

Fat Tuesday

Ian McDonald

Not only was Ian McDonald one of the first of a new generation of British SF writers to break into print in the eighties, he did it in the USA. After publishing several highly acclaimed short stories in Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine and being nominated for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer of 1985, he published his first novel, Desolation Road, and a collection of short fictions, Empire Dreams, in 1988. Three more novels have followed, the latest being Hearts, Hands and Voices. At present he's working on something called Necroville, but whether that has to do with the fact that he lives in Belfast isn't apparent. If anything, as with Van Morrison, Belfast inspires McDonald's lyrical fictions, notable for their density of ideas and exuberant characters and prose, which in 'Fat Tuesday' find an ideal marriage of form and content.

McDonald tells us:

I'd like to say it happened like this:

Six fifteen. Pressing buttons on the remote control.

Channel one: the child killers of Rio are abroad in the hills again.

Channel two: dance energy, some Harlem kid pulling incredible rhythms out of a plastic bucket.

Channel three: ladeezlgennelmanlboys 'n 'girls: life in the Lycra Age!

Channel four: the great white guitar thrash fetish.

Remix is the dominant popular culture form of these last two decades of the twentieth century.

Except - it didn't. Quite.

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Black Sunday

S

ambada: musical composition in 2/4 rhythm characterised by massed drum-ming, remixed sampled material and extended electric guitar improvisation.

Also: sambada: a popular dance originating from the conurbations of Alto California province, to the above-mentioned musical composition, especially as performed during the annual pre-Lenten carnival.

Also: sambada: a social gathering at which *sambada* is danced and performed.

Sambada school: a collection of individuals, usually of one shanty district (see *cabaña*) incorporating musicians, dancers, costume designers, etc. who represent their district in the carnival parade and *sambada* competition.

sambadero(a): a man or woman wise in the ways of *sambada*.

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Run, Annunciato

Do not doubt they are behind you, pouring down the steep alleys of Birimbao Hill. Do not doubt that theirs are the voices whooping and cheering, theirs the wolf cries and the laughter like whips, echoing among the shanties and favelas. Do not doubt that theirs is the *batteria* surging through the trash streets and dirt squares, drums beating beating you from wherever you try to hide. And never for one instant imagine that they will ever give up until they catch you and kill you. For they are the Lobos de Sangre, and no wolf will abandon the chase until it has tasted blood.

Grasped in Annunciato's right hand, the glass guitar gently bleeds.

Thoughts of escape, Annunciato? That maybe if you can reach the boulevard you will be able to lose them among the holographic saints and neon madonnas and videowall advertisements for Coke and Sony and *cannbarillos*? Prayers, Annunciato? Oh Mary, dazzle them with your neon

halo, oh gay St Sebastian, send your laser arrows into their eyes?

Better to run, Annunciato. The freeway has new gods now, new deities born out of the media remix. They are gauche and inexperienced, but enthusiastic.

Nissans and Toyotas cut smoking rubber hexagrams into the blacktop as Annunciato and his glass guitar weave between the bumper-to-bumpers crowding the five lanes inbound and five lanes outbound: *Hey boy you tired of living, stupid favelado, cabañero you want to mash yourself all over my hood ornaments I am only too happy to oblige you where he steal that guitar from anywhereplacehow?* Oaths and imprecations cease as the Lobos come loping through the gridlock slap-ping out the rhythm of the hunt on spray-customised hoods, leaping from fender to fender to fender, leering in at the Valley Girls in six centimetre heels and hi-thi-leos and wrap-round teleshades.

In some off-avenue back alley overseen by videowall Marys, he stops to listen if they are still behind him.

Oh yes, Annunciato. Most definitely, Annunciato.

The roar of engines is like a steel-capped boot in the stomach. The lowriders come revving along the alleyways, Lobos hungry, eager, riding on doors and roofs, beating out their hunting song on hot-shopped Toyota steel. Sparks scream back from their scratch plates.

Reconcile your soul with the saints of the boulevard.

And the big holoadd for Diet-Coke on the side of the National Lottery Office says: ANNUNCIATO.

