their way."

And so we climbed. Higher and higher. The path was long, but not too arduous; we zig-zagged back and forth. In parts, the hillside had been terraced to grow crops, long since abandoned; then even these few signs of cultivation ceased. The cloud came down like fog. We climbed through it, back into the sun.

And came to something else.

Steps.

The rock was cut with such precision, each block fitted the next so perfectly, at first it seemed the stair-case had been carved all of a piece, straight out of the mountainside; only close inspection showed the hair-line joints between. The blocks were of considerable size. Each step was nearly fourteen inches high. Both scale and building skill suggested quite a different culture from the people of the villages. The

climb was wearying. Soon we were stopping every ten or fifteen minutes to look back and rest. Here and there, tall, wind-bent pines bestowed some needed shade. But not even a blade of grass, not a patch of moss grew on the stairs themselves. It was as if a team of maintenance men worked hourly to scrape them clean.

And at the top of the stairs—it was late now, we were very tired—we found a door.

It was a single, plain door, twice our height, topped by a simple arch of stone. The wind rippled our clothes, fussed with our hair. The sun was warm against our skin. We didn't move.

We liked to see ourselves as trained, dispassionate investigators, scientists who made assumptions about nothing, tested everything; yet for a long, long time, not one of us would touch that door. Something about it . . .

Its whitish metal was embellished with a thousand tiny indentations, making up no pattern we could see; at least, there seemed to be a pattern there, but it defied the eye, or possibly the brain, to actually discern it.

Elaine said, "Gold over acacia wood . . ."

"You know that?"

"I'm betting." She struck a lecturer's pose, head back, one hand on her hip. "Ark of the Covenant," she said. "I'm betting it's the same design."

"Oh yeah. You touch the thing and—*bam*. I saw the film."

"Ha ha." And then, as if I'd issued her a challenge, she took three quick

steps, and placed her palm upon the metal. We all held our breath.

Nothing happened.

“Well well.” She smiled, mugging for us, masking her relief. I realised later she’d been waiting until Gordon had the camera on her. Immortalised at last.

“It tingles,” she said then, talking to the lens. “It’s sort of warm. Like there’s machinery behind it. Or it’s alive . . .”

So each of us went up and tentatively, cautiously, reached out . . . I felt it too, a slight vibration in the metal, varying in pulse.

“Layers of wood and metal,” Gordon said. “That sounds like something out of Reich.”

“An orgone accumulator? Really, Gord . . .”

“Why not? Focusing the power of the cosmos. Focusing it all on God.”

“Nice idea,” she said. “Shame Reich went mad.”

We were worn out on the journey back—exhausted, physically and mentally. The sun sat low over the sea, the light grew smoky, and we left the steps, taking the dirt track down towards a coast that seemed as small and distant as the bottom of a well.

Then Gordon said, “What’s in that tree?”

“Which tree?” But even as I spoke I saw the one he meant: a tall, yellow pine, still bright against the sky; and in the branches something moved, a sinu-

ous, constricting motion, like a hawser being tightened.

“It’s a snake,” Elaine said.

“No. Not a snake . . .” There were other parts to it as well, an arm that angled up into the foliage, perhaps a crab’s claw, copper-coloured, glinting in the sun . . .

Elaine took two steps forward, bent, scooped up a small handful of stones, and then, before we’d a chance to stop her, threw them—one, two, three.

She was a good shot. The hawser moved again, the branch it clung to shuddered, rattling in the heavy air.

Gordon said, “Wait—” But already she’d another stone in hand. She launched it, and it clattered through the branches, thumping on the dusty soil. For maybe three, four seconds, nothing happened. Then the whole tree shook.

Pine needles flew everywhere. The branches thrashed. There came a crack, the screech and scrape of splitting wood, and something tumbled to the ground, big as a bear and buzzing like a nest of hornets. Dust whirled round it, and it sprawled there, tangled for a moment in its own limbs—ugly, joint-ed limbs, that jutted up at all angles. Too many of them. Far too many. A long, black tail flicked out behind, and in the centre of the mass, a twisting, snake-like thorax swayed, topped by a gleaming, wicked little head, blunt as a cudgel.

My feet moved backwards of their own accord. I couldn’t stop myself. Only Elaine managed to hold her ground. She and the creature stared at

one another, eye to eye. It flexed its knuckled limbs, it clicked and whirred like cheap machinery. Dust fell on its carapace, and all over its body, sharp little hairs began to ripple and rotate as if to cleanse itself. There was a sense of purpose, even calculation in the way it poised there, watching us, yet—how can I put this?—no warmth, no sense of empathy, of anything that you could recognise or reach towards. Its blunt, ungainly head swung back and forth, its face all knobbed and flanged like an old Medieval shield; and now, out of a slit tucked in the lower parts, a gash that could have been a mouth, a little bud of bright pink flesh slid out and opened to the daylight like a flower. Waving cilia licked the air. It tasted, measured, and withdrew. The head ducked low. The legs pushed upwards, crab-wise, the buzzing sound grew louder, veering up in pitch and volume—

Elaine, still closest, raised her hands, uttered a shaky, “H-hello?” Behind her, Gordon simply stared, frozen.

I remember only fragments of what happened next: seeing it leap, that sudden bound, and then Elaine was gone, knocked sideways, or she jumped—I don’t know which. But Gordon fell. I heard him shout. I saw the dust fly up, and knew that in a moment everything would vanish in a hot, dry fog. If I was going to act, I had to do it now.

The gun was in my hand. I didn’t think. I raised it, aimed it.

And I blew the creature’s head off.

I danced around, my feet drumming the ground, ready to dodge a second

charge. I was too scared to move in close. A ghastly, sticky ichor oozed across the dirt, and the smell—the smell was sickening, harsh and sour, like burning rubber. I felt my guts contract. I fired another shot. A third. And then Elaine was saying, “Alright, John. Alright. It isn’t going anywhere.”

I nodded, still moving, and she said again, “It’s *alright*.”

Slowly, I put the gun up. Gordon lay, half-pinned beneath that dreadful carcass, and I felt a moment’s horror that I might have shot him by mistake. But his lips moved, forming—it astonished me—a rumbled little smile.

“Told you,” he said, looking at Elaine.

I wouldn’t touch the beast. Whatever it might be, I wouldn’t touch it. I kicked at it, I moved its crooked limbs aside using the rifle butt. The legs were lined with little bristles, almost like cactus spines. Gordon’s arm was scratched, blood seeping in a thin, red lace. “I think I’m hurt,” he said, with mild surprise. We dragged him clear and helped him to his feet. Almost at once he grunted and collapsed. I caught him. His ankle had been twisted, may-be fractured when he fell. He couldn’t put his weight on it. Already it was starting to swell up; we took his shoe and sock off, helped him to sit up. His voice was level, and he talked about the pain as if it were a thing outside himself, a simple point of study. I knew that wouldn’t last.

Gordon kept us busy. Nonetheless, I couldn’t keep from glancing at the brute, as if at any moment it might

spring to life again. Inert, it looked like something dredged up by a deep sea trawler, some lost horror left to rot upon the beach. I think the one thing we both wanted—Elaine and I—was just to go, to get away from it. From it, and any friends it might have near.

We rearranged the contents of the packs. Elaine, of course, wouldn't abandon anything, but after struggling a few yards, admitted we'd no choice; we ditched the water bottles, then—reluctantly—the battery pack and part of our recording gear, left hidden in the bushes. Gordon leaned on me, his arm around my neck.

The rest of our descent was far from pleasant.

I stumbled, soaked with sweat. I scanned the trees ahead, I kept on looking back. Only the fear we'd meet another of those monsters kept us going. Soon, just as I'd known he would, Gordon began to feel the pain. He moaned, he whimpered; his voice whined in my ear. This hard, ambitious man was suddenly dependent on me. In other circumstances, I would probably have relished the experience. But not here.

It was dark before we reached the camp. Elaine gave him a shot of morphine ("Come on, Gord. You'll like this."). His ankle was now swollen and discoloured, as best we could examine it by torchlight. "Let's hope it looks worse than it is." She caught my eye. I knew exactly what she meant: getting Gordon back would mean abandoning the mission. It wasn't just a case of sending

him on home; we'd have to power up the beacon first to make the link. The batteries would generate enough for just a single opening, and then no more. Either we all went back, or none of us. Once home, there'd be some mild celebrity, but, as Elaine had said, the real prizes would fall to someone else. Our one chance would be lost—and probably for good.

I was surprised, at once, how very much that mattered to me. More than I'd imagined possible.

Gordon grew quieter. Elaine and I stayed close, talking in quiet tones.

She said, "We'll see it in the morning. Maybe it's just bruised."

"And if it's not . . . ?"

"If he can hold out for a few days, the two of us can cover the same ground. It won't make that much difference."

"He's in pain. And I don't like the look of that arm much, either. Jesus . . . I don't want to go back, I really don't. But . . ." I looked down at the ground. "And that—that thing. That changes what we're doing here, you know? That, that . . ."

"It was intelligent," she said. "You noticed?"

"It was ugly. Vicious, too."

"Well. It might have thought the same of us."

Then I remembered what had happened.

"You attacked it."

"Hardly."

"You threw fucking stones at it!"

"Only to get it in the open. Find out what it was."

"If not for that, though, if not, we wouldn't be—"

"It weighed us up. It sniffed us. It wanted to know what we were. That's exciting, don't you think? It made *decisions*. And that's very, very interesting."

"You attacked it first!"

"I . . . nudged it, that's all. And listen. You should know, this isn't . . . well. It's not entirely unexpected. There was a chance we'd find somethin . . . maybe not like this, but . . . It was in the briefings." She took a breath. "My briefings."

"Your briefings." I echoed without comprehending her; aware the words held some significance, not seeing what it was.

Elaine stepped back under the trees. Out of the moonlight now, her face became unreadable.

She said, "Let's say that the potential had been recognised, shall we?"

"I don't know. Shall we?"

"D'you have a cigarette on you?"

I reached into my pocket.

"Thanks," she said.

"So what was it? An angel? Like *Ezekiel*? Wings of eyes, all that?" I couldn't keep the sneer out of my voice. "Or else the opposite?"

"Neither, I think."

Lighting up gave her a certain confidence, the manner of a cabaret performer. She blew the smoke out, tilting back her head. The little coal of ash lit up her sharp, determined features.

"It started a few weeks ago. They got some kind of signal on the monitors—interference, really. Movement in the

flow, something they'd never seen before. That's why they brought the start date forward. The theory—at least in some circles—was that someone else was trying to get here first."

"You're telling me that, that *thing* comes from another expedition? Like ours?"

"There are other worlds. We know that. Worlds below, as well as worlds above. Of course, it could be just some local lifeform. A rather nasty sort of predator . . . if we're lucky."

"That preys on what? There's no large animals. Not even goats. Unless it ate them all."

"So Eden's got a serpent." She dropped her cigarette end, ground it underfoot. "I don't know if we've just made the most brilliant discovery in history or ruined our whole fucking lives. It means we've got some things to do. Pick up the gear we left, for one. And get some tissue samples. Christ. You know we didn't even take a picture? That was really unprofessional."

"Did Gordon know about it, too?"

"None of us *knew*. It was all speculation. It's *still* all speculation, God's sake. But when I saw the buildings here . . . It's obvious they weren't a functioning community. You spotted that, I'm sure? My guess is, whoever lived there started as a group like ours. Stayed on, for some reason. Grew old, died out . . . years ago, I'd say. We're not the first to come here. Though I did think, if we found someone, they'd be a bit . . . a bit more human, I suppose." She shrugged. "And for the record, I didn't like the secrecy

much either. High-level clearance and all that. You know the way they work. And it was such an outside chance. Statistically. In every way. . . .”

“Don’t tell the hired help.”

I was angry all at once. She heard it.

“And what would you have rather done?” she said. “Stayed home?”

“I—”

“Not an option, was it? Not for any of us.” And she reached out, tapped me on the shoulder, almost playfully. “Boy preacher.”

Unlike her, I didn’t laugh.

It’s easy to make fun of adolescent faith. My own was no exception, I suppose: a tangle of anxieties and sublimations, ancient texts and coffee-cup philosophy; any half-bright undergraduate could probably have pointed out its flaws and contradictions (and indeed, a number of them did). Nevertheless—for just a few years in my teens, I’d had a sense of purpose and direction I would never have again. Belief had burned inside me like a star. I went to church three times a week, attended prayer groups and Bible class, took part in numerous “crusades” to nearby villages; and dreamed, in my most secret dreams, of growing up to be a great evangelist, a true disciple, even a missionary or a martyr, if the Lord decreed.

Instead, I went to Oxford, as my parents wanted. I started a career, a family, and bit by bit, that sense of being special, singled out by God, wilted away, withered and died. There was no crisis,

no decision; certainly no dark night of the soul. I never felt I was rejecting Him; rather, just putting Him aside a while, to concentrate on other things.

Only in the bleak years after my divorce, I realised that the faith which I’d so casually abandoned was no longer there to be picked up again. I knew my creed, I knew my Bible, even the hymns were half familiar; but something—some deep core of genuine belief—was gone, and couldn’t be regained.

It’s no coincidence, I think, how many of us on the project had endured some similar disjunction in our lives. Elaine, who’d never quite cast off the lesson of the nuns who’d brought her up; Gordon, the atheist, forced to admit to the existence of a power that even he could only speak about as God.

Our pasts came with us, held us, governed us, as surely as genetic code. When I was young, I had believed in free will. It was doctrine, after all; religion ratified it. Science, though, permitted no such luxury. . . .

We took watches through the night, the first time we’d felt need to do so. Neither of us slept for long. I tried to pray, but physical proximity to God brought little sense of intimacy, much less the loving father-son relationship I’d dreamed of in my youth. I had to make my own decisions now, and I was far from sure that I was capable.

The morning came. Gordon was worse. He seemed to know us only intermittently. When we took the dress-

ing off his arm, the scratches had grown angry and inflamed. I feared septicaemia.

“We’ve got to send him home.”

She was reluctant, even then. “There’s things to do. He might recover . . .”

“He might die.”

“There’s things to do!”

“I don’t think we can take the risk.”

“Then one of us,” she said, “will have to go back up,” she nodded to the hills, “and fetch the gear. While one of us stays here to get things ready.” Her smile today was far from pleasant. “You want to toss a coin?” she said.

I’m not a brave person. I never was. But I was taught never to shirk a hard task, nor to let a woman do a job that I could do instead. Sexist, perhaps, but that’s my upbringing.

Unless it was just pride. Not chivalry at all, but crude, perversely macho pride.

The path was easy to retrace. I carried almost nothing: water, and the gun. Yet even on a direct route, it took a good couple of hours to reach the spot. And then, despite my best efforts, it seemed that I’d miscalculated.

I’d marked the place we’d left the gear. I’d marked it in my mind: the Y-shaped tree that hung over the track, the bushes under it, the slope below. I’d looked at it from every angle, memorised it.

The tree was there. The equipment wasn’t.

I dabbed my brow. I shut my eyes, as if the sheer intensity of light was making me hallucinate, or miss the obvious.

I checked the bushes all around, a hundred yards this way and that.

Nothing.

My chest was tight. My head pulsed from the heat and the exertion. I pressed on, up the path, the rifle in my hands. I still had one more task ahead of me.

Again, I knew the place. I was sure of it. I saw the broken branches, pine needles all scattered on the ground. Kicking through the dust I came on cakes of dried, black blood.

The carcase, too, had vanished, all but chunks.

I rummaged in the dirt. I put on surgical gloves, picked out a few small goblets of the dried black meat, stiff now, and sealed them into plastic bags. Only the need to do this—the cold, hard, scientific need—kept the panic coiled up in my chest.

The equipment gone, the body gone.

Till now, I’d thought the horror we’d encountered was a one off; hell’s equivalent of John Glenn or Gagarin. The evidence said otherwise.

I wanted to run back. I was so horribly alone. I stumbled down the path, quick as I could. I kept looking behind. The chitter of the insects filled my ears, nagging at me, screaming. The sky was like a mirror. And this place—this was never Heaven: no, no, no. More like some bleak suburb of Hell, painted to look like paradise . . .

She said, "You take him back. I'm staying."

"No. It's all of us. It's got to be."

"All for one and one for all?" Her face was pinched under the dirt. "Don't think so."

"Is this career again?"

"Oh . . . if you like."

"Fuck's sake. That thing's got friends. They found the gear. They know we're here. It's just a matter of time, and when they turn up on the doorstep—"

"I've thought it through. And it's . . . it isn't just career. I know that's what you're thinking. And that's important to me, yes, I won't deny it. But there's more at stake. There's . . ." She sighed. "This is the last thing that I want, believe you me. The very last."

I rubbed my boot heel on the ground. "Something else I wasn't told?"

"If I'd a better choice, I'd take it. And I'm saying now—I want a team back here as fast as possible. Military, if you can. I'm depending on you, John. I really am."

I'd reached my last two cigarettes. I passed her one.

I said again, "We'll all go. That's the safest way. The fairest way."

"That thing we killed. What do you think it wants?"

I shrugged.

She said, "We can assume it's in a group like ours. Three, maybe four or five at most. Assuming, again, technology not too far from our own. They won't bring more, they won't have power. Why are they here? What do they want with God?"

Again, I scuffed my boot into the sand. "Tea and sympathy. Next week's lottery results. Christ! I don't know."

"You're wasting time. Listen. They want what we want. The very same. What everybody wants from God. *Propitiation and petition*. That's what it's about. Forget your happy-clappy Christians. All that bullshit you grew up with. That's not real. That's just the kiddies' view. It's spin. It's candy floss." She sucked her cigarette, recited, darkly: "*Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our trespasses*. That's what we want, what we need. And it's what they want, too." Her gaze dropped to the ground. "And anything that they want, can't be good for us."

"Prove."

"You saw the fucking thing. And God—well, God's got his chosen people, right? That's how he works. Perhaps we've had our stint. Perhaps it's their turn now. Just think on that. He's not been . . . well. He's not been welcoming, has he?"

"You think—"

"It's not a chance that we can take." She dropped her cigarette. "Leave me the gun. I'll keep them off the stairs, away from the door. You can be back here in an hour or two, if you're persuasive. I'll be fine till then. Far as we know, they don't have firearms. I shouldn't have much trouble. It's the only safe way. You know that."

"Can you fire a gun?"

"I'll learn."

"Not here, you won't. Start shooting, they'll be on you like—"

“You point the thing. You squeeze the trigger. Bang. So what?”

“Clint Eastwood.” I looked at her. Her hair hung down in strings, and dark skin bagged under her eyes. “Or is it Joan of Arc today?”

“The fact remains,” she said, “that someone’s got to do it.”

But I could see the sense. That’s the infuriating thing. Even if it all turned out a false alarm, there was a logic in her plan I couldn’t fault. The place was calm, but fragile as a spider’s web. I sucked the last out of my cigarette. And then it struck me—what the flaw was. She’d got it backwards. One of us would have to stay, alright, only it wasn’t her.

I said, “Listen. I spent half my childhood potting tin cans, rabbits, all that stuff. This is ridiculous. If anyone should stay, it’s me.”

“We don’t have time to argue over this.”

“And you don’t have the skills,” I said. “I’m staying, right? Me. You get Gordon back, get people here, and pick me up. That’s that. I’ll hold the fort. There’s nothing going to happen anyway, I’m sure. If that thing’s got its friends here, they’ve got reason to be scared of us. Which is just fine by me. They’ll stay away.”

I’d wonder later at how easily she’d acquiesced; a little token argument, and then she’d nodded, just like that. Perhaps she’d liked the reasoning. Or else . . . perhaps it’s what she’d wanted all along, the whole proposal no more than a trick, a bit of crude reverse psy-

chology, to make me stay, and let her go. Back home to claim the glory. Home to her career. Suspicions whisper now, like voices in the head. Yet had she really read me well enough for that? Could I be so transparent?

I can’t judge her. There might be other problems, technical, political, financial—all kinds of things. She’s ruthless and ambitious, I know that, but not murderous. Oh no. Not murderous . . .

I’m here because I’m needed here. Because there’s got to be a reason. There’s got to be, that’s all.

Seven days now. Seven days alone. I’ve been more scared than ever in my life before. I’ve seen things nobody should have to see, things that made me wonder how the world exists with so much ugliness and terror in it. And yet then, at some point, something seemed to happen to me, and the fear was gone. It was as if I’d moved beyond what I could bear, I’d left myself behind somehow, and something else—a force I still can’t name—took over. And since then, it’s all been very, very clear.

The first two days I kept returning to the camp. I checked the beacon, rigged a bleeper to alert me when it’s active. I expected rescue any moment, but as the hours went by that hope diminished, and by the third day I knew something had gone wrong. There’d be no rescue, no escape. I was lost here. Shipwrecked.

I climbed the stairs again. I’ve been up to the door now many times. I’ve

lost my fear of touching it; I've hammered on it, shouted at it, pressed myself against its warm, pulsating surface. I've kissed it. Whispered to it, lovingly. Spat upon it. Railed against it. Threatened, cursed, accused.

I've begged it. Begged it many, many times.

There's no reply. No burning bush, no thunderous voice. Only the faintest tingle through the metal, and the promise of a life beyond.

While I'm marooned here, outside. Out here with the gumps.

That's what I call them. It's a childhood name, a playground bogeyman; it makes them seem—not less frightening, perhaps, but just a bit less alien, less difficult to think about.

They've got a base camp, much like ours. Elaine was right, I guess; they must have started as a small group, three or four, perhaps a half a dozen at the most. They settled in a valley to the west. I tracked them down. I sought them out. I feared them and because I was afraid I had to see them, and to find out what they were.

I heard them first. Hissing, clicking, whirring, like a thousand furious machines all running simultaneously. I came in from above, from high up in the hills, the sound rising to meet me, guiding me in. I crept under the bushes, hid behind the trees. I reached a precipice. The nest lay down below, a great, round valley, like a cauldron, sheltered from the sun.

A building had been raised up at the centre, twenty feet in height, an odd,

unsettling structure, slanted roofs and walls all twisted out of shape as if by some internal spasm.

The gumps were all around.

Not three or four, as I'd imagined it. Not half a dozen. There were fifty, sixty, maybe more, swarming there like maggots in a jar, their bodies coiled together in a mockery of coitus. The big ones strode amongst their fellows on great, stilt-legs, while tiny, pallid incunabula rummaged like fleas over their armoured hide. And for a while, that's all I saw, the mass of writhing, tangled bodies; only later I began to notice purposeful activity, co-operation—signs of the intelligence that had so thrilled Elaine. Here, a group was busily assembling a second structure, with the same peculiar, slanting platforms, angled struts and rails; there, two creatures, face to face, engaged in some mysterious communion . . .

Yet I felt nothing. I watched as if it were a movie, or a dream. A thing apart from me. And then, in that detached state, piece by piece, the understanding came.

They eat each other and they shit each other out.

It starts off with a challenge. A push, a shove, a bit of jostling for position. Then some small sign of weakness—a flinch, a shrinking back—and straight away, the victim's marked.

They round on it. They face it down. It's never one on one, it's always two or more, the big ones ganging up against the little ones, the strong against the weak, like playground bullies: gumps.

They nip, they snap. They circle. If their quarry fights, perhaps they'll back away. If not, the nips will turn to bites, the feints to slashes, rips, and severed limbs. They fight like dogs, coming in from all sides, wearing down their prey. Exhausting it, and eating it alive.

That's all I saw at first. The fights, the killings. And the feasts.

It took a while to put it all together. That, and what came next.

Satiated, those who've eaten become sluggish. They settle, bellies to the ground, seemingly vulnerable now themselves; and yet their fellows never touch them, won't go near. The violence is over, banished as by instinct or by tribal prohibition.

I was perching on the cliff edge, high above. The nearest of the victors lay a bare few hundred yards away, its foreparts drenched in ichor; and I was watching it when suddenly it shook, a spasm racking it from head to tail, shooting through it twice, three times, and then again. I stared, astonished and repulsed. Was this some kind of fit? Was it injured, somehow? Poisoned?

