

The Measure of All Things
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Richard Chwedyk lives in Chicago with his wife, Pamela Miller, and often reads in the Chicago area, most recently at the Twilight Tales reading series at the Red Lion Pub (where an early draft of "The Measure of All Things" was first presented). His poetry has been recently published in Tales of the Unanticipated and Tales from the Red Lion (also from Twilight Tales/11th Hour), but has also appeared in Another Chicago Magazine, Oyez Review, Paul Hoover's Legendary Oink! (now called New American Writing) and The Best of Hair Trigger anthology, among even older and more obscure publications. He teaches creative writing classes for Oakton Community College, but his major paycheck comes from doing layout/copyediting for a chain of newspapers in the Chicago suburbs. He has had fiction published in Fantasy & Science Fiction, Amazing Stories, and Space and Time. He has moderated writing workshops at a number of recent worldcons, and will do so again at ConJose in 2002. "The Measure of All Things" was published in F & SF, and is one of two stories in this volume that might be considered in the tradition of H. G. Wells' The Island of Dr. Moreau (see James Morrow's story, in this collection); it might even be perhaps a bit Dickensian in its sentimentality. The home for biopet saurs has metaphorical reverberations that ambiguously evoke abandoned pets, orphans, and abused children.

Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the lamb make thee?
—William Blake

Axel was the first to see the car coming down the driveway from the main road. He stood on the table next to the picture window, where he always stands after breakfast, looking out at the woods, the sun (if it's out), the clouds (if it isn't), shifting his weight from one clumpy foot to the other, tail raised to balance himself against the slick, smooth surface. His mouth, as always, was wide open, displaying rows of benign teeth—benign compared to the predator he was modeled upon; and his tiny black eyes were alight with amazement, as always, as if he was witness to a secret miracle every moment.

"Huuuuuu-man!" he shouted. "Huuuu-man coming up the road!"

I had just finished cleaning up the kitchen, taking stock of the food supplies: plenty of pellets (some saurs still preferred them); another day's worth of collards and meat; and enough of the ever-essential oranges to last out the week. I needed more coffee, but since it was "human stuff" it took a lesser priority. A razor, too, would have been nice, and a new hairbrush. A pair of jeans wouldn't have hurt either, or at least another belt (I was losing a little weight), but I was getting off the subject of food. I drank my cold, leftover breakfast coffee with a touch of melancholy as I walked into the living room.

"Huuuuuu-man!"

The room was bright. The windows were open. Rain was predicted for that night but just then you couldn't ask for more beautiful spring weather. Few saurs paid attention to Axel's alarm, since Axel, in his constant ebullience, often announced the arrival of alien battle cruisers, or warned us of approaching death rays, tidal waves (we are four hundred kilometers from the ocean), and Confederate Army divisions charging our house from out of the woods.

"Are you goofing around again, Axel?" Agnes said, her spiked tail and back plates upright in a guarded stance. "Because if you are—"

"Real," Axel insisted. "Real real real real. Big blue car coming down the driveway!" He pointed out the window with his tiny forepaw.

I walked over and confirmed the sighting: a dark blue Mercedes, the sort of car that's always been popular with young men who want to show the world that

they've arrived. I wondered briefly if I'd ever wanted that: the sense of validation those wheels provided. I couldn't remember, but when I was a boy, like every other kid, I wanted everything.

"Is it the doctor?" Agnes asked.

"She's not due until this afternoon."

"It's not that horrible researcher, is it? The one who wants a tissue sample from Hetman."

"Researchers aren't Mercedes-type people," I assured her.

"I'll give him some tissue to sample!" She swung her tail back to demonstrate. Her battle-stance is less impressive when you consider that Agnes is forty centimeters long, her head is about the size of an apricot, and her tail spikes really wouldn't stand up in a fight.

"No," I said as I looked down at Axel and Axel looked up at me. "I think we have a visitor."

"Visitor!" Axel repeated in a whisper, as if he'd heard the word for the first time.

He hadn't, of course. Visitors aren't frequent here, but they're certainly not unheard of. Delivery drivers come all the time. Dr. Margaret Pagliotti visits once a week. Folks from the Atherton Foundation stop by for regular inspections. But there are other visitors, people who come by just to see the saurs.

Most people these days hardly remember them. The smallest saur is no more than ten centimeters long. The largest one is a meter and a half tall. They're not "real" dinosaurs—that's another business altogether—but they were modeled after them, sometimes to painstaking detail, but more often to the cuter, cartoonish caricatures that children of many generations before wore on their pajamas or had printed on their lunchboxes and notebooks. They were an outgrowth of that vision of dinosaurs as cuddly buddies, friends to all children everywhere—moving, talking versions of the plush toys they've always played with.