The name, tastefully iconised in spray-can platinums and razor blues, tumbles away through holospace. The spotlights of the Lobos pin and pluck you naked as one of the chickens Madre Amparo takes to the shrine of St Anthony. The back streets off St Dominic's Preview are loud with the whisper click of switchblades.

TRUST ME. I WILL PROTECT YOU.

Lasers sear the night. Brave, bold howling Lobos fall back swearing screaming clutching burns gashes scars. A new ingredient in the city perfume of sweat, shit, smoke and semen: scorched flesh. Glass guitar in

hand, Annunciato is safe behind a wall of flickering laserlight.

A miracle.

STAY HERE. SOMEONE WILL COME TO HELP YOU, says the holoaid.

'What who why how?' says dazed and confused Annunciato.

The big BVM videowall on the Credit and Loan fills with starry starry night. A pair of strawberry luscious lips rezz up on the startrek sky. Fruit comes tumbling out of the mind of the Coca-Cola Company's videographics computer; bananas, pineapples, oranges, guava, mango, piled up like Mr Socks' stall in Birimbao Plaza. A woman's face fills in behind the lips, beneath the tutti-frutti hat. Blessed Virgin Mary was never like this.

LA MIRANDA, says the videowall as, with a wink and a smile, the woman fades into the Alto California night. Los Lobos howl and smash the big chrome wrenches that are their ritual weapons against the oily concrete. But the lasers hold them.

A light. And a voice. A woman's voice. Flashlight beams, a vision, riding down on an extending fire escape out of the Sacred Heart of Jesus on the U-Bend-We-Mend. Silver lamé from the peak of her baseball cap to the tips of her boots, a jingle-jangle of ripped-off hood ornaments around her neck, the Six Mystic Stars of Subaru.

Angel of mercy, and, incredible of incredibles, *white*.

Annunciato thought they had all died out in their rotting haciendas and Tudor mansionettes years ago.

'You come now, right now,' she says. Her Angeleño is appalling. 'Right now, you come. La Miranda, she cannot go on drawing this much power from the grid for long time. Catholic engineers come, shut her down. So you come, come now.' He reaches toward the pure white hand and is drawn up into heaven. Over rooftops, she leads him, through forests of aeriads and satellite dishes, past cooling towers and rotary clotheslines and coiling serpentine airco ducts, across rooftop marijuana gardens and coca plantations, leaping through the yawning dark over deep dark alleys while the never-ending stream of taillights winds and wends beneath them and the Lobos, released from luminous imprisonment, go loping along the shining sidewalks, howling at the grapefruit moon. And the glass guitar drips

a trail of minims and crochets like the silver slime of a night snail on the side of the basilica of Santa Barbara.

‘Down. Now.’

The big jacked-up mauve and yellow 4X4 is circling, growling in the parking lot of Señor Barato All-Nite super-mart like a bull in the ring, pawing at the piss-stained concrete with its monster balloon tyres. The Lobos, war drums a-swinging, arrive in a wave of uniform pink and green as Annunciato and the angel drop from the swinging end of the fire escape and hit the ground.

‘In, in.’ The driver is an old old black man - more incredible even than the silver lamé angel - already gunning the accelerator, tyres smoking on the concrete. ‘In!’ Doors slam.

‘Caution, caution, your seatbelt is not properly engaged, please engage your seatbelt,’ says a made-in-Yokohama chip-generated conscience. Lowriders slam to a halt beneath Señor Barato’s flashing sign. Grinning and gabbling like a *loco*, the old black man throws the beast into four-wheel drive and up they go on those big monster wheels right over the tops of the lowriders and out into the neon and smog of the boulevard.

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¿Porque?

Because on this Black Sunday night Annunciato killed a Blood Wolf with a glass guitar.

The sambadrome had been jumping. Word is up, *compadres*. Tonight tonight tonight is the big Play-Off. Tonight the last two *guitarristas* do battle to the beat of hip-slung drum and mixing desk for the glory glory hallelujah of leading all Birimbao Hill on Fat Tuesday.