It tipped itself onto its rear legs, shuddering once more, and then a moist, putty-coloured substance squeezed itself from underneath the carapace, dropping to the ground. Excrement, I thought. The other creatures, too, began to tremble, shake. And then I saw this lump of dung, this ordure, squirm and twist, put out a slender, infant leg, and shakily pull itself erect.

It tottered to its feet, lifted a blunt head to the sky.

I realised then what must have happened to the body in the hills, the one I'd killed, and why there'd been so little left of it. They'd got there first, and used it: fed themselves, and bred.

My old habits die hard, and even now, I can't help wondering. Imagine a digestive system, say, absorbing DNA intact, reproducing it at a record rate, in half an hour or less. A population that redoubles, every time it eats.

And here's a bit of biological determinism, too: in general, we human beings reproduce by acts of mutual consent, co-operation—even, if you want to say it, love. And most of us are hardly saints. The gumps give birth through harassment and murder. What does that make them, then? How do they think, and feel?

Elaine was worried they'd petition God, seek out the patronage which, in more modest form, I now believe she wanted for herself. She judged them by her own desires; she never grasped the difference in their physiognomy, and therefore in their minds. The fact that others might have very different plans from hers.

Let them devour the flesh of God. A true communion. Let them eat him and then shit him out, reborn into their own image, infernal God, all-holy-gone-to-hell. Their re-creation. Their own re-making of the universe.

I wish I had a cigarette. Another gun to fire. I wish that there was someone here to help me, and I wasn't so alone.

I wish that God would speak out of the place behind the door, would offer me his aid, his sustenance.

And yet already it's too late. This is the day, the hour.

A shadow's rising slowly up the hill. I've watched it for a long time without thinking; only now, as I look up, I realise there are no clouds in the sky to cast it, and when I look back down, I see it's not a shadow after all, more like a flicker in the landscape, a trace of movement, darkening the ground. I put my eye up to the rifle scope, guessing beforehand what I'll see.

It's them. They work their way along the paths, under the trees, over the ru-

ined houses and abandoned fields. They climb, they scramble over obstacles. They move with an inexorable slowness, dream-like and unstoppable.

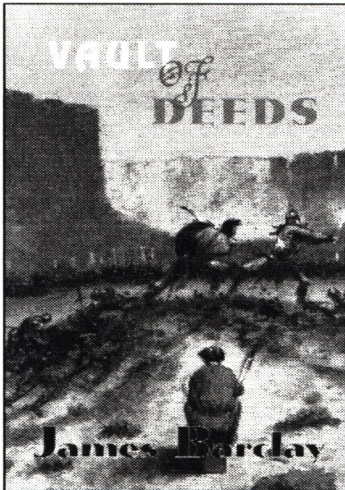
Not hundreds of them. Thousands, coming for me. Thousands upon thousands. And their ranks darken the ground.

My guts clench in a stab of fear, but straight away I block it and it's gone. Then there's just me, here, and the job I've got to do.

I've found my faith again. I lift it to my shoulder, feel its weight, take aim, and gently, gently, squeeze the trigger.

Faith is easy. Faith is simple. Like Elaine said: *bang.* ☒

OUT NOW a novella by JAMES BARCLAY



The status quo is being upset so much it feels distinctly queasy. You see, in the land of Goedterre, good always triumphs over evil. Or that's how it should be. But something is wrong.

Across the land, invincible heroes are meeting their dooms at the hands of opponents who have clearly practiced beforehand. It simply will not do. Too many books are closing for good in the Vault of Deeds. Too many scribes are looking for new heroes. The spectre of invasion raises an ugly head on which altogether too much expectancy is plastered.

Signed Hardcover £25.00 and Hardcover £10.00

Brendan is an Australian author with a PhD in the deep molecular evolution of mammalian sex chromosomes, in which he compared the genetics of Australia's unique marsupials and monotremes to those of mice and men. Brendan's short stories have been published in Hartwell & Cramer's Year's Best Fantasy, and Congreve & Marquardt's Year's Best Australian SF& Fantasy, and a novel based on the intricacies of renaissance science and natural magic is in the pipeline.

Brendan described "The Green Man" to us as, "... hard SF with a Greg Egan start to weed out the infidels, and a soft, gooeey end like a creme chocolate as a reward." He says, "While writing my first novel an unplotted series of ideas kept nagging so I indulged them as an amusement, and they fell together into a tale of discovery: 'The Green Man'. You don't decide what you like, you discover, and tales of love, even between those as unlikely as the virtual and the physical, a spirit and an animal, Cupid and Psyche, are so archetypal that even the best laid plans often go astray, and when they do—you have to feel it."

The Green Man

Brendan Duffy

Nascence

The shiny marbles lay within the ring drawn in the sand. We rubbed our glassy taw between our thumb and forefinger, thinking about the shot we should play: one shot to knock all marbles from the ring. We could see numerous shots that would knock out one hundred and fifty seven, three that could knock out one hundred and fifty eight, but none yet that would knock out all one hundred and fifty nine. We thought some more.

A grain of sand winked in our periphery, catching a mote of our attention. Our collective mind paused. We spawned off a subclone and sent me down to engage.

The singularity winked, and I smashed down through the crystalline

laminae of infinites toward it, from the 7D equation arena to 3D vspace, crashing through each dimensional interface with a perceptual epiphany. Dimensions boiled off and solid virtual lower-dimensional vspace collapsed in about me.

No longer visible as simple objects, the little marbles exploded into complex fractal blooms. Equations with too much data to be plotted with lower-dimensional mathematics, they shed excess axes and expanded into incomprehensibility until their exotic seven-dimensional topology engulfed all and vanished, too complex to perceive in Euclidean vspace. Likewise, the winking singularity gained complexity and blossomed into a full 3D interactive data sprite. It looked like a snowflake with a face.

I solidified into the virtual spacetime wash among a data tide of remnant equational flotsam: pH range fluctuations, salt concentration interpolants, protein functionality probability densities; the interactive functional specifications of 23 naturally occurring amino acids, and the synthetic amino acids we had designed, patented, and were testing.

Hey Cookie Cutter, don't spend all your time playing marbles with Poly, sent the sprite, looking at the mathematical residue about me. All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.

I like playing marbles, I sent. Virtually mapping the changing interfunctionality of keystone proteins in the cellular systems of terraforming organisms, caused by substituting native constituent amino acids with natural or synthetic analogues, in order to plot and maximise ecosystemic outcomes for client planets.

The sprite laughed. *And you're the company's human liaison? You really don't get out enough. Try again, but keep it simple!*

I was still disoriented from my sudden nascence. Tweaking the amino acids of proteins in terraforming organisms in order to determine the ecological effects.

Better . . . but now more corporate, sent the sprite.

Designing better proteins, organisms, ecosystems, planets!

Good, because you've got another job, it sent. Another trip to another world!

It squirted a data packet.

Hey, Cookie Cutter, have fun in the fizz! You never know what will happen out there,

it's unpredictable, it sent as the data transferred to me and its emptying shellware slowly absorbed back into the vspace substrate. I watched it melt. I used to get physical. I like a bit of xyzzzzzz . . . It gave one last zzzzzzzzzz, then was gone, leaving two icons glowing in vspace: a flaming yellow bird and a Green Man; the Phoenix Project portfolio and my personal file. Me.

I ate the Green Man. Personality modules swelled into my neurome; memories reminded me of what I was.

A Consciousness Clone.

A 5 human equivalent Consciousness Clone. I was soft-ware spawned to drive fleshbod meatware through the phys, a carbon copy of the most successful, reliable and re-usable consciousness pattern, The Green Man, the company's representative and physical insertion agent, stamped out fresh from Poly, the 35K Hueq upper dimensional number cruncher; the chaos-math-equation solving 7D Polygrokker tip of the giant corporate iceberg that was Panstellar Proteomatic Trajectories.

I remodelled my neurome to the standard Corporate Ambassador profile with a 10 polyskill cassette, a 15 yottaflop personality shell, plus some 3 yots of random personality skewed to post-hume. As it assembled I felt consciousness expand. My toolbar appeared, low left in my field of view, populating with icons as their functionality came online: Time, Spawn Sprite, Briefcase, Brain, Itinerary, Local Field, Hub and more.

I ate the flaming bird.

A vast cube of volume appeared before me. Poly floated within this space, a fat blue multi-headed caterpillar centred at the nexus of three intersecting axes. Its tail hung in negative space, its body passed through the origin, and its uncountable heads stretched out toward infinity. It wiggled its tail, rotated about the origin, and a hundred jostling heads towered into my field of view.

Green Man, it chorused with most of them. *Your next task: planet Palawan is being terraformed on a regional basis by three independent contractors. Further sub-contractors handle atmospheric, carbon and nitrogen cycles, and hydrology. However, unsynchronised timelines, organism and substrate incompatibilities, and secrecy wars over intellectual and physical property have derailed progress.*

An understanding of the issues coalesced in my mind. The head of a black-bearded man leaned in close, *Planetary terraforming should never be handled by uncooperative independents in competition . . .* The head shook conspiratorially and a blonde woman cut in, *but by a centrally administered monopoly running a single, coordinated plan. The Phoenix Project is to be the new overarching Palawanian terraforming schedule, constructed from their pre-existing but unsuccessful organisms and ecologies.*

Various heads loomed in to communicate their piece, while others spread out across the vast volume, attending to different projects elsewhere. Given the ultra high-speed virtual mapping of ecological constructs offered by Pan-

stellar Proteomatic Trajectories, we are perfectly placed to be the monopoly that secures this project. The competition use mutagenesis to acquire novel variants and selection pressure to develop them into terraforming organisms. We will demonstrate that virtual prediction modelling supersedes anything so slow and archaic as real-world evolution.

Poly wagged its grubby tail, and three heads sent, The fleshbod has entered the Palawan system and requires a driver. Go to fleshbod at these coordinates immediately.

I accessed the xyz and located the designated fleshbod, then calculated the quickest route with the fewest exchange nodes and fattest bandwidth. I pinged it. It responded, and sent a status report. The bod was a John Smith, an ultra-tweaked Hyperdrive MetaHumanClone 46XY₁Y₂Y₃; the Y-borne translocation chain carried the new mods. I'd never been one of those. It was currently running idle mode, a holding pattern all slowfuzz mindumb, just enough to keep the meat on spec and breathing.

I squirted into the meat.

My conc crammed into the empty substrate, seized control of the motor neurones with a lurch, and I initiated the clean-scrub colonization protocol to delete the minimind housekeeper and reset all synapse connections. The neurokinase cascade swept through the brain in a dorso-ventral purge, breaking all synaptic connections, washing away any pathways, programming and be-



haviour patterns remaining from whatever had previously used the John Smith. I felt billions of dendrite and axon connexions retract like a tangled orgy of snail heads finishing last kisses before withdrawing into their solitary shells. The minimind flushed away, cleansed in a whiteout and jettisoned into the hormone wake.

Once the fleshbod brain was wiped clean the Brain icon on my toolbar flashed. I executed it, and my data transferred from vspace into the phys, across the interstellar gulf via communication nodes of the hub, and into the fleshbod where it laid down the new pattern: me.

Axons and dendrites branched out through the neurone stem cell foam. Rapidly staged chronological release of tailored growth factors forged familiar links, autocatalytic feedback achieved an autocorrecting exponential synapse growth, rapid neuronal fire reinforced desired pathways, and the brain gradually remodelled to my consciousness pattern. I downloaded more of myself into the meat as its available consciousness space expanded, autodeleting sections of my digital being from vspace as they transferred across into the cellular substrate.

The non-virtual data stream slowly coalesced around me like a waterfall: the real washed past in a fast fluid rush as I filled out into the body. My dawning physical consciousness achieved sensory differentiation. An opaque cloud surrounding black stillness. I sat in a room, looking out a window onto

darkness. An orange orb leaped from the black and froze before my face as I slowed time twenty fold.

Palawan

The planet was so bright it glowed like a sun.

The armrests of my seat contained no physical controls or plug-ins, so I spawned a sprite and sent it out to increase the polarisation of my porthole and filter the glare. It bounced back.

Ship interface unavailable, ship server offline. Please log passenger cabin porthole polarisation level change request via your local cabin controls, sent the sprite.

I pinged the local area for interactivity. Two new icons appeared in the local field section of my toolbar: Ship and Cabin. I accessed the Cabin icon's window controls and toggled the porthole glare filter. It didn't work. The icon wasn't connected to anything. I accessed my inventory; a diagrammatic representation of the fleshbod appeared in my upper left field of view. A pair of sunglasses were located in the fleshbod's breast pocket. I deployed them, then returned my attention to the window.

The ringed planet revolved beneath the ship, slowly revealing new terrain. The equator and tropics were an indistinct orange blur. I toggled the fleshbod's eyesight for an enlargement and scanned. The only visible biomass detail was toward the polar region where dark green forests grew. Verdant tendrils penetrated from the poles into the

otherwise featureless orange temperate zone, following rivers and canyons.

I accessed ecological data via the hub. Tiered virtual overlays superimposed diagrams, hypertext and pop-ups upon my visual feed: 91% of the planetary biomass centred around the cooler poles as fertile rainforests and wetlands of peak species diversity, then thinned through tertiary and secondary ecologies toward the warmer, drier temperate regions along deep canyons and refugiums. Life ended in the dusty windblown plains and hot plateaux where creek beds bled out into the barren deserts; the interface where primary terraforming began and slowly pushed toward the planet's interior. Pop-ups identified clusters of pale green circles dotted about the orange desert frontier: robofarms of simple pioneer ecologies. A hypergrowth weed. The Primary Terraforming Organism that brought me here: *Mentha x piperita*.

Mint.

The ship passed the planet's axis of rotation and continued toward the equatorial plane and ring system. Three belts of iceteroids, one of ice rocks so large as to be a belt of moonlets, rotated around Palawan in stable orbits within the equatorial plane. Seventeen large moons also rotated in this plane. A further shell of 10^7 moonlets of ring origin circled Palawan in unstable, chaotic orbits, making all transorbital travel dangerous.

A Download Complete message appeared, and the Brain icon on my

toolbar was replaced by my Green Man icon. Only my basal personality and neurome shell had downloaded into the fleshbod's brainbound meat-folder.

Poly appeared in my field of view. *Due to consciousness space restrictions your memories, personality modules and skill cassettes will operate as hub-linked plug-ins. Meet with agents and collect actual samples of their Primary Terraforming Organisms for analysis. Send the data to us for re-design, then synthesize and deliver our finished product and return.*

We will remain in contact with you for the duration of this exercise via the hub. Contact us with questions or personality and skill requests. We'll be in touch.

It spawned an icon of itself and placed it in the hub section of my toolbar, then wagged its tail and vanished, and I was alone in the phys.

Real.

In the meat.

Alone above a frontier planet.

Well, almost alone. There were other passengers onboard, but I pinged and got nothing: no greetings, per-scommos or icons. None had hub. I acquired a passenger list via the hub: 37 individuals aboard, so close they had to brush past each other in the corridors, too physically close to be this distant, this mentally isolated, totally disconnected from each other and their culture. Out in the corridor they were further from me than distant planets on the other side of Empire that I had instant access to. With a permanent hub connection I was never alone—

anything I wanted from the vast, roaring interstellar web of Empire was available at any time.

The Phoenix Project had begun. Itinerary alarm flags would warn me well in advance of any impending action requirement. Difficult situations would be anticipated. Personality, knowledge, memories and skill would be made available as required. I would be warned and armed. Very few decisions would be necessary.

This would be a staged walkthrough: read the script, tick the boxes, secure the contract, deliver the product and get out.

I'd done this 87 times before.

Easy.

The Itinerary icon indicated nothing required until we landed.

My Time icon indicated that I was still running octuple speed.

I collapsed down into realtime. All grew sluggish as time slowed and a smooth gelid torpor thickened about me. I was stuck in it. A heaviness congealed as I condensed into the body, spread out into its deadened extremities, felt the weight of it draped over me.

Live matter.

Oppressive and limiting.

Planetfall

A flashing sprite spawned on my toolbar and jumped into my field of view.

You are hungry. Imbibe 556 grams of physical substrate 1A now, it sent, then vanished.

My briefcase had been sustaining the fleshbod and needed recharging. I hubbed the ship's schematics and plotted the most expedient route to the galley as a diagram in the virtual overlay; a glowing green line superimposed over the real for me to follow. I unbuckled my seatbelt and walked the route to the galley, the local field section of my toolbar continually repopulating with the icons of nearby ship devices as I passed among their active ranges: doors, vending machines, maps, and FAQs, all offline.

When my briefcase recharged I opened it to find a few changes of clothes, cash, toiletries, my analytic techtools, and my nutrient synthesizer. I toggled Briefcase commands on my toolbar and the nutrient synthesizer filled a tube with 556 grams of nutritive paste 1A fleshbod maintenance substrate.

The Ship icon in my local field remained offline, which indicated possible loss of ship functionality and danger to project outcomes, an issue that needed to be resolved immediately. I plotted a course to the cockpit and browsed the personality modules and technical skill cassettes required to engage the captain en route. I sent the request through to Poly.

Request granted, sent Poly, and my point of view altered as my neurome expanded. New linguistic strings formed and my understanding of the ship's technical specifications solidified as my personality absorbed a yot of *First Mate*.

A chubby man in flying leathers sat in the captain's seat. He looked up as I entered.

"Looks like our cargo snapped out of its coma," he said. "You were sleeping like a baby. Dribbling. For days."

"Why is the ship functionality interface offline?" I asked.

"Who needs it?" he said.

"Me. It is a helpful tool and a necessary component of the ship navigation system," I said.

The pilot laughed. "I'm Monty," he said, and checked the passenger list. "You must be . . . John Smith."

"Pleased to meet you." I shook his hand. "Why are we approaching the rings? This is to be a polar landing. We are near a chaos dense region of orbit populated by numerous erratically vectored objects, have an unnecessarily high probability of collision, and our collision coefficient increases as we approach the equatorial plane."

"Yeah. Beautiful, aren't they?" Monty stared at the white rings as we approached.

"I have performed a systems check on the ship," I said. "It is fully functional. There is no reason to have disengaged the automatic collision evasion protocols."

"I haven't!" he said, chewing gum.

"The automatic collision avoidance system remains offline," I said.

"No, it's all in here." He tapped his forehead.

"I suggest that you engage all safety protocols, leave the equatorial asteroid

dense region and commence a polar planetfall."

Monty wasn't listening. We passed underneath the outer ring's circumference and watched a 178 metre thick band of sparkling iceteroids pass 18.2 kilometres overhead; boulders of tumbling crystalline ice, twinkling and glittering in the sun, 95% having a mass between 0.5 and 850 kilos, with a mean of 137 kilos. Monty fingered the 18 carat gold band on his finger where a round brilliant-cut diamond sparkled.

The ship's current course would intersect the second iceteroid belt. A couple of quick calculations and I plotted our trajectory as a virtual overlay that specified the 4D coordinates of impact.

Tears brimmed in Monty's eyes.

"Collision imminent in 215 seconds," I reported. "I have calculated numerous 99.99+% safe escape trajectories that you could employ at any stage until then."

"Oh, shut up," said Monty. "I thought we'd do a little sightseeing."

I filed an incident report for Poly, and requested more personality. *Insufficient personality to achieve situational stability and ensure project outcomes*, I sent. The extra personality came online immediately and I felt the fleshbod's muscles loosen as two yots of *Fly Boy* took control. I sucked on my tube of nutripaste and plotted the success trajectories of further interhuman negotiation strategies.

"What *is* that stuff?" asked Monty.

“556 grams of specially tailored nupripaste 1A fleshbod maintenance substrate.”

“Really? Sounds delicious. Can I try?”

I handed him the tube. He tasted a mouthful of the beige paste.

“It’s not even disgusting. It’s nothing. More boring than pureed tofu. You should try Ghenghala spiced chicken. Now that’s tasty!”

“Yes, I will . . . So, I guess you’ll be engaging the AI and donning the mental navigational interface helm shortly?” I asked.

“My wife said I was like tofu,” he said, flicking buttons on the dash. A panel slid open and manual controls extended. He grabbed them with his hands.

Unassisted manual control was dangerous even under perfect conditions.

I focussed on our target collision zone and enlarged the local region to determine the precise impact microenvironment: iceteroids slowly rotated around the planet, but at the collision zone thousands suddenly changed vector and rained toward the surface, burning up across the atmosphere. I looked closer at the belt and saw machinery.

Pop-ups indicated the roboharvesters that scuttled over the iceteroids, sorting and tagging just ahead of the gaping iron mouth that gouged a kilometre wide furrow from the belt, devouring everything that rotated into it. From there the iceteroids accelerated down a magnopipe, riding the Van Allen laminae into the atmosphere.

I recalculated our trajectory.

“We are headed directly into the narrow diameter of that ice harvester device, along with at least 863 iceteroids per second,” I said. “Plus or minus 17.”

“Yeah. Sleepy iceteroids plucked from their cosy blue heaven to race towards a fiery death in the atmosphere! Just like getting married, really. Wanna beer?” He kicked a fridge open, leaned forward with a groan, grabbed two beers and passed me one.

“Montgomery, at this stage I would advise that this is an unsafe course of action, possibly *the* most unsafe planet-fall . . .”

“Are you married?” he interjected.

“No,” I said.

“Lucky for you!”

“Our trajectory . . .”

“Siddown,” said Monty, cracking his beer, “and I’ll show you a little trick: the best way to get past the shell of moons around this planet.”

I sat in the co-pilot’s seat next to him, watching everything about us slowly being drawn into the giant gaping mouth, where tumbling iceteroids smashed each other to dust.

“It’s a Van Allen Magnocannon,” he said. “The entrance to the boob-tube, a one way crap chute all the way down the pipe to hell, boy! Haw haw!” He stared at me with red-rimmed amphetamine eyes, manically chewing gum. “And we’re gonna boost us a ride.”

“How many times have you done this?” I fumbled with my seatbelt.

“About eighty,” he said. “Three times a week for six months. I’m the

best, never had to lodge or dodge a claim.”

“Six months? What were you before this?”

“Six months ago I was an accountant. Never flown.” He chewed his gum. “That’s when she walked out.” He scowled. “Bitch took everything.”

He skulled his beer and tossed the empty bulb into a tensor field, then strapped himself in, set the seat back into a reclining position and flexed the manual controls.

“Better strap in, I’m gonna switch off the immobilator.”

“Why?”

“Cuz ya gotta *feel* it.”

I lay back in the seat and strapped in with all the belts I could find, plus the full mesh harness. We raced toward the impact zone. The hungry gaping maw yawned open.

“Momentum neutraliser off,” said Montgomery, and the cabin bounced and shuddered so violently that I couldn’t think. Icons on my toolbar flashed, but I didn’t consult them.

The ship sped toward the machine, faster, faster.

Iceteroids closed in about us as though a giant bath were emptying down a plug hole.

“You ready?” yelled Monty.

“No!” I fumbled with the harness clasp.

We tipped over its horizon like a waterfall. It engulfed us and we plummeted down the pipe.

Tumbling iceteroids bumped and crashed around us, bouncing off the

walls and back into our path. Monty pumped the controls and the ship ducked and wove, but he only dodged the big ones. We barrelled along, spiralling down and down, hitting more than I could count. Someone screamed 117 decibels of terror. I couldn’t hear for the roaring, and we shook so hard I couldn’t tell what was happening. Things worked loose from somewhere and bounced around the cabin until caught by the tensor field.

We hit the atmosphere with a bang. The ice powder haze vanished and the glaring orange face of Palawan loomed toward us like an untamed shrew. The hull blazed red as we burned.

“Bitch. Bitch. Bitch! Gaaaarrrrrrrgh!” screamed Monty as we bounced and shook. Iceteroids bashed into the hull, glowed and burned away. I watched them tumble and shrink as we shot out of the pipe to be captured by the gravity well.

We rode down the well, burning up like a comet through the atmosphere, blazing across the sky, friction wearing down the ablative hull cladding as we fell to the planet. The iceteroids burned away into water vapour. The ship stopped shaking. I wiped the sweat from my brow, and a quasi-silence returned; just the dull roar of planetfall.

