

THE WOMB

DAMIEN BRODERICK

Damien Broderick is one of Australia's most important and well-known science fiction writers. He is the recipient of four Australian Literature Board/Fund writing fellowships, four Ditmar Awards, and one Aurealis Award. His radio play *Schrödinger's Dog* was Australia's entry for the 1995 Prix Italia international radio drama award. He holds a PhD from Deakin University and is an Associate in the Department of English and Cultural Studies at the University of Melbourne. Broderick was a science fiction reviewer for *The Age* during the 1980s and now regularly reviews science books for the *Weekend Australian*.

His novels include *The Dreaming Dragons*, *The Judas Mandala*, *Transmitters*, *The Black Grail*, *Striped Holes*, *The Sea's Furthest End*, *Valencies*, *The White Abacus*, and *Zones* co-authored with Rory Barnes. Some of his stories can be found in the collections *A Man Returned* and *The Dark Between the Stars*. His non-fiction titles include *The Architecture of Bahel Discourses of Literature and Science*, *Reading by Starlight: Postmodern Science Fiction, Theory and Its Discontents*, *The Lotto Effect*, *The Spike*, and *The Last Mortal Generation*. He has also edited a number of anthologies, which include *The Zeitgeist Machine: A New Anthology of Science Fiction*, *Strange Attractors: Original Australian Speculative Fiction*, *Matilda at the Speed of Light: A New Anthology of Australian Science Fiction*, and *Not the Only Planet: SF Stories About Travel*.

In the brilliant and disquietingly archetypal story that follows, Damien Broderick reaches back into his past (see his fascinating afterword) to recapture the yearnings of childhood and investigate our culture's disordered fantasies.

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I

Twice have I stood a beggar
Before the door of God!
Angels, twice descending,
Reimbursed my store.
Burglar, banker, father,

I am poor once more!

— *Emily Dickinson, 1858*

My father despised biographies, but even more (or so he told his followers) he detested movies and novels and invented stories of every kind. “Fiction is the gossip of those who don’t get out much, Rosa,” he told me once, with a smile. No doubt I was curled up with a book at the time. “Purveyed,” he added, sarcastically, “by those who don’t get out at all.” So here I am writing a story, his story, perhaps my story as well, possibly the chronicle of us all. No doubt my father would laugh heartily at this. Will laugh. I don’t know.

My father, after all, is the Rev. Daimon Keith who revealed to us, in the years prior to his second disappearance, that as a youth he had been abducted from the vicinity of a Clayton school playground by small grey aliens. Indeed, Daimon had been taken up into UFOs not just that once, in Australia, at the age of twenty, but from infancy, and over and again. No doubt it was this germinal and outlandish experience that caused him to devote his middle years to the establishment of the Church of Jesus Christ, Time Traveller (or, as the American chapters have it, “Traveler”), and later Scionetics. At last, as his madness grew deeper and more hilarious, its equivocal memory fetched him to the belief that it was his own Nazarene face which the black-eyed aliens had sculpted from a eroded mesa on the surface of Mars, memorialised so ambiguously in the famous 1976 NASA photographs and twenty-two years later so conclusively unmasked, despite his angry blustering, as my father’s fame neared its zenith.

To exist in the shadow — the dark aura, perhaps — of such a father is, you might suppose, inevitably to grow up as a wretch obliged to launch the tale of her own life with details of her father’s name and lunatic obsessions. Do not think to find me out so readily. My life has not been so straightforward, nor is Daimon’s notoriety altogether just. I am a student of narrative, as are we all in these early days of the millennium, fully up to the mark with anxieties of influence. I have every intention of constructing and revising my father’s testament, if only I can find my way to the bottom of it. For now perhaps a sketch must suffice, or a series of arbitrary laminations.

You should know at once that for a long time I understood that he tried to force my mother to have an abortion (or so I was told frequently) and, when she refused in horror, attempted to give me up for adoption three days after my birth, which he would inform his followers had occurred on July 20, 1969, a little after midday, Eastern Australian Time. This, the elderly among you might recall, was the moment Neil Armstrong set his foot upon the Moon, during the first landing by the Apollo astronauts. In fact, I

was not born until the middle of 1975, and the gap serves my father's purposes admirably, for people are always taken by how young I seem. It is a subtly tacit endorsement of his esoteric teachings.

His own birthdate is hardly less notable, for Daimon entered the world — by his own account — on August 6, 1945, within hours of that other Little Boy who squalled into heat and light over Hiroshima.

One last prefatory point: although his family and friends call my father "Deems", a childhood nickname, his proper given name is not pronounced "Demon", as the ignoramuses of the mass media assume, but "Die-moan", in the way of its Greek source. If that vulgar error was an occasion of chagrin for a man of the cloth, even cloth so self-elected and flamboyant as my father's, he never allowed his family to perceive it. His name had been gifted to him from his Scottish grandfather, a classicist of minor note in the Ballarat gold fields, and it means, as you may know already, a kind of indwelling spirit or force of nature. Certainly he became that for his daughter, even as Daimon became convinced that he himself was now infested by illuminations from beyond the present: from beyond the world itself.

For all that, I am not Rosa Keith but Rosa Rosch, named fore and aft by my mother Margaret, the strong-willed woman who stole me away me from his clutches when I was five years old.

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Aboard the Zetan craft

In his dreaming confusion, he knew that it had started again. The musty stench reminded him of mice, the piles and heaps of mouse droppings they'd found in his uncle's empty weekender when they'd gone to Queenscliff for a cheap winter holiday. The bench he lay on was not quite hard, and the long, lighted oblong above his head burned like a pink musk-stick sucked to a piercing sweetness in the vacant eternities of geometry and geography classes. His dry tongue searched his mouth for the absent taste. The brothers would snatch the sweet from his mouth if they found him enjoying it during a lesson. Once, Brother Ronald had literally seized his jaw in one handball-roughened fist and pinched the nerves, forcing the nub of musk-stick out from between his teeth, made him spit it on to the scratched school desk. In the pink darkness, as his heart

accelerated with the fright of being here once again, he felt a quirky grin move his lips, at that memory within a dream, because at least Brother Ronald isn't around to torment him.

Something was standing at his side. Something like a doll formed hastily from putty and not left long enough in the sun, moist and pliant, curvy and dirty white. He could not bring himself to turn and look at it. Yet the disgust he felt seemed, somehow, to come from the creature itself. There was another of them at the foot of the slab, with its blobby head and wraparound eyes, doing something to his left foot. That was hard to understand, because normally he was very ticklish. If one of the guys grabbed his bare foot, he'd go into a girlish paroxysm of giggles and flailing around. The thing down there was fooling with his foot, and it wasn't making him giggle one little bit. Quite the contrary. He felt sick with anxiety, and numb, and heavy in the limbs.

He screamed, then, a hard sharp yelp, as a needle went into the flesh between his big toe and the next toe along.

"Hey! Cut it out!"

In the funny atmosphere, his words hung in his ears like underwater echoes. Had he even spoken?

"Fuck!" The bastard was shoving the fucking needle deeper into his god-damned foot! "Jesus!"

This was unbelievable. Every time he came here they did something like this. And every time he told them how much it hurt, how vehemently he detested their invasion of his private places, but it never made the slightest bit of difference. Never did the faintest bit of good. But they were not cruel, he knew that. The one at his side touched his forehead with a cool tube, it felt like, something glimmery and pale, not metal and not plastic, and it soothed him at once. It took away the pain. No, the pain was still there, but it didn't hurt any more. Did that make any sense? It was like shoving with your tongue at a dead tooth. That baby tooth he'd pried at with his fingers and his tongue for a week and half, deciduous tooth they call it, when he was seven years old. He'd even tried that old trick they tell you about, loads of laughs, cheaper than a visit to the dentist, and you got your lucrative visit from the tooth fairy that much sooner. You tied a piece of string around the loose tooth and attached the end to a door knob, and another kid jerked the door open and out popped your floppy baby tooth. It hadn't worked. It had hurt like blazes, and the string tightened and cut into his gum, and he got his backside tanned when Mum came in from the back yard, drawn by his

yelping and howling, and found him with this bloody string hanging out of his goddamned bleeding gum like he'd been gargling with a tampon or something.

Deliberately, he turned his head and stared at the putty-grey creature at his side.

Look away! the grey thing told him in his mind. Stop staring at me! You know we don't like you looking at us!

He averted his gaze, feeling horribly guilty, as if he'd been caught staring through a crack in the wall into some girl's bathroom while she was taking a pee or something. Which he had done, now that he thought about it, back in that old dairy they'd had in Olive St, Jesus, how incredible, he'd been 11 or 12 and they still ladled out fresh creamy milk into washed bottles you brought from home there to the dairy, right in the middle of the suburbs, well, okay, out on the edge of the metropolitan area, but still. And there were milkman's delivery horses, was that right? Hairy hooped big bastards, sweet natured and much given to shitting placidly and copiously right there in the street. His father made him rush out after they'd been past, carrying a flat-bladed spade and a hessian sack, and scoop up the steaming, heavy-smelling horse crap and bag it for the garden, God, he'd been so embarrassed, none of the neighbours did that, they probably thought his father was a perv of some kind, a manure fancier, maybe they thought we ate it with our milk and white sugar and Weeties.

