

*What is real? In "Visionary Shapes," Robert F. Young ("Three-Mile Syndrome," August 1985) poses this question and finds, as was once said, that "A handful of sand is an anthology of the universe."*

## Visionary Shapes

BY

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**H**awkins hit the spacewarp (he assumed, at least, that this was what happened) just as he sighted the Kus fleet, and a moment later his scoutship landed of its own accord on the sandy surface of a strange world lighted by a sun like Sol.

It entered his mind that the warp, if warp it was, might be a weapon of the enemy. But he threw the thought out. Despite their advanced technology, the Kus could not possibly bend space.

He had been headed toward Mars, around which the Kus fleet, pausing in its Earthward course, had gone into orbit. The ships comprising the fleet were equipped with image-shields that made them immune to radar and that lent them invisibility, except at close range, even when telescopes were used. Months ago a supply ship headed for the Barnard Star's H colony had passed close to the ships when they were entering the Solar System and had sent back vague photos. Special unmanned craft had monitored the fleet's course afterward. Hawkins's scoutship was the first manned craft the Terran Navy had employed. His mission was to alert the Terran flagship the moment the Kus ships resumed their Earthward course.

He tried to turn on the scout-ship's lift-off engine so he could return to space. Once there, he might be able to locate the warp and pass back through it. The lift-off lever broke off in his hand.

Staring at it, he saw that it was no longer made of steel but of plastic. Or, if not plastic, a substance that so closely resembled it, it could be called nothing else.

Next, ignoring the possibility that he might now be light-years from the Solar System, he tried to radio the Terran flagship — only to find that the transmitter had turned into a plastic imitation of itself.

He saw then that the control board had undergone an identical metamorphosis.

He tapped the board. It gave forth a dull, hollow sound.

He tapped the bulkheads and stamped on the deck, obtaining similar sounds.

Was he to believe, then, that the entire ship had turned into plastic?

He stared at the viewscreen. It had turned into a window. He saw sand, sand, sand.

Hawkins was a sensible man. He knew there had to be a logical explanation for what had happened.

He had Addison's disease, and a navy medman had recently given him a new drug. All drugs had side effects, and there was no reason to think that this one was an exception to the rule. Perhaps he was hallucinating.

The thought that he might be filled him with relief. Far better to be hallucinating than he had gone through a spacewarp and that his ship had turned into plastic than for both incidents to have really occurred. Any moment now the delusion might fade and he would find himself back in space on board a bona fide ship.

He waited for the moment to come. It did not.

But perhaps it would. While he was waiting he would take a closer look at the strange world he seemed to have landed upon.

He stepped into the lock, closing the inner door behind him. He reached for his space suit. It seemed to be real. But he did not put it on because he noticed then that the outer door was ajar and realized his lungs were already full of alien air.

There was no difference, insofar as he could tell, between it and the air he had been breathing before.

He pushed the outer door the rest of the way open and climbed down the boarding ladder to the

ground. The planet had Earth g, but he had known this in the back of his mind ever since he landed.

Sunlight reflecting from the sand hurt his eyes, but they quickly adjusted themselves to the glare. He saw that the ship had come down in a large, sandy basin. Nothing grew there. He doubted that anything ever had.

There was no evidence of intelligent life. But this did not mean there was none. Instinctively he felt for his cation pistol, which he carried in a holster on his right hip. The feel of it reassured him, and then he thought, Maybe it turned into plastic, too! But he saw that it had not when he took it out and examined it.

He climbed the nearest slope, his feet sinking into the sand. His lack of a shadow told him the sun was directly overhead. Its rays were warm, but not uncomfortably so.

Reaching the top of the slope, he saw another basin, similar to the one he had climbed out of. And in the far, far distance, he made out a small mountain. It had an odd shape. Its peak had sheer slopes and rose abruptly from the broader base of the lower slopes, which were also sheer. At this point he became aware of a wind. It brought to mind a distant bellows and came from the direction of the mountain.

Far to his left a body of water glittered in the sunlight, and far to his right he discerned the upper face of an escarpment.

