

APPEARANCE OF LIFE

by Brian W. Aldiss

For the past few years Brian W. Aldiss has been writing exquisite short stories which baffle the comprehension. He seems to have been interested in utilizing his own high talent for experimental ventures in literary coloration and poetic theme along the margins of the sf sphere. It was therefore a really pleasant surprise to find that he has turned out a story which is clearly and truly science fiction, which has quite an original premise, and which nevertheless continues to display his great stylistic skill.

Something very large, something very small: a galactic museum, a dead love affair. They came together under my gaze.

The museum is very large. Less than a thousand light years from Earth, countless worlds bear constructions which are formidably ancient and inscrutable in purpose. The museum on Norma is such a construction.

We suppose that the museum was created by a species which once lorded it over the galaxy, the Korlevalulaw. The spectre of the Korlevalulaw has become part of the consciousness of the human race as it spreads from star-system to star-system. Sometimes the Korlevalulaw are pictured as demons, hiding somewhere in a dark nebula, awaiting the moment when they swoop down on mankind and wipe every last one of us out, in reprisal for having dared to invade their territory. Sometimes the Korlevalulaw are pictured as gods, riding with the awfulness and loneliness of gods through the deserts of space, potent and wise beyond our imagining.

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These two opposed images of the Korlevalulaw are of course images emerging from the deepest pools of the human mind. The demon and the god remain with us still.

But there were Korlevalulaw, and there are facts we know about them. We know that they abandoned the written word by the time they reached their galactic-building phase. Their very name comes down to us from the single example of their alphabet we have, a sign emblazoned across the facade of a construction on Lacarja. We know that they were inhuman. Not only does the scale of their constructions imply as much; they built always on planets inimical to man.

What we do not know is what became of the Korlevalulaw. They must have reigned so long, they must have been so invincible to all but Time.

Where knowledge cannot go, imagination ventures. Men have supposed that the Korlevalulaw committed some kind of racial suicide. Or that they became a race divided, and totally annihilated themselves in a region of space beyond our galaxy, beyond the reach of mankind's starships.

And there are more metaphysical speculations concerning the fate of the Korlevalulaw. Moved by evolutionary necessity, they may have grown beyond the organic; in which case, it may be that they still inhabit their ancient constructions, undetected by man. There is a stranger theory which places emphasis on Mind identifiable with Cosmos, and supposes that once a species begins to place credence in the idea of occupying the galaxy, then so it is bound to do, this is what mankind has done, virtually imagining its illustrious predecessors out of existence.

Well, there are many theories, but I was intending to talk about the museum on Norma.

Like everything else, Norma possesses its riddles.

The museum demarcates Norma's equator. The construction takes the form of a colossal belt girdling the planet, some sixteen thousand kilometres in length. The belt varies curiously in thickness, from twelve kilometres to over twenty-two.

The chief riddle about Norma is this: is its topographical conformation what it always was, or are its peculiarities due to the meddling of the Korlevalulaw? For the construction neatly divides the planet into a northern land hemisphere and a southern oceanic hem-

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isphere. On one side lies an endless territory of cratered-plain, scoured by winds and bluish snow. On the other side writhes a formidable ocean of ammonia, unbroken by islands, inhabited by firefish and other mysterious denizens.

On one of the widest sections of the Korlevalulaw construction stands an incongruous huddle of buildings. Coming in from space, you are glad to see the huddle. Your ship takes you down, you catch your elevator, you emerge on the roof of the construction itself, and you rejoice that—in the midst of the inscrutable symmetrical universe (of which the Korlevalulaw formed a not inconsiderable part) —mankind has established an untidy foothold.

For a moment I paused by the ship, taking in the immensity about me. A purple sun was rising amid cloud, making shadows race across the infinite-seeming plane on which I stood. The distant sea pounded and moaned, lost to my vision. It was a solitary spot, but I was accustomed to solitude—on the planet I called home, I hardly met with another human from one year's end to the next, except on my visits to the Breeding Centre.