Get up, the alien told him. We have to go now.

He seemed to float in an amazingly heavy way. They went across the curved brushed-aluminium floor toward the huge curving windows full of stars, and there was a door in the wall but it wasn't actually a door, it wasn't even marked as a door, they went through it without it opening, holy shit! He had just passed through the fucking wall like smoke. No, as if the wall was smoke. Curdled for a moment. Floating. There was that strange stink again. What do these guys eat? With mouths like that, how could they eat anything? Maybe they sucked blood through a straw. And here was that room again, that hallway, full of green-gold tubes in serried ranks. Each was twice the height of a tall man, and inside each there hung a human body, male and female alike, naked, longhaired. Their eyes were closed as if they slept, or were dead. In the green medium they floated, as he floated down the corridor in their midst, and their long hair streamed out from their scalps.

It was too awful to be borne. He squeezed his eyes shut tightly, and looked away.

Good boy, he thought he heard. Do not look. They are just dolls. But he secretly turned his head again and squinted at the ranks of drowned people and his heart squeezed hard and bumped. The tubes were not as large as he'd supposed, not by a long chalk. They were much closer than he had imagined, and they were smaller than the grey dwarfs leading him in their midst. They were hardly larger than test tubes, if the truth be known, and the creatures floating in them — pale, stringy haired, barely sexed — were like fetuses, limbs slightly curved, bobbing in the liquid that preserved them. The horrid little things were less alien than the grey bastards, but certainly less human than anyone he'd ever seen. In fact they looked like some kind of unholy hybrid, some vile intermixing of the two species. He wanted to scream or vomit or reach out and tear things apart in his rage, but he could not move, and the wall parted without opening and he was in his bed again.

He lay staring at the familiar ceiling for a moment, while the pounding of his heart subsided, and waited for sound to resume. A car went by in the street, throwing the edges of its headlights through the closed louvres, and he looked fearfully around the room through slitted eyes without opening them properly. The putty-grey creature stood there still, on the other side of the bed.

As always, something prevented him from screaming blue murder and waking his parents. Anyway, they had to know about this. Jesus, it had been going on as long as he could remember. Two years old, three? Up in the sky, in the blue gushing light beam, drawn toward the clouds and the shining disk, and his parents sitting frozen on the grass in the back yard, beer glasses in their hands, smiling at each other. They hadn't helped. Or was that when he was six, just back from the hospital after getting his tonsils out? There'd been a polio scare that year, and they'd kept him in the private hospital to see he was okay, and during the night the grey Harvesters had come and lifted him and three of the other kids out of the ward. Nobody ever did anything to stop them, not your parents and not your teachers, nor even the brisk nurses or the doctors, the human doctors, that is. Adults were useless, really. They'd let you get fucked up the arse in front of their very eyes and they wouldn't lift a finger to help.

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20 July 1999, San Diego

My father, Commodore the Reverend Daimon Keith of the spacetime cruiser *Zygote*, sits at ease behind a desk of audiovisual controls. Scionetics devotees face him, cross-legged on cushions. A Saint-Saens symphony, rendered soft and luminous for New Age sensibilities, fills the room's acoustic background like an odour of cinnamon. At the back of my balding, silver-haired father, on a huge bank of high definition TV screens, a ceaseless montage lifts the hearts of his followers, placing Deems in his proper context: sweet pale Australian sky with little white merino sheep clouds, rust-red outback dunes, the soaring, ancient curve of Uluru like a stone fallen from heaven, the Moon's cratered surface seen from the window of Armstrong's plummeting Lunar Excursion Module thirty years ago to the day, deep heaven itself captured by the Hubble telescope, black as eternity, roaring with a violence of stars and quasar plumes a hundred or a thousand light years in extent. Deems is clad appropriately in his commodore's uniform, silver jump suit cinched at the waist, emblazoned on shoulder and breast with the curiously aching symbols he and his fellow abductees have seen etched into the curved walls of UFO operating theatres. When he speaks to his followers, though, there is no hint of grandiosity or vainglory. This is a man among men and women, a seeker after truth, a witness to the incredible among us.

"Friends," he says quietly, and his relaxed words are captured and borne lightly by hidden speakers to every ear, "let's talk today about one of the oldest questions of philosophy: the meaning of life. You'll be relieved to learn that I have an answer to this question," he says with a smile, to a ripple of quiet amusement, "although it would not please the philosophers who first sought its resolution, or the dreary men and women of today's academies who lack the wisdom or even the curiosity to ask it. I can give you a complete and provable four-word answer to that question, What is the meaning of human life? But my concise reply might merely shock and disturb you, friends, unless we first go carefully through the reasoning that leads us to this revelation — the revelation of the grey harvesters who brought me to its understanding."

"Tell us anyway," cries a fervent voice.

"We're up for it, man," cries another.

Deems gazes at them sardonically. "Really? You actually think you can handle this revelation?"

"Sure."

A little voice pipes, "You'll help us understand it," and everyone laughs, friendly and enthusiastic.

"I will indeed, Sandra," Daimon says with a smile. He leans forward, putting his silver elbows on the desk. "Very well, let's take a chance here. What is the meaning of life? The philosophers and theologians and shamans and public relations flacks struggled with this one for thousands of years. I'm here to tell you, friends, that their answers aren't worth a pinch of shit. We can forget them. The speculations of Plato and Aquinas and Kant about the meaning of human life were exactly as informed and interesting as their speculations about nuclear physics. It's not just that they were wrong about everything that science has since revealed to us. It's not just that their guesses were childishly primitive. No, friends, they weren't even asking the right questions. Which is why the answer to that big question, that ultimate question, seems so hard for us to accept. Until we see through it, and through the question. Here's the answer, friends."

He pauses. They crane forward. Surely they have heard this before, know it as their catechism, but the thrill never leaves them, the burst of creepy shock, that exultant shock of freedom and transgression and sheer good humour in Daimon's UFO revelation.

"What is the meaning of human life? It is the same answer the wise scientist gives if asked, What is the meaning of the sun? What is the meaning of a tidal wave that smashes a hundred thousand suffering people caught in its path? What is the meaning of the sky's darkness at night? What is the meaning of a joyful orgasm that begins a new life?"

He stands up abruptly, and the great screen at his back goes scarlet, a shocking explosion of blood or sunset, and then to total black. In the centre of the void, a tiny flower of piercing light opens. Its petals unfold. It is the universe in the first moments of creation, the Big Bang itself, the universe uttered into existence. Organ chords carry the numinous message. Daimon stands before them, his silvery suit catching light from the screen. He is exultant, and he stares at them with absolute conviction.

"What is the meaning of human life?"

"There is no meaning."

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IV

July, 2005, Los Angeles

After my mother was slaughtered, butchered and eaten by Valentine the guru and his followers, I spent the next ten years submitting at night to physical and sexual abuse by members of Harmonic Resonance and studying tensely at a cult school during the day. This is hardly the place to dilate upon that atrocious decade, which I blocked from conscious memory until my chance encounter with Benjamin Thompson, Daimon's adopted son.

By 2003, my step-brother was an established therapist in the USA specialising in deep recovery techniques, having broken some years earlier with the Church of Jesus Christ, Time Traveler (as it was known on the West Coast) after my father denounced his earlier claims and slid the movement's substantial holdings into a Malaysian account for the newly announced Scionetics organisation.

My own powers of recall were in terrible shape, of course, for I had developed a barrage of dissociative personality disorders to permit me to cope, however inadequately, with my rough handling by the Harmonic Resonance cultists. It was my belief, until Ben opened up the hideous can of worms under my skull, that Margaret Rosch had died in an automobile accident six months after our arrival in the United States, and that I had been adopted by her ditzy friend Katie, whom I called "Mom" from that day hence.

The most curious aspect of this hidden life is that Benjamin had no slightest inkling of our relationship, or of the type of banal horror he would unmask when the hypnotic probing began in his comfortable Los Angeles office. From all the indicator instruments I filled out tediously, a barrage of Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventories, Hopkins Image Recognition Test cards, Barber Suggestibility Indices and so on, he had expected that I was a prime candidate for alien abductee of the year.

It was not true; to the best of my knowledge I have never been visited by the grey gynaecologists, never gone into their high laboratories for probing and ovary pillage. I'm sure that's true. When I came out of trance, Benjamin sat looking at me with a very pale and bemused expression. His obese black nurse busied herself with the Mac voice-activated transcriber, a machine prone to lexical ambiguity unless watched closely, and her matronly presence protected both of us from any possible subsequent forensic disputes.

