

## THE BLACK BUS

By Marc Laidlaw

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DRIVER APPROACHED THE main gates, hunched low against the cold clouds and the eerie onrush of music that crept out over the escarpments of the amphitheater, thin groping notes like the claws of wintry trees made of black sound. Colored lights, auroral, pulsed against the clouds in time to the music, reminding him of something older than memories of childhood Hell-dreams. He imagined his grandfather's evangelical words driving down at him like a pelting brimstone hail, and thought how the old man would see the theater as a concession erected around the mouth of Hell, into which the damned were lured with music and screams which passage through the gates had transfigured into wild, seductive laughter. He pulled up his collar against the storm of invisible coals, and wished he could have stayed in the bus. But it had broken down completely, the prognosis was terrible, and he needed help.

He glanced back at the old bus, cold now in the mountain moonlight and the distant moth-battered glare of the stadium lights, far out at a corner of the lot among a dozen other buses not quite as full of memories, though equally lurid: paisleys, spirals, fractal swirls in luminous paints. An anachronism, a retrograde voyager, an affront to the new serious spirit of reform. Do drugs! — it seemed to tell all the little children who followed its progress on the back roads, delighting in its psychedelic colors. Run from home and join the circus! Following the Group was the same thing.

Turning back toward the gates, he saw another bus pulling in before the amphitheater, brakes squealing and then a gasping hiss of air as it stopped almost directly in his path. Gleaming black, with a long row of square windows all seemingly cut from warm yellow parchment. Its black surface was weirdly textured in diamond-shapes, oblique facets that turned light back on itself: like a stealth-bus, invisible to enemy detection. He walked around it cautiously, watching it over his shoulder, expecting the front door to open — anxious, in fact, to see the driver sitting up in the high seat at the top of the steps.

“Tickets,” said a voice, and he whirled to find himself in the shadow of the gate. A flashlight caught and held his hands in glare, making the hairs stand out like abrupt shards of spun glass, the blemishes suddenly malign. He jerked his hands out of the light and plunged them into his pocket as if to spare them such scrutiny, but actually searching for the plastic pass that had been his for longer than he could remember.

The torch, its bearer still unseen, waved him in, opening a path into the cement tunnel strewn with tom tickets, broken bottles, pools of piss with cigarette butts disintegrating in them. He hurried, but the beam deserted him. Laughter, and then a low growling that might have been nothing worse than some enormous old man

clearing his throat. He walked around the sound of breathing, kicked a crushed can skittering, walked into a solid wall of stench and sound. He didn't need to see the Group. Their music was everywhere. He brushed cobwebs from his face and stepped out into the amphitheater.

Bodies like an ocean, like a breaking wave of souls caught in mid-curl, rushed away beneath him to fill the vast pool of the theater, curving up and around, reaching to the sky on all sides, energized by the pulsing light. All of them dancing, swaying, caught in the trance of the music. From down here the clouds looked like a vaporous cover thrown over the theater. Looking up made him dizzy, his vision lined with a funnel of possessed faces staring down at him— past him, really, toward the stage. He shuddered and followed their eyes with his own, knowing that was where he could always find his charges.

The Group was so much smaller than its music. Tiny figures, although of jewel-like clarity even in the smoky distances of the theater, they bent above their instruments, hardly moving anything but arms and fingers. He had seen them often enough to know their eyes were closed, their mouths fixed in grave and urgent expressions. So they would remain until some shrieking inspiration bore its way through them, when their heads went back and their eyes bulged and words spirited from their throats in desperate harmonies. — But that was always later. This early on, the concert was a voyage in its infancy, almost plodding still. It was perhaps the only time he would be able to find his riders. Earlier, the place would have been a riot of people vying for position; later it would be a frenzy. Things were relatively subdued.

He found a stairway leading down into the sunken center of the arena; it was covered in bodies, worshipers who hardly acknowledged his presence, barely allowed him to pass. They resented his worming passage, thinking that he sought to put himself closer to the source of the music. If they had known how little he wished this, they would have laughed in disbelief. Often he was forced to halt and wait for a new path to open; and then he would feel himself trapped with the music, suffocating in it. People all around him, eyes rolled back, heads whipping from side to side, and himself deaf to it. Afraid they might recognize that he was not one of them.

Finally he pulled himself free of strangers, seeing faces he recognized just ahead, mere yards from the elevated heights of the stage. They were together there, packed close as if for protection, the eternal pilgrims. No doubt there were other such clusters scattered through the theater, but these were his own. Driver had grown fond of them, if not their music. The object of their devotions — the Group — meant nothing more to him than a steady job, travel, food, companionship. He could as easily have been driving a limousine or a schoolbus, or delivering parcels door to door — in which case, he would never have experienced the strangeness of such nights. The awareness of how close he had come to missing this particular life lessened his dread of the crowd. He felt almost at home here, through familiarity.

As he pushed his way toward Sonora— her blond hair streaming back, metal rivets threaded through the strands, long strips of gleaming tattooed scalp showing above the wildly colored scarves she wore — a fearful face thrust toward him. A skinny young man, bearded and pale, his hair tom into tatters, his eyes wide with horror. Screaming not with the music, which might have been appropriate later in the night, but in time to some sinister rhythm of his own making.

He collided with Driver, who would have fallen if not for the congestion of bodies holding him upright. “It’s happening again!” he howled, staring desperately into Driver’s eyes. “I can’t stop it — make it stop! I always forget!”

Driver flinched away from the apparition, anxious to avoid contact. The kid reached toward him, then drew back himself, his eyes already wandering. “No,” he muttered, and Driver knew he was in the depths of some drug-inspired nightmare. There were people in these crowds whose minds had cracked and would never heal. People who appeared only in this context, screaming prophesy, gripped by visions, having no relation to the outside world, the world of day. This one sank to his knees, forcing the heels of his hands up into his eye sockets, wrenching them violently as if pushing something in or jarring something loose. “No, this is the first time,” he said. Then he staggered upright again and stumbled on, chewed up in the mill of flesh. To Driver he was vaguely familiar; he had probably glimpsed him rushing through the crowds on his stoned jeremiad on other nights, during other shows.

By now Sonora had noticed Driver, and she pointed him out to the others, who drew him into their midst in a sheltered spot they had made of their bodies, a haven woven of flesh and bone. It was difficult to hear them in the din, for the music was building now, cresting toward some peak he did not wish to witness. But they made him welcome with looks and gestures and squeezes on his arms and shoulders. No doubt they thought he was becoming one of them, that the music had finally done its trick and lured him in. In a spirit of companionship, Sonora put her mouth to his ear and said, “Try this.”

She opened her palm under his eyes, and in it was a little foil pack. She opened that, and in among the silver creases he saw a thing like a stylized teardrop the color of blood, a three-dimensional paisley, gelatinous, specks of light sculling through it. She lifted it by the curled tail, like a tadpole, and laid it on his palm. He could sense what was in it, and instantly panicked, gripping the droplet as if to crush it.

“We all did it,” she reassured him. “It’s just coming on, we won’t be too far ahead of you.”

“No,” he said. And then, because it didn’t register, he screamed it.

She drew back slightly to show her amusement. “It’s not what you think,” she shouted. “This is new.”

He shook his head firmly. “The bus is dead. We need a decent mechanic—we need parts, and a ride to find them. We need help. Help!”