The human-formed buildings on Norma stand over one of the enormous entrances to the museum. They consist of a hotel for visitors, various office blocks, cargo-handling equipment, and gigantic transmitters—the walls of the museum are impervious to the electromagnetic spectrum, so that any information from inside the construction comes by cable through the entrance, and is then transmitted by second-space to other parts of the galaxy.

'Seeker, you are expected. Welcome to the Norma Museum/

So said the android who showed me into the airlock and guided me through into the hotel. Here as elsewhere, androids occupied all menial posts. I glanced at the calendar clock in the foyer, punching my wristputer like all arriving travellers to discover where in time Earth might be now.

Gently sedated by alpha-music, I slept away my light-lag, and descended next day to the museum itself.

The museum was run by twenty human staff, all female. The Director gave me all the information that a Seeker might need, helped me to select a viewing vehicle, and left me to move off into the museum on my own.

Although we had many ways of growing unimolecular metals, the

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Korlevalulaw construction on Norma was of an incomprehensible material. It had no joint or seam in its entire length. More, it somehow imprisoned or emanated light, so that no artificial light was needed within.

Beyond that, it was empty. The entire place was equatorially empty. Only mankind, taking it over a thousand years before, had turned it into a museum and started to fill it with galactic lumber.

As I moved forward in my vehicle, I was not overcome by the idea of infinity, as I had expected. A tendency towards infinity has presumably dwelt in the minds of mankind ever since our early ancestors counted up to ten on their fingers. The habitation of the void has increased that tendency. The happiness which we experience as a species is of recent origin, achieved since our maturity; it also contributes to a disposition to neglect any worries in the present in order to concentrate on distant goals. But I believe—this is a personal opinion—that this same tendency towards infinity in all its forms has militated against close relationships between individuals. We do not even love as our planet-bound ancestors did; we live apart as they did not

In the summer, a quality of the light mitigated any intimations of infinity. I knew I was in an immense enclosed space; but, since the light absolved me from any sensations of claustrophobia, I will not attempt to describe that vastness.

Over the previous ten centuries, several thousand hectares had been occupied with human accretions. Androids worked perpetually, arranging exhibits. The exhibits were scanned by electronic means, so that anyone on any civilised planet, dialing the museum, might obtain by second-space a three-dimensional image of the required object in his room.

I travelled almost at random through the displays.

To qualify as a Seeker, it was necessary to show a high serendipity factor. In my experimental behaviour pool as a child, I had exhibited such a factor, and had been selected for special training forthwith. I had taken additional courses in Philosophical, Alpha-humeral, Incidental Tetrachotomy, Apunctual Synchronicity, Homoontogenesis, and other subjects, ultimately qualifying as a Prime Esemplastic **Seeker. In other words, I put two and two together in situations**

where other people were not thinking about addition. I connected. I made wholes greater than parts.

Mine was an invaluable profession in a cosmos increasingly full of parts.

I had come to the museum with a sheaf of assignments from numerous institutions, universities, and individuals all over the galaxy. Every assignment required my special talent—a capacity beyond holography. Let me give one example. The Audile Academy of the University of Paddin on the planet Rufadote was working on an hypothesis that, over the millennia, human voices were gradually generating fewer phons or, in other words, becoming quieter. Any evidence I could collect in the museum concerning this hypothesis would be welcome. The Academy could scan the whole museum by remote holography; yet only to a rare physical visitor like me was a gestalt view of the contents possible; and only to a Seeker would a significant juxtapositioning be noted.

My car took me slowly through the exhibits. There were nourishment machines at intervals throughout the museum, so that I did not need to leave the establishment. I slept in my vehicle; it was comfortably provided with bunks.

On the second day, I spoke idly to a nearby android before beginning my morning drive.

'Do you enjoy ordering the exhibits here?'

'I could never tire of it/ She smiled pleasantly at me.

'You find it interesting?'

'It's endlessly interesting. The quest for pattern is a basic instinct/

'Do you always work in this section?'

'No. But this is one of my favourite sections. As you have probably observed, here we classify extinct diseases—or diseases which would be extinct if they were not preserved in the museum. I find the micro-organism beautiful/

'You are kept busy?'

