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**The Year's Best Australian  
Science Fiction and Fantasy**

(VOLUME 3)

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**&**

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## Introduction

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elcome to the third annual edition of *The Year's Best Australian Science Fiction & Fantasy*.

In *The Art of Romance Writing*, Valerie Parv states that a romance novel must have an implicit message that love is possible. Does science fiction have such a simple answer? Is there a single, straightforward concept which encompasses and defines SF?

Well, science fiction is about the future, right? Not quite. There's SF about the past, SF about alternate realities, SF about time travel. None of these are specifically about the future. How about the term, 'science fiction'? Fiction about science?

Is a historical novel about the discovery of X-rays SF? No, not by how we define the term.

Then there's the Utopian ideal of futuristic fiction about science. This was the concept that Hugo Gernsback used to promote his early SF magazines in the 1920s and 1930s, and even then it was promotional copy more than reality, for the stories were pulp adventures and the 'science' that appeared in them could never exist, even by the standards of those days. Gernsback published futuristic fiction, yes, adventure stories set in the future, but science content? That wasn't the point of the exercise, and still isn't for most of the genre today, yet we still accept such fiction as SF.

How about fiction of science that might one day be known? Even that's Utopian. In effective SF story-telling, the science sits in the background while a story unfolds. The bottom line is that stories are what happen to characters. Very few stories are about the science alone, and even those need characters to explore the science. (A notable example being Poul Anderson's classic exploration of relativity and

cosmology, *Tau Zero*, outdated now as our understanding of the universe has moved on.) Sometimes it is the implications of the science, or the technology, which drives the narrative, such as in Larry Niven's 'Inconstant Moon'.

This brings into play another aspect of SF. Robert Heinlein once wrote that the only universal crime is stupidity, and the punishment is usually death. Well, the universe works in a certain way, and human beings who get in the way of how the universe works can subcontract spin doctors to complain about it all they like but that ain't gonna help. An elitist view, but one which most of us follow all our lives, especially when we stand on the edge of a cliff. A story which uses the implications of this kind of thinking is Tom Godwin's 'The Cold Equations', a controversial piece often condemned as contrived and inhuman, but read it before you stow away on a space shuttle.

Mention of Larry Niven causes us to include a sense of wonder in our discussions of SF, particularly of *science* in SF. Niven, in his earlier writing days, brought a sense of wonder to the science he used in his stories. The novel *Ringworld* had only a simple quest plot, but also one of the classic science fiction devices to drive it along - an artificial world built in a ring about a star. Now circumnavigating *that* is a quest. Hal Clement's *Mission of Gravity* is similar - a quest into the polar regions of a rapidly rotating super-Jovian planet by an alien race contracted by humans to locate the wreck of a downed spaceship. These novels use speculation about science to generate a sense of wonder about the universe, about the 'other', which fuels the narrative.

Science fiction reminds us that the universe is a big place and, like the best science writing, uses the implications of that size to excite readers. If we investigate the strangeness of the universe, we can find wonderful stories, wonderful characters, wonderful settings. More recently, Scottish writer Iain M. Banks has added a delicious and subversive understanding of politics to this sense of wonder.

Here are a few concepts that we do recognize as SF.

Space travel in the future, and all the various permutations from near-future histories of the solar system, to far flung wars among galactic empires, to explorations of the death of our universe and the birth of others. Space opera is included here, but so are such hard SF philosophical treatises on the nature of the universe as Greg Egan's *Schild's Ladder* and *Diaspora*.

There's military SF. This is where some variation of the US Marines goes forth to an alien planet, (or into the past) and kills everybody, letting God sort out the good guys in the unlikely case the marines want to say sorry at some point in the afterlife. Some of this sub-genre is space opera, some of it involves time travel. The point of the exercise is the power-fantasy adventure story.

There is also the other military SF, the 'if-this-goes-on' kind of military SF, such as Joe Haldeman's *Forever War*, which questions the politics and morality of war, and asks if humanity is capable of a

future.

There's time travel and the closely related subjects of time paradox and alternate universes.

How about novels such as Tanith Lee's excellent *Silver Metal Lover*? Romance or SF? Perhaps both, and an excellent example of how SF can blend with other genres. SF is as much a setting for stories across a range of genres as it is a genre in itself.

Cyberpunk discusses a new form of alternate reality where the rules of what we know about our universe are subverted. The *Matrix* trilogy of movies shows us that literally anything is possible in the cyber-world, and that such narratives can discuss metaphysics and the nature of God. It becomes even more interesting when the imaginary cyber world is contrasted with some form of our own, typically a dystopian near future, in a discussion about the nature of reality. Enter Philip K. Dick.

But science fiction is also optimistic. No matter how profoundly disturbing the future, there *is* a future.

Once we're out in the universe, or in the future or past, fiction is free to discuss politics and religion. Political or religious stories set in our world often alienate the reader. The reader who agrees is bored, the reader who disagrees is alienated. About the only market left for the story is the fundamentalists, who read to reinforce their prejudices... But shift those same elements into a fantastical or futuristic setting, and don't preach, just show the characters in conflict in their world, and the story suddenly entertains. Do this in the past, and we have the historical novel. Shift the concept into the fantastic, and we have SF novels such as *Dune*, or fantasy narratives such as *Lord of the Rings*. Writers question; narratives look for understanding; easy answers are subverted. Science fiction in all its forms is good at this when it chooses to be: questioning the world with entertaining narratives.

But is that the only kind of politics in SF? The dystopian novel has a long tradition within the genre. Such novels as Orwell's *1984*, Frederik Pohl's *Jem*, and Huxley's *Brave New World* fit all definitions of SF with their exaggerations of current social and political trends in alternate and future settings. If this goes on... The entertainment can disappear as the questioning becomes critical, subversive, satirical.

Let's lighten up a moment. Are we talking about SF being any form of fiction in a world not recognizably our own? No, that's fantasy. So perhaps SF is that subset of fantasy where the world could be our own, or can be reached from our own by the application of some form of technology. Is SF a genre where the elements that make the narrative fantasy are ones which pretend to be part of our real world? Or which pretend one day to be part of our real world? Is *Star Wars* fantasy, or science fiction? Does *Star Wars* belong to that sub-genre of fantasy which we call science fiction?

Where does that leave fiction set in a world which probably will exist? Or fiction that talks about science or technology that we already know? Perhaps the only genuine kind of science fiction is that subgenre we know as hard SF, and all the rest is a branch of fantasy. But we're back to needing to draw a line, to deciding on an arbitrary definition.

If we limit this to hard SF, the subject becomes simpler. For me, what defines hard SF is a philosophical attitude. If a tree falls in a forest, and nobody hears it, did it happen? The hard SF answer is: of course it did. The solipsistic weakness of, 'If I didn't hear it or see it fall, it didn't happen', does not apply.

The drive to make sense of our world is a core part of what makes us human. It is also a core factor in our success as a species - a need to understand the world on the world's terms and act accordingly, rather than to contain the universe and reduce it to what we want to be there. Hard SF looks out at the universe, asks questions, and allows what it finds there to drive the story. Sometimes the stories are about science, sometimes they are about people; always they are about *our* universe.

The slow development of the scientific method, a pattern of thinking and experimentation designed to uncover the working of the universe on the universe's own terms, takes a similar approach. It is no accident that writers with a solid grounding in the hard sciences produce most hard SF. This definition of hard SF fits uneasily within an encompassing envelope of fantasy.

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We make no claim to have considered all the novels published by Australians in 2006, so the following are the considerations of others - the award winners for the year.

The Aurealis Awards are decided on by a peer-group panel of writers, editors, reviewers and academics. For a complete list of all winners, including for short stories, go to: <http://www.aurealis.com.au>.

The following books won Aurealis Awards:

Golden Aurealis for Best Short Story: *The Arrival*, by Shaun Tan (Lothian). This graphic novel of emigration into a surreal, fantastical society and landscape, deservedly won numerous major literary prizes around Australia. Bizarrely, the Aurealis Award process considered it a short story. For us, this graphic novel is the book of the year.

Golden Aurealis for Best Novel, and Best Horror Novel (co-winner): *The Pilo Family Circus*, by Will

Elliot (ABC Books).

Best Horror Novel (co-winner): *Prismatic*, by Edwina Grey (Lothian), the second of Lothian's ill-fated and greatly missed adult horror line.

Best SF Novel: *K-Machines*, by Damien Broderick (Avalon).

Best Fantasy Novel: *Wildwood Dancing*, by Juliet Marillier (Pan Macmillan).

Best Young Adult Novel: *Monster Blood Tattoo* by D.M. Cornish (Omnibus).

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The Australian Science Fiction Awards (nicknamed the Ditmar Awards) are voted on by fans - members of the annual Australian Science Fiction Convention. For a complete list of all winners, including for short stories, artwork and fan activity, go to: [http://www.natcon.org.au/2007/Noomination\\_shortlist\\_2007.html](http://www.natcon.org.au/2007/Noomination_shortlist_2007.html). The following books won Ditmar Awards:

Best Novel: *Pilo Family Circus*, by Will Elliot.

Best Collected Work: *Year's Best Australian SF & Fantasy, Volume Two*, edited by Bill Congreve and Michelle Marquardt (MirrorDanse Books).

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A number of SF news and reviews websites are available to the interested reader:

<http://www.asif.dreamhosters.com/>

<http://www.aurealis.com.au/news.php>



<http://www.australianhorror.com/>

<http://members.optushoie.com.au/aussfbull/>

<http://www.emcit.com/>

<http://www.locusmag.com/>

<http://www.thealienonline.net/>

<http://www.sfsite.com/>

<http://www.sfcrowsnest.com/>

In addition, most of the electronically published magazines listed below publish reviews. In print, both *Aurealis* and *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine* offer reviews of local work.

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In 2006, independent presses and electronic publishing dominated the speculative short story field. Flash fiction again dominated the numbers, with quality improving. The number of flash fiction stories reaching our recommended reading list increased with a number being shortlisted for inclusion. In addition, short stories were published in a total of twenty issues from four different e-zines and twenty-four issues of seven different magazines. Another two websites either published or reprinted short fiction. Overseas, a diverse range of publications, from *Asimov's* and *Interzone*, to *Postscripts*, published Australians. For this volume, calendar year 2006, we read over four hundred and twenty stories totalling a million and a quarter words.

The market is more varied than it has ever been.

The content of these publications was spread across all genres: SF, fantasy and horror, and blendings of all three, with only hard SF sadly being under-represented. The quality of small press publications is as varied as ever. The anthologies *Eidolon 1* and *Agog! Ripping Reads* set the editorial and production standards for the year.

Of the local e-zines, *Ticonderoga Online* was the most consistent, with four issues. The fiction was always competent. *Shadowed Realms* posted three issues; the first devoted to Australian women writers of horror. The reliable flash fiction e-zine, *Antipodean SF*, edited and published by Ion Newcombe, posted a dozen issues, including an anniversary 'double' celebrating 100 issues. New e-zine, *Wyred*, published a strong first issue late in the year.

Of the other electronic publications, *Cosmos Online* reprinted stories first published in *Cosmos* magazine, and also published some original fiction. *Cosmos* itself continued its tradition of publishing Australians alongside the best international writers.

*Specusphere* published a number of original stories and also posted a number of stories reprinted from other venues. Stories by the likes of Simon Brown and Richard Harland can be found online here.

Of the print magazines, *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine* met its bi-monthly schedule, keeping faith with readers, writers, advertisers, reviewers, booksellers and distributors. The long-running *Aurealis* published a single excellent issue.

Of the smaller magazines, *Borderlands* published three issues. *Fables and Reflections* sadly published its last issue, with editor Lily Chrywenstrom now concentrating on her writing. We saw one issue from horror magazine *Dark Animus*. All the print magazines include a mix of fiction, reviews and articles.

Eleven collections were published during the year, three of which we consider major works.

Only one collection, Margo Lanagan's *Red Spikes*, came from a major publishing house, once again Allen & Unwin. *Red Spikes* is as strong a collection as the earlier *Black Juice* and *White Time*. At the time of writing, it has been shortlisted for the World Fantasy Award for Best Collection and has won the Children's Book Council Book of the Year: Older Readers. In addition, Orion in the UK have reprinted *Black Juice* with one new story added.

Terry Dowling's *Basic Black: Tales of Appropriate Fear*, is a major retrospective of the author's best horror fiction published by US independent press, Cemetery Dance Publications. Dowling has for many years been Australia's most significant horror writer and *Basic Black* demonstrates Dowling's love of language, strange literary devices, and subtle twists of reality.

The third major collection is Simon Brown's *Troy*, from the resurrected print operation of Ticonderoga Publications. Simon Brown's career has been punctuated by a series of stories inspired by the legend of

Troy: the characters, the history, the myth.

We unreservedly recommend all three collections.

US publisher Prime published three collections by upcoming Australian writers through its Prime Australia print-on-demand operation. With no local printer or distributor, all three books are difficult to find, your best bet is Amazon. Lee Battersby's *Through Soft Air* reprints the author's first twenty odd short stories, and includes seven originals. Included are the first two of the Father Muerte cycle. Trent Jamieson's *Reserved for Travelling Shows* displays this writer's talent for eclectic, original, understated fiction across a range of genres. Paul Haines's strengths as a writer lie in the sexuality and twisted emotions of human relationships thrown into relief by the otherwise familiar conventions of genre fiction. *Doorways for the Dispossessed* is the best of his work.

Lucy Sussex published *Absolute Uncertainty* as part of US small press, Aqueduct Press's 'Conversation Pieces' series of feminist SF. Of the three original stories, two were reprinted in local publications during the year.

Terry Dartnall published *The Ladder at the Bottom of the World* as an e-book through US electronic publisher, Trantor Publications. *Ladder ...* reprints twenty-five stories and includes another seven originals. Often sentimental, the stories explore philosophy, science and perceptions of reality.

Altair Books published three collections, two of them late in 2005 but which we include here. *Walking in the Garden of my Mind* by Sophie Masson is a retrospective of her fantasy short fiction and historical essays. The stories are most often set in English or Celtic history and myth. *Tales of the Dragon* by Tony Shillitoe is exactly that, and evidence of the author's love of high fantasy. About half of the stories are original. *When I Close My Eyes* by Kurt von Trojan is a retrospective of the author's short fiction; about half the stories are original. Sadly, Kurt von Trojan died during the year.

The standout anthologies of the year are *Eidolon 1* and *Agog! Ripping Reads*. *Eidolon 1*, edited by Jonathan Strahan and Jeremy G. Byrne, raises memories of the long running *Eidolon* magazine, at its heyday through the 1990s. *Agog! Ripping Reads* is the fourth and strongest of Cat Sparks's original anthology series. Both books contain a number of strong stories from a mix of local and international talent. Try your local SF specialty store or Amazon.

The other anthologies published during 2006 also have much to recommend them. *The Outcast* is a theme anthology of outsiders and people ostracized from society. Edited by Nicole R. Murphy, it is the latest publication from CSFG. *Cock*, edited by Keith Stevenson and Andrew Macrae and published by new small press, Coeur de Lion, is an exploration of masculinity through the speculative fiction short story. This is the kind of project that most likely can only be done effectively by an independent press without the influence of vested financial, political and social influence, and which therefore makes the

independent press essential. *Tales From the Black Wood* from Altair Books, edited by Robert N. Stephenson and Kain Massin, and published with the support of Mitcham City Council in Adelaide, continues the tradition of spec fic writing groups publishing their own anthology. *Flash Spec One*, edited by Noel Cladingboel and published by Equilibrium Books is a print anthology of flash fiction. Most stories are less than a thousand words.

New independent horror publisher, Brimstone Press, released two reprint anthologies in 2006. The first, *Australian Dark Fantasy & Horror: 2006 Edition*, edited by Angela Challis & Shane Jiraiya Cummings, is a year's best style horror anthology covering the best of 2005. The second, *Book of Shadows Vol One*, edited by Angela Challis, reprints the flash fiction from the first six issues of the *Shadowed Realms* ezine. This volume includes a handful of original stories.

Details of all publications can be found at the end of this e-book.

There you have it: a quick look at the short speculative fiction from Australian writers in 2006.

Bill Congreve and Michelle Marquardt

Leura, August 2007.

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### **Dead Sea Fruit**

KAARON WARREN

Kaaron Warren's short story collection *The Grinding House* won the ACT Writers' and Publishers' Fiction Award, and will be published in North America by Prime Books.

Kaaron writes, "I came up with the Ash Mouth Man while watching folk music in a smoky, crowded, dark club in Canberra. I imagined a very skinny girl, walking from table to table, kissing people, and I wondered what it was she was looking for. The title 'Dead Sea Fruit' is one I've been tempted by for a while, and it helped me develop the nature of the Ash Mouth Man."

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I

have a collection of baby teeth sent to me by recovered anorexics from the ward. Their children's teeth, proof that their bodies are working.

One sent me a letter. "Dear Tooth Fairy, you saved me and my womb. My son is now six, here are his baby teeth."

They call the ward Pretty Girl Street. I don't know if the cruelty is intentional; these girls are far from pretty. Skeletal, balding, their breath reeking of hard cheese, they languish on their beds and terrify each other, when they have the strength, with tales of the Ash Mouth Man.

I did not believe the Pretty Girls. The Ash Mouth Man was just a myth to scare each other into being thin. A moral tale against promiscuity. It wouldn't surprise me to hear that the story originated with a group of protective parents wanting to shelter their children from the disease of kissing.

"He only likes fat girls," Abby said. Her teeth were yellow when she smiled, though she rarely smiled. Abby lay in the bed next to Lori; they compared wrist thickness by stretching their fingers to measure.

"And he watches you for a long time to make sure you're the one," Lori said.

"And only girls who could be beautiful are picked," Melanie said. Her blonde hair fell out in clumps and she kept it in a little bird's nest beside her bed. "He watches you to see if you could be beautiful enough if you were thinner, then he saunters over to you."

The girls laughed. "He saunters. Yes," they agreed. They trusted me; I listened to them and fixed their teeth for free.

"He didn't saunter," Jane said. I sat on her bed and leaned close to hear. "He beckoned. He did this," and she tilted back her head, miming a glass being poured into her mouth. "I nodded. I love vodka," she said. "Vodka's made of potatoes, so it's like eating."

The girls all laughed. I hate it when they laugh. I have to maintain my smile. I can't flinch in disgust at those bony girls, mouths open, shoulders shaking. All of them exhausted with the effort.

"I've got a friend in New Zealand and she's seen him," Jane said. "He kissed a friend of hers and the weight just dropped off her."

"I know someone in England who kissed him," Lori said.

"He certainly gets around," I said. They looked at each other.

"I was frightened at the thought of him at first," Abby said. "Cos he's like a drug. One kiss and you're hooked. Once he's stuck in the tongue, you're done. You can't turn back."

They'd all heard of him before they kissed him. In their circles, even the dangerous methods of weight loss are worth considering.

I heard the rattle of the dinner trolley riding the corridor to Pretty Girl Street. They fell silent.

Lori whispered, "Kissing him fills your mouth with ash. Like you pick up a beautiful piece of fruit and bite into it. You expect the juice to drip down your chin but you bite into ashes. That's what it's like to kiss him."

Lori closed her eyes. Her dry little tongue snaked out to the corners of her mouth, looking, I guessed, for that imagined juice. I leaned over and dripped a little water on her tongue.

She screwed up her mouth.

"It's only water," I said. "It tastes of nothing."

"It tastes of ashes," she said.

"They were hoping you'd try a bite to eat today, Lori," I said. She shook her head.

“You don’t understand,” she said. “I can’t eat. Everything tastes like ashes. Everything.”

The nurse came in with the dinner trolley and fixed all the Pretty Girls’ IV feeds. The girls liked to twist the tube, bend it, press an elbow or a bony buttock into it to stop the flow.

“You don’t understand,” Abby said. “It’s like having ashes pumped directly into your blood.”

They all started to moan and scream with what energy they could muster. Doctors came in, and other nurses. I didn’t like this part, the physicality of the feedings, so I walked away.

I meet many Pretty Girls. Pretty Girls are the ones who will never recover, who still see themselves as ugly and fat even when they don’t have the strength to defecate. The ones the doctors try to fatten up so they don’t scare people when laid in their coffins.

The recovering ones never spoke of the Ash Mouth Man. And I did not believe, until Dan entered my surgery, complaining he was unable to kiss women because of the taste of his mouth. I bent close to him and smelt nothing. I found no decay, no gum disease. He turned his face away.

“What is it women say you taste like?” I said.

“They say I taste of ashes.”

I blinked at him, thinking of Pretty Girl Street.

“Not cigarette smoke,” the girls had all told me. “Ashes.”

“I can see no decay or internal reason for any odour,” I told Dan.

After work that day I found him waiting for me in his car outside the surgery.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “This is ridiculous. But I wondered if you’d like to eat with me.” He gestured, lifting food to his mouth. The movement shocked me. It reminded me of what Jane had said, the Ash Mouth Man gesturing a drink to her. It was nonsense and I knew it. Fairytales, any sort of fiction, annoy me. It’s all so very convenient, loose ends tucked in and no mystery left unsolved. Life isn’t like that. People die unable to lift an arm to wave and there is no reason for it.

I was too tired to say yes. I said, “Could we meet for dinner tomorrow?”

He nodded. “You like food?”

It was a strange question. Who didn’t like food? Then the answer came to me. Someone for whom every mouthful tasted of ash.

“Yes, I like food,” I said.

“Then I’ll cook for you,” he said.

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He cooked an almost perfect meal, without fuss or mess. He arrived at the table smooth and brown. I wanted to sweep the food off and make love to him right there. “You actually like cooking,” I said. “It’s nothing but a chore for me. I had to feed myself from early on and I hate it.”

“You don’t want the responsibility,” he said. “Don’t worry. I’ll look after you.”

The vegetables were overcooked, I thought. The softness of them felt like rot.

He took a bite and rolled the food around in his mouth.

“You have a very dexterous tongue,” I said. He smiled, cheeks full of food, then closed his eyes and went on chewing.



When he swallowed, over a minute later, he took a sip of water then said, "Taste has many layers. You need to work your way through each to get to the base line. Sensational."

I tried keeping food in my mouth but it turned to sludge and slipped down my throat. It was fascinating to watch him eat. Mesmerizing. We talked at the table for two hours then I started to shake.

"I'm tired," I said. "I tend to shake when I'm tired."

"Then you should go home to sleep." He packed a container of food for me to take. His domesticity surprised me; I laughed on entering his home at the sheer seductiveness of it. The masculinity masquerading as femininity. Self-help books on the shelf, their spines unbent. Vases full of plastic flowers with a fake perfume.

He walked me to my car and shook my hand, his mouth pinched shut to clearly indicate there would be no kiss.

Weeks passed. We saw each other twice more, chaste, public events that always ended abruptly. Then one Wednesday, I opened the door to my next client and there was Dan.

"It's only me," he said.

My assistant giggled. "I'll go and check the books, shall I?" she said. I nodded. Dan locked the door after her.

"I can't stop thinking about you," he said. "It's all I think about. I can't get any work done."

He stepped towards me and grabbed my shoulders. I tilted my head back to be kissed. He bent to my neck and snuffled. I pulled away.

"What are you doing?" I said. He put his finger on my mouth to shush me. I tried to kiss him but he turned away. I tried again and he twisted his body from me.

"I'm scared of what you'll taste," he said.

“Nothing. I’ll taste nothing.”

“I don’t want to kiss you,” he said softly.

Then he pushed me gently onto my dentist’s chair. And he stripped me naked and touched every piece of skin, caressed, squeezed, stroked until I called out.

He climbed onto the chair astride me, and keeping his mouth well away, he unzipped his pants. He felt very good. We made too much noise. I hoped my assistant wasn’t listening.

Afterwards, he said, “It’ll be like that every time. I just know it.” And it was. Even massaging my shoulders, he could make me turn to jelly.

I had never cared so much about kissing outside of my job before, but now I needed it. It would prove Dan loved me, that I loved him. It would prove he was not the Ash Mouth Man because his mouth would taste of plums or toothpaste, or of my perfume if he had been kissing my neck.

“You know we get pleasure from kissing because our bodies think we are eating,” I said, kissing his fingers.

“Trickery. It’s all about trickery,” he said.

“Maybe if I smoke a cigarette first. Then my breath will be ashy anyway and I won’t be able to taste you.”

“Just leave it.” He went out, came back the next morning with his lips all bruised and swollen. I did not ask him where he’d been. I watched him outside on the balcony, his mouth open like a dog tasting the air, and I didn’t want to know. I had a busy day ahead, clients all through and no time to think. My schizophrenic client tasted yeasty; they always did if they were medicated.

Then I kissed a murderer; he tasted like vegetable waste. Like the crisper in my fridge smells when I’ve been too busy to empty it. They used to say people who suffered from tuberculosis smelled like wet leaves; his breath was like that but rotten. He had a tooth he wanted me to fix; he’d cracked it on a

walnut shell.

“My wife never shelled things properly. Lazy. She didn’t care what she ate. Egg shells, olive pits, seafood when she knew I’m allergic. She’d eat anything.”

He smiled at me. His teeth were white. Perfect. “And I mean anything.” He paused, wanting a reaction from me. I wasn’t interested in his sexual activities. I would never discuss what Dan and I did. It was private, and while it remained that way I could be wanton, abandoned.

“She used to get up at night and raid the fridge,” the murderer said after he rinsed. I filled his mouth with instruments again. He didn’t close his eyes. Most people do. They like to take themselves elsewhere, away from me. No matter how gentle a dentist is, the experience is not pleasant.

My assistant and I glanced at each other.

“Rinse,” I said. He did, three times, then sat back. A line of saliva stretched from the bowl to his mouth.

“She was fat. Really fat. But she was always on a diet. I accused her of secretly bingeing and then I caught her at it.”

I turned to place the instruments in my autoclave.

“Sleepwalking. She did it in her sleep. She’d eat anything. Raw bacon. Raw mince. Whole slabs of cheese.”

People come to me because I remove the nasty taste from their mouths. I’m good at identifying the source. I can tell by the taste of them and what I see in their eyes.

He glanced at my assistant, wanting to talk but under privilege. I said to her, “Could you check our next appointment, please?” and she nodded, understanding.

I picked up a scalpel and held it close to his eye. “You see how sharp it is? So sharp you won’t feel it as the blade gently separates the molecules. Sometimes a small slit in the gums releases toxins or tension. You didn’t like your wife getting fat?”

“She was disgusting. You should have seen some of the crap she ate.”

I looked at him, squinting a little.

“You watched her. You didn’t stop her.”

“I could’ve taken a football team in to watch her and she wouldn’t have woken up.”

I felt I needed a witness to his words and, knowing Dan was in the office above, I pushed the speaker phone extension to connect me to him.

“She ate cat shit. I swear. She picked it off the plate and ate it,” the murderer said. I bent over to check the back of his tongue. The smell of vegetable waste turned my stomach.

“What was cat shit doing on a plate?” I asked.

He reddened a little. When I took my fingers out of his mouth he said, “I just wanted to see if she’d eat it. And she did.”

“Is she seeking help?” I asked. I wondered what the breath of someone with a sleep disorder would smell like.

“She’s being helped by Jesus now,” he said. He lowered his eyes. “She ate a bowlful of dishwashing powder with milk. She was still holding the spoon when I found her in the morning.”

There was a noise behind me as Dan came into the room. I turned to see he was wearing a white coat. His hands were thrust into the pockets.

“You didn’t think to put poisons out of reach?” Dan said. The murderer looked up.

“Sometimes the taste of the mouth, the smell of it, comes from deep within,” I said to the murderer. I flicked his solar plexus with my forefinger and he flinched. His smile faltered. I felt courageous.

As he left, I kissed him. I kiss all of my clients, to learn their nature from the taste of their mouths. Virgins are salty, alcoholics sweet. Addicts taste like fake orange juice, the stuff you spoon into a glass then add water.

Dan would not let me kiss him to find out if he tasted of ash.

“Now me,” Dan said. He stretched over and kissed the man on the mouth, holding him by the shoulders so he couldn’t get away.

The murderer recoiled. I smiled. He wiped his mouth. Scraped his teeth over his tongue.

“See you in six month’s time,” I said.

\* \* \* \*

I had appointments with the Pretty Girls, and Dan wanted to come with me. He stopped at the ward doorway, staring in. He seemed to fill the space, a door himself.

“It’s okay,” I said. “You wait there.”

Inside, I thought at first Jane was smiling. Her cheeks lifted and her eyes squinted closed. But there was no smile; she scraped her tongue with her teeth. It was an action I knew quite well. Clients trying to scrape the bad taste out of their mouths. They didn’t spit or rinse, though, so the action made me feel queasy. I imagined all that buildup behind their teeth. All the scrapings off their tongue.

The girls were in a frenzy. Jane said, “We saw the Ash Mouth Man.” But they see so few men in the ward I thought, *Any man could be the Ash Mouth Man to these girls*. I tended their mouths, tried to clear away the bad taste. They didn’t want me to go. They were jealous of me, thinking I was going to kiss the Ash Mouth Man. Jane kept talking to make me stay longer, though it took her strength away. “My grandmother was kissed by him. She always said to watch out for handsome men, cos their kiss could be a danger. Then she kissed him and wasted away in about five days.”

The girls murmured to each other. *Five days! That's a record! No one ever goes down in five days.*

In the next ward there are Pretty Boys, but not so many of them. They are much quieter than the girls. They sit in their beds and close their eyes most of the day. The ward is thick, hushed. They don't get many visitors and they don't want me as their dentist. They didn't like me to attend them. They bit at me as if I was trying to thrust my fingers down their throats to choke them.

Outside, Dan waited, staring in.

"Do you find those girls attractive?" I said.

"Of course not. They're too skinny. They're sick. I like healthy women. Strong women. That's why I like you so much. You have the self-esteem to let me care for you. Not many women have that."

"Is that true?"

"No. I really like helpless women," he said. But he smiled.

He smelt good to me, clean, with a light flowery aftershave which could seem feminine on another man. He was tall and broad; strong. I watched him lift a car to retrieve a paper I'd rolled onto while parking.

"I could have moved the car," I said, laughing at him.

"No fun in that," he said. He picked me up and carried me indoors.

I quite enjoyed the sense of subjugation. I'd been strong all my life, sorting myself to school when my parents were too busy to care. I could not remember being carried by anyone, and the sensation was a comfort.

\* \* \* \*

Dan introduced me to life outside. Before I met him, I rarely saw daylight; too busy for a frivolous thing like the sun. Home, transport, work, transport, home, all before dawn and after dusk. Dan forced me to go out into the open. He said, "Your skin glows outdoors. Your hair moves in the breeze. You couldn't be more beautiful." So we walked. I really didn't like being out. It seemed like time wasting.

He picked me up from the surgery one sunny Friday and took my hand. "Come for a picnic," he said. "It's a beautiful day."

In my doorway, a stick man was slumped.

"It's the man who killed his wife," I whispered.

The man raised his arm weakly. "Dentist," he rattled. "Dentist, wait!"

"What happened to you? Are you sleepwalking now?" I asked.

"I can't eat. Everything I bite into tastes of ash. I can't eat. I'm starving." He lisped, and I could see that many of his white teeth had fallen out.

"What did you do to me?" he whispered. He fell to his knees. Dan and I stepped around him and walked on. Dan took my hand, carrying a basket full of food between us. It banged against my legs, bruising my shins. We walked to a park and everywhere we went girls jumped at him. He kissed back, shrugging at me as if to say, "Who cares?" I watched them.

"Why do it? Just tell them to go away," I said. They annoyed me, those silly little girls.

"I can't help it. I try not to kiss them but the temptation is too strong. They're always coming after me."

I had seen this.

"Why? I know you're a beautiful looking man, but why do they forget any manners or pride to kiss you?"

I knew this was one of his secrets. One of the things he'd rather I didn't know.

"I don't know, my love. The way I smell? They like my smell."

I looked at him sidelong. "Why did you kiss him? That murderer. Why?"

Dan said nothing. I thought about how well he understood me. The meals he cooked, the massages he gave. The way he didn't flinch from the job I did.

So I didn't confront him. I let his silence sit. But I knew his face at the Pretty Girls ward. I could still feel him fucking me in the car, pulling over into a car park and taking me, after we left the Pretty Girls.

"God, I want to kiss you," he said.

I could smell him, the ash fire warmth of him and I could feel my stomach shrinking. I thought of my favourite cake, its colour leached out and its flavour making my eyes water.

"Kissing isn't everything. We can live without kissing," I said.

"Maybe you can," he said, and he leant forward, his eyes wide, the white parts smudgy, grey. He grabbed my shoulders. I usually loved his strength, the size of him, but I pulled away.

"I don't want to kiss you," I said. I tucked my head under his arm and buried my face into his side. The warm fluffy wool of his jumper tickled my nose and I smothered a sneeze.

"Bless you," he said. He held my chin and lifted my face up. He leant towards me.

He was insistent.

It was a shock, even though I'd expected it. His tongue was fat and seemed to fill my cheeks, the roof of my mouth. My stomach roiled and I tried to pull away but his strong hands held my shoulders till he was done with his kiss.



Then he let me go.

I fell backward, one step, my heels wobbling but keeping me standing. I wiped my mouth. He winked at me and leant forward.

His breath smelt sweet, like pineapple juice. His eyes were blue, clear and honest. You'd trust him if you didn't know.

The taste of ash filled my mouth.

Nothing else happened, though. I took a sip of water and it tasted fresh, clean. A look of disappointment flickered on his face before he concealed it. I thought, *You like it. You like turning women that way.*

I said, "Have you heard of the myth the Pretty Girls have? About the Ash Mouth Man?"

I could see him visibly lifting, growing. Feeling legendary. His cheeks reddened. His face was so expressive I knew what he meant without hearing a word. I couldn't bear to lose him but I could not allow him to make any more Pretty Girls.

I waited till he was fast asleep that night, lying back, mouth open. I sat him forward so he wouldn't choke, took up my scalpel, and with one perfect move I lifted his tongue and cut it out of his mouth.

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**The Cup of Nestor**

SIMON BROWN

Simon Brown's most recent books are *Daughter of Independence*, the third book in the Chronicles of Kydan trilogy from Pan Macmillan, and the short story collection *Troy*, from Ticonderoga Publications.

He lives on the New South Wales south coast with his wife Alison and children Edlyn and Fynn.

About 'The Cup of Nestor', Simon writes, "This story took nearly twelve years to write, and was influenced by a Stephen Jay Gould essay about 19th century scientists. The story didn't turn out the way I expected, which was disconcerting at first, but ultimately more rewarding."

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## **JUNE 1866**

W

hen the Thackeray Expedition arrived by steamer at the river port of Manaus it was welcomed with more grace than curiosity - scientific expeditions being almost as common as mosquitoes in Amazonas - although the fact that the daughter of the expedition's sponsor was in attendance allowed it some extra notoriety. Nevertheless, most excitement was reserved for another passenger on the same steamer; Jenny Lind, the famous Norwegian opera singer, had agreed to suspend her retirement in England to sing in Manaus's new opera house. A small detachment from Milan's Teatro alla Scala had already been in town for several weeks, rehearsing the repertoire they would be performing for the next six months, and they were on the dock to greet her.

Young William John - student, veteran and hollow man - had left his own cabin in time to watch Lind disembark with all the style and precision of a wading bird. Her admirers clapped and cheered enthusiastically, surrounded her with parasols and fluttering fans, and shepherded her towards the town's best hotel, the white and indomitable Christabelle. John was joined at the railing by his master, Professor Nestor John Saumarez, a small dapper man despite his paunch and the salt-and-pepper moustache that draped across his upper lip like a signature.

"And there, untouched by nature, marches culture," Saumarez said in a voice that was both admiring and regretful.

"Sir?"

"Look around you, William. Here we are, several hundred miles inside the Amazon jungle, and what

greet us? A town that would not be out of place in Estremadura.” He glanced at his student, his eyebrows arching. “That’s in Portugal.”

“Yes, sir,” John said, trying not to sound resentful. Saumarez always assumed his students, lacking his knowledge of biology, were ignorant in all else as well.

“I cannot help but applaud Madame Lind’s progress. She is everything our civilization aspires to: art and artifice, dignity and gravitas, romance and allure. And yet...” Saumarez raised one index finger, his signal for the imminence of a concluding remark, “... and yet, for all she represents, for all Manaus represents, there is no accounting of that bounty surrounding us. It is as if God’s very thoughts had no place in our own.” He shook his head sadly. “Art has no use for science,” he added lowly, “and that is the shame of our species.”

Lind and her party were almost out of sight, their coloured parasols twirling in the sun like tiny flowers spun in the hands of children. The figures seemed to wash in the light for a moment and then they disappeared behind the wall of the Christabelle. With their passing the town became darker, the jungle closer. John held his breath, expecting something more. Perhaps a sign from Saumarez’s God, which he sometimes imagined to be part patriarch and part tree, a strange amalgam of religion and nature and equally terrifying in either aspect.

Saumarez touched John gently on the shoulder and said, “Do not let me persuade you to despise our race.”

Before the weight of the comment could bear down on John, Charles Thackeray appeared from his cabin. He was a tall, well-built and self-made man with a strong desire to be famous for something other than his wealth, hence the expedition. He was followed by his daughter, the long and angular Alexandra, her face as blank as a cloudless sky. Her gaze fell on John and he felt his skin prickle. Thackeray smiled broadly at Saumarez and said in his conniving voice: “Who’s despising who? How could anyone despise anyone on a day like this?” He swept out one arm to encompass Manaus. “Just look at this magnificent place!” He had not expected an answer, and did not receive one. He was, as usual, smiling with that effortless ease that comes to those who are sincerely convinced they are universally liked and admired.

John wanted to escape Alexandra’s stare, which settled on him like a judgement. Before he could go, Thackeray grasped his elbow and beamed down at him. “You must be *very* excited about all of this... umm...”

“John, father,” Alexandra said evenly, as if she was reading from an attendance book. “William John.”

“William, eh? Young students like you don’t get an opportunity like this every day.”

“Once in a lifetime, sir,” John agreed hurriedly. Thackeray, pleased with the reply, released his grip and John made his escape.

On his way back to his cabin he passed his fellow student, Nathaniel Slater. Slater’s blue, watery eyes regarded him with interest. “Was it fine?” he asked.

“The disembarking of Miss Lind? Oh, yes, a grand procession. It was an admirable affair.”

“And our reception?” Slater asked nervously. He was extraordinarily shy, and hated attention.

“None at all, I should think. Miss Lind has quite taken everyone’s breath away; there is little left for us.”

Slater nodded. “I must see about organizing the unloading of our equipment. Professor Saumarez was *insistent* the equipment be my responsibility.”

John nodded gravely, repressing a smile. “Can I give you a hand?”

