

HE TRIED TO CATCH THE LIGHT

TERRY DOWLING

Terry Dowling is one of Australia's most respected and internationally acclaimed writers of science fiction, fantasy and horror. He is author of *Rynosseros*, *Blue Tyson* and *Twilight Beach* (the Tom Rynosseros saga), *Wormwood*, *The Man Who Lost Red*, and *An Intimate Knowledge of the Night*, and editor (with Dr Van Ikin) of *Mortal Fire: Best Australian SF*, and senior editor of *The Essential Ellison*.

His stories have appeared locally in such magazines as *Omega Science Digest*, *Australian Short Stories*, *Overland*, *Eidolon*, and *Aurealis* and in anthologies as diverse as *Fabulous at Fifty*, *Metaworlds*, *Crosstown Traffic*, and *Australian Ghost Stories*. His overseas publications include *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Interzone*, and *Ténèbres and Ikarie* and appearances in such acclaimed anthologies as *The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror*, *The Year's Best Horror 1996* and *Destination Unknown*.

Dowling has been called "one of our finest futurists" (*Independent Monthly*) and "one of the finest imaginative minds of the 1990s" (*Canberra Times*). His work has been compared to that of Jack Vance, J. G. Ballard, Cordwainer Smith, Ray Bradbury, Gene Wolfe, James Tiptree Jr, Kate Wilhelm, Frank Herbert, Harlan Ellison, and Peter Straub, and such South American writers as Borges and Cortazar, though his voice is uniquely his own, earning him complimentary entries in *Twentieth Century Science Fiction Writers*, the Clute/Nicholls *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, John Clute's *Science Fiction: The Illustrated Encyclopedia* and, most recently, in the "Movers and Shakers" section of David Pringle's *The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. *Locus*, the multi-award winning genre newspaper, regards his work as placing him "among the masters of the field".

Dowling has won more Ditmar Awards for Science Fiction and Fantasy than any other Australian writer — nine times! He is also the recipient of two Readercon Awards, a Prix Wolkenstein, the 1996 inaugural Aurealis Award for Best Horror Novel, and the 1997 Aurealis Award for Best Horror Short Story.

A Communications lecturer at a large Sydney college, Dowling is also a freelance journalist and award-winning critic. He reviews science fiction,

fantasy, and horror for Australia's largest circulation newspaper, *The Australian*, and his essays, articles, and reviews have appeared in *Omega Science Digest*, *Science Fiction: A Review of Speculative Literature*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The National Times*, and *The Australian*. He is also a musician and songwriter, with eight years of appearances on the ABC's *Mr Squiggle & Friends* (which earned him great points with the editors of this volume!).

The next story is perhaps one of the most daring and experimental in this collection; like most of Dowling's work, it will reveal new facets and pleasures with subsequent readings. This tightly crafted, layered story is about the nature of transcendence ... and how we perceive — and catch — the light.

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There was sunmire curling on the rooftop across from the Centre, the dazzle interfering with Ham's concentration and giving him the first signs of a headache.

"Almost ready," Bellinger said, gently, kindly as ever. He knew what these press conferences did to him.

Ham indicated the airy shimmer, immediately moved his hand back to shield his eyes. "Can we do something about that, Ross?"

Bellinger spoke into his coat-mike. "Polarize 21 and 22. Sorry, Ham. We thought we'd leave it clear for the media. Sunmire's more intriguing than ever since your last disclosures."

Ham nodded. *My disclosures?* Lydia found them. In him, yes, but they were hers.

The filters came on. He was still distracted by the patch of sunmire, but now it was easy to study the audience, searching for faces he knew while Bellinger and the techs made final arrangements for the pre-launch briefing.

The press-room was more crowded than he'd ever seen it. As well as the sixty or more media and departmental people allowed places, there were the large Vatican, Panislamic and other religious contingents, and, surprisingly, a much larger turn-out of various world government delegates

who had used diplomatic privilege to get inside.

Grouped together in the front rows, in clear view of everyone, were the veterans of previous missions — Public Relations' idea and still a good one after five years, despite the deaths, the missing faces, maintaining the program's useful, top-secret, quasi-military feel.

Ham counted survivors. Two of the Oneiros 3 crew were here, and in the very front row, Frank Sterman, captain of the Psychos 7 probe sat with mission coordinators Salt and Medda, conspicuous diplomacy, unmistakable, drawing the cameras. Lydia Parkes, lone survivor of the Imago 9 disaster, was seated strategically at the other end of their arc with the independent analysts, their hard-won support invaluable now with the funding cuts being reconsidered.

Her discoveries, yes. Drawn out of him, but hers. Of all the people he had let into his dreams to find God, she was the one he ultimately trusted, finally believed.

Movement among the platform party caught his attention, though Ham didn't have to look to know who that would be. Though Ross Bellinger led the program, it was suave, accomplished and highly-telegenic Richard Salt who, as usual, moved forward to address the group. When Salt spoke, the ratings were always good, though using him had become an obvious tactic for many of those present, even the sympathetic ones.

"I'd like to welcome you all here again today on the eve of what promises to be a very exciting and crucial mission for the Donauer Project and possibly the whole world. Most of you are well acquainted with the general objectives for Oneiros 5, but in view of some recent — misunderstandings — I feel it might be useful to review those goals now." His gaze fell genially, ever so briefly, on certain parts of the room. "So we remain clear on what they are — and what they most definitely are not, nor have ever been."

Ham's own gaze wandered back to the windows. The sunmire concentration had been neutralised by the filters, but he knew it was still there — a fine, roiling knot of focused light. He had never made much of the things until two weeks ago; the phenomena had always been just what the media and science commentators had said: a particularly charming by-product of the "smart" building materials introduced into most of the world's cities after the 2026 Expo. The lifeblood of these self-cleaning, temperature adjusting, security aiding laminates was electromagnetic, and gave rise to the distinctive little clouds of refracting ionised vapour that,

eight years later, were enjoying all this renewed attention.