That's what they were designed to be. That's why they were brought into the world. Forget for the moment that the manufacturers had plans to make enormous sums of money on them, at which they succeeded (several million were sold); forget also that the designers were trying to put forward their own subtle agenda: that bioengineering and its nanotech components could be safe and fun—cuddly, like a shoebox-sized triceratops—an agenda at which they were far less successful. Forget all that, at least for the moment.

To the saurs themselves, they had come into being to be friends, buddies, giving out love and receiving affection from appreciative girls and boys.

That's what they were designed to do—that, and nothing else.

The designers fidgeted about for a name—they didn't like "life-toy," since it contained the troublesome "life" word. They didn't want the saurs confused with "animals," since that would place them under hundreds of government regulations. "Bio-toy" passed with all the marketing departments, so someone went out and wrote a definition of it: a toy modeled from bio-engineered materials, behaving without behavior, lifelike without being "alive."

The blue Mercedes parked in the gravel at the end of the driveway. I looked around our old Victorian-style house and its saurian occupants: the group gathered around the video screen watching a Buster Keaton film; little ones, mouse-and squirrel-sized guys riding across the living room on the battery-powered carts we call skates; in the dining room, another group of little ones were sitting before the big Reggie system computer, having a geography lesson (I could tell it was geography because I could hear them repeating the word "Togo" in unison); in another corner sat the Five Wise Buddhasaurs, blowing into their plastic horns; further back, in the library, I could see Diogenes and Hubert (two of the biggest guys, very tyrannosaurian) shelving books (yes, we still have books here, and even the saurs who can't read are fascinated by the illustrations, the type styles, even the little

colophons); also in there was Hetman's bassinet-sized hospital bed, rolled over to the sunniest window.

Along with the usual furniture, scattered about were the hassocks and clever stair-step things the saurs use to get up on the furniture; the old wheelchair lift—adapted to meet the needs of the saurs—was in operation, transporting the little and the lame back and forth between first and second floors.

It's a world I've grown accustomed to, but one that many visitors find fairly startling, and some even find disturbing.

"Well," I said to everyone within earshot, "ready for a visitor?"

Most were indifferent to the prospect. Some jumped onto skates and rode off to other parts. Others climbed up on the chairs and couches, not wanting to be underfoot with a stranger in the house.

Charlie, a light brown badger-sized triceratops, hobbled away from the group around the video, accompanied by his beloved companion, Rosie, and headed for the lift. The designers, for all their mastery of eyes, ears, brains, and larynxes, had trouble with limbs, and it was hard to find a saur who didn't walk with at least a slight defect, though many limped for other reasons.

"If it's that Joe," Charlie called back to me, "tell him I'm not here. Tell him I'm dead."

Charlie has been saying this for years whenever visitors come by, even though in all that time not one of them has been named Joe.

"Humans," Agnes grumbled. "Idiots. I wish they'd all just leave us alone."

I noticed her mate, Sluggo, wasn't with her and I asked where he was.

"Feeding squirrels. Feeding sparrows. He's always feeding someone, like some goddamned Saint Francis."

"He never feeds us," said Pierrot, a pint-sized theropod standing by the couch closest to the window, with his friend Jean-Claude, a dark green tyrannosur three times his height.

"Carnosaurs!" Agnes spat out the word with a resonance that belied her size.

"Hopeless, brainless embarrassments!"

"I'm glad to see the lovely day has not affected Agnes's mood," said Doc, a light brown theropod just under a meter tall, with heavy-lidded eyes and a serene smile that makes you think he must have gotten into the liquor cabinet.

"That is her nature," I said to Doc as I brushed my hair back.

He sat on a plastic box over which he could drape his tail and rest his weary legs. Before him played two of the tiniest saurs in the house, named Slim and Slam. The two held a pen between them as if it were an enormous tree trunk and drew lines and curves on a sheet of paper spread before them.

"And nature," he replied, "we know, is a thing we shouldn't adjust without caution."

"I hate when you talk about me as if I can't hear!" Agnes thumped her tail against the floor.

"I meant to ask before," Doc said as he watched Slim and Slam at work/play, "did you sleep well?"

"Yes," I lied. I knew I'd had a nightmare but I couldn't remember any of the details. The best I could recall was a vague sense of hiding in a cramped, dark place. Perhaps I'd cried out in my sleep.