“Thank you, but I think I will be all right.”

“Let me know if you change your mind.”

Slater promised he would and continued on his way. When John reached his cabin he loosened his tie and shirt. Even though the expedition had been sailing up the Amazon for over a week before swinging northwest into the Negro River to reach Manaus, he was still not used to the heat and humidity. He opened the cabin’s single porthole, seeking a breeze, but all he got was a view out across the water and in the middle distance a green fringe indicating the far bank of the river. In two or three days, perhaps less if Saumarez could arrange guides and porters, they would be making their way upriver, deeper into the jungle, collecting specimens for Harvard and some of the world’s leading museums. Thackeray was right: it was a unique opportunity for John and the other five students. In exchange for their assistance in catching and sorting specimens, Saumarez would deliver a lecture to the students every afternoon in nature’s own classroom.

John grimaced. *Assuming the heat does not first addle all our brains.*

He lay back in his bunk and closed his eyes. It was hard for him to breathe in the confines of the cabin, but he did not want to leave and risk encountering Thackeray or Saumarez again. The first was too loud and the second too domineering to be taken in large doses. And then there was Alexandra and her eyes; he was frightened of her, he was embarrassed to admit, and without knowing why.

He turned over in his bunk and tried to will himself to sleep. God knows, he needed it, and would need it twice as much once they were in the jungle, but his own anxiety worked against him. When at last he admitted failure and opened his eyes he saw, without surprise, that everything was changed. Instead of the steamer's bulkheads he was surrounded by the thin green foliage of a northern summer, and though he could not see it he could smell and hear the smoke, the burning and crackling of sap wood and cotton and wool, of leather and human flesh. In the distance, too, he could hear the peppering of rifle muskets, the deeper cough of 6 lb Napoleons, the hurrahs and cries of men.

*No...!*

And he opened his eyes and saw the heavy metal hull all around him, smelling of paint and rust and tropical water. He sat up, sighing so heavily it was almost a sob, his skin glistening with sweat.

\* \* \* \*

Though careful with his money, Thackeray was no miser. The members of his expedition were established in one of Manaus's better hotels. If not the Christabelle, the Zezere was at least more comfortable and considerably cooler than the steamer that had brought them this far. Even John found himself falling for the charms of Manaus. Every day the students, with nothing to do while Saumarez made final preparations for the expedition, would wander between cafes and restaurants and salons. At night they would walk by the glittering whorehouses, but never enter - some because they were afraid for their souls and the rest because they were afraid Saumarez would hear of it and send them home in disgrace. They would saunter by, as casually as their naiveté allowed, and beneath the brim of their hats slyly ogle at the women who decorated the entrances of the brothels with such practiced ease it made the students envious. John would sometimes find his glances returned, would glimpse soft brown eyes flashing at him above round moons of tempting flesh; ironically, their voluptuousness reminded him of Alexandra, who seemed to him as dry as kindling and as unappealing as Saumarez's puritanical virtue.

Profits from the trade in timber, rubber and coffee had made the people of Manaus among the wealthiest in the world, and they proudly decorated their town not only with an opera house, but with a museum and an art gallery as well. The museum was popular because of its collection of shrunken heads. Slater, without any evidence, said they were fakes. John visited the art gallery on the second day; the paintings and sculptures were pleasant enough without being exciting, and it wasn't until he had left he realized he

had not seen a single depiction of the jungle.

Towards the evening of the second day, John and Slater were drinking coffee and sharing a seed cake when Saumarez sat down next to them. The professor was looking pleased with himself.

“We have the guides and porters we need!” he told them cheerfully. “And the mayor has arranged for several boats to take us. Tomorrow we can load our equipment, and the day after that leave Manaus!

“As well, the mayor has invited our party to Jenny Lind’s Manaus debut tomorrow night.” He glanced at John. “A last taste of culture, William, before we leave man’s world and enter God’s. I look forward so much to showing all of you His song first hand.”

John was not sure how to reply to this, but Slater broke the silence for him. “And may we learn to recite some of it.” From anyone else it would have sounded obsequious, but from Slater it had the ring of absolute loyalty.

Saumarez always seemed slightly surprised by Slater’s earnestness, as if his own shadow had suddenly spoken out. “That is our plan, Nathaniel, but all will depend on the Creator’s will, not ours.” Slater nodded deferentially.

“Come,” Saumarez urged. “We must tell the others the good news.” He led the way back to the hotel. John followed almost reluctantly; on this day Manaus was filled with a gentle light, and at that moment he felt as if he walked in a better world than the one he was used to. He did not want to go into the jungle. He had enough darkness of his own.

The next day passed swiftly. Saumarez, whose facility with Spanish was good enough to let him make do in Portuguese, explained to the new porters what their duties would be on the expedition. With their assistance, the equipment was packed into several long boats, and these in turn were then stored in a small warehouse by the river ready for their departure the next day. That evening, alerted by anticipation, the Thackeray party made its way to the opera house.

Miss Lind and the singers from the Teatro alia Scala sang excerpts from Mozart’s works; Saumarez, familiar enough with the composer’s virtuosity not to be dazzled by it, snatched moments to observe his companions. Most of his students formed a coterie of promising if not brilliant biologists, especially Slater, whose diligence and devotion seemed obsessive even by the Professor’s standards; the odd one out was John. Saumarez could not help liking the Rhode Islander and his blunt honesty, but found himself puzzled by John’s infatuation with systematics and Charles Darwin’s heretical theories on natural selection. The man was Saumarez’s newest student but the oldest in years, having interrupted his studies

to fight for the Union, and possessed a nature so sombre Saumarez assumed his heart carried a great tragedy.

Completely opposite to John in character was Thackeray; an ebullient, successful businessman who had done well out of the war. His manner was abrasive because it was so constantly lighthearted and eroded good will like a tide working on a beach. But he was rich, and enthusiastically supportive of Saumarez's aim to collect as many new species of insects as he could from the Amazon rainforest, and for that alone Saumarez would forgive him anything. It seemed to him that his daughter, Alexandra, could have been made from the same mould as John, and played the cloud to her father's eternal silver lining.

During the last piece of the performance, an aria from *Don Giovanni*, Saumarez observed a single tear roll down John's cheek. He felt guilty for seeing it, and was glad the theatre was too dark for anyone to notice him blush.

\* \* \* \*

## **JULY 1866**

A breathless John arrived late for the noon lecture. He took the last camp chair under the awning and nodded his apologies to Saumarez, who graciously smiled back and continued with his lecture on the structure of insect wings. Alexandra Thackeray, her face as impassive as ever, held up Saumarez's little blackboard for all to see; on the blackboard a rough picture of the hooked wings of a fly had been drawn out in blue chalk.

John pretended to listen to the lecture, but his mind was on the occupant of the little polished wooden box with a muslin lid which he held in his hand. A beetle, over an inch in length, uselessly struggled to escape its prison; its elytra shone with a beautiful metallic blue. Most interesting was that it possessed both mandibles for chewing and stylets for stabbing, something John thought could have been unique. He was sure it was a new species, or more likely an entirely new genus or even family. He raided his memory of Latin to come up with a binomial for it. *Caduceus* meant staff; that could describe the stylets. But he remembered the caddis fly had been named after that. Perhaps *Gladius*, for sword. He studied the beetle more closely. The stylets were quite short, really. *Pugio*, then. The dagger. That was it. And a species name to describe the wonderful colour of its wing cases. *Pugio caeruleus*. Yes, that had quite a ring to it, he told himself. The dagger beetle.

He turned his attention to Saumarez, who had erased the first drawing and was busy sketching the wings of a butterfly; his attempts at drawing some kind of pattern on the wings drew muffled laughter from his students, and he faced them with mock gravity.

“I am a scientist, not an artist. At least it *looks* like the wing of a butterfly; you all should be grateful for small blessings.”

“Looks more like an ear,” Thackeray muttered, and even Saumarez joined in the laughter then. The businessman enjoyed sitting in on the professor’s lectures, especially since Saumarez had named a new species of dragonfly after him two weeks before; the science of biology had become personal.

“Well, an ear that flaps,” Saumarez conceded. He rubbed his forehead with the flat of his hand. For a moment he looked as if he was confused, unsure of where he was. Then he seemed to gather his thoughts and he continued quickly. “Just as Manaus - a city amid the jungle - gives perfect architecture to God’s own creation, so does taxonomy give architecture to the chaos of life. By studying how nature is ordered we discover the keys to God’s secrets, secrets left by Him to challenge us; and it is through such challenges that God propels us in our ascent over nature. We are his city in the chaotic verdure of life.” He pointed to the sketch of the butterfly wing. “Even Michelangelo could not have drawn a butterfly wing that properly reflects its symmetry, its intricate design so matched to its function.

“But!” he declared, holding up a finger to his audience. “But never believe that such perfection is due to the workings of nature alone. Do not mistake the sign of God’s greatness for a sign of His irrelevance. Nature does not accomplish its miracles alone. There is a guiding hand, the Great Draftsman’s will, behind all you now see around you.”

John listened with increasing impatience. He knew Saumarez really was holding his finger up to Darwin: his theory of natural selection strayed too far from God for Saumarez. But John believed differently. He had actually read *On the Origins of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, one of the very few of Saumarez’s students to have made the effort, and it had been a revelation. So much that he had not understood before started to make sense. And he knew why he and Saumarez’s opinions were divided over this. Saumarez believed in a God.

*But I have seen God die*, John reminded himself.

\* \* \* \*

“The dagger beetle,” Slater said flatly. “And those stylets were formed from the maxillae alone?”

“Yes. If you look closely, you can see that neither the labrum nor the labium have evolved at all.”

Slater looked disapprovingly at John. “Don’t let the Professor hear you use that word.”



John nodded stiffly. He knew that Slater's views were closer to those of Saumarez than his own, and yet Slater accepted John's radical opinion about evolution with equanimity. When John had first arrived at Harvard, still recovering from his physical and mental wounds, Slater, who himself had been in the war, accepted him immediately. In the past year the two students had formed something resembling a friendship, and often worked together. John often wondered what it was Slater saw in him, apart from their shared experience in the army of the Union, but never questioned the relationship itself.

"Where did you find it?" Slater asked.

"About half a mile from here."

"Do you think you could find the spot again?"

"I think so. Do you want to go now?"

Slater checked his fob watch. "We have an hour before the evening meal."

John led the way from the camp, heading west along a trail the expedition had themselves made over the last two weeks. After ten minutes he headed south, and the going became much rougher. They clambered over roots and vines. Insects buzzed around their heads. Monkeys hooted at their invasion.

John eventually stopped before a fallen tree; to John it looked like an ancient cannon covered in moss and fungi; saplings grew around it, reaching for the hole in the canopy left behind by the giant. He pointed to a branch stump about halfway along its length. "I found it on that."

They both leaned over the tree and carefully studied its surface. There were several insects, most of them beetles, wandering over the bark; John lifted one paper-thin section to show there were as many crawling underneath. But no *Pugio caeruleus*.

"Are you sure this is the right -?" Before Slater could finish his question, a beetle with electric blue elytra appeared. If anything, it was larger than John's first specimen. For a moment they watched it stalk an almost equally large weevil, but it took so long to do the business that eventually Slater sighed in frustration and picked it up. He placed it in his open palm.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” John said, but too late.

The beetle’s head jabbed down into the pillow of flesh at the base of Slater’s index finger.

“It stung me!” Slater exclaimed, brushing it off. John inspected the wound; it was too small for his eyes, but a small bead of blood welled up to mark the spot.

“You don’t suppose it was poisonous, do you?” Slater asked.

“I’ve never encountered a poisonous beetle. How much does it hurt?”

“More of an itch now, but that’s not necessarily a sign. Who knows what toxins are yet to be discovered in the Amazon?”

“Well, let’s return to the camp and await developments.” John meant it lightly, but Slater seemed annoyed by his casualness.

“I think I will let you study the pest and its offspring by yourself, William. I have no intention of being poisoned - or worse - in the name of science.”

\* \* \* \*

The mosquito net divided the night sky into small squares like a graph sheet. It seemed to John that each square claimed a single star. He reached up a hand and ran his finger along the net; the sky seemed to ripple like a river, and for a moment the stars were nothing more than reflections of some greater light.

The idea made him start. He tried to recollect the date, and realized with a shock it must have been close to the middle of July. It had been three years since that afternoon on Little Round Top when God had died. He closed his eyes, tried to squeeze the memory from his brain, but the sounds and smells of the battle came back as if it had been yesterday. He gasped and opened his eyes, focused on the stars; no great source of light, but things unimportant and far, far away. Slowly he remembered where he was. The sounds of insects filled the air, and nearby he could hear the sighing of the Negro River. For the first time on the expedition, he was glad to be surrounded by jungle, as far from civilization as it was possible to get.

Later, he was woken by the sound of someone moving nearby. He sat up in his cot and looked around. Slater was still asleep. Then he heard the sound again and turned. Alexandra Thackeray was crouched down over his sample boxes; she turned her head and their eyes met. He hurriedly pulled on his pants under his blanket, threw the blanket away and brushed aside the mosquito net. Alexandra watched him with a detached amusement.

“What are you doing?” he asked sternly.

“Slater told me about your new beetle. I wanted to see it.”

“You should have asked.”

“You were asleep,” she said simply, and returned to sorting through his boxes. “But now that you’re awake, I expect you won’t mind. Which box should I be looking at?”

John did not know whether to be affronted or embarrassed. He felt Alexandra was assuming too much, but her blunt curiosity was something she had never revealed before and it made him feel he was imposing on her rather than the other way round. He pointed to a box she had already discarded. “That one.”

Alexandra picked it up again and peered into it. “No wonder I missed it. Such a plain thing.”

“Its elytra - that is, the wing cases –”

“I know what the elytra are,” she said evenly.

“— the elytra are quite beautiful in full light.” He swallowed. “Anyway, it isn’t its colour that makes it interesting.”

Alexandra looked at him with the hint of a mocking smile on her lips. “Shouldn’t you put a shirt on?”

Confounded by this, John scabbled among his clothes at the end of his cot, found his shirt and pulled it

over his head. "Why couldn't you have waited until everyone was up?" he demanded.

"I couldn't sleep," she said. "Do you really think this is a new species?"

"I think it's an entirely new genus," he admitted. "Look at its mouth parts. To the best of my knowledge, there is nothing else like it."

She peered even closer at the specimen. "This is a predator, then?"

"I'm sure of it."

"I wonder what it preys on?"

"Naturalists," he said, remembering Slater's wounding. The thought made him smile. "Among other things," he added quickly.

"Have you shown this to Professor Saumarez?"

"Not yet. I was waiting for the right moment."

Alexandra looked at him strangely. "And when would that be?"

John felt himself grow smaller under her gaze, as if he was being accused of a wrong. "I'm not sure."

"You think it's important, don't you?"

John shrugged, then realized the implications of her question. "But that's not why I haven't shown it to the Professor!" he said quickly, suddenly alarmed.

Alexandra shook her head. "I wasn't thinking that." She handed him the specimen box. "If you find more of these in the jungle, I'd like to see them."

John nodded and she left. He slowly let out his breath and noticed Slater looking at him from under his blanket.

“What was that about?”

“I haven’t a clue,” John said quietly, and then looked at his friend accusingly. “If you were awake, why didn’t you say something? I could’ve done with some help.”

“Safer under cover,” Slater said. “She reminds me of a preying mantis.”

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## **AUGUST 1866**

It was a Sunday, and Professor Nestor John Saumarez was delivering a sermon, his words floating up into the air and becoming part of the canopy, part of the dark sky and endless forest that enveloped them like great hands. The words seemed fitting in this place, so despite his natural inclination, John found himself intrigued by Saumarez’s vision of God and the destiny of His creation. He closed his eyes and listened, and the sound of Saumarez’s voice was like the hum of bees on a warm spring afternoon, and he wanted to be a boy again, growing up on his family’s Rhode Island farm, believing everything he was told about the world with absolute faith. With faith came a freedom he had lost in the war, a freedom that allowed a mild consolation that for every event there was a cause, for every question there was an answer.

John opened his eyes.

But he did not believe, because there was nothing to believe in. There was no cause apart from chance. And most important questions had no answers, and the few that did offered no comfort.

Saumarez finished and led the gathering in prayer. From habit, John bowed his head with the others, but instead of praying he studied the new specimen in the box he held in his hands. When he had first found the beetle, John thought he had found a specimen from another population of *P. caeruleus*, but on closer inspection had discovered the mouth parts had a slightly different arrangement. The stylets were even longer, and the elytra flashed green, not blue, when caught in the sun. He was sure it was a related species, and tentatively named it *Pugio viridis*. On reflection, it was interesting that he had not yet

rediscovered *P. caeruleus* anywhere within walking distance of the new camp, only four of five miles upriver from the old one. It was as if an invisible shield had been placed between the two species.

Deciding it was time to consult Saumarez, John had come to talk to him about the find, but the Sunday service had stopped him short. He felt as if he had walked into the wrong temple, and he was no longer sure he wanted to discuss the beetle with the professor. At that moment, Saumarez seemed smaller to him, and his respect for the other's authority was so reduced it shocked him into inaction.

The prayer finished, and the gathering of students and clerks and natives dispersed. John did not move at all. The air in the clearing stilled. A shaft of sunlight traced across the grass, the tents, scalloped off the river, then across John. The beetle shone.

"That's an interesting specimen," Saumarez said.

John's head jerked up. He thought Saumarez looked flatter, less exuberant than usual after worshipping his god. Reduced by the heat and humidity, John thought. "I wanted to show it to you."

Saumarez smiled benignly. "I would be pleased to see it, William, but first I must consult with Charles Thackeray about transporting our specimens home. He seems to think that since they are dead they will not object to rough treatment."

John nodded. "Of course. I will show you later."

Almost like a father to a son, Saumarez patted John's shoulder and ambled off, humming a psalm.

Although relieved he had not lied, John felt ashamed of how easily he had blurted the first thing that came into his head. It was uncharacteristic of him to panic, or be so acquiescent; he marvelled, too, at how with an expression of interest and the slightest physical contact, Saumarez effortlessly restored his authority, never knowing it had been under threat.

His enthusiasm at discovering the beetle was overwhelmed by listlessness, and he did not know what to do next. Distantly, he heard parrots in the jungle, and he decided to go back, to search for more specimens of *P. viridis*, but his legs did not want to move.

"Is it the same beetle as before?" Alexandra took the canvas chair next to his.

He regarded her warily, but what he had once taken for a blank expression he now saw as an openness, a completely guileless interest that he found almost flattering.

“No. Not quite.”

He handed her the specimen and she studied it closely. “Could it be a juvenile of the other beetle?”

“I don’t think so. I was about to go back and see what other examples I can find. I need to return to Harvard with as many specimens as possible and compare them properly with the literature, and the university’s collection. But I’m sure I’m right, and that this and the first beetle you saw belong to an undiscovered genus. After all, there are more species of beetle in the world than any other kind of animal.”

“Really? Beetles, and not fish or birds?” She swatted at an insect. “Or flies?”

John’s smile widened into something genuine. “As a group, they found the most adaptable body shape very early on, and have capitalized on it ever since.” He looked around at the forest. “Of course, who knows what will be found here in Amazonas? Or in the depths of Africa or New Guinea? Or the jungles of Siam?”

“Or the Appalachians or the Everglades.” She handed him back his specimen. “Tell me, Mr John, did you come on this expedition to find new beetles, or to get away from home?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” he said, suddenly on his guard.

“You seem like a lost child to me. A runaway.” She took a quick breath. “Could I come with you?”

“Excuse me?”

“If you are going after other specimens now, would you mind if I accompanied you?”

John did not know what to say. He was reluctant to agree - he again found himself on his guard with her

- but after succumbing so easily to Saumarez's authority he no longer felt he had any of his own.

"You must lead the way," Alexandra said, as if the matter had already been decided.

A short while later he had returned to the site where he had found *P. viridis* - a tangle of branches and vines on the bank of the river and extending over it somehow like a half-completed bridge - and almost immediately found another specimen. They watched it ambling along the bridge for a while before John reached out to collect it with his left hand, using his right to steady himself against the branch. Alexandra pulled him back. "Look," she said, nodding to where his right hand had been. The biggest centipede John had ever seen, almost as long as his forearm and an inch thick, was curling itself around the branch and heading for the beetle. Involuntarily he pulled back, almost losing his balance. Alexandra put a hand behind his back to steady him, all the while watching the centipede to see what happened.

The beetle seemed unaware of its danger, and John found himself losing any detachment as a biologist or student. He wanted the beetle to get away, and at the same time recognized how ludicrous that was - under other circumstances he would not hesitate to capture and kill the beetle himself. He could even sense Alexandra tensing beside him.

The beetle realized its danger too late. It turned in the opposite direction, did a little wiggle with its abdomen and scurried away. The centipede realized its meal was escaping and put on an extra burst of speed that was astounding for a creature its size, and was within an inch of catching the beetle when, suddenly, it stopped. John and Alexandra could see the centipede struggling to continue the chase but its first two segments seemed stuck fast somehow, as if a nail had pinned them to the branch.

"What happened to it?" Alexandra asked, nodding at the centipede.

"I have no idea," John confessed.

Then they saw the beetle do another turn around and come back towards them. It carefully avoided the centipede's poisonous jaws, ambled onto its enemy's back and jabbed it between the second and third segments. The centipede's struggles stopped almost instantly.

"That's remarkable," Alexandra breathed.

"It must be venomous," John said, then felt stupid for having stated the obvious, and then guiltily thought of Slater. But no, Slater was alright, so *P. caeruleus* was either not venomous or not venomous enough to affect humans.



The beetle leaned over its catch and tapped the branch with its two forelegs. A few seconds later a dozen of its kind scrambled out from behind leaves, knotholes, and loose bark and converged on the centipede. John and Alexandra watched astounded as the beetles collectively dismembered and then consumed the centipede; within half-an-hour all that was left were the pincers and fangs.

“You had better be careful collecting any more specimens or you might end up being collected yourself,” Alexandra chided.

\* \* \* \*

Saumarez joined John before the evening meal to see his specimens. John kept his two species of *Pugio* until last, and when he presented them held them out like gifts to a king. Saumarez studied both carefully, holding each carefully up to the light as John described how and where he found them.

“Well, William, I am sure you are right. This must be a new genus.” Saumarez held them up together. “And you say you found the blue one near our first camp, and the green one not far from here?”

“Yes, Professor.”

“And did you see any intermingling of the two species?”

“No, Professor. None.”

Saumarez looked uncomfortable. He drew a long breath, wiped sweat from his forehead. “God’s garden is not an easy place to endure, William.”

“No, sir.”

Saumarez looked up, searching the clearing and the surrounding jungle almost as if he thought his god would stride out from among the trees at any moment. “But I am sure Eden would not be an easy place to endure, either. God made it a place of suffering, I am sure, which is what the Old Testament means when it says it was taken from us.” He looked at John with a bewildered expression. “Who would have thought that a place filled with so much of His creation could be so...” His voice drifted off and he

handed the specimens back to John.

“Thank you for showing me. Nathaniel said you have names for them.”

“Provisionally.”

“Of course.”

“*Pugio caeruleus* and *Pugio viridis*.”

Saumarez smiled. “Ah, good. Yes, for the colour of the elytra. Good.”

John put the specimens down. “Professor, are you all right? You’re not ill, are you?”

Saumarez seemed puzzled by the question. “Ill? Oh, no. I am never ill. God takes care of me. I rest myself in his hands and he carries me through all trials and all tribulations. Did you know I think we’ve discovered twelve new species of ant over the last week?” He stood up slowly. “The good lord only knows how many other species we have stored away in our boxes. It is really quite remarkable. If mysterious. But quite remarkable, and evidence of God’s imagination and dedication to creation.”

John gathered his courage and said, “It might also be considered evidence of natural selection, each species finding its own role to play in creation.”

Saumarez smiled thinly. “You know, William, I am not as close-minded about Mr Darwin’s theory as some would have it. His research has some merit. But I am absolutely certain that no species evolves into its own role. God is not merely inspiration, not merely the guiding hand. He is entirely and absolutely the driving force.”

He patted John on the shoulder, just as he had earlier in the day, reaffirming his authority.

“This can be a terrible place if we forget our creator. We can find ourselves led into gross error. Nature can dazzle us as assuredly as words and blind us to the truth.”

\* \* \* \*

Slater volunteered to help John dissect one of his examples of *P. viridis*. The humidity made it difficult work, and they were constantly swabbing sweat from their foreheads and wiping their hands dry on their pants.

After separating the beetle's head, thorax and abdomen, they started on the creature's amazing mouth parts, John dissecting and describing and Slater recording.

They had been going at it for half an hour when Slater said, "Saumarez is concerned about you."

"He has no need to be." John pushed the beetle's head aside and brought the thorax under the magnifying glass. "Alright, we have six pair of spiracles on the thorax; that might be important. The first pair of legs stem from prothorax -"

"It's not just your opinion on evolution," Slater continued, undaunted. "He is worried about your health."

John grunted. "He should be worrying about his own health, not mine. He has not looked well for weeks. Second pair of legs attached to mesothorax, third pair from the metathorax. All normal there. I'm now making a medial incision."

Slater cleared his throat. "He likes you, you know. Admires you. It is ironic that for someone who abhors violence, he thinks more of you than his other students because you fought in the War." His voice was tinged with a hint of indignation.

John cut the thorax along its ventral length and gently pulled the exoskeleton apart. "We both fought in the war."

"I never fired a shot in anger, William," Slater said, his tone subdued. "I was never fired at in anger, either."

John paused, remembering what it was like to be fired upon. He lifted his head from the magnifying glass and put down the scalpel. "Where is all this leading, Nathaniel?"

Slater swallowed. “And there is talk, you know, about you and Miss Thackeray.”

“Talk from whom? About what?”

“Mr Thackeray and his daughter have argued. It is well known.”

“It is not well known to me.”

“And, well, Mr Thackeray has asked Professor Saumarez to consider your position.”

John felt as if ice water had been spilled down his back. “I have done... I mean we have done nothing improper... she asked to accompany me when I search for specimens...” He stopped his gabbling, a terrible suspicion forming in his mind. “You have heard this argument between Mr Thackeray and his daughter?”

“Well, no -”

“And you overheard Mr Thackeray talking to the professor about me?”

“Not as such, but Professor Saumarez assures me -”

“Yes,” John said firmly. “I’m sure he did.” He picked up the scalpel and returned his attention to the specimen. “But he has made no such assurances to me. Shall we continue?”

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## **SEPTEMBER 1866**

Saumarez had given permission to one of the students to use a rifle to shoot a monkey from a troop that never seemed to come to ground, and whose members were too wily to be caught out with traps or nets and had proven too quick and observant to be felled by any of the native guides with their blow darts.

John, who had been expecting the sharp report of the rifle, was still caught out by it and could not help jumping. The specimen box he was holding dropped from his hand.

“Are you alright?” Alexandra asked.

John did not answer. He was seeing clouds of black smoke and yellow dust and could feel only his left thigh which was as heavy as lead and slick with blood, coppery and almost golden in the light.

“William?”

He looked up to see Alexandra staring at him, frowning with concern.

“I’m fine.”

He stood up unsteadily and rubbed his thigh over the old wound. It was not hurting at all. But still, out of the corner of his eye, he could see the line of infantry to his right falling one by one, slowly forward as if they had been pushed gently by an invisible hand. All his friends. And then the ground tilting as he fell, too.

“William!” Alexandra grabbed him as he swooned and held him upright.

“It’s nothing,” he said automatically, struggling to stand on his own.

“Sit down,” she ordered, and he did not have the will to resist that voice.

“Alexandra?”

John recognized the sound of Thackeray, but not in full flight; there was curiosity with effrontery mixed in.

“It’s William John,” Alexandra explained.

“I can see that for myself.”

“He was faint and I caught him before he fell.”

“Are you well, boy?”

John thought there was more threat than concern in the question. “Yes, sir. I am all right, thanks to Ale... thanks to your daughter.”

“Well enough. He will do fine by himself, Alexandra. Come away. There are some things we need to discuss.”

Hesitantly, Alexandra left, but it was not long before John was able to stand again. At first he saw only the canopy and the columns of light underneath and smelt only humus and rain. Then he noticed Saumarez staring at him strangely, almost glaringly, before the student with the rifle ran up to him holding a small dead monkey by the tail, diverting Saumarez’s attention. John was puzzled by what he took to be a sign of ambivalence if not actual hostility from the professor. He remembered the specimen box then and found it near his feet. The muslin lid had held, and inside was his new prize. Another species of the dagger beetle, he was sure. The elytra were a brilliant yellow, so *Pugio croceus* seemed an appropriate binomial, and although the stylets were still present they were so short they might as well have not existed as far as he could see; as if in compensation the mandibles were huge. He wondered how many more species there were to find, and what variations they would show. Perhaps every time the expedition set a new camp he would find another. If the expedition lasted his whole lifetime he might spend it collecting examples of the dagger beetle. That would give his life purpose.

He heard a rustling near his head and glanced up. Hanging from a branch of a giant fig tree was a glistening metallic lump that looked like some exotic drupe made from mercury. He edged closer but then stopped suddenly when he realized what it was he was looking at. Hundreds, maybe thousands, of the new beetle he had found, all clumped together in one huge colony. He stared at it for a long time. The individual beetles hardly moved, but the colony as a whole moved slightly with any breeze, and the surface of it rainbowed and ribboned like oil on water. Cautiously, but driven by an almost overwhelming curiosity, he gingerly tapped the outside of the colony. It swayed a little but affected no change. He searched for a fallen branch, found one nearby, and used it to prod the colony a little harder; some of its individual members tried to move aside but were stuck fast, and John realized that the huge mandibles of the species were used to clasp onto the abdomen of the beetle in front. He prodded harder. And harder again. This time the end of the branch disappeared inside the colony. He jerked it out, and the colony exploded. There was a puff of wind that made him blink. Skittering, chittering beetles fell to the ground and scattered. Some whizzed past, green diaphanous wings humming in his ears. And there, hanging from the tree, was the corpse of a small monkey, a member of the troop Saumarez had been so interested in.

It's little dark eyes stared into his. There were no marks on its body, but its fur was slick with moisture. A cord of what could have been silk connected it to the branch above. Even from where he was standing, John could feel the heat emanating from it. Steam started to rise from the fur.

“What's that?” Saumarez demanded.

John whipped around, and Saumarez retreated a step. The professor's eyes were recessed so deeply in his skull they were covered in dark shadows. His moustache seemed more like a strange growth than a jaunty signature. His grey hair was thin and plastered to his skull.

“William? What happened to you?”

John held up his specimen. “There were hundreds of these beetles, maybe more, surrounding that poor monkey.” He pointed behind him.

Saumarez looked around him. “I see no such beetles -”

“I saw them!” John snapped. When he saw the reaction on Saumarez's face he swallowed and mumbled an apology. “But I did see it, Professor. It was like a bee swarm. And in the middle was this monkey.”

There was a sound like a thread snapping and John turned in time to see the monkey hit the ground. The remnant of silk cord shrivelled away.

“I saw it,” he said weakly.

\* \* \* \*

John felt everyone was avoiding him. Except for the most necessary courtesies, no one talked to him at all that afternoon or at the evening meal. Even Alexandra seemed to be avoiding him. It was not until he made his way to his cot that Slater caught up with him and took him aside, away from the camp where no one might overhear them.

“The professor has asked me to have a serious talk with you,” Slater started.

“Why doesn’t he talk to me himself? He’s had plenty of opportunities.”

“He’s increasingly worried about your state of mind, William. He’s concerned that his relationship with you may be part of the problem.”

“There is nothing wrong with my state of mind, Nathaniel, and the only thing wrong with our relationship is that where I closely study nature to explain nature’s diversity, he closely studies theology. He thinks any explanation that distances god is automatically heretical and therefore scientifically untenable. He thinks Darwin’s theory is anathema”

“Can you be surprised the professor reacts so strongly to Darwin’s theory when what Darwin proposes does not merely distance God but removes any need for him entirely?”

“But that is not a refutation of the theory, Nathaniel! I have shown Saumarez proof of natural selection here in Amazonas!” William rubbed his temples. “No, no, I’m sorry. Evidence. Strong evidence, not proof. But what does Saumarez show me?”

“Respect,” Slater said.

John shook his head. “Oh, Nathaniel. This is not about respect. I do not doubt the professor’s good heart, nor the good work he has done in our science over the years. But you have seen for yourself the effect this trip has had on him. Have you ever seen him so unsure of himself? So bewildered by nature?”

Slater avoided John’s earnest gaze. “He would say it is you who have been bewildered. Bedazzled. Deceived.”

“Ah. Deceived. Theology again, Nathaniel?”

“I believe too, William. It is not just Professor Saumarez. All of us on the expedition share a strong faith. I see the same wonders you do every day we are here. I remember how overwhelmed I was when I was a child and walked in the forest at home for the first time. I see with the same eyes as you, my friend, but I do not doubt.”



“But your eyes have not seen everything that I have seen.”

Slater nodded. “You mean the War. It’s true. None of us has gone through what you have gone through. But at least credit me with enough imagination to comprehend something of your pain.”

“God was felled with a musket ball, Nathaniel. And round shot. And bayonet and sabre and the surgeon’s saw. It was nature, too, in a way, the other side of the forest, the dark side where most of us never go and those that do never return quite the same. But I did not die. I realized something. Nature needs no god. We need no god. There is as much comfort in death as in life, because it does away with the past. Saumarez has his theology, you have your faith.” John looked out into the jungle. “I have this.”

“And that will always be enough?”

John drew a deep breath. “It will have to be, my friend. There is nothing else.”

\* \* \* \*

In the morning John woke before anyone else except the native guides. He took with him a machete, a flask of water, a compass and nothing else. He walked north from the camp, keeping the river in sight when he could but using the compass to orient himself when he could not. He stopped every hundred yards or so to search the ground, the trees, in burrows, in clearings. He ignored everything that did not bear at least a passing resemblance to his dagger beetles. He found another colony of *Pugio croceus*, but despite almost overwhelming curiosity he did not disturb the swarm. He wanted to cover as much ground as possible before returning to camp.

After he had gone what he estimated to be some four miles, he found *Pugio atramentum*, with glossy black elytra and stylets formed from the mandibles as well as the maxilla. They patrolled the jungle floor in a column several beetles wide and forty yards long, like the soldier ants he had heard about in Africa. They looked like a flotilla of ironclads, and moved with the sinuous ease of a snake. Tapirs and monkeys and lizards scampered ahead of the beetles in a panic.

John marched on, following animal trails when he could. He found no more of the black dagger beetles, or any other new species, and when it was midday he turned around to head back to the camp, and walked straight into a sticky glittering curtain. He reeled away slapping at his face, thinking it was a spider’s web. And realized there was no web on him. The curtain was in front of him, a wide sheet of shining beetles that hung suspended from a branch and fell all the way to the ground. For a moment he thought it was *P. croceus*, and that this was how they captured their prey, ensnaring any animal that blundered into them and surrounding it to suffocate it. But it was yet another species of the dagger beetle,

with elytra as white as ivory. No, John corrected himself. As white as silver. So perfectly silver he could see his own face reflected in the sheet.

No, part of his mind told him. He should see his face reflected back to him in the elytra of every beetle. Instead, what he saw was a copy of his mouth and nose and the mole on his chin and the flaring cheek bones and his eyes, his staring eyes, his whole face writ as large as the shining, living sheet. What he saw was William John - student, veteran and hollow man - waiting for him here in the middle of the jungle, and somehow he knew it had always been waiting for him. The mouth opened and out of it came the ear-piercing, chirruping song of a thousand thousand beetles, and it was the most beautiful song he had ever heard.

\* \* \* \*

Saumarez remembered the single tear he had seen rolling down the cheek of William John during the performance of *Don Giovanni* in the opera house of Manaus, and remembered too how it had made him blush, as if he had glimpsed a part of the man's soul. He had no doubt that what he had seen was part of the divine, the supraordinary element that gave Man his exalted station in nature, the connection with the godhead that every human carried. And yet it only made him more curious about what William John had become, how his humanity had so subverted his holier self and left him lost and bewildered in Amazonas.

"Nestor?" It was Thackeray, unusually subdued. "I am sorry to trouble you. But the boats are packed. Everyone is waiting."

"Yes, of course," Saumarez said. He continued to stare into the jungle, hoping, willing, that John would step out into the light and be saved.

"It has been five days," Thackeray continued. "Our supplies are almost completely gone. No one will blame you for returning now."

"I know, Charles. There is nothing more to be done. Of course." He turned and led the way back to the boats, boarded the one with Nathaniel Slater. The guides pushed the boats off and they glided into the current.

He saw Thackeray in the boat ahead talking quietly with his daughter and then place his hands on her shoulders, and saw her grasp them with her own and Saumarez knew it was right. Then he stared at Slater's back, hunched and heavy with guilt which Saumarez knew did not belong to him, but he no longer knew what to say to ease his student's burden. As if he knew he was the centre of the professor's

attention, Slater twisted in his seat and said eagerly, “I will lead a search party back here as soon as we can resupply at Manaus.”

Saumarez smiled and nodded, but he knew it was pointless and later would dissuade Slater from even trying. Saumarez was sure that William John had found his Eden, his dark paradise, and that the gates had closed behind him as surely as if God’s angels themselves had descended from heaven to block the way.

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## **Hero Vale**

MARGO LANAGAN

Margo Lanagan’s collection of speculative fiction short stories, *Black Juice* (Allen & Unwin Australia 2004, HarperCollins US 2005, Orion 2006), was widely acclaimed, won two World Fantasy Awards, a Victorian Premier’s Award, two Ditmars and two Aurealis Awards. Her short story ‘Singing My Sister Down’ has been nominated for many other awards, including the Bram Stoker, the Theodore Sturgeon, an International Horror Guild Award, a Nebula and a Hugo. Her third collection, *Red Spikes*, was published in Australia in October 2006, has won the Children’s Book Council: Book of the Year, Older Readers award, and has been nominated for a World fantasy Award for Best Collection. Margo lives in Sydney. She has just completed a fantasy novel.

Margo writes about ‘Hero Vale’, “The story combines two of my favourite things from the *Narnia Chronicles* — the moment in *The Silver Chair* when Eustace and Jill are fleeing from the school bullies and accidentally travel to Narnia, and the Wood Between The Worlds in *The Magician’s Nephew*. And, come to think of it, there’s definitely something of Uncle Andrew in the Hero’s disproportionately large head, although the Hero, of course, is a real hero here, whereas Uncle Andrew just fancies himself as one. In terms of composition, the Vale Between The Worlds and the stray Hero came first, and the bully story came along afterwards and kicked them into life.”

