

# Post-Human Pat

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*he little children run and wave  
The mothers smile, the fathers stand  
The post is coming all around  
The post that comes from other days*

The children run and wave on the planet of New Beijing, making grabs in the air for the precious paper packets floating down over their heads; In plague-ridden London an ancient grandmother huddles in the corner of a dark, damp room and pulls her black shawl closer, clutching the priceless paper page in her blue-veined hand; and in the ring-like cities in orbit around the Earth, and in the torture-chambers of the Spanish inquisition, and in generation starships on their silent journeys through eternal night and in wagon kraals burning in the African sun, people sigh, people welcome the mail.

'Who are you writing to?' the tall boy slumps down, stretching his hands to the fire. It is cold at night on the islands, off the coast of First Continent, where the cold currents keep away the sea-beasts and the tourists, and the words come out as 'whreyoowrtingtoo?' through chattering teeth. His wet hair falls down on his naked back like a dark emperor's fan.

The girl smiles, says 'to my great, great, great, great...' and frowns, slender finger counting silently in the air, 'I always forget how many greats, dammit.' Her almond eyes shine in the light of the camp fire. 'I just call her Grandmother.'

The boy waves his hands through the fire, raising steam. His eyes narrow and he turns his head to look more closely at the girl. 'she's not like, you know, from...' he mumbles.

She laughs, and her rich voice sends shivers down his back. He turns his face away and adds wood to the fire. '...from somewhen else, you mean?' she arches her brows in comical surprise.

'Is she?' he says.

The girl shrugs. 'is your great great great great whatever grandmother still alive?'

'I didn't know you were a penpal,' the boy says, his voice a mixture of envy and doubt.

'Well, you never asked,' she says matter-of-factly. 'Besides, I didn't know I could *write* to people until a few months ago. I got letters from penpals before, but everyone can *receive* letters.' She looks intently into his face as if on a silent challenge. 'Didn't *you* ever receive a letter?'

The boy has found a pebble and throws it into the fire. His face relax and he sits back on the sand, holding himself up with his elbows.

'Once. From the past — someone on the ship when they were coming here. I don't know how she knew to send it to me...'

He smiles, and his face lights up and sends burning embers flying that catch at the girl's heart, who looks very thoughtful before rising and wiping the sand from her body.

'Well, do you want to go for a swim?' she begins to move away.

'Yes! Wait...' he gets up and hurries after her.

Running down the beach in the bright starlight of distant suns, all thought of pasts and futures slip away, and so the boy forgets to ask the girl what she was writing.

Her name was Shime and his name was Yang, and it all happened a long time ago and far far away, and a long time from now in a place very close to here.

But the girl never did get a reply to the question she was writing, and it was — who or what is the postman?

People say the postman is an angel, a devil, the cross-pollination of a woman and a bull, a machine, an experiment gone wrong, an entire living planet; The Irish have taken him for their own and celebrate St. Patrick's day in his (or hers, or its) honour every year.

Some, in the more modern centuries where science replaced witchcraft and terminology replaced ritual, say that he was once a man, an astronaut trapped in a space-time anomaly. Others say he is a mutated sendmail program, computer code graduating to memetic infestation through racial memory.

If you don't hold with that sort of thing, you may call him a deity; a force of nature permeating human history; a blessing and a curse.

An old woman sits alone in the outer ring, looking at the shifting scenes of the gas giant. She has enough gravity to sit comfortably on the red sofa, but not enough to make movement difficult. A leaf of paper is resting by her arm: a letter from her future.

Her eyes are dry, but red, suggesting she might have been crying before. The letter is still wet, smelling of wood-fire smoke and alien oceans, of salt water and young bodies. Plucked from the sand where it lay forgotten, delivered across time and space as if they were nothing more than an illusion, and left at her bedside quietly. Bringing memories that ache dully, like a thorn buried deep under the skin, still sending out signals of pain.

She closes her eyes and enters memory-sleep, the letter floating slowly to the ground.

*(A man and his cat enter a painting).*

The discontinuity spreads tendrils of gaseous mass in every direction, a vortex of shifting spectrums of colour, spatial rainbows Doppler-shifting as space and time are stretched and bent.