"You did?" The skin behind Doc's thick eyelids furrowed as he looked up at me.

"Of course. Why do you ask?"

"No reason." The deep voice took on a placating smoothness. "You look tired." We heard the soft clip of a very expensive car door shutting outside.

"I'd better go out and greet our visitor," I said.

"Is the security on?" Agnes asked sharply.

"Of course. You know it's always on."

"Hmmp!" She positioned herself under the lamp table next to the couch.

"Remember, I'm watching!"

It was hardly a matter of remembering.

The visitor stood outside, reluctant, it seemed, to step onto the porch. He looked in his early thirties—a few years younger than myself, I figured—with an athletic build, light gray eyes, and strong facial features. His expression

had that severity most professional people affect these days, with downward-bent forehead lines ending in a little "V" between his eyebrows. He wore a dark blue sports jacket, light gray slacks, and a rose-colored shirt with the top button open.

It was all very acquired and practiced, as if he were living up to a model. But everyone out there in the real world acted that way. So would I, if I were out there.

"Look at that!" Axel shouted. "He's bald!"

He jumped up and down as I went to the door. "Take me with! Please! Please!"

"You'll have to behave yourself."

"Yes! Yes! Won't say a word. Just want to watch when he pulls out his mini-machine gun and starts shooting-du-du-du-du-du-right through the walls!"

Agnes groaned.

I picked Axel up and cradled him in my right arm. As I looked down at him, I couldn't help noticing the long scar down his back. It's been many years since that scar was made, but you could tell it had been a deep, nasty cut that left it.

Out on the porch, I said "Good morning," to the visitor. I must have looked a mess, but you can never dress for visitors because you never know when they're coming.

"Morning," he said with a deep, rehearsed voice. "You must be Groverton."

"That's me." I shifted Axel over to my left side and held out my hand. "Tom Groverton. And this is Axel."

Axel raised a forepaw and said "Hiya!" but the visitor ignored him. I shook hands with the man but he wouldn't tell me his name.

"You're looking for someone, aren't you? Most visitors are."

He spoke hesitantly, as if he wished he'd brought an attorney with him. "I don't really know if he's—"

"HIYA!" Axel tried again.

"—here. I—we, my brother and I—had him when we were kids. There's not much chance of it, but I thought—"

"HIYA!"

The visitor looked at Axel at last and slightly bowed his head. "—I thought he might be up here."

I gestured for him to come up on the porch and sit down on the old bench.

"Maybe you could give me a little description of him."

"He was—is, I guess—a stegosaur. Maybe thirty-five centimeters long. Orange on the top, mostly, and a kind of purple color on the bottom. Some patches of yellow between the orange and the purple. His plates were purple and a little orange at the center. His head is more beak-shaped than rounded off." He stood with his hands in the pockets of his slacks, refusing to sit on the bench. "My brother named him Elliot."

Axel made a hissing, gasping sort of sound. "Elliot!"

"A lot of saurs changed their names once we offered them shelter here." My mustache brushed my lower lip. "I can't keep track of whose name was given and whose was chosen, but we do have a saur here named Elliot who fits that description. Do you want to see him?"

"Yes!" His reply was so emphatic it seemed to startle him.

"You understand, I hope, that I'll first have to check with Elliot. Would you be disappointed if Elliot didn't want to see you?"

"I don't know." He returned to his previous, severe expression. "I don't understand a lot about this operation."

"The point," I said, "is this: many of these guys were extremely traumatized before they got here. Some of them were barely alive. You didn't have to have personally hurt him to remind him of days he'd rather not remember. That's why I need to check with Elliot first."

"I don't really understand." He tugged his slacks at the knees before finally taking a seat. "They're just toys, aren't they?"

"If that were true, would you be here?"

He looked away and exhaled with a hint of frustration. "Okay. Whatever."

I took him inside.

The visitor was surprised at the number of saurs gathered around the video screen. They were now watching Chaplin in Modern Times.

"How many you got here?"

"Ninety-eight in this house, all counted, which isn't a lot considering how many were made. Some folks wonder why the foundation set up houses for the saurs. Why not reservations or preserves? They forget that saurs don't have a 'natural' environment other than a house. They were designed to be domestic." And yet, when children tired of their saurs and stopped taking care of them, their parents drove them out to the woods or to parks and dumped them. It was worse than dumping cats or dogs: they at least had some vague instincts to work with. The saurs pretty much had to start from scratch, which is why so many of them starved, froze, were run over by vehicles or were eaten by predators.