While he was shouting, Sonora peeled back the fingers of his hand one by one; he ignored her silly game until he had finished shouting, and then, because she was staring at his palm, he too looked down and saw the small reddish stain where the teardrop had been. Even as he looked, it squirmed away into his skin, drunk in as if the flesh were dry earth touched by rain.

At the sight, he began to forget his errand. He forgot where he was, who he was. “Why” became the real concern, but when he asked it of Sonora and the others—Chad and Parky, Selene and Yvette and Dietch—they stilled him with their hands and buffeted him into the dance, until he no longer questioned anything. He gave up his will, if he had ever had it.

It was merciful, for a time, to escape his dread and innate skepticism, his constant sense of something going wrong. But his anxiety did not end, exactly—only changed, uncurling like the tail-end of that paisley, and left him weaving through the gates again, this time one of a hushed line, holding hands in long chains like human molecules, everyone deserting the theater silently, the entire crowd speaking in whispers or not at all. Something vast slept behind them, and they departed quietly so as not to wake it.

The matter of the bus had already been discussed, he discovered, as with gestures Sonora indicated they were to board not their own defunct vehicle but the black bus that had pulled up by the amphitheater gate. Apparently there was room for them in it, and he went along, though he would not be the driver of this bus. And that was something of a relief, too. It had been so long since he’d been able to sit back and simply watch the changing roadside. He had always felt so responsible for everything. . . .

Inside was pleasant contrast to the inky, angular black exterior. Here it was all warmth and glow, soft pillows and cushions spread everywhere, low bunks overhead for sleeping, plenty of blankets for the cold nights of traveling. He slipped off his shoes and went on hands and knees onto the padded platform, crawling toward the back of the bus, the warm rumbling cave above the engine. In his own delapidated vehicle, the engine had growled under the hood, always up in front of him. It was less efficient, but he missed it for a moment. Curled against a pillow, eyes shut, he dreamed a clear picture of the other bus as it had been, new and freshly painted, when he’d first hired on as its driver. Years ago, and thousands of miles behind him, that had been. He realized—had known all along, tonight, without admitting it till now—that it would never be fixed. The old bus was dead.

Now the passengers of the black bus, those who had invited them aboard some unknown time during the show (as if their plight had communicated itself

osmotically), pulled down black shades, as though no spark of light could be permitted out. Sonora and Chad joined in the effort, but Driver was content not to move.

I wonder, he thought, since I'm apparently not the driver of this bus, I wonder if I get to keep my name.

THEY WERE all passengers now, Sonora thought, watching Driver, halfway convinced (but never quite) that she was sharing his thoughts. His fear was obvious enough, betrayed by his stiff posture, as he lay among the cushions like a wooden martyr marionette dropped down from a cross to which it was still attached by strings. His mind barked out loud warnings; he felt threatened, but it was easing.

She smiled and put her hand on his breast. "It's strange for you, not driving, isn't it?"

"We're not moving yet," he said with a wry smile, as if he had seen into her intentions.

"Yes we are," said Sonora.

Sonora could still remember her name, which was more than she could say of the others on the bus. She wasn't sure about all of them; and they didn't seem exactly sure of themselves. Chad she remembered; Yvette, yes— and the one who called himself Neuron. Or did she know Neuron? Hadn't for long, actually. He'd come up to them during the concert, right after Driver had said he needed help.

"Join us on the bus out front," he'd whispered in her ear. "We'll take you wherever you want to go."

He wore a cowboy hat, which, for a guy who called himself Neuron, was an odd thing. But the crown of the hat was transparent, clipped away and replaced with a transparent dome which crisply replicated the crease down the center of a Stetson. And down in that dome you could see lights moving and pulsing inside a plastic model of a human brain. At least she hoped it was plastic.

"It's not plastic, you know," he'd said right away, as if she'd asked audibly. "It's laminated so you can look right in. Just as tough as my old skull."

"You go around like that?" she said.

"Sometimes I wear a regular hat, like when I'm working in bright lights. But on nights like this I like to keep the top down and . . . 'just let the lights shine!'"

The last of his words were a line from a song the Group was singing right at that exact same instant.

“So how do I know which bus is yours?” she leaned and asked him.

“Can’t miss it. She’s black and weirdly angled, as you’d say.”

“I’d say? You said it.”

Now he was putting himself down beside her, his cowboy hat tossed off, and wrapping a black bandanna kerchief around his head. The neural lights had dimmed anyway. She vaguely remembered seeing his brain bobbing along way up ahead in the dark tunnel as they were seeping out of the amphitheater, the last chords of music hanging behind them like a bubble about to burst. She had followed him dreaming of nightlights. “I don’t suppose you have any wisdom pills, do you?” he asked.

She pulled a vaporizer out of her pocket. “Will this do?”

“Hafta.”

When he could speak again, he did so raspingly. “Who’s your friend there? The comfortable one.”

“That’s Driver,” Sonora said. She couldn’t tell if he was asleep or just pretending. The motion of the bus lulled him. She realized it was probably the first time he had ever allowed himself to sleep on a moving bus. My God, she thought. The most basic pleasure of the journey and he’s never experienced it until now, no wonder he seemed so uncomfortable all the time.

Driver opened his eyes and looked at them.

“What kind of bus is this?” he said.

“You’ll be sorry you asked that question,” Neuron said.

Sonora had ominous intimations of an unspeakable horror about to be revealed. No sooner had Neuron spoken his warning than an old man near the front of the bus began to talk, twisting his leathery neck around so the cords twined together.

“This is the only kind of bus there is,” the old man said.

“That there’s Crouch,” said Neuron. “And you just started him on his favorite subject.”

“It’s not my favorite — not by a long shot,” Crouch said, knee-walking toward them. “But it’s one on which I have many opinions.”

“That’s what I meant,” Neuron said.

“They’re not the same thing, what you said and what you meant.”

“Crouch, you make my brain tired.”

“And it makes my soul weary looking at you, Cerebrus.”

“What was that again?” Sonora asked, looking on amazed at this stream of bickering, which suggested old well-worn ruts in the relationship between these men, so that she doubted they could ever talk to one another in any other way — had they even wanted to.

“Cerebrus. The Spectacular Transparent Head. The Mind-Body split made manifest.”

“I have many opinions about buses, too,” Driver said. “I’ve thought about them a lot, while I was driving. But this isn’t like riding on any bus I can imagine. This is like moving on waves, just soft little swells over the sea . . . or a big lake.”

“Or a river,” said the old man. “A river’s more like it.”

Then “Look!” said Yvette at one of the windows, peering out through a tiny spyslot she’d lifted beneath the shades. “It’s our bus!”

Sonora turned around and made herself one of the eyeholes. They were coming down from the mountains, narrow curving roads winding around and switching back, wriggling down the slopes. They were out of the cool dark trees, the pines and rivers and rocks. This was the arid desolate place above the foothills, the place where nothing grew but weeds and aluminum guardrails. She had always hated this part of the road— of any mountain road. This was where the dust beat itself senseless, blowing in from the plains; or where the salt fell, whisked in off the sea. Nothing moved here but headlights.

On the switchback below — moving past, under them, and then in the opposite direction — she finally saw their bus. Unmistakable. And there were people in it.

“Hey,” she said. “Driver, I thought you said the bus was broken.”

His face darkened in a scowl. “I know that bus,” he said. “And it died tonight.”

“Maybe it hasn’t, yet.”

Sonora looked over at Neuron, but only briefly. His smile, like his words, puzzled her. She went back to watching the bus below. Headlights vanished around a curve, came out again, continued to weave. The air was full of dust or smoke, so she could see the beams swinging back and forth.