\* \* \* \*

iammid Anderson gazed over into the Vale. It was dark down there among the trees, and not just from shadow. He was glad of the rock's coolness and solidity against his chest.

"I don't like that black mist," he said. "It makes me feel as if bits of my eyes are blind."

"Oh, you caint see straight in this place," said Razor. "And when you *do* see summink, afterwards you cannot quite remember. You caint quite believe, you know? It will not stay proper in your head."

Razor's skin was like yellowed wax. He was dressed all in raggy black, his head thrust forward motionless, his miserable eyes taking in the overcast sky, the complex darkness of the Vale.

"It's not guaranteed we'll see anything at all, is it?" said Diammid.

"Nuffing's sure, no. Git out the glass, though - you never know, it might help."

Diammid had forgotten about the spy-glass. He rummaged in the rucksack and brought it out. It was comforting to look at, and to hold - the old, tooled, red leather, the chased metal.

"Crothel will notice it's gone. Maybe even before he notices *me* gone." Diammid laughed nervously.

"Long as we get us a half-hour here. Any longer and we'll be for the nuthouse."

"Have you ever stayed longer?"

"Last time I stayed an hour, but half of that I was behind this rock, not looking, while Ark and Chauncey went peculiar. I had to whack them in the end, to get them away."

"I heard that Ark hardly had a *nose* left."

"I dint do that. The other boy done that. Fighting like scranny-cats, they were."

“Is that true, then - they only hurt each other? Nothing else got to them, from down there?”

“Ennink from *down there*” said Razor, with a bitter smile, “the boy wouldn’t be alive, I don’t reckon.”

*It’s not possible*, Tregowan had said. *I saw Ark. No one the size and make of Thomas Chauncey could do such damage. His ear was torn near right off.*

Diammid hadn’t seen either boy right afterwards; by the time he’d got back from hockey practice Ark was gone to the hospital, all the way to London, and his parents shipped him home from there; Chauncey had been fetched from the school San and kept home six weeks. He had come back cold and quiet and no longer popular, lasted to the end of summer term and then gone away for good.

Diammid glanced at Razor again. The older boy’s eyes were like pale-grey buttons; his mouth was always pursed as if he were remembering some new thing to worry about. He was one of those people who would go all the way through to old age with barely a change; he would wrinkle up a little and his dull brown hair would go grey, but that would be all. And then he would die. Diammid rarely thought about deaths like Razor’s; he suppressed a shiver, and turned back to the Vale. “There *are* colours,” he said. “Just not strong ones. Just very dim greens and browns, and you have to look for them.”

“They might stren’ then, if summink comes,” said Razor. “They tend to.”

“You never properly said what you’ve seen,” said Diammid.

“Sh,” said Razor. He had not shifted his gaze from the Vale.

A peculiar feeling flowed off his last words to Razor, *You never properly said...* It hissed off Razor’s *Shhbh...* and it moved across Diammid’s mind like the black mist down there, which had just covered a patch of tree-trunks, tangling with the beardy stuff in the lower branches. *Razor is lying*, he knew all of a sudden. *He’s faking. He’s making all this up. He’s never seen anything here. He just –*

Then the mist passed, showing the tree-trunks again, the beards, the white haze of the beard-berries. And Razor’s eyes were steady; they didn’t dart guiltily or anything suspicious. And Razor hadn’t taken the money Diammid had offered him on Wednesday, had just looked at him by the roadside there where accosted and said, *Course I’ll take you, if you’re sure*. And pushed Diammid’s hand away, with the money in it. *No*, he’d said, *It’s not a thing I do for money*.

Now Razor turned and saw the stare on Diammid. "Have a bite," he said. "It's best not to be hungry. But be quiet about it. And keep looking. More eyes the better."

Diammid pulled out the cloth full of chicken-fritters, fresh-tuck swapped from a day-boy. He handed one to Razor and bit into another.

Oh, there was nothing like eating outside; there was nothing like walking, striding away from Grammar and going to somewhere one shouldn't go, and then eating; there was nothing like salty yellow-and-brown fritter full of shreds of white meat and glossy green peas; Diammid only just restrained himself from grunting with pleasure as he ate! My heaven, it was good.

*You wouldn't*, Teasdale had sneered across the supper table.

*Would, too*, said Diammid - it was easily said.

*You wouldn't have the bottle. You're just another spineless tweaker from Roscoe's dorm, all farts and giggles.* His cronies laughed like machine-guns, showing half-chewed food.

Yet here he was, scoffing fritter above Hero Vale. And when Teasdale heard he'd gone, he wouldn't believe it at first, but then he'd have to - Diammid hoped someone was watching Teasdale, and could tell him later about the look on Teasdale's face.

\* \* \* \*

*Who will vouch for this boy Rickets? For this worm? For this weed?*

Bully Raglan rowed and boxed and played rugby. He and all his boys were big, stuffed tight with muscles, excepting Arthur Septimus, who was tiny and weaselly and did all Bully's listening and spying. Bully strutted about in the quad, ridiculous in his short pants and braces. Diammid wondered at how such a big baby-looking boy could make the whole quad-ful of boys stiffen and stink with fear.

Teasdale and his boys were up on the hall balcony, jostling and egging Bully on.

Rickets was white and his eyes were lowered; there was a spot of pee on the front of his shorts from

when Bully Raglan had grabbed him so suddenly out of the huddle of new Preps.

*What happens if no one vouches for him?* whispered a Prep behind Diammid.

*He will destroy him, is what Hopper says.*

*What, beat him up?*

*Well, that too.*

*No one?* cried Bully. *Rickets is alone in the world? Rickets is entirely without protection?* He smirked around at them. *And such a fine figure of a man, too. Shall we see just how fine?* he called up to Teasdale's lads.

*Show us his haunches!* they cried out. *Show us his scrawny chest!*

They won't, will they? Diammid thought unhappily. They won't take off his clothes?

Rickets slowly raised his face, the face of a boy who was always smallest and palest and most picked-upon. Diammid saw not only that they would strip Rickets and worse, but that Rickets knew they would, knew and was already resigned, so resigned he was almost saintly with it, sagging in his captors' arms, reading his future in Bully's bully eyes.

\* \* \* \*

Razor touched Diammid's elbow. He was staring, caught in mid-chew, towards the far rim of the Vale.

Diammid swallowed; a big lump of fritter went down unappreciated. Here it was, then, the sight he'd come to see, the tale he'd come to fetch and take back to Grammar to widen the fellows' eyes, and quieten Teasdale a minute.

Copper and emerald brightened in a high part of the forest thick with mist, almost boiling with it. Then the

mist passed, and the copper gleamed, and the emerald turned and flashed, and there was some shape to the thing.

“Is that the head?” Diammid muttered. “That *whole thing*’s the head? But how far away...”

“Arr, gawd,” said Razor through fritter. “Always when I bring you Grammar lads. I come by myself and all I see is elefumps or horned horses that stray out and wander and stray back away. But that’s a full hero, that one. The real thing. Oh, my.”

“That’s good, isn’t it?”

“Might be good, if we keep very, very still. Might just look about a bit and pass on. That’s what Mr Ark’s and Mr Chauncey’s did. Set them against each other summink terrible, but it didn’t do aught itself.”

In shape and solidity the head was like a cauldron, or maybe a boat, a high-sided coracle. It looked as if it were made of iron, iron covered with a coppery skin. Its thin, shiny black hair was tied behind; one ear was clear for a moment, intricate, with coppery gleams inside. Diammid didn’t want to look at the face. He turn his own face away, but his eyes would keep on looking. The hero’s nose and mouth were small and delicate, almost pretty. But the eyes above the great broad cheeks, sitting on the cheekbones like plates propped on a mantel, were wide and indistinct. The grey irises slid and jittered, shrank and swelled on the vast, wet whites.

“Euh,” said Diammid.

Razor’s hand touched his arm again behind the rock. “Nought sudden,” he murmured, and resumed chewing very slowly.

The hero moved, from the upper right of their view down through the trees towards the middle of the Vale.

“Is it *just* a head, floating?” said Diammid.

Razor swallowed. His voice came much clearer, but much quieter. “There’s a body. Watch. Where there’s less mist.”



The head coasted down the hillside, closing its eyes and pushing its face through branches, or looking from side to side in a slow, wavering, over-sized way. *Something* hung from its underside, some dark spindlyness, some bright metal.

Slowly, behind the rock, and with his eyes on the floating head, Diammid pulled the glass open to its full length.

“Ooh,” said Razor. Diammid could hardly hear him. “I’m not so sure about that now. With this one.”

“Just to see that body, the nature of it.” Slowly Diammid raised the glass to his eye.

“Mmph.” Razor shifted uneasily.

“Phaugh, you should see this, Razor!” Diammid whispered. “It’s just like us, only all streakly and straggly. *Weird*. Like dangling iron. But - what’s that on its back?” He took his eye from the glass and checked, then put it back.

“I wouldn’t be looking through that,” whispered Razor. “I don’t know -”

“Why, it’s a shield! Great long thing. And his swords! See how they flash, their curved blades? - Ooh, you should see the hilts of them. And he’s got knives at his waist, and an axe, and - What are those beady things hanging from his belt -”

“Sh! Put it down, master,” Razor hissed. “He’s coming clearer. I’m sure you can see him just as well with your own eye now.”

Diammid took down the glass and scowled into the Vale. The hero had paused in a clearing, about to plunge into a part of the Vale where the trees grew taller than himself. His heavy head turned and nodded, choosing the way. The head moved first and the slender body swung and drifted after it, brandishing its swords.

Diammid put the glass to his eye again. “I just want to see -”

“Master, I wouldn’t.”

The hero’s head swivelled dozily towards them.

“Oh, look at the earring! It’s -”

Diammid’s eager voice switched off, as suddenly as if by electricity. Diammid was gone from beside Razor. The red leather spy-glass hung where he had held it. Comb-marks streaked the air where he had stood. Swirls at the other end showed the force with which he had been sucked through.

The glass dropped, *clink-tap-clink*, and rolled, and lay. Smoke wisped out at the top; a trickle of molten orange glass ran out the bottom, and pooled on the rock.

\* \* \* \*

“Psst! Anderson!” said the coat-rack.

“What?” Diammid stared. “Who’s that?”

A coat kicked out with a thin bruised leg, and now he saw the eye in the shadows. “Rickets?”

The boy was hung there like a hunchback by the collar of his blazer. “Can you get me down, Anderson?”

“Yes, but they’ll - But I’ll - Is it Bully has done this, or Teasdale?”

“Just for a piss, Anderson, and then you can hang me up again. *Please*. I’m *busting*. It won’t take a minute.”

“Oh, all right.” And he lifted the boy down and waited there, looking about nervously.

It took more than a minute, but eventually Rickets came hurrying into sight. “Quickly! I can hear them

coming back from Gym!”

And it was accomplished.

“Thanks, Anderson.” Rickets pulled the coats around himself. “I owe you. Go away, now - you’d best not be found here.”

Diammid went, trying to shake off the scrape of Rickets’ boot against his shin, the imprint of his bony hip as he lifted him down, the pale face with the watery greenish eyes, the smell of drains about the boy.

\* \* \* \*

Bells rang above Diammid. His eyes would not open.

It seemed to him that he had only just been born. A great amber eye had brought him into being. He had started as a hot line on the air, then suddenly, violently, been plumped into shape and thrown down on this grass. And now he was a dense honeycomb of pain, his every cell outlined with fire.

The hero’s towering shadow darkened Diammid’s eyelids. The black mist came and went. When it was there, it furred everything - sound and taste and skin - like iron filings on a magnet. It made the bells at the hero’s waist clank and clack; when it cleared they rang sweet and properly metal.

\* \* \* \*

Diammid’s cheerful voice chimed across the supper table.

*‘Where they come from, they come from other worlds. Where they go, they go back to other worlds; I don’t know whether back to those they came from, or on to fresh ones, or what.*

*What do you mean, what other worlds? Teasdale scoffed from opposite him. You talk so much rot, Anderson; why don’t you run orf and write one of your po-wems or something?*

*I'm telling you, I talked to Razor; he told me.*

*He filled your head with gumf is what. Razor is a filthy peasant what has et one toadstool too many. You there, pass the bread-and-dripping.*

*But why don't they come here?*

*What do you mean, Rickets?*

*When they're in our world. Why don't they do anything here? Come over to Grammar and - I don't know – flatten Raglan for us? Rickets finished under his breath. Flatten that one. He nodded faintly towards Teasdale, who was biting bread and calling up the table to someone.*

*Oh, they never come out of the Vale. Least, that's what Razor says. The sides are too steep, maybe. I don't know; I've never been there.*

*And you never will. There was Teasdale again. You piece of slop.*

\* \* \* \*

Diammid's eyelids unstuck from each other. The hero's booted iron legs led up to the bells and blades at his waist, to his swords in their battered black sheaths, to the head that blotted out so much of the sky.

"S-sir." Diammid's whole painful body trembled.

*Ah.* The hero's head tilted, the boots stepped away, the giant eyes came down. First the painful amber eye regarded him through the mist, then the other slewed grey across the eyeball, seeming to see nothing.

The hero opened his neat mouth. Diammid sensed a much larger, rawer mouth opening somewhere nearby.

*Gorwr hay sheen hee pashm drouthsh,* he said. Then both his eyes turned amber as the mist thickened,

and he tried again: *You hay seen hee passin throok.*

The mist furred Diammid's eyes and brain. The hero was saying several things: *You have seen me passing through this place*, as well as *You have seen things you were not intended to see*. But most urgently the hero wanted to know, *Have you seen him? Which way did he pass?*

"Who, sir?" cried Diammid, but the mist had frayed and faded, and only the grey, uncomprehending eye swerved and slid above him. Diammid felt ill watching it - at any moment he would be sick all over the hero's boots.

But then the eye flickered, and steadied amber again. Crothel had a piece of Baltic amber in the glass case in the Science Room; there was a lacewing trapped in it, with some scraps of ancient leaf-litter. That specimen was a poor approximation of the amber world into which these eyes were windows. A dragonfly hung there, its thorax the length of Diammid's arm; whole thorny lizards hovered, wrinkled-leather birds with tooth-edged beaks, entire mammoths - bubbles clung to their flanks and crevices, golden with the hero's interior fire.

"Who, sir?" Diammid said again, to stop himself dying of the sight.

This time the hero understood. *Mine eneme*. His voice rumbled in the ground. Skulls hung on cords at his waist, skulls of wolves and of Diammid-sized people and of horned, toothed beasts Diammid did not recognize. They clacked and clinked together on many notes. *My foe!* The mist thinned, the words turned to roar, the eye dimmed and slithered, and the ground shook hard, banging against the back of Diammid's head. The hero blurred against the clouds, and the skulls became dull metal bells, and swung and sang.

Then the amber eye burned above him. *You cain tell me*, said the hero, *into whuchaputchatha...* The eye dimmed, then shone very bright and hot. *Into which aperture did he flee?*

"I have seen no one but yourself today, sir." Diammid trembled, pinned to the ground by the heat.

*And other days? Many years might pass in this place, that do not signify for the duration of the Chase.* The eye came closer and hotter. Diammid squirmed.

"But I have never been here before, sir!"

*I could crush your head like an asp's under my boot-heel, rumbled the hero, pushing his face lower. I could cut you apart and hang your still-living pieces in the trees. Do not toy with me.*

“Oh, but I'm not, sir! I wouldn't!”

The hero brought the full heat of its amber eyes to bear on Diammid. The boy's skin crisped and curled and flamed up like thin dry leaves. He arched on the ground. Screams forced out of him, unconnected to his will.

Then the black mist closed in with a sifting sound. Diammid's skin rose into iron fur. The mist blotted out the sky; from here to high in the Vale behind him the air turned hollow, so that his cries echoed lostly. And *something* emerged into this hollowness, heavy, scrambling, tearing the vegetation, breathing hard and steadily.

The hero's head swung up to face that other, and his amber eyes glared and glowed. *Show yourself, coward!* He drew both swords; they tzedged and spat on the iron-rich air. The skulls at his waist clacked out a horrid laughter. The trees had turned to leafless bone on all sides.

He strode up the hill. His iron boot-toe kicked Diammid in the side; his following foot caught Diammid's head a blow that exploded the world into fireworks. The boy lay gasping, the enemy crooned farther away and higher, the giant's swords whipped the weighty air and the trees rattled and rubbed their bones with his passing.

\* \* \* \*

It was nearly tea-time and Rickets was dozing, when Anderson pulled apart the coats and lifted him down from the hook.

Rickets shook out the arms of his shirt and blazer, blinking up at Anderson, not daring to speak. Anderson seemed taller, thinner. His face was one big rough-featured scab, incapable of expression without cracking.

“I thought you were - Shouldn't you be in the San?” said Rickets.

Stillness and patience clarified the air around Anderson, spreading out from him like a pure oil.

“Thank you,” Rickets finally said, in a muted voice.

Anderson jerked his head, *Come on*.

Rickets bobbed along uncertainly beside Anderson, then settled to walking. He longed to ask, *What happened to you in the Vale? What did you see? Will you ever tell, or was it too terrible?* But the blunt, crusted ruin of Anderson’s face was too awesome; he could not quite bring himself to. And then they passed the last empty dorm and went up into the Prefects’ Wing.

These stairs, these halls, were richly scented with Taylors Imperial tea and woodsmoke and buttered toast. A carpet runner muffled their footfalls, and peaceable sounds came from behind each door - the clink of glassware, Victrola music winding up, assured voices in conversation.

They stopped at a door guarded by two big boys. Rowdier talk went on within. “I’m here to see Bully Raglan.” Anderson’s voice was a burnt-out croak.

One of the guards gave a startled laugh, and Rickets stifled a gasp. No one called Raglan ‘Bully’ in front of his lads.

But the guard knocked on the study door and stuck his head round. The talk paused inside. “Anderson’s here to see you.”

“Anderson?” Raglan’s sharp voice shook Rickets like a gust of wind. Anderson’s hand rested briefly on his shoulder.

“The boy who - the one who got burnt.”

“I thought he was unconscious!”

“Well, he’s here now, Raglan, and asking to see you.”

Raglan gave some signal, and the guard opened the door wide.

Rickets stood on the threshold, his mouth sagging open. All was rich reds and browns in the blazing candlelight. Every surface invited the hand, from curved polished wood to embossed wallpaper to gilded picture frames to plump velvet upholstery, to the rug on the floor, thick-napped, bright-patterned, quite unmarked by wear. The difference between this warm place and the scarred Prep Common Room with its mean coke fire made Rickets ache.

The prefects sat around a table that was crowded with a miniature city of silverware and porcelain. At its pinnacle rose a many-storeyed cake stand. Sweet buns gleamed and glittered on the lower levels; a merry-go-round - an entire *carnival* - of iced and cream cakes ornamented the top tray. Bully Raglan's bad-tempered face was all the uglier for peering at Anderson around such beauties.

The other prefects winced and goggled at the sight of the burnt boy. Teasdale looked to Raglan to see how he ought to behave.

"What is it, Anderson?" Raglan was rattled, but he did not want to show it.

"I've come to vouch for Rickets."

Raglan's gaze touched Rickets for the merest fragment of a second. "Jolly good. But I'm having my tea, boy. Can't this wait?" His voice was smooth as cream after Anderson's croaking.

"I've come to vouch for any other Prep boy who needs protection from you, Bully Raglan."

A high giggle broke from Teasdale. The other prefects froze.

Raglan slowly, smoothly adjusted his head the way Rickets imagined a snake would, lining itself up ready to strike. "I beg your pardon?" he said almost soundlessly. "What did you call me, Anderson?"

"Bully, sir."

Only the faces changed. The prefects' slackened in disbelief; Bully's assembled like a fist. Even the cakes sat stiller on their stand.



Raglan was fast; he leaped around the table. But Anderson ran two steps and launched himself straight across it. Boy, vessels and cloth disappeared on the far side. A cake flew out of the crashing to the underside of the marble mantel, stuck there, then fell, leaving a smear of cream.

The prefects exploded from their chairs, shouting.

“Collar him!” said Raglan. “Burns or not, I shall beat him senseless!”

Anderson had landed in the fire. Now he rose, the back of his dressing-gown alight, the flames sheeting up behind his gruesome head. He dived again, between the prefects’ odd-angled bodies and upflung hands, fetching up against the wall, the bulwark, the immovable might that was Bully Raglan.

And the wall buckled.

“Get him off me!” The bully tried to step back, but Anderson had a death-grip around his knees. “Do something! Help me, you wasters!” Batting at the boy’s flaming back, the blond floss of his own hair catching fire, Raglan fell.

\* \* \* \*

“It was *wonderful!*”

The circle of faces glowed back at Rickets in the faint light from around the dormitory window-blind. Soft laughter warmed the air at his face.

“It *sounds* wonderful!”

“Oh, I wish I’d seen it. Raglan on fire and screaming!”

“Go on, Rickets. Don’t stop there.”

“Well, then they threw Raglan’s smoking jacket on Anderson to smother the flames, so *that* was ruined.

And they rolled him on the carpet, so there were these scorch marks -” Rickets sighed with pleasure. “And then they called Matron because Raglan was making such a racket, and she made him look like a goose with that bandage, and the pre’s had to carry Anderson back to the San on a blanket and, I tell you -”

“He was unconscious, wasn’t he?”

“Yes! And he *stank* of burning, and he was *filthy*, covered in ash and he was bleeding - his face, you know, where he had knocked the scabs - and all the - he must have fallen right *on* the cakes - he was all over jam and cream, and this big *splash* of tea all down his nightshirt. He was soaked; he was a mess! And they carried him off in the blanket, and even with the mess and the cream and all of it he was like - I don’t know - like a prince being carried on a litter, or maybe a soldier with his comrades bringing him off the battlefield, with the gun-smoke hanging in the air still. The noble dead, you know? The glorious dead.” Rickets’ whisper was breaking up with glee. “Lying there with his robe around him, and all these prefects his servants. It was just - *perfect*. I can’t tell you!”

“He didn’t have permission to leave the San,” said Lowthal.

“Really?” said Tregowan.

“He was supposed to be in bed, ordered by the doctor. O’Callaghan said he heard Matron say. She couldn’t believe he walked that far, let alone got in a fight.”

“Let alone *won!*”

Hands clapped softly or covered laughing mouths.

“So is he all brave because he went to the Vale?” chirped Crewitt Minor. “Is that what happens to you?”

“Well, it didn’t happen to Chauncey and Ark, did it?” said Lowthal. “And that boy, the one who brought Anderson back - he’s a weed, isn’t he? He’s a very quiet sort of person. I mean normally, not when he’s blubbing and carrying on like he was then. Nothing brave or reckless about him, that I’ve heard of.”

“He’s mad in the head, is all. Anderson, I mean. He’s just sick. Delirious. Brain fever.”

“Cave! Cox!” hissed Harvey at the door, and they scattered to their beds.

Mrs Cox entered the suddenly silent dorm. She made one slow, suspicious patrol, sniffing and hmm-ing as if trying to decide which boy she would pounce on and sink her long teeth into. Lowthal gave a very creditable snore, but, “Don’t imagine I am fooled for one moment by you, James Lowthal,” she said. And then she sat at the open door with her lamp, pointedly rustling the pages of her book.

Rickets lay full of his story, the darkness lit by the memory of that crowd of enthralled faces. Their owners fell asleep one by one around him. Things would be different now; things would have to be much improved, wouldn’t they? Bully’s reputation surely could not survive this? The whole of Grammar bubbled with laughter at him.

And even if Raglan managed to live today down, even if he came back stronger and crueller than ever, there would always be Diammid Anderson with his awful face and the absolute certainty of his bearing. Anderson would always be there for the Preps; he had said so.

And even - Rickets breathed happiness into the night – even if he wasn’t, even if Anderson died of his wounds, Rickets would have the memories to hearten him, of Anderson lifting him down from the coat-hook, of Anderson calling Bully ‘Bully’ to his face, of Anderson rising to his bare toes, and running two light steps across the prefects’ carpet, and taking flight over the laden table, and crashing to Rickets’, to *everyone’s* rescue, in a magnificent explosion of cakes, and plate, and sparks, and shattering china.

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\* \* \* \*

## **When the World Was Flat**

GEOFFREY MALONEY

Geoffrey Maloney has had over seventy short stories published in anthologies and magazines in Australia, the US and the UK. He grew up in Sydney but now lives in Brisbane with his wife and three daughters. A collection of his short stories. *Tales from the Crypto-System* is available from Prime Books in the US. Other recent stories have appeared in *Fantastic Wonder Stories* from Ticonderoga Publications and in *Albedo One* in Dublin.

Geoffrey writes: “Most of the inspiration for this story was taken from *The Queen’s Conjuror* by Benjamin Woollet — about the science and magic of Dr Dee during the Elizabethan age. But to get a story to work, you need to warp the history, mix it all about and see what you come up with. It was quite surprising to find, many, many months, after I’d written the story, that Elizabeth I was quite fond of fart jokes. When she was excommunicated by Pope Pius V, her response was: ‘Excommunications are the Pope’s crackfarts.’ I think she would have loved Kate Marlowe’s play, *Hell’s Bells a’Calling*, as much as Lord Fontingroy did.”

\* \* \* \*

P’hew! Is this the sulphur and brimstone of hell I smell? Nay, it cannot be! Surety Doctor Faustus has merely dropped an egg of maliferous odour. But perhaps even then, the likeness of its stench shall be enough to summon the evil one.

Che sera, sera? So you shall see what will be.

- Kate Marlowe, *Hell’s Bells a’Calling* (1592)

## **ACT I: THE CHAINING SEASON**

A

As was his habit each morning, Lord Admiral Fontingroy, Commander-in-Chief of the Queen’s navy, rose before dawn and rode his grey mare to the top of St Climan’s Struggle. Here was to be found a rocky cairn that marked the place where the great saint was said to have buried his pagan faith, along with his clothes, and danced joyfully naked in his enlightenment. Lord Fontingroy thought the story pure poppycock, but the view from the cairn allowed him to note contentedly that as far as the eye could see all belonged to him. But that particular morning, his sense of contentment was short-lived as he detected an oblique angle in the horizon.

Too early the seasons shift, he thought, and Eastermus groans upon us. The fleet would need to be recalled from the Edge, and the house chains brought out. He chuckled as he recalled the horrified look on the Rector’s face last Eastermus when an inadequately secured sideboard had careened towards him during the peak of the Tilt.

Lord Fontingroy squinted once more at the horizon, hoping his initial observation had merely been some trick of the early morning light, but the angle was definitely there, and now too he saw that Mother Luna and her infant son, Baby Cupid, had appeared in the eastern sky as they did every Eastermus. The Tilt

*had* arrived early. He could even feel it in his body, in the way his muscles tensed, pulling him upright in the saddle towards the east.

\* \* \* \*

Upon his return, Lord Fontingroy found his wife, Lady Gia, in the ballroom of their house with her arms moving in great swirls and arcs that would have done Sir Augustus Pino, conductor of the Albion Symphonia, proud. At her command, scores of servants scurried every which-way, carrying thick-linked iron chains to secure the furniture.

Lord Fontingroy crept up upon his wife from behind, slipped his arm around her waist and kissed her upon the cheek. The servants scattered, dragging their heavy chains through the hallways that led from the ballroom, to begin their chaining elsewhere for the time being.

“See what you have done. I had them working in good order,” Lady Gia said, but still she smiled. “Now they think we wish to be *alone*.”

Lord Fontingroy spun his wife around and leaned his head to one side in what he believed was a romantic gesture. Unfortunately he leant towards the west, where the Tilt of Eastermus had begun its pull, and he experienced a sudden spasm in his neck muscles as his head involuntarily jerked the other way.

Lady Gia laughed. “Sorry,” she said, holding her hand to her mouth to stifle her laughter, “but that *was* rather...”

“Funny?” Lord Fontingroy suggested, feeling irritated, but then laughed himself to demonstrate he had a sense of humour.

“I felt it as soon as I rose from bed this morning, that sense of not being quite as well balanced as one would wish to be,” Lady Gia said.

“And already the horizon tilts. I must be away to see the Queen to seek her permission to recall the fleet.”

“And she will say, dear Gilly,” Lady Gia said, pressing her hand flat to her breast in mock earnest, “‘I have the utmost faith in you, Lord Fontingroy, to drive those devils from the deep blue sea’ or some such

cliché. Then she will say, ‘I will see you in my chamber this evening.’”

“And I will say,” Lord Fontingroy said, squeezing his wife more tightly about the waist, “that I have more important business to attend to.”

“You will do no such thing,” Lady Gia said, pulling his hands away. “You know you are the Queen’s favourite. How else to explain a man of such relative youth in such a senior position.”

“Sheer talent,” Lord Fontingroy suggested with a knowing wink.

“Talent, of course, you have in abundance, dear, but good looks even more so,” Lady Gia said. “Besides did you not say after your last visit to Albion Town that the Queen was a passable lover?”

Lord Fontingroy blushed. “I was merely being polite. I meant that for a fat old cow she was quite well versed in...”

“Yes, well, spare me the details,” Lady Gia said. “But you must do your duty as the Queen requires it. Promise me you will say nothing foolish, that you will not do anything to endanger our house and estates. You know what she can be like - look at what happened to the poor Strathbows.”

“Lord Strathbow was an artless beetle-brained jolthead, whereas I...”

“Gilly!” Lady Gia said sternly. She had been quite fond of Lady Strathbow and still felt a little queasy in the stomach when she thought about the poor woman losing her head.

“I will hold my tongue and do as the Queen desires,” he said, sighing.

“And if what I have heard is true, holding back your tongue will not be as the Queen desires.”

With this she poked her own tongue out, pulled away from him and charged after the servants, crying, “Too much slack, the tension must be just right...”

But then, in a moment, she was back again. “Do try not to linger in Albion Town too long. Remember Dr M’Gee arrives tomorrow on his way home to Northumberland. He has recently been to the Continent and no doubt he will wish to see you on all manner of urgent things.”

“Huh, the old dismal-dreaming quack returned yet again from one of his spruiking adventures. How long is he staying this time?”

“This *is* Dr M’Gee we are speaking of. Last time it was several months. Remember, he was anxious for you to arrange an audience with the Queen.”

“Too clearly,” Lord Fontingroy said. “He wanted to show her that new wheel he’d invented. That ridiculous thing with the pumped-up pig intestines wrapped around it. It hissed and popped every time it hit a rock. And do you remember Dr M’Gee’s response?”

“That there was nothing at all wrong with his wheels; the Queen just needed to build roads without rocks in them. And of course he had the vision,” Lady Gia said, then deepened her voice and raised her hand to her brow. “I can see it now,” she said, in imitation of the old doctor, “miles and miles of flat smooth roadways across the length and breadth of Albion and carriages with my wheels flying along them at great speed.”

Lord Fontingroy laughed. “Can you possibly imagine a road without rocks. The man is a complete tickle-brained eccentric. But, yes, he is your father’s very best friend and your godfather, so stay he must, whenever he wants, for as long as he wants, as he always does.”

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## **ACT II: THE QUEEN IN HER CUPS**

And so, Lord Fontingroy departed in a rather grumpy mood, taking the royal navy barge, *Lady Albatross*, down the central canal to Albion Town. It was a lovely mid-summer’s day and he entertained himself on the journey with a book of love poems by an up-and-coming poet by the name of Elizabeth Shakespeare Makepeace. Although the romantic prose of Makepeace was not really Lord Fontingroy’s cup of tea - he much preferred the raucous sentiments of Comedia Bawdia - he found a couple of lines in the slim volume that stirred the codpiece:

Your nose is like a wood squirrel that sits upon your face

And if I had my drathers, I'd drather take its place  
There to sit, so your tongue should sip  
The nectar of love's pleasure from these sweet and rosy lips

So it was that Lord Fontingroy, with a head full of bad poetry, was ushered into the Queen's presence three hours later. His first thought upon seeing her majesty was that she had put on considerable weight during the balance of Christamus. Her figure bulged upon the throne, overflowed it even, and her face was as round and plump as a chocolate pudding. Yet her skin was fair, but for her ruddy cheeks which were the hue of crushed strawberries. The bottle of Lisboa port and the half empty goblet on the lacquered table next to the throne attested to the habit responsible for the Queen's complexion.

"Dear Giles," she said when she saw him, her voice loud, clear, resonating and regal, despite the weight of the port upon her tongue, "it is so many months since I have seen you. But of course you bring good news; the Black Fleet is finally defeated, those pirates no longer plunder our trade and my beloved Albion rules the waves."

"As always, Ma'm," Lord Fontingroy replied, "but the Tilt of Eastermus is upon us and I seek your leave to recall the ships from the Edge."

"The Black Fleet *is* defeated then?" she asked, cocking an eye at him.

"Well, not quite, Ma'm, but excellent progress has been made, indeed far greater progress than we ever expected at this time..."

"Hmm, I think I shall leave them there."

"That would be dangerous, Ma'm. With the balance of the world shifting as it does this time of year, so quickly they could be to drawn to the Edge to..."

"Plummet through space with their sails a'flappin'," the Queen said, then giggled drunkenly. "Surely that would be a sight to see." She raised the goblet to her lips and drank it dry, picked up the bottle of port, but found it empty. "Oh dear, I was going to offer you a little drink, but now we have a dead man upon our hands. Too soon the bottles run dry. Still, plenty more where that came from; I am the Queen of Albion, after all, and I can pretty much do what I bloody well like, can't I, Giles?"



“Yes, Ma’m, you can, but about the ships...”

“Now, Giles,” she said, “come join me in my private chambers where we will find the bottles replenished. You do want a little drink, don’t you? I like my men to take a little drink, now and then; I believe it gives them fortitude.”

“Yes, Ma’m, indeed it does.” Lord Fontingroy sighed, knowing he would need more than a little drink for what the Queen had in mind.

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A discreet time later, her most royal majesty sat upon her massive bed in her opulent nakedness, redolent of one of the heathen Buddha statues to be found towards the eastern edge of her empire. And, after she had disposed of another bottle of Lisboa port, her smile too took on the serenity of the heathens’ most beloved prophet. The only thing that spoils the imagery, Lord Fontingroy thought, as he struggled into his tights, is the massive forest of hair that springs forth from her loins.

Having dispensed with her goblet - it became annoying after a while, the Queen had decided, to pour before one could actually drink - she now swigged liberally from the bottle. “I have a little surprise for you, Giles,” she said between swigs.

“You have been reading the *Kama Sutra* again, Ma’m,” Lord Fontingroy said wearily, as he drew fast the strings of his codpiece. Both his jaw and back ached, such had been his endeavours the past hour, and still he stumbled occasionally, as his body adjusted to the balance of the season.

The Queen giggled. “You are such a lusty lewdster, Giles. I sometimes think men think of little else but the ungyring of their loins. But no, my thoughts are soaring now far above the hot darkness of the nether regions. Satiation brings a clear vision, I believe, and so well satiated am I that I have a grand vision indeed. It is something that has been preying on my mind for some time and now I have decided it. I am going to rule the world in a manner that has never been seen before.”

“With respect, Ma’m, you have achieved that already. You have colonies in every corner of the Earth. You control all the major sea-lanes and commerce routes. You determine who shall rule and who shall not in the lesser kingdoms. You name it and in your name it has been done. There is nothing you cannot touch and do not rule. You are, my most illustrious majesty, in control of just about everything, and the greatest monarch in all history.”

“But not the seasons!” the Queen shouted, her brow becoming sullen and brooding black. “I am sick of the Tilt! I do not like falling out of bed when I get up in the morning. I do not like walking up hills, especially not in my own palace. I do not like securing my plates and chaining my furniture and none of my subjects do either.

“I do not like it as well, when you insist, as you always do when the seasons change, that *my* navy must be brought in from the Edge. So every Eastermus and *every* Wintermus, the Black Fleet follows us in, expanding their control. I want the world to be flat, flat, flat all of time! From now on, I want the balance of Autumus and Christamus all year round! That is my command!”

Lord Fontingroy had seen it often enough. One sip too many and the tide did turn, the Queen swiftly slipping from her fat giggly good-time tart personae and into her impersonation of the wailing banshee of the Moor Lochs. He chose his words carefully. “My dear, most majestic majesty, you will appreciate the natural changing of the seasons is in the hands of the Great King in the Sky, whose powers we do not question...”

“Oh, poppycock!” the Queen cried. “You have been given your command, Lord Admiral. Find me an answer! Are you the man for the job or not? Shall I ask Lord Herringbone in your stead?”

“Most certainly, your majesty, I am the man for the job,” Lord Fontingroy replied nervously, knowing full well that sneaking fawning cat’s paw Herringbone had been after the admiralty for years.

“Oh, Giles, you really are such a good brave boy. Now come kiss the Gloriana and depart post haste. There is so much work to be done.”

As Lord Fontingroy touched his lips to the giant girasol on the Queen’s ring, the Queen said, “Giles, you do understand this mission you are upon is to be our special little secret.”

“Yes Ma’m,” he said, thinking Herringbone might very well end up with the admiralty yet, should he fail, and he was convinced right then he would.

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### **ACT III: THE EXPLOSIVE DR M’GEE**

It was, of course, the fool of all fool errands that Lord Fontingroy had been set upon and he was to linger in Albion Town for several days - not to take in the pleasures of the town, not the fine inns with their spicy and exotic foods from across the empire, nor to view the galleries of the rich and famous artists the Queen patronized, not even to part-take of the erotic pleasures of the ubiquitous bordellos and fleshpots - no, no, no, of course, not - but rather to understand the mechanics of the world. So it was off to Albion University he went, seeking to engage the wisest men of his time. But after three days of learned discourse, he found he was no closer to fathoming the nature of the seasons. He had numerous discussions about how many angels could dance on the head of a pin and was surprised to hear the debate ranged from just one to over four hundred and forty-four. This suggested to him angels were small tiny little creatures and not the soaring ten foot beasts with massive feathery wings he had imagined them to be, but then he *was* willing to admit metaphysics had never been his strong point. As far as the changing of the seasons were concerned there was little interest paid to such esoteric matters, save he was assured by all and sundry that any further understanding of the matter lay with the Great King in the Sky.

So with the burden of his mission weighing heavily, Lord Fontingroy abandoned his quest momentarily and ventured forth to the *Golden Globe* to catch a matinee. It was the latest Kate Marlowe play, about a man who had sold his soul to the devil and, in typical Marlowe fashion, Lord Fontingroy found it a riotous comedy, replete with flatulence gags and bawdy innuendo. Barely five minutes into the play, he was rolling in the aisles with laughter. Afterwards, he was able to commence his journey home in a somewhat jollier mood.

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On his return, he found his wife in her sewing room gazing into a crystal ball. The house echoed with the mournful moans of the furniture chains as the Tilt of Easternmus began to build.

“It is a present from Dr M’Gee,” Lady Gia said. “He told me that if I was to gaze into it long enough I should see the future.”