I wondered if any of the saurs' designers ever imagined their creations would end up in a house like this. They had guaranteed the investors, the executives, and the buying public that the saurs were limited to a relatively few responses and reactions. They were supposed to be organic computers, and very simple ones at that. They could remember names and recognize faces, engage in simple conversations. They would sing the "Dinosaur Song" (a hideous thing that started "Yar-wooo, yar-wooo, yar-wooo/the dinosaurs love you-"), and if you told one you were sad he would know how to respond with a joke. Yes, the designers said, they were sophisticated creations, almost miraculous, a high point in what they had mastered by tweaking a few genes—but they were not to be confused with living things. They could respond to stimuli, they could retain data, but that doesn't make something a "living" thing, they said.

A bell rang in the library.

"Hetman! Hetman!" Axel squirmed around under my arm.

But just then I heard another commotion in the kitchen. Agnes was shouting. I excused myself from the visitor and entered the kitchen just in time to see Jean-Claude on the sink with Pierrot on his back, trying to open the freezer door.

"Hey!" Agnes shouted at them. "You idiots get down from there!"

"Honestly, guys." I helped the two of them back down onto the floor. "Couldn't you wait until lunch? You know you can't eat uncooked meat."

"Nooo," Pierrot corrected me. "We-were just-guarding, yeah-guarding the meat, in case the visitor tried to steal it!"

"I wish someone would steal you," Agnes grunted.

"The visitor steals Pierrot!" Axel yelled. "He takes him and he throws him down a well—and he's falling-falling-falling-AAAAAAHHHHhhhh!"

"Look what you started," I said to Agnes.

"It was a bad idea to create carnososaurs," Agnes sighed. "It's meat. Meat equals stupid. It must be."

Jean-Claude and Pierrot ran out of the kitchen, Agnes went back to her hiding place, and Axel quieted down.

The visitor had moved on to the dining room when I returned. He watched the group gathered around the Reggiesystem computer. On the screen was an animated version of a rocket taking off, moving farther and farther away from the planet.

"Where is the spaceship going?" asked the steady, soft Reggiesystem voice.

The question set off a little conference among the gathered saurs. Tyrone, a hamster-sized theropod, bent over and listened as Alfie, his constant buddy, whispered to him.

"The Walkuere space station?" Tyrone replied.

"Correct." The Reggiesystem played a little synthesized melody. The other assembled saurs cheered.

The visitor watched, two fingers pressed against his lips.

"Some of the saurs are quite clever," I told him. "Some not so. Some can speak

very well. Some can't. The problem is that you can't always assume which are which. Some saurs who can speak choose not to. Some are still too traumatized."

Axel waved to Alfie and Tyrone.

"They all seem hooked up in some way," the visitor observed, "like they have mates and children and whatever else. They're supposed to be asexual, aren't they?"

I shrugged. "These attachments they make to each other have baffled everyone who's studied them. Reproductively they're supposed to be neuter, but one saur will call another a spouse, or a parent, or an offspring, or a sibling, as if the need to establish familial connections transcends genetics. Who knows? Their designers know less about them now than when they first created them. "Take their life span. They were supposed to live for five years, tops. Doc over there is twenty-eight. And Agnes under the table is twenty-five."

"How dare you!" Agnes barked. "Tell him everything, why don't you?"

There were things I wouldn't mention to the visitor, or to anyone else. Like Bronte, sitting on the couch, warming the orphan bird eggs that Sluggo brings to her. Some of them hatch, and Sluggo feeds them—little robins and sparrows and finches—until they're big enough to fly from the window ledge.

And then there's the egg I found Bronte with the other day, the one that doesn't resemble any bird egg I've ever seen.

In the library, the visitor saw saurs reading, talking, listening to the radio. Fred and Ginger practiced a dance. The Five Wise Buddhasaurs hooked up their plastic horns to a synthesizer, so that their instruments sounded full-sized. Their cacophonies only occasionally coalesced into some charming harmonies.

Over in the far corner of the library, where the sun came through the windows most directly, Hetman rested on his little bed. Hermione, an apatosaur, stood nearby, watching over him.

"It's okay," she said. "A bad dream."

"S-s-orry," hissed Hetman. "I didn't mean to disturb anyone. I rang the bell in my sleep."

"Jesus," the visitor whispered as he got a look at Hetman.

Hetman's been in the little bed ever since he came here. His hind legs were crushed under some vehicle; his fore-limbs were hacked off and his eyes burned out. No one thought he'd live more than a few days when he was found, if that, but he's been here many years now.