I could remember little of my hypnotic testimony. "Was I abducted by a UFO?" I asked my new therapist hopefully. Anything was better than this awful *not knowing*.

He coughed, and coughed again. Something seemed to be stuck in his throat, and I doubt that it was an alien implant.

"Your name is not Angel," he told me, evading my question, "it's Rosa. Rosa Rosch."

No, my lost life did not instantly flood back into my conscious awareness like a dam bursting. I looked at him as if he were the one with the mental problem.

"What?"

Benjamin sat where he was and extended his beautiful hand to within 20 centimetres of my own. "May I hold your hand?"

I gave my permission. His grip was warm and firm, if, I thought, a trifle damp. He was anxious. His eyes darted about my face.

"Rosa, you are my step-sister."

I withdrew my hand and got smartly off the couch. "Send me your bill," I said coldly, making for the door. The nurse somehow got in my way, and Benjamin reached past her and took my hand again, increasing his grip.

"They did terrible things to you, Angel," he said. "They took away your mother, and your name, and your history, and your peace of mind. But at least they were not able to harm the rest of your family. We thought you were gone for good, Rosa." There were genuine tears in his eyes. "If you wish to see your father, I can arrange a meeting."

I was thunderstruck.

"My father? Don't be silly, Dr Thompson, my father died many years ago."

"No," Benjamin told me, with a smile, "your father is alive and kicking."

"Who is he?" I forced myself to ask, through lips anaesthetised with fear and hope. This man was clearly out of his tree. Dr Ben placed credence, after all, in the routine abduction and pillage of a tenth of the

population of these United States, so he was patently unhinged. But then I was slowly remembering, through a numb, shaking haze, the details of the regression: that my mother had been hacked up and stir-fried by sweet-natured people, my own extended mystical family, who claimed to be vegetarians.

“Your father is quite a famous fellow,” Benjamin told me, with a certain ambiguous satisfaction. It is hard to dislike Deems, after all. “The Reverend Daimon Keith, founder of Scionetics.”

We had not been permitted to read the *National Enquirer* at Harmony, or indeed watch vulgar television programs, and after my escape I had never gotten into the habit. I didn't have a clue what he was talking about.

* * * *

V

August 1970, inside the UFO

He opened his eyes, and it was happening again. Were they under the bed, hiding beneath the fall of the blankets? Were they peeking at him from the crack of the closet's open door? Were they lurking behind the door? No. The door was closed, it was deep in the middle of the night. Everyone else in the house was asleep. He wanted to huddle into the comforting warmth of body-heated sheets and covers, but somehow they had been pulled away. It was cold. He felt so cold that he was sure he must be shivering, but his legs and arms were so heavy that he could not even shiver. They were standing there next to his bed, looking at him with their huge dark eyes.

“Go away,” he said, wanting to scream.

They were just out of view, at the edges of his vision. Were there four of them, or five? The grey doctor was one of them, he could tell that much. They would do things to him again. Within his chilled, heavy flesh, his heart thudded. One thin hand came up over the edge of the bed and touched his own bare hand with a metal rod. He yelped, once, and then his heart slowed, calmed.

“What?” he asked sluggishly. “What?”

He was to go with them once more. They meant to put him on their

ship and invade his body again. Despite the effects of the rod, his blood seemed to cool even further. His stomach contracted in fear. Light poured suddenly from the wall between his bedroom and the backyard. The small grey people, dirty-white people, big-eyed bugs without mouths or noses passed into the light with jerky, spasmodic steps. Like frames of a badly-edited old film. Jump cuts. Merging into each other like some sort of overlap. He was in the air and moving into the blue light.

It was so cold. The light was gone. He lay tilted on his side somehow, the blood draining into the left side of his face and body. The slab was hard, unyielding. Yes, they had brought him into the round room again. He recognised the heavy stink of the place. What do they eat? he thought blurrily. What kind of awful crap do they suck up through those lipless little mouths? The grey doctor touched his forehead with a needle. It was sharp, long, glinting in the dimness. The doctor pushed it hard into his skull, like a drill, and it hurt. It was agonising! He could not believe that they were doing this to him again. The sadistic bastards. Don't they know anything about pain? He told himself that he would teach them about pain if they let him loose, if they withdrew this sickening heaviness from his arms and legs. Tears flooded his closed eyes.

“Why are you resisting?” asked the one he called Klar-2.

“It hurts so much,” he whimpered. The needle came out of his cranium now and, without cleaning it, the grey doctor put it up into his left nostril. A blob of blood and grey goo clung to the needle as it went deep into his nose. He wished he could faint, or just die. The pain was excruciating, and they would not let him scream or turn away. The needle drilled and drilled, and a stench of burning entered the whole of his head like a ponderous cloud. Out came the needle, the drill, and one of the others handed Klar-2 a long flexible tube with a three-clawed grip at its snout. The grey doctor pushed the new thing up into his nostril. Light burst through his head, and for a moment he did lose consciousness. Despite the torpor they had induced in him, he convulsed in agony as the device came out of his nose. Blearily, he saw that its tiny claw now held a small burred sphere. Klar-2 held it up for general inspection. A drop of blood fell from the device. The grey doctor's eyes were huge and dark, a brown almost black. Throbbing, burning pain hung in his head.

Two of the small aliens took him by the hand, one on each side. The slab rotated until it stood vertical, and then, to his horror and disbelief, it swivelled forward another thirty or forty degrees. He dangled above them, unsupported. This was not free-fall, not a region of the ship without gravity. From time-lapsed moment to moment he felt dizzily that he might fall and

smash his nose — his tender, brutalised nose! — on the segmented metal deck. Instead he somehow remained stuck to the hard surface while they inspected him with their gadgets, their stupid toys. He realised suddenly that he was so cold because they had stripped him naked. At the same moment, one of them touched his penis with its machine. To his horror, he instantly got an erection. His rage increased.

“You bastards! Leave me alone, you shits.”

They stepped aside into shadows, and the slab whirled back to the horizontal. He lay, heavy, immobile, with his ridiculous hard-on sticking straight up at the lens or light or whatever it was on the ceiling. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a seamless doorway open in the wall to his left, close again. A woman in a silvery cloak and long stringy pale hair came into the chamber, and the aliens did their jump-cut retreat as she approached the slab.

His humiliation was complete. The woman was not quite human, but there was no telling his fucking mindless dick that. It quivered, a randy jolt that was not quite an ejaculation. He remembered that they had done this before. They had brought some kind of tube over and connected it to his penis as if he were a prize bull, and he'd spurting his jism into it even as he had roared his furious rejection of them. Everything blurred. Cliché or not, this had to be a nightmare, a dream, the sort of fantasy you get when you've gone over the edge, cracked up; a stupid, unbelievable image dredged from horror movies.

Something light and cool touched his right eyelid, and he realised that he had been lying hunched with his eyes tightly clamped shut. The pale-haired woman regarded him without expression. She touched her own garment twice, at throat and groin, and it fell from her. Somehow, crumpled, it flew across the room and stuck to the side of the chamber.

She pushed him off the slab.

The metal floor struck his shoulder, and his left ankle clipped the hard edge of the slab as he fell. Emotions collided inside him: outrage and hilarity. He lay on the slick floor, rubbing his ankle, and started to laugh. He pushed himself to a standing position, conscious of his absurd hard-on, and looked over his stinging shoulder at the woman.

She had got herself on to the slab and lay there looking expressionlessly at the ceiling lens. Naked and unpleasant as a fish, she was stretched out like someone expecting a disagreeable medical

examination. The grey doctor touched his arm, and he jumped. Where had that bastard come from?

You will give her a baby, Klar-2 instructed him in the weird way they had, without opening his slitty mouth.

“Fuck you!”

There was perhaps the faintest tinge of ironic amusement in the alien’s gaze.

He looked back at the woman. At least she was human. Sort of. Her hair was long and unappealing, Alice in Wonderland grown up a bit. On the face of it she should have been attractive, but something about her rigid presence repelled him. Her breasts were small, but sagged a little. Her public hair was thick, untrimmed. She saw him looking at her and opened her legs, lifting her knees. The grey doctor gave him a push in the back.

“Forget it!”

But a kind of sexual pulse passed through him, a perverse pleasure at this insanely obscene spectacle. What, they abduct you into a fucking flying saucer and stick needles up your nose and drill your brain, and then they expect you to root some hybrid alien? Jesus! His erection could not make up its mind. Klar-2 struck him more firmly in the small of his back, and the lights on the control patches around the walls began to fizz and flicker. He had not noticed any lights earlier, or any control surfaces.