“And have you?” Lord Fontingroy asked. “It seems an unlikely proposition.”

“Indeed, but just now it told me of your return.”

“Really...”

“As you walked through the door, I saw you reflected in the glass.”

“Fascinating,” he said and slumped into a leather chair, which groaned and tensed on its chain with the added weight.

“So, how is the Queen?” Lady Gia asked.

“Plumper than ever, obstinate as always, and now she has a grand vision and I am on a secret mission,” Lord Fontingroy said wearily.

“Which is?”

“Darling, it’s a secret.”

“Gilly!”

“Oh, all right. The Queen is sick of the Tilt. She rules just about the whole world and now wishes to rule the seasons as well. In essence, my dear, I have been charged with finding a way to stop the Tilt.”

Lady Gia struggled hard to suppress a laugh, but then it burst out and bubbled through her whole body. She could even feel it tingling right down to her toes.

“It’s not funny,” Lord Fontingroy said grumpily.

Lady Gia took a deep breath. “Has she gone stark raving bonkers?”

“Some would ask whenever was she not. However, the Queen’s sanity is beside the point. She is, after all, the most powerful monarch in all the world and perhaps it is a fair question for one such as she to ask, why can she not control the seasons?”

“And you accepted this secret mission?”

“She would have given the job to Herringbone and I expect the Admiralty too, should I have been so callous to refuse. You told me I must do everything to retain our good fortune, and so I have,” Lord Fontingroy said, rubbing the back of his neck nervously.

All of sudden there was an explosion outside. The house shook and the furniture chains groaned loudly. “What in all heaven’s name was that?” Lord Fontingroy cried.

“I expect it’s Dr M’Gee. He said a short while ago he was going down to the rose garden to try a little experiment.”

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Unfortunately, most of the rose garden was no more. Much of it had been replaced by a huge gaping hole at least twenty feet deep. Dr M’Gee, long white hair and beard to match, wizened face, and dressed in an appalling purple robe covered in glittery stars and now fresh sods of earth, stood gazing wistfully at the edge of the hole his art and science had created.

When Lord Fontingroy and Lady Gia approached, he turned from his work beaming a triumphant smile.

“Ah, Giles and Gia, how nice to see you. Isn’t this magnificent?” he said, sweeping his arms wide.

“I was rather fond of that rose garden,” Lord Fontingroy said.

“You can grow another one,” Dr M’Gee said merrily. “We can’t let a little rose garden get in the way of progress, can we now?”

“And what progress is that?” Lady Gia asked, cocking her head against the Tilt, as she felt its pull shift up a notch.

Dr M’Gee winked knowingly and with a flourish his hand entered his robe and withdrew a small phial. “Just a little something I picked up in Brittany during my travels. A most powerful elixir which when mixed with this equally powerful elixir,” -another phial emerged from his robe - “can produce a very large explosion indeed. Here, let me show you how it works.”

“Are you sure it’s safe?” Lady Gia asked.

“Yes,” Lord Fontingroy said, gazing sadly at the remains of his rose garden, “it doesn’t look safe at all.”

“Yes, yes, quite safe it is,” the doctor muttered, moving to another part of the garden and dispensing a drop of elixir from one phial onto a flat stone that lay there, then taking the other phial, he placed a second drop a short distance away. “The pull of the Tilt will merge them shortly. Now I suggest we stand back a little.”

But no sooner had he said this than there was a brilliant flash, an ear splitting explosion, and the heavens rained with warm earth and rose petals. Lord Fontingroy, Lady Gia and Dr M’Gee were thrown from their feet, and when Lord Fontingroy looked up he saw the surviving portion of his rose garden had been replaced by another ugly hole.

“Do you think,” Dr M’Gee asked, wiping dirt from his face, “the Queen would be interested in this little dandy. I was thinking I could make up a small capsule - let’s call it ‘La Bombe Albioni’ - with a glass seal in the middle and a drop of the opposing elixirs in either end. The capsule could then be propelled by aid of a slingshot, the glass shattering on impact and boom, boom, ka-boom. Think what quick work could be made of the Black Fleet.”

“I think not at this moment, doctor,” Lady Gia said. “The Queen has more pressing matters on her mind. Besides, hasn’t Gilly mentioned before that he doesn’t want to get rid of the Black Fleet?”

“But, why ever not? Those pirates are the scourge of the border seas, threatening Albion’s trade routes, plundering our ships... well, at least that’s what the official propaganda says.”

“Which Gilly writes and, yes, they do occasionally do some naughty things, but if it wasn’t for the terrible scourge of the Black Fleet, the Queen might decide to cut back on her navy, and Gilly might be out of a job. Isn’t that true, Gilly?”

“I wish you hadn’t mentioned that,” Lord Fontingroy said and stormed back to the house. He was terribly upset about his rose garden.

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## ACT IV: A PLATE OF PIGS

At dinner that evening, Dr M'Gee was waxing lyrically on the new techniques the ladies of Brittany were employing to manage their pubic hair, when Lady Gia, all hot and rosy cheeked, said suddenly, "Gilly, perhaps you should seek the doctor's assistance on that certain matter you mentioned to me earlier today."

"And so they pluck it nearly all away," Lord Fontingroy asked, squeezing his legs together squeamishly, "leaving only the tiniest of strips?"

"Which they do then dye in all manner of colours, scarlet, plumberry, and even gooseturd, a colour which they claim drives their menfolk wild."

"The matter with the Queen..." Lady Gia said, clearing her throat loudly.

"And in that matter I can be of assistance," Dr M'Gee said quickly.

Lord Fontingroy flashed a look at his wife. "You told him!" he said.

"Well," she said, "you do require assistance."

"Which I can give," the doctor said, stroking his beard. "Now, in order to meet the Queen's request, first we must understand what it is that causes the Tilt. That is, we need to understand the infernal logic of the matter in order to design the necessary intervention. Am I right?"

Fontingroy groaned. "Yes, you are right. But I knew this days ago and none of the learned men of Albion University were able to explain it to me. Too busy they were investigating how many angels could dance upon the head of a pin."

"I thought that one was resolved," Dr M'Gee said. "It is universally agreed, by scholars of Brittany, that the number of angels that can dance upon the head of a pin is zero, zilch, zip. That is, not a single one. They are far too big you see."

"Yes, that's what I thought," Lord Fontingroy cried, thinking, I knew I wasn't that stupid.

“Indeed, you did, a clever young chap such as yourself, of course you would, now where were we?”

“The dynamics of the seasons, precisely what causes the Tilt,” Lady Gia said.

“Oh, yes, yes indeed, what causes the Tilt, or a more fundamental question, how does the world work? To resolve this we will need to tap into the Akashic Records where the knowledge of everything is stored, as it has been and as it will be for evermore. But first we must consult the keepers of the records. Come to my study at Cockcrow. It is the best time for a consultation. Fear not, with the aid of my special assistants, we shall resolve the dilemma the Queen has burdened you with.”

Thus saying, Dr M’Gee rose from his place at the table, swung his starburst cloak about him with a theatrical flourish and bid them adieu.

“He has touched nothing of his pig,” Lord Fontingroy said after the doctor departed. “And he has a study now, here, in our house?”

“I fear the doctor has sworn off meat since his travels in the East last Wintermus,” Lady Gia said, avoiding the question of the study. “He ate only the pumpkin, the spinach and the potatoes. Snow Pea remains as he was roasted.”

“Snow Pea?”

“That’s what you called him, dear, when he was born. I remember you were so clucky with him, caressing his ears, rubbing his leathery little snout. I remember it so well. ‘I shall call this one Snow Pea,’ you said, ‘because he is such a little cutie.’”

“And this one?” Lord Fontingroy asked, pulling his fork from the pig on the plate before him.

“That’s Little Butch,” she said. “Yes, yes, I’m sure it is.”

“Little Butch was my favourite piglet. Snow Pea was my second favourite, of course, but I always thought Little Butch and I had a special bond.”



Lord Fontingroy pushed his plate away. "I shall bury both of them tomorrow."

"And this one too," Lady Gia said, pushing her own roasted piglet to the middle of the table. It had not been touched. She had eaten only the apple that had been roasted in its mouth.

"Which one is this?" Lord Fontingroy asked.

"Buttercup," she said.

"Buttercup," he said. "She used to come and sit in my lap."

"I'll have a word to the cook, shall I?"

Lord Fontingroy nodded and brushed a wayward tear from his eye.

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## **ACT V: THE GATE OE HEAVEN**

The doctor's study, Lady Gia had assured her husband, was nothing more than a disused room in the west wing of the house, a place they never ventured on account it was where all the ghosts of the previous inhabitants were supposed to live. So it was with some trepidation Lord Fontingroy rose at the first crow of the cock and went in search of Dr M'Gee. He had been reluctant to leave his warm cosy bed, but not just because of the ghosts. The night, you see, had been a restless one. Both he and Lady Gia had their sleep tormented by nightmares of tiny angel pigs that flew around the house with stiff little wings, bizarrely using their own flatulence for propulsion. Lady Gia had said, as she attempted to describe her dream, that there was a dazzling flare from the posterior region of a little pig she was sure was Snow Pea, "and then he did shoot off like a shooting star. It was amazing to see him fly so fast."

Now, Lord Fontingroy found Dr M'Gee soundly asleep and untroubled by dreams it seemed. There was a distinct smell of alcohol hovering in a thick cloud over the doctor's head and Lord Fontingroy noticed that several bottles of his best brandy lay dead beneath the bed.

He touched the doctor on the shoulder and he woke with a start. "Ah, Giles, Cockcrow already, eh?"

the doctor said, rolling from the bed and falling straight onto the floor where he found a bottle of brandy that still held a small portion within it. He sniffed at it, then said, "I shall take a hair of the dog that bit me last night."

And so he swigged the last of it, then cried gleefully, "Ah, that's better! Cockcrow it is then, but yet I bet your cock did crow last night."

Lord Fontingroy cleared his throat. "Now about my problem with the Queen..." he said.

"Yes, yes, and now we shall get down to the business which needs to be done. If you could just help me up off the floor... yes, there we go, back on two legs again. What was it the poet once said, 'Two legs good, four legs bad' or some such thing."

Lord Fontingroy knew, of course, that the poet in question had extolled the virtue of four legs over two. But he kept his silence and allowed Dr M'Gee to lead him to small table in the corner of the room. There the doctor whipped away a red velvet cloth to reveal an ugly misshapen crystal orb beneath. It was transparent apart from its centre which seemed to hold within it a deep grey smoke. Now Dr M'Gee seated himself and his hands with his fingers splayed open began to move above the orb, as if he was trying to draw something forth. "Gaze closely, Giles, gaze closely, and see the powers of the heavens reveal themselves."

"Pamini, my dear, dear girl," Dr M'Gee said in a soft voice, "are you there my little angel?"

The grey mist of the orb turned dark and swirled, then within the swirling a bright white light began to appear. Lord Fontingroy was astonished to see the immaculate features of a naked white nymph. "Her breasts are sublime," he said and felt a lump rise to his throat.

"Ssh, she is seraphim," Dr M'Gee said, "of course, she is sublime. It is in her very nature to be that way."

"Yes, of course," Lord Fontingroy said, then asked, "Does she mind me looking?"

"Being a lower order angel her vanity is as great as any human's."

Then a rich beautiful female voice filled the room, resounding and echoing off the walls. "My, your companion is such a handsome devil, doctor."

“And the Queen of Albion and his good lady wife acknowledge this, but this handsome devil, dear Pamini, has a handsome problem that more than matches his good looks.”

“Ah yes, the Queen of Albion has set him a challenge to test her strength as Queen Regina against the natural forces of the world.”

“She knows everything then?” Lord Fontingroy asked, still absorbed in her lithesome beauty. Never had he seen a woman so immaculate, so perfect in every detail. Certainly, he thought, his own dear Lady Gia was renowned as a great beauty, but Pamini was exceptional, beyond anything he could have ever imagined a woman could be, but yet so like every woman as well.

“So much, perhaps,” she said, “but certainly not all. Angel Uriel knows more, and Michael and Gabriel too, but only the Great King in the Sky knows all, which is the way it is and shall ever be. Now I shall do a little dance for you.”

Within the orb, Pamini turned around, displaying a set of delicate gossamer wings and wiggling her perfect white buttocks. Then she bent over and revealed that part of the female anatomy known colloquially among the high-class bordellos of Albion Town as the ‘Gate of Heaven’ or as the ‘Honey Pot’ in the lesser ones.

Lord Fontingroy blushed hot and pink. Dr M’Gee slapped him on the back and yelled at the top of his voice, “You’re in, my good man. Oh yes, you are in!”

In where, Lord Fontingroy wondered, but then cold air rushed through the room as if a sudden tempest was upon them and the legendary Prospero’s chooks had fled their roost.

“What manner of things are now before us?” Lord Fontingroy cried, as hail stones pelted down around him and the air in the room swirled and twisted, and then with a great big whoosh he was drawn into the orb in a twisting tornado that ripped him from his chair and rushed him towards the ‘Gate of Heaven’.

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**ACT VI: A FLAT WORLD FABLE**

Lord Fontingroy found himself flying in a mad rush down a long tunnel accompanied by the sounds of a thumping heartbeat and the fluttering of many tiny wings. At first, all was darkness, then, at the end of the tunnel, a light appeared growing rapidly in fullness and brightness. Yet it was not a light by which to see, for its illumination revealed no details of the place he was in, save, Lord Fontingroy imagined, the walls were a deep rose petal pink.

His body shuddered as he burst through the light and he was forced to close his eyes with the intensity of the pleasure that swept through him.

When he opened his eyes once more, he found himself standing in a beautiful white marble hall of soaring ceilings and many columns. Before him lay a pool of turquoise water and on the other side of it stood Pamini. She was dressed now in a diaphanous gown which, by Albion standards, made only a slim attempt at modest attire. Lord Fontingroy thought poetically that the whiteness of her skin beneath glowed with the phosphorescence of sea creatures swimming in midnight seas.

“This is Uriel’s pool,” Pamini said in a voice that held the music of Autumus and Christamus in it. “He said I could borrow it for a short while. It will show you what you seek. Will you gaze into it?”

But the truth was Lord Fontingroy could not take his eyes away from Pamini. He felt as if he had become frozen in stone and would remain that way for evermore, yet this thought did not frighten him at all, for so happy was he to be locked into that gaze with such beauty before him he did not wish even for an instant to change the moment.

“You find me comely then, you cheeky boy, you handsome devil, but now there is much business to attend to,” and saying this her form began to change. She aged rapidly to an old withered crone, then became a skeleton with rotting worm-eaten flesh, which was not only physically revolting, but smelt much worse than it looked.

So with the spell broken, Lord Fontingroy’s gaze fell into Uriel’s pool. Before him now he saw his world floating in space as if he was a mighty eagle soaring above it. Flat it was and square too, as he knew from the maps his navy used, with each corner of the square a compass point. Within the centre of the world was his beloved Albion, a landmass as round and plump as the Queen herself, but with a corrugated coastline hinting at the wealth of its shipping harbours. Directly to the east was the land mass known as the Continent, its western shore the home of Dr M’Gee’s learned Brittany. Towards the west were the Albion Isles, the home of fishermen and drunken monks. To the north and south was the first of the seven seas, and beyond these the islands and continents of Albion’s empire, stretching all the way to the Edges, which were unfathomable, unknowable save for the Black Fleet that haunted them.

And now, Pamini, tiny as a faery folk, came and sat on Lord Fontingroy’s great eagle shoulder and whispered in his ear. “I shall tell you a tale as we watch the world and, if you listen well, then I promise I

shall dance for you again. The Queen's attention must be diverted from her silly crusade. But do not fear, you shall have the solution you seek."

Then she nipped him playfully on the ear and said, "Now see and watch what we have here. It is your twin moons, Mother Luna rising in the eastern sky followed by her son, Baby Cupid, as they do every Eastermus. But see too, as mother and son ascend, the demon that inhabits the eastern ether, Old Man Satyr, follows them upwards on their journey, lusting after Mother Luna as he has always, since time immemorial. But he is an earth spirit, too heavily anchored to the ground, and in his lust he pulls the world up with him. So the Tilt of Eastermus begins. Ah, but he's an old man. He cannot keep up the chase for too long. He has pulled the whole world with him for a while and now it is the peak of the Tilt! But see, his energy wanes and he is forced to retreat as Mother Luna and Baby Cupid leave the eastern sky and reach their zenith, at which point the world returns to balance and Autumus, the season of good fortune, begins.

"Then mother and son descend through the western sky and pass over the Edge, beneath Wester Point, where there lives another demon, and the chase begins anew. So the Tilt of Wintermus begins, but this old demon, too, soon gives up the chase and the balance returns once more and the love and giving and merry drunkenness of Christamus arrives. Shall we follow Mother Luna and her son to the other side, my handsome eagle? Of course, we shall!"

And with that Lord Fontingroy found himself soaring off, down over the edges of the world into regions unknown. But as above, so below. Here was a world familiar to him, a replicate almost of his own world above, yet even as he thought these thoughts, he realized there was no above and no below - there were merely two sides to the world...

"It is a virgin land, uninhabited by people, yet the nature of it is similar to your own," Pamini said. "Here shall be found gold and jewels in abundance and exotic spices growing wild and ripe for harvesting."

Lord Fontingroy suddenly found himself gazing into Uriel's Pool again, the images, the illusion of flying like an eagle gone. "My god, that was sublime," he said.

"I love that old story so very very much," Pamini said. "Come, I shall do another dance for you now, and you shall understand the solution offered."

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## **ACT VII: PAMINI'S SECOND DANCE**

Lord Fontingroy thought Pamini's second dance was even better than her first. Then as the last cock did crow, he was staring into Dr M'Gee's crystal orb once more. Only a dim light came in through the doctor's windows. As if, Lord Fontingroy thought, only a few minutes had elapsed since he had first arrived and roused the doctor from his bed.

"I had this absolutely amazing vision," he said. "I soared like an eagle."

"I saw it all," Dr M'Gee said, whacking him on the back, "although towards the end the orb did get a little misty."

"You missed the second dance then?" Lord Fontingroy asked, feeling somewhat relieved. If Lady Gia should hear...

"And the solution she offered."

"We'll, after the, um, dance, she showed me other worlds that were round like balloons and footballs; they have no Tilt, you see, but are full of air and weighted down to stop them floating off into space with a huge iron ball in the middle of them."

"Like my pig intestine tyres," Dr M'Gee exclaimed, his hand going to his forehead, "I see it, I see it, yes, yes, yes, I can see it, it's coming to me... don't tell me; I'll have it in a minute."

Lord Fontingroy groaned. "No, dear doctor, it is clear we cannot change the natural order of the world in which we live and are chasing demons if we think we can. Pamini has given me a much safer solution. Think. It is as obvious as the nose on your face. We must change the Queen's mind."

"That sounds altogether too difficult and just a trifle boring," Dr M'Gee said who was already thinking there must be some way his explosive phials and inflatable pig intestines could be put to good use on a massive scale.

Lord Fontingroy chuckled. "No, no, not at all. It is a brilliant and exciting idea. The Queen requires a distraction from the Tilt and think what is it the Queen delights in more than anything else?"

The doctor cocked an eyebrow. “Several bottles of Lisboa port and some handsome male company?”

“No, more than that. Those are merely her dalliances, her indulgences, mere whims like this stupid Tilt idea, things that come into her head when she is unhappy. No, the Queen’s greatest passion is her Empire and the bigger it is the better she feels about herself. All of this Pamini has revealed to me; she is such a clever giglet.”

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## **ACT VIII: VIRGINA REGINA**

And so it was that Lord Fontingroy presented before the Queen once more.

“Your majesty,” he said, with an air of new-found confidence, “I have a grand vision for the expansion of your most noble empire.”

“Sod it!” the Queen said. “I already control all there is to control. You have told me this before. There is nothing more to conquer, nothing more to gain. Have you got rid of the Black Fleet yet and what are you doing about the secret mission you are supposed to be upon?”

“With all due respect Ma’m, I do beg your indulgence... just for one brief moment. When I told you that you controlled all the world before, I was, um, speaking in a metaphorical sense. Presently, you see, you control only half the world, but with my plan...”

The Queen rose from her throne. Her face was scarlet with anger and her brow blackened to a deep royal purple. She could hardly speak, such was her fury. “Half the world,” she stammered, “half the fuckin’ world! You, Lord Herringbone, Commander Fowell, and all those useless others have told me consistently for I don’t know how many bloody years that I control the *whole* world.”

“So we believed, Ma’m,” Lord Fontingroy said, finding some of his confidence slipping away, but then he snapped his fingers. A court retainer rushed to his side and handed him a flat board model of the world which Dr M’Gee had constructed. “Your majesty,” Lord Fontingroy continued quickly, “here, you see, in the middle of the world your beloved Albion and beyond the lands of the Continentals and the heathens, stretching all the way to the Edges. This is your most glorious empire...”

“Yes, yes, get to the point, if you have one!” the Queen roared.

“But,” Lord Fontingroy said, flipping the board over, “here on the other side of the world is your virgin empire, your majesty, just waiting for your seal to be placed upon it.”

The Queen resumed her throne. Some of the dreadful colour had gone from her face. Her voice was gentler now. “Come closer, Giles, you are beginning to intrigue me.”

“So you see,” Lord Fontingroy said, as he crouched next to the Queen and placed the model of the world upon her lap. “You just flip it over like this and, voila, the world has another side.”

The Queen gazed off into the middle distance. Her eyes became all misty. “Another side,” she whispered, “a virgin empire. Oh, yes, I like that, I do indeed. Who would have thought, but of course it must be. Another side to the world! And gold and diamonds and exotic spices, you say. Oh, dear Giles, you are such a clever, clever boy. I shall call it Virginia Regina and I shall make you, you lovely, lovely man, its very first Governor. Here, kiss the Gloriana. Now where’s the port; this calls for a celebration!”

And as he kissed the girasol, so great was the delight of the Queen she put her big fleshy tongue into his ear and swirled it all about.

\* \* \* \*

## **EPILOGUE**

What followed next was a series of extraordinary events the like of which were unknown in the history of the world hitherto that time. History now knows it was the beginning of the modern age, with the development of the Grand Staircase being the momentous event which triggered the Renascence, but back then it was all about taking chances and trusting your luck.

Dr M’Gee, much to his delight, was given the main carriage of the project and he set to work immediately, commencing his blasting in a fallow field on Lord Fontingroy’s estate. After several months, he called for the assistance of a brilliant young Continental engineer by the name of Da Vinci and work began on the construction of the internal staircase that would link the two sides of the world.

Fortunately the world was much thinner than Dr M’Gee had had calculated and, much to the Queen’s



pleasure, the Grand Staircase was completed within twelve months rather than the three years that had been anticipated.

As Governor of the new world, Lord Fontingroy, with the support and practical intelligence of Lady Gia, proved to be a very capable ruler, although he was never able to escape a rather obsessive feeling that he was living life upside down.

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### La Profonde

TERRY DOWLING

Terry Dowling is one of Australia's most awarded, versatile and internationally acclaimed writers of science fiction, fantasy and horror. He is author of nine books, among them the award-winning Tom Rynosseros saga and the critically praised collections *Blackwater Days* and *Basic Black: Tales of Appropriate Fear*, as well as three computer adventures. Terry's stories have appeared in *The Year's Best Science Fiction*, *The Year's Best SF*, *The Year's Best Fantasy*, *The Best New Horror* and many times in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, as well as in anthologies as diverse as *Dreaming Down Under*, *Centaurus*, *Wizards* and *The Dark*.

Holding a doctorate in Creative Writing, he is also editor of *Mortal Fire: Best Australian SF*, *The Essential Ellison* and *The Jack lance Treasury*, and has been genre reviewer for *The Weekend Australian* for the past eighteen years. His homepage can be found at [www.terrydowling.com](http://www.terrydowling.com)

'La Profonde' is the result of Terry's fascination with the landscapes around Perth's suburban railway stations under that unique western light, and his chance discovery of the name for those special pockets in a magician's coat.

\* \* \* \*

T

here was no mistaking how surprised Derwent was when he saw Jay walking along the railway tracks towards him. Jay's one-time business partner was wearing sunglasses, so his eyes were hidden, but his mouth actually fell open. Then, in true Derwent fashion, his surprise and fear turned immediately to anger.

"Fuck, Jay, what is all this?" he shouted. "This 'meet me at the station' stuff?"

Jay just smiled and waved, then waited till he'd reached the end of the otherwise deserted platform, and Derwent was glowering down at him over the safety rail.

"Tell me, Dee" - Jay deliberately used the unwelcome nick-name - "Do you know what a *profonde* is?"

But Derwent wasn't up for any of Jay's smart-ass questions. He was hot and sweating, clearly upset. Though only thirty-seven, two years younger than Jay, red-faced and agitated like this he looked ten years older. One well-timed email had turned Derwent's world upside-down.

Dee, we need to talk. I have documented proof of what you and Cally did to Edilo Ltd. Take the 12:55 to Morley Station on Sunday for a 1:30 pm meeting. You won't tell the others and you will come alone. This is your one chance.

Jay couldn't see Derwent's eyes, but he could easily picture the determination he'd find in them amid the rage and desperation. Dee had been threatened with having his scam exposed, the dangerous emails he'd thought he'd purged from the office systems while he and Cally were plundering Edilo in true insider fashion. Three years of enjoying the spoils; now this summons to a deserted suburban railway station on a hot Sunday afternoon. He'd had enough.

Jay hauled himself up onto the platform. Morley Station was almost as new as the housing estates going up all about them beyond the cutting, just a stretch of hot concrete between two sets of tracks, with nothing more than a modest double-sided passenger shelter, two lamp-posts with signs attached saying *Morley*, and a set of iron steps at one end leading up to a deserted bus-stop and a car-park, both as deserted as the station at this time of day. "A *profonde*, Derwent? Ever hear of one?"

But for Derwent there was only one issue. His sunglasses might be hiding his eyes but his other features showed the full extent of his emotion. "Three fucking years, Jay. What do you want?" Not, Jay noticed, how the hell did you find out?

Jay grinned and gestured down the platform to where the rails stretched off in the afternoon glare. "I want you to take a walk with me, Dee, that's all."

“Christine and the kids know where I am, Jay.”

Jay doubted that, and ultimately it didn't matter. “So what's the harm in taking a walk so we can talk about this?”

“Talk about it here. What do you want?” It was the old Derwent, the pre-scam Derwent showing through, but it truly was a mere shadowplay of how Dee had been three years before, a bravura display from a broken puppet.

Jay squinted in the glare. He glanced up and down the quiet platform in its lonely cutting. No sunglasses for him. Never. He listened to the hot breeze pushing through the grass on the embankments, then glanced at this watch. “Derwent, I'm going to start walking north along the tracks now. If you've got any sense, any interest in saving your fat ass, you'll take that walk with me. It's up to you, buddy.”

And, true to his word, Jay turned and began heading along the platform.

Derwent swore, called after him, shouted abuse, even the beginnings of threats - just the beginnings - but Jay kept walking. When he reached the end of the concrete deck he crouched and jumped down onto the rail-bed, then began moving north along the tracks.

There were more angry shouts from the platform behind him, but Jay didn't stop. He kept walking, smiling into the day, relishing the warm breeze on his face and the realization that this could indeed be done exactly as he had planned it.

Back at that hot quiet station Derwent would be running through his options, railing at the universe, at the insufferable turn of events. Sooner rather than later, he would accept that there was nothing else he could do but follow. He'd been caught out. He could only try to survive this. Maybe he'd blame Cally, say that *she* had persuaded *him*. That was likely.

Finally Jay heard, “Well hold on then!” But, of course, Jay didn't slow his pace. Couldn't. He'd checked his watch and it truly could remain a matter of timing. Let Derwent shed some of those happy fat-cat pounds he'd been putting on during the past three years.

It was easy to tell when Dee was gaining by the laboured breathing getting nearer, the growing thud of footsteps out of time with Jay's own. It was like someone imitating an old-style steam locomotive, exactly

that.

Then Derwent was there, staggering, straining, hauling in big ragged breaths. When he could get words out, they were the expected things.

“Wasn’t personal - Jay. Never - personal. Un’erstan’?” It seemed like all he could manage.

“Glad to hear it, Dee.” Jay didn’t look at him, just kept watching the way ahead, reading every detail of the route between the two sets of tracks. “But how exactly do you mean that? Never personal?”

Derwent stumbled along, still trying to catch his breath but probably exaggerating that, giving himself time to gather his thoughts and, hardest of all, hold back his anger. Would he blame Cally, take the easy out and blame it all on her? Difficulties for him later, certainly, but a solution now.

Jay savoured the breeze on his brow and wondered what line the other man would take. However it went, Derwent would be sensing there was hope, would believe he knew exactly how he had to play this. Maybe he’d be thinking he really could reach some private settlement here, buy himself out of trouble.

Derwent finally answered. “You were just someone, okay?” More ragged breathing. “Could’ve been anyone.” Another pause, laboured. He truly did seem to be judging every word. “You un’erstand? It was just - the situation. An opportunity. It’s not like we ever - signed on to get *you*.” Derwent emphasized the last word.

Finally Jay did look across at the man trudging with him between the two sets of tracks. “Who’s we?”

“Aw, hell, Jay. What does it matter? It was just something that came along, you know? Never thought about it too much.”

“Enough to get away with it for a while. Ruin the company. I trusted you.”

“Yeah, well, some of us aren’t as trusting as you, okay? We don’t light up as bright. We try, but it doesn’t always happen. You made it easy.”

“There was Cally. Who else?”

“Hell, Jay. It’s been three years! Why this now?”

“Brian had to be in on it. Those emails make that pretty clear. And Mark, doing the accounts. You needed him. Barbara, Ashley and Hiro were mentioned.”

“Christine knows where I am, Jay.”

“I grew up on a railway line, did you know that, Dee?”

“How the hell would I know that?” Derwent said, thrown by the change of subject and forgetting for a moment how this had to be played.

“That was out in Leederville. As kids, friends and I would walk the tracks between Leederville and Quinton, just exploring, you know. Always loved what you found along railway lines.”

“Is that right?”

“Nothing forces patterns on a landscape more than a railway. All those lines and curves. No barriers. Hills cut away, fields divided. Rivers hardly stand a chance. It’s all so precise, so artificial. Then it changes. It doesn’t stay like that. It’s almost as if the intrusion is resented, worn away.”

“Resented? That’s a bit much.”

“Not at all. It’s the elevator effect. People get in an elevator. It’s really just a little room that moves up and down over a tremendous drop and takes them to where they’re going. Most people don’t think of using an elevator in terms of shafts and counterweights and terrible drops. It’s just a room that moves and does a job. Same with railways. People notice the trains, sure, maybe the tracks while a train is on them, but what about when a train isn’t passing? The tracks are overlooked, forgotten. All that precision, that regimentation gets blurred, roughed up. Pretty soon those railside corridors become wilderness, bits of a rogue landscape. People looking out train windows always look *beyond* the corridor, have you noticed?”

“No, I haven’t. Listen, Jay, this is interesting but I don’t see what it has to do with our situation.”

“Love that word, Dee. Situation. Tidies it up so nicely, don’t you think? That’s why names are so important. Finding the right handles.”

“What can we do about this, Jay?”

“One thing at a time. You never answered my question.”

“What question?”

“When we first met back at the station. First thing I said.”

“A question? What question? Hey, look, Jay, I’ve had a lot on my mind. You really can’t expect -”

“I would’ve been in your thoughts though. You would have been very much aware of me. You wouldn’t have given me a thought in years, but when my email arrived the other day, ever since Thursday, I would’ve been in your thoughts surely.”

“Well, yeah, but - I mean, I was pretty mad. Worried and all. You have to allow that -”

“You were right, what you said before about destroying Edilo. It really wasn’t personal, was it?”

“That’s right. That’s right, Jay! It just happened.”

“No, I mean in the sense that I never got to *be* a person to you with a life and interests, plans and hopes. Never got on your radar.”

“Well, you were the boss. Always so earnest, you know? So remote. It just never -”

“Right. But if I’d been a *person* enough, mattered more, you wouldn’t have pulled something like that. You’d have picked somebody else. If you’d liked me at all, thought I was *worth* liking, worth respecting at least, you wouldn’t have used me like a mark and taken advantage.”

Derwent's eyes were hidden by his sunglasses, but the way he suddenly went quiet, suddenly became fixed in his gaze while walking, let Jay know that there would be a very different look in them now.

Jay smiled and glanced at his watch again. It was 1:42 and here it was at last: the *You're a wacko!* look tucked away behind black Raybans.

"Where are we going, Jay?"

"Just to the next station. You ever take this line?"

"You kidding? I'm a city boy. I never get out this far."

"Right. Well, Greenwood's just another little station like Morley back there. Brand new. They all are once you get past Belmont. Just a platform, a shelter, some steps up to a bus-stop for a feeder bus line that doesn't seem to be operating yet, not much else. Not much of a train service on a Sunday out here, not yet anyway. What's that term they use a lot nowadays: abandoned in place?"

Derwent nodded and uh-huh'd. He'd adjusted again, had worked out a new strategy, all predictable really. "You did this as a kid?" His tone was pitched to invite sharing.

"It's where we played a lot. I still love walking the tracks."

Derwent knew his cue. "We never knew stuff like that, Jay. That you had a thing for trains -"

"Not so much the trains, Dee. More the landscape you find around railway lines, the narrow strip of land they run through. Even out here where it's not too built up yet you get the same no-man's-land corridor you find in cities and the inner suburbs. The moment a line is opened up, there they are: the same lines of fences and plantings, the same cuttings, power poles, the chain-link barriers and supply sheds. Look at all this! Grass, bushes, mounds of soil. Rails and sleepers for repair work, future track development. Today I've seen an old tanker bogey left on a spur not even joined to the main track. Not even joined! Then half a dozen cattle trucks, just left out here. Go figure. That's all part of it."

Derwent didn't miss a beat. "So how far have you walked today, Jay?"

Jay knew exactly how far to the precise mile and yard, the exact metre, but he pretended to think. "Let's see. I drove out early and parked at Silverton, then caught the 9:40 back to Belmont. Now I'm walking back to the car. That's five stations so far. One more to go: Greenwood, then it's Silverton again."

"I caught the train out like you said. I'll need to get back."

Jay nodded. "I can give you a lift. I can drop you off once we settle this."

That clearly made Derwent feel better. "And just how do we settle this? Like I said. Jay. It wasn't personal. I can pay you back something if -"

"It can't be about money now, Dee," Jay said, and looked at his watch again. There was a double coming up, he was sure of it.

"Hey, you're counting!" Derwent said. He'd only just noticed.

"I am," Jay answered. "Ten more paces and I'll show you something really interesting. Here we go: six, seven, eight, nine, ten. Look over there now! Where that stanchion meets the embankment. Near that pile of earth."

"What? What am I looking at?"

"You don't see it?"

"See what?"

"To the left of the stanchion. That shimmer of light on the soil. See the light near the top? It's a hot-spot. Unfinished, but what's called a double."

"Jay, it's a hot day. Of course there's going to be heat shimmer."



“Not this. This is different. It’s a double.”

Derwent would have that look in his eyes again. “Okay. Then it must be something *you* can see.”

“Guess so.”

“Walking those tracks back then, you probably learned to notice lots of things other people don’t.”

“Quite likely.” Jay almost made it sound sad the way he said it.

Derwent reacted to the tone. He had to be figuring that every step took them closer to Greenwood.  
“What about the other kids you played with back then? Did any of them see these - these doubles?”

“Sometimes. Not often. Jenny Attard did for a while. Jeff Callan did a few times, but we disagreed over details. We both wanted to name them, but we always disagreed over the names.”

“Are there that many?” Derwent seemed genuinely interested, though doubtless he figured this was the best way to play it. Either way, they were on the same page of the script.

“You’d be surprised. You see them more easily as kids. If you work at it, you keep the skill.”

“Does this other kid - Jeff? - does he still have the skill?”

“Can’t say. Haven’t seen Jeff since we were kids. Guess you lose it if you don’t keep at it. I put in a lot of time. Only stands to reason that I’ve kept the knack.”

Derwent didn’t overdo it, didn’t say something like: “There’s more to you than we ever knew, Jay”, or “If only we’d known...” He kept it simple, kept the focus on more immediate things.

“That was a double back there, you said. Okay, tell me some other names.”

“I’ll point them out as we come to them. There’s a clearback up on the embankment, but it’s very faint and the grass is hiding it.”

Derwent looked to where Jay was pointing, even removed his sunglasses to squint through the heat. “A clearback. Okay. Can’t see anything.” He replaced his Raybans.

“You won’t. I barely can. Clearbacks are common, but they come and go. There should be another one soon.”

“Is there a particular one I’ll be able to see, do you think?”

“That’s what I’m hoping to show you before we reach Greenwood. *If* it’s there. Sometimes they come and go. That’s why I’m counting. This one’s called a *profonde* and it’s a bit of a test really. If you can see it and describe it to me, I’ll forget the whole Edilo business.”

“But, Jay, you said it yourself. Most people don’t have the skill.”

“Turn back any time you like, Dee. No-one’s forcing you. I tell you when we’re near a *profonde*. You try to see it and describe it to me. That’s the deal.”

Derwent stopped walking, put his hands on his hips. “I have to describe something that no-one else can see but you! That I only have your word exists in the first place! You’re crazy!”

Jay didn’t stop. “You should be able to manage it. It’s one of the more noticeable ones.”

Derwent started walking again. “Oh, fine, Jay! Just one of the more noticeable among invisible things! Great!”

“Greenwood is about ten minutes around that next bend. You’ll just have to master the skill. If it’s any help, there’s a rather special *servante* over there to the left of that bush. Nowhere near as common. There’s a prime *antesammis* near that fence there.”

“You know, I was just going to say that, Jay. Yessir. That’s a prime antipasto over there, whatever!”

Jay ignored the barb, just breathed in the smells of hot steel tracks, the dry grass and the heated eucalypts beyond the embankments. “There’s usually at least one *profonde* before we reach Greenwood.”

“And you reckon I’ll see it.”

“If you take off those sunglasses you might.”

Derwent did so, putting them in his shirt pocket. He squinted in the glare again. “Fine. Just say when.”

They walked without speaking for a while, following the lines as they began to curve through another cutting. The breeze followed them. Dry grass rustled on the embankments.

The quiet was too much for Derwent. “So we’re just walking through these things right now?” he said.

“Not right here,” Jay told him. “But the one we want is very close. It’s usually - No, there it is! Get ready, Dee. It’s not even fifteen yards away, exactly in front of us. Describe what you see!”

“What I see! I can’t see anything!”

“We’re heading right for it. Ten yards now, right in front. Try looking from the side. Turn your head a little.”