Driver pushed up next to her. “What are you looking at?”

“Just what Yvette said. It looks like

“It can’t be our bus.”

“That’s what it looks like, I’m sorry.”

“It can’t be our bus.”

He looked anyway.

Someone up front switched on a radio and music came out of the scattered speakers. It was the Group, predictably, broadcast from the microsatellite they owned, which all the pilgrim buses picked up with a special antenna. Sonora hardly heard it, it had been background music for so long. But she noticed when the broadcast cut off suddenly.

Suddenly was hardly the word for it.

The tune died with a scream, then a hysterical wailing and clamoring. Voices in panic and terror. “No!” someone shouted. “No, my God!”

“No — no!”

Screams. Then a clearer voice, only slightly stronger than the others, high and nasal, a man: “This is a report— hello, are you there? Anyone? I’m reporting live from the airfield where the Group was just now departing. It’s hard to be sure, but we just saw — everyone waiting out here is afraid of it —”

For a moment the sane voice was drowned out by shrieking that completely overwhelmed everything else. He moved away or somehow regained control — at least of himself, at least for the moment. “Oh my god, yes, it’s apparently true. We saw a fireball — well, heard a horrible sound, first, hard to describe — impossible to describe, I’d have to say — sort of a metal scraping and then a crumpling crash — and then that fireball, an explosion that is now pouring up into the sky.

“Brothers and sisters, I do not want to be the one to tell you this, but I saw them with my own eyes and I have the microphone now, so my voice is going to have to be the one to say it. I saw them board that plane a few minutes before it took off. I would like to tell you that they were not on it, but I saw all of them go in, and



then the door closed and the ladder pulled away and the plane started to taxi off down the runway into the darkness, so I could only see its running lights moving across the field. It was very dark out there, everyone. I don't know if another plane came in out of nowhere or if the Group's plane just didn't get off the ground in time . . . or if something else went wrong. But I can see a giant wing or a tail sticking up out of the flames; that's all I can see through the smoke. That's all I can tell you now, my friends . . . my poor friends. My God . . . I'm so sorry for all of us."

Silence in the black bus, indecipherable. Sonora knew that she and Yvette and Chad and Driver were all looking out their windows at their own bus on the road below, but somehow none of this seemed real. What they were hearing, what they were seeing — none of it.

Their crazy, colorful bus's headlights drove in and around, wove sharply once, twice, and again. In an instant — it happened that fast — Sonora saw the bus speed up and go out of control. The turn ahead was sharp and lit too late, and whoever drove was not thinking of the road.

"You idiot!" Driver said, yelling down at the bus as if he could save it with a word.

But he couldn't. None of them could have done anything to stop it going over the edge. The disaster had begun when the Group got onto the plane; now it was only spreading, a shockwave, carrying all of them with it.

"Shut those shades now," Crouch said firmly.

"But — but —"

"I said shut those shades!" the old man insisted.

"Come on." Neuron was up next to her now, gently taking the shade out of her fingers, sealing it down again. "Crouch knows."

"What's happening here?" Driver yelled at them.

It had to be asked, eventually. Sonora was not so sure it would ever be answered.

The speakers shut off and the lights dimmed drastically. Only a few little bulbs remained to show a way through the heaped pillows. For the first time Sonora noticed figures sleeping, wrapped in sheets, on the overhead bunks which lined the interior. There was not much room up there, under the curved ceiling; they were crammed in like luggage, and among luggage. The bus whirred on, and it was as Driver had said: it felt as though they were rocking, but not so gently now. Crazy. With growing violence. She lay down flat on her back, afraid she might be thrown or

at least rolled; with arms spread wide, she grabbed onto the mattress, convinced that they too were now going off the road.

A wave of sound roared through the bus, beginning in the pings and creaks and groans and rattles of the engine, the shocks, the brakes and the tires — growing louder and louder, until it sounded like jabbering voices. It built into a storm of howls and crashing as if they'd been caught in an avalanche of souls on the steep road. The sides of the bus felt too thin to protect them. Hail or hammerblows struck the ceilings, the walls, even pummeled them from underneath. She felt a repetitive, dull slamming just under one of her shoulders, a steady beat that seemed to be aiming up deliberately at her, driving toward her heart.

Her mind had room for nothing else. The lights flickered and went out, and she would have screamed except that Neuron was right up next to her, whispering comfort in her ear, and she could see his brain glowing faintly, comfortingly, through his bandanna. She grabbed onto him, wondering for a moment how Driver was taking this — sorry that he had always been so aloof from them. She supposed he would be all right.

Then, some long time before she accepted the fact, the sounds died out and the hammering stopped and even the sickening motion was done. They seemed to be at rest, the motor purring— idling — underneath them; and all around them, otherwise, perfect silence.

A few lights came on again. Neuron sat up and pulled his hat from a hook between the windows, settled it over his head. He looked down at her. “You might want to wait here.”

“For what?” she asked, words that barely escaped her dry throat.

But he was moving on his knees toward the front of the bus, along with some of the others, including old Crouch, who was coughing with a wet, bubbling sound as if the shaking had jarred something loose in his chest. The others from their old bus were sitting against the walls, the masked windows, some curled into fetal positions among the pillows, eyes squeezed shut. Yvette sat with her arms wrapped around her knees, watching Crouch.

Sonora looked over at Driver. His eyes were open but he was staring at the ceiling, looking contemplative, resigned. When he saw her looking, he smiled briefly, a darting flicker.

“Are you okay!” she said.

“I don't suppose so,” he said. “On the other hand, does it matted”

Crouch whistled sharply, and she turned to look down the aisle at him. But he

wasn't calling her, or any of them. He was looking up at the sleeping racks. One of them, up there, was stirring.

Just then, there was a loud pneumatic wheeze. A rash of warm air tore at her scarves, as if the bus had gasped out its last breath. A bitter metallic cold replaced the warmth she hadn't noticed until it was gone. The driver—whose face she had not seen, who was no more than a scarcely registered shape in her memory—stepped from his seat and descended the steps at the front of the bus. Everyone watched him depart through the accordioned doors, his shoulders sharp in a dark, stiffly pressed uniform, disappearing outside. When he was gone, Crouch moved irritably toward the sleeper in the closest bunk.

“Come on,” he snapped, shoving the figure there. “It’s your time.”

There was a crackling sound, something like a canvas sail being unfurled in the confined space, and a creaking groan. What Sonora had thought were sheets slowly unfolded into wings. Pale leathery wings, bald as a rat’s tail, with clawed hinges. The sleeper, at Crouch’s prodding, rolled from the bunk and dropped to the floor, moving awkwardly on thin legs, its long nails catching and tearing in the mattress covers. She had only a glimpse of its face — but that was enough. Sleepy slitted eyes, long white snout, thin ranged mouth. Then Crouch was harrying it ahead of him through the aisle, down the steps and out the door. Only when it was gone could Sonora look away, and then her eyes went immediately to the others still slumbering overhead. They did not all appear to be of the same sort; but there were more like that one up there.

Suddenly the black bus seemed less of a haven than she had imagined. She went on her knees after Neuron, who was sitting at the edge of the platform pulling on tall boots. Her own sandals were below in a pile of shoes.

“Be sure you get the right ones,” he said as she rooted for her pair. “This isn’t the place to go walking off in someone else’s shoes.”

“You and your identity,” Crouch called back sourly from the doorway. Then he stepped off into the night, and Sonora distinctly heard his footsteps crunching down hard into gravel or sand. The sound reassured her. At least they were somewhere.