The slab was now twice its previous width, a narrow double bed for a celestial wedding. Christ! He approached the woman hesitantly, and let his hand fall on her ribcage. His erection was sagging. Her flesh had never seen sunlight and seemed slightly moist. With a sigh, he clambered on to the slab and lay next to her. There was no response. He played for a moment with her stringy hair, touched one small nipple briefly, sent his fingers down between her legs. She failed to react to his caresses. He licked his fingers and tried again. A sour, faintly rank odour rose from her body as her cunt moistened. He hoisted himself dutifully over her supine body and tried to enter her, but his erection had subsided.

To his amazement, he found himself muttering, “I’m sorry.”

The woman looked at him, looked away.

“Just a moment.”

He tried to kiss her, and her mouth remained closed and unresponsive. Humiliated, he lay like a log on her.

“It might help if I knew your name,” he said.

Cinder, she told him. Had he heard her correctly? A cold demon from hell? The Cinderella of the flying saucers? Was he the prince, then, trying to fit his foot into her glass slipper? Foot: ha! Inch was more like it. But her name fired something in him. His hard-on half returned. He touched her, touched himself, forced himself somehow into her. The grey doctor was watching them with his awful black owl’s eyes, and nudged him at the base of the spine with a device. Whimpering, he came in a thin trickle.

He lay exhausted and sick at heart on the slab as she got carefully to her feet and dressed again in the silver garment. “Why won’t you tell me anything about yourselves?” he asked bitterly. “Who the hell are you people? How dare you use us like this?”

We have transferred our souls, bodies and minds into computer implementation and moved millions of light-years back into your time dimension, the Cinder creature told him coldly. Our command centre is in another dimension beyond the supposed god you call the sun. We are millions of light-years backwards. The voice you are hearing has been sent billions of light-years ahead.

“I don’t understand,” he said, sitting up and hugging himself. He felt sticky and abused. “What is this bullshit? ‘Light-years’ isn’t time, it’s a distance. A schoolchild could tell you that.”

In the singularity metric, the grey doctor informed him, time and space are unitary.

“You mean a black hole?”

One little point collapses all dimensions, the woman told him. Powers gather through that point. It is the main channel for tuning into worlds with greater probability.

“Dimensions? Like, time and space? You mean time and space vanish when you go through a black hole? Is that how you get here?”

The accumulation of time does not vanish. You must understand that space with an infinite rotational energy tensor excludes time. We gather it in

and put it to work. Our devices are using up time.

He did not understand. He sat there on the slab, downcast and tired and sad, and waited for them to send him back in their beams of light.

* * * *

VI

FILM MAKER SNATCHED BY LITTLE GREY MEN

By JUDITH FRIPP (Melbourne, Tuesday)

In 1952, Californian guru and cafe handy man George Adatnski snapped a flying saucer and met the ski instructor from Venus who drove it. In 1975, timber worker Travis Walton was "abducted" by aliens for five days. Two years ago, Australian pilot Frederick Valentich vanished at sea after his plane was buzzed by a UFO, and hasn't been seen since. Now it's the turn of slick ad man and director Damon Keith, 35 (photo at right), to vacation on Venus.

Anyway, that's the explanation from his step-son, Ben Thompson, who watched them take Damon in a blue beam of light. Ben's real father is the famous cinematographer Vic Thompson, now working in Europe and the US with Peter Weir and Fred Schepisi among other ex-pat luminaries of local cinema. His worried mother Zelda, the former Mrs Thompson, is now married to Damon. Confused?

The vanished Mr Keith is known in Melbourne's bohemian arts circles for some entertaining pranks played when he was a comic turn and anti-Vietnam activist at Carlton's La Mama and Pram Factory theatres.

St Kilda police were not commenting on the bizarre abduction claim, although they stated that Mr Keith had been listed routinely as a missing person. By a strange coincidence, Mr Keith recently returned from California, after an unsuccessful search for his daughter. Five-year-old Rosa was allegedly taken to the USA without his permission by her unmarried mother, Ramona M. Roach.

An officer warned that anybody making a false statement to police could be charged and prosecuted. No UFOs were booked in the bayside suburb for exceeding the speed of light on the rainy Saturday night.

Some late night disco revellers made independent reports of a “bright disc” hovering below the clouds near Luna Park. A local astronomer said this was “almost certainly” a shooting star, or meteor.

Ben Thompson, 18, admits he has been a “flying saucer nut” since childhood, when he believes he himself was contacted by creatures from outer space. He can even tell you where they come from — a planet called Zeeta Reticule!

Asked when he expects his step-father to return from his Spielberg adventure (remember Close Encounters of the Third Kind?), the second-year psychology student said he feared for Mr Keith’s life. “They killed Captain Mandell,” he said, referring to a famous jet pilot who crashed while chasing what US authorities say was a weather balloon.

And who are these little grey men? Aren’t they meant to be green? A common error, says Ben. The UFO guys (and sexy gals!) come in plenty of shapes and colours, but strangely enough hardly any of them are green.

Anyone sighting Mr Keith on the ground is asked to contact St Kilda police, who will notify his concerned family.

* * * *

VII

4 January 2000, Langley interrogation unit 8

Despite the clamour and frenzy caused by my father’s second disappearance, he had not been abducted yet again by the Zetans. On the contrary, he seethed in a massively secure apartment (call it a cell and you would not be far wrong) in Maryland, USA. Every night he was fed well, given access to a superior choice of cable first release movies, permitted to swim or exercise in a compact but comprehensive gymnasium, all in the company of one pert young woman or another, each of whom made it clear that as part of her duties she was happy to stay the night in his king-size bed. Every morning he was fed an ample breakfast and then taken to a stark white room and attached to myographs and other stress-indicator devices, and asked by a fresh team his opinions about UFOs, world politics, and the meaning of life.

“I’m writing a new book,” he told his fourth pair of interrogators peevisly. “Look in my notebook, there’s a directory called *The Zygote Paradigm*.”

A red-headed CIA scientist with a kindly expression flicked through his notebook menu and accessed a file. “I have it here, Mr Keith. Do you actually expect us to believe this?”

“I couldn’t give a flying fuck. Believe what you like.”

Nobody slapped him heavily about the chops. The monitoring equipment did not fry his nerves with an overdose of amps. Spiegle, a fat psychiatrist who hardly spoke during the first couple of hours of their interview, sat back in his easy chair, scratched his well-tailored belly, sighed. Tanner, the red-haired man, said, “Mr Keith, if what you claim is true, this is the most momentous news since the discovery of the wheel.”

My father stared at him, and then away, drolly, to an imaginary or perhaps a hidden camera. He knew that much already.

“Tell us about their propulsion system.”

“Do you know how a bicycle derailleur gear system works?”

“What?”

“Have you ever ridden a bike?”

“Is this one of your cracker-barrel parables, Mr Keith?”

“I’m an Australian, Dr Tanner,” my father told him. “If you’re going to insult me, you might at least use an Australian epithet. Ask me if I’m pissing in your pocket, for example. Ask me if I’m bullshitting you. Don’t bother, I’m not. It’s true, every word, and if you don’t believe me you can check with Sir Lindsay Taggard.”

Incredibly, they had it on file. “The public servant you hoaxed back in April, 1972? I don’t think he’d give you a sterling reference, Mr Keith.”

“Call me Daimon, for Christ’s sake. Call me Deems. We’re old pals by now, aren’t we?” He had never seen them before this morning, nor had the previous pairs of interrogators shown their faces once they’d left the room.

“What *about* bike gears?”

“Have you ridden one lately? A trail bike, say, with a lovely little set of ten or twelve gears to get you up the side of the mountain.”

“Not lately, but yes. So?”

“How do the derailleurs work?”

“Why, they — There’s a sprocket, and the chain — I don’t know. Is that what you’re saying? That we leave that kind of detail to the mechanic in the store?”

“That’s what I’m saying. It’s metric defects, and beyond that they send it back under warranty.”

The psychiatrist eased forward, lit a cigarette, blew its smoke carefully away from Daimon. “Sorry, I know you hate this, but I get stressed, okay? And we’re paying for this place, Daimon. Why do you called them ‘Zetans’ when you know they couldn’t possibly be from Zeta Reticuli?”

Deems smiled at him with admiration. “I thought you were the strong silent type. Are you telling me that Betty Hill invented her star map?”

This was an old, old story in UFO lore. When Barney Hill and his wife were kidnapped by the grey gynaecologists, Betty was shown a holographic map of linked stars. Several years later a school teacher named Marjory Fish painstakingly built a scale model of the sun-like stars within 65 light years of Earth, and peered at it until she found a configuration closely matching Betty’s hypnotic reproduction of the alien map.

The red-haired physicist snapped down the screen of his notebook. “You dealt with this Zeta crap yourself in that dumb Jesus book of yours, Deems. Fish would have done just as well if she’d turned Hill’s dots upside down and hooked the lines together that way. Besides, the Zeta Reticuli binaries are too young and gravitationally destabilising to have habitable planets.”