Yelping and blowing football whistles, his brother Lions’a’Judah had carried him shoulder high down the precipitous paths of the favela, this boy from nowhere who had swept the wing play-offs with his glass guitar. Have you not heard? Tonight tonight tonight the red gold and green of Judah will smash the pink and green of the Lobos.

As the rival *guitarristas* were borne into the sambadrome, the *batteria* had struck up, those aristocrats of rhythm, drumming up an avalanche of

sound that seemed to sweep all Birimbao down before it into the valley. And the *remixados* in their baseball caps with the correct corporate logos and their hi-tops and cycle shorts had spun and scratched and sweated and mixed and mastered. And the *sambaderos* in their Famous Names sportswear, the *sambaderas* in their leos and body-paint had spilled onto the floor, shaking it strut-ting it slapping it stuffing it shrieking it *ai ai ai ai*.

He had been good, the Blood Wolves' *guitarristo*. Had he not been, he might have lived. But as the guitars up on their speaker towers clashed and tangled in fugues and counter-points, he had felt a spirit awaken in the glass guitar, that same spirit that had called to him that morning when this Annunciato, sixth son of a sixth son, glimpsed that gleam of glass in a Birimbao trash heap, a spirit growing stronger, stronger than Annunciato could hold, something that fed on the sweat and the stink and the shatter of drums and one by one the dancers and the *remixados* and even the *batteria* stopped to watch and the only sound beneath the sambadrome's corrugated iron roof was the unbearable feedback howl of the glass guitar on and on and on and on and on and on and on like the scream of every child that was ever born in the street and the scream of every soul that ever fell to a blade in a *cabaña* alley and the scream of every *sambadera* in the ear of her *sambadero* as she gave it away in the rear seat of a hot-wired Nissan in the back rank of the drive-in and the music seized the Lobos' *guitarristo* and burned his soul away to nothing and he toppled from the speaker tower with smoke coming from his eyes and then they all screamed with one voice and heart and soul.

One chord. That is all the difference there is between hero and monster.

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Blue Monday

Sambada por mujeres.

Everything is crucially dependent on the T and A zones. Yah, you got it. Tits and Ass.

The T Zone. You got a mirror? Then get a mirror. Strip off. Yes, everything. All you going to be wearing come Fat Tuesday is gloves and boots and black velvet G-string. The Five of Spades look. Cellulite? No worries, there will always be someone worse off than you. Roll your shoulders; left, then right. The idea is to get each breast to describe its own

separate, complementary orbit.

The A Zone. As above, but with hips rather than shoulders, and - here is the bit that marks the true *street sambadera* from the exhibitionists in from the suburbs or up from the projects - *the A zone has to work in contra-rotation to the T Zone*. They reckon it takes half a year just to get the basic rhythm. When you can give the impression you are having an orgasm sitting on top of a thousand-speed spin washing machine, you are close. It helps if you smile. Anything that makes you feel more confident wiggling your T and A in front of several million spectators and eleven satellite channels while dressed in a postage stamp on a piece of elastic has got to help.

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Her name is Ros'a'Jericho.

She is an apostle of the Tucuirombé.

They are members of a *kairis*.

A *kairis* is a group of (usually) four individuals who may, or may not, previously know each other, called together by the Tucuirombé to achieve some divinely ordained purpose.

The purpose of this *kairis* is to find a *guitarristo* to lead the Tres Milagros parade, the theme of which this year is the New Gods.

The Tucuirombé, of whom this La Miranda who saved Annunciate from the Lobos is a member, are the new gods.

Whoa whoa whoa whoa whoa. Kid Annunciato's head is spinning. He is only a malnourished undereducated favela boy, after all.

Ros'a'Jericho lives with the old black man, who is known as El Batador, in a house on Tres Milagros Hill. They do not sleep with each other. Annunciato has heard of Tres Mila-gros Hill. Most people in this city have heard of Tres Milagros Hill, the one with the big white letters on top of it that no one can understand, the one where all the *weirds*, and *freaks*, and *devos*, and *teevees* go to be weird and freaky and devo-ish and dress up or dress down together. Tres Milagros have won the golden Bell of St James five times in the past ten years under the leadership of their director, the fabled La Baiana.