Derwent did so. “Is it still there?”

“Right there. Two yards now. Opening and closing along its seeking edge. It’s got quite a rhythm going.” Jay steadied himself on the stones underfoot.

“I can’t see anything, Jay. What’s it like exactly? How big is it?”

“Both big *and* small. That’s why it’s called that. A *profonde* is a word that conjurers use.”

“Conjurers? Do they?” Derwent was peering into the emptiness ahead.

“It’s what magicians call the long pockets in the tails of their coats. The ones they use for making things disappear.”

“Okay, so how -”

It was all he managed because Jay had pushed him hard from behind. There was a single yell, more like a squawk that ended almost as it began, and it was done. There was just the heat shimmer above the tracks, the sound of the breeze rushing in the dry grass.

Jay glanced at his watch, then stepped around the hot-spot in case it was still active, and continued walking. Another hundred yards and he rounded the final curve of the tracks and saw the small Greenwood platform in the bright afternoon light. And there was Cally, exactly on time.

Jay quickened his pace and was soon looking up at the last person on his list.

“Hey, Cally,” he called, pleasantly enough. “Do you know what an *oubliette* is?”

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\* \* \* \*

### **The Dying Light**

DEBORAH BIANCOTTI

Deborah Biancotti’s first published story won the Aurealis Award for Best Horror Short. She’s also a Ditmar Award-winner and a previous attendee in both the *Year’s Best Australian SF & Fantasy* and *Australian Dark Fantasy & Horror*. Her work has appeared in *Eidolon 1*, *Ideomancer*, *Orb*,

*Borderlands, Shadowed Realms, infinity plus*, and publications from Ticonderoga and Agog! Deborah lives and works in Sydney. She can be found online at <http://deborahbiancotti.net> and <http://deborahb.livejournal.com>.

“I’ve been looking for a new mythology of mortality. I didn’t know that then, though. All I knew was that there was a blind man pointing at the stars and a young girl beside him. Both were looking for something. I started to wonder about the different kinds of blindness and, in particular, the idea of willing blindness. It’s something I’m still exploring, in other stories.”

\* \* \* \*

A

nu fell, twisted his ankle, fell again and kept falling. He rolled, grabbed at the ground and came away with handfuls of dirt. The mountain known as Old Man was steepest here. His face slammed against rocks and he swallowed gravel trying to scream. Earth and sky were both black and impossible to keep apart in his mind.

His ankle snagged a sapling and he roared, spinning so that he fell head-first over a precipice into deeper night. One hand shot out for the sapling and found it in the dark, gripped it hard so that he swung in space.

The grit in his mouth tasted of blood. He tried to spit it out, dribbling it onto his chin instead. Carefully he took a breath, afraid the air in his lungs would make him too heavy for the sapling. His heart beat in his ears, and his face was hot and numb though the air on his bare skin was cold. His arms had hollowed out from shoulder to fingertip and his fingers had grown fat. Too fat, he was sure, to hold on.

His mother would be angry. She would say he was careless, that just because he hadn’t found the story of his dying in the stars yet, still it didn’t mean his dying couldn’t find him. She would call him foolhardy.

“Until you have the foretelling,” she would say, “and can see what is held for you by the constellations above your foolish head, you should be careful.”

What would she know? Anu had grown old enough for doubts but not for certainties. Just old enough to distrust his mother’s advice. Not old enough, so he’d thought, for death.

“Help me! Please. *Please.*”

He was crying, and embarrassed by it. The emptiness in his limbs had been replaced by an ache. Above him, the constellation known as the Sickie gleamed, its five points as familiar to him as his own skin. He counted its stars over and over, trying to ignore the trembling in his elbows, trying to hold on until help arrived.

“Onetwothreefourfive, onetwo...”

Something had changed. There was a sixth star now, its light strengthening as he watched. And then he realized something. His entire life, he’d been looking at the Sickie wrong, because surely that sixth star told a different story. He knew what it was. He knew what he had found.

The foretelling.

This was it, this was the thing he’d searched for before he’d even known to search. Everything in the sky and under it began to make a new sense.

The Sickie blurred and danced and between it and him appeared the face of the Messenger. Just like his mother had promised. He almost laughed in recognition. He let this new knowledge fill him up and it was like he took those stars and put them inside himself and he was warm. He was whole. He had found it. He had found his dying.

He let go of the branch and fell.

*Do you think that Father’s really blind?*

*I heard he went blind from grief.*

*I heard he’s faking.*

\* \* \* \*

“Today in class, Nisi found her dying at last. Everyone was pleased for her because her foretelling showed that she would have a long life. Time enough for children and for grandchildren, they said. Maybe even great-grandchildren.”

“Her family must be pleased.” The old man beat out a soft rhythm on the ground with his palm, his sightless eyes fixed on the empty air.

They sat in the shade of an outcrop in front of a cave, on the side of the Old Man. He was sprawled so his feet alone were in the sun, and now and then he’d rub his toes against each other, or along his insteps. He was bare except for a cloth wrapped around the tops of his legs. The girl was bare too, since she was young, and she sat beside his knee with her legs drawn up beneath her, careful not to touch him.

“Yes, everyone is happy,” she said. “Nisi says it makes her very marriageable.”

The old man laughed deep in his throat. He rubbed brown dirt across his shinbone and nodded, his toothless smile swinging this way and that.

“Very marriageable, yes. Nisi must be eight now, yes? Time enough for marriage and children, I should think.”

His cackle turned to silence and after a while Shobe asked, “Did you ever find your dying, Father?”

He wasn’t her father, but the term was one of respect and he nodded acceptance. Shobe edged closer in return, and looked to where his fingers folded over one knee. Father was very old, and his skin was soft and thin. Even his hands were soft. Blindness had saved him from hard work. The rest of the tribe didn’t particularly resent him for that, but nor did they love him, and perhaps it was this that had driven him to move to the far side of the mountain and out of their sight.

“Never did, no, never saw it. Not even when I had eyes that worked. But,” he sighed, scratched at his neck, leaving ochre streaks, “I was young when I was blinded. Same sickness that took my sight took my mother’s life, did you know? They say when she saw her dying at last - because she was very old, and already with another child in her womb - that she went to the valley and wept tears enough for a lake, and her tears were pure, not made of salt. That valley is where Lake Begoan sits now.” He nodded, his head loose on his neck. “Imagine their surprise, when they went to look for her and found an entire lake! Now the lake has fish. Animals come to drink. Her grief feeds the whole tribe.”

Shobe hesitated. This story opened many questions in her mind, but she was careful not to irritate the Father, so she tried to ask just one.

“Do you remember what it’s like? I mean, to see? To see anything; not just your death, but anything. Do you...”

Her voice dried up. She wanted to ask if he remembered colours and trees and whether he knew the kinds of animals that came to the lake. She wanted to know whether he understood any of these things himself, or whether all his knowledge had become only words given him by others. She imagined him asking ‘what is a devil?’ and someone explaining it, describing the thick neck and heavy teeth, and describing the colour grey. Recounting how it would slurp water under its whiskers. She wondered how the devil would look when the storyteller was done, whether it held together in the Father’s mind. Or whether there would always be gaps when he thought about a devil, like gaps between symbols marked on the walls of a cave, the devil no weightier than the marking that meant it.

But she resisted asking, because this Father was called Frail, and his bones were thin like reeds beneath skin that sagged and hung loose. His belly protruded like a fat thumb, and his chest, almost concave, rested on top.

His hands lay at his groin like abandoned cups now, the skin partly translucent as if he were made of muddy water. She almost wanted to check his neck for a pulse, but couldn’t bring herself to touch him. She feared the coolness of his skin and the sourness of his old man’s breath. He stirred then, straightening his back and sighing.

“I remember...” he began, as if no time had passed at all. “I remember the moon and my mother. I remember someone - her, perhaps - teaching me the constellations that lie in the darkness over our heads.” He raised his hand and made the shape of an arrow with his fingers, pointing to the sky. “She taught me the Sickle and the Horned Bull. She taught me winged Oberon and the Nascent Triplets, their hands reaching across the horizon. She tried to help me find my foretelling, but I never saw my dying, not once. It wasn’t my time, and then the virus caught me up. No one could see that coming for me. My mother saw her dying and she understood how the loss of a mother would affect a child. In the end, I’m not sure which loss she felt worse, hers or mine.”

His hand fell back to the ground, slack skin by his armpit trembling. “I kept my blindness from her. I was young, but already I knew that without the use of my eyes I could never follow the lessons. Still she asked whether I’d found my foretelling. And because she wanted that so much, I told her yes, I’d seen my dying. She asked me to tell her the story of it and I lied and said I would have a long life. Or, I thought I lied. In the end it has turned out to be true.”

Shobe was still, because it seemed there was more to be told.

“In the mind’s eye she is no more than a shadow,” he said. “But bright like light. I try to catch her face and there is only white. Like the moon.”



Shobe watched the afternoon light stretch the shadows of Father's feet. Soon it was evening. Father couldn't see the world with his eyes, but he must have sensed it with his skin. When the time was right he said, "Off you go to class," and she went.

*I guess the telling helps.*

*I guess. Maybe it helps you feel like you own it.*

*Why would you want to own it?*

\* \* \* \*

Nisi was there, and Teka, Gef, all the others. Mama Teacher had already started the lesson and didn't acknowledge Shobe's tardiness, not with a glance or a movement. She did the same when Fe arrived even later. Fe made a point of going to the front and sitting at Mama's feet, staring up at her, almost daring Mama to say something. Fe's long hair (nut brown by daylight, but now dark like deep waters) hung to her waist, and when she bent herself almost into a ball her hair brushed the ground.

Shobe sat at the back. She was restless, like always, and couldn't focus on the lessons.

"Now," said Mama Teacher. "There are two ways to eat. The found way, like ours: what is hunted, what is discovered on land, in water or air, that is ours to eat. But there is also the made way: what is grown and kept and built and counted. Those that follow this way say it is earned or owned."

"Kept on purpose?" asked Gef.

Mama nodded. She was sitting in what they called the beehive, though it had never held bees. It was a dirty brown bubble big enough for half a dozen grown-ups to climb inside. It had twin holes like staring eyes, and Mama was sitting in the one on the right, her feet dangling just above the ground. The eyes went all the way through the beehive and out the other side, and inside were soft, rotten shapes that looked almost a little human. Mama called these 'seats', but she didn't sit on them because sharp coils stood out like twisted teeth.

"But how can both those ways be equal?" Nisi asked. She leant back on her hands and stuck her feet out in front of her, crossing her ankles and rolling them from side to side. She tossed her hair off her shoulders - though it was nowhere near as beautiful as Fe's - and smiled conspiratorially around her, meeting the gaze of no one in particular. She at once commanded attention and despised it.

Yesterday, Nisi had been merely vain. But now she'd found her foretelling, she was also smug. Shobe wrapped her arms around her knees and hid her sneer behind her legs. She felt bad for her negative thoughts, but also right. She tried to tell herself that Nisi deserved to know her story, that perhaps she'd been studying the stars for hours every night, but she didn't believe it. Nisi wasn't patient and meditative the way the children were schooled to be when searching the constellations. The foretelling had come to her unearned.

"Why must they be equal?" Mama asked.

This was her way of teaching, this questioning and reflecting. It was said that when Mama Teacher was little, her parents had called her a nag. She had found her place, though. Surely everyone did eventually.

Nisi had shrugged as if the question were beneath her and trained her gaze on her toes, ignoring Mama.

Fe said, "Because both are ownership. Finding and making."

Mama Teacher nodded thoughtfully. "Perhaps, yes," she said, still not looking at Fe. "Our way is to exist side by side with things. The plant or animal gives what it is able, and so we have. We take what is available. The animal or plant is not beneath us." (Here Shobe noticed a meaningful glance at Nisi.) "But to some people and in some ages, things had to bend to your will. They had to be controllable. A thing was *made* to give. That is what ownership meant. In some ages, even people could be owned."

"By who?" This from Gef.

"Other people."

Mama Teacher didn't correct him and tell him to say 'by whom', but Shobe was sure she thought it, just as Shobe herself did. Gef would learn in time, if he listened hard enough to what others said, and no doubt Mama Teacher trusted this tradition of learning to correct him on such a minor point.

Still, Shobe was pleased she knew better. At the same time, she wondered what worlds of knowledge were still out there for her, what she didn't know and hadn't thought to guess. Sometimes this way of learning frightened her for all it must be leaving out. It made her afraid to open her mouth, in case others found what she didn't yet hold in her mind.

“Why would people want to own people?” Gef again. In the moonlight his skin was oil-blue and he sat on ground only a little darker than himself. He had a body wrap that went from his neck to the tops of his thighs and seemed almost fluid. Only the outline of his arm beside his waist gave him shape.

Fe turned to Gef and said, “So you can make other people do your work, so you can rest and they can bring you food as if you were a baby and they were your mother.”

“Very good, Fe,” Mama Teacher said, and smiled, the blue-whites of her eyes squeezing up.

Shobe couldn't see Fe's face, but no doubt she smiled, too, at this blessing from Mama.

Teka, who was the youngest though not the smallest, said then, “The days and nights when they owned people, were they the same as the age of machinery?”

“They overlap, yes, and perhaps one fed the other,” said Mama. “Once the idea of owning machinery was born, perhaps they concluded plants, animals and also people could be owned. Or perhaps it was their attempts at owning people that made them build machinery.”

“Perhaps people can't be owned very well, and so machines were made because they could be better owned,” Gef offered.

“Machines would be more compliant,” Nisi said.

The others looked about in confusion, and waited for Mama to add to this.

“Yes, machines were probably more compliant than people. If machines worked now, perhaps we would know this, but as we see...”

Here, Mama gestured around her at the beehive.

“The car,” said Teka.

“Good, the car. It’s said it moved, though it has no legs with which to do so. See?” Mama leaned forward and looked between her feet, brushing the long grass aside so the children could see there were indeed no legs.

Under the eyes of the car were two long shapes, hard, like pared branches. The branches were dark red-brown in the daylight, and left flakes and smears of colour on the children’s hands if they touched them. They rested on square piles of sand-coloured blocks, which crumbled and left no colour. They had discussed the possibilities of the car many times, and none had come up with an answer as to how the car could move on those branches and blocks. Perhaps one day someone would be born with sight enough to discover the secrets of the car.

Shobe leant back and rested on her straight arms. She looked up at the stars, at their blinking, shrugging indifference, and wanted, almost, to plead with them to show her what kind of dying to expect so she could begin to prepare herself. It was said by some that when the stars told stories it was like music, sweet sounds like streams made of amber, and some stars had voices like birds, except richer. Shobe wasn’t sure she believed these stories, though Nisi tried to make out that she’d heard every one herself. For Shobe, as always, the stars were silent.

Teka broke the quiet when she said, “What’s ‘compliant’?”

*What do you see?*

*Nothing. Darkness.*

*Darkness isn’t nothing.*

\* \* \* \*

The discussion wound through many subjects that night. Mama told them about agriculture, and how it was possible to own water. (Though how could you control water? Shobe couldn’t understand that; water would go where it wanted.) She talked about art that was made and kept and some people said what could be art and what couldn’t, and where it could be kept and who could keep it. Shobe grew bored of such fanciful stuff and anyway, why was it important? What did those ages have to do with anything now? When finally Mama called for quiet time a few hours before dawn, all the children were grateful to lie back and study the constellations. Shobe focussed on Wind Caller, which seemed to hang over just her, accusing her with its long pointed beak. She glared back, almost daring it to come down and take her. Frail Father had told her one day a particular constellation might call to her, and that it might be this very one that would eventually reveal the secrets of her dying, but the sky was so busy with constellations that all any of it did was confuse her.

Closer to dawn, Mama said, “Perhaps we have time for one story. Who would like to tell?”

Nisi was cross-legged and leaning forward, but when Mama finished speaking, she straightened up with a sly smile and said, “I could tell you about the night I found my dying.”

Some of Shobe’s classmates rolled their eyes, the whites flashing like falling stars. Mama laughed. They were all good-humoured though, and Shobe had to hide her face so they wouldn’t see the scowl there.

“Nisi,” said Mama. “That was only yesterday. Are you sure it is a story worth telling already?”

But Nisi nodded and got to her knees. “It is a story now, and my mother says it will be a better story with each telling.”

Mama Teacher grinned and nodded. “She’s very smart, your mother. Perhaps it is never too soon to tell your story.”

“It would be better with fire,” said Teka.

“Next time, when we have a fire, Nisi will tell it then, too, and it will be better,” Mama agreed. “But tonight we will also listen to the story as it is. Begin when you’re ready, Nisi.”

Nisi cleared her throat, the way a real grown-up might, and began.

*They say knowing your death means you can quit worrying*

*and settle into having a good life.*

*But what if it’s not a good death?*

\* \* \* \*

## **NISI’S STORY**

It was a day and a night like any other. My mother, Mama Home, had been gathering corn and wildseeds. We were coming along the track that goes to and from the river and, as we came along the top of the mountain, I saw Frail Father's feet sticking out into the sun. His feet are darker than the rest of him, so I always know it's him when I see his dark feet and his paler legs. And also he is the only one to ever sit there, of course.

Seeing Frail Father, so old, always makes me wonder at his dying. So I asked Mama to tell the story of the first time she'd found her dying. So she told me again, though I've heard it many times. And though I was behind her and the wind whipped away some of her words and left gaps in her telling, I knew the story well enough that I could fit the gaps with words from my own memory.

She said it was a day and night like any other for her, too, and she was a young woman, older than me, when she first saw it. She looked to the constellation of Small Bears like she did each night, and there it was: a new star between the paws of the third and fifth bears, paler than all the rest. And above the ears of the fourth bear was a star that had been there forever, but had always seemed wrong. Like it was lost. Suddenly it made sense.

Mama Home said, "I realized why it had felt wrong, why I had wanted to erase it from the sky for messing up the Small Bears. It was because that pattern was my dying, and it told me my death would be painful and long. I didn't like the message. Perhaps that's why it took so many years to see it."

Mama Home cautioned me that I may take a long time to find my own dying, too, and that I mustn't fret that the constellations were not always compliant.

"Is it better not to know, Mama?" I asked her.

"No, it is always better to know, because then you don't waste time trying to find out. You don't bother trying to rush your death, or to avoid it. You're able to move towards acceptance. It's just that sometimes knowing isn't good, either, and acceptance is difficult."

I asked if her death was at least a long way off, and though she always said yes, this time the wind pulled her answer away from me, and I saw her how her head towards the wildseeds in her hands. Her shoulders slumped and I didn't ask again.

That very night we had fresh water and corn cooked on coals in the ground and while we ate I looked up at the Silver Gryphon and saw it. I understood that pattern was just for me and I had found my story at last, as it appears in the stars. It was my foretelling. It said my death was many, many years away and it was a good death and perhaps it was so far away that my children and children's children would live long

enough to see it.

I rushed to tell my parents. Papa Home was pleased for me and told me I could choose any husband I wanted with a story like that, it was such a happy future. Mama hugged me and when she thought I wasn't looking, she wiped away tears.

My home parents are very happy to be bonded, though I wonder sometimes what it took for my father to choose my mother when her death is known to be such a difficult one.

*So, when you're older, do you become more afraid of death, or less?*

\* \* \* \*

"Did you see the Messenger?" Teka asked.

"Stupid," said Gef. "You only see the Messenger when you're really dying."

Mama Teacher broke in, "Thank-you, Nisi. That is an accomplished story."

"Mama," said Fe. "Has anyone ever lied about their death?"

"Of course some have tried. One, Falla, tried to conceal her early death and choose a man with a good foretelling, but in the end her guilt drove her to grief and she drowned herself in Lake Begoan rather than face him again."

"Did she see her drowning in the stars? Why couldn't she avoid it?"

"Avoidance won't take it away," Mama said quietly. "When she was ready, Falla followed her constellation to the lake. No one thought to go after her, because they believed her death was a long way off. It was only when she didn't return that night they realized her falsity and they were very angry she'd lied."

The children were quiet.

“So you see,” said Mama. “No matter what choices you make or what plans you think you can control, there is one story in the sky for each of us. It is why we use the found way. Because we accept we can’t control what’s most important in life. We can’t control our dying.”

Shobe pressed her lips together and rocked on her heels, avoiding Mama’s eye. She hated this passivity. She wanted to know why nobody raged against their deaths, why they didn’t fight and scream out at the inevitability, hanging like a precipice in front of each one of them. But she said nothing. Once before she’d asked Mama Teacher these questions, but Mama had merely replied that it was only those who had not yet found their dying who could feel such fear and make such arguments.

“Once recognition is reached, acceptance is the only possible course,” Mama had said then. Just like she was saying now. “It is the found way.”

Nisi was asking, “What do you think will happen to Father Frail?”

Mama paused. Nobody had said it out loud, but Shobe knew they were all wondering if, being sightless, somehow he would avoid death altogether. He had lived a long time, longer than anyone else in the tribe. Perhaps it was possible that he would go on living, forgotten by the stars, his death lying unseen and unused somewhere in the sky.

“Some say,” Mama began carefully, “that the real story of dying lies not in the constellations, but in our selves, and it is just that the stars release this inner sight. If this is the case, then perhaps Father Frail knows more than we realize.”

Some of the children sniggered at this, since many people believed that if Father Frail was a burden, he must also be a fool. Mama cut them off, saying, “If you can’t see the purpose in another, it may be because you lack purpose yourself. Each of us has the power to help others. But I think that’s a story for another time. Good night, children.”

Shobe ran from the class back towards the mountain. On the way, she realized what it was that had been nagging at her during the entire lesson.

Anu.



He hadn't been in class for two nights.

*Why lies' Everyone will know eventually. There is nothing more honest than death.*

*Desperation. Arrogance, maybe.*

*Don't those words both mean 'fear'?*

\* \* \* \*

The next day, Frail Father was in his place, his toes curled around each other in the sun. He seemed to be staring out at where the boys were playing catch at the foot of the mountain, but of course he couldn't see that far, and it was only because Shobe's eyesight was so young that she could make out the children with any level of detail. She looked back at the father and wondered what went on behind the grey-whites of his eyes.

He turned at the sound of her light steps on the path.

"Did your mother give you any food to bring?" he asked.

Shobe shook her head. "Sorry."

"Ah, it's you. Never mind," his eyes crinkled good-naturedly, but Shobe was ashamed. It was true, she never brought anything with her.

She took a seat silently at his knees and watched the children's game. Some of the girls had joined in now, and they were all intent on throwing a small, white object to each other. From this distance it was difficult to make out what the object was, but its size and colour suggested the skull of a small animal. They were covered in dirt and scratches, but they had broad grins across their faces and each one of them squealed in terror and delight when the skull was nearly dropped.

Beside her, Father Frail appeared to be dozing, listing sideways on one arm, mouth slack against his shoulder. She wasn't sure why she chose to be here instead of with the other children, except that she felt sorry for him. No one else was interested in his stories any more and he received little company.

When he stirred at last, bending his elbow as if in pain and shaking the sleep from his opaque eyes, Shobe asked, “Do you stay awake nights and sleep days, like the rest of us?”

Father chuckled. “I wake and sleep when I want,” he said. “Night, day is nothing to me. Hardly any difference, except night is cooler. But what I see and think is the same at any time.”

It was a strange idea, that night and day could be so similar, when at night all the world of stories lay in the sky above their heads, to be blotted out by the dawn. Father rubbed at his elbow, wincing. His breath rattled while he did it and he sought to correct it by coughing. He wiped his mouth and sighed, leaning back against the rock of the Old Man.

Shobe found herself wondering again whether he really had outlived his death. She didn’t like to watch his labour with life. She wanted to pass on Mama Teacher’s lesson, that he could look inside himself for the sight denied him in life, but somehow it seemed disrespectful to play teacher to a man so old.

She’d grown protective of him. The other children mocked him and called him a skinny good-for-nothing. He was only skinny because he couldn’t fetch for himself. They should see it as a sign of their own shame that they didn’t feed and keep him better. But many adults said this was not the found way, to fetch and carry for someone else. You were meant to rely on yourself, what you could find and bring.

Shobe’s thoughts went around and around in her head. Father startled her when he asked, “How are your lessons?”

“Last night,” she began, speaking quickly to cover her embarrassment, “we discussed ownership and agriculture, and Nisi told the story of her foretelling.”

Father cackled. “Already? She’s keen. She’ll be a good story-teller.”

“Why did you never become a teacher, Father? You know many stories, and then people...”

She trailed off. She’d been about to say people wouldn’t dislike him so much if he could give something back, but she knew there was something wrong with the thought.

“People...?” Father asked, but didn’t press her for an answer. “People learn when they are ready, and it

is easier to be ready when you find a teacher you respect. Many people are not ready to respect a blind man. Which is your teacher now, Mother or Father?"

"Mama. Mother, I mean."

Father Frail nodded. "That's fine." He was silent again, his dry feet rasping against each other.

The children playing catch had wandered close to the precipice and were looking down. Shobe knew they felt safe, because these ones had all already found their foretellings. They thought they were invincible.

"Their parents should teach them about injury," Shobe murmured, not meaning to say it out loud.

"I'm sure they do," Father said, though he couldn't know what she meant. "And about responsibility. To the group, to the families. They should know not to cause grief, and that grief can come from hurt as well as death."

Father Frail must be speaking generally, she decided, but her attention was on the children below. They were pointing down the mountain, and a nervous energy worked through them. She wished they would move back from the edge, but the biggest boy leaned out even further. He rested on a bent sapling, tipping over the precipice until a friend grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back. One of the girls raced away toward the gathering plain, leaving the others holding onto each other and staring down the mountain.

"Not long now, then," Father Frail said.

Shobe tensed. "For what?"

"For Weki," Father said, and was silent again. Eventually he began to snore.

Shobe didn't ask who Weki was.

The girl had brought Papa Gorge back with her. He looked over the edge just once, then he too turned and ran, seeking more help. Anxiety prickled Shobe's skin, pulling her ribs in tight. She stayed in the

cave, waiting for Papa Gorge, waiting out the sun.

Gorge returned with two others. Mama Temple had brought reeds tied into rope. They walked a way around the precipice, then tied the reeds to Gorge and lowered him slowly down the mountain. Papa Able and Mama Temple held the ropes and shouted at the children to stay away from the edge if they knew what was good for them.

When Gorge returned he had a long, dark bundle with him. Mama Temple reached out and, as they transferred the bundle between them, Shobe realized what it was.

Anu. His skin blackened, his head lolling. He looked as though he'd been burned. Dark sooty smudges covered his skin. Even from here she could see his mouth hung open and his eyes were closed. Mama Temple gathered his body to her, pulling his head against her neck as if comforting him.

Shobe leaned against the smooth wall of the cave, unable to look away from the small procession below. They walked slowly. Next they would have to return the boy to his family, and clearly they didn't want to meet that moment. The tribe would be gathering for evening meal by now, but there would be little eating done that night. All deaths were determined, but not all deaths were easy to accept.

Papa Able ushered the children before him, allowing them to cling to his arms. They kept their eyes on Mama Temple, on Anu, his face buried against her neck. Mama kept one hand on the back of Anu's head and she seemed to be consoling him.

Shobe watched the figures retreating, taking their time. When they were nearly out of sight, she stood and silently left the cave, following them. She didn't want to be part of what would happen next, but to avoid it would be selfish. She should be there to bear witness with the others.

As she picked her way down the slope, she reflected that she'd known nothing much about Anu except his name. He was like many of the younger children, always throwing themselves at the edge of things, thinking their deaths were lifetimes away. She wondered if Anu had been lucky enough to find his dying before the end. She wondered if Father Frail had known about him, whether he'd been able to hear the boy cry out and if he had, whether he'd gone to help, or had wanted to help but hadn't been able to reach over the edge of that precipice, being blind.

Just before she reached the gathering place she remembered who Weki was. Home Mother to Nisi. And Anu.

*Do you really think that, for all their searching, some people  
simply never find their stories?*

*No. No, I don't think that. Do you?*

\* \* \* \*

Weki was feeding kindling to the cooking fire when they reached her, but even the crackle of the flames seemed to dim when she looked up and saw what they carried.

“My son,” she said into the silence, and her voice held the kind of certainty that comes from waiting just one moment too long. “My son.”

The tinder fell from her lap as she rose and stepped forward. Straight into the fire.

Those gathered nearby were slow to react, their gazes fixed on the returning group. Possibly it was the smell of burning skin that woke them. Only Father Lakeside had presence of mind enough to turn to Weki and, seeing her already within the circle of fire, to reach for her arm. Weki twisted away from him and tipped forward, falling further into the flames. Kindling snapped beneath her as she hit the ground, but her eyes never left her son's body.

At first she seemed to feel nothing. She got to her knees and the flames licked along her back to her hair, lifting and curling it as if she would be carried away on its fiery strands. She tried to shake the flames off, reaching a hand to her forehead absently. She seemed lost. Then her eyes locked with Shobe's, standing apart from the rest of the group. Her vision cleared and she began to scream.

Shobe stepped back involuntarily, stuffing her hands against her own mouth to stifle a cry.

Weki strove to stand, but the logs beneath her rolled. She stumbled and this time when she fell she snapped her forearm on the rocks bordering the fire.

The others were immobile, even Father Lakeside. Fire was a power they had stolen from the sky. They were afraid and ashamed of it. The only one to move at last was Weki's husband, Lito. He picked up a log and hit her so that she was pushed beyond the edge of the flames and as he did so, he shouted to match her screams, tears spilling from his eyes.

Weki rolled, clutching at her arm, screaming and burning still. No one helped her. No one knew how. When she stopped moving she was burned from head to toe and her long hair was ash around her. Her voice had fallen to a croak.

They took her home and lay her on a mat, where her skin swelled and oozed and stuck to the floor. She spoke no more words after that, and they weren't sure whether it was the fire or grief that closed her throat.

Nisi crouched by, wrapped in her father's arms, tears dripping from her chin. Her crying drowned out the condolences of the neighbours. Mama Teacher stood at the opening to the cave, some of the students pressed against her. No effort was made to protect them from the knowledge that this was one of Death's many faces. It was believed that no child was too young for this lesson.

Weki hadn't even died yet, but Shobe could hear people discussing the funeral. She didn't like this too-public dying. She wanted to scream at everyone to get out of the way and leave the grief to the family, but she was always silent in crowds. The habit had become as strong as stone.

Most people had left by the time Nisi's sobs gave way and she whispered, "Mama never told me it was to happen already."

*Already.*

Living with all this dying, thought Shobe, was like dying already.

And then she knew.

The knowledge drilled into her spine and into her knees. She ran all the way back to Father Frail's place on the side of the Old Man and there was a hollowness in her ears and forehead. Frail's blank eyes were focused keenly on the space by the front of the cave where she came to rest. He'd been waiting.

She was sobbing, furious, wiping fiercely at the tears on her face.

"I thought I couldn't live with not knowing, but Father, I can't live with knowing," she shouted.

Father Frail said gently, “What is it you know, child?”

“I know why I have never found my dying in the stars, why the sky seemed so busy with so very many stories, and none of them made any sense. It is because my death is everywhere *already*. There is nothing in the world for me but my dying.”

With no death to find outside herself, Shobe had looked within and seen that this was the only answer, the only possible way forward.

Unthinkingly, she edged closer to Father Frail and put a hand to his arm. She was surprised to touch him at last. His skin was dry and cool and she could feel it just as if she were alive. Father patted her hand and smiled, his eyes not quite meeting hers.

“Father,” she said. “I have already started my dying.”

She glared, willing him to prove her wrong, to give her some other explanation for this, this *thing*, this terrible, awful injustice she’d found.

He was still stroking her hand, tracing patterns on the back of her palm.

“Give me your telling, child.”

Shobe was self-conscious. Her story was grotesque and unfair and speaking it would only confirm that. She wanted to resist, but the words came out of her like heat.

“It was a day and a night like any other. My own Mama Home said I was too young yet, much too young to find my dying in the stars. She said, when you’re ready, you’ll be able to see. She said there was no point staring, that the stars weren’t even out yet and if I stared too much in the sun I’d go blind like that boy with the virus. That boy...” here she paused and looked at Father Frail and saw, for the first time, something other than his age. Saw the story of his life in the pores of his skin.

Father Frail chuckled, a dry, rasping sound.

“Are you only as young as all that, child?”

Shobe continued. “Mama said it wasn’t a virus that blinded him - you, Father - it was all the searching he did, hunting for his foretelling amongst the constellations when he was much too young. This is the found way, she said, to learn patience and to wait until a thing is given. She said all that seeking and not finding had sent him mad, and all he could do was sit and talk to ghosts, and that’s why people were afraid of him. Why he spent much of his time alone on the far side of the Old Man.”

“Did you stop searching?”

“No.”

“Of course.”

“I didn’t stop; I wanted to know. Mama Teacher - I mean, the Mama Teacher I had before my dying, because it was a Mama Teacher then, too - said it is given to some to always seek. I was proud she thought that of me, that I had a place, and I wanted to prove I was ready, that I was grown-up enough. I was bored with children’s things. So I was staring at the sky as the evening star appeared. And I knew, that day, that this was my star. That my death was clean and immediate. Not even a pattern. Just one star. It was so bright and big I thought it would eat up the whole world. It seemed to explode and I thought at first the forest had turned to fire. I stood up so I could run and warn the others, because I was afraid the evening star would kill all of them that day, every one. But when I tried to take a step, my legs buckled and I realized that the fire was in my heart. I knew what the star was saying, that my heart had burst already.”

Shobe took a breath to steady herself, “Somehow it feels as though it was the very act of seeing my death that caused it, Father. It’s so strange, to see it and feel it at once.”

Tears were still rolling down her cheeks and she found that strange, too, that she could cry yet.

“Dying is hard work, child, but we all find our way eventually.”

Father Frail lay back against the rocks and rested his head, his chin pointing to the ceiling of the cave. He sighed.



“Father, if I’ve been passing through my dying all this time, does it mean that you are the Messenger? The one sent to guide us at the moment of death?”

Father’s voice was whisper-thin. “Have I been your guide, child? Strange to think that, when all this time you have been mine. I suppose...”

But he was silent. Shobe found the truth inside herself. She said to him, closing his lids against his bare eyes, “I suppose,” she continued, “we all guide each other, Father. The Messenger is not one of us; it is all of us.”

*Do the stars ever lie?*

*Does it matter, once the story is told?*

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\* \* \* \*

## **Father Muerte & the Flesh**

LEE BATTERSBY

Lee Battersby is the multiple award-winning author of over fifty stories, including appearances in *Writers of The Future Volume 18*; *All-Star Zeppelin Adventure Stories*; and the upcoming *Year’s Best Fantasy & Horror Twentieth Annual Collection*. A collection of his work, *Through Soft Air*, was released by Prime Books in 2006. Lee lives in Clarkson, Western Australia, with his wife, writer Lyn Battersby, as well as a gaggle of children and far too many weird things for his own good. He is far too attached to Daleks. You can find out more, including all sorts of lies, at the Batthome (<http://www.battersby.com.au>).

Lee writes: “Costa Satanus is the perfect background for me to write stories against, and Father Muerte has been very good to me so far. This is the third of four published stories, and I keep finding ideas that will fit. I’m very fond of this story: it touches on several fascinations, and the good Father is like a scab I can’t stop picking.”

\* \* \* \*

T

here are very few completely true things in Costa Satanas. Of those that are, perhaps the truest is that it is impossible to climb to the summit of Point Arrival, the bony finger of land pointing out into the ocean at the west end of town. Or the east, depending upon where you look, and who you are when you're looking.

Any number of theories have abounded over the years to explain its isolation, from geological anomalies to one involving the body of an ancient giant and the curse of a jealous lover. That one is my favourite, possibly because it comes closest to the truth. Today, however, Point Arrival's remoteness stems from an entirely different source, one more mundane than anyone would suspect: sometimes I like to be alone.

Slightly winded by the long hike up the hillside, I laid out my picnic blanket, unwrapped a cheese and jam sandwich, and took a bite. I sat, and with my face to the ocean breeze uncorked my thermos. The smell of Benito D'Amico's special macchiato blend rose into the air, mixing with the sea current and wafting toward the front beach. As the molecules combined, I saw the sunburn addicts wrap towels around themselves and walk up the beach to deposit sand onto Benito's suede-covered wicker chairs.

The first sip of Benito's coffee is a solemn ritual, a meaningful one despite its ordinary accoutrements. I take great pains to make sure I am never, ever interrupted. This made the woman's arrival all the more incredible, and all the more annoying.

"Whew," she said, wiping her forehead with a bandanna wrapped around one brown wrist like a sweatband. "That's some climb." She rounded the last lip of rock and planted herself opposite me as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"It's meant to be." My cup was not yet halfway to my expectant lips. I placed it back on the blanket. "Pardon my asking, but how did you get up here?"

She favoured me with a look that questioned my sanity in a gentle way. "I walked. Don't tell me there's a bus service I could have taken?"

"No, it's just..." I looked around my spoiled sanctuary. "This place is private."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize. The photographer said... this is yours?"

“In a manner of speaking.” I sighed. “This photographer. Young man, black, carries an odd looking camera?”

“That’s him.” She smiled, and I decided not to notice what a lovely smile she had. “He said I’d like the view.”

“I bet he did.” Henri Anglomarre suffers a terminal inability to remain single. He wishes to inflict his curse upon me, one of the reasons I found myself climbing the Point more and more often in recent times. “One of these days I shall have to introduce him to the meaning of privacy.”

“I’m sorry.” She looked me up and down. “Hey, are you that priest everyone talks about?”

“I keep telling them I’m not a priest.”

“No, you don’t look like one. Is that coffee? May I? I’d kill for a good coffee.”

“Here.” I handed her the cup and passed the thermos behind it. “It’s lost its taste.”

She drew deeply on the brew then sprawled backwards into the grass, a moan of pleasure escaping her parted lips. I busied myself in folding the blanket, ignoring her long legs as I slid its edge from underneath them. I left the sandwiches to the circling gulls. The intruder looked up at me as I busied myself, then slowly rose to her feet, screwed the cup back on the thermos and handed it to me with an air of regret.

“No taste?” she said to the circling clouds. “You, sir, have been spoiled.” I smiled despite my annoyance, and she stuck out a slim hand. “Bonnie Crake.”

I shook it. Her skin was soft, with just a hint of callous where tools had suffered years of grip. Her shake was firm, decisive.

“Well, Miss Crake,” I indicated a path she would never have found without me. “Would you care to share the journey back to town?”

\* \* \* \*

We were halfway along the beach when I spied a group of children gathered around a large, indistinct lump on the sand. I moved toward it, Bonnie in my wake.

“What is it, a body?”

The group parted as we drew near. I knelt by the slab, running my hands over the mass of matter. It was cold, despite the mid-afternoon heat, and bore no resemblance to anything I could remember having seen.