There was a pile of loose shawls and blankets near the shoes. She dragged a poncho with a mandala pattern over her head and went down the aisle, down the steps, looking over once at the driver’s seat and the dashboard as she went. She didn’t drive, herself; but it looked like any other bus.

Stepping out, she learned instantly where the heat had gone. Sucked up, sunk into the reddish sand, which instantly snatched the last trace of warmth from her body. She stood hugging the blanket around her, cold as alabaster yet not quite

feeling the chill. That numb.

Footprints led away from the bus, toward the horizon. At the end of that lengthening trail was the dark uniform of the driver, plodding steadily along. But Crouch, who stood outside, and Neuron, who now jumped down beside her and stamped his feet as if to force nonexistent heat into them, were not looking that way. They gazed straight out ahead of the bus, in the direction it was headed. Neuron pushed back his cowboy hat for a better view of the winged silhouette that was lofting higher by the second against a dark sky with faint stars in it. It was the violet hour, wolf-glow, but lacking qualities she associated with dawn or dusk. Then she realized what it was. At the zenith was a molten orange glow, like a sun without definition; while spreading away from that in rippled waves was steadily deeper darkness, purpling till it coalesced into perfect blackness against the land. It was the exact opposite of sunrise or sunset; here, darkness massed at the horizon, and light retreated toward the center of the sky. Stars burned and flickered close to the ground, like the lights of a desert city. The flying shape, as it gained distance, gradually merged with the darkness that ringed them entirely. Behind them, she noticed, was no sign of the mountains they had traversed; nor of any river, for that matter.

Sonora was grateful to have at least the thick blob of molten light above, though it cast no warmth that she could feel. Even as she thought this, she saw that it was dwindling — that the darkness was not a static thing, a mere wall around them, but continued to grow and seep up across the sky. Blue and violet invaded the orange flare, weakening it while she watched. It was like a foreign cell under attack, dissolving. Stars marked the territory taken by night.

Well, she thought. At least there are stars. For the moment. I won't take them for granted.

As the orange light faded, Crouch and Neuron grew visibly nervous. They peered hard at the horizon, squinting into the dark, until the old man began to curse.

"I can't believe it," he said. "Another one."

"Maybe he'll be back," Neuron said. "Anyway, there's more."

"Not many!"

This, too, had the feel of an old — an endless — argument.

"Okay," Neuron said, turning toward Sonora. "That's about it for us, now. You better get back up inside there."

"What about the driver?" Sonora said, for at the end of that long trail of footprints there was nothing now but more darkness.

“Looks like that’s taken care of,” he said, nodding up the stairwell. Driver himself had taken the seat, settling in with an eager look as he examined the dashboard, tested the steering wheel, and finally tried the lever that worked the door. It sighed shut casually, squeezing the inner light to a narrow slit between its robber flaps — until even that went out.

“Hey!” Neuron shouted.

“Shit!” Crouch yelled. “Don’t move!”

The black bus was gone. There was nothing now but darkness sweeping in over the empty plain of sand, with the three of them standing there alone while wind erased the tire tracks.

Sonora spun to look around, to see where it had gone; but Neuron grabbed onto her, harder than she had ever been grabbed. “Don’t . . . move!” he cried. She could hardly see his face, it was so much darker now. A membrane seemed to have been pulled even across the stars. There was only a tiny sullen dot of orange being extinguished in the vault overhead. Once it snuffed out, there would be nothing left to see by.

Everything was quickening. Night came on like the wind, which roared out of nowhere as if bent on tearing them from their place. She planted her feet in the sand and knelt, dragging Neuron down beside her. Voices buzzed in the sand, which scoured her flesh, tore at her eyelids. She screamed and the sand rushed into her mouth, caking her tongue, drinking every ounce of moisture— stealing it from her, sucking the life away. Neuron and Crouch had her by either arm, holding her between them, and they were doing something she couldn’t quite see. Waving their arms, pounding the air with a hollow sound.

Suddenly something blocked the wind. As if a wall had been erected behind them and they stood now in a quiet, sheltered spot. Sonora brushed sand from her eyes, tried to look behind her, but something else caught her stinging gaze. The light again, a thin slice of yellow, opened up before them. The steps of the bus were revealed.

“Go!” Neuron yelled, and shoved her in. She stumbled on the steps, clinging to his arm, pulling him with her. Crouch, his face scraped raw and caked with bloody sand, swept the air with open hands, feeling for the door but missing it. Beyond him, something enormous moved toward them at inconceivable speed— like a part of the landscape curling and reaching for the bus. Sonora screamed and grabbed for his hand, and Neuron turned and saw it too, and also grabbed. They caught him by one wrist, but their screams -or the view— had startled Driver, and he closed the door with only that one hand yet inside the bus.

“Wait!” she said. “Open it — open!”

Driver was slow, as if stunned by what he had seen through the door. She couldn't grab the lever herself, not without letting go of Crouch — and that wouldn't have been wise. As hard as she and Neuron pulled, she could feel the old man's arm slipping out of their grasp.

“Driver!” she screamed.

“Go!” Neuron yelled.

“The door!” Sonora cried.

“Just go!”

Driver stamped on the gas and the engine roared. His face was white, stricken. He started to haul on the stick shift, and Sonora could hear gears grinding, could feel the wheels catching in something, jerking them forward.

Yvette rushed up then, grabbed the lever and hauled it back. The door wheezed open again. At first all she could see was Crouch's hand and forearm. It seemed to end in midair, just below the elbow; but that couldn't be true. Driver threw the shift the rest of the way into gear. With a liberated growl that quickly became a whining purr, the black bus lurched forward, throwing its passengers back. Crouch flew into the stairwell and the door clapped shut, rubber flaps somehow sealing out the night.

Neuron moved quickly, gathering the old man up in a limp heap from the stairs, carrying him back to the padded platform where he laid him down gingerly. Sonora peered over his shoulder, expecting to see Crouch in rags, shredded and bloody, worse than he had been a moment before.

But he lay breathing quietly, sand covering his clothes, lining the wrinkles of his face, otherwise apparently untouched. He opened his eyes and breathed up at Neuron:

“Got me.”

“No, old man,” Neuron said. “You're fine. You're gonna be okay this time.”

Crouch shook his head. “I was out there — for ages. I just barely remember you. . . .”

Driver, at the wheel, still accelerating — though Sonora couldn't imagine into what, with the windshield showing nothing ahead of them -twisted around to say, “What happened? I only shut the doors for a second — a fraction of a second.”

“To you it was a fraction of a second,” Neuron said, then turned back quickly to Crouch. “But you remember now, don’t you? You’re here again.”

“I’m changed, though — changing. I want . . . I need to lie down.”

“You are lying down.”

“No, I mean — up there.”

Neuron glanced at the overhead racks. Sonora thought she saw his lips move in prayer. Then he put a hand on Crouch’s breast.

“No, old man, you’re not —”

“Damn it, I know what I need. Help me up. I wasn’t asking, I was telling you.”

A few of the passengers moved to his aid, but Neuron was not one of them. Sonora put her arms around him; as much for her own comfort as for his. Crouch hobbled a few feet down the center aisle to the newly empty bunk, and allowed himself to be boosted up into the rack. They put a pillow under his gray head, swept the sand out from under him. Then he closed his eyes and turned his face away. In moments he was as quiet as the rest of the sleepers up there.