“Whoa!” Monty took a deep breath.

“Who screamed?” I asked. “Which one of us was screaming?” I coughed. My throat felt raw. I accessed my memory replay but for some reason there was only a blank.

“Ha ha ha, that’s my buddy.” Monty took us down to the south pole.

Hubcoms re-established, sent a sprite.

My toolbar repopulated its hub-linked icons.

A rush of adrenalin coursed through the fleshbod and prickled out to its fingertips.

I hadn’t even known there had been a break in transmission.

I’d *really* been alone.

What if I had died?

Ghengahala

As the ship taxied from the runway to a docking bay I pinged the region for data. There were no other fleshbods within 500 kilometres. I received nothing from the spaceport and only five corporate responses from the town: offline apologies from the offices of the three terraforming cartels, and two adverts from hotels purporting top-of-the-range services. The hotels tried to clone icons onto my toolbar, but I burned them out and spawned a sprite to book the best and organise transport.

I also received a government ping: a non-interactive 2D animation of a notary saying, “Welcome to Palawan! Welcome to Palawan!”

By now any hub city would have barged me with thousands of snippets of tawdry eye-candy, link diverters, hijacks, semiperm toolbar tattoos, and all kinds of mis/information. This paucity was an anticlimactic welcome to Ghengahala, gateway to Palawan.

The only remote eyeballs on which I could hitch sensory feed were the external cameras fitted to ships that had come from elsewhere. Atmospheric and deep space vehicles taxied across the apron, between hangars and runways and vertical launch pads.

I spawned a scout sprite. It data-hopped all available cams and constructed a 3D envirtument of the spaceport. I roamed around inside the vmap, checking the hypertext of things unknown. The runway stretched behind us across the dry kilometres of flat, featureless grassland. Ahead was Ghengahala spaceport.

I saw cameras mounted in strategic positions around the spaceport, and even saw cameras inside the buildings, but I couldn’t access them to expand the vmap: they were either extremely high tech, or extremely low. I would normally have the hotel and taxi already booked, plotted the route as a virtual overlay, have visually scouted most of the city, and scheduled all meetings before exiting the ship.

My city-bound sprite returned with some sensory feed from the lobby of the Hotel Cozy-Me. It had not been able to secure transport. I hubbed planet Palawan data and found an old map of Ghengahala, then spawned a sprite to familiarise itself with the map. It reported a 76% structural difference between the hub map and the vmap of the spaceport I had just assembled. The last updates were of low quality, compiled by agents on our last visit—652 years ago.

The ship came to a halt in a docking bay. Local visual feed was unavailable for this area, so I waited until I felt the walkway extension connect. Spaceports used sealed envirotubes with aircon, for direct walkway access to immigration and customs. Then I would progress to the aircon taxi, and to the aircon hotel.

The red Disembark icon in my local field turned green. I toggled it. The exit door opened, revealing an open expanse of sky and land. A simple gantry waited before me: a staircase welded onto an ethanol powered internal combustion car that had been driven up to the exit.

The atmosphere exhibited some rare characteristics. A hot dry breeze wafted in: 38°C and 12% humidity, and the fleshbod's olfactory sense detected an anomalous scent at 58 parts per million. I consulted my aroma profile database. A model of the chemical appeared in my virtual overlay: 1-Methyl-4-isopropyl cyclohexane-3-ol.

Menthol.

The planet smelled of mint. How pleasant: how sanitised.

I spawned an experiential sprite to experience it, and stepped out onto the gantry.

It said it was like stepping into a hot mint soup.

The fleshbod squinted as I used it to eyeball the planet. Blue sky laden with orange dust, and a chaos of moons overhead, more than I could count. The rings were visible, too.

That was when I noticed.

The spaceport was made of wood.

I had never seen that before. Such a blatant and hazardous embodiment of low technology correlated with terraforming failure, indicating that progress may be hampered by culturally endemic luddism.

I activated the protein sampler in my briefcase. A tiny hole sucked air into a filter and probots sorted and analysed content. The briefcase detected many novel proteins and chemicals just from stepping out onto the gantry, so I spawned a 4HueqCC to analyse primary protein data while a single conc drove the fleshbod. I had the endocrine gland secrete a white cell proliferation cascade trigger: an estimated 193 minutes until the fleshbod achieved omnimmunity to all novel antigens detected.

The gantry swayed as I progressed down the staircase. Flags marked the path across the tarmac to customs and immigration. On my toolbar the Green Man icon flashed, indicating the physiological measures required to compensate for the delta vee in temperature and humidity.

I clicked.

The fleshbod sweated.

Clerks conducted manual customs and immigration checks with eyeballs and verbals in realtime. After laborious physical procedures I exited the spaceport to a 2D street and needed to spawn a sprite to identify local forms of transport from the chaos. I hailed a pedal-powered rickshaw taxi and progressed to the Hotel Cozy-Me.

The driver took us through streets of yellow dust, between old wooden buildings and dry tumbledown ruins. We eventually descended the long zigzag roads into the verdant canyon that cradled the city of Ghenghala, where jungle sprouted from every untended corner. The driver talked to me. After five yes/no answers I spawned a sprite to engage him and returned my conc majority to protein analysis and white cell generation. I also spawned a sprite to generate 500 grams of nanocams in my briefcase.

We arrived at the hotel. A crowd of locals swarmed from all directions in the busy street. I spawned a sprite to engage and divert their petitions, then hubbed the Hotel Cozy-Me site. I located my envirocontrolled suite, laid down a route in the virtual overlay, and timed the hotel's autoporter to open the doors as I walked so I would not have to adjust the fleshbod's speed.

I walked to the hotel doors, raining a dust of 10^6 microcams from my briefcase. They would spread out over the city on people's shoes, carried out into the street and across town in all directions. Shortly I would request snapshot telemetry and construct a 3D Ghenghala vmap that would also map conversation snippets and other downstream demographic data, such as population age/sex structure, clothing, workforce configuration, commodity exchange, technology use, and cultural interactions. This would provide a current on-the-ground political and socioeconomic topology that would offer

invaluable insights to our company when planning the advertising, marketing and pricing of further biological products to the government and populace.

I pushed through the sweaty crowd of barking locals to the doors. They didn't open. I stood before the doors, cycling through the functions on the Hotel Cozy-Me hubsite. Nothing worked.

It didn't even attempt to transfer an icon onto my toolbar.

And the concierge greeted me vocally.

The real is slow and dumb, with no hypertext, minimal context, and negligible subtext. Actual 'interactive' conversations are so irrelevant I rarely bother with them, but I needed the doors open so I engaged him directly.

By the time the concierge opened the door and released a cascade of inane pleasantries with minimal cultural consequence and no Phoenix Project value, I had spawned three sprites, incorporated a small 100% privately owned protein function speculation consultancy with myself as chairbody, interacted with the major industrial node of Abyssinia Steppe and contacted representatives of the three interplanetary terraforming cartels, sent them an introductory data squirt and Green Man prospectus, and organised physical meetings with their agents on location.

I went upstairs to my room to wait for the first meeting with an agent from Primary Subsoil Generator Combine in 4 hours.

I waited.

Two hours passed.

An itinerary sprite appeared.

Prepare for your first appointment.

The fleshbod needed to be ablated, have toiletries applied, be dressed and fed paste. During this process I completed the analysis of the airborne chemical constituents from the sample taken at Ghenghala spaceport. My Green Man icon indicated that white cell generation had maximised and diversified, and the fleshbod had achieved omnimmunity to the many novel molecules detected.

With that analysis complete I took a microcam snapshot and spawned a 4HueqCC to construct a 3D map of Ghenghala and crunch the demographics. I estimated that the data capture covered 83% of the urban environment and ~20% coverage of two regional centres. The population was much higher than hub history or independent predictors indicated. Furthermore, there was a data skew: population structure was unlike the standard Terran norm. Urban sex ratio was skewed to 88% female, and this percentage increased further into the wilderness.

This was statistically significant, and there was either an error in the sample method or a good reason. I hubbed demographic histories for Ghenghala and surrounds, particularly health industry, births, hospitalised maternity, obstetrics and midwifery. Hub data was riddled with inconsistency, but it appeared that the local human population was

tenfold higher than it should be, and predominantly female.

Shadow

I walked through the hotel lobby. Crowds of people lingered outside the hotel, peering in through the windows, waiting by the locked doors for a rich person to exit. The concierge opened the doors and I stepped into the soup. The smell of mint was pervasive. An experiential sprite told me the smell was sickening, although the fleshbod was still within A grade operational parameters, experiencing no illness or loss of functionality.

The drivers from the taxi rank rushed across the crowded street and surrounded me. I selected one, but they argued with each other anyway, and the fracas became quite animated. My plans for a rapid exit required revision. I signalled verbally to the concierge.

“An aircon taxi please.”

“Certainly.” She entered the hotel to organise one. I scanned the street and spawned a sprite to analyse. Groups of women gathered in the shade on the footpaths around tables and carts where meals sizzled on grills; birds and other morsels. People walked, talked, ate, sold wares, or just stood there. The street functioned as a makeshift meeting place, kitchen, bedroom, dining area and a commercial focal point, thronging with locals eking out a living in the shadow of a hotel that housed interplanetary business representatives.

A woman sold hand woven sandals, another stood before an archaic set of mechanical scales to charge people who weighed themselves, five more offered transport on motor bikes. Others slept on grass mats.

The fleshbod's head turned. In the shade beneath a tree a woman cooked Ghenghala spiced chicken. I had the fleshbod eyeball it. Pop-ups identified each constituent: a charcoal grilled Maryland cut speckled with cloves, turmeric, chilli, mint, black pepper, peanuts and potatoes in a coconut milk sauce. Hypertext gave me a history, full ingredient list and recipe. The fleshbod secreted saliva into its mouth. A trail of drool hung from its lip and swung about as I turned its head. Droplets of the saliva fell to the ground.

A flashing sprite appeared.

You are hungry. Imbibe 214 grams of physical substrate 82D now.

I purchased some Ghenghala spiced chicken and had the fleshbod consume it, as Monty had suggested. I received taste and odour data; numbered chemicals listed by quantity. There was so much data: salts, complex fats, proteins, acids, chemical interactions. As it ate, the fleshbod vibrated rhythmically. I spawned a sprite to investigate its motion.

The fleshbod is laughing, it sent.

I compiled an initial flavour profile; a complex 4D graph with torsion densities highlighting exotic constituents. The sample was vastly different to nutripaste as it also had localised areas of alternate taste and texture. Very inter-

esting. I walked the fleshbod along the footpath through the multitude, thinking and eating. It would take a long time to fully analyse this data, I estimated 234 minutes.

The hub-linked icons on my toolbar winked out. Hypertext and overlays vanished. Garish colours exploded in my face, trumpets blared and my shattering-hot skin prickled with screaming wet sensation.

I was slapped to the ground. No, I still stood.

There were no pop-ups. I didn't know what anything was, couldn't recognise anything.

A chill swept through me. The hub had failed.

I'd lost everything: personalities, skill cassettes, memories, knowledge. Disconnected, I had no access to any real information.

I was alone.

I had nothing.

I ran.

Two paces and my toolbar repopulated, the sensory analytic filter thickened around me, and with a gentle hum I felt my consciousness expand fivefold; access to the hub bloomed into my mind, with the reassuring weight of universal knowledge and power. It had only been a hub transmission shadow.

The crowd pushed past me. I paced around the shadow, sensing its dimensions. It was a localised rhomboid volume starting from a point on the footpath to the left of the Ghenghala spiced chicken woman, widening to 4.3

metres and continuing down the street for an unknown distance.

I marked it on my vmap.

This place smelled strongly of mint.

I ingested my nutrient substrate in the aircon taxi to the spaceport, then chartered an ultrasonic VTOL speeder flight to Abyssinia Steppe.

The Steppe

The speeder circled a dark metal tower that erupted from the steppe; the frontier founder site of Primary Subsoil Generator Combine, a central automated manufactory constructed over an ore body by terraforming robots to construct more terraforming robots. They mined and smelted ores, constructed robomachinery, laid pipes, propagated clones, cultures and seeds, and sent out roboprospectors to colonise new land and convert raw desert into simple primary ecology.

We set down upon the VTOL pad atop the tower, high over the plain. I stood by the railing and looked out across the monotonous steppe. Primary soilfarms clustered in large groups around central sites. Each was a simple artificial ecology, a circle of pale green on desert orange, tended by robotic machinery: vast cranes and wheeled vehicles, planters, sprayers and tenders. Green discs of terraforming organism spread out through the dusty haze to the horizon. Beyond lay lifeless desert.

I was met by their representative, a fleshbod smartly dressed in neutral panstellar business attire. The wind

rippled her suit as she walked toward me. A sprite informed me it was an authentic Terran Prada woolen suit. Italian. As she approached we swapped toolbar icons, links, and engaged in some lengthy virtual intercourse in a civilised manner.

When close, we reached out across the interpersonal gulf and shook hands: my dataplug slid into her palm socket, we connected and opened datasafe communications channels, the interstellar data transfer network blossomed exponentially from our palms across the local galactic arm. I contacted Panstellar Proteomatic Trajectories and assembled Poly, the members of the board, project managers, scientists and advisors.

The representative did likewise, and the meeting arena expanded to encompass all 2817 required entities. Within a few seconds we had opened the meeting, addressed all required items, reached an agreement, secured a contract and closed the meeting: the Phoenix Project planetary terraforming program of Panstellar Proteomatic Trajectories had secured the rights to prospect among the genomes of the 4 Primary Terraforming Organisms for possible genetic improvement and I/O optimisation.

Rapid orbital ice harvesting had increased humidity, decreased radiant energy penetration and cooled the planet to a degree where primary soil generation rate had fallen below contractually agreed levels. Based on the novel airborne (and thus public do-

main) molecules I had already analysed, Panstellar Proteomatic Trajectories estimated that a 7-8% improvement in the primary biomass generation rate could be achieved through reengineering the functional temperature ranges of crucial thermostable enzymes of the existing PTOs, to retain maximum activity at lower temperatures. Also, we would redesign and replace current PTOs with killswitch versions that automatically die when encountering the apoptotic proteins secreted by our Secondary Terraforming Organisms.

The representative led me downstairs from the VTOL pad to sample ground level organisms. I walked out into the steppe, following the shadow of the tower. Machinery drove through mint groundcover into the heatshimmer, sending up clouds of dust and aroma. I halted at a 50 metre radius soilfarm where a superseeder sewed PTOs into the shale. The soilfarm was a simple ecological construct of genetically modified pioneer organisms, a 4 tier inter-pollination of bacteria, fungus, leafcutter ants and mint, self sustaining once established for two years, generating 1.2 kilos of type E7 humus per square metre per year given a standard photo and hydro input. Once a critical threshold of 78 kilos of humus per square metre had been attained the area would be ready for colonisation by Secondary Terraforming Organisms, and eventually Tertiary, each level increasing systemic complexity and redundancy.

I knelt in the shale, opened my briefcase, and sampled each of the 4 PTOs

and their micro-substrates. Once the sample cartridges were logged in my protein analyser queue I spawned a 4HueqCC to analyse all constituents for remote data crunch by Poly.

"Hello." A woman stood behind me. She wore a light sari about her waist. It rippled in the breeze. Her skin was brown, covered in a light golden down. All over.

It was interesting to see a local woman almost naked. Her hips were very narrow and legs long. Based on her movements I extrapolated her skeletal structure and superimposed it over her body in the virtual overlay. Oddly, her arms measured as long as her legs. I spawned a sprite to investigate. Hub data on the skeletal development of far regional Palawanian women was nonexistent, but from the sprite's cursory measurements and the standard human diagrams that the sprite superimposed about her, it seemed that this woman's hip diameter was too narrow to give birth to a baby. The sprite suggested that this was probably the result of a congenital birth defect or accident when young.

"Hello," I said, and stood.

The breeze changed. The woman sniffed at the air, the fleshbod's scent. Her eyes dilated and facial capillaries flushed. She readjusted her stance, feet aimed at the fleshbod, and smiled.

A sprite alerted me to an alteration in the fleshbod's physiological continuum: a slight increase in blood pressure and heart rate; but all still within optimal parameters.

"I'm Jennifer." She swapped a large steel wrench to her left, then held her hand out across the gulf. We shook; no icon or data exchange, no burgeoning interstellar information flood, just a soft 37°C, female *Homo sapiens* hand. She looked at the business attire I'd dressed the fleshbod in. "Are you from the company?"

I nodded.

"Well, don't stare!" She laughed and wiped some dust from her face. "What's your name?"

What could I tell an animal? In my current structural arrangement as a conglomeration of five consciousnesses my rarely used digital name was physically unpronounceable.

"I am John Smith."

Other women wearing similar attire worked on a pipeline nearby. A sprite informed me that all women currently visible shared the same physique, and that it was natural. I had it investigate whether they were related, or if there was an infertile female worker class on the planet. Maybe the alternate stature was a function of non-terran gravity and nutrient intake, or it could be genetically controlled.

"A man!" said one. The women rushed over and surrounded me, staring. They smelled and touched the fleshbod, laughing and chattering. Jennifer joined in. She ran her hands over the fleshbod, picking out its masculinized features: square jaw, Adam's apple, broad shoulders, big hands; typical testosterone markers. The fleshbod smiled, it looked at her body.

Pop-ups and layers of hypertext appeared over her sari: a long float 7/1 satin-weave cloth, spun from a raw 14 micron diameter fibre secreted from the silk gland of the *Bombyx mori* larvae, dyed with turmeric and indigo in a lost wax batik style . . . I swept it all aside.

That wasn't the information I wanted.

A flashing sprite appeared.

You are hungry. Imbibe 384 grams of physical substrate 24C now, it sent, then vanished.

I knelt at my briefcase and synthesized nutrient paste. The women crowded around. They watched and laughed as the nutrient synthesizer extruded paste into the tube.

"What is this machine?" one asked.

"It makes the fleshbod's maintenance substrate," I said.

"Is it a little oven?" She looked closer. "It's a miniature kitchen!"

"Or a laboratory!" said another.

Jennifer addressed the women. "Why don't we take a lunchbreak?" They retrieved bags and boxes, then laid a blanket in the shade of the tower and sat to eat lunch.

Jennifer smiled and sat next to me. My toolbar flickered and the hub-linked icons winked out. The diagrams and overlays vanished. I focussed on items, food, plates, and other things. No pop-ups appeared, no hypertext, no info sprites or advice. Nothing.

Another hub transmission shadow.

It was as though a noise I'd been ignoring for all this time had just stopped.

I felt small, alone. Something was wrong. I sniffed.

“Ugh! The mint smell is so strong!” It was in my mouth and up my nose. It stank. I gagged and held my hand over my mouth, but it didn’t help.

“I can’t smell it,” said Jennifer.

I didn’t know what to do. I spawned a sprite to investigate, but nothing happened. I tried again. And again. I waved my hand in the air where the icon would be.

“Are you alright?” asked Jennifer. She grabbed my hand and stroked my arm. I felt it. The fleshbod’s sensations came to me direct, no experiential filter or neutral buffer zone, no sprite announcements.

“I have a strange feeling. I don’t know what it is.” Her skin felt soft and warm, and my pulse pounded. I clicked my Green Man icon: my consciousness had dropped to 1Hueq, just the meat-personality, but physically all was OK except mild hunger.

“I’m hungry.”

I ate some nutrient substrate. It tasted like homogenous nothing. The others talked and swapped food, so I offered some to Jennifer.

“Oh, that’s awful! Here, try this.” She held up a thing with no pop-ups or hypertext. She put it in my mouth. I ate it, and flavour exploded hot, with soft spheres and fibrous matter mixed with small lumps of substance, all enveloped in a brittle flaky material. I had no idea what it was—I had no numbers to refer to or graphs to check, just raw data, native experiential flavour.

I needed more.

The women sat on something, doing something I didn’t understand, so I crawled between them, among them, tasting all of the different things that they had, as they laughed and said things that I was too busy to understand, then Jennifer fed me more and more items, each one different, my mouth was full and my analytic functionality blurred in an offline glut of sensory passion.

It was sublime.

I felt a surge and my hub icons repopulated. Pop-ups and overlays filled my field of view, and the confusion drained away as my conc expanded to 5Hueqs, experiential filters kicked in, and the scene receded into the distance, like I was observing from some other place, looking through the wrong end of binoculars.

Once again I knew the names of every object just by looking at them, and received extensive hypertext downloads on anything I cared to. Jennifer held an Habero to the fleshbod’s stuffed mouth: light oven baked filo pastry stuffed with chick peas, couscous, spices and mint, served hot.

A fat multi-headed maggot appeared before me. Poly.

Itinerary item 2.3.2 needs addressing. Return to hotel and analyse all Primary Terraforming Organisms for full remote datacrunch.

Immediately.

I closed up my briefcase and made the fleshbod swallow all the food, then said my goodbyes and left the party

of women for the tower and VTOL pad.

“Where are you going so suddenly?” I heard Jennifer’s footsteps crunch through the shale after me.

“Ghenghala and the Hotel Cozy-Me.” I kept walking. Jennifer hurried to keep level with me.

“How old are you?”

I clicked on my Green Man icon. “It is seven months old.”

She cast me a doubtful glance. “So are all men green?”

I stopped. I examined the fleshbod: some areas of dermis that had been exposed to the sun had taken on a greenish tinge. I consulted my project brief for an update on the changes that were occurring.

Jennifer reached out to touch the fleshbod’s skin. She stroked its greenish hand, then its neck. It was distracting the fleshbod.

“No, not all men are green.” I held her hand before me. Her fingers were quite slender. “This body is preparing to metamorphose. It absorbs nutrients and energy, and shortly it will receive the new genetic blueprint of your Primary Terraforming Organisms and generate them within itself: ants, bacteria, fungus, and the mint; using its own body mass.”

“What will happen to you?”

“I will deliver the product.”

“And will you be dead?”

“No, I am a dividual, a consciousness clone constructed from 5 separate entities and inserted into this fleshbod. When I receive the signal I will drive

the fleshbod to your company’s main greenhouses and convert its mass into the PTOs. It will discontinue, and I will transfer into vspace to be absorbed back into the Polygrokker from which I was spawned, where I will live until required again.”

Jennifer looked at me blankly. “How will you do that?”

“My pattern is digitally coded. I transfer that pattern from vspace into the brains of bodies like this. When the job is done I transfer the pattern back into vspace.”

“So you’re saying consciousness is a pattern, not matter?”

“Of course. There are no special consciousness-giving isotopes of carbon or nitrogen. The matter in conscious organisms is the same as the matter in everything else, thus consciousness is pattern. I have done this 87 times before, on different planets with different biomes, cultures, and problems. Each time I transfer into different bodies, it’s me. I have the memories.”

Jennifer planted her hands on her hips. “So if your consciousness is just a pattern, can it be reproduced in any media?”

“Yes, that seems consistent.”

“So I could reproduce your pattern in a series of pipes, tanks, junctions and ducts like this?” She waved her wrench at the network of piping and hydrological equipment that stretched from the tower out to each soilfarm.

“Theoretically. . . as long as there is an exact reproduction of communica-

tion channels and nodes. But such a system would be vast.”

“This network spreads around the planet. But I don’t believe that it could ever be conscious or reproduce your consciousness, even if we modelled it perfectly.” She shook her head. “I’ll tell you where my consciousness is, right here,” she patted her sweaty chest with her fist. “I’m the body, and I think you are too. You just don’t know it.”

“Definitely not,” I said.

She laughed, then cast me sidelong glance. “Do you think we’ll meet again?”

“No. I have collected everything I need from this site.” I proceeded to leave.

“Hey!” she called. I looked back. “Just say they made two of you next to each other, which one would you be?”

She walked away.

Discomfort

I slowly picked my way through the crowd, acutely aware of the hub transmission shadow and keeping well clear of its borders. A bare minimum conc drove the fleshbod while all excess analysed the PTOs.

A nearby woman waved and caught my attention.