It was futile to try to identify the planet (assuming that it really existed), because even if he was still in the same universe, he might be on the opposite side of the Galaxy from Earth.

He had only glimpsed the landscape when the scoutship came down, and while it was true he had seen nothing but sand (had failed, even, to spot the body of water he had just described), he knew there must be vegetation growing somewhere; otherwise there would be no air.

He descended the slope into the second basin, crossed it, and ascended the opposite slope. Walking was laborious, for his feet kept sinking into the sand. He feared that when he reached the top of the slope he would see another basin. Instead, he found himself gazing down upon a small sandy plain. And resting upon it in a wide circle as though they were still in space, their bizarre design betraying their alienness, were the ships of the Kus fleet.

**H**awkins dropped down flat and inched back down the slope till he was out of sight. Then, lying on his stomach, he raised his head high enough to enable him to see the ships. There were twelve of them, and despite their immobility and despite their nearness to each other, they lent the impression that they were orbiting a planet.

Either they had come through the same warp he had, or one just like it.

Assuming, always assuming, Hawkins reminded himself, that I am seeing what I think I see and am not hallucinating.

He wondered if he had been spotted. There was no activity around the alien ships, but this did not mean there was none within them. The flagship was less than half a kilometer from where he lay. The bubble covering its observation deck scintillated in the sunlight. The Kus could easily have seen him when he crested the slope.

Any moment now one of the hull guns might be trained in his direction. He fixed his eyes on them, ready to roll back down the slope if one of them moved. He knew he was being naive, that a race of beings capable of building interstellar ships certainly would have projectiles that could blow both him and the ridge away. Yet he lay there feeling no fear.

At length he realized why. The sunlight, while it scintillated on the observation deck bubble, gleamed hut dully on the ship's hull, and in the back of his mind he had known at first glance that the Kus ships had undergone the same metamorphosis his scoutship had.

He had nothing to fear from plastic guns.

Lying there, he began to wonder if the Terran fleet had passed through a spacewarp, too, and had also undergone a metamorphosis. Logic said no, that the presence of his own ship and the Kus fleet was preposterous enough. But did logic really apply?

He had not glimpsed the Terran fleet during his swift descent, but he had not glimpsed the Kus fleet,

either.

Given the original positions of both fleets in space and the original position of his scoutship, the Terran fleet, if it had passed through a warp, should lie in the direction opposite to the one he had taken when he left his scoutship. And since distance had shrunk, the fleet might be within walking distance.

He would find out.

He was both hungry and thirsty when he reached his ship, and he climbed up into it and stepped into its tiny galley. He was only mildly surprised to find that the food had turned into plastic and that the water had disappeared. Nevertheless, for the first time since his arrival, he knew fear. And try as he would to convince himself that he was the victim of a drug-induced hallucination, the fear would not go away.

He was not a man who frightened easily. He had enlisted in the Terran Space Navy on a dare and had risen to the rank of lieutenant commander. Before he became afflicted with Addison's disease, he had been cited twice for bravery in action.

Before joining the navy he had been a moon pilot, ferrying passengers to and from the moon. He had had a mistress on the moon and one on Earth. Probably if he had not already been in the navy when the Barnard's Star spacecraft sent back photos of the approaching Kus fleet, he would have enlisted without the provocation of a dare. For patriotism had been reborn — only it applied not to any individual race, but to the Earth-race as a whole.

Wishful thinking that the alien visitors might be benign vanished when radio messages arrived on Earth, in which the Kus, employing a language translator, stated their identity and commanded the peoples of Earth to surrender or face annihilation.

At once the nations of Earth began building weapons that the builders hoped would outmatch those of the enemy. But no one believed the forthcoming battle would be easily won, for although it was unlikely the guns with which the Kus ships were equipped would be superior to the new nuclear cannon being installed in the Terran ships, the Kus, like the legendary cowboy who carried his pistols in plain sight upon his hips, might have a derringer up their sleeve.

