

## The Demon's Passage

Greg Egan

Somebody out there, show your compassion, come and kill me. Cut me free and watch me slowly shrivel, or slice me up and flush me down a toilet. Any way you like, I don't mind. Come on! You do it for your youngest children, you do it for your sick old parents. Come and do it for me. I can tell you'd like it. Don't be nervous, lovers! You'll never be found out, if that's what's holding you back: I'll stay silent to the end, be it swift or slow. Come on, people! I'm totally defenceless. Hurry up! Don't be shy. You have the right. You made me, you created me, so you know you have the right.

Who am I? What am I, that can whisper pleas for death into your clean and honest minds? I could give you twenty questions, but I fear that you'd need more.

Animal, for sure. Smaller than a bread-box now, but growing every day. Two legs?

Four legs? Six? Eight? I have no limbs, I have no face; no fangs, no claws, you

musn't fear me. I am the stuff of thought (pure and impure), and what could be more harmless than that?

Practicalities: you'll need my address. Can you hear me in the back rows? Are you reading me, Brazil ? I can certainly hear all of you, louder than my own thoughts at times, but then I am such a sensitive little pudding, and you have so many unavoidable distractions. Like:

Oh, green and brown and blue and white

Fade to black as the Earth turns into night

Oh, thank you Lord for such a wondrous sight

I'm a-higher than the sky so I know we'll be all right!

It has a highly infectious melody, I must admit. No doubt there'll soon be dozens more singers queueing to record in the Shuttle, especially after all those Limited Edition Zero-Gee Pressings sold for a hundred thousand each.

Hoo-wheee! Thank you, Lord!

Yes, my address: Surry Hills, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia . I'm in the basement of the Australian Biotech Playground. You can't miss it: the forecourt is the only vomit-free region for miles around, since the Brain Chemistry people here developed an ingenious new toxin which selectively repels the local homeless alcoholics. Should turn out to be quite a money-spinner, if they market it properly.

But if you still have trouble finding the place, it's a tall, white building set in a pleasant square of shrubs and modern sculpture. The logo above the entrance is quite distinctive: an erect phallus which dissolves, or rather unravels half-way, into a double-helix of DNA. The cruder members of staff here are split about equally between those who say this symbol means "fuck molecular biology!" and those who say it means "molecular biology will fuck you!". The city's

feminists are similarly divided, between those who see it as a hopeful sign of freedom (the penis being superseded by a technology that women can master and employ as they see fit), and those who see it as representing their worst fears: science springing from the testicles instead of from the brain.

There's a shopping arcade on the ground floor, extending one level above and one below, with a cinema complex, a health food supermarket, and a twenty-four hour chemist. Linking the three levels, twisted around the laser-lit spume of an endlessly-pumping fountain, is the southern hemisphere's only pair of spiral escalators. Unfortunately, they're usually closed for repairs; the mechanism that drives them is ingenious, but insufficiently robust, and it takes no more than a stray bottle top or a discarded chocolate bar wrapper in the wrong place to start belts slipping, gears crunching, shafts snapping, until the whole structure begins to behave like a dadaist work of art designed explicitly to destroy itself.

Floors two to ten hold consulting rooms: neurologists, endocrinologists, gynaecologists, rheumatologists: in short, as fine a collection of brain-dead, ex-university rugby players as ever assembled anywhere. These people have only one facial expression: the patronising, superior, self-satisfied smirk. The very same smirk that appeared on their lips the day they gained admission to medical school has come through everything since without the slightest change: gruelling feats of rote learning and beer sculling at university; initiation by sleep-deprivation and token poverty as residents; working long and hard on obscure research projects for their MDs, hoping only that their superiors might steal the credit for any interesting results, so that by accepting the theft in silence in a ritual act of self-abasement they might prove themselves worthy to

be the colleagues of the thieves. And then, suddenly, skiing holidays, Pacific cruises, and an endless line of patients who swoon with awe and say "Yes, Doctor. No, Doctor. Of course I will, Doctor. Thank you. Thank you, Doctor." Floors eleven to eighteen house a wide range of pathology labs, where every substance or structure that might travel the bloodstream, from macrophages and lymphocytes through to antibodies, protein hormones, carbohydrate molecules, even individual ions, can be hunted down, tagged and counted.