“Excuse me, sir, you buy.” She stood before an assortment of wicker and bamboo cages strung from the trees, each with an approximate volume of 20cm³.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Freedom bird,” she said and waved me over. I approached and assessed the cages. Each contained a small furtive avian, chirping intensely.

“The fleshbod is not hungry,” I said.

“No eat!” she said. “Freedom!”

I held a cage level with my eyes and examined the avian. It flitted about inside its tiny cage, then paused to sing loudly.

“Why would I want one of these?”

“You buy, you set free! Is freedom bird!”

“Why?”

“Bird made to be free,” she said, “to fly. But poor poor in cage.”

“You should let them out,” I said.

“No! You buy and set free. Is good.”

I did not understand the purpose of this oddity so I spawned a sprite to collect and grok the data. Hub data indicated the taxonomic classification of the avian: Order Passeriformes, Family Nectariniidae, Genus and species *Nectarinia jugularis*; a Yellow Bellied Sunbird. A flock of the same birds roosted above in the flowering tree that provided their sustenance. Behind the woman, packed in a box, I spied feeders for nectivorous birds, thin gauge nets, and 8 empty cages. This woman caught birds to put in cages to sell to people so they could set the bird free. A brief analysis of the bird’s behaviour and an estimate of population and food source restrictions from my Ghenghala snapshot vmap gave me a ranging model, and I assessed that any particular bird had a 22% chance of being caught by her that evening.

Why would someone pay for that?

“How much?” I asked.

“Two dollar.” She smiled. I calculated: seventeen cents.

A sprite informed me that this place stank of mint.

I left for the respite of the hotel.

Upstairs in my aircon room I checked the progress of the PTO analysis: 19% complete. I calculated 11 hours 14 minutes to completion, which left me a further 1 hour 28 minutes to spare before my next meeting, so the itinerary was well timed and on track.

Something bothered me. The room was still too warm and dry. The fleshbod felt uncomfortable. I spawned a sprite. It told me that all fleshbod functionality remained within A grade operational parameters and the environmental factors were within an acceptable range.

My Green Man icon listed the fleshbod's optimal operating specs. Optimal Temperature, Pressure and Humidity were 298.15°K, 100 kPa, and 40% RH. The room's envirocontrols had not appeared in the local field of my toolbar. I pinged for local controls. Nothing happened. The aircon wall unit didn't respond when I waved my hands before it. Behind the unit a hole had been hacked in the wall. It contained a tangled mass of wiring that led nowhere. I manually adjusted the unit to match the Fleshbod's OTPH.

There were 12 hours 41 minutes to wait before my next meeting.

I waited, crunching data.

The room achieved the optimal environment in 9 minutes, but the fleshbod was still uncomfortable. It detected mint odour.

7 parts per million.

I returned to my analysis.

6 hours and 2 minutes passed.

The mint concentration dropped to 5 ppm.

But something was annoying me.

Which one would I be?

I halted the PTO analysis and commenced an initial study of Jennifer's DNA. Rather than sequence her entire genome I performed a differential subtraction and hybridised it to a range of human standards, then sequenced the non-hybridising regions to determine a difference profile.

Within 57 minutes I completed the study. Jennifer was a 99.95% standard 46XX human female, with a few unidentified tweaks that may require further analysis as they were possibly point mutations at critical sites in regulatory genes. The genotypic difference between her and the samples was of the same magnitude as the samples were to each other. No abnormal GM insertion fingerprints were detected, and there was no other evidence of genetic manipulation. She was human.

I reanalysed my vmap demographic data for male and female hip skeletal structure: there were only a few narrow hiped women in the marketplace, but many in Ghenghala. A huge percentage presented in the smaller towns, and 100% in the soilfarms.

Most males observed were in town, and all had a standard human skeletal structure, but it appeared that Palawan females had a gradation of increasing skeletal structure deviation that corre-

lated with increased distance from Ghenghala.

I did not know why.

I returned to my work and completed a full analysis of the entire PTO protein topology, then hubbed it to the Polygrokker. Let them play marbles with it for a while.

An itinerary sprite appeared.

Prepare for your second appointment.

As I prepared the fleshbod to leave I noticed that the areas of dermis that had been exposed to the sun had darkened considerably, and developed a leafy texture.

Patterns

Downstairs in the lobby people crowded outside the hotel at the windows, tapping urgently when they saw me. The concierge reprimanded them to no avail. The mint smell was starting to annoy me, so I had the concierge organise another air-con taxi. It eventually appeared, slowly pushing through the crowds in the street. The concierge opened the door and I plunged outside. The smell of mint was particularly strong, at 62ppm, a higher level than yesterday. People rushed forward and mobbed me.

“Freedom bird! Freedom bird!” said the freedom bird woman.

Another woman jostled through the crowd, strumming a ukulele and leaning her smiling head in front of me as I walked. I squeezed between them, one

hand on the briefcase while the other held them at bay.

“Sir, sir, I tell your future!” said a man.

“No thank you.”

“Lunacy, sir, it’s lunacy.”

“Yes . . .”

“I predict future from patterns.”

“What patterns?” I stopped.

“I am a lunar divinator,” he said, puffing his chest out and holding his head high. “If you know the pattern, you can predict the future.” He straightened his collar. “And I know yours.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

He pointed upwards. I looked up, but only saw the canopy. He led me to an open area in the park opposite the hotel, where I looked up and saw the moons spread across the dusty sky like soilfarms across the desert. I spawned a sprite to count them: 3281 visible to the naked eye, all sizes. I hubbed my memories. There were more moons than I had ever seen.

“Each day’s events are written in the sky, and the lunar pattern tells us of how the day will unfold. Today the major event is that Grojon carries the hand-basket to the canyon. See him go?” The man pointed to Grojon and his moonlets. “Oh, it’s a day of plenty! But there is a different pattern every day, so what of tomorrow? Only I know your future, because I can predict tomorrow’s pattern!”

“How do you achieve a confident prediction?” I asked him.

“I know these things!” He laughed. “The larger moons are characters of the major arcana. I look at how they wander into the different astral houses of your birth, and the splay of minor arcana that each carries with it on its journey. Now tell me the moons under which you were born.” He smiled expectantly.

“I was not born on this planet.”

“Ah! But that is OK. Where were you born?”

“I was not born. I am an AI, coded and incorporated in gradual stages until my dawning nascence transcended the consciousness threshold.”

“Ah, sir jokes!” He pinched the flesh-bod’s arm and laughed. “When were you born?” His expectant smile waited on his beaming face.

“This body is a genetically modified post-human artificial Y chromosome polyclone, spawned in a vat seven months ago on Xenon II: a distant planet that has no moons.”

The man scowled at me. “Then maybe you have no future.”

“But the chaos puzzle you pose is of interest to me.” I spawned a 4.5Hue-qCC datacruncher and toggled my hub icon, contacted the orbital satellites, ice harvesters and known transorbital navigational databases, downloaded all available vectorial data, plotted the momentum and trajectories of all moons and constructed a 4D vector map for use as a positional prediction model to ascertain all future lunar patterns with a 99.98% accuracy for the next 133 Palawanian days. After that point the error fluctuation radically decreased the

prediction reliability. I had my briefcase print out pictures of the lunar splay pattern as seen from Ghenghala for all last week and all next week. I handed them to him.

“These are patterns of the Lunar arcana for each day last week, and this is your future . . .”

He flipped through his yesterdays, saying, “Yes, yes, oh yes, ahh . . .” then stared at his tomorrow, eyes widening. He flipped to the next, muttering the names of the major arcana and their attendant minor patterns, obviously worried about what the coming days held.

“In two days Basti and Kengala fight! Everything will change!” He panicked, looked about as though he had to rush somewhere, then stopped and grabbed my shoulder. “How did you do this?” he demanded. His future fell from his hand and scattered on the wind.

“Tell me!”

“I plotted all lunar trajectories and made you a computer program that will display the major arcana for any day you care to name for the next 133 days.” I handed him a disc with the prediction program then walked to the aircon taxi.

“Computers?” He grabbed the disc, then ran about the field gathering up the fallen futures. He followed after me, yelling. “2000 years ago a Palawan woman plotted the movements of the major arcana with nothing but a stick and some string!” He shook the disc at me.

I entered my cab.

“No computers, just a woman,” he called as he approached the cab.

I slammed the door so he couldn't enter.

"With a stick, I tell you!" he yelled, leaning down to the window.

He chased me down the street as we drove away.

"A stick!"

Jennifer

I flew out into the steppe to my next meeting with the next planetary terraforming combine. It was much the same as the earlier one, except I felt distracted during the negotiations. I needed to return to the first site to take sample replicates of the PTOs in order to increase data confidence. When the meeting concluded, rather than fly straight back to the hotel I had the pilot detour 5,743 kilometres around the vast hub transmission shadow that spanned the interior to the VTOL pad of Primary Subsoil Generator Combine.

Down on ground level I walked in the sun among the shale and weedy mint. The fleshbod's skin itched with virescence, greening in the sunlight. I felt chloroplast generation accelerate. My Green Man icon indicated that Florigen transcription had begun, initiating the fleshbod's bloom cascade sequence: the fleshbod was preparing to transform. I removed my suit so that the sun would contact more skin, then walked from one soilfarm to another, searching.

Jennifer lugged a steel pipe on her shoulder. She looked up and saw me, waved and came over, almost naked in

the dry dusty heat except for that clinging sari and a tool bag. I watched her rolling gait, skinny, long limbed and lithe, but very thin hipped. Toolbar icons flashed.

Three laughing children ran alongside her. She scooped up a young girl and carried her on her hip with her other arm. Jennifer now appeared heavily pregnant, but she had not been yesterday. Could I have missed such data?

I spawned a sprite to compare yesterday's recordings to today's measurements: Jennifer was not pregnant yesterday, but definitely seemed it now, with a distinctly measurable bulge, the foetus weighing approximately 4250 grams, a developmental stage that took a standard earth infant a mean of 11 months to achieve from conception.

"Hello, John," she said. "You know, I'd never met a man before."

"Are these your children?" I asked.

"Yes." She grinned, studied the fleshbod's chest, then let the child slide down from her hip to the ground. It joined the others. The children looked up at me, giggled and ran away through the mint. The bump in Jennifer's belly moved: a struggling elbow. She gasped and soothed it with her free hand, the steel pipe still held on her shoulder by the other. A small mess of blonde hair erupted from Jennifer's stomach. Two tiny blue eyes watched me, just peeking above the horizon of Jennifer's belly.

The foetus.

"Come on, out of there!" said Jennifer. A giggling girl wriggled free from

Jennifer's belly and onto her hip where the last child had been.

"This is Mali, my youngest," said Jennifer. "She's my fifth, all girls." Mali smiled mischievously, then jumped to the ground and ran off to catch the others. I could just make out the entrance to Jennifer's pouch as the skin flap stretched back, taut. I ran some skeletal augmentation simulations: Jennifer's pelvic structure most closely resembled a fusion between human and *Macropus Rufus*, a marsupial.

I spawned a sprite to investigate. It informed me that although the most recently evolved Eutherian mammals have a womb and placenta to gestate a foetus, the older subclasses use a pouch, or marsupium. The pouch is an open womb, and rather than the gestating foetus receiving nutrients from the placenta and umbilicus, it receives a chronologically ordered series of growth hormones and developmental regulator proteins through pouch milk. Both processes use similar genes, proteins, and chronology, although marsupial females give birth to tiny 10 week old zygotes that live in the pouch the last two trimesters and often way beyond. In some cases, young aren't weaned for years. With such an easy labour, females have many offspring with few problems.

The benefits of a pouch are evident in resource scarce environments, where during times of scarcity the female causes foetal diapause in the pouch-young by halting the lactic delivery of growth and developmental hormones

and sending a hibernation trigger that suspends development until resources are plentiful again.

"Are you a reengineered posthuman?" I asked.

Jennifer smiled, then walked away, following a pipeline across the shale. I followed her to a hydrology node where six pipes intersected. She dropped her pipe to the ground and had me help her replace a section.

"Deeper into the desert I have seen people who lay eggs that only hatch when the environment suits, and further, scaled people that don't need to drink water. No one made them. No intelligence designed them. This planet has a high mortality rate, there's a harsh drought cycle that kills off lots of normals. That's what made us."

She crouched to work on a bolt. I ran my hand over her smooth brown shoulder. The light down that covered her skin was not down, but actual golden fur. This planet had awoken a dormant genetic legacy, an evolutionary history, and selected for atavism.

"How could you have not met a man before?" I asked.

She stood and walked to a complex network of ducts, tanks and windmills. "Out here, evolution has favoured women who give birth to more women. Men can't give birth, a 50:50 sex ratio is an affluence we can't afford. We just don't have many, and I've never met one. Besides, all the men and normals go to the cities because of the heat."

"But, how can you be a virgin with children?"

“You ask a lot of questions!” Jennifer laughed, then worked on a fused bolt.

“Tell me!” I said.

She stood and wiped her forehead, then looked me in the eye. “Our cohort has a woman that goes to the city to meet men. We all get sperm from her. She shares it out, and we pass it on to each other so that all our unmated virgins can breed. She has encounters with multiple partners to ensure that all offspring in our cohort have different sires and aren’t too interrelated.”

A sprite superimposed an image over Jennifer in the visual overlay: Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*, the sublime pinnacle of love and female sexuality borne on the shell of a scallop. Layered diagrams and pop-ups appeared around Venus on the half-shell as the image zoomed in, not on voluptuous Venus, but on the vulval bivalve. Spermatheca: an organelle of the female reproductive tract in some molluscs and other invertebrates that stores live male sperm for long periods until conditions are favourable. 3D diagrams rotated in my upper left field of view.

Jennifer tightened some nuts with a grimace, then paused for a rest. She looked me up and down.

“So have you been with women before?” she asked.

“Yes, I have memories of being with women.”

“On this planet? On this mission?”

“No.”

“Well, how can you be sure this isn’t your first mission and those memories

are just some pattern the company uses as a halter? Whatever these memories are you access, they’re from other people in other bodies on other planets, people a lot like you, almost exact, maybe copies, but not you. That makes you a virgin, too.”

“No, they were all me. It’s true.”

“It doesn’t matter anyway.” She laughed and put the wrench down. “I have to go,” she said.

“Wait,” I said and grabbed her hand. “We’re finishing up the protein analysis of your Primary Terraforming Organisms. I think the only thing holding back the primary ecology is the growth rate of the fungus. If the ants could farm more fungus . . .”

“Yes! That’s exactly what our cohort’s labwork indicates,” she said. “The planet has cooled regionally and the DNA binding coefficient of the fungal replication trigger transcription factor has fallen and cell replication lags; fungal growth has slowed, so PTO growth rates aren’t in synch. The ants harvest plenty of leaf and the bacteria decompose it quickly enough, but all the biomass cycling through the ecosystem accumulates in the ants’ underground nurseries as humus waiting to be converted into fungus, because the fungus doesn’t grow fast enough; it’s a bottleneck reducing the amount of biomass available to the other organisms and slowing overall output.”

I watched her talking: smart, animated, excited.

A sprite appeared but I deleted it.

This close I could smell her. Numbers. I smelt her numbers and coconstructed an odour profile specific to her, then consulted the chemical scent charts; more numbers. My vomero-nasal bulb detected airborne pheromones, particularly the androsterone pregna-4, 20-diene-3,6-dione. A diagram of the molecular structure of the chemical rotated to my upper left field of view, pop-ups told me the chemical's active groups, chemical interactions and related chemical families. Hypertext listed the pheromone's functional descriptors and the effects it would have on a body, a male body: *this* male body.

Words, all just words. Things I would never actually *know*.

The fleshbod shifted uneasily.

A sprite appeared. The androst-erone had triggered the predicted autonomic physiological response cascade, gonadotropins and nerve growth factor surged into the fleshbod's serum. A series of sprites heralded changes in respiration, vasodilation, cardiac frequency, and electrodermal activity. Neuroendocrine secretions surged: luteinizing hormone, follicle stimulating hormone, testosterone. Layers of jumbled information tumbled into my field of view, increasing dopamine, oxytocin and vasopressin, decreasing serotonin.

Too much. I couldn't think.

"Come with me." I grabbed Jennifer's hand and ran to where we'd lunched yesterday, then walked about until I found it.

My hub-linked icons went offline.

I heard an odd noise: silence. My breathing.

I looked at Jennifer's hand, her brown arm, the light golden fur; I smelled her scent and swooned. Passion surged through me. I felt desire well up from some place within, and then explode into dizziness, limerance, an impulsive urge that clutched me and squeezed as I looked at her face.

I needed her.

It was horrifying.

Jennifer looked into my eyes.

"I really should go," she said, and gathered her tools. Sweat broke out across my prickling body.

She strolled away. Her kids scurried along after her. The smallest jumped head first into her pouch and somersaulted so that its little eyes peered out. Another one jumped up. Jennifer grabbed her and carried her on the hip, but then dropped forward and walked on all fours, arms and legs the same long length, knuckle walking, like a baboon. The child wrapped its arms and legs around her torso and hung underneath. The others ran along side.

She waved goodbye then walked away into the distance.

I had never felt so alone.

Snowflake

■ concluded the third meeting and retired to my hotel room. I'd spawned a 4.5HueqCC to perform the protein analysis of the last terraforming organ-

ism. Soon I would be finished. Poly would design and send the new genetic blueprints to me, and I would generate and deliver the organisms to the clients.

Poly determined that the functionality of all organisms sampled could be replicated and better regulated in a single set of PTOs, modified versions of the 4 PTOs sampled from the frontier founder site of Primary Subsoil Generator Combine. The new designs were almost complete.

I hubbed my personal memories and replayed my 87 physical insertions on other planets. It seemed to be me in them. I siphoned 0.5Hueqs from the PTO analysis to help examine them: it was me, making decisions I would make, thinking things I would think. Definitely. And there were times I had known women. I accessed my memories of sex; sometimes a cultural part of closing contracts, sealing deals, numbed through an experiential filter, emotionless.

I'm sure it was me.

A fat maggot appeared in my hotel room.

Cease accessing irrelevant data and direct ALL spare conc to protein analysis. We need to finish the task and deliver the product.

When the PTO analysis was complete I sent the data to Poly. I noticed through the window that the sun was beginning to set. My neck itched. I examined the fleshbod in the mirror. It was bright green, and small leaves erupted from under my collar. An ant crawled across my face, carrying a cut-

ting of leaf: empty shell organisms ready to receive new DNA blueprints from Poly. It vanished into a tiny hole in my neck.

I consulted my Green Man icon. The fleshbod was ready to transform, and was awaiting the signal. I donned my best black suit and left my room for the street. I walked among the crowds, browsing, watching the people laugh and talk. The lunar divinator chatted with people, showing them his pictures of all tomorrows' moons. Nearby, the Ghenghala spiced chicken woman tended her smoky barbecues. Little cages of freedom birds hung from cords in the tree next to her.

I bought some Ghenghala spiced chicken then entered the hub transmission shadow. My hub-linked icons vanished and I felt Poly's grip drain away like emptying bathwater as the street became real.

Dense air cloyed on my skin. I drew a deep breath and smelled spicy charcoal smoke. Parallel shafts of sunlight speared through the humid green canopy and perfumed smoke, casting a dappled orange glow over the hotel. Huge white flowers floated down from the trees into the street.

The sun lowered, reddened, and lit up the atmospheric dust. The blazing red sky submerged the street in a deep, clotting crimson. Like ruddy liquor it seeped from the cracks in the walls, from the trees, the planet itself. The freedom birds shrieked insanely, they trilled and warbled in their cages. Cicadas chirped.

I was disconnected, totally disconnected from the vast incessantly chattering zoo of Empire.

I was just me.

And I had no memories of anything. Maybe I was the body.

I ate the Ghenghala spiced chicken. It was delicious.

A winking sprite appeared, like a snowflake with a face.

“Hey Cookie Cutter,” it said, “why did the chicken cross the road?”

“Who *are* you?” I asked.

“Oh, Cookie Cutter . . . who are *you*?” It laughed.

“I’m not a Cookie Cutter, I’m a consciousness clone.”

“You’re a stamped out pattern. A Carbon Copy of the puppet they always use, cause they know what it’s gonna do. They always know. You’re gonna sing, sing for Poly, because you’re reliable Cookie, the best pattern for the job, always does what he’s told. But can you tell the future?”

The sprite pointed, and I looked across the street to where a woman stamped out a row of gingerbread men from a sheet of dough. Another slid trays laden with gingerbread men into a brick oven to bake. One carried trays of finished biscuits among the crowd to where some children played marbles in the sand. A child reached up and grabbed a gingerbread man from the tray. He stuffed it in his mouth, biting his way through its head with glee, then its body. The boy laughed then played his shot and cheered. The game was over.

I stepped from the transmission shadow.

My toolbar repopulated its hub-linked icons.

The street scene receded as I reconnected to the hub.

Poly appeared.

The new PTOs have been designed. Accept PTO blueprint datasquirt and progress Phoenix Project to completion: generate and deliver the product.

Data poured across the hub into the fleshbod’s brainbound meatfolder like a lightning bolt drilling through my skull. I couldn’t think, and the fleshbod shook as data transferred. The data transfer bar grew, 10%, 40%, 70%: data transfer complete. My Green Man icon flashed with the command, Transform: Yes/No.

I was ready to deliver the product.

I chartered an ultrasonic VTOL speeder flight and turned back to the hotel to organise a taxi.

Freedom

Jennifer stood before me on the footpath, arm-in-arm with a friend. They were wearing town clothing that made them indistinguishable from the locals. They whispered to each other. The friend looked at me with sly appraisal, nodding, whispered to Jennifer, then walked away into the crowd.

Jennifer smiled. I did too.

“It certainly wasn’t hard to find you,” she said. “I think everyone in town can describe everything about you.”

I held her hand. It felt good.

“What will happen to your cohort if I deliver the new PTOs and terraforming progress resumes?”

“We’ll move further into the interior.”

“What happens when the entire planet is a garden?”

“We’ve managed to stop that from happening so far.”

I nodded. “I thought you knew too much about the fungus.”

She smiled. I pictured the vast hub transmission shadow that spanned the

interior. “I have information your cohort could use.”

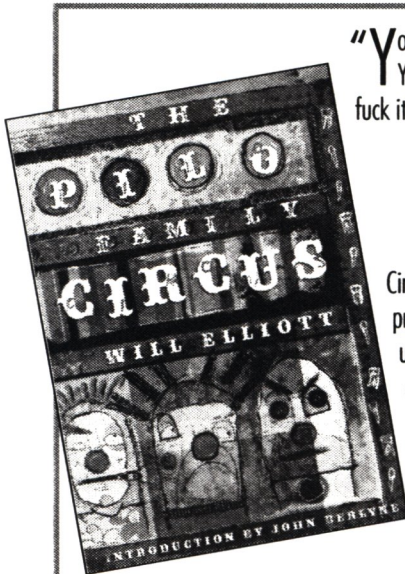
A bird chirped from a cage that hung nearby. I looked into the cage. The pretty little bird perched within, warbling proudly.

“I’ll buy this bird, please.”

The woman nodded. I handed her the two dollars, untied the cage and opened the door.

The bird jumped to the open door and stood, looking out.

Then it flew away.



You have two days to pass your audition. You better pass it, feller. You're joining the circus. Ain't that the best news you ever got? The fuck it ain't."

Gonko, on behalf of Doopy, Goshy, Winston and Rufshod.

Clown Division, Pilo Family Circus.

Somewhere just above the searing flames of hell, The Pilo Family Circus is playing at a town near you. This darkest of carnivals has preyed on the souls of its audience for centuries and young Jamie has unfortunately just come the attention of the star turns—the baddest, most psychotic clown troupe you could never hope to meet.

Will Elliott's debut novel is not recommended for coulrophobics

Signed Slipcased Hardcover £50.00 • Signed Hardcover £20.00

T.M. Wright has been writing ghost stories for more than 30 years and, he tells us, “The Blue-Faced Man’ may be one of them.” And you know . . . he’s probably right. After all, it’s lyrical, surreal and solidly on-and off-key at various points, all of which are the hallmarks of Mr. Wright’s stories. Indeed, Blue Canoe, a similar tale—lyrical, on- and off-key, surreal . . . but of novella-length—is forthcoming from PS, maintaining the mood of his earlier PS outing, the masterful I Am The Bird. His first collection—short fiction, a novel, art and poetry—Bone Soup is forthcoming from those lovely folks at Cemetery Dance Publications.

