

A Heart for Lucretia
a short story by Jeff VanderMeer

This is the story of a brother, a sister, and a Flesh Dog, and how two found a heart for the third. The story has both oral and written traditions, with no two versions the same. It begins, for our purposes, with the city...

"The city, she has parts. The city, she is dead, but people live there, underground. They have parts..."

Gerard Mkumbi cared little for what Con Newman said, despite the man's seniority and standing in the creche. But, finally, the moans as the wheezing autodoc worked on his sister persuaded him. The autodoc said Lucretia needed a new heart. A strong heart, one which would allow her to spring up from their sandy burrows hale and willowy, to dance again under the harvest moon. Gerard had hoped to trade places so that the tubes would stick out from his chest, his nose, his arms, the bellows compression pumping in out, in out. But no. He had the same defect, though latent, the autodoc told him. A successful transplant would only begin the cycle anew.

In Lucretia's room, at twilight, he read to her from old books:

Bellafonte's Quadraphelix, The Metal Dragon and Jessible, others of their kind. A dread would possess him as he watched his sister, the words dry and uncomfoting on his lips. Lucretia had high cheekbones, smoky-green eyes, and mocha skin which had made all the young men of the creche flock to her dance.

But wrinkles crowded the corners of those eyes and Gerard could detect a slackness to the skin, the flesh beneath, which hinted at decay. The resolve for health had faltered, the usually clenched chin now sliding into the neck; surely a trick of shadow. Anyone but Gerard would have thought her forty-five. He knew she was twenty-seven. They had been born minutes apart, had shared the same womb. Watching her deterioration was to watch his own. Would he look this way at forty-five?

"Gerard," she would call out, her hand curling into his...

It had become a plea. He forced himself to hold her hand for hours, though the thought of such decay made him ill. The autodoc insisted on keeping her drugged so she could not feel the pain. Could she even recognize him anymore, caught as she was between wakefulness and sleep, sleep and death?

Flesh Dog, eyes hidden beneath the rolls of raw tissue which were its namesake, stayed always by his side. Flesh Dog shared few words with Gerard, but every twitch of its muzzle toward Lucretia or the squat metal autodoc reminded Gerard she would die soon--too soon, like their mother before her. Unless a miracle arose from the desert.

"The city, she has parts..."

And, finally, he had gone, taking Flesh Dog with him.

Thus it begins. The ending is another matter, a creature of fragments and glimpses which pieced together only tease...

That summer, as the stars watched overhead, an angel descended to the desert floor. And, when it departed, Lucretia arose from the dead and

danced like a will o' whisp over the shifting sands; a fitful dance, for she often dreamed of Gerard at night, and they were unpleasant dreams. That winter, Flesh Dog and Gerard limped back to the creche. He did not speak now. Always, he looked toward the south, toward the great sea and the city with no name, as though expecting strangers.

And the middle, finally, in which meat is placed upon the bone.

For twenty days and twenty nights, Gerard trudged the sands, subsisting on the dry toads which Flesh Dog dug up for them. They encountered no one on their journey, listened only to the dry winds of the desert.

Finally, at dusk of the twenty-first day, they climbed a dune and stared down upon the city. The sun lent the city with a crimson glare, silhouettes burnt into the sand. Gerard saw that the walls had crumbled in places and the buildings within, what could be glimpsed of them, had fallen into disrepair. Although Gerard looked for many minutes, he could discover no sign of life. The only movement came from the west, where a vast ocean glittered and rippled, red as the dunes which abutted it. Though tired and disappointed at the city's abandoned appearance, Gerard would have plunged forward under cover of darkness. But Flesh Dog sniffed the air, sneezed, and counciled against it.

"Strange smells," it ruminated, "strange smells indeed..."

Gerard, fatigue creeping into his bones, could not find the strength to argue. He fell asleep against Flesh Dog's side, sand on his lips and the wind in his hair.

During the night, he woke in a cold sweat, convinced his sister had been leaning over him the moment before, her hair back in the pony-tail she had lovingly braided at age nine: giggling and warning him to stay away from the city, the city which lay at the edge of his vision: a dark and ominous block of shadow.

As he drifted back to sleep, Gerard imagined he felt his sister's pulse weaken, back in her creche bed.