“Not a body,” Bonnie said as she knelt beside me and reached out a tentative hand. “It’s flesh, though.”

“Yes.” I kneaded a small piece between finger and thumb, while the children screwed up their faces and chorused a squeal of disgust. I pointed to one. “Kaylee, run and fetch Henri for me, will you? He’ll be at Benito’s.”

“Yes, Papa.” She set off at a self-important trot. I turned back to Bonnie.

“I’d say this is a globster.”

“A whatster?”

“Globster. They float up onto beaches every now and again. Scientists think they might be pieces of giant squids attacked by sperm whales.” I smiled at her over the bulbous mound of flesh. “Or might not. Henri should be able to tell us.”

“He’s a scientist?”

“Not quite.” Henri’s father had been a football manager in his native Cameroon, and a firm follower of tribal superstitions. His son had grown up with the ability to ‘sense’ animals, a skill he’d blocked until recent events had sent it bubbling to the surface of his consciousness. I was hoping he’d identify the animal that had donated our little mystery before we carted it away. Within a minute he was loping up the sand behind Kaylee, a smile of triumph plastered across his deliberately innocent face. I reached into my

jacket pocket and removed a stick of Blackpool rock. Kaylee received it as due reward. As she skipped away, I spied Henri and Bonnie with their heads together.

“Told you so,” he was saying. They straightened when they saw my glance. I frowned in puzzlement, and at the giggle Bonnie gave in return. I placed a hand on the lump.

“Any ideas?”

Henri knelt, then leaned forward and pressed his face against the cool, slippery flesh. After a minute or so, in which I ignored the pretty young woman’s questioning looks, he tilted back and glanced up at me.

“Nothing. Whatever this is, it isn’t animal.”

“What is it, then?” Bonnie looked between us. I reached into a jacket pocket and withdrew a scalpel and test tube.

“That is what I intend to find out.”

\* \* \* \*

I have, over the course of what other people would consider a number of lifetimes, accumulated knowledge in a variety of areas. Some of it is more practical than others. How to use a microscope, for example. Even so, I had to triple check before I believed the evidence presented to me by the eyepiece.

“It’s human.”

“What?” Henri leaned forward on his stool. “Are you sure?”

“I wish I wasn’t.”

“But how?” Bonnie had perched upon the edge of a bench. She jumped off and elbowed me out of the way, peering into the microscope with professional ease. “That mound must be four feet long. There

were no bones, no framework.” She turned the focus, lapsed into silence, then, “Shit, you’re right. Undeniably human.” She glanced up into our inquiring stares. “Sorry, forgot to mention. Forensic pathologist.”

Henri laughed. “Oh, nice one. Really nice, eh Father?”

Bonnie chuckled. To cover my consternation I lifted the slide from the microscope and carried it across to the bench I use for my more unusual investigations. I mixed together some basil, a little shaved mandrake, and some milk from a nursing white whale. I crushed the skull of a long-extinct mammal into the mix, then scooped a finger through it and spread a blob across a slice of the flesh, chanting in a language known only to myself and three living monks in Tibet.

“Should he be doing stuff like that?” Bonnie whispered.

“He’s not exactly a priest,” Henri replied. I smiled. I might be getting through to people. I placed the sliver of flesh onto a fresh slide and slid it back under the microscope.

“So,” Henri asked as I bent to the eyepiece, “Is it still human?”

The mixture on the slide spelled out the owner of the flesh in a pattern I could not mistake. I stared at it, refusing to allow the shock of recognition to reach my voice.

“It’s more than that,” I told him. “It’s someone we know.”

\* \* \* \*

Costa Satanus has many fascinating features, not least of which is its topography. If you can navigate a tesseract and you know where to look, you can travel the length of the entire town in little more than a few steps. I had been banging on the front door of Mama Casson’s Hotel Quixote for over three minutes before Henri and Bonnie staggered round the corner at the far end of the street.

“One of these days,” Henri gasped as they reached me, “you’re going to have to introduce me to a map of this place.”

“It’s locked.” I indicated the entrance. “There’s no answer.”

“Locked? Mama C locked the hotel door?” We exchanged worried frowns. Mama Casson never closed the Quixote. Time of day was no impediment to parting a tourist from their cash.

“If that really was her on the beach, she may not have been the one who did.”

“You don’t think it was her, do you?”

I stopped to consider the mass of flesh we had carried up the beach to the cooler room at Benito’s.

“Mama is one of my earliest residents, and one of my oldest friends. If it is, I shall never stop taking revenge on whoever did such a thing to her.”

“But it can’t be. Surely.”

I pulled my lock picking gear from inside my jacket. “There’s only one way to find out.”

“Excuse me,” Bonnie moved past us and reached into her purse. She pulled out a key, inserted it, and opened the entry. “After you.”

“A key?” Henri stage-whispered as we entered the darkened hallway.

“I’m as surprised as you are,” I replied. I couldn’t recall Mama Casson using a normal key, and I’ve been here longer than the town. We stopped creeping halfway down the hall, outside Mama’s apartment. The door was closed. I knocked.

“Mama?”

No answer came from within. I knocked louder, and called her name once more. Still she made no reply. Henri made to grab the doorknob, and I stopped his hand.

“I wouldn’t do that just yet.”

Mama Casson was driven from her homeland for being a witch. She wasn’t, not entirely, but her knowledge of arcane matters outstripped my own in many places. Protection charms were something she could do in her sleep. A scent in the deadened air of the corridor teased at my memory.

“Mothers?” I looked at the others in surprise. “Why would she be afraid of mothers?”

“You’ve obviously not met mine.”

I smiled at Henri’s nervous joke. “Okay, you can open it.”

He turned the knob, and the door swung open on silent hinges. The air inside smelled clean, and altogether wrong for a woman who spent every spare moment huddled over pot, saucepan, and cauldron. I traded glances with Henri, moved inside, and reached for the light switch.

“What the hell?” Henri stepped past me. The last time either of us was here, the room had been scaffolded by shelving. Books and ornaments from a thousand travels leaned together in joyful chaos. Now it was all gone, and in its place...

“It’s a shrine.”

“Did she mention anything to you?”

“No,” I took a step forward. “No, she didn’t.”

“But you’re her priest.”

“I keep telling you...” I reached the far corner and bent to examine the memorial. “Oh, no.”



“What is it?” Bonnie’s voice reached us from the doorway. We turned towards her, and she gestured at the room helplessly.

“Is it...?”

“You can come in.”

“I... uh, I have a son.”

“Ah. Wait a moment.” I pulled a medallion from a jacket pocket, walked over and placed it round her neck. “Saint Anne,” I explained. “Patron saint. You should be fine now.”

I took her hand and led her inside, ignoring Henri’s intentionally guileless face. Bonnie took one look at the picture forming the shrine’s backdrop and gasped.

“Holy Mother,” she whispered. “Matris of templum, matris nostri fides, servo quod indulgeo nos ut vos did qui unseated quod pessum ire vos.”

“What? What did she say?”

“I don’t know,” I replied.

“It’s a prayer,” Bonnie told us. “To the Holy Mother Joan.”

“You recognize her?”

Bonnie smiled. “Catholic girls’ school. We had to hero worship *somebody*.”

“Anybody fancy clueing me in?” Henri raised his eyebrows in mock encouragement. I indicated the cheap print.

“It’s a picture of a statue which once adorned an edicola on the Vicus Papissa in Rome.”

“The whatus?”

“Street of the Woman Pope,” Bonnie translated.

“Woman Pope.”

“Pope Joan.” As I spoke her name, the woman in the portrait turned her head and regarded me with a look both calculating and watchful. Bonnie took a step backward. I reached out a hand to stop her.

“Now would not be the time to run.” She stood rigid. I did my best not to recognize the warmth beneath her trembling skin. “She reigned as Pope John the Eighth during the ninth century, disguised as a man. But she fell in love with a junior bishop on the Papal staff. When she gave birth while journeying along the Vicus Papissa they hanged her, along with her baby and lover.” I regarded the print. “The likeness does not do her justice.”

The picture opened its mouth, and a voice like ancient sand filled the room.

“Where is he?”

“Where is who?” Bonnie whispered.

“Where is he?” The voice became more strident, angrier. The eyes fixed upon me, and grew wide as recognition distorted its features. “You! How could you...?”

“Run!” I pushed my two companions toward the exit. Ripping sounds filled the room behind us, and a scream of rage. We bundled into the hallway. I slammed the door, catching a glimpse of the ruined shrine and the creature half emerged from it as I did so.

“The medallion! Quickly!” I pointed to the ornament dangling from Bonnie’s throat. She tore it off and flung it to me. I wrapped it round the doorknob and spat on it three times, murmuring a chant in Black Aramaic.

“She’s a pope,” I explained as I herded them out of the building. “Mother to a whole cult. Reversing the charm might hold her for a while.”

“Catholicism is hardly a cult.”

“All religions are cults.” I set off down the street.

“Some priest,” Bonnie muttered as they fell in behind me.

“He’s not a priest,” Henri replied, but I was too lost in thought to take any pleasure in his denial. “So where are we going? We’re not just leaving her there, surely?”

I looked back at the hotel. I had thought never to revisit the pain that suddenly encircled my throat. “No,” I replied, “We’re going to seek psychiatric help.”

\* \* \* \*

“What is all this about, Father? I’m a very busy man.”

Mister Gull has an office on Jongleur Street, just below Henri’s photographic studio. He was always busy, although he no longer practiced medicine, at least not upon the locals. I disregarded the speculative look he gave Bonnie and explained our problem. Gull stared at me over steeped fingers. “Why should this concern me?”

“I need an insight into her psyche. I need someone with experience.”

Bonnie snorted. “As opposed to, say, a woman?”

“Sir William was physician in ordinary to Her Majesty the Queen,” I replied, not shifting my eyes from the doctor’s measured gaze. “He was also the world authority on the treatment of madness in women, and the first man to accurately diagnose epilepsy, not to mention his studies into the occult. He is well placed, believe me.”

Gull harrumphed, and rose from his chair, walking round the room with slow steady steps. "I no longer consult. You know that."

"I do."

"Why not?" Bonnie asked.

"Because I have no need to."

"Sir William is interested in transubstantiation." I did my best to keep my voice neutral. "Especially the transformation of female flesh into something else."

"Something *higher*, Father." Gull crossed the room to gaze up at a Walter Sickert portrait of Victoria. "Her Majesty was a remarkable woman, both mystically powerful and... troubled. She foresaw her death, and knew it would herald the death of the Empire. I was charged with finding a way to transform her into something higher, more permanent."

"Five prostitutes died."

"Were transubstantiated, Father. Ennobled. As was Her Majesty, in the end."

"Wait a minute!" Bonnie strode past me to confront the heavysset surgeon. "Queen Victoria? But that was..."

"A lifetime ago. No more."

She turned to me, throwing her arms wide in exasperation. "This is too much. It's just too much. Globsters made out of people, pictures coming to life and attacking me, now ageless doctors from a hundred and forty odd years ago?" She made for the door. "I can't take this. I came here for a holiday. Two weeks in the sun. That's all."

"Bonnie," I placed a hand on her shoulder and let a small portion of my being flow through my skin and

into her. She stiffened, turning wild eyes upon me. "I understand your fear. But this is very real, and very urgent. Leave if you want to, but I cannot guarantee your safety. She has seen you."

Gull advanced upon us. Bonnie raised her head to him. I removed my hand, and she sagged against me.

"Five prostitutes," she whispered.

"Five martyrs," he replied, reaching out to wipe away the tears that sprung to her eyes. "And I have changed so very much since that time."

"You're..."

"I am a surgeon, young lady, nothing more." Gull contemplated the portrait for long, silent seconds. I sensed the loneliness in him, and the soundless apologies he sent toward the painting's subject. I wondered what they had to say to each other, in the evenings, when the two of them were alone and she could climb down from her frame in safety. Eventually he bowed his head, and turned back to me, his eyes full of memory.

"This woman, Father."

"Yes?"

"She seeks to reclaim someone. A male. If she has been transformed and comes back, it is because she cannot be complete without him."

"Who?"

"The baby, perhaps. Or the lover. Both, if necessary."

I looked into his steady, knowing gaze, and felt a hidden weight shift within me.

"Do you think you might know who, Father?"

“Yes,” I whispered. “Yes.”

\* \* \* \*

There is a small room toward the back of my house, at the end of a corridor that appears only when it is absolutely unavoidable. I keep my items of pain there, all the mistakes and evils I cannot rectify, and cannot bear to keep within me. I placed my hand on the door and turned to my two companions.

“Please wait in the kitchen.”

They left. I closed my eyes and opened the door, stepping into the dark interior. No light infiltrates the room. It isn't necessary. I can find what I want without illumination. Directly inside, on the top shelf, lay a pine box, exactly twenty four inches long by eight wide. I lifted it down with both hands and made my way to my companions. The door locked itself fast behind me, as it always does, until I need it again.

“What is it?” Henri asked as I placed the box gently on the kitchen table. I prised the lid off and gazed down at the tiny figure within.

“My son,” I said, allowing pain to fill me. Bonnie choked back a sob and began to whisper a prayer in Latin. Henri simply stared, his fingers turning white as they gripped the edge of the table.

“Joan was not hanged for being female,” I said, reaching into the casket and gently raising the body out. “She was a good Pope. The people loved her. She was on the verge of heralding a new era of Papal responsibility, widening the Church's influence in areas that were significant in the coming Dark Ages. She was an efficient administrator, incorruptible, holy in every thought and deed.”

I nestled my son against my chest, stroking his mummified brow as I talked.

“Those in power knew she was a woman, and didn't care. Joan was good for the Church. Even when she secretly wed a member of her staff and became pregnant they re-ordered their calendar to accommodate it. The mother of the Church would become the mother of a child. It was as a second coming of sorts, a symbol to unite the people under God. The perfect union of faith, humanity, and motherhood.”

“But...” Henri choked.

“But she gave birth a month early, on her way through the streets of Rome. And she gave birth to this.” I ran my fingers over my son’s horns, down across the scales on his body, along the tail to its forked point. “My son.”

“I don’t... I don’t get it.”

“Her body rejected him, I think.” I looked up from his wizened visage. “Joan was the personification of God upon earth. She had... *transubstantiated*. Her husband wasn’t evil, but his flesh came from an evil source. She could no longer bear it inside her, so she simply... rejected him. This is the reason she was hanged.” I held him out to them. “This is what she has come back to claim.”

“But... that was over a thousand years ago,” Bonnie gasped, her eyes fixed on the baby. “Who are you? *What* are you?” She backed away from me, stumbling as she banged into a stool. I spoke as gently as I am capable.

“I am old, and trying to be wise, and much better than I was.”

“Oh God, you’re... you’re...”

“No,” I said, reading the conclusion in her eyes. “I’m not him. He wouldn’t even consider himself my father. I am a part that was lost, that is all.”

“No.” She retreated to the door. “No.” She flung it open, running into the street.

“Bonnie!” I turned to Henri. “Follow her, please. Make sure she’s okay. She’ll need your protection.”

Henri moved past me, turning at the door to view me with more tiredness than fear.

“What about you?” he said. “Shouldn’t you go after her?”

“I have things I need to do,” I replied, holding my son close.

\* \* \* \*

The hallway of Mama Casson’s hotel lay quiet around me as I carried my tiny burden to her apartment. The charm was still twisted round the doorknob. I placed my ear against the door but heard nothing from within.

“I’d be terrified if it wasn’t for the fear,” I muttered in my best Hawkeye Pearce voice, and loosened the charm. I dropped it into a jacket pocket, pushed open the door, and stepped through in one swift movement. Only once I was fully inside did I let go of the breath I was holding.

The room was dark; the rubble of Joan’s frenzied attack visible only by the glow emanating from her figure, hanging in the air three feet in front of me. She glared at me from a twisted caricature of the face I once cradled in my hands, her eyes elongated slits of hatred and need. She raised her hands toward me, and they stretched into claws more avian than human. I returned the gesture, showing her the baby.

“They salted his flesh,” I said. “After they took him. They quartered him, and salted him, and took the parts to four pagan countries and buried them in ground they decreed could never be consecrated.”

Joan floated down and placed her claws beneath my hands. I withdrew them, and my son stayed where he was, supported by ectoplasm and his mother’s desperate love.

“It took me six hundred years to find him,” I whispered, “But I did, in the end.”

She drew her eyes away from his body. Iridescent tears streamed down her cheeks. Her lips twitched, and she mouthed a name I have not owned in over a millennium. Then she drew the little corpse up, nestling him against her breast in an unearthly parody of a feeding embrace. With her free hand she reached out to stroke my cheek. I was surprised to find it wet.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I never wanted to...”

“No!”



Joan's attention snapped from me to the door. She flew back across the room with an enraged hiss.

"Get away from him!"

I turned to see Bonnie outlined in the doorway.

"Bonnie, don't!"

She stepped forward as I spoke, fists raised in the beginning stance of a Jeet-kun-do expert. As she crossed the threshold, Mama Casson's protection spell activated, lifting her and flinging her backwards. She struck the wall outside the apartment with a wet thud and hung there, three feet above the floor. I moved on impulse, diving out the door, shouting an anti-spell in an effort to free her. I heard an shriek behind me. Bonnie began to slide down the wall. Joan swept past me, engulfing Bonnie's helpless form with her own.

Bonnie screamed and I joined in. I clawed at her waist, trying to pull her away from the maddened form of my former love. She turned to jelly as I watched, voice cutting off as her body transformed into a shapeless blob of flesh. It hit the floor with a soft plop. Joan spared me a single glance before swooping down the hallway and into the sky beyond, leaving me kneeling, Bonnie's cooling corpse in my arms, crying out her name until my voice gave way to helpless tears.

\* \* \* \*

Henri was waiting for me when I returned to my house.

"How did it... what's wrong?"

"Go to Benito's," I told him, pushing past and striding into the kitchen. "I want a bottle of his best red. His best, you understand, the stuff laid down in the bomb shelter he doesn't think anyone knows about. Here," I pulled a handful of coins from my jacket pocket and threw them on the bench. "Go quickly."

"He'll take doubloons?"

"Henri," I turned my back on him and let a little anger creep into my voice. "Go now. Tell him there is

another globster at Mama's for his cool room."

"Yes, Father."

The door clicked shut, and I went to work. Within an hour I was ready, and waiting for Henri's return. There was a knock, and the young photographer stepped through, a bottle of wine in his hand.

"I've got... what the...?"

Deep in the bowels of the house I have a cabinet full of candles. Each century I make another set, imbuing them with the essence of the most potent experience of the last hundred years. If lit, they cast shadows in such a way that the memories are released and fill the room. A dozen such candles circled the kitchen. Henri stood in the gilded doorway of the private dining quarters of Pope John the Eighth, the night she and I first made love. I sat at the small dining table, my simple cassock tight and itchy across my chest.

"Thank you, Henri. Leave the bottle with me, please."

He crossed the room in amazement, circling slowly in an attempt to take everything in.

"How...? I mean, what is this place? How did you...?"

"She has her child now." I concentrated on the ball of calm that sits within my chest whenever I am about to reach an end that will leave me altered. "A child needs a father. A wife needs her husband."

"What are you going to do?"

"Transformations, Henri. We all need to change, to reach higher states of being. If we don't we stand still, or worse, regress. And if we regress, we die." I reached for my jacket pocket, then remembered my simple robes and crossed to the sideboard to retrieve a corkscrew. I bent to the bottle, releasing the cork with a satisfied grunt. "She's coming. You should leave."

"I... yeah, okay." Henri made for the door. He opened it, and glanced back at me. "Good luck, Father."

“Goodbye, Henri.”

He left, and I waited for the arrival of my lost love. I did not wait for long. She was before me within minutes, glowing blue in the dark light of the candles. She was dressed as I best remembered her, in the cotton shift she favoured in her private apartments. Her hair was tied in an uncomplicated bun, a single flower tucked behind her ear. Her neck spoiled the illusion. It twisted to one side, her head tilted at an angle only achievable by a hangman’s noose. Even in death, even with her child returned to her, she could not move past that moment.

“Lady,” I bowed my head toward the bottle, “will you join me?” She floated to the chair opposite me. I poured two glasses, and pushed one in front of her.

“Your health.” I raised my glass and sipped. Joan placed a ghostly hand around her own glass and it glided up toward her mouth. I watched the wine drip down her throat, as well as the stream that crossed her angled cheek to spill upon the tablecloth. I stood and moved to the sideboard. Two plates lay upon it, next to a bowl of fresh vegetables and a small cut of dark meat. I filled each plate with thin slices. I placed a plate in front of Joan, turning it so the meat was closest. Then I regained my seat, speared a slice, and brought it to my lips.

“To our son,” I said, and ate. Joan acknowledged my toast, then raised a sliver to her own mouth. She chewed and swallowed. The little ball fell down her throat until it reached the hangman’s bend. Then it lodged. Joan swallowed, and again, but the meat remained stuck.

“Interesting cut, don’t you think?” I asked. Joan stared at me with bugged eyes, hands clawing at the obstruction. “I found it, eventually, in a box buried in a garden in the courtyard of the Emperor’s Palace in Tokyo. It was guarded by a small Shinto spirit called into being for that exact purpose. It is heart, my lady. Your son’s heart.”

Very gently I placed my cutlery on the table, then left my seat and walked round so that I stood with my hands on the back of her chair. I leaned forward, closed my eyes, and whispered.

“A devil’s choice, don’t you think? The meat will poison you, spirit though you are, if you leave it there. Or you can reject it, spit it out. But you will need to become flesh to do so. Either way you will be transformed.” I kissed her ear, feeling the electric tingle of her substance beneath my lips. “What shall it be, my love?”

She said nothing in response, merely stiffened as realization of her position deepened. I kept my eyes closed, trying to remember the way Bonnie smelled, the way Mama Casson's hips swayed as she walked.

The room began to grow cold. Matter is energy condensed into a slow-moving form. A spirit is a being of energy. It can become flesh again. All it takes is will, and chemical change. I stood silent in the midst of Joan's endothermic reaction; until she bucked forward and I heard choking erupt from the flesh of her newly substantial throat. I saw Bonnie's screaming face in my mind, saw the indisputable fact of Mama's transformation on the microscope slide, watched the images melt and run down into the ball of calm at my centre. Then I reached out and enclosed Joan's throat with my fingers.

"I shall never stop taking revenge."

I squeezed until my knuckles throbbed, until the last feeble struggle died away beneath my hands, and I stood alone in the room with only my own steady breathing for company.

\* \* \* \*

I buried them at the top of Point Arrival. Four graves, one smaller than the rest, each marked with a single, millennium old candle. When the task was done I sat on a rug and drank a final cup of coffee from my thermos. I overturned the rest, and let the hot fluid run into the grass. Henri was waiting for me at the bottom of the incline.

"Are you okay?"

"No."

"Are you going to be?"

"That remains to be seen." I drew a small vial of smoke from a jacket pocket, uncorked it, and spread the contents around. The language I spoke is so old the only words remembered are those of that spell, and then, only by me. Point Arrival shimmered and disappeared. By the time the smoke cleared, no sign of the spur remained. A small beach stood in its place, easily accessible to all. Henri exhaled deeply.

"One thing I don't understand."

“Yes?”

“What was Mama C doing on the beach? And why didn’t anyone notice?”

I turned away from his questions. “I don’t know.”

“What?”

“I’m not perfect, Henri. I’m only human.”

His gaze flickered down my length, the look on his face telling me all I needed to know about his opinion. Finally he shrugged, and changed the subject.

“What about Bonnie’s son?”

“He’ll be taken care of. I’ve made arrangements.”

The young photographer looked past me at the new beach, then up at the spot in mid-air where four graves deserved to be.

“You frighten me sometimes, you know.”

“No more than I do myself.”

I walked away, and took the long way back to town.

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## The Souls of Dead Soldiers

### Are for Blackbirds, Not

#### Little Boys

BEN PEEK

Ben Peck is a Sydney based author. He is the author of the autobiography *Twenty-Six Lies/One Truth*, and the dystopian novel, *Black Sheep*, while his short fiction has appeared in the *Polyphony*, *Leviathan*, and *Agog!* anthology series, as well as *Fantasy Magazine*, *Aurealis*, and *Phantom*. He keeps a lo fi blog at <http://benpeek.livejournal.com>

About ‘The Souls of Dead Soldiers are for Blackbirds, Not Little Boys’, he writes, “There are a couple of alternate versions for this story. Versions where there are big empty white spaces to signify burnt patches in the letters. Versions where the blackbirds have less to do, the father more, and the doctor, much, much less. Thank the editor Cat Sparks and be pleased you’re not reading those versions.”

\* \* \* \*

W

hen I was twelve, my mother took me to see a doctor at the Samohshir Medical Clinic. As we could not afford a private doctor, we left early, and walked the two hours from our home to the clinic, and waited in the dim morning light with a dozen others who had travelled early and on foot, like us, in the hope of seeing a public doctor.

In the roof of the world above the clinic were thousands of lights. They were the most lights that I had seen anywhere before and I was content to sit on the stony ground and watch them brighten. To my gaze, the white stones sitting in the roof of the world were like tiny misshapen eyes, and looked as if the ground herself had awoken and was watching us living inside her. My father, a miner, had laughed when I told him this once. The light was made from the empty world outside, he explained, and the red sun’s light filtering through long shafts of crystal and quartz to us.

The doctor that I eventually saw was named Osamu Makino. He was a small man with a thin, sad-eyed, lined face beneath disintegrating grey-white hair. When he stepped out of his office and into the waiting room to call out my name, he was dressed in the doctor’s black pants, black jacket, black gloves, and the doctor’s white collared and buttoned shirt. Under the bright white light of the room he appeared as if he were falling apart; that it was not only his hair, but his entire personage, that was crumbling into nothing

before us.

He examined me in his bright surgery, dripping ointments over my hairless chest, placing cold coins on my eyes, and pressing down on me with warm, powdered fingers. Eventually, he began rubbing a slender bone across my arms. While he did this, he dropped powder onto my left arm. Finally, he said, "Does your skin hurt?"

"Sometimes," I replied, quietly, for I had always been a quiet child. "It feels as if something is pulling at it. At night, mostly."

My mother had brought me to the clinic after she and my father had found me walking around our house two nights earlier. I had never walked in my sleep before and, when they stopped me and asked me what I was doing, I spoke about a life I had not experienced, about things I could not have known. I remembered none of what I'd said in the morning, but when they asked me if anything was wrong, I did not speak of the pulling on my skin. We could not afford for me to get ill, even with the public clinics. But after consulting the family history and agreeing that there was no ancestor lingering in me who could be the cause, my parents felt it best to take me to a doctor. When I told him of the pain in my skin, my mother shifted her thick, heavy body in her worker browns and pursed her thick lips together in a frown.

"You should have told me," she said, finally.

I nodded, said nothing.

"It doesn't matter now," Doctor Makino said. He stood and brushed flakes of powder from his black pants. "There's no harm, so long as he doesn't lie now. Tell me, do you have other pains?"

I shook my head. "No," I said, for emphasis.

"No strange dreams that recur?"

"My parents say that I walk in my sleep."

His lips curved into a sad, disintegrating smile. "I was not asking what your parents told you, hut what you experienced. Do you dream?"

“No.”

“Why are you asking him this?” my mother asked.

“Your son’s skeleton is distorted.” Doctor Makino sighed and rubbed at the left side of his face with his black gloved hand, as if to erase himself. “There is a second shadow around his skeleton. It is the first stages of soul infection -”

“Infection?” Mother interrupted.

“Yes.” Doctor Makino’s sad dark eyes never met mine, only hers. “Infected is probably not the best word to use. A soul is not meant to be an aggressive thing, but in your son’s situation, the soul cannot stop itself. It is a lost soul from the war; there are more than a few in our city now, though the Queen and her department never speak of it. The war - the attacks against us continue, despite our successes, and soldiers do die. The souls infecting our young are those Aajnnese men and women who have lost their soulcatchers, or whose catchers were broken by the enemy after their death, thus leaving their soul lost and scared.”

I wore a soulcatcher around my neck, my fourth. My father and I had made it from pieces of bone and silver on my eleventh birthday. He had shown me how to bond the silver with the bones of a blackbird we had purchased at the market, but it was I who had made most of it, and I who had killed the bird. I still remembered the blackbird watching me silently with its white eyes as Father and I walked through the narrow, crowded streets of our neighbourhood that evening. The roof of the world was lit with a weak scattering of eyes, and so most of our light had to come from the blue and green mushrooms people planted on the sides of the road. The blackbird did not utter a sound when, at home the following day, I had reached in with my hands and snapped its neck.

It bothered me, that last part, as if it knew what I was to do, and was allowing me.

“Who...” I hesitated.

“What is it, Mi?” Mother asked.

I asked, “Who is it?”



“I don’t know,” Doctor Makino said. “The problem is that these souls are falling into the bodies of our young and that their identities are completely unknown. Without knowing who they are, it is difficult to draw them out, and no one has yet been able to explain why it is happening. It is becoming more and more frequent, that much I know. Just last week a young girl was bought in with three souls - three, would you believe! She was in agony, souls pulling at every part of her. She had already gone blind, the poor child -”

“It can be removed, yes?” Mother asked. “This soul. We can remove it?”

“Not by me, no,” he said. “I am sorry. It is beyond my skills. You will have to write to the Queen and request a soulbird. I will provide you with a letter.”

“What will happen if, if the Queen says no?” I asked.

“She won’t,” my mother said sharply. “The Queen protects us, remember.”

The doctor’s disintegrating smile was less comfort. “The soul in you has died violently. It was not ready for death. Few of those fighting are, I suppose. But it is important for you to understand that the soul is trying to live again - that it wants to live! It is trying to make you into itself so that it can have that life. Because of your youth it will eventually be able to dominate your own soul, to rule it, if you like. Your skin and bones will begin to grow into this old memory at an accelerated rate. It is happening now; that is why your skin aches.”

I did not fully comprehend the danger of the doctor’s words at the time. I had not yet seen the boys and girls whose souls had been overtaken by lost souls - who would be called the Infected - and whose bodies were now monstrosities. I had not seen the extended arms, the twisted faces, and in some cases, limbs that they had removed in brutal, ugly fashions to fit the phantom memory of injuries that had been sustained before death. When she stood, my mother’s face was pale and grim in a way that I had never seen before, and so I knew, then, and knew again as the doctor gave his private address to her “just in case,” that there was some danger. I had the sense then to be frightened and to realize that the words Mother spoke on the way home were hollow comforts, meant to assure both her and myself.

When we arrived home, the blackbirds were waiting with letters.

*Satomi*

I want to go home. It's cold. So cold. I've never been this cold. The wind pierces the thick army greys I wear, ignores my gloves, sinks into my bones. Kyo tells me that I will get used to it, that my duty will warm me, but I don't believe him. I can't. Everything around me is dark and damp. Everything is heavy with ash that turns the ground an ugly black-brown.

This ugly empty world spreads out beneath the stilts of our watchtower like a stain. If not for the thin, stilted shadows of other watchtowers around us, I would think us alone and dead. I have not seen Aajnn for over a month. I am here beneath the empty red sky with a musket Kyo assures me I will never have to fire. Fire! As if it will in this damp! The powder for it is useless. I tell him this, teeth chattering, but he shrugs and tells me the Queen will never allow the enemy to come close to us anyway.

I am writing in the fading light of the red sun. The sun — the sun is worse than we were ever told. It fills the emptiness day and night. At night, the sky turns an ugly brown black, never truly dark. To think, our clear, beautiful white light is drawn from this!

The sky reminds me of how much I have left behind, how much I loved the narrow, twisting passages of our home. How much I miss the cool, clean smells. Everything is so mixed up here. Ash and meat. Meat and trees. Trees and waste. Why did I come here? Why did I just not ignore the Queen's conscription and go further down, to the deeper towns, to where the lights are blue and green, and draw nothing from this awful, awful red sun?

My only pleasure comes in watching the blackbirds. Day or night, they pass through the red sky. They set tie on our towers. They scratch. They look for food. Later, they fly away, either behind or in front, to Aajnn or towards the thin, thin plumes of ash that signal the approaching enemy. The birds, at least, are free.

*Yoshio*

\* \* \* \*

It is wrong of me to write that the blackbirds were simply *there* when my mother and I returned from the public clinic. In truth, they were there for the entire walk home. The dark feathered birds sat alone on the sloping roofs of houses, sat on the wires across the roof of the world in twos and threes as they often did, and landed on the sidewalk, to peck at the glowing mushrooms, or in the cracks of the road. They were silent, as always, but there was never anything strange or untoward about these birds until we emerged from the narrow tunnel and into our neighbourhood.

I was born in the neighbourhood called Yokto. For most of its existence, it was beneath the notice of

anyone who did not live in it. It had been built only seventy years ago in a small cavern that could hold fifty families comfortably, but which held more than two hundred, now, in cramped, narrow streets. In Yokto, the roof of the world hung so low that none of the houses could ever grow beyond one storey, and those at the corners of the neighbourhood had to do without the steeped roofs that were in fashion, and which blackbirds favoured. The poorest of the poor lived in flat roof houses. Yokto was a dim, chill neighbourhood in comparison to others, for across the roof of the world was the lightest scattering of eyes, a hundred and thirteen, none of them bigger than my fist at the age of twelve. We relied upon our fungi and portable stones for light, and it served, but with only so many lights in the roof of the world, Yokto also kept a certain chill, as it never drew enough of the red sun's warmth for us.

By the time of our return, hundreds of blackbirds had covered the neighbourhood to such a point that their presence was noticeable, but not the curiosity that it would eventually become. My father, who had returned from the mines at midday, said that the birds had migrated one at a time. They emerged from the tunnel's black like an inky drop of water falling from a tap. As he was illiterate, he did not use such language, but you will forgive an old man this quirk in his own memoirs. Yet still, emerge the blackbirds did, and they came with scraps of paper in claws and beak, which they dropped on the streets and the houses of Yokto. Burnt and dirty and caked in dried blood, these letters lay, unmoving, until the soul-infected children of Aajnn arrived to retrieve them.

*Satomi*

An order today. An order? I don't know if I could call it .such. They've told us to capture blackbirds. As many as we can. Any way we can. Alive or dead. It matters not. The musket in the tower up from us lets out a crack every so often, proof that they have the same order, for there is no enemy to shoot at. No birds fall from the sky, however, and there is no sense that they have hit anything, so far. And why should they? You don't catch blackbirds, Kyo said after the order was delivered. If they're wild, you just don't. It's the Queen's law.

Our musket has proved useless, but we are trying despite ourselves. Orders are orders. We are using a blanket. When one of the birds lands before us, we throw it, trying to toss it over the bird to catch it alive. So far, we have succeeded only in throwing the blanket off the tower and into the ash and mud below.

*Yoshio*

\* \* \* \*

My mother wrote a letter to the Queen asking for a soulcatcher. She included Doctor Makino's letter, but there was no immediate response, which my father said was unsurprising. No one in Yokto could afford a soulcatcher, and the Queen's mercy was not as infinite as it had once been. My mother ignored

him and more blackbirds arrived, and more paper filled the streets. Stories of people trying to pick up the letters reached everyone, and my father tried it himself, to know if it was true. Like the stories, my father found his hands pecked by sharp beaks, but it could have been worse, as there were stories of blackbirds suddenly falling upon individuals, their black wings beating and claws scratching at faces silently.

“There are over three thousand now,” my father said, staring out the window, a bandage around his left hand. He was a short, stocky, unshaven man in worker browns. He could not read, it is true, but he could gauge numbers and lengths and widths with a glance better than anyone I knew, and no one disputed his estimation now. “There’s no sign that they’re going to stop, either.”

“The Queen will send somebody,” Mother replied from the small dinner table. She was writing a third letter requesting a soulcatcher, and had a third letter from Doctor Makino, who supplied them each time she went. A blackbird’s feather scratched across paper. She did not look up when she added, “It will be explained soon enough.”

From my position on the floor, I saw my father’s back straighten, the thick muscles around his neck tighten at the mention of the Queen’s name. The war had changed my father’s relationship with the Queen. He had mined before for new neighbourhoods, to find minerals, to help advance Aajnn, to help it grow. But with the war, his job had changed, and now he mined for metals and minerals that could be turned into weapons. His job, he said, was not to kill, or to aid in the construction of weapons that would, but when he complained, he was told that all resources in Aajnn were being directed to the war. He could work or starve.

The argument was an old one between my parents. The more pressing concern was the need for a soulcatcher. During the week since my return from the doctor, I had not slept well, and needed to be drugged after the second night. It happened, on that night, just as I was drifting off to sleep, that I felt my bones and skin moving. At first, I thought that the doctor’s words had come back to frighten me, that it was just the lingering hint of a nightmare; but when I touched my right arm, the skin shifted, and phantom fingers pushed up against it. I screamed. It was not, perhaps, the most masculine response, but it felt - I remember it now as clearly as that moment when I first felt it - as if a hand had been trapped beneath my skin. That it was caught in the meat and the muscle and the veins. That it was tangled against the bone. That it was struggling for freedom, trying to force my body into the right size and shape for it so that it might be able to move freely.

My only response was to scream. When Doctor Makino arrived in his doctor’s blacks, appearing from the dim night light as if he had been waiting in the dark for this to happen, he wasted no time in sedating me. I was to be sedated, likewise, each night, and in that haze I was only dimly aware of the second body pushing against my skin. But in the morning, I was sick and groggy, and unable to attend school, but there was no presence of this soul, except in my mind. I followed my mother on her errands, or sat in the main room, or worked at some other task, but at no point did I stop thinking about whose soul was inside me.

*Satomi*

They tell us that the enemy makes blackbirds from brass. That beneath the black leathers, beneath the beak, beneath the hard skin of claws, there is nothing but brass machinery. That there is no blood. That there is no soul. That the birds are nothing but the machines a man made. The machines a woman made. The machines that have been sent to spy upon us, to tell the enemy who we are, where we are, and how to kill us.

The plumes of smoke draw closer and I ask myself, "Will the enemy be of blood and bones?"

*Yoshio*

\* \* \* \*

My left arm, to this day, is longer than my right. I am right handed, and so my right hand and arm are used more, yet my left is thicker, stronger, the arm of a man who would always be more active than I. It is not something that you will notice upon first meeting me, but it is the physical reminder of my infection, of being Infected, and it is the only way by which I can now gauge what the owner of the soul once inside me looked like. Yet, in comparison to many other children in Aajnn who were Infected, my deformity is not even worth mentioning.

The Infected came into Yokto in the second week after my visit to Doctor Makino. It was they who picked up the burnt and bloody letters off the streets.