'Certainly. New exhibits arrive every month. From the largest to the smallest, everything can be stored here. May I show you anything?'

'Not at present. How long before the entire museum is filled?'

'In fifteen and a half millennia, at current rate of intake/

'Have you entered the empty part of the museum?'

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'I have stood on the fringes of emptiness. It is an alarming sensation. I prefer to occupy myself with the works of man/

That is only proper/

I drove away, meditating on the limitations of android thinking. Those limitations had been carefully imposed by mankind; the androids were not aware of them. To an android, the android umwelt or conceptual universe is apparently limitless. It makes for their happiness, just as our umwelt makes for our happiness.

As the days passed, I came across many juxtapositions and objects which would assist clients. I noted them all in my wristputer.

On the fifth day, I was examining the section devoted to ships and objects preserved from the earliest days of galactic travel.

Many of the items touched me with emotion—an emotion chiefly composed of nosthedony, the pleasure of returning to the past. For in many of the items I saw reflected a time when human life was different, perhaps less secure, certainly

less austere.

That First Galactic Era, when men—often accompanied by 'wives' and 'mistresses', to use the old terms for love-partners—had ventured distantly in primitive machines, marked the beginning of the time when the human pair-bond weakened and humanity rose towards maturity.

I stepped into an early spaceship, built before second-space had been discovered. Its scale was diminutive. With shoulders bent, I moved along its brief corridors into what had been a relaxation room for the five-person crew. The metal was old-fashioned refined; it might almost have been wood. The furniture, such as it was, seemed scarcely designed for human frames. The mode aimed at an illusion-ary functionalism. And yet, still preserved in the air, were attributes I recognised as human: perseverance, courage, hope. The five people who had once lived here were kin with me.

The ship had died in vacuum of a defective recycling plant—their micro-encapsulation techniques had not included the implantation of oxygen in the corpuscles of the blood, never mind the genetosurgery needed to make that implantation hereditary. All the equipment and furnishings lay as they had done aeons before, when the defect occurred.

Rifling through some personal lockers, I discovered a thin band made of the antique metal, gold. On the inside of it was a small but

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clumsily executed inscription in ancient script I balanced it on the tip of my thumb and considered its function. Was it an early contraceptive device?

At my shoulder was a museum eye. Activating it, I requested the official catalogue to describe the object I held.

The reply was immediate. You are holding a ring which slipped on to the finger of a human being when our species was of smaller stature than today/ said the catalogue. 'Like the spaceship, the ring dates from the First Galactic Era, but *is* thought to be somewhat older than the ship. The dating tallies with what we know of the function—largely symbolic—of the ring. It was worn to indicate married status in a woman or man. This particular ring may have been an hereditary possession. In those days, marriages were expected to last until progeny were born, or even until death. The human biomass was then divided fifty-fifty between males and females, in dramatic contrast to the ten-to-one preponderance of females in our stellar societies. Hence the idea of coupling for life was not so illogical as it sounds. However, the ring itself must be regarded as a harmless illogic, designed merely to express a bondage or linkage—'

I broke the connection.

A wedding ring ... It represented symbolic communication. As such, it would be of value to a professor studying the metamorphoses of nonverbality who was employing my services.

A wedding ring ... A closed circuit of love and **thought**.

I wondered if this particular marriage had ended for both the partners on this ship. The items preserved did not answer my question. But I found a flat photograph, encased in plastic windows, of a man and a woman together in outdoor surroundings. They smiled at the apparatus recording them. Their eyes were flat, betokening their undeveloped cranial reserves, yet they were not attractive. I observed that they stood closer together than we would normally care to do.

Could that be something to do with the limitations of the apparatus photographing them? Or had there been a change in the social convention of closeness? Was there a connection here with **the** decibel-output of the human voice which might interest my clients of the Audile Academy? Possibly our auditory equipment was more subtle than that of our ancestors when they were confined to one planet under heavy atmospheric pressure. I filed the details away **for future** reference.

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A fellow-Seeker had told me jokingly that the secret of the universe was locked away in the museum if only I could find it.

'We'll stand a better chance of that when the museum is complete/ I told her.