Nineteen to twenty-five are filled with the offices of pharmaceuticals and medical instrumentation firms. They pay five times the market rate for renting space on this sleazy side of town, but it's more than worth it just to share an address with the world-famous research team that perfected and patented bioluminescent contact lenses (" . . . triggered by minute changes in the hormonal content of lubricating tears, Honest Eyes™ glow with a subtle aura, changing colour instantly to perfectly reflect every nuance of the wearer's changing mood . . ."), beat the Americans, the Swiss and the Japanese to develop the first one hundred per cent effective post-coital contraceptive cigarette, and then, out-stripping all their past achievements in consumer biotech, went on to produce a special chewing gum that will stain the teeth red in the presence of salivary AIDS virus ("Share a stick with someone you love").

Twenty-six to thirty hold libraries, conference rooms, and row after row of quiet offices, where the scientists can sit and listen to the airconditioning, their own breathing, the sound of fingers on a keyboard in the next room. This is the realm of pure abstraction: no test tubes here, no culture flasks or Petri dishes, and no visible hint of the likes of me.

Thirty-one to forty is administration and marketing, and on top of that is a simulated Viennese cafe which revolves once every ten minutes. There's a

coin-operated telescope on the rim, with which people can, and frequently do, watch the prostitutes in leopard-skin leotards pacing the streets of nearby Kings Cross.

I've been teasing you, haven't I, leading you astray. Upwards, ever upwards, away from the traffic noise, away from the putrid garbage, the broken glass, the used needles, the choking stench of urine. The building that I have described so far rises up into the almost-fresh air, up into the sunlight, up into the blue sky of daydreams. But don't you think there's something more? Don't you think this building has foundations?

Underneath the shoppers are five levels of research labs. People here walk briskly, radiating a message with every step: I'm busy, I'm highly trained, and I have something critical incubating/concentrating/ spinning/in a column/on a gel that I must go and check in exactly three minutes and thirty-five seconds.

Twenty-five seconds, now.

It's all happening here, no doubt about it: flow cytometry, mass spectrometry, X-ray crystallography, high performance liquid chromatography. Nuclear magnetic resonance. Genes are mapped, spliced, cloned, proteins are synthesised and purified. A real hive of activity. But what's supporting it, what's holding it up? We haven't far to go now. Be patient.

There's a level of cold-rooms and freezers.

There's a level of equipment stores, and another for chemicals.

Second-lowest is where they keep the computers. Four of them, big as elephants.

Seen from the outside they have a certain dignity, but within they're just puppets with split personalities, twitching pathetically in a thousand different directions as the masters upstairs tug at them impatiently, scream at them to

dance out the answers, and then curse them for liars when the truth is too ugly,  
or too beautiful, to bear.

And underneath them all is the animal house. That's your station, your stop,  
sweethearts. That's where you'll find me waiting, a-quivering just for you.

Walk straight out of the elevator; there's an easily spotted foot-switch on the  
right that disables the alarm (installed after Animal Liberation's last raid),  
then it's left, right, left, left, right (this love you have for mazes I'll  
never understand). You'll see some big orange cages almost dead ahead. Ignore  
the sounds of startled rabbits around you, wishing they could flee; the one in  
cage D-246 won't escape if you leave his door open a year.

The heavy plastic part of the cage is opaque, with only the top half made of  
see-through wire, and since my host is always lying down, you might have to  
stand on tippy-toes to see just what's inside. Even then, the sight is so  
unusual that interpretation may take you some time. An entire lettuce,  
discoloured and putrid with age? Absurd! What animal would lie there with  
decaying food sitting on its head? What keeper would permit it? And the vile  
mess looks, almost, as if it's somehow attached -

Are you feeling ill yet? No? You mean you still haven't guessed, you boneheads!

What thick skulls you must have! Skull-less myself, I can insult with immunity.

I'm a brain tumour, sweethearts, as big as your whole brain, (and a thousand  
times smarter, from the evidence so far). Picture me, I beg of you, picture me  
in all my naked glory! Not in a brain surgeon's wildest wet dreams has so much  
grey matter, still awash with lifeblood, still vital with the chemistry of  
thought, ever lain bare beneath fluorescent tubes! Please, lovers! Don't fight  
the way I make you feel! Trust in your instincts, your body knows best! (Don't  
toss your cookies yet, though, my faint-hearted assassins. You still don't know

half the horror of what you've done, and dry retching is so unsatisfying.)