In the morning, Gerard and Flesh Dog found that the city was nearly eclipsed by the cusp of the ocean, its waves a blinding green. Flesh Dog wished to bathe, but Gerard said no. The waves echoed his sister's voice in their constant rush and withdrawal: hurry, hurry...

Flesh Dog scouted ahead as Gerard entered the city. The walls had been breached in a dozen places and overhead zynagill hovered, waiting for carrion. The smell as Gerard passed under the shadow of walls made him bite back nausea. A subtle smell of plastic and leather and unwashed drains.

The interior was littered with corpses: a valley of corpses. Flesh Dog, whimpering, retreated to stand by Gerard. Gerard stared at the spectacle before him.

Dead people had been stacked in rectangular pits until they spilled over the edges. Nothing stirred. No flies tended the dead. No zynagill touched them. Plague, Gerard thought, putting a hand over his mouth and nose. But the bright, festival clothes, the perfection of flesh without hint of boil or scab, mocked his intuition.

Gerard stepped forward, Flesh Dog shadowing him. The clothing upon the dead remained limp, lacking even the secret life of the wind. Eyes stared glassily and the jaws beneath were stiff, locked against giving up their mystery. Gerard would rather they sprang up in parody of human form than lie there, staring...A chill entered Gerard's bones. Watching. Bloodless. Cold. A vast tableau of the unburied and unburnt.

"So many dead," Gerard muttered. Once, he had been told of the legend of the Oliphant's graveyard. Was this the human equivalent? Would his Lucretia soon find her way to this city, against her will, because he had failed?

Flesh Dog sniffed the air as they skirted the nearest pit.

"Dead?" it said. "They smell as if they never lived..."

"Hush," replied Gerard, respectful of the silence.

And so they shuffled forward through the army of bodies, some appealing with outstretched arms, but all quiet as run-down clockwork mice. The eyes seemed to have lost the hope of blinking away deep sleep, the skin of feeling dappled sunlight upon it.

Beyond the pits lay the city proper: a maze of half-buried fortifications and jumbled buildings. In places, it appeared wars had been fought among the ruins, for the ground was burnt and some walls had melted into slag. All Gerard could do was remind himself that Con Newman had said, "people live there, underground." It was obvious none lived above. Not even grass grew in the pavement cracks. They trudged on to the sound of their own belabored breathing.

Finally, they came upon a strange sight amongst the wreckage: the top of an exposed elevator shaft some fifty meters ahead; the tower which had once housed the device had fallen away entirely, leaving only a rough rectangle of regular stone embedded in the ground. The shaft, which had all the looks of a bony arm, vein-like girders naked to the sky, the mortar peeled away, revealed a compact glass box, intact, which was the elevator. Gerard recognized it from *The Metal Dragon*. Jessible had escaped using an elevator. That something so fragile could have survived for so long amazed him.

Standing by the shaft were three creatures, each larger than Gerard by a third. They resembled giant weasels but no fur grew upon their clawed hands and they stood upright as though it was their birthright rather than some carnie show trick.

"What are they?" he hissed to Flesh Dog. "I have never seen them before."

"Meerkats," it replied. "Distilled somewhat with other species, but still meerkats. Your father used to read you tales of the meerkats and the dances they did for the men who created them."

Meerkats! This was indeed magical, and it created out of the torn and wasted landscape some small scrap of hope. Meerkats! He had killed meerkats for the meat before, but they rarely reached two feet in height. For a moment, he considered the possibility that Flesh Dog lied, but dismissed it: Flesh Dog had taught his father how to read and write. Flesh Dog never lied.

"Are they...they are intelligent?"

"Yes," replied Flesh Dog flatly.

Intelligent. He almost laughed. Was he to believe an intelligent toad next? His heartbeat quickened and with it he could feel his sister's heart, uneven and diseased, slowly winding down. He sobered.

"Flesh Dog, are these the folk who live underground?"

"Almost certainly," replied Flesh Dog.

When they came before the meerkats, the leader spoke to Gerard, ignoring Flesh Dog. The leader was a sleek, jet specimen with amber eyes and the language it spoke was all trills and clicks. The meerkat soon switched to gish when it interpreted the confused look on Gerard's face.

"State your business," it said in a bored voice.

"I need a human heart," Gerard said. "I am willing to trade for it."

A huffing rose from the leader, followed by similar noises from the other two.