Because of what Lydia had said.

It no longer seemed simple coincidence. Ham imagined the vanquished patch and considered her words at the end of the mission trance, cried out unthinking during the momentous Oneiros 4 extraction: “God is just a by-product of our perception of light.” That term again. By-product.

There had been a careless desk tech, an audio glitch, something, but an accident, he was sure of it, not some deliberate “slip” to feed him provocative data. Lying there in the mission room, coming out of the trance himself, he had heard the words and they had amazed him. Lydia’s voice. Those words.

“God is just a by-product of our perception of light.”

Sunmire, rainbows and mist-bows, coronae, aurorae and crepuscular rays, sundogs and *gegenschein*, everything from mock-suns, mock-moons and mirages to glories, haloes and lofty *fata morganas* beckoning in the sky — all the countless anomalies of light and electromagnetism, the tricks of reflection and refraction that were no longer quite the same. A beam of white light passing through a prism had become profound again.

“First of all,” Salt was saying as Ham drew back, “Hampton Donauer does not have stranded personalities wandering around inside him. The brave men and women whose identities were sent into the subject’s dream-life and lost to us in the Imago 9, Eidolon 2, Psychos 7 and Oneiros 3 shut-downs are regrettably dead. They knew the chances; they volunteered ...”

And why? Why did they keep volunteering, Ham wondered yet again, even as a voice called from the audience.

“The mind is a relatively closed system, Dr Salt!” It was Kilmer of NFD, predictably enough, as dogged and contentious as ever. “Why, just last week, Caltech’s Professor Raglan admitted that those personality sets, those energies of self, those *people*, Dr Salt, *could* be inside Mr Donauer somewhere, for all we know. Professor Raglan suggested that traces of vestigial imprinting ...”

“Mr Kilmer,” — Salt was smooth, so reasonable, seeming to lower his

voice but actually leaning closer to the lectern mike and using that rather than his coat-mike to drown Kilmer out — “I’ll be more than pleased to answer all reasonable questions presently, if you’ll just be patient.” The emphasis fell so gently on the fourth last word. “The main point of this pre-launch today is to make sure that we are not sidetracked from the real purpose of the Donauer Project, which — I need not remind any sufficiently informed person — is made up completely of legally authorised volunteers well-acquainted with the risks involved.”

Mantovani in the headphones, Ham decided there in his place at the long table on the dais. Any moment now. He always accepted the need, but this time Lydia’s overheard remark from the Oneiros 4 aftermath — and the sunmire on the roof across from the Centre, the coincidence of that now — would make it something else, a violation, a hated intrusion.

Salt continued, turning the subject away from the lost missions back to the present objectives, which had to include what Lydia had said, whatever it was she had added after that momentous line.

Sure enough, music came. Not Mantovani, of course — Vivaldi, the tiny subcutaneous implants just behind his ears switching in, Ham keenly aware as always that Project staff and accredited independents would be monitoring that fact scrupulously, aware too how this was part of the vital price, sitting there partly occluded and they all knew. The audience got to see him watching the sunmire, musing, reflecting. They couldn’t have planned it better.

Patient, charming Richard Salt would be reminding them yet again of the purpose behind the mind-missions. Repeating, reiterating as they always had to, because people *did* forget the details. How twenty-four years ago, Ham’s father, the late, eccentric and gifted Henry Donauer, had shut his infant son off from all information about the world’s belief systems, all input about formalised religion. How he had allowed full socialisation to occur through controlled tutorials and carefully screened peer groups and media broadcasts, but always with that one key element missing: no conversation, no books, no reference to organised metaphysics. It was Jean Jacque Rousseau’s “Noble Savage” idea expressed in a crucially modified form, but instead of the child being raised outside society altogether, it was just one single vital omission from the societal dataflow. To find out what humans knew of such things *a priori*.

Ham knew this now because the experiment had always been implicitly one of diminishing returns. He still had no formal knowledge of the different cultural belief systems that governed so many lives and

governments, so many communities on the planet, but he knew what the experiment was in these final stages.

He'd loved his father. At age 11, when a highly respected if self-serving observer, Camille Jaels, had finally leaked details of the Donauer Project to a European scientific journal, she had paradoxically helped guarantee the Project's survival beyond Henry Donauer's untimely death from pneumonia in 2021. Ham had consented to the ongoing controlled deprivation. Sociologically, historically, parents the world over controlled their offsprings' received cultural knowledge whenever they could, biased learning outcomes, the ways subjective reality was in fact made. At the very least, Henry Donauer was doing no more, no less. Yet from another viewpoint, a wholly scientific viewpoint, he was doing so much more.

And Henry Donauer had always been amazingly frank.

"I want to see what you believe, Ham, naturally and intuitively," he had said. "What your dreams show — what universals are passed on through the genes, through any form of a collective unconscious. Are particular neurotransmitters predisposed? Are such dedicated functions possible, vested applications such as the pleasure chemical, dopamine, gives? Are there such things as adulant biasing as Gina Colfax suggests? Or is it just a phosphene spill, susceptible minds responding to entoptic residue?"

And often when Ham asked, "But just what do you mean, what do I believe?", his father would leave it to one of his trusted assistants — one of the three R's — Ross, Richard or Ruth Medda, to take him through it oh so carefully, explain how he was doing humanity a service, that he was a "pure soul" operating without details of one of the key conditionings.

Though Ham had read necessarily edited texts on the nature of social history, how cultural "norms" led to everything from traditions of boys being raised differently from girls, what caste and legal rights were available, how property was disposed of and so on, he'd accepted it. Still accepted it.

Kilmer was on his feet again, Ham saw, the tall sneering man pointing at him and shouting something. Ham immediately averted his gaze, making no attempt to read the famous science journalist's lips. He was used to fighting the curiosity, again his choice. Instead, he turned his attention back to the sunmire, trying to judge its intensity with the filters on, wondering how long it would last. The trick of light had none of its earlier impact; perhaps it would soon dissipate altogether.