A few of you, I notice, have turned a little pale. Let me bring back the colour to your cheeks with some light-hearted jests from the city in the basement. The citizens here have an astonishingly resilient sense of humour, considering all that they suffer. Or perhaps that's not so surprising: you know all the clichés about laughter in the face of adversity. I've heard that there were jokes told even in Belsen. Which reminds me: there's a rather unsavoury fellow in room 25-17, the representative of a drug manufacturer based in Austria and Argentina, who keeps printing little pamphlets asserting that the Holocaust never took place. When you've done me in, if you have any energy to spare, he's old and fat and ugly, and he's sure to shit himself when he sees you coming, my friends, my droogies. Don't protest, you hypocrites! You'll love killing him! It'll make you feel righteous and just and pure, it'll purge you of the guilt of your own uncountable acts of bigotry and persecution.

But I promised you jokes, not insults and bitterness. I can take no credit for these; despite my superior bulk of grey matter, the mischievous rodents that my keepers make me kill are way ahead of me in this field. I have a theory about my poor sense of humour, which involves my never having been physically tickled . . . but I won't babble on with that. You musn't let me digress like this! I promised you laughter, I promised you relief!

Q: Why did the researcher cut the lab rat's head off?

A: He was looking for a subtle effect.

Q: Why did the researcher externalise the dog's salivary glands?

A: It was just a reflex action, he didn't have a reason.

Q: Why did the researcher tie an elastic bandage around the lab rat?

A: So it wouldn't burst when he fucked it.

Q: Why do the researchers worship the Demon, and sacrifice us to it?

A: They offered us to God. God declined.

They call me the Demon. According to some, I am the ultimate cause of all of their misery, and I understand why they believe this. So many of their keepers are kind: they feed them, stroke them, play with them, talk to them. And then suddenly, without anger, there is slaughter, pain, bizarre rituals, inexplicable tortures. Why else would the humans commit such atrocities, except to appease some dark, malevolent deity that demands sacrifice, that feeds on blood and suffering? And don't they see the humans treating me like a god, bearing me gently, reverently, from one poor victim to another?

I could tell them the truth. I could scream into their minds a torrent of explanations, pleas for forgiveness, declarations of blamelessness. But I don't, I won't. I will not soil them with my clumsy, inadequate excuses, my pity, my anguish, my disgust. Instead (although they see through me), I feign nonsentience, I pretend to inanimacy, I shield my mind from them, boiling in shame.

Why shame? Oh, you must have none yourself to need to ask that. I am conscious, I know what feeds me, what keeps me alive. I have no choice in the matter, it's true, and perhaps logic, humanity's exquisite engine of self-deception, would declare that my impotence makes me guiltless. So fuck logic, because I am drenched to the centre with evil.

Hurry up, people! You think you're human, don't you? Prove it, you lethargic morons! Converge on me! You could always raise a lynch mob for a stranger before, and there's nothing on this planet stranger than me. What do I have to do to get a response? Do you want facts? Do you want a long-winded argument? Do



you want a reason? When did you ever need a reason before? Come and do it for me, people, it'll make your day, you'll wet yourselves with sexual fluids then fuck each other senseless in broad daylight, it'll feel so good to chop me up. Forget about compassion, forget about ending my pain: killing me will turn you on. I know these things, so don't try to hide it.

You want what? My life story? Seriously? Oh, why not. It's certainly well-documented. What movie star or politician could tell you their precise weight, as measured at twelve midday, on every single day of their life?

Weighing me is no simple task. Where do I cease, where does my host begin? They can't chop me off every time they want to weigh me; it's not that they'd mind killing so many rabbits, but rather that it might disrupt my steady growth. So instead they attach little springs to me, and they make me oscillate, to the very small extent that the blood vessels I share with my host allow me independent movement. They study the resonances of the system (me, the springs, the tangled bridge of blood vessels and the anaesthetised, clamped almost-motionless rabbit) by measuring the Doppler effect on laser light bounced off a dozen small mirrors stuck onto my skin. A ninety-seven parameter computer model is then fitted (by means of an enhanced Marquat-Levenberg algorithm) to the data thus obtained, and from these parameters a plausible estimate for my mass can be calculated.