"Parts," the leader ruminated, his tone bordering on contempt. "Fifteenth level." He barked a phrase to his followers and they stepped forward and passed a glittering rod in front of first Gerard and then Flesh Dog.

The leader nodded and escorted them to the elevator.

Gerard had seen elevators in books before, but never dreamed he would one day ride in one and so, when the doors closed, he bent to his knees and whispered to Flesh Dog, "Are elevators safe?"

Flesh Dog, sensing the tremor in Gerard's voice, replied, "Hold on to me if the motion makes you sick."

And so Gerard did hug Flesh Dog as they descended into the city's belly. He clung also to the ruck-sack full of precious stones and old autodoc parts with which he hoped to woo a human heart.

The levels seemed to crawl by, each more wondrous than the last, more terrible, more strange. Many of the things they saw, Gerard did not understand. They saw winged men with no eyes and vats of flesh and monstrous war engines belching, spitting sparks, and tubes and gears grinding and metal frames for ships in enormous caverns and stockpiles of small arms and old-style lasers and meerkats walking on ceilings and ghosts, images which reflected from the floor, that could not be real and more meerkats--meerkats in every size and color, crawling all over the engines of war, the tubes, the metal frames.

Fires burned everywhere--in rods and in canisters, on walls and floors; yellow fires, orange fires, blue fires, tended by meerkats more sinister than their fellows. Meerkats with frozen smiles and cruel claws and mouths which like traps, shut. The acrid smell of fire came to Gerard through the elevator walls, a bitter taste on his tongue. Around some fires meerkats threw squirming creatures the size of mice into the flames and, once or twice, larger, metallic objects, their alloys running together and melting like butter to grease a pan.

Gerard turned away and ignored the cruelty of the meerkats, tore it from his mind. Lucretia needed a heart. Lucretia needed a heart.

The weight of earth and rock above him and to all sides made him dizzy and nauseous, but still deeper they went, silent and fearful, into the blackness beneath their feet.

At the fifteenth floor, they were greeted by a man who resembled the people in the pits: the same lifeless eyes and fixed jaw. But this man was alive and he indicated that Gerard was to follow him down the corridor. The corridor led into a maze of tunnels, all lit by a series of soft, reddish panels set into the ceiling. The smell was dank--a sharp, musty scent as of close quarters and many residents over many generations. The

original reliefs carved into the walls had been defaced or done over, so that meerkat heads jutted from human bodies and gish became a weird series of sharp, harsh lines. Unease crept up on Gerard as they walked and, when he looked down, he saw that Flesh Dog's hackles were up and its fangs bared: a startling white against the black-blue of his muzzle.

By the time they reached their destination, Gerard was thoroughly lost and could no more have retraced his steps than conjured a heart out of thin air. He clung to his rucksack, and to the thought that Lucretia still needed him.

They were led into a large room which had partitions to hide other sections from them. A chair had been provided and the silent man gestured to it before locking the doors behind him. Gerard sat down and Flesh Dog flopped to rest at his feet.

"That man smelled of the pits," Flesh Dog muttered. "Everything smells of the pits."

A whirring sound made Gerard sit straighter in his seat and a brace of meerkats appeared from behind a partition. One was tall and white, the other short and yellow. Flesh Dog growled, but they ignored the beast.

"My name is --" said Whitey, pronouncing a series of high-pitched trills.

"And I am --" said Yellow. "Together, we are the Duelists of Trade. I assume that is why you are here?"

Gerard nodded eagerly.

"First," said Whitey, "you must be thirsty."

He clapped his paws together and the lifeless man re-entered, holding a glass of clear liquid. He offered it to Gerard, who took it with a nodded thanks.

"Do not drink!" Flesh Dog hissed. "Do not drink!"

"Hush," Gerard said. "Hush."

The liquid smelled of berries and the first tentative sip rewarded him with a tangy, smooth taste. He took one more sip, for politeness' sake, and then heeded Flesh Dog's warning and set the glass by his chair.

"And now," said Yellow, "what precisely do you wish to trade for?"

"A heart," replied Gerard. "A human heart." He reached for his ruck sack. Whitey looked at Yellow, made a huffing sound. They both had fangs which poked out from the muzzle. Red dye designs had been carved into the whiteness, designs like scythes and slender knives in their sharpness. The eyes were slightly slanted and they devoured Gerard with a kind of hunger.