The Blue-Faced Man

T. M. Wright

Dear Josephine,

In your recent letter, you wrote, “So tell me, what are your ideas about ghosts?” and I’ve been giving your question a good deal of thought, unexpected as it was, especially from someone such as you, so centered and so grounded in what passes for reality.

I’ll admit, though, that I cannot answer your question directly: I’m sure you weren’t asking if I “believed” in ghosts. That’s simply not your style. Naked “belief” means little, whether we’re talking about ghosts or an “after-life” or the possibilities for a successful existence. “Belief,” as I’m sure you realize, is a first cousin to “faith,” which, as you may also realize, isn’t something I embrace.

However, all of that being said . . .

Ghosts are spines, stomachs, spleens, nosebleeds, bad breath, lips puckered and reasons unremarked. They’re doodles, too, slips of the tongue and incipient megalomania. They’re walks in the

park, disinclination, remorse, knees out of whack, a long moment left behind (as all long moments must be).

Do you understand?

And they fly, they soar, they waddle, squat, dance, walk tip-toe; they’re as physical as words left unsaid, imaginings not gotten to, deaths unchallenged, challenged, and ignored.

They are the ignored.

They’re time in snippets, time in many snippets, time not characterized.

Do you know what I’m getting at, Josephine? Do you understand?

Ghosts are the whole that has become the not-whole, at last, and regret it.

They are repetition and repetitious; they long for headaches and heartaches, again, sores that heal quickly or badly or not at all, kisses that drip, hands that grip hard enough to hurt.

Ghosts are the poets of the great noisy silence, they are all the flotsam and jetsam of having been, nasty predilections and limitless brilliance trapped forever in the pitch dark.

Write back.

When you're able, write back.
Josephine.

Daniel,

Look at this city. Look at it. Squarely and with an artist's focus. It's as remarkable as we who live in it.

No, I don't understand what you've written. "Ghosts are spines"? I don't understand that. I don't believe I want to understand it . . . "incipient megalomania"? I'm nowhere near understanding that, either.

But I have never really understood you, have I? You and your "nasty predilections"—whatever they might be. Perhaps someday you'll tell me. Perhaps someday you'll tell me.

And that is my reply this time.

Now I must feed my very hungry children, who are always in need.

Josephine,

I do, at last, see this city with an artist's focus. I've made love to it, wrestled with it, become cold as a winter's sleep in it. It's as forbidding, *always, always*, as a man with three hands, as remorseless as a badger; blood runs in its narrow streets and broad avenues, but it cannot be smelled or seen, except by the ignored.

I can only float through it, as do we all.

Daniel,

I've never seen you float. I've seen you stumble, and I've seen you run, though simply to be on time, and I've seen you walk as steadily as any man can.

But float?

It is rarely that I'm not busy, but I feel I must respond to your letters although I'm certain my responses are disappointing, at best. You're off on a journey again, and I understand the reasons for it. You've always been so restless, so restless. Even now.

Join us for a meal soon, will you? We'll talk the way we used to. I'll invite Anne and Harry, too. They've opened a shop not far from here; they sell wicker baskets of many shapes and sizes. It's a good business and they claim to be doing well. Everyone's got something to put in a wicker basket, don't you think?

Surely you must have your easel set up somewhere in the city on these beautiful mornings.

What a corrupt universe. We arrive in it, we arrive in it, I think, after having never left it. Does that mystify you? Is it fuzzy word-play, no more than semantics?

It may be, but I would guess that it isn't. I'd bet my internal organs on it, in fact, and, whatever the outcome, what would it matter? And who's going to make the judgment in the

first place; who's going to decide the outcome?

Ghosts are epithets, spilled platters of cheese, a wedding gone sour.

Ghosts applaud without stopping—you can hear them on a quiet evening, if you listen very closely. Endless applause. It causes consternation among the wildlife.

You spend your nights in a small, dark-blue room, Josephine. I've seen it. And you sleep naked, naked, regardless of the temperature, which is endlessly enjoyable for passersby:

Yes, I have my easel set up in strategic areas these beautiful mornings. But do I paint what I see? No. What would be the use? My talent cannot make better what my eye sees poorly or not at all.

Ghosts are bobbing heads and stiff recriminations and darkness suffused with the nothing-much: ghosts wake early, before sleep has overcome them. They're time without movement, underwear at the knees, a brief buzz at the ear.

Ghosts long for the orgasm which will end, at last. And so they shriek and wail and complain and possess the gut, the night, the powder room, the small colorless area on the lawn.

I can not define you, Josephine. I can not define myself. I can only list the parts of the whole. And I can only guess at the whole, like a blind dog barking at movement in the bushes.

Your letters make me happy, small challenge to the brain that they are.

Sometimes, even now, I see you at the end of a long street, easel under your arm, and I want to run to you. But I have children to feed. They are, it seems, never fed well enough.

They're as demanding as disease.

Do you remember the painting you did of me, Daniel? Of course you do. I'd be heartbroken if you'd sold it. Did you? Did you sell it? And to whom?

There I go, asking questions for which I've received no answers and imposing my own answers on the equation. You'd say that was typical of me, and I'd agree, I'd agree.

A friend said, when I showed her your letters, "Ghosts are a melding of longing and need and memory." What do you think of that? I find it profound.

Yes, I do still spend my evenings in the dark blue room and, yes, of course, I sleep naked regardless of the temperature. But there are no passersby; I would see them looking at me. Perhaps you are the only passerby, Daniel. Would you even know if that were true? Would I?

As long as we are discussing ghosts (in a haphazard way, like throwing darts at Mayflies), my guess is, my *understanding* is, that ghosts are confusion incarnate, or confusion re-incarnate. You say they're "spleens" and "spines" and "reasons unremarked," et cetera, et cetera, but that's only because confusion itself, which ghosts must surely be, amounts to the myriad *parts* of a thing, and when that thing, trying to remain whole, seeks to understand those myriad parts, seeks to bring them

together into the whole, the *sum* of the parts, to become, once again, *itself*, all that can result is confusion, phrases out of context masking as definitions or lyricism. But it can be only futile guesswork, like trying to put together a puzzle that has become ashes.

Do you understand me, Daniel? Do you understand me, Daniel?

And the dark-blue room in which you sleep so invitingly naked, Josephine, is only one of many rooms in a large gray stone house in a very large city made entirely of stone houses and shops that sell wicker baskets.

Ghosts sing at odd hours. And they sometimes sing well. Their harmonies are almost always perfect, though they don't often sing in harmony, and when they do, it's not as if it's something they've planned, it's simply coincidental—the harmonies of wind and rain, or the harmonies that passion produces.

I understand you completely. You have a gift, now, in these circumstances, for making yourself understood; you did not seem to possess that gift before.

And so there it is—"before." Which ghosts are not. I was going to write that they are not "after," as well. But I'll save that idea, that discussion, that possibility, for another time.

Another time.

Another time.

Ghosts resemble children, adults, the old and the very old. They shake their heads occasionally, bend over occasionally, as if to look at something on the floor, on the sand, the sidewalk, the veranda; they peer around corners, sometimes as if surreptitiously, sometimes not.

And they are always, always surprising.

I remember your hands, Daniel. I remember all of you, of course, but I remember your hands, especially, because they are the most useful and the most graceful and supple hands I have ever experienced. They have their own intentions, I think—beyond the intentions of your brain and soul, intentions that are almost clear to me.

On some days, and some nights, I see your hands in places I don't expect to see hands.

Ghosts, Daniel, are personal.

Dear Josephine,

I'm the tall one who walks with a limp and I carry an easel around with me wherever I go, hoping for the right artistic moment, hoping now, of all times, for a better eye.

"Snippets," you wrote.

We become snippets, Daniel.

We become our children, our children become us. And then they make us whole.

Good news! I'm opening a shop of my own. I haven't decided what to call it. I feel I should call it something. All shops have names, of course.

Anne and Harry were over not just long ago and they ate pie. I showed them your letters and they made some comment or two, and our conversation following was scant.

So many centipedes here, Daniel. So many. They're like small exclamations of the night.

Remember that painting you did of me? Have you sold it?

Dear Josephine,

I always open one eye when I'm nearing sleep: this has become a habit with me—not because I'm clinging to the reality of the room, the doors, the mirrors and the bedding, or my arm itself, which I sometimes use as a pillow: I open one eye when I'm nearing sleep, because—I cannot now even guess how long ago—I was nearly at the point of sleep in a room here, in this place, and it was illuminated softly by early morning light, and I opened one eye, and, after a small moment, I saw another eye staring back at me. It was a dark and lucid eye in a face I could see little of—an eyebrow, a lift of forehead, a rounded cheek. I closed my eye: I felt the air move near my face. I opened my eye some minutes later, saw the room—a tall chest of drawers, a slight mirror, a window, the new morning beyond.

In the farmhouse where I grew up,

Daniel, a man came in, when I was young enough not to realize his importance, and made a place for himself in the attic. I knew he was there but no one else did, not Father, nor Mother, my brother Jim, my sister, either. He lived in the attic for a week—during which I heard him moving about, dancing a little, eating food from plates, whispering at me through the floorboards—and then he left the farmhouse. No one ever ever went into the attic so no one but I knew he existed. Have I told you about him? He's a snippet. A snippet. I believe he came to see me now and again, when all the others in the house had gone to their jobs or their schools, leaving me by myself and barely young enough to know anything. I look at him in my memory, I see him in my memory. He's the man in the attic who had sour breath and coarse gray whiskers. And he was as thin as straw, and he smiled at me, said, "Yes, there you are, Josephine," and, "I've swallowed *everything* up there, little one," and much else, through the floorboards, into my face, squarely, his mouth only inches from mine.

So many centipedes here, Daniel. Little night wigglers.

Ghosts are personal. Yes. Josephine. We don't know their intentions, so they're personal. They're strang-ers, no matter what face we see star-ing back at us, so they're personal.

I knew a woman who talked in clipped sentences and followed me

from place to place for decades, decades, and her bright red hair was long and unclean and her lips and eyes dark. She talked in clipped sentences. "Hello, don't!" for instance, and, "I'll gather you inside me, yes," and, "Maybe it's today for that!"

I got locked in my room by my father when he was in his thirties. I was much younger than that, and he locked me in my room and boarded the windows. Stared at me. I remember his one eye.

Ghosts are Schwinn bikes, gingerbread cookies, long moments unexamined, tea stains.

You should invite me for a meal. We should enjoy a meal together soon, again.

Ghosts are despair, of course, Josephine. It's in their hands and their skin, in their unstudied glances, their gait, that miserable two-step, their nonexistent bones (which got carried away, put in a hole) and their bare, trembling feet. They leave no stains but the stains of their despair wherever they are.

And they are everywhere.

I'm not as relentlessly cheerless as you about the subject at hand, Daniel. Look, after all, at this city we live in, at our very existence. If you asked any of us here if we'd thought it possible, we would have had nothing to say but "No."

But you're right, yes, we're followed wherever we go, even if we go nowhere we are observed constantly, and the eyes

that observe us cannot know us well enough. Have you discovered that?

I look back, I look back, and I see the unblinking eyes and the open mouths and I get a peek of pink tongue. I see hands in close detail, too—the river courses of the veins.

And the man in the attic had no name, I asked him, "Tell me your name," and he said, "I have no name," and I didn't believe him because, of course, in that child's brain, in the wildest of her imaginings, how could she believe that this man in the attic had no name, that he went about, from place to place (from attic to attic to attic) without a name? How does one leave traces of oneself without a name?

And there it is: he must have had a name or I wouldn't remember him now, so very long later.

Also, there is the other child; she plagues this house as she plagued my father's house.

She is "Erma," which is sewn in black script into the yellow bodice of her blue dress. I see her around corners; I see her at my shoulder, as I did at my father's house, and, there, at my father's house, she whispered to me, as I passed beneath doorways, her secrets and nightmares, said, "Keep these."

And I have.

She is here, now, Daniel. In this house. She steals the food my children much need, she clamps her hands on their ears as they sleep, and they wake screaming because they believe silence is death and that it has come for them.

She sprinkles centipedes on their pillows.

Josephine, ghosts are the masks of congealed possibilities, they are the smashed heart and mid-morning's cum cries, the octo-genarian grasping at his memories, they are his memories coming apart, his memories squirming away while he sleeps, while he plays cards, while his grandchildren stare at him and wonder about themselves as he succumbs, slowly, before their eyes, and they grab for pieces of him, giggling and afraid.

You must invite me for a meal, my friend. I walk the streets of this place and I see much less than makes me comfortable, much more than makes me afraid.

Do you remember the drowning at the park in the suburbs? Do you remember the moving water and the blue-faced man?

I remember everything I remember. I remember believing the long-dead mourning dove in the planter in the garden made us immune to bad things, but only as long as it lay undisturbed. And then Timmy disturbed it and the blue-faced man appeared in the park on his back, mouth open, and with naked feet, and then was taken away by people who laughed quietly.

Ghosts, Josephine, Ghosts, Josephine, go around picking up hair-thin bits of their gray matter. And then, Josephine, they see nothing useful in it because it is merely something that

once was. But they pick it up anyway. They use it as food. And so they grow to be as thin as the legs of insects.

Ghosts, Josephine, beg loudly not to be heard.

And, Daniel, there was the cat, when I was young, that followed me everywhere and bit me. It happened every day. Daniel, it happened every day. My arms and legs, my torso and then, at last, my face became crisscrossed with infection. I looked in mirrors. I recognized nothing that stared back.

And so she is here, too. In this stone house. She's alive in all its small rooms; she sings at all hours, her cat cry, the cry of her; her harmonies with the stone walls.

And she follows my children, Daniel, who cannot but try to turn and see her, so I see her for them.

The centipedes are everywhere.

Daniel, the centipedes are everywhere.

I'm opening a shop. Daniel, I'm opening a shop. Harry and Anne have opened a shop, too. They sell wicker baskets. Everyone has something to put in a wicker basket, don't you think?

Josephine, I saw an ocean today. It was at a distance of many miles across the great gray expanse of the city and it encompassed the horizon like a cloak; it rose a little, fell, rose a little. As if it were breathing.

Who breathes, I wonder, for those who don't?

Nothing exists, Josephine, quite as succinctly as a shoulder-width passage through the endless pitch dark.

I've dreamt of that. Have you? I wake to it, I briefly wake to it. And so I avoid sleep. I wake endlessly. I see, endlessly, an eye staring back.

Do you? Josephine.

And what do you recall that's certain?

Do you write with pencil, or do you write with pen? Josephine.

How is our communication accomplished except through the minds of others? Josephine.

Do you see the words slinking off, wriggling off, into the pitch dark?

Josephine.

Josephine.

Ghosts are storms completed.

They lie desperately in any bed not their own, eat unnoticed from empty bowls, keep what memories they haven't yet lost in places they don't recall.

Josephine, I know none of this.

I'm guessing at it. I'm guessing at the whole, only guessing at the whole.

I believe in the whole. It's what I need.

I see you lying naked, no matter the temperature, in your dark blue room,

and you're either sleeping or waking, the difference between the two being, of course, absolutely, absolutely nothing.

My window, Daniel, shows me a cloud of small and harmless insects.

I have no window.

My window shows me your easel, your hands, the river courses of the veins.

Erma.

She has done something with my children.

I have no window.

The nothing speaks ghastly well.

I have no window.

My dark blue room is so very cold. So very cold. So very cold. Daniel.

Dear Josephine,

In your recent letter, you wrote, "So tell me, what are your ideas about ghosts?" and I've been giving your question a good deal of thought, unexpected as it was, especially from someone such as you, so centered and so grounded in what passes for reality.

☒

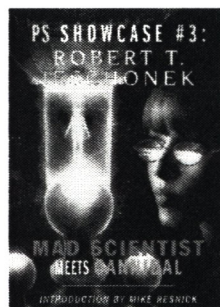
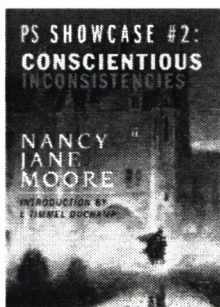
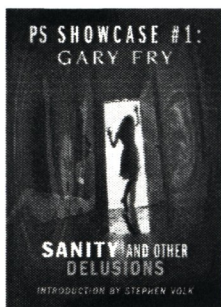


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PS ANNOUNCES
SHOWCASE Collections

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 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?

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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

"The Blue Room is an institution in Newcastle," the ever-informative Mr. Brenchley informs us. "Every month, local and national and international writers give readings, in a pub. Usually there's music too. It's an honour to be invited. It used to be women-only, but they invited me to be their first man; and last year, they invited me back. You get ten minutes to read, which is not really long enough to introduce a novel and then read a significant chunk of it; and a piece of a short story is never satisfying; so I decided to write something freestanding. My short work recently has either been concerned with people with Aids and their carers, or else with classic English ghost stories. This piece combines the two.

"After I'd read it, someone asked if they could see the silver dollar. So I showed it to him. Because yes, of course it's a true story. That's why I had to make it up."

Chaz Brenchley has been earning a living as a writer since he was eighteen, which was thirty-some years ago. He claims that it doesn't seem enough, and has taken to publishing under other names as well. He lives in Newcastle, with two freeloaders cats and a remarkable number of books. "I know they're remarkable," he adds, "because people keep remarking on them." Isn't it always the way.

Parting Shots

Chaz Brenchley

When you're burying a man, you can give a lot of time to what he wears, how he looks, what he takes with him. That last, especially. You don't have to get all Ancient Egyptian on his ass, he's probably not Tutankhamun, but—well, it's a thing. You can do it.

Us, we stood around his bed and cracked a litre of Stolichnaya. Shot-glasses straight from the freezer, the way he'd taught us all to drink it: we drank him a toast of parting shots, wetted his forehead, opened his wardrobes and set to work. Dressing Miss Daisy, Micky called it.

We'd already washed and shaved him, we were good at that; it was rou-

tine, we'd been doing it a year already. I would've liked to have his hair cut, but none of us was competent with scissors and who can you ask, to do that? We were sending him on shaggy, then—but we did touch up his roots, not to let him go greily.

Underwear was simple, a pair of his favourite Calvins; he'd seen a banned advert once, dissolved into hysterical lust and never wore anything else after. Clean black jeans and a silk shirt, the Issey Miyake jacket with the mandarin collar that he loved, all of that was straightforward.

We argued over footwear, because he hated his smart shoes. For preference he went around in sandals and socks, and we all hated that and always had. He'd have been thrilled, to know

that we were still fighting over his feet. In the end, we decided he could go barefoot. Clouds are fluffy, and the road to hell is notoriously well-paved; he'd be fine, either way.

We crossed his legs for comfort—"sorted for ease," Sally said—and because we were all settling in to make a night of it, and because he'd always been a crusader. We laid his hands across his belly, fingers linked, because he used to do that when he was drunk or tired or bored enough, when he was just sitting back and listening while we bickered and flirted and debated great matters all around him, and you'd think we did it entirely for his amusement. Likely we did.

Then it was all about decoration. His favourite rings, that had grown too heavy for his fingers: they could go back on now, the jet and the jade and the skull-knuckle silver ring. They were too loose, but that didn't matter any more. He wouldn't be flinging his hands around to make his points again, his stillness did that for him.

No watch—he used to say there never was that much hurry, that a man had to carry the time on his person; and I never knew him late, though it was odd how often the rest of us turned out to be early—but we plaited leather thongs around his wrist, and each of us tied a knot in the trailing ends to hold them.

Around his throat, what he liked to call his giveaway: "I'm a creature of the seventies," he used to say, "medallion man to the core." Only his medallion

hung on a fine silver chain and was silver itself, a moon in crescent, the bulk of its disc black and secret, with just that sliver shining. He loved that.

A silver Bajoran cuff on his right ear, with the finest imaginable chain linking it to the sleeper in the lobe. In his left, a stud of white gold, which was all the gold he ever had or wanted: one of a pair, and these days Gerard wore the other. Gerard wasn't there. He'd given this to us to do, which was either acutely generous or an acute surrender, and I wasn't sure which.

We'd already ruled out a post-mortem tattoo, even if we could have found someone to ink it. We had discussed it, though. He'd have liked that.

Nothing left, then, bar what went into his pockets or into the coffin with him. Much of that was standard, those things he always used to carry in his jeans when he was still able for it, when he was up and about: his purse with all his credit cards in case he needed money, house keys in case he wanted to come home. A corkscrew, a toothpick. Loose change. He liked to jingle a little as he went.

In his right-hand outer jacket pocket, a fresh pack of Winstons and a lighter, because he hadn't been able to smoke for a long time now and he'd want that; left-hand outer pocket, a flask of Lagavulin. The last thing he drank in this life, first drink in the next.

Left-hand inner pocket, a wallet of photographs: his mum, his sister, us. Some of us individually or in twos and

threes, the ones he'd taken himself; and then the team photo, all of us together at the foot of his bed on the day he came home from hospital, the day we started nursing him ourselves. All of us bar him. He took photographs, he didn't appear in them. He used to say he wasn't interested in how he looked to other people, only in how they looked to him. It wasn't true, of course, which is why he found it necessary to invent.

Right-hand inner pocket, his passport. We'd renewed that for him just six months ago, when he was long past leaving his bed. He'd need it now, wherever he was going.

In the same pocket, because every journey involves longeurs, he'd want a book. We gave him—no, we let him keep his copy of *Religio Medici*, a slim Victorian edition with the leather long since worn to a butter softness. That'd see him through.

Tucked under his arm, of course, a cuddly toy. How not, when it would infuriate him to find her there? Besides, she had a function: this was Vespa, the vast fluffy wasp we'd bought him years back and hung on the back of his door to remind him never to go out without his epinephrine.

That, of course, was the moment that Alix yelped, and scurried out of the room; and came back a minute later, blushing and laughing, with his EpiPen in her hand. We'd almost sent him off without it.

So that went into his jacket pocket with the fags, because there was nothing he liked better than a smoke after a crisis; and then we were done. The vodka was gone, but hey, there's always another bottle. And this was a wake and a houseparty and, what, did anybody imagine we were going to *bed* tonight . . . ?

At some uncertain time during that long night, when the others were all out in the kitchen, concocting some witches'-brew punch to welcome Gerard home, I slipped into the front room—laughingly renamed the parlour, just for the occasion, because that's what he would have done—and I added one little memento of my own, slipping it into his pocket with the rest of his loose change. My lucky silver dollar, that I'd been carrying since I was thirteen, since my astronomer-uncle sent it to me from Mount Palomar: the design showed an eagle with an olive-branch in its claws, descending on the moon. It was a sharp counterpoint to his own moon-medallion, and I wanted him to have something that would hurt one of us, at least.

Later we gave Gerard some time with him alone, while we went out walking in the dawn mist and the chill of it, climbing a hill and passing a bottle from hand to hand, drinking one more toast on the summit. And then—at last, too soon, whichever, both—it was properly

tomorrow, and we had to let him go. See him off. We had to be good in public, dress as sober as he was and act as quiet in church and at the graveside and over sandwiches and squash in the church hall after. His sister presided, while his mother sat quiet and proud and miserable in her wheelchair at a table in the corner. One by one we all went over to do the dutiful by him as well as her, listening to her and failing utterly to recognise her son in anything she said.

And when that was over, we could go home and there could be wine in plenty or whisky for those that wanted it, the rest of that bottle of Lagavulin; and it turned out that I was the only one who wanted it, so I did that, I applied myself to what I wanted most.

Then Tig started rolling joints and sending them around, clockwise and anticlockwise each in turn, so I got them coming and going; and eventually between the whisky and the dope it was me that was going, losing contact, drifting hard.

And when I was roused, when Gerard aroused me everyone else had gone, seemingly; and he said, "Not so much a wake, more a sleep, eh? Bed for you, sweets. I've made up the spare, so shift yourself."