'No/ she said. 'The secret will then be too deeply buried. We shall merely have transferred the outside universe to inside the Korleval-ulaw construction. You'd better find it now or never/

The idea that there may be a secret or key to the universe is in any case a construct of the human mind/

'Or of the mind that built the human mind/ she said.

That night, I slept in the section of early galactic travel and continued my researches there on the sixth day.

I felt a curious excitement, over and above nosthedony and simply antiquarian interest. My senses were alert.

I drove among twenty great ships belonging to the Second Galactic Era. The longest was over five kilometres in length and had housed many scores of women and men in its day. This had been the epoch when our kind had attempted to establish empires in space and extend primitive national or territorial obsessions across many light-years. The facts of relativity had doomed such efforts from the start; under the immensities of space-time, they were put away as childish things. It was no paradox to say that, among interstellar distances, mankind had become more at home with itself.

Although I did not enter these behemoths, I remained among them, sampling the brutal way in which militaristic technologies expressed themselves in metal. Such excesses would never recur.

Beyond the behemoths, androids were arranging fresh exhibits. The exhibits slid along in transporters far overhead, conveyed silently from the museum entrance, to be lowered where needed. Drawing closer to where the new arrivals were being unloaded, I passed among an array of shelves.

On the shelves lay items retrieved from colonial homes or ships of the quasi-imperial days. I marvelled at the collection. As people had proliferated, so had objects. A concern with possession had been a priority during the immaturity of the species. These long-dead people had seemingly thought of little else but possession in one form or another; yet like androids in similar circumstances, they could not have

recognised the limitations of their own umwelt.

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Among the muddle, a featureless cube caught my eye. Its sides were smooth and silvered. I picked it up and turned it over. On one side was a small depression. I touched the depression with my finger.

Slowly, the sides of the cube clarified and a young woman's head appeared three-dimensionally inside them. The head was upside down. The eyes regarded me.

'You are not Chris Mailer/ she said. I talk only to my husband. Switch off and set me right way up/

'Your "husband" died sixty-five thousand years ago,' I said. But I set her cube down on the shelf, not unmoved by being addressed by an image from the remote past. That it possessed environmental reflexion made it all the more impressive.

I asked the museum catalogue about the item.

In the jargon of the time, it is a "holocap",' said the catalogue. It is a hologrammed image of a real woman, with a facsimile of her brain implanted on a collapsed germanium-alloy core. It generates an appearance of life. Do you require the technical specifics?'

'No. I want its provenance/

It was taken from a small armed spaceship, a scout, built in the two hundred and first year of the Second Era. The scout was partially destroyed by a bomb from the planet Scundra. All aboard were killed but the ship went into orbit about Scundra. Do you require details of the engagement?'

'No. Do we know who the woman is?'

'These shelves are recent acquisitions and have only just been catalogued. Other Scundra acquisitions are still arriving. We may find more data at a later date. The cube itself has not been properly examined. It was sensitised to

respond only to the cerebral emissions of the woman's husband. Such holocaps were popular with the Second Era woman and men on stellar flights. They provided life-mimicking mementoes of partners elsewhere in the cosmos. For further details you may—'

'That's sufficient/

I worked my way forward, but with increasing lack of attention to the objects around me. When I came to where the unloading was taking place, I halted my vehicle.

As the carrier-platforms sailed down from the roof, unwearied androids unloaded them, putting the goods in their translucent wraps into nearby lockers. Larger items were handled by crane.

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'This material is from Scundra?' I asked the catalogue.

'Correct. You wish to know the history of the planet?'

'It is an agricultural planet, isn't it?'

'Correct. Entirely agricultural, entirely automated. No humans go down to the surface. It was claimed originally by Soviet India and its colonists were mainly, although not entirely, of Indian stock. A war broke out with the nearby planets of the Pan-Slav Union. Are these nationalist terms familiar to you?'

'How did this foolish "war" end?'