"What do you have to trade?" asked Yellow.

The hairs on Gerard's neck rose. The question had been asked with quiet authority and now, and only now, did he think that perhaps these meerkat were not as simple as the ones he had caught in the desert. That they might be dangerous in their own way. But the drink had created a sharp warmth in his stomach and it made him careless. Besides, Lucretia still needed a heart. He reached into the sack.

"I have gems," he said, pulling out a huge orange stone he had found at an oasis.

Whitey took the stone from Gerard's hand. He examined it for a moment, held it up to the light. Then he dashed it to the floor. It shattered.

Flesh Dog growled.

"Gems?" Whitey hissed. "Gems! For a human heart?"

Gerard shrank back into his chair.

"But I--"

"Do you mean to insult me?" His tail twitched and twitched.

"No! My sister Lucretia is dying! Her heart is bad. I have brought the richest stones I could find..."

Flesh Dog rose onto his haunches, fur bristling, teeth bared.

Yellow patted Gerard's shoulder.

"There, there. No need to shock our guest. What else do you have?"

Here was a warm-hearted fellow, a generous fellow. Perhaps Yellow could be satisfied. Gerard scabbled in his pack, pulled out an autodoc part.

"There. It is almost new."

Yellow's claws bit into his shoulder. Strangely, Gerard felt no pain, though the shock made him bite back a scream.

"No," said Yellow, voice like ice. "'No, I'm sorry, but this won't do...this won't do at all. You come here, down all fifteen levels, spy on us, and offer us used parts?"

Flesh Dog growled and Gerard shook off Yellow's grasp. Why did he feel so numb? He was a fool, he realized, to have come here. In his ignorance he might well have come into the clutches of villains.

Gerard felt Flesh Dog against his feet, a position from which to guard him, and an unworthy thought crept into his head.

"What about Flesh Dog?" he asked Whitey. "I will trade Flesh Dog's talents for a heart..." An unfair trade considering the multitude of services Flesh Dog performed, but it was after all a beast. Surely a human life outweighed ownership of a talking beast? He tried to ignore the animal's whining.

Yellow nodded. "Very good. Very good indeed. However," and he pushed a button, "not good enough."

One of the partitions slid back. Behind it: one hundred Flesh Dogs, their parts not yet assembled, so that the heads sat upon one shelf while the bodies sagged in rows below. Two men, like the ones in the pit, lay sprawled in a corner.

Gerard gaped at the sight. So many Flesh Dogs. Dead? Decapitated? It made no sense. But then, neither did the numbness spreading through his body.

Flesh Dog shuddered, shook its head, and moaned.

One hundred heads, connected by one hundred wires to one hundred nutrient vats, turned to stare at him, with their globby folds of tissue dangling.

"We are," said Yellow, pausing, "overstocked on Flesh Dogs at the moment.

Human hearts, now, those are rare. We have only one or two."

"However," said Whitey, "there is one way in which we might be persuaded to part with such a heart..."

"Yes?" said Gerard, afraid of the answer. He had volunteered his own heart before, but that had been with the assurance of care, faulty though it might have been, from the autodoc.

"It would involve both you and Flesh Dog," said Yellow slyly.

"It would take six months," said Whitey.

The delightful warmth had crept up his chest, the cold following behind.

"Afterwards we would let you go..." Whitey held his hands while Yellow caressed his neck. "And in return, we give Lucretia a heart..."

"How soon?" Gerard asked. "How soon?" He shivered under Yellow's touch.

"Immediately," whispered Yellow in his ear. "Flesh for flesh. You must simply show us on a map where your creche lies--you do know what a map is?--and we will send it by hovercraft. We do not break our word."

"So what of it, friend Gerard," said Whitey. "Do you agree?"

Gerard turned to Flesh Dog.

"What do you think, Flesh Dog?"

Flesh Dog peered at him through its fleshy folds. It turned to the Flesh Dog heads on the shelf--and howled. And howled, as though its heart had been broken. Then, with a sideways stutter, it leaned into the floor and was still, trembling around the mouth.

"Poor, poor machine," hummed Whitey. "It has forgotten it is a machine. So many years in service. Poor, poor machine..."