Neuron sank down onto the mattress. “I can’t believe it,” he said. “This is bad. I thought Crouch was— if anyone, Crouch was here for the long haul.”

Sonora kept her arms around him. She glanced up at the front of the bus, saw Driver’s face in the black glass of the windshield. What did he see out there, she wondered. How did he keep control?

DRIVER STARED down into the headlights, which scarcely showed anything except flat sand unrolling ahead of him, just enough to drive straight into. He drove by instinct, or by trust, suspecting that there were no obstacles in their path — would be none for quite some distance. Thinking, grimly, that even if he ran into a wall — so what?

It was something he reflected, to be up here again, in the driver’s seat, doing the only thing he had ever done for as long as he could recall. He felt relief at being essentially alone. Too many passengers back there— from the old bus and from this new one — brought on that unfocused, troubling pressure he always felt in crowds, as if he were in danger of coming apart or losing himself in their midst. They would know him as Driver now, and he wouldn’t have to know much about them. They would be grateful to leave the driving to him.

It was a challenge. He had never seen a road like this; or imagined one existed. Well . . . maybe he had. On certain nights after days of driving, after weeks of journeying on the endless pilgrimage, following the Group, he would sometimes lie in bed in some motel, or in a sleeping bag on the ground outside the bus, and imagine that he was still driving — but in perfect darkness, with his eyes closed. He would dream the act of driving distilled to its essence— no real mad beneath the tires, only the voyage itself, always leading into sleep.

Sleep, he supposed, if you could stay conscious through it, might be like this. Lucid dreaming, that's what this was. Or dreaming wakefulness. A drugged kind of

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Squirming memories surfaced; the palm of his hand tingled. Something about a drug, a droplet, a burrowing thing.

He was on the verge of remembering when a white shape flew into the headlights and slammed against the windshield. He hit the brakes, screaming into the face of the thing that had crumpled against the glass — crushed snout, red slit eyes, torn wings as wide as the windshield. When the bus finally ground to a stop, the flattened thing slid backward and fell into the dust.

Sonora and Neuron stood next to him, peering down. In the headlights it was fairly well-lit, and apparently dead. Its wings unfolded the rest of the way, its claws twitched galvanically then stilled. From one of the withered wing-fingers, a bit of colored ribbon dangled, talon-pierced. It was a rainbow paisley pattern, part of a scarf or a pennant. Driver had seen the colors before, flapping over the stage at a concert.

“Damn,” Neuron said. “I guess we are headed the right way.”

“You're not going out there again,” Sonora said.

“No. You can keep on going, Driver-man.”

Driver sank back into his seat. The engine had stalled, but it started up easily enough. He pulled forward slowly, watching the ruined thing pass under the front bumper. He was careful to drive as straight as possible, but even so, he thought he heard the wide wings crackle as the tires passed over them.

Neuron clapped him hard on the shoulder. “It's a good sign,” he said, nodding. “A real good sign.”

Not long after that, the stars reappeared. Dead ahead, clustered low on the horizon, spreading slowly apart as the bus sped forward.

He was squinting for a better look when he saw something moving. He wasn't



ready for a repeat of the last collision. He started to brake, hoping to avoid a mess; but then he saw the pale thing waving. A person.

“What’s going on?”

Without answering, he brought the bus to a stop. The person outside—a skinny, ratty-looking kid — came running toward them down the bright twin tunnel of headlights, waving his arms desperately. When he reached the bus he started banging on the door.

Driver looked back at Neuron, as if for permission. “Go ahead,” the cowboy said, and Driver opened the doors.

The kid hurled himself up the stairs, breathless and laughing. “I can’t believe it!” he was saying. “You — you found me out here. I mean, there’s others here? Wow! I thought I could hear them up ahead, you know, I been following just the little sounds in the dark, just those few notes you can barely hear. But I should have known I wasn’t the only one. I couldn’t be the only one. I mean, of the followers who’d do this, who’d come here.”

His eyes were everywhere all at once, pupils enormous, as if he’d been staring into darkness forever. Finally his gaze settled on Driver, and his wide smile froze inside his pale ragged beard.

“I remember you,” he said. “I met you! And you’re really here now. Man!”

Driver started to look away, leaving him to the others. The kid was crazy or high. Then, abruptly, he remembered their meeting in the amphitheater earlier; the kid had come rushing up to him just like this, exactly as crazed, and then staggered off.

“Man, this is great,” he was saying. “We’ll catch up with them now, yeah. You got a bus and everything. How’d you manage that? I mean, on foot it’s tough. I didn’t have much to go by. But — but maybe it’s what you have when you go, right? I mean, were you all in a bus? All of you?”

He looked around the interior of the black bus, but no one answered. The other passengers seemed almost embarrassed by his manic energy.

“I mean, all I had was my own two feet, right? Only way I could think to follow was to, you know . . . walk. I found an edge, like, a real high place, top of a building. A real tall building. It was so tall the lights on the ground looked like tiny faraway stars, you know? Like stars, yeah. And I just went walking toward them, right out into the sky, stars above and below, stars everywhere . . . and I walked through that for a while, till the stars went away and it got dark. But I could hear the Group again, finally. Like they were up ahead just a little ways— they didn’t have much of a head start on me. That was such a relief, right? I mean— I was trying to

imagine the world without them. What's left? Hey . . . you got a radio, why aren't you tuned in? You gotta tune 'em in. How else you gonna follow?"

The kid went to the dashboard and punched on the radio. It hadn't been on since they'd seen their old colorful bus plunge into darkness. It crackled to life now, as if the satellite were still out there orbiting in the dark, bouncing signals to anyone who cared to receive them. . . .

Music.

Driver straightened when he recognized it. The Group was coming in clear, as if they were outside the bus, surrounding it.

"Yeah," the kid said, ecstatic. He sank down on the steps.

Some of the others began to whisper, in the back of the bus. Yvette and Chad sounded excited. They knew all the tapes, all the recordings going around, being traded; they knew not only all the songs, but all the individual concerts, had heard most of them in person. But this was something new. This was. . .

"It's happening right now," Chad was saying. "Can't you feel it?"

And Yvette: "It's live!"

"Yeah!" the kid on the steps agreed. "That's them! We're catching up! What're we doing sitting here, Driver? Let's get moving!"

Driver had already been in the act of pushing the great bus forward. He bent once again to the task of driving, while music filled the black bus and the stars spread out on the horizon, drifting higher now. Not stars at all, he saw, but fires. Scattered fires burning all over the slopes of some dark shape. He sensed that something held them up, but could gain no impression of it. Spires, or simply a wall? The sky was too black to allow a silhouette, and the fires lit nothing but themselves.

The excitement in the bus grew as they approached the lights. The music was getting louder, the signal stronger. It was strange to know that the Group was up ahead playing — but to what audience?

And then, from the passengers, came a cry of disappointment and frustration — even of despair. For the tunes had blurred into a final lullabye . . . the Group's signature piece, after which they always left in utter silence.

"Hurry!" they were yelling at him, as if he could squeeze any more speed from the bus — as if they didn't mind crashing headlong into whatever black enormity held the specks of flame aloft. He couldn't bring himself to drive blindly, though. The closer he got to the lights, the slower he went — he had no sense of depth here. How

far had he come? How far had he to go?

The tune crested, tumbled over an inevitable edge into silence.

“Noooooo,” they wailed inside the black bus.

At that moment, the bus passed through a gate, an entrance or exit of some sort, into a tunnel. It was luminous with a deep violet light. They were descending, so he took his foot off the accelerator for an instant — and just then, they burst out abruptly into a huge arena, a stadium or coliseum whose dimensions were almost inconceivable.