And they want Annunciato to be chief *guitarristo*? HeesusHoséMaria .

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Ros'a' Jericho is the *remixado*. She lives on a mattress amid piles of rotting Chinese food cartons in a room stacked to the ceiling with silver and black boxes bearing the logos of Pacific Rim corporations. The only light is that of LEDs and crystal displays.

'No vinyl, no spiral, no scratch,' she says. 'Happening world is my found source.' The pockets of her silver lamé suit contain DATcorders from which she remixes the sound of the city into her music.

The aged aged black man makes food. *Guitarristos* are always hungry. It is good for the music. While Annunciato pokes rice and beans and a little chopped synthetic meat into his face, El Batador tells him about the Tucumbé.

They are gods. Real gods. Street gods. Patterns of alien intelligence stirred out of the informational minestrone of the Pacific Rim computer cores and seasoned with Catholic hagiolatry; favela myth and superstition; silver screen icon-ography; the symbolism of *candomblé*, *umbanda*, *vodun*, Rosicrucianism and mass-market Buddhism; emergent myths of the global data nets; night-hawk radio heroes, rock'n'soul legends. They have quite a following on Tres Milagros and in some of the big projects and *arcosantis*. Gods of the remix.

Though it was Seu Guantanamera had been watching you, calling you, chose you for the *kairis*,' says the old black man, 'it was La Miranda, the oldest and strongest of the Tucumbé, traced you through the traffic control cameras down on the boulevard and called us. These are gods of the public telephone and the traffic signal. They are strong, young, eager. They do not ask of their disciples *renounce the world, the flesh and the devil*, they ask *and what have you done for me lately?*'

Ogun Dé is the old black man's particular patron. Con-ceived in the informational shatter of a Mundo Tercero terror grouping's viral attack on the military systems, he oversees all things dynamic and rhythmic. Arcologies, freeways, ionocruisers, carnival fireworks, heavy rains, fire, fighting, team sports, all these fall into his bailiwick. He is Master of Rhythm. He is Lord of the Drums. His avatar, rezzed up on Sendai-Nihon wristie-vision, is a stealth bomber in Gothic spiked armour.

San BuriSan is a rotating icosahedron of Japanese theatre masks, persona of change and evolution. Bottle banks and carc crushers are his, his also adolescence, plastic, birthdays, editing desks and lasers. Born one cherry-blossom morning in the transfinite complexity of the Pacific Rim stock exchange cores, he is King Scratch, Master Remix.

Seu Guantanamera, the one who, if this crazy old black man can be believed, if anything that has happened these past twentysomething hours can be believed, is the personal guardian and guide of Annunciato and his glass guitar. He is Master of Harmony, Completer and Sustainer of the quadrilateral of entities; his source and symbol is a glass guitar.

El Batador reverently picks up the Glass Guitar, wipes the scabs of dried music from its wounds, hands it to Ros'a'Jericho, who shakes her silver head - she cannot understand anything that is itself, not made from other things remixed together - passes it back to Annunciato, like some sacramental *ganja*. His fingers come and go, come and go, up and down the silent frets.

'Back in the time of the Black Star Liner,' says El Batador, 'when the black people left for Ethiopia on that ship that was three miles long and two miles wide and a mile high that sailed for forty years through every ocean in the world, back then lived the greatest guitarist ever laid finger to fret. Bar none. Seu Guantanamera. With those six strings he could make you cry and laugh and die and feel like you had seen the face of God or something even better. People said he was God, or something better, and they would have made him God if he had let them, but he died trying out a new guitar, a guitar like there had never been before. Made of glass, it was. Clear pure and perfect crystal. And it killed him. An accident with the electronics. The circuitry went live. He died instantly, up on stage in front of twenty thousand people, in mid chord.

'And then the legends started. Legends that his soul had passed into the glass guitar, that whoever bought it would have no luck with it until it passed into the hands of someone who had as much, or more, talent than Seu Guantanamera, legends that when the time was right the trapped soul would be released.'

And as the old black man says those words, Annunciato, who has been thinking, yo, yo, ga, ga, suddenly feels the strings hum beneath his fingers, like electricity like summer lightning in the hills. And he is much much afraid.