'The Union sent a battleship to Scundra. Once in orbit, it demanded certain concessions which the Indians were unable or unwilling to make. The battleship sent a scoutship down to the planet to negotiate a settlement. The settlement was reached but, as the scoutship re-entered space and was about to enter its mother-ship, it blew up* A party of Scundran extremists had planted a bomb in it. You examined an item preserved from the scoutship yesterday, and today you drove past the battleship concerned.

'In retaliation for the bomb, the Pan-Slavs dusted the planet with Panthrax K, a disease which wiped out all human life on the planet in a matter of weeks. The bacillus of Panthrax K was notoriously difficult to contain, and the battleship itself became infected. The entire crew died. Scout, ship, and planet remained incommunicado for many centuries. Needless to say, there is no danger of infection now. All precautions have been taken/

The catalogue's brief history plunged me into meditation.

I thought about the Scundra incident, now so unimportant. The wiping out of a whole world full of people—evidence again of that lust for possession which had by now relinquished its grip on the human soul. Or was the museum itself an indication that traces of the lust remained, now intellectualised into a wish to possess, not merely objects, but the entire past of mankind and, indeed, what my friend had jokingly referred to as 'the secret of the universe'? I told myself then that cause and effect operated only arbitrarily on the level of the psyche; that lust to possess could itself create a secret to be found, as a hunt provides its own quarry. And if once found? Then the whole complex of human affairs might be unravelled beneath the spell of one gigantic simplification, until motivation was so

lowered that life would lose its purport; whereupon our species

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would wither and die, all tasks fulfilled. Such indeed could have happened to the unassailable Korlevalulaw.

To what extent the inorganic and the organic universe were unity could not be determined until ultimate heat-death brought parity. But it was feasible to suppose that each existed for the other, albeit hierarchically. Organic systems

with intelligence might achieve unity —union— with the encompassing universe through knowledge, through the possession of that 'secret' of which my friend joked. That union would represent a peak, a flowering. Beyond it lay only decline, a metaphysical correspondence to the second law of thermodynamics!

Breaking from this chain of reasoning, I realised two things immediately: firstly, that I was well into my serendipitous Seeker phase, and, secondly, that I was about to take from an android's hands an item he was unloading from the carrier-platform.

As I unwrapped it from its translucent covering, the catalogue said, 'The object you hold was retrieved from the capital city of Scundra. It was found in the apartment of a married couple named Jean and Lan Gopal. Other objects are arriving from the same source. Do not misplace it or our assistants will be confused/

It was a 'holocap' like the one I had examined the day before. Perhaps it was a more sophisticated example. The casing was better turned, the button so well concealed that I found it almost by accident. Moreover, the cube lit immediately, and the illusion that I was holding a man's head in my hands was strong.

The man looked about, caught my eye, and said, 'This holocap is intended only for my ex-wife, Jean Gopal. I have no business with you. Switch off and be good enough to return me to Jean. This is Chris Mailer/

The image died. I held only a cube in my hands.

In my mind questions flowered.

Sixty-five thousand years ago . . .

I pressed the switch again. Eyeing me straight, he said in unchanged tones, 'This holocap is intended only for my ex-wife, Jean Gopal. I have no business with you. Switch off and be good enough to return me to Jean. This is Chris Mailer/

Certainly it was all that was left of Chris Mailer. His face made a powerful impression. His features were generous, with high forehead,

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long nose, powerful chin. His grey eyes were wide-set, his mouth ample but firm. He had a neat beard, brown and streaked with grey. About the temples his hair also carried streaks of grey. His face was unlined and generally alert, although not without melancholy. I resurrected him up from the electronic distances and made him go through his piece again.

'Now I shall unite you with your ex-wife/ I said.

As I loaded the holocap into my vehicle and headed back towards the cache of the day before, I knew that my trained talent was with me, leading me.

There was a coincidence and a contradiction here—or seemed to be, for both coincidences and contradictions are more apparent than real. It was no very strange thing that I should come upon the woman's holocap one day and the man's the next. Both were being unloaded from the same planetary area, brought to the museum in the same operation. The contradiction was more interesting. The woman had said that she spoke only to her husband, the man he spoke only to his ex-wife; was there a second woman involved?