The Vivaldi soothed him but he was aware that he was frowning. He caught himself at it, wondered why he had been. He let his thoughts go back to the Oneiros 4 extraction. The overheard words. The iconauts in the staging chamber, one moment in their imposed trances, tracking his own so-called adulant neurotransmissions, scouring his hippocampus, riding, searching, finding, then emerging, and Lydia's voice full of excitement, saying those words. That word.

God.

Their word, not his. Never his. A person. A place. A state. He had had no such word. Not consciously before they'd given it to him afterwards. A name for a goal, a context, a setting. Lost knowledge. But they had something. She did. Had come back with it, all of them so excited. Before the gentle music came. Mantovani in the headphones.

It had caused a furor among the independent observers, an outcry scotched by Henry Donauer's prerecorded stipulation that such a name should be given to him at age 25, a mere two months away. Fate had simply played a hand.

Now, in the world beyond Vivaldi, Richard Salt was doing his careful best. Ham knew many of the standard rebuttals; the speech plans Richard would be following, sampling, blending. Ham had also listened to plenty of Kilmer/Davidson/NFD edits; he could pretty well model what the man would be saying. Such a dangerous man, Sol Kilmer, a media luminary with his own top-rating, widely syndicated net program, *Living Science*, the sort of man who too often seemed at odds with his own vocation, who rather seemed bent on seeing how people jumped, just to make something happen. But Richard would deal with it. Ham watched the sunmire and thought of Lydia and something — a place, a person, a thing — called God.

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“We do nothing more than place observing viewpoints into Hampton Donauer's sleeping mind,” Richard Salt said. “Coherent, cognisant, slaved viewpoints to share his dreams. The Donauer Glove lets those personalities, all trained eidetics, monitor the iconography of that REM sleep, bring back the precise patterns. We then assemble them with meticulous care as both a literal image array and a symbol system. The imaging room here at the Centre has — thanks to the generosity of so many of you present here today — become the best in modern clinical psychology. We lose very little.”

“People are dying, Doctor Salt,” someone called, not Kilmer this time, probably his crony at NFD, Davidson.

“Volunteers are taking acceptable and freely chosen risks,” Salt answered. “As you all know, sometimes the dream force is intense, very powerful. There are nightmares, trauma dreams ...”

“Remmers!” Kilmer cried, and others did, NFD plants most likely.

Salt let it pass. “Externally, we have to judge when heightened brainwave activity indicates crisis as opposed to maximum image flow of exactly the kind we need, and sometimes we are wrong. We do not read minds; we read images and track image runs. Simply observe and report. Sometimes our observers are too deeply engaged and sometimes they are lost...”

“Lost, you say! In a relatively closed system, Doctor Salt!” It was Davidson again, probably trying to set off the *yaddist* extremists. It made great viewing when a glowering fundamentalist or even an indignant monsignor was caught reacting. And, yes, so obviously planned. Kilmer, the champion of science as “everyone’s entitlement, everyone’s proper entertainment”, couldn’t afford to say some things, so he had others do it for him. “They’re sure to impinge on the dreaming consciousness. I hate to say it, but any god-pictures you get could well be eroding personalities as they die.”

There, it was said. Ridiculously wrongheaded and naive, yet tabloid headlines for the next month. His mistake for using the word “lost”. Salt could only continue.

“Here’s where I tell you two things — Mr Davidson, is it? Firstly, contrary to Professor Raglan’s colourful theories, we have not “lost” any of our observers *inside* Hampton Donauer, regardless of how much that notion seems to take your fancy. This has been well documented by independent observers, including members of ACAC and FEDEP. Do feel free to interview them again, if you feel you need to verify your facts. It’s on the way out of the Donauer Trance that there is danger, in that stage of the extraction process requiring the participation of the iconauts themselves. In a sense, they bring themselves out, via a careful system of neural phase-downs, reintroducing their own wills. It is then, if they are traumatised and distracted by neural surges ...”

“Nightmares!”

Kilmer? Davidson? Salt dared not stop.

“...and adulant residues, that they fail to complete this process. There is something we call attenuation; there is sometimes the equivalent of a major stroke. It is a simple problem right there at the body-mind interface, where chemicals become consciousness. It is quite possibly insurmountable.”

Kilmer would never buy it, Salt knew, because he couldn't use it. The idea of “remmers” had caught the popular imagination — helpless mind-sailors pursued and hunted by nightmares as marauding “free radicals”, or, as one old revamped phrase had it, by “monsters from the id”. Great copy.

Ironically, it had done harm at the moment of greatest public attention. Certainly the public sponsors were worrying, the Vatican, the Eden League, Gaia Spec, the various Islamic nations, the rest, all the countless, global, corporate “medicis” trying for some sort of positive PR flow-on. The mostly anonymous secret sponsors, well, who knew what they thought?

“Secondly?” someone demanded. And not Davidson this time. Not Kilmer. Geridh, the Libyan diplomat.

“Why don't we let Lydia Parkes tell us that,” Doctor Salt said. “Someone who's actually been there. Lydia?”

And on cue the short, compact iconaut approached the lectern, her collar mike engaged. She gripped the lectern's sides and gave her wonderful smile.

* * * *

Ham watched the short blonde woman move to the front of the stage and step up to the lectern. She looked so different in her dark blue cutaway suit, so different from when she wore her mission fatigues. Her long plain face was the sort that made you think “dependable” and never frightened people off, yet had a full intelligent gaze that made many more people than Ham use the really quite inappropriate yet compelling analogy that her eyes were filled with light. They weren't, of course, in any quantitative sense, but they carried a force, a vitality and charisma that was carried down into her smile and often made people grab at that allusion before any other.