My father said happily, “I love it when I see you buggers bite. ‘Zetan’ is a coinage of my own. It has nothing to do with the Fish map. See, the stuff the UFO aliens are built out of is cosmological dark matter, ‘Zed-nought’ weakly interacting particles. I suppose you illiterate Americans would say ‘Zee-zero’. That’s why they live near the core of the Earth where

the gravity is nice and cosy. So they're Zed-Terrans — Zetans, okay?"

While the physicist had no ready reply to this, the psychiatrist was clearly disappointed; he had expected better of a man of my father's evident intelligence. "I see. So you subscribe to the Hollow Earth theory?"

Daimon was disappointed in return.

"Jesus, Spiegle, use your fucking ears. If the Earth was hollow, why would gravity-eaters choose to live there?"

The physicist winked at his colleague. "He's right, Leo. If his aliens are made of WIMPs or even WILPs, they'd sink straight down to the middle of the earth. Or the sun, for that matter. Do they live on the sun, Daimon?"

"In the sun, Tanner. Why else do you think every culture in history has worshipped the sun and the stars?"

"Well, light and warmth might have something to do with it, don't you think?"

"Uh huh, sure." My father got up and went to the nice little kitchen, where an espresso machine burbled quietly. He pulled the handle and steamy coffee spurted. "Anyone else while I'm up?"

Tanner raised his arm. "And some cookies."

"What are WILPs?" murmured the psychiatrist.

"WIMPS are weakly interacting massive particles," the physicist muttered back, "and WILPs are weakly interacting light particles. Not to be confused with photons, which are just light particles." He smirked, obscurely pleased with himself.

"The Zetans are the closest thing we can conceive to spirits," Deems told them, carrying his coffee back into the bleak room, a tall pile of biscuits balanced precariously. "So you see, Heaven turns out to be there in both directions — down below, where the priests told us Hell was, and up above, in the stars."

"You think these aliens are sort of like ghosts?" Spiegle asked grudgingly, "discarnate human souls?"

Daimon laughed out loud, a trifle hysterically.

“No, you don’t have a soul, Spiegle,” he said, sputtering his coffee. “Neither do you, Tanner. Sorry.”

“Oh, I see, only you gifted UFO abductees have souls, right?”

“No, you fuck-wit. Did they lock your brains up when they gave you this damned jailer’s job? Of course I don’t have a soul, I’m an adult. Do I look like a first trimester foetus to you?”

The psychiatrist seemed taken aback. He opened his mouth, thought better of it, mused in silence. My father ate his chocolate cookie. Spiegle said slowly, “And that’s why the occupants look like pre-term humans? They’re neotenised, is that it? They remain somehow in the human foetal stage, but develop into a different kind of adulthood. Maybe sexless, even.”

“Exactly. They are our children. Without us, there wouldn’t be any of them.”

“Our children grow up and become us,” the physicist pointed out uneasily.

“Not all of them,” Deems said. “Not those that miscarry in the womb. Not the abortions. Not the ones the Zetans engender and pilfer from the uterus of an abducted woman. And there’s a lot of it going around, trust me. Put your wife under hypnosis and ask her. Or your daughters.”

Both interrogators looked back at him without noticeable emotion, although there was the faintest tinge of abhorrence in the physicist’s voice. “So. UFO aliens are the souls of the aborted.”

“To be precise, they’re the WILP complexity-correlates of the human foetal central nervous system,” Daimon told them, as he had told the others like them during the past week. Nobody listened. Nothing he said seemed to get cross-indexed from one interrogation team to the next. Someone further up the chain of command was insulating this knowledge. And who could wonder at it? This was appalling news, after all. This was diabolical news. This, clearly, was why the truth about UFOs had never been made public, and never would, not by the political and spiritual princes of the world. The Zetans, in one grotesque and illuminating revelation, had snatched away the foundations of human self-esteem, aspiration, had snatched away meaning itself.

“This is insane,” the physicist said angrily. “You’re telling us that

another kind of evolution is going on, parallel to the universe of quarks and leptons and photons and gravitons. And you want us to accept that the sorry accidents of reproduction, the genetic waste, the biological excess, the mutations, the discards — that these are the heirs of the Kingdom of God?”

“That’s what your favourite scriptures tell you,” Deems said flatly. He really did not care any longer if they believed him, if they listened, if they paid attention. The grey proctologists would find him, even here under fifteen floors of subterranean steel and concrete, and lift him away to their gassy white operation rooms. The little shits were probably here right now, he thought, sitting in the middle of their air which was the heavy crust of the visible earth, listening in their puzzled way to this dreary exchange between three animals without souls.

“How could an ecology like that evolve before humans invented abortion?” Tanner said, still angry, getting angrier. “Is spiritual progress so swift that they developed their nifty starships in the ten thousand years since the invention of the ... what, Leo? What did the Palaeolithic sluts use to scrape themselves out? Gnawed twigs?”

Unexpectedly, the psychiatrist spoke to him sharply. “Control yourself, Professor Tanner.” Spiegle met Daimon’s gaze steadily. “They taught us in medical school that spontaneous human abortions account for up to eighty percent of all conceptions. I’ve always wondered why a replicating system shaped by evolutionary pressures would be so wasteful of metabolic energy and ecological resources.”

“Well.” Deems shrugged. “The *real* question is, why do so many of us go to term and live our pointless lives? But remnant life does have its useful side, you see. We’re their parents, and they have to keep us on our toes. Darwin was right in his limited way. The cockroaches haven’t beaten us yet in the Red Queen’s Race. Or the retroviruses. All those other creepy little fuckers at the top of the food chain.”

“What Red Queen?”

“He means the evolutionary arms race. One species gets smarter or quicker or more wired, and then all the others have to hustle to keep up in the same spot. My God. Abortions. Negative reincarnation. This is, this is ...” The government’s man looked at him with detestation. “This is techno-gnosticism.”

Deems gave a yell of laughter. “I like that! Techno-gnosticism! I’ll use it in my next book.” Suddenly he hurled his empty coffee cup violently

across the room, where it smashed on a white wall. The fragments lay curled on the tan carpet like thin ceramic fingers. “If you sons of bitches ever let me out of here.”

* * * *

VIII

*From Rev. Daimon Keith, The Scionetic Paradigm,
Chapter 13, “The Meaning of Life”, Los Angeles:
Jerome Tarcher, 2002.*

Perhaps by this point some of you will have a few doubts about the truth of what I have written, or even about my sanity! Despite widespread reports of UFO abductions, despite the eerily common elements recorded in hundreds of cases world-wide, many people continue to attribute this testimony to fraud, hysteria, substance abuse or mental breakdown. Some psychiatric specialists believe the experience is caused by a brain disorder known as “transient temporal lobe dysfunction”.

I have no argument with these sceptics, for I spent several years examining such explanations myself. Certainly I was not eager to believe in the truth of my dreams of UFO abduction, or even to take literally the dozens of hours of careful hypnotic retrieval of those terrible ordeals. Even when I came to understand that these memories were largely accurate, were not fantasies or confabulations, or masks for childhood sexual abuse, I resisted the message of the Harvesters. Who wants to face the dismal fact that human life is meaningless? What kind of stoical stalwart can deal, day after bleak day, with the awful news that we all — child and adult, felon and saint — have no more significance in the darkly radiant scheme of spiritual evolution than ... what? A snake’s discarded husk? A male spider chomped by his female mate after his small spasm has inseminated her?

Worse: than the severed placenta thrown carelessly into a hospital bucket after the bloody labours of birth?

But it is so. I must not hide the truth from you, or from myself.

We are of no more significance in the real universe, the invisible, impalpable immensity of dark matter that comprises the true cosmos, than a lump of bloody afterbirth.

But of course, that is only true from the narrow perspective of our

puffed human pretensions. A placenta, after all, however lowly and disposable, is not without meaning to the child it nourishes for nine months in the womb. The growing snake's skin has protected it for a season, before it splits into tatters and is left by the side of the road. A baby's first teeth loosen and fall out within a very few years, and for a day we treasure them whimsically, placing them beneath the child's pillow and promising that a fairy will bear them away to some finer land. We pay our gappy infants in good coin for the privilege. As we tuck a dollar bill beneath the pillow, and whisk the milk tooth into the trash, we do not despise that small fragment of organic detritus. But we do not believe our fairytale, either.

The meaning of the lost tooth is not salvation in a heaven of tooth fairies, it is the adult dentition that springs up to fill its gap. And the meaning of terrestrial life is not a transcendental afterlife for the dying human — starving child or withered sage, automobile accident victim or cancer patient, AIDs patient or his selfless helper. The meaning of human life is not afterlife but afterbirth: we are a disposable stage in the production of the Children of Heaven, our Scions, the first casts, the happy miscarriages, the uncorrupted abortions. Those who perish in the flesh before crude matter has infected, corrupted and swiftly corroded their potentially immortal souls. Little wonder that all the false religions of pomp and human glory, intellectual and fundamentalist alike, denounce abortion as the vilest sin. No. Far from being a sin, a crime, an atrocity, it is the release of our Scions into eternity, and so, even as the churchmen pretend to squabble among themselves, they conspire wickedly to prevent this sacrament, this single good deed of human flesh, this midwifery of heaven.