>From a view high above the galactic plane it appears like a mirage of bright, psychedelic artwork, a Pollock painting, and revealed for some of what it is: the assemblage of micro-singularities interacting; bright energy pouring like coffee reversed in slow motion, cream separating itself from the dark brew and flowing away, as mini white holes open and explode like clouds of mushrooms; the slow and dignified consumption of matter as it spirals into slowly expanding black holes —

Temporality is disintegrating, expanding in areas, tightening in others, shifting like liquid, bending and contracting; a discontinuity.

The *Reverse Engineering* sits stationary, like a tiny ant against a cosmic background, its (metaphorical) antennae gesturing wildly as it tries to capture as much of the event as possible; its crew floating in free fall round-eyed.

'Well, what do we do now?' says Michiko, her fingers stroking Mr. Pokey's slim neck.

'I love you, Mich,' the man says softly.

He is compact and neat, his hair, like the woman's, cut short, his eyes bright and innocent and seeing nothing but the discontinuity ahead of him.

Mr. Pokey disentangles himself from Michiko, floats towards the man and purrs; rubs his head against the man's leg.

'It's no use arguing,' he says. 'You *should* leave while you can. You should have left before we got here. The escape capsule will take you away from the danger zone — and you will have all the recordings. One of us has to make it back.'

He turns to her at last, and she wonders if he is seeing her at all. His pupils are dilated, his look distant.

'Pat,' she says. 'Please.'

*Please you bastard please I could smack you I could kill you with my bare hands please snap out of it come away come with me while you we can still go you're dreaming you're drugged you're hallucinating please Pat please come away with me please*

But he has already dismissed her.

His eyes are once again on the event, the discontinuity, this phantasm of elastic space.

'Go.'

He collects Mr. Pokey and takes him in his arms, stroking his head, waiting.

Some time later a red alarm signal floats in his visual space, informing him the single escape capsule has been released and is speeding away, with one passenger inside it. He activates the main engines, disabling the correcting thrust of the smaller ones, and moves the ship towards the discontinuity.

From her tight confines in the escape pod, Michiko is monitoring his progress; the scientific instrumentality that marks the highest achievement of her life, her greatest discovery, also brings her the last-ever pictures of a mortal lover. Fleeting, she thinks of Mr. Pokey and hopes he still has some of his nine lives.

*A man and his cat enter a painting.*

Two carbon-based life forms, one a biped, the other busy licking himself from back to front, move closer in a toy ship into an area of violent space and raging time. The camera records are confused: the ship seems to stretch itself, then expands to giant size; a (second? minute? year?) later it is back to normal size (but that word has no meaning, here).

The ship disappears from recorded space.

(Primal powers are tugging and pushing at it. Bursts of energy, converted gas, streams of broken comets are hurled at it.)

*A man and his cat enter a painting.*

Her eyes snap open, the memory gone.

A new letter lies on the floor. Unruly, jagged letters scrawled in a familiar hand. She picks it up and looks at it unseeing, tears streaking down her cheeks. The outlines of a man and a cat fade and disappear behind her.

'Well, Mr. Pokey.'

The cat ignores him. The man pokes him in the tummy, but gently. 'Here we are.'

The outline of a man appears over the sky of New Beijing, throwing down letters like kites flowing in the wind. A painting of a man and a cat comes to life in a Spanish dungeon. The man hands one last letter to the dying witch, who clutches it in her hands. Her nails are missing, stumps of black pus. The cat pisses on the floor. A fleeting ghost of a man breezes in the wind above the coast, plucking a discarded letter lying in the sand just off First Continent. On a ring orbital, a silent man watches an old woman dream memories. His cat rubs himself against her withered feet and meows softly.

Some say the postman is an angel, a devil, a mutated artificial intelligence, a cosmonaut once trapped in a space-time anomaly. A spirit trapped in history, looping in the neverwhen. But for the children out there in deep-future, and for the suffering and the abused (tortured in underground cells where not even a moth could flee; dying like flies in disease and filth; slaving patiently in the heat of other people's fields, laying railway lines with their lives, dying in the trenches in ready-made graves), and for all the men and women (dead for centuries, yet to be born) he is simply the postman, and he brings the greatest gift of all.

The cat purrs and springs to his feet, touching infinity.

'Here we are.' The man smiles and looks over the centuries swimming underneath. 'I'd better write to Mich and tell her. Tell her ... we're OK,' he says, and joy and sadness mix in his voice.

Taking a breath, he takes Mr. Pokey in his arms and jumps, head first, into the waiting ocean of time.