'Tell me,' says El Batador, and it is as if all Tres Milagros Hill right up

to those crazy letters on the top is listening for Annunciato's answer, 'Tell me, how did you find it?'

'On a trash heap,' says Annunciato, 'on Birimbao Hill. One morning, I went out, and there it was. It didn't look like it was anybody's. I taught myself to play, day in, day out, every hour I could spare, I practised, so I could be like the big *guitarristas*, better, even.' But as he says these words, he understands that they are true, and at the same time not true. They should be reversed, It found Him, It taught Him. It made Him the best. There had always been a sense of the hand of the angels about it, from the moment he saw it twinkling from the shit and foam styrene burger boxes that bright Birimbao morning.

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Sambada por hombres.

You got it easier. You only got one zone to worry about. From the waist up you might as well be foam polystyrene. From the waist down you got to be hotter than Mama Marilena's hot salsa. So start today. You want ten-, twelve-, fourteen-year-old *boys* to *out-sambada* you?

First, the stance. Feet apart, shoulder width. Now, bend back from the knees. Back. Back. Are you making a thirty degree angle with the ground? That's all right. Next, clench the cheeks of your ass. Tight. You should be able to carry an Amex card between them all the way from the sambadrome down to the Square of the Basilica of Our Lady of the Angels where the judging is held. Once you can do that you are ready for the *grind*. Swivel your pelvis, left hip up, round in a circle, back, then your right hip so that your groin - the entire focal point of *sambada* - is going round and round like an aeroplane propeller. When your RPM equals your degree of inclination away from vertical, you are *muy sambadero*. But do not forget: dignity. You got to have dignity, or the boys will laugh. You got to be cooler than a bottle of Dos Equis in a tin tub full of ice.

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La Baiana: is: twenty-two stone of fun wedged into leopard-print lycra, falsies jutting like the Guns of Navarone, little troublesome moustache line virtually invisible beneath a stucco of powder and rouge. *Rei de Las Reims, carnivalado* of *carnivalados*, the designer's designer. There was never as titanic an old Queen as La Baiana. From his throne of hammered flat Heineken cans in Tres Milagros sambadrome, guarded by Playa

Venecia body-shop *musculados*, he purses persimmon lips as radiantly beautiful young teevees parade past, wiggling it, jiggling it, pouting and preening and prinking, pausing in front of La Baiana for that little turn, that little shake of the *tushie*.

‘He choosing teevees,’ says Ros’a’Jericho. Tres Milagros much much famous for quality of transvestites. Big honour, be chosen by La Baiana to march in Tucurombé parade.’

But the big carnival queen has seen his fellow *kairisados* and claps his be-ringed hands.

‘Out girls, out. Back at nineteen and then we shall see who wins the prize.’ He leans forward in his throne, peers at Annunciato like he is a turd sticking to a shower curtain. ‘La Miranda saves this piece of ass to be our *guitarrista*? This is Seu Guantanamera come again?’

Annunciato, with the unerring *cabañero* talent for the gratuitous move, lifts the glass guitar above his head in both hands, strikes a groin-jutting *sambadero* pose.

‘I got his guitar.’

‘I got a crucifix, but that doesn’t make me Jesus,’ says La Baiana. But you can see he is just the littlest, tiniest, *poco* bit impressed. He indicates the wall of banked-up amps speak-ers bins drivers mixers decks behind his throne. ‘Let the *sambada* decide. Yo! El Batador!’

Rhythm answers. Complex, sinuous, muscular, many-layered rhythm that strikes into the heart and finds its resonant frequency. El Batador is seated on an empty beer-crate drumming on an upturned plastic bucket, lifting the rim and slapping it against the pounded clay of the sambadrome with his boney feet in counterpoint.

Q: How many men does it take to fill a sambadrome with one plastic bucket?

A: One, but he must be *muy muy sambadero*.