All so fitting now. You noticed Lydia Parkes when she smiled because it changed her face; then you saw the eyes and it changed

something else. It bemused men. That truly rare thing, it charmed and eluded women rather than threatened them. It broke categories and strategies. What her smile did to her eyes was inexpressible.

She began speaking, and Ham had to make himself look away. It wasn't anything as simple as being in love with her. Lydia Parkes had nearly died because of him once, *in* him if you listened to the likes of Raglan, Kilmer, NFD and CIRODEC, overwhelmed with the rest of the Imago 9 crew. Only she had been revived this side of brain-death, drawn out of heartstop, kept from flatline, barely in time. When she'd regained consciousness, she had immediately volunteered for the Oneiros 4 probe and this latest Oneiros 5 follow-up, not really a veteran iconaut given active hours in the Donauer Trance, but treated as one by those who were.

She *knew* him, he liked to believe.

Someone knew him.

Dependable and a survivor. Full of light and life. He had liked her when he first saw her, even before she smiled. He loved her when she did. Had fallen in love with her when he looked above the smile to her eyes again, saw the knowing of him, the caring, the simple caring. Now the whole quest reminded him of her. The muted sunmire did. He wanted to watch her speak, read her body, her set of self, see how she mouthed careful, confident words against the surging strains of Vivaldi, but he looked back at where the sunmire coiled about what was left of itself. While he wouldn't understand all the words she said, he knew what the first ten would be.

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"God is just a by-product of our perception of light," Lydia Parkes said. "That's what I remember apprehending — *knowing* — in an evolved sequence-tree probably thirteen minutes into full REM phase. Excuse the jargon, ladies and gentlemen. It's how we try to identify locales and orient POV under trance. If one of us fails to do that then we're one observer down. It's probably the second hardest thing we have to do: remember to be ourselves in there. The hardest, as you already know, is coming back out again. On this insertion, there was a hallway and staircase from the Donauer Clinic as Stage One, a field of standing-stones from Dorset segueing into Easter Island, a group of birds-into-druids all branching into multiples then. A cloister on a shoreline. A forest lawn with spindles of light. All reinforced motifs, all transformation segues of a very high order. Completely unexpected. The frame POV, Ham's master template for us, was affirming a role for light. Obviously we associated as we always do —

allowable reification under the circumstances — posited God of Light, Lord of Light, Let there be Light, but I grabbed it as the *key* determining element of our god-perception. I templated that idea in-trance so I had referents, then jettisoned the lot as we're trained to do. I sought confirmation and found it. Ben and Marjory affirmed and confirmed. Excuse the terms, please. It's how we experience it, as affirmations and confirmations inside our heads inside Hampton Donauer's head. Sometimes we can talk to one another in-trance. We don't know how that works exactly so we don't expect it. Ben and Marjory saw what I did and confirmed. We knew we had locked onto something with an A-1 flag, the highest rating we can give.

“These are Big Dreams, ladies and gentlemen, just as our reports show, just as Dr Jung correctly named them all those years ago. Everyone of us has them — the key dreams that recur over months, years, lifetimes and are traditionally regarded as prophetic and highly significant for the dreaming individual. Not just the usual syntheses of daily minutiae, not just the result of associative data saturation. We have never been sure of riding a Big Dream before. These are allegedly the psyche's own messages to itself, after all, to the evolving individual or carrier it is. Not fashionable believing that these days, but never disproven.

“Allowing these Big or Key Dreams and recognising them has always been the problem. There is so much random and associative iconography, so many hundreds and thousands of image referents available, segues, associants, value-sets to evaluate in terms of the individual. Because we can control something of Hampton Donauer's environment — the day to day information horizon available to him, people he meets and so on — we can often identify the associational material surprisingly well; understandable since much of it is our own daily experience also. Inside him there is a dream, mostly circumstantial, incidental material, mostly just a light-show or the psyche carrying out housecleaning duties. We do what nanotech cannot yet do reliably. Nano probes may glean image ghosts but never the *felt* experience, the recognition associated with them. Sometimes we *know* it's essential data we're seeing because the themes are so powerful and so apparently original. So numinous. That's a vital word for what we get. Just data-streams, then exaltation. Recognition *and* rapture suddenly there. We *sense* the dream as being of enormous numinous significance. Allow that the psyche *does* know when it is being replenished, even if we ourselves as conscious individuals do not. Self, not ego, despite the bigotry and narrow-mindedness, the inherent envy of the ego.”

She did not give Kilmer, Davidson or even Geridh time to respond to the slight.

“Deprived of god-lore, many of Hampton Donauer’s Big Dreams could well have shown such wonderfully promising image arrays. In comparative terms, it’s like the Jungian case of the little girl who presented her father with a notebook containing accounts of dreams she’d had, filled with all sorts of symbolic elements she *couldn’t* have lived. We allow that there are such dreams. It is faith in a sense, supported by the most dramatic wave-surges in the brain. Something *is* there, more than just images, and we’re trying to find out what that is.”

It was as if no-one dared speak. Lydia left a four-beat of silence, then continued.

“Let me clarify something. We have already *proven* we are not inside Hampton Donauer as people. We have repeatedly *demonstrated* that we have access to the man’s *revemonde*, nothing more. We’ve never claimed more. Our opticals are slaved to his, that is all. Henry Donauer very wisely published the technical specifics of the Donauer Glove immediately after Camille Jaels made her unofficial disclosures. Medical experts have confirmed that the deaths resulted from a curious and recurring anomaly we call trauma separation, a massive, regenerative release of neurotransmitters that has the same effect as a major stroke. These are volunteers and it’s regrettable but, in a sense, *you* have pushed us to it. Even more regrettably, we have let you. We’ve published all the specifics on this again and again, furnished you all with technicals verified by your own sanctioned observers and investigative bodies and the accredited independents. I want to know why some of you persist in asking such uninformed questions in the first place.”