* * * *

IX

Three days after his outrageous revelation, on a gorgeous Californian summer's day, Benjamin picked me up in his black retro-fitted Porche 944 Turbo and drove me to my father's West Coast home in Malibu.

I was all of a dither, as you will understand, but I did what I could to hide my emotions. This was easily enough done, given my childhood conditioning, but I also wished to avoid slipping into some disabling multiple personality confusion, so I gave vent to my mixed feelings by squeezing my wide brimmed ozone hat in my hands until its sturdy genetically engineered cotton was crushed into a shapeless lump. Benjamin certainly noticed these small convulsions but, adroit therapist that he was (and is), he refrained from comment.

“Did you get the book I sent over?”

I had been studying the yellowed pages of *The Dying Breed* all morning. None of the photos was labelled, so I could not even be sure if Margaret was included. One woman poised on top of an old automobile, haughty and proud, bore a certain resemblance to the face I saw in the mirror, when I could bear to look in the mirror. Still, it had given me a curious and visceral thrill to see her name on the dedication page, placed there by the man who was allegedly my father. And there was a suite of portraits of babies viewed through glass, rows and ranks of the tiny wrinkled things, big pink heads and squinty eyes, and a wry nurse standing to one side of a complex bit of machinery sustaining a tiny little creature barely alive by the look of it. I had a terrible feeling that one was me.

“Yes, thank you. The courier service is quite reliable now they’ve started travelling in pairs.” Things had calmed down quite a lot since the Year 2000 End of Millennium riots, and the even more explosive Year 2001 True End of Millennium riots, but services were still bumpy.

“Have a look at these,” Benjamin said, and passed me a folio. He was a handsome man of 45, more boyish than distinguished, and I trusted him implicitly, which is more than I’d been able to do with anyone else since the day I’d escaped from the cult. The photographs were in a variety of styles and voices. I peered out, two or three years old, in big eyed fascination from some of them, or painted colourful daubs with my fingers, or stuffed food into my mouth, laughing and happy. This time I recognised myself at once, and my adult eyes burned with misery and loss. I turned the sheets slowly, examining each hungrily. The first convincing shot of Margaret caused me to utter a soft cry, a hand squeezed at my diaphragm, for it was me staring back at myself: an offbeat beauty, if one made allowances for her awful seventies’ haircut and make-up and clothes: defended, waspishly amused. They had burned all her photos at Harmony, of course. Restrained by my seat belt, I leaned forward in the urban racing seat to hug the picture to me, eyes prickling, breathing in little gasps.

* * * *

X

The Reverend Daimon Keith lived in ecologically responsible luxury. Behind a high fence laced with sensors and lethal devices, his marvellous house, designed according to principles allegedly revealed by UFO

architects but thought to resemble certain embargoed ideas from blockaded Saudi, sucked at the sun and polluted air like a flower, and turned them into a cool, faintly rose-scented breeze, gentle indirect lighting, and full-surround musical background. I walked into a round white room carpeted in pale green, with startling art works suspended on the walls: thick slabs of wood in bright gold and purple and crimson, curves and arcs above and radiating bars below, Samuel Barber's exquisite Violin Concerto entering its second movement and tearing my heart out as it did so, and my father, clad for the occasion in normal business suit, having forsaken his silver flying saucer garment or rainbow robes, standing up to greet me from a sunken pit in the centre of the room. His throat worked visibly, and he swayed, and to my astonishment and immense gratification he burst into tears.

"Jesus," he blurted. "Margaret!" Then he shook his head, squeezed his eyes shut, came toward me like a man dazed. "I'm sorry, Flake. Oh God."

We went into each other's arms as if we had never been separated, and everything went very runny and snotty for a while.

* * * *

XI

Daimon flew me to Sydney, where his wife Zelda preferred to live, and we walked along Bondi Beach while a pair of inconspicuous Scionetics heavies paced us for our own protection. Somehow the Australians had managed to clean up the foreshore with its wonderful white sand, and depollute the blue and white surf, which had been turning into a sewer, Deems told me, last time I'd been here with my murdered mother. We rolled up our trouser legs and splashed at the edge of the mild winter sea.

"I don't understand any of it," I told him, holding his hand. By rights, according to the symptomatology of my condition, I should not have been able to bear his touch, or anyone's. Alternatively, I should have been hard at the task of seducing him with glancing laughing eyes and hints of cleavage, all that. Somehow, though, wonderfully, this was, for the moment at least, simply homecoming. I was all wept out by that point, and my heart was torn two ways at once: by uncomplex happiness and by a more profound dull emptiness that made mockery of the happiness. "What does it mean?" I asked my father, who had made hundreds of millions of dollars and bought the huge old building up on the top of the bluff by telling hundreds of

thousands of desperate people his awful answer to that question.

“Come on,” he said, “let’s get some fish and chips.”

We bought piping hot fried shark in batter — it is called “flake” in Australia, which made us both laugh — and french fries, and a six-pack of light beer to wash it down with. One of the heavies fetched a thick woven blanket so we could sit on the sand without getting piles, my father said, wincing at some memory, and a pair of light, insulated capes to keep the breeze at bay. Daimon tore open the paper bag of french fries — “chips” — and inhaled the dietetically dubious odour of salt and vinegar.

“The meaning of it all? Darling, let me tell you what I’ve learned, what the greys have taught me. You won’t enjoy hearing this, but it will,” he said seriously, “set you free.”

I was apprehensive.

“You’re going to say that human life has no meaning,” I told him. I knew already that this was his scandalous doctrine, because I had gobbled up a couple of potted and scathing magazine exposes of Scionetics in the previous days, and I wasn’t buying it.

He popped the top on a stubby and sucked froth into his mouth. The sun, burning down from the north of the sky, caught his UVA-machine-tanned forehead, slipped down the laugh lines beside his eyes. He should have been wearing a hat, of course, as I was, because the ozone hole was straight overhead in Sydney, but he was protected against cancer, he said, by the painful ministrations of the Harvesters.

“No meaning? Not exactly,” he said. “Look, Flake — hey, you don’t mind me calling you that, do you?”

I smiled primly. “Not so long as you share *that* flake with me.”

He tore me off a hot fat piece of fish, wrapped one end in a double thickness of paper to save my fingers, and passed it over.

“All right, Flake, can you sit still for my two minute lecture on the meaning of meaning?”

I shrugged, nibbling shark. It was sweet and delicious.

“Okay, the starting point is that everyone gets everything arse

backwards because they're always facing the wrong way. I mean the philosophers, the theologians, the anthropocists, the fucking quantum holists, everyone except for a handful of old-fashioned semioticians. And even they squibbed when it came to the jump."

"Oh dear." I pushed back the brim of my hat and gazed across the Pacific ocean. Sea gulls circled, trying to snatch our fries. "Sorry, this reminds me of Valentine and the great truth of Harmonic Resonance." The comparison, risen unbidden, made me shudder. Deems watched me. He did not put his arm around me, which was wise at that moment.

"Yes," he said, "we all think we're the first and only ones to understand the secret of the universe. I was always suspicious of people who thought they knew it all. I loved to take the mickey out of the bastards." He sighed. "I'd still be running about like a perpetual adolescent if the Harvesters hadn't told me what's what."

"And what is what?"

A lolloping dog ran past, spraying us with sand. I threw him a cooling chip, and he missed it. What was his notion of the good life? This, surely. And what did his doggy mind imagine was the meaning of the world? But we were not doggies. We made our own chips and beer and polluted our own beaches and cleaned them up if we felt like it.

"Look at the words we use when we ask the most poignant questions, Flake," my father said. "When your mother abducted you and ran off to the States, I raved and flailed and ranted. *Why?* I screamed. Why did this happen to me? I flew to America and tried to find you, and nobody would tell me, and then the fucking guru went to ground with all his witless devotees, taking you and your mother with him, and I had to come back to Australia, and then I was snatched for three weeks by the Harvesters — Christ, it sounds like a bloody soap opera! Well, I ranted and flailed, when they brought me back, and spent a lot of time screaming, *Why?* And when your mother was killed and they told you she'd died in a car crash, you probably ran about asking *Why, why, why?*"

"I was five years old," I told Deems. "Of course I did."

"Okay, what's the common element here? Three different strokes of ill fortune, and we keeping asking *Why?* But that's a question that is only appropriately addressed to an intention. Do you see what I mean? Why had Margaret stolen you to America? I've thought about this a lot, Angel —"

“Rosa,” I said.

He gulped, and his eyes misted.