"Don't be sorry, Hetman," I said. "Someone is always here. Whatever you need, we'll get."

"I'm here!" Axel squirmed under my arm again. "I'll get for Het! I'll stay! Can I stay? Want me to stay with you, Hetman?"

"Yes, Axel," Hetman said with a raspy whisper. "Keep me from falling asleep again. Tell me once more all about the tidal wave."

I put Axel down next to Hetman.

The lines in the visitor's forehead looked deeper, the little "V" looked like it had been carved in.

"Who could do a thing like that?"

I didn't answer. Such questions, even when rhetorical, are meaningless. The saurs were sent out into the world with simple physiologies that demanded a few food pellets, water, and a litter box. Sweet natures, a few prepared phrases, a few songs. They were delivered into the hands of wealthy parents who bought them as much to show their neighbors they could afford them as to please their children. The children were told the saurs were toys and the children played with them like they were toys—which meant many of the saurs were suffocated, drowned, starved, crushed, beaten, vivisected. I can go on for hours, cataloging cruelties, tragedies, mistakes: how Hubert, tortured to the point of near madness, decided to use his tyrannosaurian teeth and claws to defend himself and was almost destroyed for it; how Diogenes had been shown a box of food pellets by the father who bought him and was told, "When these run out, so do you." There were stories like that behind nearly every small,

strange-shaped, puzzled, puzzling face in this house.

Had I come from a more affluent background, would I have done the same? I felt too honest to answer either way.

I led the visitor upstairs.

"This place would drive me nuts," he said softly. "How could the people who made these things not know?"

He looked so appalled by what he'd seen of Herman, I gave him the best answer I could think of for free. "In those days, designers thought of each little piece of the genome, each little element, as a symbol, like a letter printed on a wooden block. Each letter, they thought, had a simple denotative definition. When you placed the C next to the A and followed them with T, you could spell 'cat.' That it might all be a little more complicated didn't occur to them."

The visitor took the stairs slowly, carefully reviewing each step. "So, these engineers learned their lesson, huh?"

"They think so."

We passed the dark little bedroom where Tibor keeps his cardboard castle. It's really quite a shambles, but Tibor, a runt of an apatosaur with a stern Beethoven-like face, sits there all day and hatches Napoleonic schemes. On the other side of the room sits a cardboard box on a dresser which Geraldine, another runt, calls her "lab." Nothing has happened with any of her experiments so far, but I keep two fire extinguishers in the room anyway. Elliot and his mate, Syrena, a bright red stegosaur, hang out in a bedroom on the second floor with Preston, a chunky, round-headed theropod.

"If you could wait here a moment," I said to the visitor, "I'll check with Elliot."

Preston worked away slowly but determinedly on a computer keyboard with his tiny two-digit-each forepaws. I described the visitor to Elliot and asked if he'd mind seeing him. He thought for a moment, looking to Syrena for advice. "It must be Danny," Elliot said, his voice so soft it would make a whisper sound like an outcry. "I told you about him. Danny never did anything bad to me, except—leave me."

He pressed closer to his mate and rubbed his face against hers. "I'll see him, if he wants to see me."

When I brought the visitor in he was momentarily distracted by Preston at his keyboard. He read over his shoulder:

"By dawn the crowd in the Plaza had swelled to ten thousand. The Ambassador had an excellent view of the frenzied multitude from his window. They all wore their red bandannas and stoked the air above them with their banners, chanting that the world of Lorair was their birthright..."

"This is his eighth novel," I told the visitor.

"He publishes them?"

"Not under his own name."

But then he saw Elliot, and his old expression completely evaporated. It seemed to reveal, maybe for the first time in years, a wound as deep as the scar on Axel's back.

"Elliot?"

"Danny?"

The visitor bent down until his head was nearly resting on the desk's mahogany top.

"Been a long time," the visitor mumbled.

Elliot nodded apprehensively.

The visitor looked up at me first, then at the other saurs in the room.

"Would it—" he started. "Is there somewhere Elliot and I could talk alone for a little while?"

I gestured to the others and helped them out into the hallway. "It won't be for long," I said to them. And to Elliot: "We'll be right outside if you need anything."

As I shut the door I looked down to see Agnes staring up at me, her expression as hard as a Brazil nut.

"It's all right," I told her. "Nothing's going to happen."

I hoped I was right. That was my responsibility: to make sure nothing happened. Agnes kept looking at me. Her tail tapped against the floor. Behind her gathered a number of curious saurs, including all the biggest guys: Doc, Diogenes, Hubert, and Sam.