She read the murmurs rippling through the crowd. “Look at you! Look at this turn-out today. Many of you openly ridicule us yet gather like this even for a pre-launch. You fund us yet challenge the very clearly established terms of our search, even list human rights abuses. You wilfully misrepresent the facts. You have scorned and challenged this program every step of the way. Consider yourselves for a change! Ask yourselves why.”

It was a terrible, wonderful moment, a silence of steel and glass, coral-fragile with danger.

She had called them selfish, deluded, ignorant. Vatican delegates. Top-level Islamic mullahs. Diplomats, career politicians and mercenary scientists.

She must have calculated every second that silence could stand, because she was there again.

“The funding has been invaluable. It’s let the Donauer Institute and the Donauer Project perfect variants on its hardware, all the different approaches we have tried. Those mission names aren’t just window-dressing *as you will already know*. The names are different and so highly numbered because they represent entirely different access and insertion methods. You will have *seen* the data.” She was merciless now. “Again, why are you continuing to ask these questions? You have not bought us. We would have proceeded without any of you.”

It was still so dangerous. In this room were implicit pogroms, jihads and censure, the capacity for disinformation and reprisal, yet it was all on hold, everyone waiting, allowing.

“And if you think Oneiros 4 gave us something, just wait till you see what Oneiros 5 intends to do. “We cannot declare too much at this point; that would be prejudicing the observers. Just remember please that what we stand to find usually has very little to do with memory. This is the unknown appearing *amidst* the known. Something new amongst the memories, not just registering as imaginings but as recognitions. We can identify those moments. Even allowing for anomalies of perception and recognition — *déjà vu*, *jamais vu*, *presque vu* — we have discrete and distinctive EEG signatures for these moments of *rapture* and conviction.”

Then someone did interrupt. Not Kilmer or Davidson this time. It was Geridh, fiercely conservative, inflammatory. “But ultimately we still only have your word for it, don’t we, Ms Parkes? You could have been misleading us all along, feeding Mr Donauer requisite data, fabricating the alleged discoveries.”

“Then why are you here, Mr Geridh?” she asked, then forestalled any reply by raising a hand. “But why not let me answer that, since you’re certainly not alone in your misgivings. Like most of us, you’re judging the moment. You don’t want to miss out on such a vital thing, but it has to be the *real* thing, and you are correct in rigorously challenging what we do because of that. So let me tell you just a bit more about Oneiros 5 and its objectives.

“In our last mission we discovered likely causations for a God-perception in response to light. Having monitored a Big Dream at last,

we now mean to approach it from the opposite position, to stimulate Ham's optic nerves and vision centres while he is in REM sleep. He does not know we will be doing this."

For a moment, hundreds of people watched Ham watching the sunmire, a calm handsome young man, as serene-looking now as a Christ or a Bodhisattva.

Lydia continued. "We have devised and field-tested a means to do this. While allowing that at one extreme it could be no more than the phosphene display behind a human's closed eyelids predisposing us to recurring symbols such as mandalas and cruciforms, stars and all-seeing eyes, and at the other the existence of adulant neurotransmitters, a specialised visual predisposition in the cortex, we now mean to send light signals into the relevant areas of Hampton Donauer's brain, then track the resulting image runs. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, this time we will attempt to induce such a theophanic experience. Not just a Big Dream. We hope to trigger God."

At some level or other, everyone hated hearing it. There was shouting. Hands were up. People were standing, calling, clamoring.

Ham looked round at the commotion, then turned his attention back to the windows, forced it there.

"Shall I tell you more?" Lydia said, and kept saying it like a mantra until the large gathering settled again. "If we did *not* attempt this, we would *not* be fairly testing our previous observations. You should expect this as the next step; you should insist on it. We personally — the iconauts — do not need to do this. We have been *in* the dream. We have stood in what reads as the light of sublime ideation; we have lived the moment as profoundly as anyone who has ever experienced epiphany and theophany. We probably have enough data already. But seeing if we can trigger the response is a crucial and appropriate final step, not a redundancy. At least we know you will all be here for the next press conference seventy-two hours from now." And she smiled, marvellously, beatifically, wickedly.

There was such danger. People were muttering. There were one or two cries in various languages, no doubt the usual accusations of blasphemy.

Then Kilmer stood, his hand raised as well, uncommon civility, and the audience let him be their voice.

“Mr Kilmer?” Lydia said, ready for him.

“What is in it for you personally, Ms Parkes? You have, well, experienced God, you say. What passes for God — you imply — in the faith convictions of millions. What is in this for you?”

Lydia could have deflected it so easily, but she decided to answer. Her smile changed, mirrored Kilmer’s, became sharing and gentle. “The ancient Greeks were at a similar point to the one we’re at now. They were maintaining a vigorously rational society, were mistrustful or disbelieving of their countless flawed and brawling gods and goddesses. The best thinkers, the greatest, truly greatest citizens and statesmen — *men*, regrettably, the women didn’t leave such a written legacy of what they thought — then knew to pursue excellence, *aristos*, the life of reason but as the work of art too. They sought *aristos*.”

“I did say personally, Ms Parkes,” Kilmer said. “Personally.”

“We do not have that mindset, Mr Kilmer, just as we do not have the mindset of the Elizabethans or even those who lived during the World Wars. But I believe this: the age of reason is done with too. We need more. Societies regulated by reason alone, just like those regulated by their once so useful founding religions, will fail as surely as those founded on our gods and goddesses. We need more now. I need more now. That’s what’s in it for me personally. Excellence. Quality. Calling out the Eternal Yes, Mr Kilmer, is not a thing of reason. It is an exultation in the act of living. But is it just an atavistic thing, a throwback to some old triumph over adversary and adversity? Reason can try to explain it but it cannot do so without first reducing it, stripping it of its psychoactive power, its intrinsic reality. As with any epiphany or conviction or hope or inspiration, the inherent motivating, phenomenological force is lost.”