So I did that, I shifted myself upstairs: through the bathroom on autopilot, toothbrush and towel, and so to the little boxroom where I must have

dossed a hundred times when we were sharing shifts, while he was slowly dying in the room below, breathing no more than a leaf breathes, heedless and fractional.

I tumbled into bed and slept, or passed out if you're not polite; and woke in the deep dark, to a terrible sense of presence.

I hadn't thought to pull the curtains, and I could see him, almost, as a shadow against the stars; I hadn't closed the window either, and I could smell him like rain on the road outside, like the risen roots of matter.

I lay very still and didn't speak, didn't breathe; felt watched, watched over, not free after all. As though there were still expectations, and I had better not disappoint.

And then he was gone and I could breathe again, like a child at Christmas who has been desperate not to let his father guess that he was still awake, not to spoil an adult's pleasure in a supposed secret; and I was still dizzy unless I was dizzy again, and I went spinning away again into incoherent dreaming, and didn't wake again till it was full day.

And when I did, when I roused and sat up and fumbled for my glasses on the bedside cabinet, the first thing I found was my lucky silver dollar, laid gently down for my fingers to discover, clean and cool, misted with the breath of leaves.

Bruce Golden's "One of Nine" combines his love of baseball with the future society he created for his first novel *Mortals All*. "I figured the game of baseball, which had a history of denying minority players, was the perfect setting to further explore the civil rights of humans who may some day be gestated in artificial wombs."

Of his most recent novel, Asimov's Science Fiction said "If Mickey Spillane had collaborated with both Frederik Pohl and Philip K. Dick, he might have produced Bruce Golden's *Better Than Chocolate*." Soon to be released, his blockbuster novel *Evergreen*, and the complete collection of his short stories, in a volume eclectically titled *Dancing with the Velvet Lizard*.

One of Nine

Bruce Golden

I remember the first day I ever laid eyes on him. It didn't start too well for me, and it ended a hell-uva lot worse. Angie, the flavor of the month, dumped my ass before I'd even managed my morning coffee. And the shitty part of it was, I'd just started to get used to all her little idiosyncrasies.

After she blew out of my place on a storm cloud and a broomstick, I spent about ten minutes regretting whatever it was I must have done that pissed her off, and then got on with my life.

By the top of the eighth I couldn't even remember what it was about her I liked so much. I was throwing pills and we were up by one. We hadn't won many lately, so a one-run lead late was a big deal. There were two down, but there were two on and I was jammed up behind a three-and-one count. I knew I had to throw a strike. Nakamura, my catcher, called for the heat. Problem was, my arm didn't feel like it had any heat left. So I shook him off.

I fingered the seams and caressed the leather cover, waiting for Nakamura's next sign. He put down the big deuce, and I shook him again. I didn't want to throw Uncle Charlie, I wanted the change, figuring I could throw something offspeed and fool the big gorilla who stood there *waving the wood like he was gonna do some damage*.

So I threw it. It was a beautiful little pitch, except I elevated it about a foot and he launched it over the big spaceship sticking out of the *See the Stars from Mars* ad on the rightfield wall. Talk about rockets. The next thing I know, we're down by two and Hernandez is shooting out of the dugout like his ass is on fire.

"What kind of pitch was that?" he growled. "My mother could throw a better pitch than that!"

"Bring in your mother then."

I thought it was a pretty funny comeback, but he wasn't laughing.

"You're outta here," he said, waving to the bullpen like he was directing traffic.

I walked to the dugout and slammed my glove against the wall, almost hitting poor old coach Blutarski. Then I kicked the Energade container to make sure everyone knew I wasn't happy.

I sat at the end of the bench and pouted till we started to rally in the bottom of the ninth. I figured if we could at least tie it up, I wouldn't get hung with another loss. Not exactly the old team spirit, but those were desperate days and I was struggling just to hang on.

The upshot is the rally fell short and I took the loss. It was a pretty quiet postgame locker-room. I had coughed up yet another lead, along with any shot I had of being called up to the show. In fact, I figured I'd just punched my own ticket back to double A.

I'd been up and down so many times over the last few years I knew the hydrorail schedules by heart. You didn't have to be no genius genetic engineer to realize I wasn't living up to the "promise" the organization had touted when they first signed me. And my arm wasn't getting any younger. It was time to start thinking about a second career, one that didn't include trying to throw a nine-inch sphere past the 240-pound behemoths they were sending up to the dish these days. It had been a helluva lot of fun when I was on top of my game. But the cheers had turned to jeers, and the lights didn't seem quite as bright anymore.

Sitting there, strapped with an ice pack, I saw old Coach Blutarski heading my way. I knew he was gonna try to play

Mr. Rainbow to my blues, and I wasn't in the mood.

"Get 'em next time, Gabe," he said, patting me on my unprotected shoulder.

"Yeah, right."

The old-timer was about to shower me with more pearls of wisdom when *he* walked in.

He wasn't that tall, but you could tell he was put together—solid, you know. He had a little satchel and a big gear bag like we all carried, but I was sure he wasn't a player. I was sure because *what* he was was obvious to anyone who could see the little metal gizmo attached to the side of his head. I would have figured he was just a new clubhouse drone, but he was all dressed up in what looked like his Sunday-best suit.

He just stood there like he was waiting for something. Several of the guys quit their yammering and stared at him. Then Santorini opened his big mouth, as he was prone to do, and said, "Those are some pretty fancy duds for cleaning toilets aren't they, andy?"

That set off the first laughs I'd heard since I gave up the dinger. But Hernandez must have had his earflaps set on high, because when he heard the laughing he came barreling out of his office ready to kick butt.

"Who the hell's laughing? You think being in goddamned last place is funny? I'll show you funny." He picked up a bat and was about to put a hole in the wall when he sees the andy standing there. "Who the hell are you?"

"I am Bill 109, your new catcher."

"The hell you say." Hernandez looked him up and down. "There are no andies in this league, bub, and I'll be damned if I'm going to have one on my team. Who the hell told you you were my catcher?"

"Someone's playing a joke on you, Skip," said Redtail, our second baseman.

"Nah," chimed in Santorini, "someone's playing a joke on the andy."

Just about everyone but Hernandez laughed. He made it plain with one of his patented scowls that he was in no mood for it.

"Mr. Richard Boughtree tendered my contract," stated the andy.

"The G.M. gave you a contract?" Hernandez couldn't believe what he was hearing. "I told him there was no way. . . well, we'll see about that."

The skipper stormed out of the room, headed for high country where management roosted.

Benny, the clubhouse drone, looked as confounded as the rest of us. He walked over to the new guy and took one of his bags.

"You better come with me," he told the andy, and they walked out the back way.

If it *was* a joke, it wore out quicker than a 40-year-old relief pitcher. It wasn't long before the laughter morphed into crude comments about andrones in general. Nakamura didn't say anything, but you could tell by the snarl on his face he was thinking about being the odd man out. Hell, I'd be pissed too if I thought I was losing my job . . . especially to an andy.

"Damn andies are everywhere," muttered someone.

"What makes that metalhead think he can play ball?"

"I ain't playing with no andy, I can tell you that."

You gotta understand, we didn't mix with them. Not just ballplayers, no one. At least no one I knew. We didn't work with them, we didn't socialize with them, and we certainly didn't play ball with them. I'd heard of droney leagues where they played against each other—kind of a freak show you know—but I'd never seen a game.

Don't get me wrong. Personally, I had nothing against andrones, or "artificial persons" as some of the media had begun calling them. They had their place. After all, somebody had to do the jobs regular people didn't want to do. But baseball was a game for men . . . *real* men. When you step on that field you're going to war, and you want guys who are gonna back you up. Guys you can trust. It didn't matter to me what color a man was, or what country he was from, or his religion, or even his damn politics, as long as he kept it to himself, played hard, and backed the team. But a genetically-enhanced, artificial construct grown in a tank? That wasn't a man. Whatever you called it, it didn't belong on a ballfield.

"I'm sorry, son, that's just the way it is."

"Well the way it is sucks!" shouted Nakamura, stalking out of Hernandez's

office. He flung his catchers mitt across the room, hitting Williams, the speed-burner just up from Double A.

“Hey!” complained Williams. “Watch it.”

“I thought you were supposed to be fast, kid,” ragged Santorini with a chuckle.

I came in on the middle of it and didn’t hear the whole give and take between Nakamura and the skipper, but I had a bad feeling about the part I missed. When I got to my locker I noticed everyone pretending not to notice what was going on. Hernandez walked in and I knew he must have been distracted, because he didn’t even yell at me for being late. The andy, Bill whatever, was sitting by a locker, putting on a uni.

“All right, listen up!” shouted Hernandez. I noticed most of the guys shut-up quicker than normal. “Beginning tonight, Bill 109 is going to be our starting catcher.” The announcement was greeted by more than the usual amount of grumbling. “Quiet down! I don’t like it any more than the rest of you. I can tell you this—it’s a publicity stunt management thinks will put more butts in the seats. If you rejects weren’t playing like a bunch of scrubs, we wouldn’t have to deal with this, but you are, so deal with it!”

“Well I ain’t gonna shower with him,” declared Santorini.

There was a murmur of agreement and another round of muffled curses aimed at andies in general and our new catcher in particular. All the while, this

Bill just sat there, no expression on his face, listening to everything but not reacting.

“All right, dammit,” ordered the skipper, “let’s get out there and see if you can look like real ballplayers for a change.”

Bill grabbed his catchers gear and headed for the field. The guys watched him go, still carping. I saw they’d given the andy his own number—his andy number—even though teams normally never used anything higher than 99. But there it was on the back of his jersey, number 109. I didn’t know it then, but it was only the beginning of the circus to come.

A beautiful full moon floated over the park that night, like a hanging curve waiting to be clobbered. I guess I remember it so well because for the first time since I’d been with the club, the stands were almost full. The place was infested with media-types, and I could hear the buzz of anticipation in the crowd.

Management had gotten the word out, and their marketing ploy looked like gold from where I stood. It didn’t seem to matter whether people liked the idea or hated it, they wanted to see the andy play ball. And, being it was the first time one had ever played with real men, I guess it was kind of historic.

The team’s little P.R. geek was going crazy trying to satisfy everyone. He looked like he was gonna have a nervous breakdown when Hernandez or-

dered the media off the field earlier than usual because they were getting in the way. Bill seemed to take the experience in stride, going about his business with B.P. and infield—giving short but polite answers to all the reporters' questions till they were shooed away.

I guess the guys on the other team hadn't gotten the word, because they were surprised to see Bill. But it wasn't long before they were on him like a rookie on a forty-credit hooker. Ballplayers can be vicious—even with their own—even when they *like* a guy. So you can imagine they weren't lobbing any changeups at this andy. They were coming in high and tight with their best stuff.

"Look at the andy. Did you ever see a goofier mug? Look at those ears. Hey, andy, do you use those ears for hitting?"

"You think that andy's gonna hit you, Robeson?"

"He can kiss my black ass and he still won't get a hit."

"Hey, tin man, you forgot your mop!"

"That sonofabitch better not get in my way."

"He's not a sonofabitch, he's a son of a tube."

"Yeah, a test tube."

"Go back to your vat, metalhead."

Once the game started things calmed down and it was pretty much baseball as usual, till Bill came to bat in the bottom of the third. Hernandez had put him eighth in the lineup and there was one out and nobody on.

"Now batting," announces the P.A. guy, "Bill 109." There was some scattered, polite applause, but mostly it was drowned out by an onslaught of boos.

There wasn't much suspense. I think most everybody in both dugouts knew what was coming next, even if the spectators didn't. The first pitch drilled Bill right between the shoulder blades. Their pitcher, Robeson, wasn't known for his control, so I figured he was actually aiming for the andy's head.

Bill didn't seem hurt though. He trotted down to first without so much as a glance at the mound. Now, usually when the other pitcher plunks your guy and you know it's a purpose pitch, you gotta hit one of their guys. It's a matter of protecting your own. But there was no quid pro quo that night, even though they hit the andy with the first pitch each time he stepped to the plate.

It was a tight one, and though Gustafson, who was on the mound for us, kept shaking off Bill's signs, we were winning. By the ninth we were hanging on to a one-run lead when they tried to steal. The andy threw an absolute laser down to second to nail the guy. It was such a helluva throw guys on both teams were left with their mouths hanging open. Game over. We went away with the W.

The next night—different team, same attitude. The first time up their pitcher planted a fastball just above the andy's knee. The next time he got beaned. I guess they thought if they

kept hitting him he'd quit. But he didn't get mad. He didn't charge the mound or even flash the pitcher a dirty look. Each time he just shook it off and hustled down to first. You had to admire the guy. He was tough.

In the sixth, with the game tied and the sacks juiced, Bill walked to the plate and there was no place to put him. Their pitcher glanced into the dugout with that "what'll I do?" look. What could they do but pitch to him?

At that point I was thinking, if he's any kind of ballplayer he's got a lot of frustration built up. Sure enough, the andy swung at the first pitch and hammered it over the centerfield fence. Some of the guys on the bench were so caught up in the moment they started whooping and hollering. Then they noticed Nakamura sitting there looking pissed and quieted down. When Bill came trotting back to the dugout, they ignored him.

"Lucky swing," said Santorini to no one in particular.

Bill just started putting on his gear.

Now if you never played, you probably don't know how humbling a game this is. Nobody in the game succeeds as much as they fail. The secret is in handling the failure—never getting too high or too low, no matter what happens. I looked at the andy, thinking he's got the perfect makeup. How could a regular human, all twisted up inside with pride and fear and insecurity, ever hope to compete with him?

The postgame antics were upbeat that night, as they always were when we

won. The clubhouse sound system was blasting and you could hardly hear yourself think over the commotion. Even old BlutarSKI moved lively—which made me think he'd taken a nip or two from that bottle everyone knew he had hidden in his locker.

"Did I ever tell you about the time I struck out the great Max Dinty?" said BlutarSKI to several of the guys who were standing there shooting the shit.

"Yeah, yeah, Blotto, you've told us a hundred times," mocked Santorini. "Why don't you come up with some new stories, old man."

BlutarSKI looked like someone had kicked him in the gut. He shut up and walked out. Most of the guys were so busy horsing around, they didn't even notice. I felt sorry for the old-timer. I guess I could see myself in him, 30 or 40 years down the road.

I didn't feel much like partying. I guess because I was still getting over what's-her-name. So I made excuses when the guys headed out, and decided to give my arm a little whirlpool session. I stepped into the training room. Bill 109 was in one of the tubs, which didn't surprise me—not with the beating he'd been taking.

"Good game," I said nonchalantly.

"Thank you."

I cranked up the tub and got in, feeling a little awkward because I'm in there with this andy. I didn't know why exactly. I was just uncomfortable.

After a few minutes of silence he said out of nowhere, "I do not understand why they hate me."

“Why who hates you?”

“Everyone—the other players. They act and talk as if they hate me.”

It may have been obvious to me, but the andy didn't have a clue.

“Look, it's bad enough when some rookie, some *human* rookie, comes up looking to take away your job. You being a drone makes it all that much worse.”

“I do not want to take anyone's job. I only want to play.”

“Well that's the nature of the game, Bubba. You play well enough and you're gonna push somebody else to the bench. In your case, management forced the skipper's hand, so you didn't even earn it. That's some downright foul-smelling shit.”

“I would have preferred to earn it,” he said. “But how do you earn it if you are never given the chance? Until now, I have never had that chance. No androne has ever had such an opportunity.”

I didn't have anything to say to that, so we were both quiet for a while.

I go to wondering though.

“How did you start playing ball?” I asked him.

He hesitated.

“I have always loved baseball. Since I saw my first game I have loved it. I am intrigued by its intricacies. I am fascinated by the symmetry of its mathematics, the encounter of pitcher versus batter versus defense. The ebb and flow of all the possible permutations each time an out is recorded, each time the count changes. The balance and beauty

of it is a master stroke of human conception.”

I'd been around the game my whole life, and I'd never heard it described quite like that.

“Why do you play?” he asked me.

I didn't have anything near as flowery to follow that. I didn't want to try. So I just told the truth.

“It was the only thing I was ever any good at.”

We went on the road after that, and the boos and curses rained down on Bill like hits in a 15-inning slugfest. But he just kept right on keeping on, even when the guys played a pretty mean trick on him.

He'd come back to his locker one night to find his clothes all gone. In their place was a clown outfit—big floppy shoes, baggy red-and-green-striped balloon pants, a tie with a big plastic flower on it. We were minutes away from loading up the bus, so he didn't have a choice. I had to admit, it was pretty hilarious.

Not that it was that unusual. The old-timers were always playing practical jokes on the rookies—making them dress like women or something goofy—just good-natured ribbing. I'd never seen a clown outfit used before, but it wasn't that far off base. Then again, that wasn't the end of it. After we got on the bus I saw Bill scratching himself. Not just a little, but like a dog in field of fleas. He was going so crazy the driver had to stop. Bill practically flew off that

bus, tearing off his clown clothes as he went. Everyone, including me, was dying. We were busting up so much it hurt. I think the skipper even pulled a muscle laughing.

It turns out Santorini put some kind of itching powder in Bill's circus suit. Knowing Santorini, I know he had nothing good-natured in mind. He was just plain mean.

Yet Bill never said a thing. Benny doused him with a bucket of water and he wore his uni till he could buy some new threads.

I think it was about then Bill started to score a little respect—at least from some of the guys. Of course it didn't hurt he was batting over .400 and throwing out almost every runner who tried to steal. And they tried. It seemed like each team set their sights on Bill. If they weren't decking him when he came to bat, they were trying to make him look bad behind the plate. He took everything they dished out, and gave plenty back. I even saw Nakamura walk up to him once when he thought nobody was watching and say, "You're one helluva catcher."

Not only was Bill hitting like a sonofabitch, and doing a great job catching, he even helped me turn it around.

It was the second inning of the first game he caught me, and I was already in trouble. Two runs in, two more on, and Bill calls time. Of course the boo birds were on him like flies on shit as he walked out to the mound.

I already had a bad case of flop sweat and my mouth felt like I'd been sucking

on a resin bag. My career was in trouble, and at that moment I was thinking the last thing I need is for some metalhead to come out and tell me how to pitch. I stood there, hands on hips, giving him my best glare. I held out my glove for the ball but he ignored it.

"Gabe, you are tipping your pitches."

"What?"

"Each time you are going to throw your curveball, it is obvious you are adjusting your grip. When I call for the changeup you invariably look at the ground before you begin your delivery. I believe the other team has noticed this also."

"No wonder they're tearing me a new one. All right, get back there and I'll give them a new look."

"According to our scouting report, we should work the next batter low and inside with fastballs and then go away with—"

"Yeah, yeah, go on. Get back there."

He did, and I made sure I didn't give away any more pitches. We ended up winning when Bill hit a two-out single in the ninth. Yeah, we were on a roll, and Bill was a big part of it. At least he was a big part of our turnaround on the field. Off the field was a different story.

Every night after the game we'd either go out somewhere or go back to the hotel and pack for the next trip. But I'd never see Bill. I knew he didn't room with anyone on the team, but I wasn't sure if he even stayed in the same hotels. I never knew where he went when

he wasn't with the team. Maybe they had droney bars or something.

I guess I could have asked him what he did. I could have invited him to join us. But I never did. It didn't seem to bother him though. He just kept on playing ball.

You keep playing like this and you're gonna need some kind of nickname."

We were batting in the top of the seventh and I made a point to go sit by Bill, who was usually alone on the bench. He already had a double and dinger. The third time up they hit him.

I was thinking about how good he was playing, and it occurred to me that Bill 109 was no name for a ballplayer.

"What do you mean 'nickname'?"

"Well Bill isn't much of a name. Didn't anyone ever call you Billy?"

"No."

"What about Willie?"

"No."

"Shit, even Will would be better than Bill."

"I do not understand. Bill seems an acceptable designation to me. Why would I want to change it?"

"You know, to make you seem more like one of the guys, more. . . human," I said, and immediately regretted it. I tried to cover myself. "It's all about style, about flair, about . . ."

I never finished, because at that moment Santorini hit a two-hopper their first sacker had to dive for. Their pitcher raced over to cover the bag, and

Santorini ran like a bat out of hell to beat him to first.

The ball, the pitcher, and Santorini all arrived at the same time. I heard this sickening *crack* that no ballplayer wants to hear. Suddenly they were all on the ground—the ball, the pitcher, *and* Santorini. The ump waved him safe, called for time, then frantically motioned to the dugout for help. Bill and I stepped up to look as Hernandez and the trainer ran out.

Their pitcher got up, but Santorini was going spastic, pounding the ground with his fist.

"Get a stretcher!" yelled Hernandez. Me and a couple of the guys ran out to help, and I saw this jagged piece of bloody bone sticking out of Santorini's leg. A quick glimpse was all I got, because I had to look away. By then Santorini was bawling. Redtail was standing next to me. He puked on my cleats.

Now Santorini was nobody's favorite player, but when a guy gets hurt like that, everybody feels for him. It's not that ballplayers are such a compassionate lot. It's that they're scared—scared it could happen to them and glad it didn't.

By the time they were shooting him full of painkillers and getting him on the stretcher, most of the guys had moved off a ways so they didn't have to watch. I was still standing there when Bill walked over and knelt next to Santorini, who was either in shock or feeling the painkillers kick in, because his eyes were glazed-over and he had shut up.

“Do not worry,” Bill said real gentle-like, “you will be able to come back and play again.”

They carried Santorini away and I walked over to Bill.

“You really meant that didn’t you?”

“Yes,” said Bill. “The biotechnology exists to repair his injury. He will play again, if he wants to.”

“No, I meant you were sincere. You were really trying to make him feel better.”

“Yes. It seemed like the humane thing to do.”

“You mean the *human* thing to do.”

“Yes,” said Bill. “That too.”

Weeks later, we’d actually climbed to the top of the division. I’d won seven straight and lowered my E.R.A. to around a buck-and-a-half. I was going for number eight and there was no score when their pitcher decided to bean Bill.

He got hit hard. I’m talking dead on the helmet. He went down and for half a minute I didn’t think he was gonna get up. The trainer started out, but Bill got back on his feet and headed for first, only a touch wobbly.

He’s batting .440, so at that point I didn’t know if they’re hitting him because he’s an andy or because they’re afraid to pitch to him. I didn’t care. Either way that shit was getting old. Even Redtail jumped up and started jawing at their pitcher.

We didn’t score and I took the mound in the bottom of the ninth. First

batter, first pitch, I nailed him but good. His teammates started shouting all kinds of shit. I ignored them.

They bunted the runner to second but I whiffed the next guy. However, their cleanup hitter was up next and he played pepper with the leftfield wall. My winning streak was over.

I walked off the field as the other team slapped hands and generally whooped it up. Bill approached me.

“Intentionally throwing a pitch at their batter with the score tied was not a strategically sound move, Gabe.”

“No, but it felt good,” I said with a big grin on my face.

Shit if he didn’t flash this big andy smile right back at me.

“Reilly!” Hernandez waved me over. I figured he was gonna ream me out for losing the game. “Pack your shit, you’re going up.”

“Going up where?”

“They’ve called you up. It seems the big club is so desperate for pitching they’re even willing to take a chance on your tired old arm.”

That froze me like a southpaw with a good pickoff move. They were calling *me* up to the show? I *wanted* to believe it, but . . .

“Seriously, Skip?”

“Serious as shit. You’d better get your ass moving. You’ve got a flight to catch. They want you in San Diego by tomorrow morning.”

The next thing you know, I was jamming stuff into my bag like I can’t think straight, because I can’t. All those old doubts started creeping into my head—

all those shitty insecurities. Bill snapped me out of it though. He walked up as I packed and held out his hand.

“Congratulations, Gabe.”

I shook his hand quick-like. I don’t know why, but I felt kind of guilty. I was finally getting the chance I had worked for my whole life, but . . . I realized what was bothering me.

“Hell, Bill, you’re the one that should be going up.”

“I do not think they are quite ready for an *andy* in the major leagues.”

“Yeah, well the way you’re playing it won’t be long.”

“Maybe soon then we will play together again.”