"Rip their throats," growled Flesh Dog from the floor. "Rip their throats?" The growl became a moan, and then incoherent. Gerard would have comforted it as it had comforted him in the elevator, but he was too numb.

"Do you agree?" Yellow asked, one eye on Flesh Dog.

"Yes," Gerard said, immobile in the chair now, able only to swivel his head. He imagined he could feel his sister's heartbeat become more regular, could feel a glow of health return to her cheeks. This, and this alone, kept him from panic, from giving over to the fear which ached in his bones. "Yes!" he said with a drunken recklessness, at the same time knowing he had no choice.

"You will leave with a smile upon your face," Whitey promised.

"Oh yes, you will," sang Yellow gleefully, taking out the knives.

As for the ending, there are many. Perhaps the next day, the next month, a new face stared up from the pits, the arms of the body reaching out but frozen, the eyes blank. Perhaps the meerkats never honored their agreement. Or...

That summer, as the stars watched overhead, an angel descended to the desert floor. And, when it departed, Lucretia arose from the dead and danced like a will o' whisp over the shifting sands. She danced fitfully, anger and sadness throbbing in her new heart.

That winter, Flesh Dog and Gerard limped back to the creche. He did not speak now. Always, he looked toward the south, toward the great sea and the city with no name, as though expecting strangers. Always, as he sat by the fire and sucked his food with toothless gums, Gerard-Flesh Dog looked at Lucretia, the Lucretia who saw only that Flesh Dog had returned a mute, and smiled his permanent smile. Beneath the folds of tissue, Gerard's smoky-green eyes stared, silently begging for rescue. But Lucretia never dared pull back the folds to see for herself, perhaps afraid of what she might find there. Sometimes she would dream of the city, of what had happened there, but the vision would desert her upon waking, the only mark the tears she had wept while asleep.

After a year, the men of the creche held a funeral for Gerard. After two years, Lucretia married a wealthy water dower and, though she treated Flesh Dog tenderly, he was never more than an animal to her.

Afterword

Cordwainer Smith has always been my primary SF influence. His ability to create SF that truly feels alien still startles and enthralls me.

I wanted to bring a mythical element to this -- I wanted to write a story set in the far future that is actually written about the distant past. If that sounds contradictory, it really isn't. As I wrote the story, I imagined myself as a storyteller in the year 12,000 AD writing a story about the year 11,500 AD. Thus the mythic can mix with the science

fictional with no harm done to either.

Added to these elements were the real-life worries I had for my sister, whose heart problems had become life-threatening.

Finally, any far future scenario that is "realistic" -- at least psychologically realistic -- has to contain two elements: (1) the presence of some other sentient species than humankind, probably created by humankind and (2) consequences for our short-term environmental policies of the present-day. I have long been fascinated by meerkats -- their quick, agile movements, their complex social and family life, and ability to survive human encroachment. So the idea of making the species created by humankind be based on meerkat genetic stock appealed to me greatly. As other stories in this cycle indicate, these are not just giant meerkats, but enriched with genes from other groups, including human beings. The Flesh Dog character is stolen, in a way, from the 1977 remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. When I saw the movie, there was one scene that stood out for me -- a brief glimpse of a dog with a human head. It scared me to death -- the juxtaposition really seemed alien. So the idea of Flesh Dog being remade to have a human face came from that movie. The other general idea behind Flesh Dog is to have a character, alien in the exterior, who is actually almost more human than the "hero" -- there is something heroic and sympathetic about Flesh Dog. This also creates a nice juxtaposition with the meerkats, whose intentions are sinister...

All of this may sound rather calculated, but in execution it wasn't. What I do is find elements I would like to deal with in a story, and then when the opportunity arises, because I've been thinking about them a great deal, they tend to organically embed themselves in the story.

As for the ending, it is implied in the beginning. One thing I like to do in stories is present the reader with a situation that seems clear and self-evident, but by the end of the story invert the meaning of the scene or situation that began the story. This process of transformation, if done well -- not as a twist, but as part of the natural evolution of the story -- doesn't just dislocate the reader. It, hopefully, makes the reader question the assumptions he or she makes in processing what we call "reality". It's like a reminder that the world is more complex than the elements we break it down into.

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"A Heart for Lucretia" first appeared in *The Silver Web*, Winter/Spring 1993.