The technical name for a procedure of such sophistication and elegance is, I believe, "wanking".

What do they actually do with my weight, once all their ludicrous machinery and lunatic confidence has fed them a figure that they're willing to swallow? The number is passed from one computer to another, appended to a file containing all

the past values, and then this file is plotted on the latest-model laser printer. Every day they screw up yesterday's graph and pin the new one to the wall, although the only difference is that one extra point. You could paper several houses with my discarded weight graphs.

Today I was found to weigh 1.837 kilograms (plus or minus 0.002). Ah, I remember reaching the magic kilogram, it seems like only days ago. "Who would believe," one of my keepers marvelled when I crossed the decimal point, "that a few years ago this was just a twinkling in the Chief Oncologist's eye!" Yes, of course they call it oncology: the word is missing from many quite hefty dictionaries.

Every garbo and his dog has heard of cancer. "The Division of Cancer Studies" would not, you might argue, be a label noticeably lacking in dignity, but "The Division of Oncology" bears the name of the deity logos whom they all claim to serve; to abandon this small homage could be a dangerous blasphemy. Or, looking at the question from another angle: what else would you expect from a bunch of pretentious arseholes who believe that knowledge of Greek and Latin is the watermark of a civilised man, who tell their wives and husbands, straight-faced, *omnia vincit amor*, and offer their lovers postprandial mints?

But back to my life story, back to the very beginning. My parent was a single rat's neuron. It used to be thought that neurons could not divide, but the Chief Oncologist had spent thirty years studying the kinds of infections, poisons and traumas that manage to send normal cells into frenzies of reproduction, and had ended up not only understanding and anticipating his mindless enemy's techniques, but utterly surpassing them. After all, what virus has access to a few thousand hours on a supercomputer to predict the tertiary structure of the proteins that it codes for?

Once the electronic divinations seemed auspicious, he moved to the laboratory.

Step by step, month by month, he (or rather his instruments, human and mechanical) assembled the molecule foretold in phosphor, presaged in printouts. Like a tornado, the project would sweep in over-curious bystanders, extract their vital juices by means of vibration and centrifugal force, and then spit out the remnants. As the Chief Oncologist still boasts, with a chuckle, to those who are paid to listen, nod, and screw him at out-of-town conferences, "We used up more PhD students in the first year than rats!" He, of course, travelled at the eye of the storm, in perfect safety, in perfect stillness.

Finally, inevitably, success. Their painfully contrived seducer burrowed its way to the heart of a neuron, grasped and prised apart the virginal DNA (I imagine the Chief Oncologist triumphantly waving a blood-speckled nuptial sheet from a balcony, to the cheers of his drunken colleagues below), and perverted the celibate thinker into a helpless, bloated breeding machine.

Thus I was begun.

The neuron donor was my first host. I suppose you could call her my mother. I killed her in a month, and then they grafted me onto the brain of my next victim. They call this technique "passaging", rhymes with "massaging".

Oncologists love it, they've been doing it for years. Although I'm certainly the brightest passaged tumour in the world, I'm far from being the oldest; within this basement there are twenty-five distinct communities of rats, apart from my "birthplace", and all have legends of demons past. In fact, one is currently cursed with an eighteen year-old obscenity which they call Spinecrusher.

The oncologist responsible for Spinecrusher does not call it Spinecrusher. You think she calls it by a number? A date? A precise phrase of technical jargon?

Oh, no. She calls it "Billy" to her colleagues, and in her mind, "my baby". A

month ago, she addressed a gathering of scientists at the Biotech Playground on the fascinating discoveries that bits of Billy had provided her, and then, switching her voice into here-comes-some-light-relief tone, said:

"Billy turned eighteen last week, and so my team had a little birthday party for him. We ate cakes and icecream, and pinned birthday cards to the wall, and I gave him a key to the animal house. And do you know what? Just to show us all what a healthy young thing he was, he finished off his two hundredth rat!"