HeesusHoséMaria, Annunciato has been waiting all his short life to play with musicians of this calibre. This old black man, he makes the massed *batterias* of all Birimbao Hill sound like kids kicking rhythms out of the bus stops with disposable chopsticks. Annunciato picks up the beat:

Baile Mi Hermana, one of the standards, easy to play badly, hard to play good. He will show this fat transvestite *carnivalado*. If they are gods, these spirits in the computers, he will be worthy of them. He plays the theme high and pure and holy and Ros'a' Jericho behind her deck comes in on a wave of samples as he breaks into improvisations. And it lifts. It soars. It takes off and heads from the Van Allen belts. It screams, high and holy and hot hot hot and the *cabaña* bums and *malandros* are standing two four six eight deep around the concrete-block walls mouths open eyes popping what kinda *merda* this and Annunciato feels the thing in the guitar awaken and open like a moonflower blooming and he looks inside and sees ...

'Ai ai ai ai,' shouts La Baiana dancing on his throne. 'Enough enough enough enough. I believe you, I believe you.' And one of his body-boys throws the master isolator and it all fails, it all falls, it all fades and comes apart and Annunciato, soaked with sweat, feels like a crashed angel.

'Hot dog, jumpin' frog,' says Ros'a' Jericho. '*Muy guitarrista!* Seu Guantanamo!' She kisses him on the mouth. She tastes of pork, like white women are supposed to.

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Crackin' bottles, yabba yabba; long-necks from a tin bath full of ice up at La Baiana's place, which is cool and airy and has ceiling fans which Annunciato has only ever seen on tele-vision and lots of things in terracotta pots on the patio and is built into the third 'O' of the letters of the hill.

Bosque de los Acebos, that is what it means, Ros'a' Jericho tells Annunciato, which means nothing at all to him.

'Used to make movies here, way way long back before the Treaty of Albuquerque,' says La Baiana, sweating like a pig developing little five o'clock shadow problemo vicinity upper lip. 'Legend is, if you go down, way down, way down low, whole damn city is built on a can of film a hundred kilometres across.'

'*Merda*,' says Ros'a' Jericho. 'Is city built on rock'n'roll. Bossanova. Blues. Soul. Samba. Sambada. Is electric guitar is way down low, down deep deep deep. Great guitar hundred kilometres long, and when great guitar finally plays, world ends, everything remixed and remade.'

'Yo yo, rock'n'roll,' says La Baiana, belching gently.

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Fat Tuesday

Sambada por gringos.

Tragic. You see them, these fat women in shades and hi-thi leotards, these Japanese boys with all the correct corpor-ate logos and hood ornaments you know they have bought at the airport and these *norte* intellectuals down by the planeload from Vancouver and Medicine Hat because the carnival is the Last Great Celebration of Folk Culture, trying to shake it shake it shake it to the drums and the deck and, I tell you, it makes me want to cry. Like watching something crawled from under a stone running away from the light. *Sambada* for gringos? Forget it. You do not have the *street*.

Please God, don't let it rain today.

In every *cabaña*, in every slum and favela, on every hill, they have been up since dawn, those who have been to bed (their own, anyone else's) perming hair waxing bikini lines slipping/wedging into feathery flowery leathery rubbery silvery goldy costumes checking the T and A zones in front of the mirror worrying about lip gloss powder paint running in heels through the shit and mud for the bus to take them to the assembly point where directors high as comsats on dexties mescaline and nervous energy marshal floats, *batterias*, vast mobile sound stages for the *guitarristas* and *remixados* like launch platforms for interstellar expeditions, regiments of bare-cheeked *sambaderas* bitching about the cellulite levels of their opponents' gleaming rumps; phal-anxes of hung-over, battle-scarred *sambaderos* in shell-suits and baseball caps of the requisite colours into *some* semblance of a procession.

Down on the freeway at the foot of Tres Milagros, La Baiana, dressed in lace tutu and Herman Goering white with campy upswept biker's cap, issues orders through a loud-hailer from the back of El Batador's pick-up.

Primero: a dancing wing of two hundred teevees.