The first I saw doing this was a girl, no older than six. She was walking down the narrow lane that my parents' house was on, following a blackbird. The bird jumped from letter to letter, occasionally flying, but clearly leading her, and she hurried along behind it. Behind her came Doctor Makino in his doctor blacks and a tall woman in worker browns that, I assumed, was the girl's mother.

When the girl was outside our house, I walked down to her. The right side of her face was lopsided and still to the point that even her right eye did not move. Through her worker browns, I could make out the swell of a breast on her right side; it was an ugly thing, too big for her, and made more prominent next to the flatness of the rest of her chest. As she saw me approach, she did not speak, but remained still and quiet, a sullen girl.

Before I could speak, her blackbird leapt, and flew down the lane. The girl ran in a limping run, one leg larger than the other. Her mother moved quickly behind her, but Doctor Makino turned to me, his dark fading gaze resting on me, and then over my shoulder. When I turned to follow his gaze, a black blur startled me. Looking back, I saw that a young blackbird had dropped to the lane and stood on a narrow letter, watching me intently.

“I think this one wants you to follow it,” Doctor Makino said.

“How can you be certain?” I still remembered the dark blood down my father’s hand. I would not risk that.

The doctor sighed and rubbed at the right side of his face with a black-gloved hand. He looked tired, and sounded tired when he spoke: “The letters are meant for those like you, Michio. The Infected. At least, that is what we think, and certainly the birds are only allowing those like you to pick up certain letters.”

It didn’t take much to make the connection between the letters and the soul inside me. Would it really tell me the identity of the person trapped within me? Would it help? Before I could talk myself out of it, I stepped out into the street, picked up the letter the blackbird had moments before stood on. Tearing its dirty envelope open, I read quickly. “It is from a man called Yoshio.”

“Is the next?”

I followed the bird, picked up a second letter, opened it. “Yes.”

At the end of the lane, the blackbird stood on a third letter, waiting. The narrow buildings and dim light from the roof of the world made it seem as if I would be following it into the unknown, and I suppose I was, though I did not feel frightened. The doctor said, “Follow it and collect your letters quickly. The more you have, the more you will know about this Yoshio, and the easier he will be to remove when - *if* a soulcatcher arrives.” He paused, then added, “*Quickly*, Mi. Do you understand that?”

I didn’t, and said so.

“The Queen will not like this,” he explained. “The letters of dead soldiers are problematic enough, I imagine, for the secrets that they will reveal about the war. You hear rumours - you are too young, but I hear them. The Queen and those around her deny them, but they have been busy telling us all that we are winning the war for years now. What if these letters say otherwise?”

I had no answer, but the doctor did not expect one. He thrust his black gloved hands into his black jacket pockets, and began walking down the street in the direction of the young girl and her mother from before. It was in the opposite direction of where my blackbird waited, and when I turned to see him again, he appeared only as a dim outline, illuminated by the mushrooms beneath his feet.

Heeding Doctor Makino's words, I collected the letters that the blackbird landed upon. Even in my haste it took me all morning. Once, I tried to collect a letter that the bird did not land on. For that, I received a sharp peck on the hand. It did not draw blood like the bird attacking my father had, but I did not touch any letter other than that my bird landed on afterwards.

When I returned home, it was late in the afternoon, and my mother had been looking for me. I was scolded, but not harshly, for she had seen the streets fill with Infected and watched as they picked up the letters, and had been able to deduce what had happened to me. In her hand, she held a fresh green envelope that lightened her mood. It was a letter from the Queen, informing her that a soulcatcher would be arriving in two days time, and that we would not have to pay for its services.

### *Satomi*

The enemy is made from brass. It sounds insane, but it's true. I saw it with my own eyes. Commander Takahaslu showed me. Well, not me, not personally. I have never spoken with him personally. He won't speak to any of us individually. No, he told us all, together. He called all of us on the Northern Line into the Forward Command so that he could show us the enemy.

It had been laid in the middle of the tent, its skin sliced open, and we could clearly see that it had been built from pieces of tarnished bronze. It was a man, though, no matter what anyone says. A man. We could clearly see that. A pale man. A man with brown hair and deep set eyes. A man who had once lived and breathed, you could believe, but he was now a man made from brass.

The Commander did not give him a name. He was the enemy. Just the enemy. A man from The Shibtri Isles. Not even a man, if it could be helped. A thing. A thing from the Shibtri Isles, the Commander said, more often than not. He compared him to the birds we shot. Told us that they were not our blackbirds, just as this was not a man like us. They were both things. Things made by the enemy to be our enemy.

We had expected men and women of blood and bone, just as the Queen said, but no. They, the Commander told us, will not fight. They will send these machines, these replicas of men and women to fight, and leave the casualties as a burden for us.

We were silent after that. Shocked. Confused. Offended? A little, but it did not matter. There was only silence. Silence in which we all heard, clearly, the click, and then the faint hum of the brass machinery starting. A gentle sound almost. A humming.

And then the thing — the *man* thing — sat up.

\* \* \* \*

The soulcatcher wore the catcher's dark blue pants, jacket and gloves. Like Doctor Makino, the soulcatcher wore the white, high-collared shirt that her occupation demanded she wear. To my twelve-year-old gaze, however, the soulcatcher was much more attractive than the doctor had ever been. She was a woman and I was immediately besotted though, in hindsight, I imagine it is more correct for me to write that she was a girl, no more than six years older than me, having only recently been appointed to her position. No family in Yokto warranted a veteran soulcatcher and experienced soulbird.

My soulcatcher's name was Mariko Ohara. She was a small, dark haired girl, and curved in ways that I had not noticed before. It is, therefore, with some amusement that I write that her first words, after the courtesy of saying hello, were spoken to me with a knowing smile on her lips and amused light in the dark eyes that were behind her thin, silver glasses; those words caused in me such utter shock that my immediate response was to blush like I had never blushed before, and to tell her that she couldn't possibly mean that.

"I'm sorry, but I do. You have to take your clothes off." She was trying to be firm but failing. "I'm sorry, Michio, but my bird cannot search you if you're wearing your clothes."

"Must he take of all off them?" Mother asked.

She was making the situation much worse and it took all the willpower that I had at twelve not to spin around and shout at her.

My distress must have been plain to Mariko, for she said, "He can wear shorts, of course. Of course. He just needs to leave his chest, arms and legs free, so that my bird can search him. You'll need to take off your soulcatcher too. The birds do not like them."

Her soulbird was the biggest blackbird that I had ever seen, twice the size of those that had made Yokto their home. It - I could never think of it as a he, or even a she - was both wider and taller than those, and it had a thick barrel chest. Its black feathers, usually so sleek on blackbirds, were shaggy, as if to suggest



a wildness to the bird that could not be tamed, as did its long, dark slash of a beak. Yet, despite its appearance, the soulbird perched in its narrow cage quietly, drawing easy breaths. It was not bothered by the fact that the black bars of its cell pressed in like a fist against it.

Once I had changed in my parents' room, Mariko told me to lie on my back upon the narrow, single bed that dominated my own. Once I had done this, the soulcatcher and my mother tied my arms and legs down with heavy leather straps. As they did this, I felt, for a moment, ashamed of the room I occupied. It was the first time that I had ever felt ashamed, and that, indeed, shamed me. Compared to others in Yokto, I was not suffering: One of my parents worked, I did not share my room, I had a table and chair from which to do my homework, and I even had a few books and toys. I could read. My own father could not do that. Yet, in this position, I was able to compare my mother's faded brown worker clothing and Mariko's new, thick white shirt, and the silver studs in her ears - three in the left, five in the right - and the glasses she wore. My family could afford none of these things, I realized. Even the bed sheets I lay upon were old and threadbare and had been mended more than once. It caused in me a sudden bout of self-consciousness. If I could have hidden our poorness from this beautiful girl before me, I would have.

But there was nothing I could do. Mariko lifted the soulbird's cage above me and then, once it was still, her slender fingers opened the door and allowed the soulbird to stick its black head out. With a delicate movement, she bent down and placed her mouth beside it: "We are looking for the soul of Yoshio - he does not belong."

The soulbird's white gaze fell upon me. It was an oddly empty gaze, one I did not like. In its cage, the big black bird shifted. Its feathers ruffled. Its long sharp beak opened and closed in silence. Then, slowly, its body scraping against the bars, feathers falling off as it pushed itself out, it dropped lightly onto my naked stomach. Its cold claws pinched my skin. Its white gaze returned to mine. The emptiness in there was slowly becoming frightening but it was not something that I could look away from -

Its sharp beak plunged into my skin.

There was pain, but worse, I realized, was that it had ripped a piece of skin off my stomach.

He sat up!

I did not move. No one did. The brass man's brown eyes were wide open. In the moment that they glanced over me I knew, knew, that he was alive. Alive as you or I. But it was only for a moment that I could think that. The next, shouting, screams, and chaos. The brass man had leapt off the table.

In the confusion, he had no trouble reaching Commander Takaliashi. Men in soldiers grey stepped back from him. Men who were meant to fight him. To stop him. Men who had been assured that the brass man was dead. They stepped back. They veiled for him to stop. But they were frightened and confused and did not think to stop the brass man's thick, mechanical hands from grabbing the Commander by the throat.

We attacked him, then. Men threw themselves at him. Others smashed chairs. Anything. But it was not enough. Not nearly. Commander Takaliashi's neck splintered. We heard nothing, but when the brass man tossed him away, the Commander landed in a bent angle no living man could make.

I do not think the brass man expected to live. Whoever had sent him, whoever gave the order for him to die and come back to life, must have told him that there was no way to survive. And so he made no attempt to do so. Instead, he attacked the officers. He attacked only those with rank. He ignored anyone else. Even as we attacked him, he ignored those of us in simple grey.

I broke one of his limbs off. I had a hammer. A big, long hammer that they use in mining pits to break rock open. The tools were outside the tent. They are giving new recruits hammers, Kyo and I had joked when we saw them. We made jokes about how we would apply for them, for they were weaponry we were both more capable of using. And when the brass man attacked, we had no choice but to run for them. Yet with that hammer I took an arm off. With another Kyo smashed open the brass man's leg. Together we broke open his head. Together we killed it. We could not have done this with a musket. Yet still, even having done this, the brass man had killed five of our officers with his own hands.

We are back in the watchtower now. They sent us afterwards. Sent us back to watch the lines of ash draw closer. To shoot blackbirds. To await this enemy.

*Yoshio*

\* \* \* \*

“It is not Yoshio.”

Mariko's voice. It was faint, however, as if it was being smothered or pushed away, and could only be heard from a distance. I struggled to hear as she continued to speak, straining as much as I could, but her words were simply incoherent to me. I wanted to open my eyes and look at her, to assure myself that she was there, that she was a person I could recognize, but another voice told me not too. *Don't open your eyes*, it said. It did not explain why, but the voice sounded like mine in all but the subtlest of tones, and there was such an unquestionable authority in it that I did not dare disobey. Not yet. Not until I knew

more.

“But the letters are from him.” My mother’s voice spoke this time; it was loud and clear, as her voice always was. “How do you explain them, then?”

“A lie, maybe.”

“There are over ten thousand blackbirds in Aajnn. What kind of enemy could send so many?”

Mariko’s voice was still faint: “An enemy winning.”

“The Queen says otherwise.”

“I do not wish to disagree with the Queen.”

“You just did,” my mother said. “Your soulbird is not helping my son. You tell me that these letters are wrong. That this Yoshio is not inside him. You are even suggesting to me that the blackbirds in our neighbourhood - in our entire city, even - are not real. The only way that this could be true is if the Queen has been lying to us about this war. That is what you are telling me, is it not?”

“The Queen -”

“The Queen protects us!” Mother interrupted.

*Don't open your eyes.* I wanted to, needed to. I could feel the silence around me, thick and angry now, and opening my eyes, I knew, would diffuse it. I would prove to them that it was Yoshio inside me. That the birds were right.

“Mu.”

It was my father’s voice, distant as Mariko’s was.

“She is a guest, Mu,” he continued. “More than that, she is trying to help our son. It’s been three days. It’s as she says - this Yoshio is not in him.”

*Don’t open your eyes.*

My mother’s breath was heavy and ragged. “I know. It’s just - No, I am - I am sorry.” Her tone was rigid, angry, but the anger was directed at herself, not Mariko. I could not hear the soulcatcher’s voice reply, but my mother said, “No, please, I shouldn’t have said that. I have believed in the Queen since I was born. She sent you, you must understand. She sent you for our son. She has never - to think that she might be lying...”

“She’s just tired.” My father’s voice grew stronger, clearer. “Mu, you need your rest. You can’t be with him all the time.”

*Don’t—*

“What if he wakes up?”

*—open—*

“That’s why Mariko is here. You’ve barely slept in three days.”

*—your—*

“I want to be here for him.”

*—eyes—*

“You need rest.”

I opened my eyes. There was no one in the room. There was no room. Rather, there was only whiteness and a faint, faint pecking, coming from all directions about me. I tried to sit up, but I could not move. The pecking grew. It sounded as if it were coming from a sharp beak that was being scraped across hard stones. My arms and legs were immobile. I could feel straps holding me down. The pecking continued, steady, coming from all around me. I struggled to raise my head. I felt a stab of pain. Then another. I looked down and saw, standing on my stomach, its claws a wet red, the shaggy, wild soulbird. Its long, sharp beak had just pierced my stomach and plunged into the bloody mess that already existed. As I watched, it drew back, ripping the wet, raw contents of my intestines with it. As it raised its head, the soulbird's white eyes met mine and I realized, with horror, that they were no longer a clean, crisp white, but that they were stained red.

Its beak opened, and in a voice that was mine, it said, "I told you not to open your eyes."

*Satomi*

The tower to the North exploded today.

One moment, it was there. The next, its thin legs were all that remained, and its broken wreckage smouldering beneath the morning's red sky. I had been on watch when it happened. Kyo was sleeping. I had gotten us dry powder for the musket and so I had it sitting on the rail of the tower. Sitting ready. Kyo had helped me, even, after what happened in with the Commander, though as we stood and looked at the wreckage, I knew that our new musket was useless.

The explosion began in raining fire. It's the only way to explain it. A soft sprinkle of fare began to fall and then, suddenly, the tower exploded! It burst apart. Ripped apart. It was shredded. I don't — I can't explain it to you. The fire rained down and then, suddenly, the slowly bleeding mid-morning opened up like a wound, and there was a broken tower on the horizon and no sign of the enemy. No brass men. No brass animals. Just the plumes of ash, drawing closer. Ever closer. I know more fear every day.

*Yoshio*

\* \* \* \*

When I awoke, Mariko was sitting in my room. Her blue jacket was hanging off the back of my chair and she was sitting at my table, reading the dirty, burnt letters that I had collected. I was no longer strapped down, though my limbs felt sluggish, as if they had not been used for some time, and I was tired. There was a thin white blanket covering me and, before I said a word to Mariko, I lifted it. I was completely naked, but to my relief, there was no other mark upon me.

“How do you feel?” Mariko picked up a stone pitcher from the floor and poured a cup of water, then came over to me. “If your throat hurts, drink.”

I did, and after watching me take my first hesitant sips, she said, “It took five days. You’ve been in a sleep, of sorts, for five days, but you won’t feel rested.”

“Where - where is your bird?” I asked, my voice soft, scratchy.

“At home. He finished yesterday, so there was no need to make him sit in the cage for the return journey. Are you sure you’re fine? Five days is a long time to be under, so if you’re feeling nauseous, or you hurt, you should tell me.”

I shook my head. “Just tired.”

“Good.”

“Where is...” I hesitated, the memory of what I heard while under still fresh in my mind. “Was it Yoshio?”

“No.”

“Who was it?”

Mariko sat on the edge of my bed. “That took a little while to figure. You’re only my third patient, Mi, and I still have much to learn. Forgive me. My soulbird had found something, but it was difficult to remove. It wasn’t Yoshio, as I said, but that does not account for five days. Even an unknown soul should be able to be removed within two. Yet he worked a third and fourth. Only a suicide is so difficult.”

“Kyo,” I whispered.

“Yes, Kyo. It took him five days to pull Kyo out - if I had read the letters, it would have taken less,

perhaps. But I thought they were fake. I've only just read them now. In fact, I was just reading Yoshio's final letter now, where he finds Kyo." She stood, and picked the dirty piece of paper off the table. Aloud, she read, "I found him this morning. He had done it in his watch. In the time when he was meant to have his gaze on the dark red sky. When he was meant to be watching the plumes of ash. To report if they came closer. When he was meant to be watching for the first touches of flame falling through the sky at our outpost. But he hadn't been doing any of those things. He hadn't been watching. His eyes were open, but he would not see anything. Kyo had done it early in his shift. He was stiff when I touched him. Cold. So cold. Colder than the wind that cut through my clothes."

She stopped, but I knew how the rest of it went.

He lay against the wooden wall with the musket next to him. The musket that was now stained with his Wood. The musket that we had been given to defend with. To share, one between two. The musket we had just only gotten dry powder for. That musket he had used, finally. The musket he had used to crush his soulcatcher so that his soul could return home to Aajnn, so that it could find a sanctuary that he could not find here.

And I wondered, as I helped the doctor take Kyo away, how it is that I will return home?

*Yoshio*

\* \* \* \*

I never saw Mariko, my soulcatcher, again, but we only remained in Yokto for another month, so it was to be expected. Yoshio wrote in his first letter that he should have gone deeper into the world rather than taken part in the Queen's War; that he should have gone into the cities that were lit in blues and greens and, I learnt later, purples and yellows and much, much more, to places where the red sun and the Queen were not known. It was into these cities that my parents took me.

I remember well the morning they told me of their decision. For weeks, we had heard rumours that cities neighbouring Aajnn had fallen. That they had fallen as much as six to eight months ago. But it was not until a Queen's messenger, wearing the pale green that signalled his service, came around and spoke in Yokto that it was finally confirmed. The letters the birds brought, he said, were from real soldiers. The Queen was now attempting to establish a peace with the forces from the Shibtri Isles, and we need not panic. Or words to those affect. On the morning after that, I woke in my bed, chilled, the lights on the roof of the world dimmer than usual. Outside, blackbirds sat quietly, as they always did. Yokto was a neighbourhood of blackbirds now, and Aajnn a city of them. Climbing out of bed, I walked down the cold hallway to the living room, where my mother stood at the small stone dining table, crying.

I had never heard my mother cry before and so I approached her, quietly. As I drew closer, I could see the outspread wings of a blackbird on the table. They were still. As still as the wings of the blackbird on my eleventh birthday. My hand drifted up to my soulcatcher, to feel the warm bone and cold silver. I hoped that I would stay in it after I died. That I wouldn't become lost like so many others.

“Mother?” I asked.

Ignoring me, she picked up the long knife that was in front of her. The blade was old and scratched, but sharp, and there was blood over it. Angrily, she stabbed the blade into the blackbird's stomach, then twisted it, further ripping open the cut she had already made. When her sobbing grew louder with each twist of the blade, as if her grief were being strangled in her throat, I realized, finally, how much she had lost. How she had become her own lost soul, even with her soulcatcher firmly around her neck. The knife fell to the floor and Mother thrust her hands into the bird. She dug into the blackbird's stomach, her hard fingers clawing through organs, breaking bones, all in a desperate attempt to find one tiny piece of brass in the slippery organs that would return her faith. That would return her Queen.

“*Mother.*” She had begun breaking the blackbird's wings. I called out a third and fourth time, until finally, on the fifth, my voice pained from screaming, her hands stopped, and rested, trembling, on the table.

“Michio.”

Her voice was soft, frail, hurt. I had never heard it like that before and would hear it again, only once. Wordlessly, I took her hard, red hands into mine, and led her away from the bloody table.

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\* \* \* \*

**Hieronymus Boche**

CHRIS LAWSON

Chris Lawson is a doctor and writer. His award-winning fiction has appeared in *Eidolon* magazine, as well as *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Event Horizon*, *Dreaming Down-Under*, *Gathering the Bones*, *Agog!*, *Realms of Fantasy* and *Spectrum*, and has been collected in several Year's Best science fiction



anthologies and the Australian retrospective *Centaurus*. His stories have been translated into French, Bulgarian and Czech and one has been optioned for feature film adaptation. He has written non-fiction for journals such as *Borderlands* and *Ticonderoga Online*. A collection of his stories and essays, *Written in Blood*, was published in 2003. Most of his work is drawn from cutting edge biotechnology, although he sometimes lapses into fantasy and horror.

About 'Hieronymus Boche' Chris writes, "Simon Brown and I share an interest in World War One as a setting for existential horror stories and collaborated on 'No Mans Land' from *Gathering the Bones*. This story came out of a sudden visual image that struck me for no reason I can think of — that of the trenches arranged in a circle that Manchester the pilot sees from 20000 feet. It is a Dante reference of course, but it also says that the soldiers who ground each other's bodies into the Flanders mud were equal victims rather than natural enemies."

\* \* \* \*

DEAREST MATER & PATER,

P

lease forgive me for not writing, and for other things. We have been cut off for so long that we are all out of spare paper, so I am reduced to writing this in the margins of the prayer book you sent for my birthday. I do not know if this will reach you. You may find it unexpectedly amongst my effects, should you ever flip open this prayer book, perhaps to see what passages I've marked. There would be no purpose in sending this letter in the regular mail, even if I could. The Censor would never allow it through.

We are well behind the lines now. Our Bn. seemed so big when we were first separated from the main body of the division, and now there are so few of us.

We were cut off by a German advance that ran right over the only trench back to HQ. So now we can't get back through the main trench, and it's suicide to go up and over, even at night.

We fight and we fight and it seems to go on forever. We live in an endless cycle of skirmishing, scrounging, and sleeping. Every night Fritz comes at us and pushes us further down the salient. The salient gets steeper and steeper the further we withdraw, which gives the Boche an even greater advantage over us for their next assault.

The winter fog is constant, morning, noon and night. We haven't had a clear day for goodness knows how long, and the fog gives the landscape a spectral quality, which is a fitting milieu for the thousands of

bodies that have been ground into the mud.

When the Huns drop gas we can't even see it coming, and the first we know of it is when the mist around us turns green. There is so little warning that we keep our gas masks hanging on our necks at all times.

The fog comes up from the stream at the bottom of the salient. The stream is not marked on the Major's maps. We call it the Black Nile. Every day some of us head down to the Black Nile to carry water back. We fill our canteens, water bags and Dixies, and trudge back up the slope. The water tastes bitter, but at least we can drink and wash and shave.

There's no food. We ran out of rations a while ago and we're all starting to look terribly gaunt. There's nothing to eat except the rats, and they're too clever to be caught. After we roasted a few of them, they learned to keep their distance. Now they sit on the trench rim, just out of reach, watching us, whiskers quivering, until they see that we are asleep, and then they scuttle over and squeeze into our kits. Of course there's nothing left to eat in the kits, but the rats are in the same pickle as the rest of us and the smell of biscuits and Christmas hams is still in the canvas. The smell drives the rats mad with hunger and they gnaw at anything that resembles food. Leather straps are a particular favourite. We can't smell nearly so well, so it's not so bad for us as it is for them. This is the first time I've felt any sympathy for the wretched vermin.

It seems almost a sin to admit it, but I wish it wasn't just my sense of smell that was dull. I wish my ears were blocked and my eyes had cataracts. I wish I could not feel the cold in the trenches at night, or the vibrations that shake the ground when the German guns pound the salient. I wish I could feel nothing at all.

I don't know how long we've been cut off. Nobody seems to be sure. Counting the days is more difficult than one might think, what with the shortage of paper to write on and the constant pounding of the shells making it impossible to concentrate long enough to figure out dates and times. Sometimes my head gets rattled so hard I can't remember what I'm doing here, and I have to pull out my name tag to remind myself of who I am.

Earlier today... At least I think it was earlier today... Yes. Earlier today I was with Kiltie and Lofty... You remember them from my letters? Kiltie is the Scot. I guess it goes without saying. I've forgotten his real name now, because we only ever call him Kiltie, and it's easy to remember because of his Scots accent. Lofty's the tall fellow, *naturellement*.

Kiltie and Lofty and I had the job of scrambling down the salient to get water for the lads when Kiltie saw a shape in the fog. "Look at this," he said, and he pointed to the outline of what turned out to be an aeroplane - a Bristol F.2b fighter.

We couldn't believe it. We hadn't seen or heard an aeroplane for ages. We thought that we had been driven too far from the main body of the division and been given up for dead, yet here was a plane behind our position, where no plane should have been.

"It's wrecked," said Lofty.

"No it isn't," said Kiltie.

We moved quietly to the Bristol. The fog makes us tread softly when we walk and whisper when we speak. You never know if there's a Boche just out of sight in the fog, so we get about as quietly as we can.

We approached the Bristol with all caution. There were bullet holes in the canvas of the fuselage and one of its landing wheels was a little bent, but otherwise it was in fine condition.

The pilot lay in the cockpit, white, motionless, and with flecks of saliva around his mouth.

"He must have lived just long enough to land the plane," said Kiltie.

Lofty went over to look at the pilot. He frowned, and then touched the pilot's skin.

"E isn't dead."

The pilot's eyes opened, flickered around to take in our faces, and then closed again.

"It's all right, mate," said Kiltie. "We ain't the Boche. We'll patch you up and get you right."

Lofty had more practical things on his mind. "Can you 'old a gun?" he asked the pilot. "We could do with another pair of 'ands this evening."

I thought someone had better introduce us to the pilot.

“The tall fellow’s Lofty,” I said. “The chap with the burr is Kiltie, and I’m Mo. They call me that because of my moustache.” I pointed to my moustache to make the point. You’d be proud of my moustache, Pater; it’s big and bushy and I’d wager you would never have guessed it possible when I enlisted.

The pilot didn’t respond or move.

“Let’s just see what’s wrong with you before we get you out,” said Lofty.

“There’s nought wrong wi’ him,” said Kiltie. “Just look.”

The pilot was in tiptop trim. There was no blood to be seen and not a hole in his uniform, not even a scrape.

“I’m not hurt,” the pilot said. His voice was coarse and strained, as if he had never expected to speak again and was now surprised to find he had to.

“What the Dickens are you up to, then?” asked Lofty.

The pilot was quiet for a moment, and then said, “I don’t want to say.”

“Christ, man, we’re not about to court-martial you.”

“I should be dead,” said the pilot. “I really should be dead. I don’t know how I’m not.”

Kiltie laughed and said, “Hell, I’ve been on the front for months now. I should be dead too, but you don’t see me complaining about it.”

“The plane went into a nosedive and headed straight down into the fog. I don’t know how I’m not dead.”

Lofty and Kiltie and I looked at each other, not knowing what to say.

The pilot said, "I must have managed to pull out of the dive at the last moment. I don't remember doing that, but I must have."

Lofty whispered to the two of us. "'E's lost 'is bottle. Let's get 'im back to the Major and 'ope 'e's useful for something."

Lofty was the strongest of us. He climbed up to the top of the cockpit, wrapped his arms around the pilot's chest, and lifted him out.

"There's no need," the pilot said. "I could have got out by myself."

"You weren't moving," said Lofty.

"You didn't ask me to."

The pilot was a queer bird, alright, but at least he wouldn't need carrying up the incline.

Lofty and Kiltie and I walked him back to the temporary HQ. He was slow, but didn't need any help. On the way back, Kiltie asked him why he'd wanted to crash the plane. The pilot didn't answer.

"Come on, mate. We've all seen too much to be shocked. I've seen men blown to shreds before my eyes. I've seen rats eating eyeballs. You won't have seen that from up in the sky, I bet. I've even seen an officer bugging one of the young privates as punishment for some minor indiscretion." Kiltie looked at me as he said it and against my will I blushed. "We took care of him toot sweet, but it left a nasty impression."

The pilot said, "You're a hard chap, I'm sure, but you don't want to know."

"Why not?"

“Either you’ll think I’m mad, or worse, you’ll believe me.”

“For Christ’s sake,” said Lofty. “Just tell us.”

He wouldn’t speak.

Kiltie said, “We’ll give him a cup of char back at base. That’ll loosen him up.” Kiltie was joking. The only tea on the line is made from leather boiled in Black Nile water, and it doesn’t make anyone chatty. The only loosening it does is at the wrong end of your gut.

We hoicked our way up to camp. Men were scattered about; most were asleep, but some were up and cleaning their Lee-Enfields or trading the baubles they’d scavenged.

First thing we got back, we took the pilot to the Major’s tent. The Major was trimming his moustache when we came in. He put down his mirror and scissors and came to see what we’d brought him.

Kiltie said, “We found a Bristol fighter out back of the salient, and this sky wallah was in it. He’s a bit shaky because he thought he was done for. He thought he was going to crash but he managed to land at the last moment. Apart from a case of the willies, he’s fine.”

The Major looked him over. The fellow was white as a vicar’s daughter. “What’s your name, man?” asked the Major.

“Let me check, sir.” He pulled his name tags out from under his uniform and said, “Lieutenant John Henry Messenger, sir.”

“So, lads,” he said to us. “What are we going to call Lieutenant John Henry Messenger?”

Kiltie piped up. “Manchester, sir. Because of his complexion,” he said. “He’s white as a sheet. Also, it sounds a bit like his real name.”

“That all right with you, lad?”

The pilot nodded. Manchester was all right with him.

“I’m sorry to tell you this, lad,” the Major said, “But your miraculous survival might not amount to much more than delaying the inevitable. We’re cut off from the division and copping Jericho every night.”

“It’s all right, sir. We’re done for one way or another.”

The Major snapped upright with indignation. He said, “That’s not the sort of talk I tolerate in my battalion. You may be shaken, but I won’t have you pulling down morale.”

Manchester said that he had seen everything. He knew what was coming. It wasn’t a matter of attitude; it was what it was.

“So what is it that you know?” asked the Major.

“I don’t want to say, sir.”

“Whatever it is, it has affected you deeply, wot?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Don’t you think the rest of the men ought to know whatever it is that’s burning a hole in you?”

“I suppose so, sir.”

“Then out with it, Manchester.”

Manchester looked about, then at last chose to talk. He recounted a most peculiar story.

\* \* \* \*

## MANCHESTER'S TALE

Manchester had been flying over the lines doing a midnight reconnoitre when a spray of bullets ripped across the fuselage.

He looked over his shoulder to find a Fokker D.VII, bright in the moonlight, on his tail. He tapped his observer on the shoulder, but the observer didn't respond. Manchester gave the man's shoulder a great shove, and the observer's head fell forward, lifeless. The fellow had a bullet-hole through his chest.

Manchester put the Bristol into a hard bank to throw off the Boche 'plane, but the pilot in the Fokker was an experienced chap who knew how to hang back just the right amount to keep the fish on the hook. Manchester put the Bristol into a roll and, right at the peak of the roll, his observer fell out of the cockpit. The dead man fell away and disappeared into the fog below. When Manchester came out of the roll, he copped another spray across the fuselage.

The new Fokkers were not quite as fast as the Bristol he was flying, but they were more manoeuvrable. It was nearly impossible to shake one off in a one-on-one scrap, Manchester told us. His only chance was to dive into the fog.

He took the Bristol down into the cloud. Looking over his shoulder, he saw the Fokker holding back, staying above the fog cover. He knew the German pilot would be watching for signs of a trail in the fog. Manchester would have to fly low and risk smashing into the ground, or one of the few trees still standing on the front.

He flew as low as he dared for a full five minutes and then he opened the throttle as hard as he could and put the Bristol into a steep climb.

It almost worked. The Fokker had lost his trail and was doing slow circles above the fog. The Boche saw Manchester's Bristol come out into the moonlight and banked to catch him, but Manchester had enough of a head start to stay out of range of the Fokker's guns.

They climbed and climbed, with Manchester's Bristol slowly edging ahead. The Fokker opened his guns, trying for a lucky shot, but the rounds fell away safely below the Bristol.

Manchester fixed his bearings on the full moon and kept climbing. The air grew colder and harder to



breathe. The Bristol's engine began to strain, but he was pulling ahead of the Fokker.

Then, without warning, the Fokker exploded. A huge fireball erupted a few hundred feet below him. Manchester wasn't sure why. Sometimes the Fokkers could overheat and their fuel tanks or their bombs could ignite spontaneously.

He watched with relief as the Fokker's ruins tumbled back to Earth, strings of black smoke trailing the debris as it fell. Manchester eased the Bristol out of the climb and went into a slow descent. He watched the Fokker fall all the way down.

Then he saw what it was that had disturbed him so deeply.

From 20000 feet, the whole arena of battle was laid out before him. Moonlight illuminated the realm. The terrain wasn't the way it looked on the maps.

According to the maps we have, the front goes from Mullhausen on the Swiss border to Nieuport on the North Sea. Manchester ought to have seen a long ribbon meandering across the Earth, roughly north-to-south. No Man's Land should have been at the centre of the ribbon, with trenches branching and sub-branching either side of it.

What Manchester saw instead was that the trenches made a circle. No Man's Land ran in an enormous loop and the trenches flanked it all the way around. The entire arena seemed to be in the centre of a depression, with the mountains reaching up around it, and the slope running down towards the centre.

The centre could not be seen for the fog. Thick banks of mist rolled out of the core, obscuring everything in the middle, and only dissipating near the front, so that patches of No Man's Land and the accompanying trenches could be seen peeking through the fog.

"I have to confess," he said. "I didn't lose control of the plane. I put it into a nosedive."

His memories became confused from that time forward. He could recall diving. He could recall the moment the Bristol sank into the clouds and everything became white. The next thing he could remember was Lofty pulling him out of the aeroplane while Kiltie and I made chatter.

"I must have lost my nerve at the last moment, but I don't remember."

When Manchester finished, we stood in silence, mulling it over.

“Well, lad,” the Major said at last. “I’m glad you can see the madness in that story. Not to worry. We all get a little confused and disoriented under the strain. You had just lost your observer, which must have come as quite a blow, and also the air must be thin up there, wot? Quite likely not enough oxygen got to your brain. Let’s hear no more about it, especially to the younger lads who are rather impressionable. The important thing is you pulled through and we need a dependable pair of hands tonight.”

“Yes, sir,” said Manchester, and then we took him out and showed him around the camp and introduced him to the other lads.

\* \* \* \*

## **LAST NIGHT**

We left him to sleep on an old bunk, and then Lofty and Kiltie and I had to go back down the salient to get the water we had been sent for in the first place.

As we climbed down the salient to the Black Nile, we went back past the Bristol in the mist. It looked like a heroic statue, proud and strong.

It reminded me of the stone lions that guard the South Bank, and that reminded me in turn of the brewery there and your promise, Pater, to buy me a pint the day I reach my majority; I hope it’s a promise I’ll be able to hold you to.

We filled our bottles and buckets and Dixies and hauled the water up the slope and then did it all over again. Then we found our bivvies and our sleeping bags and took some rest. The Huns attack at night, so we sleep as best we can during the day.

We slept, dreamt, and woke at dusk. We cleaned our rifles, filled our ammo pouches and sharpened our bayonets. The Moon came up over the enemy trench before us, big and full even through the fog, and we waited for the Hun to advance.

The Boche came when the Moon was halfway to overhead. They cast moon-shadows towards us through the mist; the shadows leaped ahead of them and crawled over the craters in No Man's Land. They came in shambling lines, without a care for military precision. I know exactly how the poor sods felt. I've been in a few forward sorties myself. It's a queer feeling. You're a sitting duck, and the only thing that might save your life is that you are one of so many other Tommies marching across No Man's Land, and only so many bullets can be fired before the captain decides enough is enough and orders a retreat.

When you're one among the huddle, moving towards a dug-in enemy with machine-guns, the merit of military discipline becomes rather abstract. Instead one digs into one's own soul and finds personal rigour. One finds the strength to walk proudly in the face of death like a true Englishman. Of course, the advancing soldiers were German rather than English, but their pride was none the less for it, no matter what stories the newspapers tell about the Huns being spineless dolts.

They marched downhill towards us and we could see from the way they moved that they knew they were as good as dead.

The first wave of Boche came into range. We opened fire and ripped them to shreds. Not a single one of them was left standing. Another wave walked behind, stepped over the corpses, and fell to another hail of gunfire.

So it went, over and over: the Hun would advance and fall. Every advance would come closer, and we knew that sooner or later the Hun would overrun our trench and we'd be forced to withdraw further down the salient. Then dawn would come, and we would sleep. The cycle repeated itself every day, and the only thing that changed was the steepness of the gradient, the thickness of the fog, and the thinning of our ranks.

True to form, late last night, as the Moon swung over our heads and sank behind us, we found the Boche nearly upon us. We could see the gas masks on their faces. They were close enough now to return fire. Bullets cracked around us and machine-guns rattled. We fired so often that our rifle bolts grew too hot to touch, though we had no choice but to touch them. We did not have the luxury of even a few seconds to let the metal cool. We had to keep loading the breech and firing as fast as we could. Some men wrapped handkerchiefs around their trigger hands, and others let their palms scorch. The only time the breech got to cool a tad was when the magazine needed reloading.

Just before dawn, the Boche reached the trench and poured over the edge. We bayoneted a few, but the numbers were overwhelming and we scrambled a retreat to the trench behind.

We had already humped our supplies back there the day before, so we reloaded and fired into the advancing Huns. Then the sky lightened. It seemed as if the Boche were led by their shadows. When the

Moon was behind them, it pushed them forward. When the Moon was at the other horizon, it pushed them back. The stand-down signal rang across the field and the German soldiers went back to their trenches with what seemed as little urgency for withdrawal as for advance.

It was dawn and we were exhausted. I'd just poured some water to replace the sweat I'd lost when Lofty of all people came leaping over the parapet and into the trench next to me. I was about to ask him what he had been doing out in No Man's Land when the answer followed him over the parapet.

Lofty was dragging a dead Boche by his harness, and the dead Jerry tumbled into the trench, covering me in mud and sticky German blood, and knocking the cup from my hand. I'd have no water to drink until the morning run to the Black Nile.

"What the Devil are you playing at?" I asked Lofty.

"Mo, the pilot's right."

"What are you on about?"

"We're not in Flanders Fields, mate."

"Christ, not you too now."

"Just look and see."

He pulled the gas mask off the dead Boche. The poor Jerry had a hole in his skull the size of a saucer, right where his left eye should have been. You could see halfway into his brains.

"I've seen lots of dead men, Lofty. I don't much wish to see any more than I have to."

"Shut up and look, you stupid Minnie."

The Boche was all shot up to hell, and he still had Lofty's bayonet stuck in his chest.

Lofty said, "Look at 'im. 'E's got bits of uniform from all over."

The Boche was wearing a German uniform, but his harness was British, he had an ANZAC slouch hat, Canuck boots, and a jade figurine on a necklace.

"That's a South Seas idol," said Lofty of the figurine. "I've seen them Maoris carry 'em. I had to shoot this monster three times and I still 'ad to skewer 'im to make 'im drop."

"So he was a tough German who liked scavenging."