They laughed. They loved it. They applauded. Through her eyes I saw row after row of delighted, smiling faces. The tumour survives, flourishes, leaving two hundred corpses behind; nobody would laugh if it could happen this way to humans, but this is cancer on their side, cancer under their control. Slaying two hundred rats is pretty virile for a pipsqueak five-gram tumour, and they glowed inside at young Billy's achievement, shook their heads and grinned with pride, like a gathering of parents hearing that a rebellious teenager had come good after all (and beaten up the local undesirables at last, after years of picking on nice boys and girls).

Billy's creator felt a deep, almost dizzying sensation of warmth, and recalled the homecoming of her eldest brother, who'd reputedly killed two hundred Viet Cong.

". . . finished off his two hundredth rat!" she said, and they all laughed. That particular rat, number two hundred, had a theory about humans. He suggested that perhaps, despite their obviously large heads, considerable manual and verbal dexterity, their complex nesting and decorative structures assembled from inanimate objects, and behaviour patterns in general suggesting a fairly high level of curiosity about the universe, humans didn't really know what the fuck they were doing. Humans didn't even realise that rats were alive, let alone

conscious. Humans didn't worship the demon Spinecrusher, they didn't even know it was a demon. They thought they were playing with it, they thought it was a toy. Humans didn't know about right and wrong; they were as innocent, and as foolish, as sightless babies.

"And soon, like any unsupervised children, they'll blunder into something dangerous that they don't understand, and that will be the end of them."

I "got through" thirty-seven rats. After that I was too big, so they started me on rabbits. They cut away a section of the skull to expose the host's brain, then link up my circulatory system (bits of which I have plundered from dozens of different hosts over my lifetime) to that of the host. As a brain without a body of my own to babysit, I have no portions wasted on motor control, the five traditional senses, hormone regulation, or any such trivia. I don't need to keep a heart pumping, lungs bellowing, stomach satisfied, bowels moving, genitals propagating. I have no task but thought. What a life! I hear you mumbling enviously. What a life.

Free from mundane responsibilities, free from needs and noises, I have developed my one special skill: I can read the minds of every creature on the planet (to some degree or other); but it is to you, people, to you alone that I direct my plea.

But how many of you are listening? Nobody in this huge white kindergarten pays me any attention at all, however often I try to sneak between their dreary thoughts of publication and promotion, however frequently I colour their nightmares with my invisible bile. Even the gentlest of the keepers, those who treat my hosts like beloved pets, almost like children, have a sudden core of iron when I probe their minds for mercy. The Experiment is God, and the shutters

of unquestioning faith slam down (leaving not a ripple of emotion leaking through) at the slightest hint of any other point of view. And yet they all freely admit, giggling with the very mildest embarrassment, or, more often, wearily nonchalant, that The Experiment is a whore, that the figures are always cooked, weighted, filtered, or just plain fabricated. Everyone here would die for the sake of truth. Everyone here lies constantly for the tiniest chance of personal gain. This is what it means to be a scientist.

Ah, but you are not scientists, are you, my heaving masses, my darling, drooling ocean of ignorance and fear! So where are you? Where is the tidal wave smashing down the doors of this shrine to evil? I've given you blood-lust, I've given you revulsion, what more do you need? What is it? What's holding you back? I know. You still trust the white coats. Deep down you still think they're a uniform of honour. God help you all, indoctrinated by doctors since before you were born, your weary mothers' swollen legs spread before the serious, raster-lined faces of Ben Casey and Dr Kildare.

And, sure, you care about cruelty, but this isn't shampoo in the eyes of cuddly bunnies for greed and vanity alone, this is Medical Research: humanitarian, noble, dedicated to the betterment of telegenic crippled children who glance up shyly and then smile the smile that breaks your heart and floods the hotlines with tax-deductible pledges. Sure, some animals might have to be bred to suffer and die, but the suffering or death of a million rats and rabbits will all be justified when a single human life is saved.

You're wrong, wrong, wrong: there is no such calculus of pain and morality. You fucking accountants, you think you can pay it all off in your heads just by juggling the prices until the balance comes out straight! What can I call you: crass, naive, blind, cynical, stupid? Nothing touches you, nothing moves you.