Segundo: four floats each bearing the glass-fibre likenesses of the Tucurumbé: La Miranda first, with body-painted acolytes throwing real fruit to the audience; then Ogun Dé with his bodyguard of Tres Milagros bloods in black spiked rubber demon suits, then San BuriSan on a videowall of one hundred televisions donated by a variety of Pacific Rim electronics

companies; last Seu Guantanamera accompanied by strolling mariachi musicians and girls dressed as lightning bolts.

Tercero: the *batteria*, made up of dockers from Drowntown and construction workers from the new Todos Santos *arcosanti* over by Poco Venecia - during the marching season, drumming in the lunch-hour ousts even football - all dressed in mauve and yellow and led by El Batador himself, as he has led them every year for the past twenty-five years.

Cuarto: the mobile sound-stage borne on the backs of three tank transporters (some general down in Chihuahua owed La Baiana, but what he was not prepared to say); complete with sound system lighting rig FX backing musicians and roadies in mauve and yellow. Here Annunciato and Ros'a' Jericho will amaze the city.

Quinto: two hundred maidens dancing.

Sexto: two hundred lords of the *cabañas* a-leaping.

Septimo: a wedge of open-topped bunting-and-flower decorated cars in which the *sambaderos* and *sambaderas* of former days, too old now to dance all the way to the square of Our Lady of the Angels, ride in honour and splendour, decked with synthetic feathers and often wearing ludicrously decorated glasses.

Octavo: a rearguard of assorted devos freakos pervos rubberboys leatherboys bike-fetishists SM enthusiasts etc. etc.

El Batador is already sounding time on his plastic bucket tucked under his arm, crazy old black man. Annunciato is scared three kinds of excretaless, only Ros'a' Jericho looks like she knows what she is doing. Her silver lamé suit is covered in clip-on microphones wired into a transmitter in the small of her back and beaming tight and righteous into her sampledeck. No recordings, no found sources; this Fat Tuesday her source is her city and she mixes in real-time the sounds and music of carnival itself, snatched and snatched and crammed rammed jammed through her mixing desk.

La Baiana takes his position in the gilded cupola at the back of the portable sound-stage, looks to make sure every-thing is ready. Which of course it isn't but if you waited until it was you would never get anywhere.

'Okay, my little chikadees.' He slips a Little Thunderer between his ice-cream pink lips, blows a mighty blast that sets even the letters up on the

hill reverberating. 'Let's go!'

Last census Alto California had a population in the region of thirty-five million people. Looks like every last one of them, plus eleven satellite channels, turned out this Fat Tuesday. The streets are canyons of sound and colour, cheering voices, whistles, banners, streamers, balloons with the faces of cartoon characters and football stars on them; it is high, high stuff, higher than anything they ever sold in zip-loc plastic sachets back of Mr Socks' stall on Birimbao Plaza and the Glass Guitar snorts it down its f-holes and it burns along the strings up Annunciato's fingers and it is just the edge, the promise of a wildness that could be if he is brave enough and Ros'a' Jericho takes up the roar of the crowd and the beating of the bells and the cymbals and slams them through her processors and La Baiana is jiggling and clapping his hands like he is in heaven and now the canyon walls of the business district close in around you and funnel Tres Milagros into the massive procession twenty kilometres long that is Carnival, a torrent of life and sound and colour and music channelled between the twenty thirty forty fifty storey high videowalls of the big Pacific Rim *corporadas* and the people crowded twenty thirty forty fifty deep along the boulevards are so close so pressing the sound of them is like a physical presence and Ros'a' Jericho scoops it up and takes it apart and puts it back together again and the glass guitar snorts it down and sends it burning up through your fingers into your brain and you see with a sudden new light like the dawn slanting through the win-dows of Our Lady Star of the Sea mission between the end of one note and the next what it is that lies hidden within the moonflower heart of the Glass Guitar, it is every great moment you ever had listening to the radio in the heat of the night, it is dancing in the rain to sound of accapella, it is rhinestone guitars playin' live from Las Vegas on the Sunday night satellite channels, all these and more, every great and true and holy and profane moment whether you call it rock'n'roll or soul or bossanova or blues or *sambada* and he realises now what he is to do, he is not to hold it back, that was where he went wrong that time in the Birimbao sambadrome, that was why the boy was killed, because he held back and it struck out to be free, struck out blindly, in anger and hurt; he opens himself to the thing in the guitar, draws it up into the heart of him and he screams and the guitar screams as his eyes are opened to a new light and he sees the faces on the videowalls change into the face of a woman with a bowl of fruit on her head and a stealth bomber in spiked armour and a dozen kabuki masks spinning in space and, last of all, a glass guitar rimmed with lightning bolts.