They had emerged somewhere in the middle of the field. Ramparts or bleachers rose on all sides; they were like distant mountains, their true size impossible to judge. He had no sense of scale.

The ground was littered with rubbish: chunks and splinters of whitish rock that looked like the shards a mason leaves behind when he chisels a tombstone. Gnawed, discarded bones; soiled take-out containers. Worms and flies crawled and buzzed through the heaps of filth. Glass crunched and burst under the tires. Wide piles of embers smoked and glowed here and there like the remains of bonfires. He drove carefully through the waste, not wanting to be stranded here. Static poured from the speakers; all directions looked equally undesirable, all destinations futile. To head for any one of the surrounding walls would have been equally vain; they were all impassable.

“We missed ‘em,” the kid on the steps said, dejected. “We just missed them.” He put his head on his knees and began to sob. “All that . . . and . . . and . . .”

Sonora moved over to him. Her eyes were on the desolate scene beyond the window, but she put a hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“Hey, don’t worry. We’ll catch them next time, okay? They’re still out there.”

“But where?”

Sonora fiddled with the radio dial, but all bands seemed equally dead now.

“We’ll figure it out,” she said.

“Not here, though,” said Neuron.

“What do you mean?” Sonora turned to look at him. Driver kept the bus moving slowly, weaving around heaps of smoldering coals, because that was what he knew how to do.

“We have to keep moving. We have to get out now. If we get stranded, stuck here, they’ll pull so far ahead we’ll never catch up.”

“How . . . how do you know all this?” she asked.

“We’ve been following them a lot longer than you,” he said. “You learn these things.”

“But — but all this, it only happened tonight — I mean, if this is still tonight.”

Neuron shook his head. “You don’t see. It didn’t happen tonight, whatever that means. And it hasn’t happened yet, neither. It happened a long time ago — and it’s still happening, even now. It keeps deepening; it keeps moving through all the levels, and that’s where some of us come from . . . from the world before, or another one before that. Just like you, now, hooking up with us. It’ll change you eventually, like it changed me.” He put a finger to his skull. “You’ll become what you are, along the way; but what you are will change.”

Sonora stared at him, irritated. “Just tell us what to do,” she said.

“If I knew that . . .” Neuron started.

“Let me,” came a rasping voice from above them. In the rear-view mirror, Driver could see someone stepping down from the bunks. It was Crouch, the old man. He hadn’t been there long, but apparently it was long enough. He almost wasn’t Crouch anymore.

He knelt before them, extended his pale, long-fingered hand, and slowly opened his fingers. Driver gasped. From the popping blue veins in the old man’s palm, red slugs were crawling. They wriggled up, dried, curled to a wisp at one end, a rounded blob at the other. “Corpsules,” Crouch said. “I can make my own now.”

It was the first thing Driver had seen here that truly frightened him.

Then he remembered when he had seen them before.

When and where. . . .

The amphitheater. Like this place, only smaller, enclosed, packed with people. Could this be the same place, much later that same night, with all the people gone from it? Had they been driving in a circle all night, and now everyone was home and sleeping except them? But it was so immense . . . had they shrank somehow?

“Disgusting,” Chad said, his face pressed to a window. “Look at all them fukkin diapers, my god. And the cans, the garbage bags.” Which there were,

bursting at the seams, stuffed with rancid meaty stuff, ground worms maybe, that wouldn't quite ever decay, it was so rubbery and plastic.

“Yea, verily,” said Crouch now, raising two fingers in a peace sign, then making a sign of power over the handful of red drops. “Behold me, that am yet angel.”

And then his wings unfolded.

It wasn't a good idea, there in the bus. He battered them against the racks and jumped back, hunching smaller. “Jesus!”

“Looks like this isn't your day, old man,” Neuron said, putting arms around him, helping him pack the wings back in again. In almost the same gesture, he swiped the handful of drops from the white-furred palm. Apparently it was expected. Crouch sucked in his cheeks and, still stooping, hobbled painfully toward the front of the bus.

“Open the doors,” he said commandingly as he passed Driver.

“But —”

Crouch hit the lever himself. The smell that swept in was unbearable. He faced into it, descended with his nose held high, turned and faced the bus and all its company. Seeing him out there, surviving in the emberlight, some of the passengers let up the windowshades on that side. Crouch clicked his heels together, put his hand to his brow in a crisp salute, and bowed stiffly at the waist. Then he sprang into the air and was gone.

“Now we take these,” Neuron said. Waving a corpsole under Driver's nose.

Sonora also remembered the droplets. She rushed over to Neuron and grabbed it out of his hand.

“This!” she cried. “This is why we're here!”

“Well, in a sense,” Neuron said with a shy smile. “Or hadn't you figured that out yet?”

“I don't mean what you think I mean,” she said. But she wasn't sure how to put it. Wherever they were — death, a dream, some other kind of place whose name came not quite so readily to the tongue — they wouldn't have been here except for the drag. They would have been somewhere else completely; perhaps they might have passed through here briefly, on their way to that other place. But instead they had gotten off the road— driven off it almost deliberately— and were now trapped in this . . . she wanted to call it a borderland, but she wasn't sure it was either a

bordering region or a zone between borders. It was more like another planet, that extensive.

“He’s wiggling out,” said one of the original passengers, whose name she had never known. She thought he was talking about Neuron, but he saw she thought that and shook his head, nodding toward the ceiling.

Wild laughter from overhead.

They went out, all of them, to see Crouch turning somersaults in the sky above. He was just luminous enough to be visible.

“Come on, old man!” Neuron yelled, clenching his fists. He had dropped the red tears into a vial he wore around his neck.

“I’m not following him,” someone else said.

Crouch hooted at them.

“Where are they?” the bearded kid cried. He sounded mad.

“Right here,” Crouch called down to them. “But not right now.”

“We know that much,” Neuron said. “Should we drop now?”

“Not yet. They’re farther ahead. Just follow me.”

“Good job, old man.” Neuron looked ecstatic, and when the kid saw him, he relaxed, too. “You heard him, Driver! Everyone back on board!”

Sonora went up just before Neuron, who came last. She realized she had smelled nothing outside— not since the moment she stepped out of the bus. As if the decay were only an image of decay, a projection affecting only the eyes. But as she boarded the bus again, she gagged on the stench that followed her in. Driver had his face covered with a monogrammed handkerchief he pulled from the label of his charcoal black uniform. It was a relief when the door shut behind Neuron.

She let him past, smiling broadly when he looked at her, then turned and whispered urgently to Driver: “Don’t take those drops!”

Neuron was looking back at her. She straightened up and walked toward him, feigning easiness. She swayed as the bus moved forward, and Neuron put his arms out to catch her. They went right around her, tighter this time than before. “Whoa, there. Gotcha,” he said.

“You sure did.” Sonora smiled, hands on his forearms, twisting away. She

went down to the mattress, scooting back in between Chad and Yvette. Neuron took a lazy swipe at her, let his arm dangle, and smiled sideways sort of regretfully, as if: oh well.

Sonora looked up and saw Driver watching her in the mirror. Concern showed in his face, but she nodded slightly and he looked back at the road, such as it was. Crouch flew on ahead of them, she supposed.

“What is it, Sonora?” Yvette asked, and Chad, hearing the question, looked over.

Chad had bowl-cut hair and a baggy sweater, a long face with the cheeks scooped out of it. One eye wandered. “Is something wrong?” he asked.