Hawkins found the Terran fleet on a small plain about three kilometers beyond the basin in which his scoutship stood.

The fleet had been in orbit around Earth; now it was positioned in the same way the Kus fleet was. There were fourteen ships, and, like the Kus ships, the Terran ships lent the impression they were still in orbit.

The sun, slightly past meridian, beat down upon plastic hulls and plastic guns. The bubble covering the flagship's observation deck was similar to the one covering the observation deck of the Kus fleet's flagship and scintillated no less brightly in the sunlight.

Apparently no one had disembarked, for he saw no sign of life. But surely someone on the observation deck must have spotted him by this time. He pounded down the slope, waving his arms. He had no fear of being mistaken for a Kus, for an X-ray camera on board one of the unmanned spacecraft had revealed that the Kus were crocodilian.

When he reached the flagship, he saw that its lock was open, and he was certain then that he had been seen. Climbing the boarding ladder, he stepped into the lock. He frowned then, for the inner door was closed. He pushed it open and stepped into a corridor. Puzzled that no one had as yet accosted him, he proceeded along the corridor to the companionway that led to the observation deck and he ascended the steps.

Several of the ship's officers were standing on the deck. They appeared to be in conversation, although nothing was being said. One of them was the admiral. Hawkins hurried over to him and stood at attention before him. He did not seem to be aware of Hawkins's presence. Neither did any of the other officers.

"Sir," Hawkins said, "my ship was drawn through a warp, too. And it, too, turned into plastic. The same thing happened to the Kus fleet. Sir, what can be the cause of all this?"

The admiral did not bat an eye. Hawkins had never met him, but he had seen him from afar. He was a tall, cold man, a veteran of two wars. A ladder of multicolored ribbons adorned his chest. His sky-blue

uniform was spotless. The creases of his trousers were as sharp as razor blades. His face was at once Slavic and Waspish — stolid yet stern. His eyes were china blue.

Hawkins touched his chest, gave a slight push. The admiral fell upon his back. His arms and legs retained the same position they had held when he was standing up.

Hawkins pushed all the other officers over.

He knew that if he went through the rest of the ship, he would find that the other members of the crew had also turned into life-size dolls. That he would find identical complements if he explored the other Terran ships.

And he knew that if he explored the Kus ships, he would find complements of crocodilian life-size dolls.

Why hadn't *he* turned into a doll?

But that wasn't the right question. The right question was why anyone had. And why two spacefleets and a scoutship had turned into Brobdingnagian toys.

**H**awkins left the flagship and set out for the distant escarpment. From its eminence he should be able to obtain a better view of his new milieu.

With each step he took, he prayed that if what he was experiencing was a drug-induced delusion, it would go away.

He crossed basins, climbed ridges, circled dunelike hills. As he neared the escarpment, he headed for a point where the sand had drifted almost to its crest. He started up the long slope. He now had a slight shadow to keep him company.

As he grew closer to the escarpment, he saw how smooth its face was. And when, after completing his climb, he touched the surface, he knew he was touching wood. He was astonished — the more so when, glancing to his left and then to his right, he saw that the face was plumb.

He was high enough now to reach the escarpment's edge. He got a good grip on it and scrambled to the top. Rising to his feet, he found himself standing on a flat wooden surface about three meters wide. He looked back the way he had come, saw a waste of sand, and in the far, far distance a straight rim that looked like the upper part of another escarpment. He made out the two spacefleets and the dark dot of his scoutship, and saw the body of water he had noticed earlier. It appeared to be a small lake.

He looked in the opposite direction. The wooden wall — for that was what it was — dropped dizzily down to a vast green plain. He saw trees in the distance — trees whose height exceeded that of the wall — and beyond them he made out a structure at least six kilometers wide and at least three kilometers high.

He felt a wind. It was little more than a breeze, and discrete from the bellowslike wind that came from the direction of the mountain. He smelled green grass and meadow flowers.