“Rosa, I was a typical male of my era. Well, not typical, but even so. And your mother was a confused but strong woman, and she wasn’t going to put up with my bullshit. Of course she had to go away. It wasn’t me, precisely — it was all of us, our stupid culture, the way we find meaning in attachment to our kids ... She thought Zelda and I were stealing you away from her, and she was probably right.”

“I don’t even remember Zelda,” I said in a grainy tone.

“You’ll meet her tonight, she’s looking forward enormously to seeing you. But the point is, I wasn’t asking for those sorts of answers. I wanted to know *Why* is the universe doing this to me? *Why* has the plan of my life — the central plan of the universe, after all — *why* has it gone so unfairly off the rails? I’m the hero of this fucking movie, right? How dare the extras screw with my happy ending?”

“I suppose we all put ourself in the main role,” I conceded, because that’s what he wanted me to agree to. But I didn’t, not really. My response to disappointment and pain and, indeed, intolerable torment had been to shrink myself, to split my soul into the colours of the rainbow and hide most of the hues in darkness. That’s why I’ve been able to construct this history of my father and my mother and myself, don’t you see? I’m the perfect biographer. I have no self. I’m anyone’s. I’m anyone.

“Actors spend a lot of time obsessing about *Why* questions,” Deems said. “Motivation. ‘What’s my character’s motivation?’ They’re looking for a few simple codes, cues to the impulses and behavioural channels of the personality they’re about to impersonate. And it’s not so strange or hard to do that, because evolution built our brains to perform exactly that function. It’s why people love stories.”

“We’ve evolved to be actors?” I stared at him. “I think you’ve been living in Los Angeles too long.”

Deems laughed gustily. “You’re Margaret’s daughter all right.” We both stared at the horizon for a time. “If you’re a horse,” he said then, patiently, “your DNA built you to graze in a herd, and avoid lions. If you’re a lion, your DNA built you to hunt horses in the company of a small squadron of other lions. In both cases, you need an internal model of social life — your own, and your prey’s or predator’s. When a horse sees the grass

sway, it's a considerable benefit if she asks herself honestly, Why did that happen? What's its meaning? Lion or wind? Sniff sniff. Freak, shit, Lion! Lion! Meaning starts by interpreting as deliberate codes the lumpy happenstances of the world."

I mused on this. "It's the other way round, isn't it? We interpret the meaning that's there. I mean, if a Chinese translator interprets my words from English, she's got to start by understanding my meaning and sort of ... carry it over to the other language?"

"Okay, both processes entail each other. The grass means food to our horsie, and its motion might mean danger, because our horsie means food to the lions. So the nutritive values and the possibility of lions are both there in the grass, I guess, before any act of interpretation takes place. But you can't say they have any meaning, in that exact sense, unless the horse is there to start with."

Some Aussie bravos were taking to the frothy water in gaudy wetsuits, clambering on to windsurfers. We watched their antics. Their play was as meaningless, as arbitrary, as open to an inpouring of significance as a whale sounding, as the Budd Hopkins Guardians on my father's Los Angeles' walls. For the surfers, its meaning was the joy of sinew and muscle and eye doing their stuff, the body's balance sustained against the chaotic turbulence of the sea. I sighed.

"I mentioned two other cases," Deems said. "My three-week abduction, and your mother's death. Why did they happen? What was the meaning?"

I sent him a sidelong glance. "Well, I don't even know if it did happen. Your disappearance. Sorry."

He gazed back without expression. "It doesn't matter, you see. Call it a metaphor, if you like."

I was relieved. "All right."

"The answer is, there is no meaning to either event — in the usual, human-centred sense. Something happens, okay. A tree falls over in the forest. All sorts of factors led up to that event — the rain has weakened the soil, the tree's DNA program has closed down its growth cycle so it's gone rotten inside, the wind has picked up because of the accidental arrangement of snow and cloud halfway around the world. So it's all explicable, down to the level of atoms if you had time enough to track it all.

But it's not part of any plan. And if you happen to be walking under the tree at that moment and it squashes you flat, all we can say is — 'shit happens'."

"Or: don't walk under trees. That might be one meaning."

"A meaning we read into the sad event, sure. We don't draw it out, we put it in. That's what our brains are good at — making up stories, scripts, schemata. The cognitive scientists have a whole batch of words for this stuff. All of it boils down to one hard fact: we love to write the universe into a text, and then to interpret it as if someone else had written it. That's okay. Horses do it, lions do it, the birds and bees do it." He grinned wickedly. "It's only when we start to fetishise our little knack that it goes crazy and cancerous and eats us up from the inside. We start *looking* for meaning everywhere, forgetting that *we're* the ones who *put* it there."

It was getting chilly, and I felt sorry for those guys out there on their windsurfers. But then nobody was forcing them to do it. We stood up and stretched, shook sand off the blanket by holding one corner of it each, handed the folded bundle to one of Daimon's patient bodyguards who took it back to the car. In the froth at the edge of the sea I noticed two or three limp, diaphanous jellyfish. I bent down to stir them with my finger, and drew back in disgust. They were condoms, washing about in the sandy foam.

"Daimon, this sounds like the crappy New Age solipsism I grew up with. 'You create your own universe.' I'm sorry, but that's the worst kind of hypocrisy."

"No, no," my father said placidly, placing his big-toed feet carefully in someone else's line of footsteps in the sand. He had to hop a little. "All we create is our own meaning. The world, other people, our own inaccessible inward systems — all of that provides the building materials, and the landscape for the architect to work in. But the meaning we end up with is a construct of our minds. It has no necessary connection to the actual priorities of the universe."

"Which are?"

He laughed softly. "Which have nothing to do with us, I'm sorry to say."

"With us human beings? Benjamin said you don't believe people have souls. Is that what he meant?"

"We *produce* souls," my father said. "Cows produce methane when

they fart, and destroy the ozone layer. Radioactive decay deep inside the Earth produces thermal plumes that cause volcanoes. We produce fetuses with souls. If they're lucky, they die in time. Or the grey doctors come down and harvest them."

I heard all this with the greatest disquiet, understanding none of it yet. It was too soon, and luckily Deems changed the topic to my own life, the confused and miserable tale of my tragical history with and without my mother.

* * * *

XII

Later we drove up to the great house when Zelda lived, and I met the rest of my family. My step-mother looked pretty good for a woman nearing seventy. They gave me a fine guest room overlooking the sea, and I slept with the window open for the first time in years. "Waves hushed at the foot of the cliff. I dreamed of condoms, and small things squirming, and woke screaming in the strange space of the room.

* * * *

XIII

A month later, Deems had vanished again. He hasn't come back. His devotees assure me that he has been taken to some finer realm — Mars, perhaps, where he thought his visage had been shaped like an icon gazing at the stars, or the centre of the Earth, or to some alternative dimension. How can I know what to believe? Does it matter? There is no text of the universe outside our inscription of its glyphs, and no meaning beyond our free interpretation. My father, true to his own analysis, or perhaps flying in its face, affected to despise biographies, to detest movies and novels and stories of every kind. "Fiction is the gossip of those who don't get out much, Rosa," he told me, a week before he disappeared, "purveyed by those who don't get out at all." Whether or not we have souls and an afterlife is the kind of question, perhaps the kind of fiction, one should abandon at the departure lounge into adulthood, I now see. I live a quiet life of satisfactory despair. Sometimes I dream of my mother, but just as often I confuse her with Katie, recalling only my Mom's heavy Southern drawl. Zelda and I run the household, hardly an arduous duty, waiting for Daimon's return, and the Scionetics heavies grow more bizarre with each year but dutifully top up our swollen bank accounts. Benjamin and I have two healthy

babies. Neither of them, to the best of our knowledge, has been abducted by the Harvesters. I float in the huge tub, scrubbing at my pale flesh, and dream of great dark eyes in pale swollen skulls, and tell myself again and again the story of Deems and Margaret and my beloved Benjamin and all the sweet burdens of time.

* * * *

XIV

The Starseed Signals received by Dr Leary and Wayne Benner in Folsom Prison, in July-August, 1973, tell us that it is time for “life on Earth to leave the planetary womb and learn to walk through the stars”. Life on this planet is now at the halfway point, having produced “nervous systems capable of communicating with and returning to the Galactic Network” where our Interstellar Parents await us. Mankind is about to discover “the key to immortality in the chemical structure of the genetic code ... the scripture of life”. At this time, the signals invite us, the “voyage home is possible ... Mutate! Come home in glory”.

— Brad Steiger, *The Gods of Aquarius: UFOs and the Transformation of Man*, 1976.

He hovers, curled in upon himself like a great balding, wrinkled foetus. It's the usual hazy nowhere under pale ribbed metal. Cupped by buoyancy, rocking airborne above dull convexity, he dreams his lucid dreams. All the cycles of metabolism flow as before, his chest expands and contracts in the mechanical bellows of breath. At the edge of awareness, hiding or at least refusing to disclose themselves there in the shadows, the grey Harvesters peer with their unblinking gaze. All about and through him is the humming rapid motion of a billion molecular probes at his trillion synapses. Without waking, without sleeping, he is aware of this prosaic violation.