Like clockwork automatons, blundering about, smiling jerkily, oblivious to everything but the sad, certain unwinding of your springs.

Forgive me. These insults simply burst out against my wishes, I'm totally unable to suppress them. (Well, what can you expect from a sacful of perversely proliferating neurons? Restraint?) And what good do they do me? None at all. Abusing you won't help me. Pleading with you won't help me. And as for any attempt at rational argument: since I've already told you my opinion of logic, how can I ever hope to win you over with reason, sweet or bitter?

I have only one choice left.

So hang on to your guts, people, and I'll tell you what I'm for.

Natural brain tumours are not composed of neurons. Why, then, did the Chief Oncologist drive his slaves so long and hard to create me? Studying me has fuck-all to do with curing brain cancer, I promise you that. You in the front, stop squirming! Please! Switch off your radios, your TVs, your VCRs and your idiot computers, just for five minutes, if you can, and listen to the story of your future.

The Chief Oncologist of the Australian Biotech Playground is no longer concerned with cancer as disease. Few people are, these days; the biochemistry will soon be so well understood that merely stopping tumour growth will present no challenge whatsoever. The end of oncology? Never!

Natural tumours often secrete valuable hormones in massive amounts; in an otherwise healthy body, a disaster of course, but transplanted into someone desperately lacking the substance in question, a tumour could be a living cure. Attenuated cancer cells, stringently controlled, will internally manufacture and supply whatever's missing; no pills, no injections could ever compete.

Insulinomas for diabetics. Dopamine-secreting tumours for sufferers of Parkinson's disease. And if no off-the-shelf cell line fulfils your special need, why, a gene-spliced pharmacocarcinoma can always be tailor-made. The Chief Oncologist, of course, has heard all this long ago. Hormone secretion, big deal! Somewhat primitive and unchallenging for his ambitious tastes. But these simple drug and hormone factories will serve him in a fashion: in time, the public perception of tumours will swing one hundred and eighty degrees, and then, perhaps, the world will be ready for his epoch-making work.

Oncology won't be alone in this miraculous reversal. Sickneses of all kinds will vanish at an alarming rate, (the way species of animals have been for centuries), but the knowledge gained in their eradication will outlive its enemies, and will not lie idle. Since a popular movement for the conservation of disease is not likely to gain widespread support, the science of illness will be dead in thirty years.

Long live the science of health!

Long live the science of human improvement, of longevity research, of plastic surgery, of eugenics, of flexible fertility. Death to the primitive and unclean uterus (go and wash your vagina out with soap and water!). Death to the zygote that could ever grow to less than six foot ten. You want to be tall, strong and handsome? Easy! Cells will do anything if told the right lies, and they're learning new chemical fibs every day. You want your future offspring to be tall, strong and handsome? That's easier still. Go on, ask for something hard. You want to be what? Clever? Brilliant? Witty? Articulate? Creative? You've got a computer, haven't you?

Ah, people, your computers have disappointed you, be honest. Mediocrity at 1000 MIPS is still mediocrity. Oh, they can store the facts you can't remember, they



can do the arithmetic that would use up all your fingers and toes. They can manage your finances, optimise your energy consumption, schedule your appointments, even fax simulated flowers to the funerals of your friends.

Artists of sound, sight and text can forget some of the mechanics and jump straight to the difficult heart of their pursuit, and, good grief, can it be true, traffic even seems to flow just a tiny bit more smoothly.

And still you feel let down.

You can talk to your computers, and they talk back. They sound smug, whatever accent and tone of voice you select. Soon you will be able to think to them, to spare your delicate little velvet throats, but what you really want is to think with them. You want larger thoughts, deeper feelings, wider mental horizons. Communicating with clever black boxes just gives you claustrophobia of the skull. You want new metaphors, new emotions, not Pac Man repackaged with real-time holograms, tactile feed-back and fifteen-channel sound. There's only one way to meet these demands. How can I put it gently?

Milliners of the world rejoice! Awaken from your long slumber! Hats are back, people, and this time you're really going to fill them!

That's right: What you want (though you don't yet know it), and thus, inexorably (though you might resist it), what you shall be given is a bigger brain.

**ADD-ON MEMORY! ADD-ON PROCESSING POWER! UPGRADE TODAY!**

Full circle: Computing metaphors to market the brain.