Seu Guantanamo.

And the Glass Guitar leaps beneath Annunciato's fingers *free at last*

free at last dear God free at last and roars in heat and draws the rhythm of the *batteria* and the master mix and the reality dub and the stamping of the dancing feet and the thirty million voices plus eleven satellite channels into one thing, one music which transcends *music*, that becomes something brilliant and burning and beautiful and shit-scary that even the *batteria* falls silent and the *sambaderos* and *sambaderas* stop in mid wiggle, mid shimmy to turn and stare at the wild things raving from the Glass Guitar and there is only old mad El Batador banging on his plastic bucket and Annunciato playing like no one, not even Seu Guantana-mera, ever played six strings. It is joy. It is burning. It is pain. It is sex. It is every great and noble thing, it is every rat-mean and wicked thing.

Higher. Higher. Higher. God save us, please, we cannot take much more of this.

Higher. Higher.

God, please, no!

Higher . . .

And it ends.

And in the silence afterwards, thirty-five million people plus eleven satellite channels hear clearly, unmistakably, enormous musical harmonics, vaster than heaven, sound deep in the earth beneath their feet, like the notes of a guitar buried in the centre of the earth, a guitar on which God might jam with creation and the immense sound of it penetrates everything, shakes everything streets buildings earth sky music heat and mind, shakes them apart and in the space between is a light purer and brighter than any light you have ever seen before.

Then the infinite sustained note dies away and the vision fades and there is no God now only a *cabañero* punk holding the fused, shattered fragments of a once beautiful glass guitar. But there is a new colour in every one of the neon signs and holograms and videowalls, one that no one has ever seen before but everyone immediately recognises as the colour of *street*.

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Ash Wednesday

Street.

The very heart and soul of *sambada*. One of those words that if you have to look it up in a book, you will never never know what it means, *compadre*.

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When the great guitar at the centre of the earth sounded and the Tucurombé were released, the world was never quite the same. When you take a thing apart you can never put it back exactly the same way. Sometimes worse. Sometimes better. Always different.

Many small wishes were granted. Lost things turned up again. The military junta all resigned.

There was a simultaneous computer failure in all the world's tax offices.

The rains actually came on time this year.

Suddenly, everyone found they had a little more money than they had thought.

Suddenly, there were more national holidays in the calendar than before.

Suddenly everyone fell in love.

Suddenly your favourite football team started to play better.

Suddenly the radios were filled with a new and wonderful music that reminded you of all the great songs you have ever loved, but more so, and better, and newer.

The Tucurombé seemed determined to start their reign auspiciously.

Annunciato became the guitar hero he had always dreamed of being but was haunted all his stellar career by the knowledge that he would never again play as he played the day the new gods were born.

Inspired by a dream of radio, Ros'a'Jericho had wires put in her head so that when she went roller-skating along the sidewalks her every thought

and hope and dream and experience would be broadcast citywide FM. You can find her most Sunday mornings at half-past a nightmare on the dial between the Evangelical Pentecostal Missions and Radio Free Oklahoma.

La Baiana went on to achieve his sixth Golden Bell, fabulous celebrity, enormous girth and immense longevity. He was commissioned to design TeeVee World, the first Transvestite Theme Park which crashed two years later leaving debts in excess of one hundred million pesos. La Miranda saw fit to extend his gift of sexual transubstantiation to any and all people, and for as long as they wished, but try as he might he could never get it to work on himself.

El Batador went back to his *compadres* at the docks and was last seen one October evening swimming madly out to sea toward what he thought was the Black Star Liner three miles long and two miles wide and a mile high come back to take him home to Ethiopia but in the end was only a cruise ship carrying *viajeros* from the *norte*, carved out of a twenty kilometre iceberg.

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