“The drug,” she muttered, low, her hands on either one’s knee, so they leaned closer to her. “Those drops. Do you remember taking them?”

“Sure,” Chad said. “Just after the Group came on.”

“It was just before,” Yvette said, with equal certainty.

“But you both took them, right?”

“Yeah. But so what?”

“Something happened to us — and I don’t mean the drugs.”

“I’m not stupid,” Chad said. “I know where we are, Sonora. You’re not the only one who can pick up on these things, and it isn’t exactly all that subtle.”

“I don’t think we’re exactly where you think we are,” Sonora said.

“All right, so is somebody going to say it?”

“We’re dead, you mean?” Chad blurted out, laughing a moment after he had said it.

“If we aren’t, I’d like to know where we are,” said Yvette.

“I think we’re sort of dead, yes —”

“Sort of?” Chad howled louder.

“— but there’s more than that going on. When we died, we were on that stuff, that drug. When you die, you’re supposed to, like, let go of things, come all apart, dissolve back into the universe— at least for a while. But we’re not getting there.

We're stuck somehow, stuck following the Group, just like we did in life. Death is supposed to be experienced with clear, concise consciousness— but we were, are, addled. So we're seeing all this instead of the Clear Light."

"Are you saying that even in death, there's drugs?" Chad asked. "Whoaw! "

"So we . . . we just let it wear off?" Yvette said.

"I hope that works. That's why I'm saying, don't take any more of the stuff. What would it be like, here, to do more of it? What is it? What does it do to you when you're. . . "

"Dead," said Chad, still laughing.

"There's a peyote paradise," Yvette said. "Maybe this is like that."

"This is no fuckin paradise," Chad said.

"I mean— a drug land. But we're stuck here in our bodies, or our astral bodies, because we're dead . . . so we're free from anything that would pull us back to the Earth plane, like happens when you come down from peyote."

"Right, baby, I follow that," Chad said. "But what about this, Sonora? What if we don't want to come down off this stuff? I mean, what's up ahead if we do? What are we waking up to, comprende? I mean, the rest of the trip might not be even this pleasant."

"But Chad, this is unnatural! We're not supposed to be here this long."

"Then what the hell are they doing here?"

Sonora looked around the bus at the other passengers, most of them unknown to her, yet with stories and lives as full as her own, hard as it was to imagine.

"No, not them," Chad said. "The Group!"

"Maybe they were doing the same stuff as us," Sonora answered. "Or maybe they're not here at all. The crash could have been like a lure, to get us here. To make our bus go out of control."

"Jesus," Chad said. "That's creepy."

"Or maybe they died but they weren't drugged, so that's why they're getting ahead of us, going forward while we're stuck here. So they were on that plane but they weren't drugged at the time —"



“Yeah, right,” Chad said. “The Group not drugged. Now you’re really stretching things. . . .”

As if to punctuate his sarcasm, there was a blare of music up ahead, a wild chord sweeping through the bus. It electrified them; everyone crowded to the windows except Yvette and Chad, whom Sonora held back.

“Wait a minute,” she said. “What do you think about Neuron?”

“We should ask you that,” Yvette said.

“I don’t know,” Chad said. “Why? What do you think?”

“I think — he’s here for a different reason than we are. He’s chosen to stay here. I remember him giving us the drugs, in the theater tonight; but we weren’t dead yet.”

“How do you know we don’t have the order of things confused in our memories?” Yvette said. “What if our minds and personalities are breaking up even now?”

“I believe they are, yes, but somehow we got that original drug. Those red drops. What if somehow, someday, Neuron was able to come out to us — out of death, I mean, into the living world.”

“What if he’s meant to,” Yvette said.

“I see what you’re saying Sonora,” said Chad, dismissing the other. “The guy came out and snatched us, sort of.”

“In a way we can’t understand.”

“Oh, I understand it. He saw you, fell in lust, and went for you the best way he knew how. Only to get you, he had to take all of us, since we’re sort of, you know . . . attached.”

Sonora swallowed. “So I’m to blame?”

“He’s to blame!” Yvette said.

“Then . . . what if we’re not really dead? I mean, what if this really isn’t death, but some other kind of world, like you say? What if the Group, playing up there, really is playing?”

“He’s coming,” whispered Yvette.

Neuron ducked out of the crowd at the front of the bus. “They’re playing. You want to come see?”

He put a hand out to Sonora.

“I can hear, thanks.”

“Yeah,” Chad said loudly. “We’re kind of comfortable now.”

Neuron glowered at Chad. He turned away, but took another look at Sonora over his shoulder.

Then the bus stopped, she wasn’t sure why. The music had been brewing, early notes of a concert, the warm-up stage, arrival. She looked out a window, raising the shade above her head, and saw light. It was artificial, drifting down from incredibly tall spindly lampposts that arched overhead and dropped blots of light across a concrete wasteland.

They were in a parking lot. All the garbage they’d passed through was peripheral to this. They had come to another stadium inside the larger one, a relatively tiny arena in the middle of the plain which was itself surrounded by ring-walls.

The black bus was the only vehicle in the lot. Except . . . yes, far off, around a curve of the stadium, she could see a black airplane, sleek and inky, angled something like the bus with a shimmering exterior, half-diamonds and other geometric planes that made the craft look at once velvety and scaly.

Driver had parked within walking distance of the gates. She could see clots of people moving through the dark arches, down the tunnels that led toward the central stage. Not many, though. She had the impression these were stragglers, hurrying in late.

“It’s started already,” Neuron said quickly to all of them, like a teacher explaining to a class. He uncapped his vial. “Okay, Crouch will back me up on this, it’s time to drop. Who’s first?”

Most of the other passengers moved forward. Sonora wanted to stop them, but she didn’t dare. It would have to be enough, for now, to save her friends—and herself. They opened their hands and she said nothing. Neuron laid the red corpuscles in their palms as they walked past him, down the steps and onto the cement, heading toward the music. Some licked their hands, slurped up the droplets; but she remembered from a sudden tickling in her palm how easily the things were administered.

She whispered, “Drop yours — I mean, get rid of them— as soon as you

can. Don't leave them on your skin."

"Why not just refuse?" Yvette said. "I mean, he can't make us take them."

"I can't believe you two," Chad said. "Dead, and afraid to take drugs. What could happen to you now?"

"What if we're not dead?" Yvette said.

"Yvette, you are one confused girl. Do what you want. I'm going for it."

He pushed up from the platform and swaggered past Neuron, who dropped the corpse in his hand and winked at him. Chad slapped Neuron's shoulder and popped the drop in his mouth, giving a thumbs-up to Sonora and Yvette on his way out.

"Ladies," Neuron said. "You coming?"

"I don't know," Yvette said.

"The show must go on, right? You've got to get off and experience —"

"She doesn't feel up to it," Sonora said.

"Really?" Neuron pressed toward them. "Don't feel well? Now how can that be?"

"I've got sort of a psychic headache," Yvette said.

"They don't have to go if they don't want to," Driver said quietly.

Neuron stopped where he was and turned back toward him. "What's that?"

"I said, there's no reason for them to get off the bus if they'd rather not."

"But, hey, out here in the parking lot . . . it gets a little scary during a show."

"I'll be more than happy to stay with them. I've done it many times."

"Done it many times, huh? Look, Driver-man, you're just a suit, all right? A uniform, you get me? Nobody's talking to you. You don't play a part in this."

"Do you want to drive?" Driver said.