I recalled that the woman, Jean, had seemed young, whereas the man, Mailer, was past the flush of youth. The woman had been on the planet, Scundra, whereas Mailer had been in the scoutship. They had been on opposing sides in that 'war' which ended in death for all.

How the situation had arisen appeared inexplicable after six hundred and fifty centuries. Yet as long as there remained power in the submolecular structure of the holocap cells, the chance existed that this insignificant fragment of the past could be reconstructed.

Not that I knew whether two holocaps could converse together.

I stood the two cubes on the same shelf, a metre apart. I switched them on.

The images of two heads were reborn. They looked about them as if alive.

Mailer spoke first staring intensely across the shelf at the female head.

'Jean, my darling, it's Chris, speaking to you after all this long time. I hardly know whether I ought to, but I must Do you recognise me?'

Although Jean's image was of a woman **considerably** younger than

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his, it was less brilliant, more grainy, captured by an inferior piece of holocapry.

'Chris, Fm your wife, your little Jean. This is for you wherever you are. I know we have our troubles but... I was never able to say this when we were together, Chris, but I do love our marriage—it means a lot to me, and I want it to go on. I send you love wherever you are. I think about you a lot. You said—well, you know what you said, but I hope you still care. I want you to care, because I do care for you/

'It's over a dozen years since we parted, my darling Jean/ Mailer said. I know I broke up the marriage in the end, but I was younger then, and foolish. Even at the time, a part of me warned that I was making a mistake. I pretended that I knew you didn't care for me. You cared all the time, didn't you?'

'Not only do I care, but I will try to show more of my inner feelings in future. Perhaps I understand you better now. I know I've not been as responsive as I might be, in several ways/

I stood fascinated and baffled by this dialogue, which carried all sorts of overtones beyond my comprehension. I was listening to the conversation of primitive beings. The image of her face had vivacity; indeed, apart from the flat eyes and an excess of hair she passed for pretty, with a voluptuous mouth and wide eyes—but to think she took it for granted that she might have a man for her own possession, while he acted under similar assumptions! Whereas Mailer's mode of speech was slow and thoughtful, but without hesitation, Jean talked fast, moving her head about, hesitating and interrupting herself as she spoke.

He said, 'You don't know what it is like to live with regret. At least, I hope you don't, my dear. You never understood regret and all its ramifications as I do. I remember I called you superficial once, just before we broke up. That was because you were content to live in the present; the past or the future meant nothing to you. It was something I could not comprehend at the time, simply because for me both past and future are always with me. You never made reference to things past, whether happy or sad, and I couldn't stand that. Fancy, I let such a little matter come between our love! There was your affair with Gopal, too. That hurt me and, forgive me, that fact that he was black added salt in my wound. But even there I should have taken more of the blame. I was more arrogant then than I am now, Jean/

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'I'm not much good at going over what has been, as you know/ she said. I live each day as it comes. But the entanglement with Lan Gopal—well, I admit I was attracted to him—you know he went for me and I couldn't resist—not that I'm exactly blaming Lan ... He was very sweet, but I want you to know that that's all over now, really over. I'm happy again. We belong to each other/

'I still feel what I always did, Jean. You must have been married to Gopal for ten years now. Perhaps you've forgotten me, perhaps this holocap won't be welcome/

As I stood there, compelled to listen, the two images stared raptly at each other, conversing without communicating.

We think differently—in different ways, I mean/ Jean said, glancing downwards. 'You can explain better—you were always the intellectual. I know you despise me because I'm not clever, don't you? You used to say we had non-verbal communication ... I don't quite know what to say. Except that I was sad to see you leave on another trip, going off hurt and angry, and I wished—oh well, as you see, your poor wife is trying to make up for her deficiencies by sending you this holocap. It comes with love, dear Chris, hoping—oh, everything—that you'll come back here to me on Earth, and that things will be as they used to be between us. We do belong to each other and I haven't forgotten/

During this speech, she became increasingly agitated.