"Nothing will happen," said Doc, staring coolly at the closed door. "If it does, it won't be without someone feeling great regret."

I knew that "someone" didn't mean me, but still my breathing quickened. The saurs waited quietly, except for Agnes, still thrumming with her tail. When the door finally opened it did so slowly. The visitor came out, looking a little flushed, his skin a little shinier.

"Hey, Elliot!" Agnes shouted back into the room. "You all right?"

I wiped some sweat from my brow and escorted the visitor back to his Mercedes. He said nothing until he got back into his car.

"Thanks." That was it.

He drove off and hasn't been back, not so far. That's how it usually goes. A week later, the Atherton Foundation received an anonymous donation of ten thousand dollars, directed to this particular house. That too is how it usually goes.

When I went back upstairs, all the saurs had dispersed save for Agnes, tail raised as if she might be considering giving me a whack with it just for good measure.

Elliot was still on the desk, right where I'd left him with the visitor. Next to him was a little plastic figure, a soldier in uniform and helmet, the type that comes in a big toy set. The visitor must have brought it—and left it there.

"What is that?" I asked.

"It's Sarge," Elliot said with his whispering voice, not taking his eyes off the little figure. "He used to leave it by my box when he went to school.

'This is Sarge,' he told me back then. 'Now you have a toy to play with too.'

I thought of Sarge as a little figure of him, of Danny, the boy who owned—who I stayed with. Danny had me, and I had Danny, or Sarge, that is.

When things got bad, before I was taken away, I hid Sarge, slipped him into a heating vent through a loose grate. I thought that if they were going to hurt me they might want to hurt Sarge too. I wonder if he's been in there all these years."

"Maybe," I said. "Maybe Danny just found him, and that's why he came today."

"It was silly of me, wasn't it? To hide Sarge like that?"

I shook my head. "Not silly at all." I bent down to look at Sarge from the same eye level as Elliot. "What should we do with him?"

"I don't know." Elliot twisted his head a little to one side and then to the other. "Could we put him in the museum? If I change my mind we could bring him down again. At least I'll always know where he is."

"The museum" is just a room in the attic. It's not very big, but it's loaded with shelves, and on the shelves are hundreds of toys: dolls, drums, ray guns, puzzles, wooden figures and plastic vehicles. There are also neckties, handkerchiefs, hats, vests, photographs, notes, tempera paintings on cardboard, little books bound with yarn. Everything in the room was left by one visitor or another for one saur or another. Over the years, it's grown into quite a collection.

I carefully picked up Elliot with one hand and, just as carefully, picked Sarge up with the other. "We'll take him there now, and you can pick out a place for him yourself."

Agnes moved out of the way as I came by with Elliot and Sarge. Sluggo rolled an orange to her and the sweet smell of the fruit distracted her at last.

That afternoon, Dr. Margaret Pagliotti stopped by on one of her regular visits. She's fairly young, with long brown hair and lovely, dark,

Mediterranean eyes. She ran down a checklist, looking over each of the ninety-eight saurs, asking if any had been feeling ill, not getting enough to eat, subject to any changes in mood or behavior. Dr. Margaret is nothing if not thorough, and she has the necessary sense of humor one needs when dealing with the saurs.

When Agnes grumbles and complains, Dr. Margaret holds her by the forelimbs and kisses her on the snout. That leaves Agnes speechless and, for the most part, agreeable.

I mentioned Hetman's nightmares to her, since Herman would never mention them himself, along with my suspicion that he might be experiencing more pain.

"Speaking of nightmares—" I thought about the night before but cut myself off. "—forget it." It was "human stuff," after all, like the coffee.

Before Dr. Margaret was even two meters from his bed, Hetman called out, "My angel is here. How are you, Doctor?"

"How are you, old friend?" She bent down and caressed his snout.

"A little tired," he answered. "A little sleepless. I don't complain. When you come a miracle happens and I'm instantly cured."

Did I mention that Dr. Margaret has a lovely blush?

She examined Hetman carefully and asked him if he might want some stronger painkillers.

"No," he whispered. "Not if they dull my senses. I have so few left."

"I'll leave the prescription with Tom. You can try a half dose. If they're too strong you don't have to take them."

"Thank you. As long as I have angels here I'm in no great hurry for heaven."

Dr. Margaret asked to see me in private, so we went up to my room.

"I got another call from that researcher from Toyco."

"You too? I'd offer you some coffee but we're almost out." I went over to my desk but, like the visitor earlier, found myself reluctant to sit down.

"Anyway, Toyco had their chance. I don't see why they need any more samples."