Neuron paled, while up inside his hat, his brain blackened, emitting a dark bruised light, purple as an injury. "Look here," he said.

Driver rose as Neuron stalked toward him.

“Hey,” said a voice from outside. “What’s going on in there?”

It was Crouch.

“Good, you’re here,” Neuron said. “The driver is giving us trouble this time.”

“What? Impossible!”

“Get in and help me.”

“I — jeez — can’t. These fukkin wings!”

Crouch tried the doorway but got stuck in it. Driver pulled on the door lever and the partitions began to shudder and flap, first crushing Crouch’s fingers and pinching his wings so he yelled, then expelling him backward onto the parking lot. Soundlessly, but not before Sonora let out a warning cry, Neuron leapt at Driver. Driver caught him, twisted, and simply shoved. Neuron tumbled down the steps, landing directly atop the howling Crouch.

Driver then, before they could regain their feet, shut the door.

The two staggered upright, clinging to each other for support, livid and furious now. They came toward the door, not seeing it, searching the air with desperate hands. Before they made contact, Driver had already thrown the gears into reverse. They stumbled past the windshield, dismayed to find the bus already gone.

Standing next to Driver, Sonora and Yvette looked down at Neuron and Crouch. The men searched an ever expanding spiral, Driver backing up a few yards whenever they approached. Finally they turned and faced each other. Neuron tore off his hat and stomped it flat; Crouch’s wings shot out stiffly to both sides.

“This is unbelievable!” Neuron cried. “I can’t believe it!”

“You?” said Crouch. “I got these outta the deal!” He jabbed a thumb at his wings. “I knew that driver was trouble from the start.”

“Why didn’t you say something?”

“Why should I have to? Oh, I know. Because you’re an idiot!”

“How was I supposed to know?”

“He was different than the other drivers.”

“No he wasn’t, he was the same. It’s been the same guy as long as I can remember, and it was him again. You’d notice any little change in that face. It never changes!”

“He was different tonight!”

Sonora put a hand on Driver’s shoulder. “Do you know what they’re talking about?”

Driver shook his head.

“Because, I mean, if you’re something more than what we think, I just want you to know . . . we appreciate it.”

“Really, I don’t have the slightest idea. They’re insane. Look at them now.”

They were tearing at each other, roiling around on the cement. The old man cried out each time Neuron grabbed his wings, and Neuron winced and growled whenever Crouch hammered him on the crown.

“Give them plenty of room,” Sonora said.

Driver pulled away from them completely, starting on a circuit of the stadium’s outer walls. As he drove, he slowly turned his course outward, moving away across the empty parking lot and gaining speed as if they were trying to break away from a planet’s gravitational field, attaining escape velocity so they could fly off into the night.

“Do you know what you’re doing?” Sonora asked.

“Getting some distance.”

“What about them, back there?” asked Yvette.

Sonora thought of their friends, the bearded boy, who had taken the drug and wandered into the theater. She hadn’t said goodbye to any of them —hadn’t the chance. “I guess it’ll wear off eventually . . . and then they’ll have to go on. Unless Crouch keeps giving them drugs, and then maybe they’ll be here a long time.”

“No,” Yvette said. “I meant them. In the bunks.”

Sonora had forgotten that the bus was not empty.

“I can stop,” Driver said. “Before we go any farther. We can unload them.”

“What if we need them up ahead?” Sonora said. “What if they really are guides?”

She could imagine them waking in their own time, electing to fly out and scout the way, instead of being roused irritably and sent half-asleep into the dark on a trivial mission.

“We’ll let them sleep then, for now?” Yvette said.

“I guess. We’re not going back then, are we?”

“I think the bus could make it through, if you wanted to,” said Driver.

“It would have to, wouldn’t it?” said Yvette. “I mean, Neuron got out, didn’t he? He rode this bus in and out between the worlds?”

“But he never stayed out,” Sonora said. “And I think— we only saw him when we’d taken the drags.”

“I thought he gave them to us, though.”

“Yeah. . . .”

But that was before she remembered first seeing him. Events were out of order; time did not quite dovetail here. That’s how he did it, she realized — that’s how he gave us what we needed to meet him . . . before we met him. He wasn’t in ordinary time. So he never really reached our world, where each thing follows another, one event gives rise to the next. And we couldn’t really get all the way back there, probably; not even in the black bus, miraculous as it is. We might pull up alongside our old bus and find it crashed on the mountainside, everyone dead — including ourselves. Who’d want to see that?

We can only go forward, she thought. Besides, maybe we weren’t even alive then, in the time before; maybe we were lost in some kind of other place, wandering and vulnerable in a drug-land like the peyote paradise, and that’s how he reached us. We were so used to the sensation of dreaming, with all the drugs we took, and everything seeming so unreal all the time anyway -how would we have known if we’d been dead already?

But we’ve broken that cycle, whatever it was. We’re going on now.

Driver’s foot was on the floor and the bus kept going faster and faster, picking up speed. Ahead of them, against a sky that was slightly lighter than she remembered, she saw not stadium walls but actual mountains.

“You don’t mind driving, do you?” she said, her hand on Driver’s shoulder.

He shrugged. “It’s what I do.” His pained, martyred expression had softened; he looked genuinely content. She realized that she was seeing someone new— not a stranger, but an old acquaintance never seen so clearly until now, and strange because of that. He glanced up into the rearview mirror, meeting her eyes.

“Why don’t you two go in back and try to rest?” he said. “I’m fine up here, alone. I’m not sleepy, myself, and there’s a long drive ahead.”

“All right,” she said. “Come on, Yvette.”

She slipped out of her sandals and crawled back among the pillows with Yvette. They lay down and wrapped themselves in blankets, and she thought of her old companions, forgetting their faces as she had earlier forgotten their names. Soft breathing filled the bus, soothing and hypnotic as the engine sound, but coming from the bunks. Her eyes closed. At the last moment before sleep, she recalled that they had not drawn the shades— and wondered if it mattered. Her eyes flickered open, going to the windows across the way. There were stars now, and suggestions of clouds, high and faintly luminous, or reflecting some distant glow. The sight reassured her; she let go of fear. Then she was a child again, lulled, rocking, asleep.

AT THE WHEEL, watching a highway slowly appear out of the receding darkness, Driver could feel the insignificant details of his personality sloughing away with every mile, leaving only the essentials, paring him down to a bare-bone surface solid as the hard, flat road on which the tires hummed. He was, had always been, Driver.

Glancing into the mirror at his sleeping passengers, he was pleased they felt safe enough to sleep. The bus was almost empty, but he knew that eventually it would fill again. Somewhere on the road ahead were numberless hitchhikers and wanderers on foot, pilgrims who might be ready for some company, all headed toward something none of them could name.

Driver kept an eye out for them.

\* \* \* \*

A little over a year ago, Marc Laidlaw became a father. Although his daughter has taken much of his time, he still has a moment or two for writing. St. Martin’s Press has published his next novel, *The Orchid Eater*, and he has sold another. He says he wrote “*The Black Bus*” late at night, after his daughter went to sleep

It certainly is a late night story, one that should be read with all the lights on. About the work itself, Marc writes, “I used to ride a bus like the *Black Bus* frequently. Social microcosms, of which such buses are prime examples, naturally suggest stories. My ‘Group’ and its pilgrims were obviously inspired by the *Grateful Dead* and its cult, but those who suspect that I’m even remotely a *Dead-Head*

should take note of the fate I assign to my poor band.”