“I’m not sure what you mean by Eternal Yes, Ms Parkes.”

“Exactly.” Her smile became both exquisite indulgence and the gentlest of knives. “So come along with us on Oneiros 5.”

“You’re not serious.”

“You would quite likely see what we see at the very least.”

“I’m not sure I’d trust you weren’t feeding me false data.”

“Ah, but the others would. The independent observers.”

Kilmer saw the trap being set, the loss of control in this assembly. More to the point, his studio heads and viewers were. "What would I gain? Scientifically?"

"Why, perhaps a first-hand experience of God!"

"What, a moment of rapture? An Eternal Yes or two?" He was trying to disparage it. Regain control. "I think I'll pass."

"Then remember you were asked." The trap was closed. He was excluded now. She left him no time to comment. "And now Frank Sterman will recount his experiences with similar light templates in his Psychos 5, 6 and 7 insertions."

* * * *

They walked on the beach afterwards, Lydia and Ham, avoiding talk of the next morning's Oneiros insertion at first, just meeting the afternoon in all its vital parts, wavefall, windflow, the warming glow of autumn sun. They walked between the security baffles, the outflung walls of one-way shieldglass, watching everything, pointing and remarking, until Ham did mention the press conference, meaning to use it to get rid of the subject, to highlight how people missed moments like this in the rush for greater meaning. It didn't work.

Ham knew Lydia's mike was on, that Salt or Medda would routinely run the conversations then or later, but he had lived with that all his conscious days.

They walked in the glorious sunlight, enjoying the on-shore breeze, held by an intimacy of the most unusual sort. She knew something of his appetites, his hidden drives and desires, what his shadow self did. She had walked his dream-fields, endured his image runs, suspected causations.

Ham felt easy enough considering, though some of the apartment towers were patched with sunmire. He saw them flaring off cornices and balconies, hazing the outlines. They kept the mission more alive than he wanted right then.

"Richard says we won't need many more insertions. He thinks we've got as much as we'll get."

Lydia accepted the inevitability of the apartment towers too, how the

lightforms starpointed the ten-storey Donauer Centre and the adjacent Trade Centre.

“Most of it will be for the sponsors after this,” she said. “Confirmation runs until they’re all happy.”

“Then we close it down.” He sounded like a child in his simplicity. He could afford to be that.

“What is it, Ham?”

“I worry. I see the empty chairs for Luke, Isabelle and the others, and I want it over, yes. I just wonder what the others need.”

“Is it to do with me?” She had always been direct.

“You nearly died. I don’t want you in there again and yet I do. I like it and I don’t.” And he wondered how many secrets she still had to keep. They said they weren’t holding back much now, but what else could there be?

About this God. Godding. Godded. Godness. Goddess. Godless. Godlessness. Godling. Goading. Guarding.

He ran the word till it became meaningless again.

“Lydia, the program doesn’t warrant this much attention. Media, yes, but those were senior officials there today, political people. It’s out of proportion.”

“I know. For some I’m sure it’s totally, politically opportunistic in that sense, electorates demanding representation ...”

“But I sensed it from the True Science and World Science groups too. Supposedly nonpartisan. They get our stuff, all the data releases. You think they’d stay right out of it, especially with the media and political circus like it is. First they didn’t want to be seen to be accrediting us too much, now they’re so visible. It doesn’t make sense.”

“We haven’t looked any gift horses in the mouth, Ham. Maybe it’s just the phenomenon itself — why this phenomenon now, why the attention? Why the patch of sunmire outside the windows today?”

“Lots of buildings have them.”

“But in sociological, philosophical, theological terms this has to seem like an Event. We can hardly blame them. How many people throughout history have failed to monitor the key events of their age as they were happening? We showed you the cover for next month’s *True Scientist*. *Light Said Let There Be God!* I wish I could tell you what *Better Science* and *International Science* have as their cover stories, but I can’t.”

“We should stop.”

“We talked about that after the meeting today. Ross and Richard think we’ve missed our chance.”

“I don’t follow.”

“They wouldn’t let us.”

“Officially.”

“Legally. Everything. They’d pass rulings through WHO, the lot. Appropriate it all. It’s gotten too big. Shouldn’t have. Should never have, and what does that tell us? And even if we could shut it down, end it, everything, they wouldn’t believe us for a minute. They’d say we’d gone into some new closed-door phase. Inner circle. You think it’s out of control now! They’d go crazy.”

“What do we do?”

“That’s up to you as always. But I’d say continue. Phase it down and give more press conferences, more public appearances. Show them it’s diminishing returns. Show them there are no new disclosures, just confirmations. Like the NASA Apollo missions last century. The public will lose interest. Suggest human rights angles to the right people so they lobby for your total acclimation.”

“Will it work?”

“Our experts think so. You’d be free of it.”

“It’s hard to imagine it, Lydia. Things happening for so long in response terms I just can’t track. Whatever this God is must be very important. It’s so — disproportionate.”

“For a long time it gave meaning.” She had to be so careful. “Now we want more.”

“We make our own meaning,” Ham said. “But we *need* more.” He looked out to sea, saw the autumn sunlight glinting off the waves. “We need the meaning to come from somewhere else.”

It was the sort of astute-facile comment that kept astonishing the Project team.

Lydia didn’t hesitate. “Exactly. And that’s natural. We’re predisposed to wanting that. That’s why he did it, Ham.”

“Henry?”

“Right.”

“We need closure on this, don’t we? Soon. It’s too volatile.”

“Yes.”

“God has to be a source. A destination. A maker. A state and a vessel. But an object of yearning.”

“Oh?”

“A power base too, but an answer to meaningless.”

“I’m hearing you.” She was referring to her audio link. “We all are.”

“So why do we continue?”

“Confirmation. A bit of hope. Knowing. The nature of the age lets us do it.”

“No other age would have?”

She was careful. So careful. “Probably not. Not publicly at least.” She took his hand as they walked. “Are you worried?”