Dr. Margaret sat on the top of my desk and stared out at the afternoon shadows in the yard. "I hear it has to do with the saurs' longevity. They're back into immortality research."

I glanced up at the ceiling. "Wonderful."

"Or it may be something else they hadn't anticipated." She spoke softly, as if we might be overheard.

"Such as?"

"I saw Bronte's egg."

I walked over to the window as if to stare out but I can't remember really looking at—or seeing—anything.

I was recalling, for the first time in years, a trip I'd taken with my mother, to one of the big, fancy department stores in one of the old-fashioned malls. Maybe it was something about Dr. Margaret that reminded me of my mother.

In the toy section were about a dozen gray stegosaurus of Sluggo's size housed in a colorful pen. The "Dinosaur Song" spilled out of speakers at each of the pen's corners: "Yar-woooo! Yar-woooo!"

The saurs huddled together apprehensively until a salesperson walked by and shouted at them.

"Smile!" she said. "No one's going to buy you if you don't smile!"

They were accidental or deliberate failures at the task, and when a little girl in blonde curls and a red coat picked up one of the saurs with her sweaty pink hand I clearly saw the expressions on the little gray faces, the one taken and the others remaining: the agony of loss and separation.

When my mother noticed me looking at the saurs she gently tugged me away.

"Forget it, Tommy. We couldn't afford one in a million years and you'd never take care of it anyway. Remember what happened to your iguana."

The first part didn't bother me. My parents were honest in their poverty and never used it as a crutch or a badge of honor. The second part hurt because I did my best to take care of the iguana. What hurt about it most was that my parents, fair as they were in many ways, could not help but remind me of my every failure and see in them the genetic imprint of my future.

But what struck me just then, as I recalled this scene, was how I ignored what she said. I looked up at her seriously, even with a bit of reproach, and told her, "I wouldn't buy one. I'd buy them all, so they could stay together." I took a little satisfaction, remembering that moment, in seeing past the delusion of those days, and proving my mother wrong. Not only could I take care of a saur, I could take care of ninety-eight of them.

"Tom?" Margaret waved her hand in front of my eyes.

"Sorry. You were saying?"

"I said, there's something else I'm worried about."

"What's that?"

"You," she said, looking at me with all her medical precision. "You spend so much time here, with the saurs. I'm not sure if that's good for you. I'm not sure it's good for anyone."

She looked at me seriously, sadly, as if I'd already said something to hurt or disappoint her. In that moment she reminded me even more of my mother, which made it even harder for me to answer.

"I'm happy here, Margaret." I touched her hand. "I don't know why. Any explanation I could give you beyond that would be something I made up. I feel at home here. I feel I'm with friends."

Worry lines marred her forehead, which was the last thing I wanted, so I changed the subject back to my dwindling supply of coffee.

If she continued to worry she never said a word about it to me. But I'm still not sure if—when she showed me that grave expression—it was for something more than myself she worried.

After dinner, some of the saurs sat in the living room, watching a production of Turandot on the video. Between acts, Axel demonstrated how to fall off a couch and onto a pillow, backwards, perhaps a few too many times.

"Suddenly, a hole opens up underneath me! A hole in space and time! And I'm falling-falling-falling-FALLING-FALLING! AAAAAaaahhh!"

During the finale of Turandot, some of the saurs joined in with the chorus—not that they knew the words, but they followed the melody with open vowels.

In the library, The Five Wise Buddhasaurs took over the stereo and played Louis Armstrong recordings for several hours. They love his voice, his cornet, and the sheer elation one finds in both. They're convinced he's one of them: a joyful saurian angel.

Sluggo told the little ones some more tales of Sauria and the heroic voyages of the brave saurs who returned to their homeland.

"And do you know why they sailed to Sauria?" Agnes queried the little ones after the story.

Those who could speak answered "Humans!" mostly because that was the answer Agnes wanted to hear.

"Humans!" Agnes nodded. "Messing up everything! Messing up the whole damn world!"

"Foo!" the little ones chanted, at Agnes's direction. "Foo! Humans! Foo!"

I sat in the library, reading to Hetman and a few dozen saurs gathered around. The book was Hetman's choice, *The Deluge*, by Henryk Sienkiewicz.

"I wonder why they come." Charlie interrupted my reading, still distracted by the morning visit. "What do they think they're going to get? Forgiveness?"

Peace of mind? Wouldn't they be happier if they forgot all about us? I would."

"No, Charlie," Hetman said, breathing heavily. "You don't forget. As painful as the memories are, forgetting is dying. And, in the measure of all things, nothing that truly lives truly wants to die."