“Take me back,” he tells them through lips too heavy to open. His voice is blurred and hopelessly distorted, lost in the anechoic void, but he knows that they hear him by other than vocal means.

Klar-2 speaks to him through dark wraparound eyes. You must stay with us this time. We will take you to a city all of gold, where the leaves of the tree are for the healing of all nations.

“Horseshit,” my father says, forcing his lips to shape the syllables.

Behold, a pale horse, the grey doctor tells him without the slightest trace of humour: and his name that sat on him was Death.

Deems is shown the customary storm of visions. The world is consumed in nuclear fire. Great chasms open in its soft, ripened skin, and all the numbers of humankind tumble into the burning depths. Air sours, foully poisoned, an acid-rain storm that blights every flowering plant and tree and crop in the world. Maggots eat at lambs and babies. Transparent demons move like wraiths at the centre of the earth among the last of the living, tormenting them eternally. It is a terrifying spectacle, disturbing as a nightmare one cannot awaken from. But Deems has been this way before. He is too frightened to laugh, but it is preposterous. This has to be the unadulterated noise of the unconscious, the cheese sandwich he ate before turning in, a mask or screen for something else.

“Pull the other one,” he croaks, “it has bells on it.”

A little girl comes forward, thin as a Bosnian refugee, pale and gaunt, limbs like a foal's. Her hair is thin and straggly, and she looks at him without fear or expectation.

Take her in your arms, Klar-2 tells him. Give her your human warmth. Kindle her into life. This is your daughter.

“Why do you have doorways and ramps if you can take us through walls and fly us in the air,” sceptical Deems insists, exhausted and scratchy. “Why must you torment us with crude surgery when a painless scraping of cells from the inside of the mouth could give you more genetic material than you'd ever need? After all this time, Christ, two thousand years, ten thousand, why are you still tampering with our poor bodies? If you can calm us and heal our hurt, why do you continue to bring such torment to your victims? If we have no souls, why do you terrify simple village children with visions of eternal damnation?”

His throat is dry, hoarse, and the mouse dropping stench is making him feel sick. He tries to turn his head, to look Klar-2 and the others straight in the eye, and they stir uneasily and shift like shadows, like candle smoke in the candle flame's heat.

The little hybrid child gazes at him, arms hanging desolate at her sides. She wears a kind of white shift, and her limbs are painfully thin.

He struggles in the air, struggles for purchase on nothingness, with immense effort brings his heavy feet over the edge of the operating table

and down to the tepid warmth of the floor. They rustle and move aside, withdrawing into the shadows, into the light. The girl child stands dumbly, fatherless, motherless, aching, alien, human.

Daimon Keith, my father, reaches out his own arms, then, at last, and enfolds me within them.

* * * *

AFTERWORD

When I was 13, 15, I was besotted by flying saucers. On dark crisp nights I would creep out from my bed — my “room” was a bunk next to our laundry/toilet, a back verandah fixed up with louvred windows, a little draughty but it allowed me to read forbidden magazines without anyone catching me at it — creep out and lie on my back to stare up with my heart all swollen, gazing at the hard little bright lights and dustings of the stars, waiting for the UFOs to loom overhead. And not just waiting patiently — *impelling* their attention, soliciting with the force of my desire, calling on the same telepathic wavelengths that young Peter Reich was using around the same time, beyond the curve of the earth and across the world’s largest ocean, in his doomed attempts to fetch back his mad father Wilhelm, former favourite of Freud, master of the therapeutic orgasm and the pale blue force-field of orgone energy, captain, poor little Peter believed, of flying saucers, crying out to the good aliens (or were they the bad ones after all?) to fetch back his daddy. But it was the FBI who’d nabbed his old man and flung him in jail. Mine had been grabbed by anti-communists, conscripted to their cause in the decades before Vietnam, giving meaning and backbone to his toolmaker’s life, plugging the downward thrust of the Red Menace from Asia and points north, wasting his family’s, like, you know, *quality time* in endless caucuses and late night plots of unionists against unionists, right against left, informant against spy ... mindboggling self-denying stuff, the very contrary, one might suppose, of Reich’s orgasmic raptures. Catholics were not permitted contraceptives in those dark days and nights, as I gather they still are not, although these days the rules are less rigorously attended. So my parents brought six living children into the swelling population, and a dead foetus or two, but without, one might also suppose, a great deal of additional whoopee. So there was a penumbra of anxiety in our household, of shouting hysteria, of stress and strain to go with the poverty. So I went looking in the dark of my early adolescent nights for the aliens. I knew that when they came for me it would be a little better. Perhaps — who knew — perhaps it would even be

glorious?

As soon as I was permitted to enter the adults' section of the municipal library I had found mysterious hidden truths lying all about me on the shelves, declaring themselves to me if to few others — a book, in particular, by an upperclass Englishman (although I didn't know that then, didn't know about Honourables and their kind, thank God, being an Australian) named Desmond Leslie, and by an American working-class stiff and scamster named George Adamski, "Professor" Adamski, a handyman for a small cafe below Mount Palomar where, according to my astronomy texts, they had the largest refracting telescope in the world, 200 inches, the very thing to see UFOs with, it seemed to me, because I was given to understand that Prof. Adamski worked there under the big dome snapping plates of the heavens and its zippy inhabitants and on occasion speaking to them in the desert. This odd double book was *Flying Saucers Have Landed*, and along with its richly loony tales of *vimanas* from Sanskrit legend, and Colonel Churchwood's occult lore of drowned Mu, and the devious metals of lost Atlantis, it was illustrated with those famous shots of the tilted, nuts and bolts craft with its three balls — landing gear, perhaps, or something to do with the power supply — and shots of long cigar-shaped "motherships" waiting to carry the small scoutships into hyperspace at speeds greater than light, to Venus and other wonderfully hospitable worlds beyond our atmosphere ... an atmosphere which, as Peter Reich's daddy knew only too well, was even then being remorselessly brutalised by filthy nuclear weapons tests, lethal and mutagenic radionuclides scattered into the high winds and falling into the upturned, trusting faces of children gazing at the stars in search of redemptive aliens in flying saucers.

Then I grew up and understood how extremely unlikely it all was (the Catholicism, the anti-communist obsession, the sexual prohibitions, the UFOs). When flying saucer contactees like Adamski morphed into abductees, snatched in blue beams of missing time and elevated into disks for a spot of anal probing and nasal implanting, my interest revived. This kind of urban myth is so charming, so weirdissimo, so *sci-fi* in the single acceptable sense of that vile term. I gobbled down the revelations of Dr John Mack, Harvard psychiatrist. I seized up Dr David Jacobs, historian at Temple University. I ploughed through C.D.B. Bryan, upmarket journalist. I wallowed in Whitley Strieber and his profitable concoctions. And I laughed my head off at Jim Schnabel's splendid travelogue among the beamed-up, *Dark White*. Somewhere in there, a curious prickle ran down my spine. I started making lists, drawn from these books, of the Signs & Symptoms of Alien Abduction. I recalled the primary school near Monash University, where a whole class and their teacher witnessed a close encounter of the

third kind, just a kilometer or two from where I was studying in April, 1966. I glanced back through my own science fiction novels and out popped, one after another, virtually the entire checklist: the investigation and probing on the floating slab, the wafted transition through a wall in a bubble, the mysterious mutant foetus, the transferred embryo, the creatures suspended in tubes, the occlusions of memory, the great-eyed animals with cold voices, the prophecies of doom or transformation ...

Calm down. I'm not about to spring any unseemly revelations upon you, leap from the UFO closet. But it did focus my amazed attention on the ubiquity of these narrative elements, the odd way in which they seem to have seeped into our dreams and our unconscious (or out of it), long before they were written up in fat lurid paperbacks or dramatised for network television and Spielberg movies. I don't know their source, and nobody else does either. Carl Jung had some confused thoughts on the matter, and experts in millennial delusion figure there's something going on in the cultural depths. Me, I wondered what would happen to someone a little like me who really *did* fall into the trap of hardening these wisps and vapors into concrete. From there, it's a short step for an sf writer to ask: what if it is true, after all? Or what, at any rate, if you talked yourself into believing it? What would it be like, living curved and suffocating inside the womb of a culture's disordered fantasies?

"The Womb" has become the spine of a book by Rory Barnes and me, called *The Book of Revelation*. It tells, in much greater detail than I have space for here, the tale of Daimon Keith and his odd trajectory, and of his luckless daughter Rosa, and all the rest of his family intimate and extended, in heaven as on earth. The novel will be published by HarperCollins Publishers Australia, in 1999.

— *Damien Broderick*