“No,” he lied, because there was a mission tomorrow, so much to do. “Are you?”

“No,” she lied as well and squeezed his hand to show that lying was a

good thing when faced with so much truth.

* * * *

The mission insertion went according to plan. By 0530 the next morning, Ham lay deeply asleep at the “thumb” of the Glove, the “stem” of the flower, with five iconauts in their sleeves, heads radially aligned to his so from above he was splendid sight, an El Dorado with a radiant crown of living dreamers — or, rather, non-dreamers, literally entranced fellow dreamers. It was a powerful image, and over time had supplanted the Project’s original logo, so now there was just the single vertical line with five others radiating from it, a “dreamer’s cross”, as the media first had it, a “frightened mop”, as Davidson had quipped on *Discovery*, a “spider doing a handstand”, as Kilmer had called it on *Living Science*.

Fourteen minutes after initiation, the interfacing began, and five POVs were gradually slaved to the one — as close to functional telepathy as humanity had ever gotten. At twenty-three minutes, readings showed distinctive, coterminous synchrony, the deeply affecting sight of the variant EEGs on the six monitors, formerly dancing apart, now drawing closer, becoming virtually one, never completely overlapping, of course, but braided on the master screen as a coherent cable of dedicated mentation. That too was a media image known worldwide, as ramous in its own way as the DNA helix or physician’s caduceus it resembled. Ham was leading them. Oneiros 5 was underway.

They were at forty-six minutes when Lydia Parkes died in him.

One moment there was the quiet of the staging room, the low lighting, the barely audible hum of engaged tech. Then there were sudden detonations, corridor alarms, voices shouting, doors bursting in, the startling flash of nocto weapons.

Thirteen minutes earlier, Ham’s sleeve would have been hit, but one of the dozen modifications to the Oneiros series had been to rotate the Glove platform yet again for aura exclusion, and ascernium baffles separated Ham from the other sleeves.

The raiders had the old Imago series data and couldn’t know what they were seeing. Chris, Ram and Kaori died outright in a nocto sweep; immediate flatline in the ops room. James succumbed to a ballistic strike to the side of the skull. Lydia’s sleeve was angled away, Ham’s concealed altogether. Coincidence. Lucky coincidence.

An explosion on the roof told the three raiders that the Clinic's Quick-Save forces had destroyed their VTO. They went for contingency. But even as one reached to trigger the Landfall pack that would take out the Centre and half the city block, a Quick-Save omni fired from the door and severed head, arm and shoulder. His companions died the same way.

Ham was safe, but Lydia died in extraction. Maybe if the op techs hadn't been distracted, in fear of their lives, they might have reached her in time. There were 3.8 seconds where she was in extremis from the trauma of massive systems damage before the tertiary systems read the secondaries also down and engaged. She died in the dark of his dreaming, alone and unknowing.

* * * *

They answered most of Ham's questions in the infirmary two hours later, then, when he was out of sedation the following day, finally invited him to the briefing room for the emergency session. There were seven of them — Lydia so noticeably missing.

"Who was it?" Ham could now ask.

Ross Bellinger answered. "Riyadh says the Vatican as usual. The Vatican says Panislamic *yaddists*. The League claims a new San Diego-based Christian fundamentalist group. The UN and the Gaiasts say ..."

"Okay." Ham cut him off with uncommon brusqueness. They would never know. And Lydia wasn't there. Would never be there again. He wasn't sure what he felt.

Ross leant forward, clasped his hands on the tabletop. "Ham, there's another thing."

But Ham had already grasped it. "They could have taken out the complex with a distance strike. Used remotes. They wanted me."

"Seems like it, yes. Someone wants to continue the tests under their own control."

"What do we do?" *Lydia wasn't there.*

Richard Salt answered this time. "Close down the Program. Tell no-one initially. Do it so no-one outside this room knows till you've gone."

“Zimbabwe,” Ham said, angry and afraid, but making the old joke, needing it, something. During the early years, the intriguing, peaceful, easy years, a common answer to crisis was to joke about running off to Zimbabwe rather than facing whatever it was.

He said it, they smiled; Ross Bellinger passed him a smart card.

“Quick-Save airvac at 1450. You’re off to Zurich and a safe-house.” Ham went to speak but Ross cut him off. “Before and during the flight, from when we’re done here, you get everything on the religions. The lot. We give you dogmas and pantheons, Ham, everything from jinnis and jihads to transubstantiation. And we’re letting the agencies know an hour after you’ve gone: Mossad, Sintio, Crydin, every other top-line interest group there is. Oneiros 5 was it. No more missions.”

“Salting the well,” Ham said, another Lydia line. He *was* keeping her alive in him. As him. “Spiking the guns.” Mixing her metaphors. *Lydia*.

“Right,” Ross said. “So 1450. Before then, you use that comp over there. Call up *Godgame*.”

“No.” *She wasn’t there. The referent in so many equations.*

“What’s that?”

“Not yet, Ross. Tell them I’ve been briefed, neutralised, but no. Not yet.”

“She’s gone, Ham. She isn’t...” He paused, didn’t say *inside you*.

“I don’t want to know yet!” he cried, ambiguously. “Don’t you understand? You’re all so good at wanting, seeking, finding and giving answers that you’ve forgotten what *not* knowing does. The advantage of not knowing!”

They all waited, sensing a vehemence beyond grief, a clarity beyond the chaos of the last two days.