Later that evening, the storm clouds moved in. Even the most intelligent and reasonable of the saurs get unsettled by the lightning and thunder. Someone suggested jokingly that it was an ancient memory of the great comet, but if so then we all have a trace of that ancient memory.

At bedtime all the saurs gather in the large bedroom upstairs. The little ones who get confused are aided by the bigger fellows. Even Hetman is brought up

and wheeled over on his little bed. I check around for the stragglers and the lost under lamp tables, the bottom shelves of the bookcases, behind bedposts and in odd little corners. Every now and then, after I've turned out the lights and crawled into my own bed, I'll hear one that I've missed crying out softly. I'll follow the cries and find him or her—in the cabinet under the bathroom sink, stranded on the desk in the library—and carry the little one back to the bedroom.

It's true, just like in Andrew Ulaszek's poem, "On the Island Where the Dinosaurs Live," they sleep in a kind of huddle, the biggest in the center, the smaller ones crammed around them:

... conjoined, in outlandish sprawl,
a pile of plated backs,
spiny heads and coiled tails.

Whether they do it to "swim within the same dream," as that same poem informs us, I cannot know. The least social of them join in the huddle, even though there are many places to sleep in the old house. Tibor leaves his cardboard castle. Geraldine slips out of her secret laboratory. Doc, Diogenes, and Hubert take out the big blankets and comforters to spread over the amassed group.

Bronte brought the egg up on a skate packed with cotton.

That night, the house shook with each Tumble of thunder. Bright blue flashes intruded through every window. I checked their bedroom before turning in. The blankets twitched with every flash of light. When I put my hand on them I could feel the shudders from underneath, like the erratic tremors of an old car engine.

"I'm all right,"—Agnes's voice, stern, to cover her anxiety, as she pressed herself more closely to Sluggo. "It's all right. It's—I know it's stupid."

"The thunder scares me too," I said.

"It's stupid. I can't help it."

I looked elsewhere, not wanting to add to her embarrassment. Charlie, with Rosie pressed against him, twitched in his sleep. Pierrot was rolled up in a little ball between Jean-Claude and Bronte. Tyrone wrapped his meager forearm around Alfie, who stared up with his huge, ever-frightened eyes as the terrible light bounced against the walls and brought the shadows to life.

"Big storm!" Axel smiled, mouth wide open as he trembled. "Big, big storm! Everything blows up! Brrroooooommm!"

"For God's sake—" Agnes groaned.

"Yes. A very big storm." I stroked Axel's head until he lowered himself into the cushion of companions.

"There is always fear," Doc said, his smooth voice almost as deep as the thunder.

"Yes," I replied.

"No matter how big the big ones get, there is always something bigger to fear."

"I know."

A long hissing breath escaped from his nostrils and was lost in the low rumble of thunder. "Good night, my friend."

"Good night, my friend."

I went back to my bed but couldn't fall asleep. The storm was fierce, with no sign of subsiding, but it was more than the light and noise that kept me up. I'm not a morbid person, but I thought about death—or more precisely, how strangely tilted our view of life is. We know the universe went on before for billions of years and it will go on for billions more. There's just this brief stretch when the window is opened before our eyes, and the world is visible. Then the window is shut, forever.

I lay in bed, breathing short breaths, unable not to imagine my last moment. Will I scream in panic when it comes? Or will I manage to utter one last farewell?

There was no getting past the "human stuff"—and it was all human stuff, from God to the saurs to whatever had made both.

Everything but the storm.

The thunder pealed and roared until I could hear the loose change on the dresser rattle with the vibrations. And then, from the saurs' room, I heard one voice.

Perhaps Sluggo, perhaps Tyrone, perhaps a saur I would have least expected, but he or she sang one clear phrase with that nonsense dinosaur word:

"Yar-wooo!"

And sang it again: "Yar-wooo!"

The third time, the other saurs joined in: a few at first, then more. It was the old song, the lullaby they had been trained and designed to sing in the innocent days when they sprang forth from the lab/factories. It reminded me of old fieldworkers singing slave songs generations after abolition.

But even the most insubstantial melody can have a certain power. The urge to sing is stronger than any song. They were taught to sing it for their owners.

Now they sang it for themselves.

I listened as they sang against the unrelenting thunder, and then I joined in, with my own croaky voice, with the same nonsense dinosaur word—"Yar-wooo!"

"Yar-wooo!"

I sang with them until the thunder subsided and sleep took us all at last, even Axel.