Far to his left, in the direction of the mountain, he made out a slope that led down from the wall to the plain. I've come this far, he thought, so why not go farther? Certainly there was no point in returning to his ship. He would descend the slope and walk across the plain to the distant structure. Intelligent beings of some kind must be living in it. If they did not prove to be hostile, perhaps he could find out from them where he was.

He began walking along the top of the wall toward the slope. As he grew closer, he saw that it had been created by a huge pile of objects that had collapsed against the side of the wall. For a while he could not make out what any of the objects were, and as he walked he toyed with the idea of gaining the plain by leaping from one to another on his way down. But the notion died in his mind when he got close enough to identify some of the topmost ones, and he froze to a halt as the ramifications of what lay before him turned the red corpuscles of his blood into particles of ice.

A plastic Genghis Khan sat astride a plastic horse, even though the horse lay on its side. A plastic Teddy Roosevelt sat astride another plastic horse, and both he and the horse were upside down. A plastic MiG-15 lay between the two stalwart warriors.

A plastic Cleopatra and a plastic Antony were clasped in hot embrace between a plastic William Jennings Bryan and a plastic Cadillac. The stern of an oil tanker protruded grotesquely from the middle of the enormous pile.

He saw a plastic Amerind carrying a plastic tomahawk. The life-size doll lay on its side. He saw a plastic pope.

Farther down the surface of the pile, he saw a plastic Sumerian with one leg broken off.

People and things, things and people. All made of the same sad substance as his ship, all thrown away as though whoever had been playing with them had grown bored.

Representative pieces of the whole.

He raised his eyes to the mountain. He had thought he saw it move. The bellowslike wind had grown louder.

Yes, the mountain *had* moved. And it had grown higher. He saw that there were little trees growing on its crest. It began moving toward him on columnlike legs. The lower slopes had separated from the mountain proper and become massive arms.

Lines from the *Rubdiyat* ran through his mind:

*We are no other than a moving row  
Of visionary Shapes that come and go  
Round with this Sun-illuminated Lantern held  
In Midnight by the Master of the Show.*

In the beginning, he thought, there had been a game called *Sumer*. Gradually it had grown into a game called *Earth*.

Now it had become a game called *Space*.

He was running now. Back along the top of the wall. Back down the sand drift into the box.

As he ran, a question repeated itself again and again in his mind: How had he broken the bonds and escaped from the Grand Illusion?

The fact that he was a representative piece meant nothing. In common with the other members of the human race, he was a visionary shape.

He should still be in his ship, in space.

Thunder. The mountain's footsteps. A dark cloud. The mountain's arm.

He ran through the shadow of the cloud. In the direction of his ship. Why? he asked himself. Why am I running toward my ship? It's only a plastic toy. It can't lift me from the ground.

But he knew the answer. His ship was the only place he had to go.

A smaller cloud. Descending from the sky. The mountain's hand. You are a godchild playing a new game. You used to sail your ships on a mud puddle you thought of as the Seven Seas. Now you sail them in space. Bored with the game, you doze off, and while you are sleeping one of your pieces comes to life. What do you do?

Hawkins knew what he would do. He would pick up the piece and take it apart to find out what made it tick. Or perhaps, in a fit of anger, swat it like a fly.

He could not see the monstrous hand, but he knew it was close above him. He pounded the last few meters to his ship. He climbed the boarding ladder and dived into the lock and closed the door. The door gave forth a dull, metallic sound as it sealed itself; simultaneously the ship shimmered. He opened the inner door and stepped into the control room. Looking into the viewscreen, he saw not sand but space.

Hawkins took the small container of pills the medman had given him and threw it into the disposal. He had radioed the Terran flagship that the Kus fleet had resumed its Earthward course and now he was on his way back home.

He had put in a bad half hour, but at length everything had straightened itself out in his mind.

Human history was not a succession of cruel and childish games.

There was no such world as a planet of the gods.

The only warp he had been through was a warp in his own mind.

Tiredness touched him, and he put the ship on automatic and headed for his bunk. Before he strapped himself onto it, he took off his shoes. When he did so he saw that they were partly filled with sand.