'I know you don't want me back, Jean/ Mailer said. 'Nobody can turn back time. But I had to get in touch with you when the chance came. You gave me a holocap fifteen years ago and I've had it with me on my travels ever since. When our divorce came through, I joined a fleet of space-mercenaries. Now we're fighting for the Pan-Slavs. I've just

learnt that we're coming to Scundra, although not with the best of motives. So Fm having this holocap made, trusting there'll be a chance to deliver it to you. The message is simple really—I forgive anything you may think there is to forgive. After all these years, you still mean a lot to me, Jean, though Fm less than nothing to you/

'Chris, Fm your wife, your little Jean. This is for you wherever you are. I know we have our troubles but... I was never able to say this when we were together, Chris, but I do love our marriage—it means a lot to me, and I want it to go on/

It's a strange thing that I come as an enemy to what is now, I suppose, your home planet since you married Gopal. I always knew that

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bastard was no good, worming his way in between us. Tell him I bear him no malice, as long as he's taking care of you, whatever else he does/

She said: 'I sent you love wherever you are. I think about you a lot . . . /

I hope he's made you forget all about me. He owes me that. You and I were once all in all to each other, and life's never been as happy for me again, whatever I pretend to others/

'You said—well, you know what you said, but I hope you still care. I want you to care, because I do care for you . . . Not only do I care, but I will try to show more of my inner feelings in future. Perhaps I understand you better now/

'Jean, my darling, it's Chris, speaking to you after all this long time. I hardly know whether I ought to, but I must/

I turned away. At least I understood. Only the incomprehensible things of which the images spoke had concealed the truth from me for so long.

The images could converse, triggered by pauses in each other's monologues. But what they had to say had been programmed before they met. Each had a role to play and was unable to transcend it by a hairbreadth. No matter what the other image might say, they could not reach beyond what was predetermined. The female, with less to say than the male, had run out of talk first and simply begun her chatter over again.

Jean's holocap had been made some fifteen years before Mailer's. She was talking from a time when they were still married, he from a time some years after their divorce. Their images spoke completely at odds—there had never been a dialogue between them . . .

These trivial resolutions passed through my mind and were gone.

Greater things occupied me.

Second Era man had passed, with all his bustling possessive affairs.

The godly Korlevalulaw too had passed away. Or so we thought. We were surrounded by their creations, but of the Korlevalulaw themselves there was not a sign.

We could no more see a sign of them than Jean and Mailer could see a sign of me, although they had responded in their own way . . .

My function as a Prime Emplastastic Seeker was more than fulfilled. I had made an ultimate whole greater than the parts. I had found what my joking friend called 'the secret of the universe'.

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Like the images I had observed, the galactic human race was merely a projection. The Korlevalulaw had created us—not as a genuine creation with free will, but as some sort of a reproduction.

There would never be proof of that, only intuition. I had learned to trust my intuition. As with those imprisoned images, the human species was gradually growing fainter, less able to hear the programmed responses. As with those imprisoned images, we were all drifting further apart, losing definition. As with those imprisoned images, we were doomed to root through the debris of the past, because copies can have no creative future.

Here was my one gigantic simplification, here my union with the encompassing universel This was the flowering

before the decline.

No, my idea was nonsense! A fit had seized me! My deductions were utterly unfounded. I knew there was no ultimate 'secret of the universe'—and in any case, supposing humanity to be merely a construct of the Korlevalulaw: who then 'constructed' the Korlevalulaw? The prime question was merely set back one step.

But for every level of existence there is a key to its central enigma. Those keys enable life-forms to ascend the scale of life or to reach an impasse—to flourish or to become extinct.

I had found a key which would cause the human species to wither and die. Ours was merely an umwelt, not a universe.

I left the museum. I flew my ship away from Norma. I did not head back to my home world. I went instead to a desolate world on which I now intend to end my days, communicating with no one. Let them assume that I caught a personal blight instead of detecting a universal one. If I communicate, the chance is that the dissolution I feel within me will spread.

And spread for ever.

Such was my mental agony that only when I reached this barren habitation did I recall what I neglected to do in the museum. I forgot to switch off the holocaps.

There they may remain, conducting their endless conversation, until power dies. Only then will the two talking heads sink into blessed nothingness and be gone.

Sound will fade, images die, silence remain.