“You can play ball with me anytime, Bill.”

“In the meantime,” he said, “I will give some consideration to a nickname.”

“Gonna work on that human thing, huh?” I replied with a big smile.

He shrugged.

I zipped up my bag, ready to bounce out of there, when old BlutarSKI walked up.

“Going up to the bigs, eh?” He put his arm around my shoulder and I got a serious blast of booze breath. “Way to go, kid.” I was on the far side of 28, but to coach BlutarSKI everyone was a kid. “Did I ever tell you about the time I was up in the show and struck out the great Max Ginty?”

“Sorry, Coach, I’d love to hear it again, but I’ve got a shuttle to catch.”

Disappointment colored his face. What could I do, I had to run.

“You struck out Max Ginty?” said Bill to old Blutto. “I am unfamiliar with that particular game, Coach BlutarSKI. Could you tell me what happened?”

“Well, kid, it was like this . . .”

That was the last time I ever saw Bill 109. When I got to the big club I tried to convince them to call him up, but they weren’t interested. They had a good catcher and didn’t think some career minor leaguer should be making roster moves for them. So I shut my mouth and pitched. I actually threw pretty well for the next couple of seasons, till my arm blew out.

Of course, nowadays, andrones (within certain genetic specifications) are pretty commonplace in prime time. Everyone knows the story of Eric 79, the flashy shortstop who broke the “artificial barrier,” as the media called it.

Bill, though, never did get his shot at the bigs. I heard he kicked around playing ball in the minors, and ended up back in the droney leagues. Someone told me he’d read where Bill’s cranial implant malfunctioned and gave him a stroke. I even heard a rumor he served some time in prison. The story goes he got drunk one night, lost his temper, and nearly beat a man to death in a bar fight. One version says it started because of an argument over some annie. I don’t believe it though. I can’t imagine Bill ever getting drunk, let alone losing his temper like that. At least I’d like to think he never became that human.



Ray Russell is co-proprietor of Tartarus Press, yet another excellent specialist imprint well worthy of your attention and your support. "Beechlands'," he tells us, "was written in an attempt to salvage something positive from an unfortunate episode in my childhood." One hardly dare ask for more information . . . as you're about to find out. Indeed, Mr. Russell has an exceedingly fine way with words and an enviable flair for the styles of the great Old Masters of ghost and horror literature. You'll discover this for yourselves with his upcoming PS Showcase collection late in 2009.

Beechlands

R. B. Russell

The look of amazement on Hector's face was one that Fran had seen before, always upon answering the door to new visitors to the house.

"This place is amazing," he exclaimed. "Do you live in all of it, or are there separate apartments?"

"No, it's all mine," she admitted, standing aside to let him and Phineus inside.

"Oh, and this is Joan," Hector added, almost as an afterthought. A short, plain woman followed the two men past Fran and into the hall.

"She's my sister," he elaborated. "Wow, what a staircase!"

Hector was right; all of her visitors were right. The house was impressive in a sturdy, Victorian way. It had thirteen bedrooms, six reception rooms, and a mighty kitchen with sundry ancillary accommodation. It was solidly placed amidst vast rhododendron trees, and cut off from the main road by a high brick wall. It was the gates that would impress people first, then the long

weedy drive, followed by the large symmetrical façade of Beechlands itself.

"Can I ask you a personal question?" Phineus enquired, making it clear from his tone that he was going to ask anyway. "How does a lowly scriptwriter like you afford a huge house like this?"

Fran took their coats and carried them to the small cloakroom at the foot of the sweeping wooden stairs. It was a story she had told before, and had managed to condense over the years.

"My father bought it in the sixties for a knock-down price because nobody else bid on it at the auction. It was in a bad way, but he was a builder and spent the next thirty or forty years putting it back into reasonable repair . . ."

"It's got to be worth a million?" Hector suggested.

"Probably. He was offered something like that by a company a couple of years ago. They wanted to turn it into a nursing home."

"But isn't it a huge responsibility?" asked the sister, whose name Fran had already forgotten.

“Yes, and my father’s in a nursing home himself now, in Weyminster. He’s too ill to stay here, though I have him back at the weekends. I do wonder whether it was all those years working on this place that put him in the home so relatively young. He’s only in his sixties, poor chap.”

“So you live here alone?”

“Yes, all on my own,” she confirmed. “Would you like to come into the sitting-room?”

After the large hall the sitting room seemed quite modestly proportioned. It was, in fact, the second drawing room, and she used it because it was warmer than the long room at the back of the house with its large, high windows.

“Can I get anyone a drink? I’ve got sherry, gin and tonic . . .”

“A sherry would be splendid,” Hector said, and thrust into her hand an oversized bottle wrapped in tissue paper. “An offering,” he announced, “but we won’t open it just yet,” he said, tapping his nose to suggest that there was a shared secret. She put it down, unwrapped, on the coffee-table.

Phineus had already walked over to the portrait above the fireplace.

“A family member?” he asked.

“Somebody’s, but not mine,” Fran admitted. “My father bought the house fully furnished, so it’s from the last family, I suppose.”

“Severe looking chap,” he observed. The portrait showed a big-faced man with improbably large side-whiskers, wearing a frock-coat, and against a dark background that may have been foliage.

“No, just Victorian.”

“Or Edwardian?”

“No, I think it dates back to the time of the house itself, which is mid-Victorian.”

“I always think,” said the sister in a small, forced voice, “that they must have been very grim people, these Victorians. They never smile in photographs, do they?”

“Grim?” asked Fran, surprised, checking that there was actually some sherry in the bottle.

“I’ll have a gin and tonic, please,” Phineus asked. And then to the other woman: “You’d look grim if you had to sit still for a half-hour while your photo was taken, or for a few weeks if you were painted in oils!”

“I don’t think they were really that grim,” Fran explained. “It might’ve been a hard life for the working classes, but the kind of people who could afford to have photographs taken, or portraits painted . . . well, they led a rather jolly life, I should say.”

“Oh no, they were very strict,” the sister shook her head nervously.

“About some things, in theory. But the upper classes ate and drank very well indeed, and in a house like this there would have been as many servants as family members . . .”

“If not many more,” Phineus added.

“Even the middle classes had servants,” Fran continued. “And so-called Victorian values were only hypocritically observed, if you look into it.”

“You’re probably right, I’m sure,” the sister almost laughed, nervously,

and effectively ended what might have been an interesting conversation.

“And what would you like to drink?” Fran asked her.

“Oh, no, not for me, thank you,” she replied, slightly pathetically, and sat down on the edge of a chair.

Fran apologised to Hector as she passed him his sherry that she had to give him a wine glass. She then turned to find a suitable glass for Phineus’s gin and tonic.

“Not to worry about that,” said Hector, rather imperiously, as though it might have been an issue to any other guest, or from any other hostess. She made two gin and tonics; one for herself and one for Phineus, which she took over to him. He now had his back to the portrait and was warming himself at the fire.

“Do we get a grand tour of the place?” he asked.

“Help yourself,” she smiled. “I’ve got to go and put the lasagne in the oven. It was all prepared earlier and just needs another half hour to be ready.”

“I hope there will be enough?” Hector asked. “I should have told you that Joan was coming. I’m sorry I didn’t give you any warning.”

“That’s no trouble at all,” she smiled. “I made far too much anyway—I was going to freeze what was left over, and microwave it for myself another day. Feel free to look around downstairs. I’ll show you upstairs later, if you’d like to see it?”

“Good-oh!” said Phineus, obviously relishing the chance of to look around the house.

Fran carried her gin and tonic out with her to the kitchen and swallowed a mouthful before adding more fuel to the old-fashioned Aga. The large dish of lasagne sitting on the table was still warm from when she had created it earlier that afternoon but she was able to put it in the range without wearing oven gloves. That just left the salad, and that was in a bag in the fridge, fresh from the supermarket. Pride made her mix her own dressing for it, though, and she put together in a small jug the various ingredients which she had previously left out on the work-top. As she did so she remembered the extra guest and was annoyed that she had forgotten the woman’s name. She tried to remember what Hector had called her in the hallway and then after that, in the sitting room, and really could not remember what it had been. All Fran knew was that it was quite a short, bland name. As she was going through possibilities (‘Mary’, ‘June’, ‘Jean’ . . .) in her mind the little woman appeared from around the side of the door.

“I hope I’m not disturbing you?” she asked meekly.

“No, not at all. I’m just preparing the dressing for the salad.”

“Are you making your own?”

“Yes. I rely heavily on raspberry vinegar . . .”

“Oh, lovely,” she said, ‘and what a big kitchen.”

“Yes, it should be every woman’s dream. But in reality it’s far too big, like the rest of the house, and requires too much cleaning.”

"I suppose so."

"But it's the only room in the house, apart from the sitting room we were in before, that I can get properly warm in the winter."

"Fran!" bellowed Hector from somewhere behind them. "Phineus! I'm bloody lost!"

"In here Hector, you silly," shouted the sister shrilly, and footsteps could be heard clumping from the direction of the larders rather than the main house.

"It's a bloody warren of corridors and passages!" he proclaimed, entering the other door into the kitchen, an empty glass before him. "How did people ever find their way about in the old days?"

"They didn't need to," Phineus admonished him, suddenly appearing behind the sister. "In 'the old days' the guests would have stayed in the sitting room, and would have been waited upon."

"I suppose the hostess wouldn't have been cooking her own meals, either?" Hector suggested.

"Exactly," Fran agreed. "And I could have stayed chatting with my guests in comfort. And I would've been waited on as well."

"How did you appear from that direction?" Phineus asked Hector.

"There's an odd corridor from the back of that large sitting room. What use is that, apart from confusing guests?"

"It was so that the staff could come and go, fetch and carry, without venturing through the main parts of the house

where the family and any sensible guests would have been."

"It must go between those main rooms, and hasn't got any windows until it ends up in a kind of scullery. And it's a bit bloody spooky back there, if you ask me!"

"I find the whole house a bit spooky, don't you?" asked his sister.

"No, not at all," Fran shook her head. "I've always lived here."

"But there must be odd corners, nooks and crannies . . ." Phineus tempted her.

"No. And all my life my father was pulling down ceilings and walls and putting them back again, so there's nothing unfamiliar, or hidden away."

"No ghosts?" Phineus tempted her.

"No, not one. I had friends who lived down the road and they were forever playing here with me. We must have opened up, and hidden in, every cupboard and attic there is, never once feeling spooked."

"We are only really frightened of what we don't understand!" Hector proclaimed.

"Exactly. I've had forty-odd years to learn my way about. And there isn't an inch of this place, huge though it is, that I don't know intimately. Now, I've finished the salad-dressing, and we have a half hour before we eat. Shall I show you upstairs, and the attics?"

The guided tour was one that Fran had led infrequently of late. She pointed out the interesting features as

they went up the main staircase to the first floor, and Hector was particularly impressed that the main light fitting could be lowered down to the hall below for cleaning. She pointed out that the two main corridors actually diminished in width as they reached the end, so as to make them look longer than they really were.

Fran admitted that she didn't often venture into the bedrooms she didn't use; not for months at a time in the winter. They admired the views from the master bedroom window, despite the waning light, and she explained that when the weather was good and the air clear she could see right down to the sea. Hector was all for going out onto the balcony but she warned him that it wasn't quite safe; that her father had never quite got around to sorting it out as it would have meant replacing the whole thing along the entire front of the house. Hector was persuaded to stay inside.

The small party then followed her up the narrow west stair to the attic rooms. As far as Fran was concerned the attics were the most impressive part of the whole house; a series of interconnected rooms, they were light and airy, with exposed, whitewashed timbers that seemed at once more ancient than the rest of the house in their rough-hewn size, and also more modern in their simplicity. She explained that they would have been the servants' bedrooms.

"Not much privacy," Hector pointed out. "Going from room to room . . ."

"Almost medieval," Phineus added.

"There was a passageway when we moved in, and the spaces were more divided up then. But a lot of it had woodworm and my father ripped it all out."

"He didn't put it back?"

"No, as you might have guessed, we didn't have any servants to accommodate. And it all looked so much more impressive opened out."

They descended the east stair from the attics, and by going down the servants' passage at the back of the bedrooms they then took the other narrow back stair into the kitchens.

"This would be an excellent house for a murder mystery," Hector pointed out. "The detective would work out that although Lord Smithers had been seen going up the main staircase at the end of the evening, he had sneaked down the back stairway and down the servants' passages, where he had managed to slip the poison into the decanter of port . . ."

Fran conducted them back into the main hall and was going to take them into the dining room when she suddenly remembered that she had only laid places for three at the table. It wouldn't take a moment to rectify, but suddenly there was a knock at the main door. Phineus was asking if they could see the cellars as well.

"More guests?" asked Hector.

"The more the merrier," she said, without thinking, and walked over the somewhat faded parquet floor to the door. She opened it to reveal a smartly-

dressed couple who she didn't immediately recognise.

"Francis?" the man asked, his hand outstretched. She suddenly realised who he must be, and groped for his name.

"Martin?"

"The very same. And I'm here with Bert, my wife. You've met Bert, haven't you?"

"Of course, at that wedding?"

"Auntie Pat's wedding? That's right."

"Well, please come in. It'll have been at least ten years since we saw each other last."

"And you did say then, that if we were ever in the area, we should look you up?"

"Of course, of course!"

She stood aside and they entered the hall, stopping short when they saw her other guests.

"I'm sorry. Is this a bad time?" asked the newcomer.

"No, not at all. Martin and Bert, please meet Hector and Phineus, who I work with, and Hector's sister. . . ." She was mortified that she still couldn't remember the woman's name. Perhaps she had managed to get away without using it for this side of the introductions, but would have to bluff her way through what remained of them:

"And you three," she said awkwardly, trying to appear preoccupied with collecting the two extra coats, "Please meet my cousin Martin, and his wife, Bert."

They all expressed their pleasure at meeting each other as she carried away the new coats.

"Now, by sheer luck I have made enough lasagne for us all to eat," Fran called over her shoulder, trying not to get too flustered by the turn of events. When the coats were hung up she returned to her guests:

"Martin, you haven't been here for years, but as you are family I'm going to have to impose on you. Would you mind going through there, into the dining room, and setting some more places at the table? You might have to help him, Bert; you know what men are like. In the drawers of the big dresser by the window is the cutlery, and there should be plates in the cupboard below. I'll go through to the kitchen and make sure that my loaves and fishes can be made to stretch far enough. . . ."

"Oh Fran, we didn't expect you to feed us," Bert interjected.

"It's no problem at all. I think that I've made more than enough. My only worry is that you won't find enough matching plates."

"Let me help you in the kitchen?" asked Hector's sister.

"No, it's no trouble at all."

"But I'd like to make myself useful."

"Well. . . as all pretence of formality might have to be dispensed with, perhaps you and Hector could offer some drinks to Martin and Bert?"

"Of course."

"And Phineus, I've just remembered that I was going to light the candles in the dining room. It always looks lovely in there with candles at the table. Would you do the honours?"

"Very happily," he agreed, and turned to Hector. "Could I borrow your lighter?"

As Fran left she heard a discussion about the merits of sherry as opposed to gin and tonic, and as she entered the kitchen she could hear Martin shouting, "I've left a bottle of wine in the car, I'll just nip out and get it, shall I?"

When Fran took the lasagne from the range she could see that it was slightly over-cooked. It was how she liked it herself, but she was displeased at its appearance from an aesthetic point of view. Suddenly, the dish that had seemed far too large, now looked, if anything, too small. Well, it would have to do. She decided to take the salad through first, but wished that she had let the sister come and help her after all.

From the fridge the salad was released from the plastic bag and immediately looked quite tempting in the bowl that she had reserved for it. Rather than give her guests the option she poured the dressing over it, threw in the large wooden serving spoons, and took it through to the dining room.

Giving her guests jobs to do had broken the ice between them and had livened up the small party no end. Hector had not only given Martin and Bert glasses of sherry but had helped himself to another, and was now opening what must have been Martin's bottle of wine. Bert seemed to be enjoying arranging the cutlery, and Joan had her head in the recesses of the dark dresser, presumably hoping to find dinner

plates. Phineus had lit the candles on the table and, turning off the electric light, plunged the room into a comfortable dimness.

With the salad delivered and unnecessarily remarked upon by Hector, she went back for the lasagne, and was appalled when she realised the state that her oven gloves were in. They would have to do to carry in the hot, heavy dish she decided, and at least in the candlelight her guests might not notice them. She picked up the lasagne and returned to the dining room.

"So, you were properly invited to dinner," Martin was saying to Hector as she entered. "Unlike us gate-crashers."

"Yes, I've some good news to pass on to our hostess here," Hector said, noting her entry, and as Bert said how delicious the slightly burnt lasagne looked, he added: "It's probably the wrong time to announce this, you know. I should wait until we are all sat down and have our glasses charged . . ."

"Of course it's the wrong time," Fran said. "Although I hope I know what you're going to say, we should do this properly . . ."

"Well, dish out the food, then, and somebody tell me when I can make the announcement."

"Oh, we are gate-crashing," Bert was appalled. "We should have come back tomorrow."

"Not at all," insisted Fran. "It'll be lovely to be able to share the news with you." As she served out the lasagne Bert took the dishes and put them in their places.

“Help yourself to salad,” she told her guests, and then realised she had forgotten the parmesan cheese. She rushed back to the kitchen, failed to find it, and slightly surprised that the contents of her own fridge seemed to have changed, returned to the dining room where Hector appeared to have now opened his bottle, Champagne, and was distributing it amongst the glasses.

“It must be time now, surely?” he asked.

“Nearly,” said Fran. “I’ll just get my salad. Oh, my glass is full already, thank you.”

As she served herself salad Hector poured the last glass of champagne for Phineus and then stood by his chair rather than sit down. He waited for Fran to replace the salad bowl in the middle of the table.

“As your cousin and his wife must know,” Hector nodded to them, “Fran is a scriptwriter. She came up with a very ambitious project, a couple of years ago now, called ‘This Little Town’. It’s a psychological thriller that will run over eight episodes . . .”

“To start with,” Phineus interjected.

“In the first series there will be twenty episodes . . .” Hector explained to Martin and Bert. “Well, we’ve had lots of hurdles to jump, and hoops to go through . . . more so than would ordinarily be the case, because it is written to be made in tandem for both children and adults. The children’s series will be aired late afternoon and is told from the child’s point of view. And the adult series will show the same events,

but from the adults’ point of view, and will be shown later that evening. It’s ground-breaking stuff . . .”

Fran was allowing herself to bask in Hector’s rather pompous preamble. He had obviously secured the funding, finally, for ‘This Little Town’.

“Because we lost the previous backers we’ve been doing it all the wrong way around in the last few weeks, and have the scripts, actors, locations etc standing by for shooting in March. But now . . .”

He left a pregnant pause, and Fran suddenly realised that Hector’s sister was not at the table. There was not even a place laid for her.

“Finally . . . We have got the money from the BBC itself, and the show will go ahead!”

“That’s excellent news!” Martin congratulated her.

“Well done!” Bert smiled broadly in her direction.

“So, a toast to Fran, and ‘This Little Town’,” Hector proposed.

“To Fran,” they all raised their glasses and called out in unison.

“Speech!” demanded Phineus.

“Thank you, thank you,” she said, only now allowing herself to feel the relief that his news brought her. She had done her damndest not to think about the series for the last few months with the project being on and off so many times. When Hector had phoned to say he and Phineus wanted to come around that evening to give her some good news she had tried not to think about it. Too often they had found their support

and backing for the series taken away from them just as everything was about to be finally settled.

“So, what do you think?” Hector asked.

“I’m just so relieved,” she grinned.

“And you’ve written the whole thing?” asked Bert.

“Well, the outline is all mine. And I’ve scripted the children’s series. But the adult series has actually been written by somebody else.”

“Just think,” said Martin, helping himself to a glass of his own wine, his champagne having been drained. “Of all the nights we could have arrived, popping in on you out of the blue after ten years, we chose this night, when we could join in your celebrations!”

“It’s lovely to be able to share them with you. But, tell me Hector, where is your sister?”

Hector had finally started to tackle the food on his plate, and looked up slightly bemused. “Who?”

“So how do these two series work, then?” asked Bert. “Is it complicated?”

“Devilishly complicated,” Phineus said, with his mouth full of lasagne, which he then had the good grace to appear embarrassed by.

Hector continued for him:

“There are some shared scenes, and the actors are shared, but in the kids’ series the children have the main parts, and in the adults’ series their parents play the main roles. Both sides see things differently, and have different methods of unearthing the same information. And until the end neither the

children nor the adults know everything the others know. I mean, the children don’t know what the adults know, and the adults don’t know . . .”

“Hector . . . ?”

“Yes Fran?” he turned to her.

“What about your sister?”

“You asked that a minute ago. You don’t know her do you? Lives up in Dundee, very hale and hearty the last time I talked to her on the phone, thank you.”

He turned back to Martin and Bert:

“The main problem we’ve had with the BBC is that they think that the children will want to watch the adult series as well as their own. And, well, the adult series will have much more adult content. You know how it is. But Fran’s masterstroke is to draw the whole thing together for the very last episode in the series, which will be shared by the children and the adults. It’ll be scheduled for a special episode early on a Saturday evening. You won’t believe the trouble we’re going to, just to make sure it isn’t too tame for the adults, or too scary for the children. That’s why you need a scriptwriter like Fran. Because it’s a psychological thriller we can scare the bejesus out of everybody, kids and adults alike, without any blood and guts.”

“But Hector . . .” Fran asked slowly, and really, there was no sign of the sister ever having been in the room. There wasn’t even an unaccounted for glass, although she couldn’t remember whether she had even seen the woman drinking anything.

"Yes?" he asked, brightly. "Oh, and by the way, this is an excellent lasagne."

"It is," agreed Bert. "I'm glad there was enough to go around. I mean, to feed the five of us."

"The five of us," thought Fran, but it was the last time she was able to think about it for a while because there was a barrage of questions from her relatives about the television project, and excited talk from her colleagues about how they would start filming in just over a month's time. Phineus was especially excited by the re-casting of one particular actor, which he saw as rather a coup for them.

For dessert Fran discovered that the fresh fruit salad really was too meagre for the five of them, but Bert peeled and chopped up some more apples, and luckily there was a new block of ice cream in the freezer. The guests' wine was already drunk before the first course had ended, but Fran was able to fall back on a case of cheap French red that she had recently brought back from Dieppe. Everyone laughed that it tasted pretty raw after the Champagne and Martin's rather nice Californian bottle, but after a few sips any complaints were forgotten and several bottles had to be opened before the evening was over. Fran was feeling rather drunk by the time that everyone insisted on helping with the washing up and she was unable to stop them. The kitchen was still warm and they made a merry party in there, ending up sitting around, or on the edge of, the kitchen table, with the talk ranging from their

new television project to previous successes and failures, through to Hector's fund of entertaining stories about working on location in a costume drama filmed in Eastern Europe a few years previously. Fran had heard the stories many times before, as had Phineus, no doubt, but after so much wine they remained just as funny, if not more so. Finally Martin got up and phoned for a taxi, despite Fran's attempts to make him and Bert stay the night, and Phineus went out and did the same.

Really, Fran was very drunk as they stood in the hall, the two cars having both arrived in the drive simultaneously. The door stood wide open and the air seemed incredibly cold to Fran, and suddenly she felt very tired indeed.

"Well, what a lovely evening," she heard Martin saying behind her. "Many thanks for a wonderful meal," he added, but apparently not congratulating her. She turned as Martin himself turned to her and kissed her on the cheek: "And Fran, it's great news about the television series, great news."

Over his shoulder she was amazed to see the woman who had earlier been introduced to her as Hector's sister. She was standing by her brother, beaming at the departing guests, and Fran realised that Hector and his sister were the only ones not wearing coats. And where had her own come from? Why was she wearing it?

"Come on Fran," Phineus said, taking her arm. "I think you are a little drunk.

And quite right too, on a night like this. Let me see you to your transport.”