“We aren’t only governed by logic,” he said. “Don’t you see that? We’re governed by our perceptions, needs, passions, by our very humanism, by our *bias*, don’t you see? Our biasing of objective fact. Our need to. Our splendid triumph in doing so. Humanity isn’t just logic. Every

public gathering has shown me that, every history book, every scientist I've watched or met. Humanity is also intuition, gestalt knowing, conviction. We are evolved to operate *beyond reason!* To *require* more than reason can provide. Our rationalists have always missed it. We operate *beyond*. That's our ultimate specialisation. Whether as inner truth or placebo, as self-delusion or fervent belief, that's our ultimate survival mechanism — knowing when to set reason aside for *irrational* self-nurturing gains. Our enemy isn't a nervous, manipulative Vatican or bigoted *yaddist* sects or wacky New Agers, whatever *Godgame* will confirm those things as! They're just naturally, desperately, dangerously, even gloriously compensating for the rationalists who also fail to read what human is, who give clear objective truth but in their reductive, contemptuous, misperceiving way, fail to see the balance as well."

There was silence. They let him have it, as much attentive, caring, accepting silence as he needed, the silence, too, of tacit agreement. They knew he had had enough training in sociology to have deduced formal belief systems, the simple self-nurturing and self-deceiving need for something more.

"These are your discoveries, Ham?" Ross Bellinger said. The question was a formality for the audio-visual record.

Ham nodded, remembered why Ross had actually asked it and said, "Yes. It's where our humanising values come from. Also a cause for harm. Reason alone makes a poor bedfellow for the human spirit. It disallows the human spirit. There can be no such thing."

Again Ross Bellinger improvised. "Then we proceed to make it known that you have been exposed to *Godgame*. Even give you some salient key words. Is that okay?"

Ham hesitated. A vital integer was missing. "So long as you understand why I'm doing this now. And why not let me give you some of your key words, Ross? Communion. Benediction. Atonement. Sacrifice. Love. Charity. Forgiveness. How am I doing?"

Ross smiled, loving the young man, this known yet always unexpected cornerstone of his own life. "You're doing very well. And you have to keep reminding us, just like this, okay? That the words come first."

"But in the beginning there aren't just the words," Ham said, believing it with all his heart. "There are the feelings, the understandings, the

perceptions, convictions and recognitions. Then the names.” And he sought again for words which encompassed all he had lost. There was only one.

* * * *

He was on the roof-field at 1440, wearing maintenance coveralls and cap, carrying a duffel, playing the role of a solitary tech being airlifted back to Aluen. He stood in the cool afternoon wind that lifted over the low parapet from the ocean and watched a patch of sunmire hanging on a corner of the adjacent Trade Centre, a hot kernel in the bright sunlight, as detached and unfeeling as a rainbow.

At 1450 exactly, a Rogan *sbaukraft* appeared over Clinic’s western side, settled in a flurry of air. The long side door opened; a crewman beckoned. Ham ducked, clutched his bag and ran, but instead of climbing aboard, he remained standing at the door.

“Get in, Sir,” the crew tech said.

“Who are you with?” Ham asked.

The tech seemed not to hear. “Please, Sir. We’re on a time. Please get in.”

“I just want to know who you’re with.” It was suddenly important.

“Quick-Save Airvac,” the man said. “Name’s Jell.”

A second crew-tech appeared at the door. “Hey, we’re on a time, Jell,” she said. “Mr Donauer, please get in, Sir.”

“I don’t want you to have Lydia.”

“What? What’s that, Sir?” she asked.

The first tech reached for him, but Ham stepped back, eluding his grasp.

Figures had appeared at the door onto the roof-field, wondering what was amiss. Ross or Richard, Ham couldn’t tell.

“I said I don’t want you to have Lydia.”

And he saw that they understood, feigned incomprehension a second after, yes, then abandoned it when they saw he knew.

The first tech reached for him again. “You’re safe with us, Sir. We’re scientists too.”

But by then Ham was running, not to his friends. Diminishing returns there anyway, they’d said.

He ran away from the *sbaukraft* and the roof building, the Quick-Save imposters running behind but too late, way too late.

We make our own meaning! At the very least. Eternally yes.

There was sunmire ahead, beckoning, blazing, as meaningless and inscrutable as a rainbow, but all there was, and right then everything there was. He had her with him. He ran. He jumped. He tried to catch the light.

* * * *

AFTERWORD

I began the story in 1993, and wrote seven or so longhand pages before setting it aside because I kept resisting the ending. When *Dreaming Down-Under* came along, with its wonderful coincidence of title and theme, I went back and re-read what I had and saw how neatly it all matched. When I re-met the story’s central character, I saw what it needed to be for him. That was the way it had to go, of course.

Narrative mainsprings? I guess it mainly came out of accepting that there used to be important cultural mysteries in our societies for very good reasons. Equally important, there used to be languages for explaining such mysteries or, rather, dealing with them — of representing while avoiding them, in short, “languages of accommodation” for confronting, skirting, but at least *allowing for* a prevailing and incommunicable gestalt of human spirit in each of us.

While many excellent science fiction writers were challenging the prevailing paradigms so well, making us gasp and marvel at demonstrable truths and possibilities in the universe, many seemed too coolly detached, too offhanded and reductive, even curiously bleak and dystopian, not only in their delivery but in their approach to their task. Exploring truths and

possibilities can demand rigorous and unswerving measures, true, but this contradiction fascinated me. For all their smarts, their exciting “What ifs” and careful scientific facts and methods, some genuinely invigorating storytellers seemed either unwilling or unable to incorporate the *lived* knowledge of self and spirit inherent in each of us and in human society, and so effectively disregarded it. They were, in a sense, misreading the age. Powerful stories seemed incomplete and beside the point somehow, even dated, not because the ideas were weak or the content too formidable, but because often a clinical scientific method is still not equal to the task of grasping what it examines.

Regrettably, inevitably, many of our languages of accommodation are either gone or no longer adequate to the task of representing what they once glossed and skirted. Here’s where the storyteller, the balladeer, the dancer, the artist, the polymath explainer, can serve: not only reminding us of what we have surrendered, showing what those languages were for and helping to fill the gap left in societal need, but quite possibly helping to keep us linked with all that we are.

The task of the futurist may be much much harder than we thought.

— *Terry Dowling*