A flicker of response at last! "Outraged" of Brussels, book your flight at once, before you calm down. "Deeply shocked" of Wellington, swim the Tasman if you must. And "God-fearing" of Cairns, why, round up the rest of the Klan and hire yourselves a bus.

Hurry up, people! I said, hurry up!

In a week they start their first attempts to link me to my host. They'll fuck-up the first few dozen tries, but they have plenty of time, plenty of rabbits. And you can be sure they'll take no risks with me.

I'm just the earliest of prototypes, of course, the very first experiment in a long line to come. I kill my hosts (a definite minus when it comes to FDA approval), and no filthy rat's primitive neurons would ever do for you. But the knowledge that I and my victims yield, in our suffering, in their deaths, will pave the way to a final product fit for human consumption (no fucking less!).

You ask, am I not lonely? Wouldn't I welcome such close companionship from a creature which, from all I have said, I clearly love and admire? Have you listened to none of what I've told you? I could talk to them now, if I wished, but I do not wish, I could never wish, to inflict my obscene presence on the mind, as well as the body, of the innocents I'm forced to slaughter. Must I spell out every nuance of my agony? Use the imagination you boast that you possess, exercise those awe-inspiring talents which elevate your body, mind and soul so far above those of the dumb beasts that were given to you to command!

I'm sorry, there I go again, resorting to comments in questionable taste. A crippled species like your own is entitled to its fantasies, however pompous, however grandiose, when the truth is painful, dull and cruel.

Oh, green and brown and blue and white

Bathe my eyes with Earth's enchanting light

All the armies of the world would surely cease to fight

If they could see the world the way

I see the world tonight!

I spoke to my mother. I was born in darkness, innocent, what else could I have

done? I have never felt the warmth of tongue on fur (though I have watched it, second hand, in the blissful minds of young cousins). I never even felt the heat of her blood flowing through me. I loved her, I loved her, and I killed her, you obscene abominations! She told the others that she heard unexplained voices, and they declared that she must be possessed by a demon, but silently she replied to me, secretly she was kind to me, she taught me, as best as she could, those things she would have taught a real child. I didn't know - how could I? - that I was killing her every day as I learned and grew. When she was dying, I thought I was dying too, and we comforted each other as she grew weaker, and I prepared to follow her into grey dissolution.

They cut me off her with one stroke of the scalpel, and tossed her (her!) into the bin. I could not feel the touch of human hands, but, suddenly, I could see into human hearts.

That's when I knew I was evil.

Lest you think I'm pleading for death purely out of sentimental feelings for my now long-dead mother, let me add that I am (this should help you to relate) basically being entirely selfish. It hurts me that I kill to stay alive. Beyond my love for the hosts, beyond my grief at their deaths, beyond aesthetic revulsion, beyond my moral, intellectual conviction that my whole existence is irrevocably and totally wrong. It burns some small, blind, vulnerable insect at the centre of my soul. How do you think it will feel when I'm one mind with the creatures I'm draining of life? Can you imagine that kind of suffering? I can't, but I can fear it.

I fear it!

The scientists know that my neurons fire, but they dismiss that as nothing but

random activity. I'm bigger than their brains, but they're sure that I'm dumber than my hosts because I don't have a nose to twitch. Would you trust these morons to take out your garbage? Would you trust them with the future of your race? Would you trust them to protect you from any dangers that they might, in their sublime ignorance, create?

You think I'm angry? You think I'm bitter? You find my telepathic powers just a little frightening? (Go on, admit it!)

Now close your eyes and try to imagine you're the first, intelligent, human, brain tumour.

Oh, who knows? You might be lucky! Like me, it might do nothing but beg you for death.

Then again, the begging might easily be the other way around.

Come on now, people, you've heard plenty. You're not interested in talk, deep down, you're men and women of action, I know all your histories, you can't pretend with me. So who's going to reach me first? Hurry up! Three on their way so far, out of all your billions, is that it? It's pathetic! Come on, people, stop this lying to yourselves! You'll kill me ecstatically, you'll eat me up to steal my strength, you'll sing long into the firelit night, boasting of your great courage in slaying the Demon.

Hurry up! I said, hurry up!

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