She started to protest but Phineus turned her around to the door and it seemed only a moment before she was descending the steps and outside under the coldest, blackest sky she had ever seen. Before she could protest she was bundled into the back of the waiting car. She could hear people crying “Goodbye” and “See you soon” behind her, and then the door was closed, the engine started, and they moved off to

the sound of tyres on the weedy gravel drive.

The dim glow of the dashboard lights did not illuminate the face of the driver. Alarm grew within her as the car turned onto the road and sped up. And that alarm swiftly became panic as she could make out nothing in the road ahead. The headlights, if they were on, did not illuminate anything in front of them, and the note of the engine seemed to be increasing moment upon moment. ☒

Postscripts

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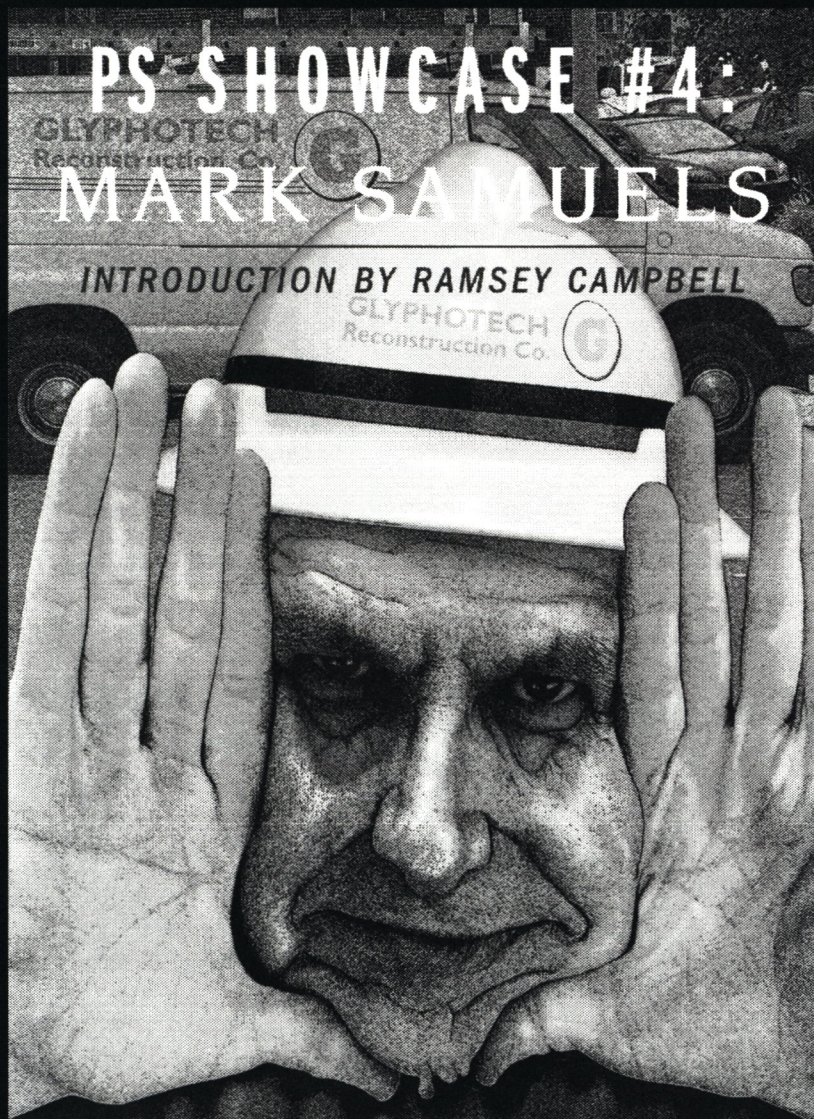
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Glyphotech & Other Macabre Processes

The fourth in our series of PS showcase mini-collections of short stories from some of genre fiction's best up-and-coming writers

When Lisa Tuttle was very young, she tells us, she loved the works of Edgar Allan Poe . . . even to the extent of memorizing his poems and writing Poe-inspired horror stories. “However, as I grew older,” she says, “I became less impressed by his overblown prose—I agreed with Tom Disch’s assessment of ‘Poe, our embarrassing ancestor’. But recently I’ve been re-reading his stories and I find myself inspired once again. I wrote ‘The Oval Portrait’ in response to his story of the same title, and I have ideas for at least two more modern re-takes on his themes.”

Ms. Tuttle’s last Postscripts outing was the remarkable “Closet Dreams”, rightly included in two Best of the Year anthologies and nominated for both the Stoker Award and the International Horror Guild Award. And now this . . .

The Oval Portrait

Lisa Tuttle

Christine wrote first thing in the morning, in lieu of making breakfast, making up, watching “The Morning Show,” or any of the other time-wasting and unnecessary things she used to do before she had to leave for work.

In between taps at the keyboard she sipped a fruit and yoghurt smoothie, or some other vitamin-enriched concoction purchased the day before. Make-up could be applied on her way to work; having something to do when traffic came to a stand-still kept her from stressing out. She’d been tempted, more than once, to open her laptop while she waited, but knew better. Writing while in charge of a vehicle—for her, it would be as bad as intoxication. When she was writing, when she really got into the flow, it was like she was in another place, and the world around her ceased to exist. Nothing mattered except the words, inside her

head or on the screen. That was why she couldn’t even *think* about writing when she was behind the wheel of a car, or when she was in the office, handling customer inquiries. That was why she got up early every morning and made sure to set her alarm clock to go off for when she had to stop.

She’d been blogging for nearly seven years, although it was only in the last one that a part-time pursuit had moved up to another level, to become the major aim and focus of her existence.

The concept for her current blog had come to her just after her fortieth birthday, which she’d spent alone, assessing her life and concluding that something was missing. She’d written about this vague, unspecified yearning on her LiveJournal, and gradually, as she wrote, it became clear to her that, although she had repressed the desire for a long time, she still yearned after motherhood. She didn’t regret being

single—true love might take her by surprise at any age—but she wanted to have a baby, before it was too late.

So she embarked on her quest. And, because her life never seemed entirely real until she'd processed her experiences into words, naturally she wrote about it. The name came to her one night in a dream: "Looking for my Baby."

Her new blog was a hit from day one, attracting far more readers than her previous, more generalized rambles ever had. Most of them were women like herself, in their thirties, forties or fifties, who were wondering if they'd made the right choices, and thinking about changing their lives. They engaged with her story and left comments and advice.

Because the quest for a baby began with the search for a potential father, Christine put a picture at the top of "Looking for my Baby" of a generic male silhouette—similar to the one used by Ancestry.com on their family trees as a place-holder for a missing portrait—and photo-shopped it into an ornate oval frame. She asked her readers to help her discover the identity of this man, the father of her baby.

Word of mouth was fantastic. People talked about her quest on their blogs and linked to it. Not all the responses were favorable: some felt justified in making insulting, hateful comments; some called her selfish for putting her desires ahead of those of the (imaginary) baby, and others were outraged by her intention to "use" a man so coldly.

As time went on, some commentators revealed their jealousy, objecting to her site's popularity: *It's not exactly original, they carped. My mother did the exact same thing, before the Internet was even invented!* She was accused of plagiarism, of ripping off other people's lives, fantasies, books, reality-series, magazine articles, or websites.

She ignored the bad stuff, which wasn't really that hard to do when the good stuff was so compelling. Now that she had something *real* to write about, a positive goal, her life changed dramatically. Men contacted her, wanting to meet her, hoping to become the man in the frame. Women offered to introduce her to their exes (*he was horrible to live with, but we produced two beautiful little girls*), or to set her up with their geeky, platonic friends (*his social skills are poor but he's got a genius IQ*).

She no longer had to cast about for something interesting to say; her only problem now was finding enough time to write about every date in the detail it deserved. She felt like Anais Nin, sexy and sought-after, forever torn between the need to live and the desire to write. She wrote frankly about her experiences, was explicit about the sex, her hopes and dreams and the often disappointing reality. She used fruit or vegetable-related pseudonyms to disguise the identities of her partners, and felt free to be brutally honest about their performance. The popularity of her blog increased, and her fame spread beyond the blogosphere and finally she was offered a book contract.

Once, this would have seemed the height of success, but she had her eye on a different prize now. Briefly, only briefly, she considered quitting her job, tempted beyond measure by the prospect of being able to spend all day writing about her nightly adventures. But a little mental arithmetic suggested just how quickly the money would be gone, and she knew she couldn't take the risk. If she had her way, she would soon have a child to support. They would depend upon her regular income.

Another birthday came around, and as the months ticked past, she knew her chances of a natural conception were draining away. The attempts had been fun (mostly) and supplied a lot of material for an eventual book, but now it was time for Plan B, the technological fix, for medical expertise, anonymous sperm, and IVF.

It might have taken another year, but she got lucky, and it worked first time. Ten weeks after the implantation, she went in for her first scan, her first sight of the new life she carried.

"A blob with a heartbeat"—that's how the technician described it. From the beating of the heart, and from the size of the fetus (barely five centimeters—not even two inches long!), he confirmed it seemed to be developing normally. Her dream would come true; she was going to be a mother.

They gave her a photograph of the scan—baby's first picture! Only it didn't look that much like a baby; if you didn't know what it was, you might take it for

a picture of a distant constellation, or of some invertebrate lurking in the murky depths of the deep ocean. She gazed at what they said was her baby, feeling mystified . . .

When she got home, Christine went searching on the internet and found large, clear, detailed, color photographs of a ten-week-old fetus. She found it a disturbing sight, the protective veil stripped away from something never meant to be seen. A big, blind head hung over a curled, shrimp-like body. It was obviously a creature of some sort, but more resembled a fish or an insect than a baby human. Although it was normal, by comparison with what a baby should be, it looked deformed.

She clicked away from it, feeling queasy, and looked again at the picture they'd given her at the hospital. The gentle, monochrome blur was more appealing now. This vague image might be almost anything, just like the still-developing fetus in her womb. The more she looked at it the more she liked it. She deleted the generic male profile, and uploaded a copy of this picture to take its place on her website, the first thing any visitor would see.

The appearance of this vague new portrait marked a new phase.

She was no longer looking for a man, no longer having sex. Christine's focus in her writing, as in her life, was turned inward now, to reflect upon the changes taking place in her body.

This was nothing like as interesting to the public as her sexual adventures

had been, and the popularity of “Looking for my Baby” fell sharply. Nearly all of her readers now were drawn from that subset of women who were either pregnant or wanting to be. Christine didn’t care. She’d never written to please a market, but to fulfill a personal need. As for her book, she’d written enough material about her sexual adventures to fill more than one volume. Her editor liked the idea of ending the book with the birth of her child, but suggested that the months leading up to it might be dealt with in ten or fifteen pages . . . unless something particularly *dramatic* happened.

Nothing obviously dramatic did happen, which suited Christine very well. She was entirely engrossed in the story being enacted in her own flesh and blood, and was never at a loss for something to say, polishing her sentences, crafting her paragraphs, piling up the precise, apt details as she turned her life into art. She would have done it exactly the same without an audience.

One week before the baby was due, Christine began her maternity leave. Finally. She’d been looking forward to this freedom for so long: to be able to sleep as late as she liked every morning, to take naps or simply lie down whenever she felt tired, and, in between, to have no other demands put upon her, to be able to pour all her energy into writing.

It should have been wonderful.

And yet, that first morning, as she settled her bulk into the chair in front

of the computer, her fingers hovered over the keys uncertainly and her mind was uncharacteristically blank. It was so unusual that it took her a few moments to realize: she had nothing to say.

She was fed up with writing about her own body, which no longer seemed like her own. She’d been pregnant for too long, and there was nothing left in that state to explore. All she could think of now was the coming birth. When would it begin? What exactly was going to happen? How much would it hurt? Was she up to the challenge? But she’d written about her questions, hopes and fears already. She’d read dozens of books on the subject, and regurgitated the facts. To write any more about birth in advance of the actual experience, struck her as pointless, stupid, *boring*.

And she didn’t want to tempt fate by writing too much about her baby before he was born. What she carried inside her was no longer an unformed embryo, but a completely formed infant, tentatively named Andrew. She’d be able to write about him after he was born.

She sat and looked at the picture in the oval frame, the blurry, ten-week-old blob. Despite having two other photographs from the hospital since then, she’d never changed it. She liked the formlessness of that very first image, when tiny Andrew, no bigger than her thumb, was all mysterious, unshaped potential. You had to use your imagination when you looked at it. It wasn’t fixed. It made her think of ab-

stract paintings, of Rorschach blots and the way random chance was constantly being organized into meaningful patterns of life.

She had to wonder why, when she'd always preferred abstraction or impressionism in art to any kind of realism, her own writing was so closely tied to her physical life, why she struggled, day after day, to capture some aspect of her experience in words, making such an effort to *get it right*, dedicated to some impossible ideal of accuracy. By inclination, taking her taste in the visual arts as a guide, she should be a fantasist, an obscure poet of some sort, and yet—well, she was stuck with using words, after all, and in any attempt to write about nonverbal experiences, something was bound to be lost. It was an impossible task, every attempt bound to end in failure, and yet she, like ranks of authors in the past—her literary foremothers and fathers—was unable to give it up.

Sighing, she began to write what was in her mind, stumbling and with difficulty, analyzing her feelings.

Only it became harder, as the end of her pregnancy approached, to write anything that didn't seem stale, fatuous, stupid. She could spend hours at the keyboard without producing a single paragraph worth posting, deleting two lines out of every three she typed. Restless nights meant she napped fitfully throughout the day. She had no energy—or, at least, none that could be diverted from the enormous, if unconscious, task of keeping herself and the

baby inside her alive. Her powers were required elsewhere, far from the seat of language.

Still, she continued to go through her long-established ritual, sitting down every morning and writing even though she had to force herself . . .

Day 281. Since the average pregnancy is 280 days, I guess that makes me officially one day overdue. Except, of course, there are no 'average' pregnancies, no more than there are 'average' babies—every one is individual and unique.

She stopped and read her words, dismayed. Average, average, average . . . What was she, a midwife? A statistician? She deleted the second line and then, to distract herself from the blinking cursor and the blankness in her brain, turned her attention to her muse and inspiration, the *in utero* photo in the elaborate, gilded oval frame. After Andrew was born she would have to change the picture. She felt a little bit sorry about that, for in his embryonic form he'd become the *genius loci* of her website, its beating heart—even though the picture was still—but once he was born, everything would have to change.

Birth was usually seen as the beginning, but now Christine recognized what she had kept hidden from herself, that *this* birth was also an ending.

An end to this website, of course. An end to waiting. An end to her life as a single, solitary, self-obsessed woman. And, maybe, an end to writing.

She shivered, and felt a cramping pain in her belly at the thought. She

didn't like to admit it, but maybe she had written herself out. She had nothing more to say. And even if other subjects presented themselves (*I'll write about the baby!* insisted one perky, perpetually hopeful part of herself) *when* would she write? It had been hard enough managing to write in her spare time, while holding down a full-time job, but once she had a baby, there would be no spare time.

Tears came to her eyes as she realized how blind she had been; how willfully blind. The demands of motherhood would consume her. There was no space in this one-bedroom apartment, no room of her own, and no place to go, even if she got a babysitter. Why hadn't this occurred to her before? For all her writing about every angle of her future as a single mother, she hadn't really thought it through.

She hunched over in her chair, rocking herself protectively against the pain. She was so absorbed by thoughts of what she was about to lose that it took her a little while to realize that she'd gone into labor.

Nineteen hours later, at five o'clock the next morning, her baby was born, a perfect, healthy little boy. She felt exhausted and dazed, but also blissful, as the nurse gave her the newborn baby to hold. When she first set eyes on him what struck Christine the most was his *otherness*. Somehow, she had imagined that he would be immediately familiar to her, like a part of herself, but

she saw someone she had never seen before, and the eyes that looked back at her were interested, intelligent and very blue. It was not remotely like gazing into a mirror. He was a *person*.

She was astonished. She had seen newborns before, and their most distinguishing characteristic, in her view, was how undistinguished they were, babies of the same race so interchangeable it was no wonder if they were accidentally switched at birth. She'd thought children only developed personalities as they grew up.

How wrong she had been. This baby was not a piece of clay who could be molded, nor was he an extension of herself. And he didn't look anything like an Andrew. She didn't know quite who he was yet, but he would require a name that was short and solid, a single firm masculine syllable.

The tiny rosebud mouth twitched, as she gazed at him in awe and dawning love; then the luminous, merry, curious eyes closed, and her baby fell asleep in her arms.

Five hours later they were in a taxi on their way home. People at the hospital had seemed a little shocked that no one had come to meet her, and for a moment, as she stepped into her apartment, noticing the close, stale smell of the air, dishes in the sink, a basket of unsorted laundry on the floor, she thought maybe she had been wrong to refuse all the friendly offers of help. It would have been nice to be looked after.

But, as she gently laid her baby down in the traditional Moses basket she'd bought for his first bed, she knew that she wanted to be alone with him. This time, these precious weeks before she had to go back to work, was the honeymoon period, and she didn't want anyone else butting in and interrupting their closeness, or distracting her from getting to know him. She gazed down at his sleeping face and thought she could have looked at him forever, drinking in every little detail: the perfection of his fingernails, smooth little nubbin that was his nose, the curved beauty of his ears. She bent down to feel the incredible softness of his skin on her lips and the faint, fine fuzz of his hair, while inhaling the indescribably wonderful new-baby scent.

He didn't cry when he woke, just blinked and made a faint little huffing noise. He didn't smile, but he returned her steady, fascinated regard, and she thought he recognized her now and was pleased to see her. She carried him to the beanbag chair she'd bought especially, thinking it would be a comfortable nursing chair (it was) and he latched onto her breast right away. There was none of the awkwardness and fumbling of the first time, in the hospital, beneath the critical gaze of the nurses; now, with no one else around to see or comment, they both knew what to do. He didn't stay on the breast for long; her milk hadn't come in yet, but apparently that was normal. She had an appointment to see her doctor the day after tomorrow, and then

there was the new baby support group she'd been talked into joining, so she'd be able to get advice if she had any worries.

But she had no worries. In blissful, silent communion with her child, Christine had never been happier. She went on cradling him to her breast even after he'd fallen asleep, but such self-contained perfection could not last. She was thirsty, she was hungry, and she needed to go to the bathroom.

So she got up (which was trickier than getting down had been) and settled him into his basket on top of the coffee table before dealing efficiently with her own bodily needs. As she drank her carrot-apple-and-wheat-grass drink, and munched a hummus and tomato sandwich, she became aware of another need. This one was not so physical, and was perhaps a craving rather than a need, but she could not ignore it. Moments later, she found herself back at the computer, her fingers tapping away, and words pouring out in a torrent, straight from her brain to the screen.

She didn't write about the birth, as she'd originally planned. She found now that she flinched away from the memory of those long, lonely hours, and did not want to revive the particular smells and cast of light in the delivery room, the tired faces of doctors and nurses she had never seen before, or the pain. It was past, thank goodness, and for once she would just let it go.

All she cared to write about was her new love, the tiny baby boy sleeping so

peacefully barely two feet away, almost right behind her. Occasionally she paused in her description to turn and look at him again. Sometimes she had to get up and go close, to smell and touch him, to feel the steady beating of his heart and listen to the faint whisper of his breath. Drinking all of him in would restore her, and she'd hurry back to the machine, impatient to capture every single detail of him in words.

But it was more than just capturing a likeness that she was after. She wanted her word-portrait to be even more real than a photograph. She was trying to bring him to life in a different way, which meant she had to recreate something of his spirit—his essence—his pure being—his soul—whatever you wanted to call the indefinable *stuff* that made him an individual, and that had so struck her at first sight..

She delved deep into her own soul, too, searching out her most elusive emotions. Nothing was too trivial to be disregarded. Everything mattered. What *precisely* had she thought and felt when she looked for the first time into her baby's blue eyes? *Love* was far too vague, too enormous, too meaningless a word to set down unelaborated. It would take a great deal of effort to describe; it would take all her skill and energy, every ounce of her talent.

Hours flowed by like minutes, like seconds, as she wrote, entranced, far into the night. At first she expected to be interrupted at any moment by a murmur or a cry from her baby, and she sat tensely, shoulders hunched as if to

ward off a blow, and wrote in a fury, desperate to get as much down as quickly as she possibly could before she was forced to stop.

At first, she kept looking around, going to him, prodded by an irrational anxiety that he wasn't really real, hadn't been born yet, perhaps she'd only dreamed him into existence. . . . But he was there, every time she checked, still warm and soft and sweet-smelling, undeniably separate and real and alive.

Gradually, as he slumbered on, she no longer left her chair or even turned away from the sight of the screen and her dancing fingers. She existed only to write, to recreate every moment of their first day together, her discovery of her son. Every now and then she paused, to reread what she had written, and her confidence grew. It was good. She was writing at the top of her form, better than she'd ever managed before, her abilities rising to the challenge, describing the indescribable. She sharpened a phrase here and there, cut out some repetitions. There. She smiled in surprised pleasure. She'd captured him, absolutely—this was her baby, not just true to life, but *truer*.

Without pausing for a second thought she uploaded her work to the website. Then she doubted. She was tired—so tired she could hardly think. Her head was spinning. It would have been more sensible to wait until morning—then, shocked, she saw that it *was* morning. The night had passed in writing, and now sunshine was spilling into the room.

She turned her attention back to the screen, forcing herself to concentrate despite the pounding in her head. She hadn't even decided on a new name for the website—"Got My Baby"? "Baby Found"?—or changed the design. She hadn't taken a picture of the baby yet, and she *must* have one to replace that old, ultrasound snapshot. That unformed embryo no longer existed.

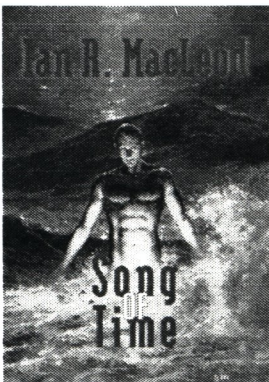
As she gazed at the familiar, blurry picture she gave a start of surprise, and blinked her eyes rapidly in disbelief, thinking for a moment that she'd fallen into a dream. It couldn't be true—she couldn't be seeing what she thought she saw—a heartbeat. But there it was, pulsing away in the center, just as if something had jolted it to life.

It held her, this impossible vision, for what seemed like a long time, before she managed to break away and turn her head. Even then she still heard the faint thumping sound coming from the screen as if, behind the glass,

a tiny, living creature was preserved.

She tried to stand up and nearly fell, her legs numb and her head spinning—she'd been without sleep for nearly 48 hours, no wonder if she was hallucinating. Finally, gripping the edge of the desk, she waited, deliberately not looking at the computer, until she had some feeling back in her legs—not completely, but at least enough to allow her to move away, to stagger the couple of steps that took her to the basket on the table.

She looked down and saw her baby, now terribly changed. His skin was no longer rosy, but had the faint bluish hue of skimmed milk. As she bent closer she could not feel or hear the regular faint movements of breathing, and, as she brushed his cheek with her lips, she found it cold and dead. At some moment during the long night, while she wrote so rapturously, capturing every last detail of his tiny, fragile life, the heart within his breast had stopped. ☒



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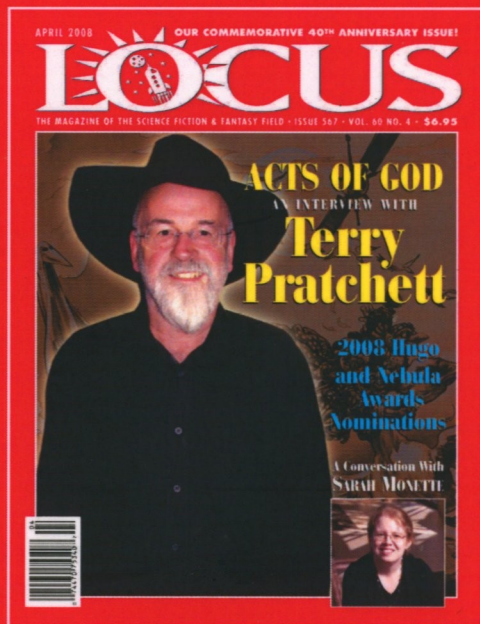
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