"How'd 'e get a head wound, then?"

"He copped a bullet while you were skewering him, that's how."

"Then how come 'is gas mask doesn't have a gaping big 'ole in it?"

He had me there, but I wasn't about to give in to his panic. "I don't rightly know, but there must be an explanation."

"Sure. The explanation is that the bullet went round 'is gas mask before it went into 'is brains. You really got the griffin there."

"Listen, Lofty. You know the war does things to our heads. It shakes us up; stops us seeing straight; makes us believe things that can't be true. Don't get in a flap about this, and for God's sake don't tell anyone else about it."

"What the 'ell does it matter who I tell? We're damned for sure, and I don't mean in some future spiritual sense, neither. We're damned right 'ere and now and probably dead to boot and just don't know it. We're living right in the middle of one of them mediaeval paintings of Hell. What was the name of that painter you told me about?"

"Hieronymus Bosch."

Lofty burst out laughing. It was the sort of laughter you hear from men who are dead-tired and pushed to their limits.

“Shut it, Lofty, and push this damned Jerry back over the top, will you? We both need sleep.”

I pulled my cap over my eyes and pretended to sleep. I got to thinking about what Manchester had seen and what Lofty had dragged back with him. I started wondering why we never got out of the fog, not even for a moment. I wondered why we had run out of food but always seemed to have plenty of ammo. I wondered why the lads in the Bn. had one name tag while Manchester had two. I wondered why the Moon seemed to be full every night, although that could have been my memory playing tricks. And I wondered if it was the Black Nile water that made it so hard to recall anything, even our names.

I thought about asking Lofty why we were in Hell, but I knew what he would say. Everyone here had done something to deserve it: the Major had been sent down from the base where he had been instrumental in developing attrition as a war strategy. Manchester had lost all hope and killed himself in his Bristol. Kiltie had knifed the captain who had punished me so immorally; but what about Lofty and me? I couldn't think of a reason.

I took the cap off my face and crept over to Lofty. He was as wide-awake as I was.

“You going to clean yourself up before you sleep?” he asked.

“I need to ask you a question,” I said. He looked surly with me, but nodded anyway. “I can understand why some of us would go to Hell, but why you and me? Is it because of what we are?”

“It's because of what Kiltie did.”

“We didn't have anything to do with that. He didn't ask us before he knifed the captain.”

“We could have stopped it.”

“How?”

“If we’d opened our traps and told ‘im what really ‘appened, that’s ‘ow. But you were afraid Kiltie would realize you ‘adn’t exactly struggled against the captain’s punishment. And I, God damn me, I wanted the bastard captain to die for what ‘e’d done.”

I couldn’t face him any more. I turned and walked away.

Down the trench I went to find an empty cubbyhole to be by myself. I got to thinking and I came up with a plan.

Please forgive me, Mater and Pater, not for what I am - because as Lofty says, God made us just as we are - but for what I have in mind. There are no chaplains here, and I am not certain a chaplain’s absolution would mean much to me any more. I can ask only you, in abstraction, even though you may never read these words.

This is what I’m going to do:

I’m not going to sleep this morning. I’m going to stay awake and I’m not going to drink any more of the Black Nile water. In case I forget anyway, I’ll have this letter to remind me.

Around midday, I’ll volunteer for water duty again. I’ll take Manchester with me and on the way down the salient, I’ll persuade him to take off in the Bristol and I’ll take the observer’s seat. If he won’t agree, I’ve got a German pistol.

It should be easy enough to turn the Bristol around and push it down the salient for a take-off.

We’ll fly out of this white emptiness, away from the front. I’m tired of being pushed further and further down. I’m taking us out of here.

Maybe I’m as crazy as Manchester and Lofty. In that case we’ll find HQ and let them know that the Bn. is cut off and needs rescuing. We’ll both get medals and it’ll be a splendid wheeze.

If I’m not mad, if we really are where I think we are, then there’ll be no HQ to find. I’ll make Manchester fly us to the centre of the maelstrom, right over the Devil’s throne, and then I’ll drop a few bombs over the side, straight onto Old Nick’s crown. I don’t imagine it will do Old Nick any lasting harm, but at least it will let him know that he’s gone too far. Not even the Kaiser himself deserves this

Hell.

After that, we'll fly right on past the Devil's throne and up into the Garden of Heaven if we can. And when we get there, I'll drop a bomb on Him too.

Please forgive,

Your loving son.

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\* \* \* \*

### **Terning tha Weel**

KIM WESTWOOD

Kim Westwood won a 2002 Aurealis Award for her first speculative fiction story, 'The Oracle', published in *Redsine 9* then translated for *Znak Sagite*, a Serbian specific magazine. Seven more stories have appeared since, in anthologies such as *Agog!* and *Eidolon I*, various Year's Bests in Australia and the USA, and on ABC Radio National. 'Terning tha Weel' was also shortlisted for an Aurealis Award.

She lives in Canberra with her partner, her dog and her novel, the last of which she took on retreat, thanks to a Varuna Writer's Fellowship. She has signed with HarperCollins for it to be published in 2008.

Kim writes: "Raz arrived, cocky like Brer Rabbit and ready for 'advencha', while I was walking one day through The Causeway, a less than salubrious part of Canberra down the hill on the river flats not far from the watered lawns and people barriers of Parliament House. She was, of course, impossible to resist; and so I followed her."

\* \* \* \*



me gonna tell you this one story strate from ware it herts, an evry werd ovit is fair dinkum. Its about tha Wird an tha Narsties, an how Jilly an me ended up ragsharers for a wile, an how nuthing good larsts.

\* \* \* \*

Grabit usta say Jilly an me were joynd, but that wos befor tha Wird, so I didn take much notis. She wos alus talking shit - I jis neva knu it wos a Gift. Enyway, Grabit ended up ded an awl our sensables ternd arse-ova on tha day tha higround an lowground stopped meening enything difrent, both being eqwaly tox.

How far did tha Wird spred? I cudn say, cos wile evrything still werked, nobody anserd. Wot I do kno is that wen Cambra became a Wirdness, sum ovus were awlredy safe undaground. As soon as tha Terrarism Alarm went off in Parly House, tha pollies an thair staffers an awl tha perverts who did tha kitchin an maintainense jobs knu to qwiksmart run down tha tunnils to tha bunkas ware nuthing - not even bad air - cud get in. But tha rest ov them left out in tha Wird, Ime sorry to say, were caktis.

Tha pollies wernt happy about us perverts being in tha bunkas, but thay wernt about to open tha doors jis then eitha, even tho tha airgages sed NoTox. Finaly tha staffers pushed a cupple ov pervs thru tha airlock an wotched them on tha skreens. Wen thayde been out a wile an hadn carked it, tha staffers disingaged LockDown an back thay awl crept along tha metal coridors to thair offises to peek out tha windows at tha sky, wich looked tha same as eva. But nobody vencherd parst tha safety wall that had been bilt round Parly House afta tha larst terrarist atack, an nobody came nocking eitha, so ov corse we wunderd iffit cud be jis us left.

Strate away tha pollies started shoving for Priority an whos gonna sit in tha Bigsliot Chair, an pretty soon tha Nashnal Intrest Party had orgenized one ov thairs (who jis happind to be Jillys dad) into tha Chair, wile tha Blueys (tha Tru Blu Party) were left to fite ova whode get wich Opazishon chairs. An then awl ovus tagged for perverts were pushed rite out.

Tha staffers - Narsties, we called them - took us down to Fedarashon Gate, tha seurity door in tha southwest wall, an slammed it afta us. Next thing, thayde opend it agen an Jilly came out awl brused thanks to her dad, who shede jis told in frunt ov evryone wot shede been doing with me behind his back.

Outside tha wall, nuthing moved. Not birds, or breeze -nuthing. Thare were drifts ov blackstuff like mold awl ova tha plase, an wareva it wos thare were peeples eaten away undaneath, so we kept well cleer ovit. A girly bunch ovus hedded for tha lake - exept it wosn enymore. Thayde reclaimed tha land to make a new guviment superb, an so parst Sorry Point wos a wide sqwelchy mudflat, ded qwiet til you got to tha Cambra river belting thru tha gulch. We crossed Commerwelth Bridge an set up unda tha dome ov tha War Emorial, wich had been closed down along with tha rest ov tha publik bildings becos ov terrarism.

Tha uthers - sum Corzway boys an a mixja ov pervs from Okes Estate - I dunno ware thay ended up. Mole rekond later she saw a bunch ova by Yarralubla Chiminy on tha behindside ov Parly House. She wos al us going off alone on expedishons, but she skrounged us sum good stuff so we didn mind wot she did, long as she kept away from tha ded peepel an tha Wirdstuff.

\* \* \* \*

Looking down onit from here on Mount Ainsly, my fayvrit vantige point behind tha Emorial Dome, youde think that Cambra had alus been a Wirdness - that itd cum coted in fungusy black an wos this qwiet on perpis. Tha hole city looks aynshent, with tha clouds bellied down perply an swollen on tha hills, Hiding for a storm that neva cums. Its hard to rememba how cleen it wos, from tha locked suberbs on tha higround neer Parly House with thair pryvit houses an gardins, to tha city centa on this side ov tha river ware tha money lorndrys (banks an stockbrakers an ashurensse offises) usta do thair bizness behind security wotch towers an round tha clock hellipatrols.

I jis rememba dum stuff, like me mums bernt dinnas an wacko relatives, an how on tha lowground ware tha pervs lived, evry Corzway house had a Hills Hoist washing line ded middle inits yard an a concreet path going strate from tha back door to tha peg bag.

An I rememba how that larst day started out qwite normil, with me an Harley, my kid bruther, taking terns swinging on tha Hills Hoist an winding tha handle wile tha naybors big dog growld an wynded on tha uther side ov tha fense. We were alus skared one day that dog wud jump tha fense an bite us, but sumthing else much wese happind befor it got tha chance.

Thay say sum good alus cums out ov bad, but I neva thort that nor saw eny sine ovit til Jilly. She showd me how even tha blackest bad had sum silver litening. We met becos ov Grabit, our naybor on tha upside. She werked tealady shift at Parly House, an thare wos nuthing she didn kno about that plase. Enyway, it wos Grabit who orgenized my reeding an riting seshons with Jilly - her being a teacha, an me being a pervert who wosn alowd to skool lern.

Even tho Jillys dad wos a Nashnal Intrest polly, she wos nuthing like him. She didn care I wos a Corzway pervert - she thort evryone shud reed an rite. Wich is why, on tha days I wosn getting trucked across tha Capital Territry borda with tha rest ov tha pervs to do factry werk in Qweenbein (nicknamed tha Qweerbin becos ovus), Ide be sneeking down tha persinhole Grabit had shown me outside tha Parly safety wall to go see Jilly. So on tha day ov tha Wird, me an Jilly were unda Parly House riting tha alfabet, an Grabit wos hedding off shift to gasbag with me mum in our kitchin. Thass tha tearable crulty ovit.

\* \* \* \*

Afta our girly bunch set up at tha Emorial Dome we chose a Hed Girl, an wen tha blud came awl at tha same time each month we chose a new one. Hed Girl gave out jobs to tha rest ovus, an this partikula nite I wanna tell about - wen things began to tern tha rong direkshon -Jilly an I were sposed to do a Parly supply run, but insted I wos out on me own, Jilly being crook from tha blud.

Ide jis got thru tha tunnils neer tha east servis exit wen one ov tha Narsties on gard juty cort site ov me. YOU TROLLY LITTLE WEASIL! he shouted at me sprinting like hell down tha tunnil, dufferbag full up an banging agenst me hip. I lept ova a fallen down blockade - one ov tha ones that usta keep us out ov Parly bizness befor thay bilt tha wall - an into tha carpark with tha showfers sitting in thair Commerwelth cars, harf eaten by Wirdstuff. Then I looked back, but I knu he wudn be following cos thay neva went out in ones - an enyway, tha speshal protekshon suits were too hard to run in. I larfed at that, tha grate git, standing in tha tunnil entrense dressed up in traffik orange with oxy tubes sticking out, shaking his big goaty fist. I gave him tha finga then an took off ova tha mudflats, hopping jis like Skippy on tha tussox, hedding for tha bridge.

Tha uthers were wating, fitcheting an skroungy in tha dark. Wotcha brort? thay aksed, trying to get into my dufferbag. I kept it closed, becos if I didn hand it to Hed Girl Arlee for propa sorting thared be trouble, an I reely didn wanna give her corz. She wos a lot bigga. An she gave Chinese berns that neerly skrewd yor arm off.

Back inside tha Emorial Dome, Arlee upended tha bag an pawd thru tha loot. Wossis then Razza? she sed, holding up a lethery ball tha size ov 2 fists. I dunno how that got in thare, I sed back. An I reely didn, but Ide seen sumthing like it befor wich I wosn going to menshon rite then, so I sed lets jis chuck it away. But Arlee sed thass for me to decide. She ternd it ovaranova in tha torchlite wile Jilly red sum riting on tha bottom then spoke up awl seerius. Its a militry divice, she sed. We looked at her an then at it. Thass probly wot it is, we were thinking, cos shes tha girly swot. Well, Arlee sed, iffits a militry divice, it shud go on tha Exhibishon Table. So we trapedd to tha middle ov tha Emorial Dome neer tha Fountin Ov Tha Hedless Solja, an solomly lade it on tha big table with tha uther Hardifacts.

Rite-O! anounsed Arlee from tha hed ov tha table, now its time to tern tha weel. An off we wooped down to tha belltower stuck in tha middle ov tha Cambra river, awl gosty wite in moonup.

It wos reely called tha Nashnal Capital Belltower, an thayde bilt it afta tha old carilyan had got nocked ova by a suicide plane aming for Parly House. Inside wos a big weel with numbas an bells onit that usta tern ovits own accord an bong difrent notes evry hour, but then it broke an thay neva botherd to fix it.

We climed tha stairs an sembled on tha ledge across from tha bellweel that hung down in tha deep water rushing thru tha kasm. Maglet, larst moons Hed Girl, took tha ferst go in acordinse with propa etiket. We set up tha chant an began pulling on tha ropes that brort tha weel round, an she started running to catch a

bellspline wen it came parst. WEEL SWINGS WERLD TERNS! we hollerd as her hands hooked on. BELL RINGS WERLD BERNS! as down she swung with tha bell sounding BONG! parst tha hammer on tha wall, an into tha river gushing like fury at tha bottom.

We straned on tha ropes an wotched her disapear. If she wosn thare wen tha weel came full turn then she wudn be back for a wile, cos if you got swept thru tha funnilway thare wos only one plase to get out befor tha long drop ova tha old dam wall - a bit ov sand on a bend about a harf a kilameter away, with a track cut up tha bank.

Afta Maglets tern, we got shuving for tha next ride. Jilly went, her skinny arms wrapping a strangelhold on tha spline an legs kicking a fit, dress hoyked up an nickers showing her beutifull mussly arse to tha werld. THASS MY JILLY! I shouted, an it bounced rite back at me ILLY! ILLY! ILLY! off walls that smelled ov unda-arms an salt. I luvded Jilly in that belly herting eyes hot way then, an I wanned tha werld to kno it, that we were ragbound as tite togetha as figs an practikly splitting with ripe for each uther.

Down she went, an wen shede got safe back around an lept onto tha ledge, I ternd to tha josslers. Now Ime gonna sing youse awl a song, I sed. No! No! thay korused, we hate yor songs. I sed but this ones betta than usual. This ones about us - a jolly vencher song. Thay cudn say much to that, so I started up big an mouthy, tha sound booming agenst tha walls, wile thay held thair ears - even Jilly - but I didn mind. I cort site ov those perly shells cupped in her delikit hands, an I felt as full as crikey that shede chosen me for ragsharer. An I wanned her rite then an thare on tha wet concreet floor, with evryone round, yes I did.

I went next. Wotch tha glidyest pro ov awl my tresures, I sed. Wotch tha bellringa go. Tha chant started up agen, an I ran hell for tha wetha as tha weel came round with tha biggest bell onit. I reechd out, missed, an fell on tha next one down. It reely hert, but tha girlies were carrying on sumthing tearable so ov corse I didn show that itd cut into me stumick a bit. I jis manidged a larst breth in befor tha cold closed round my chest like a fist, an tha water started thrashing in awl direkshons.

As soon as tha weel swung out ov tha water on tha uther side, I shinned round to be reddy for wen it ternd tha 12 an started on tha down. I wos ditermind not miss tha drop onto tha ledge, cos that wud meen falling splat back in. Igmoninius, as Jilly wud say. She used those sorts ov werds a lot, like she had a dikshonry in her hed.

Wen I got back on tha ledge she came up to me reel slidy an coy, an so I stuck my hand up her jumper for a qwik feel. She sed Mind Yor Manners Raz McLane - jis like that, in her posh voise - an then I wanned her werse than eva, but etiket sed not in frunt ov tha uther girlies, cos sum ov them wernt as lucky as me to be ragbound.

Ragsharing with Jilly wos tha most beutifull thing I eva did in my life, an ment we wud alus be part ov

each uther, no matta wot. Each full moon on tha blud wede pull out tha rags from inside us, splecked brite with tha ferst red, then push them up each uther, hers in me an mine in her. Afta that wede lock lips an suck in each uthers air til we both got dizzy, then press our cum bones togetha an fuck like fish.

\* \* \* \*

It wos close to liteup wen we got back to tha Emorial Dome an trotted parst tha Hedless Solja into tha Monsta Hall ware tha tanks an planes sat gray an lumbery in tha dark. Bombs Away! I shouted up at G for George wile girlies climed inside its grate big airopplane nose an buckled into fiterjets an toppled down tankholes jis like Gullivers in tha Land Ov Giants.

Wen tha giggling an snuffling had gone qwiet, an me an Jilly were snuggled in a submerine tube nice an smelly, she sed give me yor finga. How far up? I aksed. Awl tha way, she sed. An thass how we stayd til litefade.

Tha girlies neva vencherd out in britelite. It wos manely to keep cleer ov tha Narsties, who only came out then cos thay were skared ov tha dark. Thay wore fullbody traffik suits with gasmasks an oxypipes an big rubber boots, an went round poking tha Wirdstuff with vibratory sticks. We did n reely kno wot thay were afta, an we did n care partikuly, so long as it wos n us.

\* \* \* \*

Thare wos alus talk at Parly House about how tha Wird mite have happind. Us pervs thort it wos jis anuther terrarist atack, but tha Blueys were shure that sumone experamenting on smartbombs had axidently let one go on tha rest ovus. Tha Nashnals, awl sektritive, sed AN WE KNO WHO. That shat me to tears. I thort who cares who?

Jillys dad for one. Erly on hede made a speshal arangemint with tha Narsties, an thayde seen to it that hede been made Hed Man. Then hede shuffled tha Parly numbas to make shure that pervs got voted out ov Parly House. Jilly hated him. Reely hated - like wife hot. I did n aks, but tha bad blud between them went a long way back.

I neva got tha chanse to deside wetha I hated my dad. Mum told me that wen he discoverd she wos peggars an that a pervert wos gonna cum out, he skived off. Nobody wos sorry, but. Grabit usta say that tha only usefull thing tha pervless wunder eva did wos give me mum tha juse to make me. To tell you tha truth, I wos n much good for me mum eitha - alus getting into tha sort ov trubble that brort tha patrols round to tha Corzway, an mum havng to cuver. But she neva made me feel bad for being born a pervert, cos she knu Ide had no say init.

I dont reely wanna tell you this part, but I mite as well, sinse awl tha wite litening that Jilly showd me has gone now.

I went back to tha Corzway strate afta tha pollies disingaged LockDown. Thay were saying to stay behind tha safety wall, but I thort up yorz an I climed out tha same way I usta clime in.

In Bartin, tha guviment suberb below Parly House, tha Wird had only begun to take hold so thare wosn much ovit to see - jis on tha ded peeple, little patches like soot cuming out ov splintas stuck in thair skin, an lots ov berst open 2-fist balls barning holes in tha ground. Peeple were lent ova crashed in cars, an lying on footpaths still holding thair breefcases, an heeped both sides ov offiseblock doors - nobody having eny idea wich wos betta, in or out.

I cut thru State Sircle, parst tha cathlic cathedrill thatd been taken ova by tha Asembly Ov Jehova Evanjilists an ware perverts wernt alowd. Tha blackstuff had got rite to tha top ov its spires, like tha Wird had bernt God out ovit an now Satan had set up hell inside.

Harfway into Kingsten, I got to tha Tilopea Park fense. It usta be my fayvrit plase, with willows like giant fountins an popla leaves shining in tha sun, an soft green grass even in summer wen evryware else wos crackly brown. Only tha Kingsten peeple had keys to tha gate - wich neva stopped tha pervert kids getting in an using tha fasilities befor being chased back out by tha patrols.

But now tha Wird had got in. Thru tha fense I cud see itd dun sumthing tearable to tha trees an thay looked like big warty toes, black from frostbite. Thare were 2-fist balls skatterd about, shriviling into tha erth like rotted fruit, an peeple lying about too, neerly invizible for Wirdstuff, an nuthing green left.

Tha Corzway wos a stretch ov lowground down behind tha old railyards an tha city morchery. Eny ovus whode had tha pervert gene show at berth ended up thare, or Tuggers in tha south, or across tha wetlands in Okes Estate. I walked along tha concreet path cracked in awl tha usual plases, parst a man whode been getting his mail. Blackstuff had spred from tha splintas in his arm onto tha lettabox, an now it had a little fungusy roof. I thort then that sinse tha Wird spred from peeple onto things, tha Asembly Ov Jehova cathedrill mustv been chokablok with Evanjilists to get that black.

Our house wos ezy to pick becos ov me mums wite pickit fense. She got tha idea from a pitcha in a House An Gardin that Ide filched from Parly House. Tha local perv kids usta sneek ova in tha middle ov tha nite with spraypaint, then shede heer tha rattle ov tha cans an cum rushing out with her dads shotgun that wede kept hidden from tha wepon amnesty drives, an thayde skatter, larfing. It wos tha Corzway joke, cos evrybody knu tha gun wos brokin.

I found them in tha kitchin kerld up togetha unda tha table, with our dog Busta snuck into me mums lap jis how he usta do on tha couch at nite wen she wotched telly. Tha Wirdstuff had shriviled black onto thair bones like in a pitcha Jilly onse showd me ov a plase called Pompey. I stood in tha doorway for a bit, notising how Harleys shoelases were undun an membring tha flowry blu tablecloth wos me mums fayvrit, awl tha wile nicking little peeces ov wood off tha door frame with my finganails. A big lump ov sumthing sat in my chest, an I had to clench hard down to stop my jaw wobbling. Afta I left, my hands started to hert reely badly an I saw that Ide ripped sum ov tha nails off me fingas, so now thay were bleeding.

It wos only later that I reelized Grabit wosn thare. But I neva went back to look agen.

\* \* \* \*

Tha nite afta Ide dun tha supply run on me own to Parly House, Gash shouted from tha Exhibishon Table for us to cum look. We rushed in an saw how tha 2-fist ball had a punkcha, an how a tiny bit ov blackstuff wos leeking onto tha wood.

Thass bad Jilly sed, dont tuch eny ovit. So we jis looked sum more. I wos thinking hard about splintas an wetha eny were gonna cum out wen Arlee sed in her Hed Girl voise did sumone go neer tha 2-fist ball? Afta a bit Mouse sed skaredy, yes I hit it with me war hammer - jis a little tap to see if thare wos enything usefull inside. Her face wos skrunching up to cry an Arlee wos gonna take a swing at her, but Jilly reeched out an held Arlees one tite fist in her 2 delikit ones. Arlee, she sed, I kno you can make Mouse show you her hands, parms up.

Only Jilly cud get a Hed Girl like Arlee to stop an do tha rite thing, an awl tha wile follow propa etiket. Mouse showd her hands an tho thay were black, it wos normil evryday black, nuthing like wot wos cuming out ov tha ball. You didnt get eny ov that stuff on you then? Arlee aksed, an Mouse sed no cos it wosn cuming out befor. Well yor very lucky Jilly sed, an gave her a big sqweezy hug. Tha rest ovus jis stood thare a bit awkwid, seeing how Jilly still had sumthing inside her that wede awl gone an lost. I thort back to tha larst persin I dun that to. It wos Harley, wen tha tracta tire hede been swinging on in tha Corzway playground had brokin its chain an bounsed him on his face.

I wos awl set to tell jis then about Tilopea Park, but Mole piped up an sed Ive seen a hole lot more ov those balls unda tha Big Bird at tha Sqware Ov Apreshiashon. An wot were you doing unda tha Big Bird? Arlee aksed, getting angry awl ova agen. Rekinoytering sed Mole standing up taller than Arlee, an a fite cuming in her eyes. Mole, sed Jilly stepping qwiksmart inbetween, wot else wos down thare? A factry sed Mole, proud to have speshal informashon for Jilly. Well you betta not go neer that plase agen, Arlee growld. An that wos Hed Girl Final for awl ovus.

But afta I told Jilly about Tilopea Park, she perswaded Arlee to take tha 2-fist ball back to tha Big Bird - wich was reely an eagel stuck on a tall pole looking down ova tha Sqware Ov Apreshiashon.

It wos a present from tha Merican goviment to tha Astralyans, Jilly sed as we pulled a rockit lorncher tube off a tank in tha Monsta Hall. Wot for? I aksed. For being such good allys, she sed. Like how? I aksed. Like wotching thair backs wen they were envading uther peeples cuntries, an letting them put reserch bases in tha Astralyan desert on didginis ground. An becos ov that, thay bilt a Sqware Ov Apreshiashon in evry Astralyan city. With bird poles like ours? I aksed. Yes, she sed, but a difrent sort ov bird on each one.

Wen we got back to tha Exhibishon Table tha blackstuff had bernt a hole rite thru tha wood, so we qwikly poked tha 2-fist ball inside tha tube an plugged tha ends. Then off we went upriver to tha Big Bird.

Mole led tha way parst tha razer wire into tha Sqware Ov Appreshiashon to tha harfsize metal door hanging open at tha back ov tha bird pole. An then we climed down into tha Mericans undaground factry.

At ferst there wos jis lots ov mashinery rooms but nothing to see, an Arlee sed why arnt thare eny ded Mericans? wich is wot we were awl wondering. Then we got to an open spase with computas an maps ov difrent Astralyan cities on tha walls. Tha Cambra one had a cross for tha Big Bird, an lines with numbas (Trajektrys, sed Jilly) drawn from thare to tha Corzway an Okes Estate an Tuggers, wich were awl marked brite pink. Jilly red out sum uther riting that sed Target Sites, an I put one-an-one togetha. I sed thay shot those 2-fist balls out ov tha Big Bird, didn thay? I went ova an found Tilopea Park with my finga. Wot if thay were gonna drop them jis on tha perv suberbs, but sumthing went rong?

Jilly wos walking up an down tha map walls like she had bees in her bonnit. Tha Mericans left, she sed, becos thay reelized tha Wird wud spred like Mixamatoxis, an thay cudn stop it.

I wos gonna aks about Mixamatoxis wen Mole sed look thru thare, an pointed to a glass peephole beside a door marked with a hazid sine, like on hospital waystbins. An thass wen I saw Grabit. She wos dressed in a Merican uniform, sitting in a mashinery room filled with 2-fist balls. Tha one shede rapped her arms around had berst, an she wos cuverd in Wirdstuff.

We ditched tha rockit tube an footed it out ov thare to be back in tha Emorial Dome befor liteup. An wile we were following tha boundry fense behind Cambell, tha militry suberb on tha Qweenbein side ov Mount Ainsly, Jilly kept going ova to Mouse to see if she wos awlrite. I wos a bit anoyd about tha attenshon Mouse wos getting - speshly afta tha cuddle - so wen Jilly sed to me maybe we shud do sum reserch to find out more about tha 2-fist balls, I sed in me big loud voice DO NT BE SUCH A POLLY.



I was sorry as soon as it left me mouth. I sed dont lissin to me Ime a fukwit an I didn reely meen wot jis came out. But she looked at me so darkeyed an silent that my hart jumped into me throte.

She went off on her own that same day, creeping out wile it was still britelite - probly to go on reserch without me.

Afta shede been gone maybe harf a day, with me sick to tha stumick an swetting alone in our sleephole, I went to Arlee cuddled up in tha back ov tha comando truck with Daris, her ragsharer. I sed Jillys missing an Ime worried now. Arlee jis nodded, an called out awl tha girlies.

She organized us strate away into serch groups. Me an Maglet got tha neerby riverbank. We serched parst tha Anzak Parade monuments swallowd in weeds, then started upstream along tha top ov tha gully, checking ova tha edge in case shede fallen. But I knu she hadn.

We found her in tha belltower, lent agenst tha concreet, draglines cuming an going from her body for evry time shede tryd to crorl for home an been forsed back. An jis so we knu who, tha Narsties had drawn thair sine on tha wall above her - a nuclea simbol with a snarly face in tha middle, same as on tha backs ov thair speshal protekshon suits.

I held her, my skinny girl, with her neck lolled back an gaping, an skreemed up at tha belltower shadow poking its poizin finga into tha sky. I skreemed til my throte was raw an I was choking on bits ovit, but thare was no bottom to ware it was cuming from.

I tryd to put her dress back on riteway round but it was so ripped I cudn, so I kissed her beutifull cutup face til tha blud onit was wet agen an I cud taste tha things that had been dun to her. Then I cuddled her up close an licked her like a newborn, as if wen I got tha blud off shede brethe agen. But it was too late to tern tha bad around. ltd gone an blacked ova tha wite litening foreva.

\* \* \* \*

We beried Jilly jis by ware I am now. Tha uther girlies wanned to put her strate unda a pile ov granit stones, but I cudn bare to think ov her lying so close to awl tha bad. So I made them dig down with war vetrins shuvels to cleen soil, an I lade her in, dress tucked round her poor brused legs an hed resting on my duffercoat, wile Arlee sed werds ov consilayshon about Girlpower an tha Aftalife. Then evrything went blery in tha hole, like awlredy she was mixing with tha erth.

Jilly alus looked so delikit, like she mite brake if anyone pushed on her tha rong way, but in her hed she wos tha strong one ov awl ovus. An she wudv told us why not to do wot we did next.

Tha girlies vowd a pact ov vengense on her Hed Man dad, becos badness alus bleeds from tha top down, an he wos at tha top. We stood round tha Fountin Ov Tha Hedless Solja, cutting into our arms with a Veetnam Vetrins mashetty from tha Exhibishon Table an smeering our blud on tha Solja. I stuck my arm agenst tha metal an sed tha vengense werds, but awl tha time I wos looking down a long tunnil from far away, jis wannig to go ware Jillyd gone. Afta that, Mole thort up tha idea to use tha 2-fist balls. But ferst we went to tern tha weel.

It wos a no moon nite, inbetween tha blud, an tha water rored unda us like a monsta inits hole. We stood on tha ledge in silense, wating our tern, then one at a time latched onto a bell an swung down into tha cold water, thinking ov Jillys poor brokin body an ravenge.

We went an got sum more rockit tubes from tha Monsta Hall an marched them to tha Big Bird, loding up sevrul balls from tha edge ov tha Hazid Room away from Grabit, then 2 girlies to a tube we crept ova tha bridge, across tha mudflats, an down tha persinhole outside tha Parly safety wall.

Sneeking down tha coridors ov power into tha deeper chambas I thort ov Grabit left awl by herself unda tha Big Bird, an wetha she mite have dun a switcheroo on tha Mericans Trajektrys an Target Sites from tha perv suburbs to tha Parly Tryangle an city centa then pushed tha GO button becos she didn kno that tha Wird wud spred like mixamatozis. I wunderd how cum shede sed about Jilly an me being joynd, an not about tha tearible things afta that. But maybe shede jis told tha good bits cos thare wos nuthing she cud do to stop tha bad hapining evenshally.

Jillys dad wos in tha Priority Room in tha Bigshot Chair, snoring in his Hed Man robes. We tiptoed in an grabbed him so he cudn move or shout wile we tyde him to tha chair an stuck sum rags in his mouth. Then we rolled tha lethery 2-fist balls out an lade them like devils marbles round him. Wen we dropped one in his lap for good mesure, his eyes went so wide I thort his eyeballs wud pop out.

Choosing a ball each, we hit them awl at tha same time with tha Hardifacts wede brort - jis a little bit like Mouse had dun, so nuthing wud cum out strate away. I got to hit tha one on his lap becos I wos Jillys ragsharer. Then we stood in frunt ov him, chanting low an meen WEEL SWINGS WERLD TERNS, BELL RINGS WERLD BERNNS, like we were laying a kerse. I cudn look on his face enymore, so I stared at his row ov polly medals ware soon it wud be jis as black as on tha inside. An then we left tha way we came.

\* \* \* \*

Pritty soon tha Narsties came afta us for wot we dun, an thay neva even botherd to sneek up. We herd them ferst at tha belltower, an a bunch ovus went down to spy. Thay were flame blarsting tha slabs ov concreet with our girl simbols on, an pushing woteva thay cud into tha river. Then thay got tha bellweel with tha pulling ropes, an tugged so hard that tha bells clanged agenst tha hammer like heaven wos anounsing Gabriel or God. But insted it wos tha Narsties dressed in traffik orange with snarly faces on thair backs.

I neva found out wot made them an Jilly's dad hate pervs so much. Grabit usta say that thare wud be more pervs evry generashon, an altho sum peepel wernt happy about that, it wos jis Natral Seleکشon. But I wudn kno enything about it. Wot I do kno is that tha Wird made evryone do things that shud neva be dun. Like wen tha Narsties got hold ov Mouse for being larst away from tha belltower, an stuck a pole awl tha way up her an put her onit in frunt ov tha Emorial Dome jis befor thay came in for us.

Tha fite didn larst long becos nun ov our Hardifacts werked very well as wepons, an tha Narsties had oxysuits with gasjets an speerguns. In tha middle ovit awl Arlee got skewerd rite thru an fell ded on top ov me, pushing tha barbs into my stumick, an then tha membrense tiles unda us calapsed an I fell into a serprise war trench. Thay torched her rite ware she wos an left her body plugging up tha hole with me still undaneath.

Afta thayde got thru with awl tha girlies an thare wos no more skreeming, tha Narsties took off. I pushed on Arlee til I cud crol out, an then thare I wos unda tha Emorial Dome with tha silense an metaly smell ov blud, tha one whode brort trubble home in tha ferst plase an made Jilly go off by herself an get cort - tha one girly who didn dezerve to be left alive.

\* \* \* \*

So thass why its jis me now telling you this from harfway up Mount Ainsly, with Jilly ded unda tha stones, tha girlies gone, an no weel left to tern.

Grabit came parst a wile ago, spikanspan in her Merican uniform, saying that tha wife litening is cuming for me soon. An she shud kno - shes tha one with tha Gift. Meenwile Ive got an eyeballs vue to Parly House, tha flag flapping onits pole like a bird cort in tha clouds, but I carnt rememba if tha suns gone down awlredy. Ime jis thinking about Jilly, an ovus snuffling an larfing in our sleeppole with tha wite litening awl around like an angels halo. An how nuthing - not even tha Wird - wos bad enuff to hert us that one time ov my life wen I thort good stuff cud happin, an that it mite even larst.

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## The Legend of Greatmother June

ALISTAIR ONG

Alistair Ong has had short stories published in *Chelsea* in New York and *Aurealis* and *Eidolon* in Australia, and has also had a short play produced in Los Angeles. He is a graduate of the Clarion Writers' Workshop in Michigan, the TropNest Script Initiative at Fox Studios Australia, and the Master of Fine Arts program at Sarah Lawrence College in New York. He is currently teaching creative writing at LaTrobe University and NMIT in Melbourne, Australia, and completing his first novel, *Bamboo and Red Envelopes*. Excerpts from the novel will be published in *Meridian Volume 19 Number 1*, and in *Uninvited*, by Flat Chat Press, in October 2007.

Alistair writes: "Writers learn from writers. I have never met these three, yet I owe them a debt of thanks all the same for their lessons in the craft. Fragments of their work have stayed with me over the years, just looking for a place in my own work and finally finding a home in this story. 'The Legend of Greatmother June' is inspired by Clifford Simak's languorous, pastoral tales of oddities in the countryside; Theodore Sturgeon's recipe-as-story metaphor in 'Tandy's Story'; and the gentle, layered prose of Amy Bloom, so light on its feet and yet so heavy with resonance and meaning. I hope you enjoy it."

\* \* \* \*

M

y grandfather discovered a recipe for stories, a grand and unique confabulation of flavours. He learned it when he was young. He could have kept it to himself, hoarded it like so many shavings of gold. Instead, he shared it with our family. Over the years, as he had children, and his children had children, and we all moved far away, the story changed. Along the way we tinkered with the recipe, adding idiosyncratic voices, neurotic characters, implied endings. Eventually, people had their own personalized versions. Mine goes something like this:

Take one slice of Brightly Shone the Moon that Night, fall asleep Dreaming, add Burnt Meat, cook in June, play Hide And Seek, listen to The Family Legend (but hear a Story), find Uncle Bob keeping Secrets. Change Fuel, top with a robust helping of Wenceslas and peer through Windows. Stir twice and serve.

\* \* \* \*

## **BRIGHTLY SHONE THE MOON THAT NIGHT**

Molly had hair as red as Sean's, probably because they were twins. Molly's hair was long and straight and kept in a French braid she tied herself. Sean's was short with curly waves. Slowly didn't have any hair, but then she never had any to begin with.

The trio was hidden in the melaleuca trees, steeped in moonlight behind the barn. The fallen leaves crackled when they moved, like the Coco Pops they had for breakfast, and when the wind squirmed through the leaves it made a low warbling rustle.

"Good King Wenceslas looked out, on the Feast of Stephen," Molly sang. "When the snow lay out about, deep and crisp and even."

"Round about," said Sean. Nestled inside his pocket was a football card of his favourite player, Wayne Carey.

"Shut up," Molly said. "I'm in the middle of a performance."

Slowly floated towards her, shifting through shades of aqua and turquoise and mauve. It was her way of chuckling.

If Sean had laughed, Molly would have been mad - he was always telling her what to do, even though he was only older by four minutes - but Molly didn't mind about Slowly. *Nobody* minded about Slowly, except her mother. Slowly had done so much for the family - for many, many years. Slowly was the one who had warned them about the big storm last August, the one who had encouraged her to sing. Molly would do almost anything for her best friend.

\* \* \* \*

## **DREAMING**

Sean's favourite football team was the Kangaroos. His favourite player was their then captain, Wayne

Carey. Yesterday at the schoolhouse Tommy Johnson was teasing him about the Kangaroos. "Your captain is wankery," he said. "Wankery, wankery, your captain is wankery." Sean was afraid, because Tommy was bigger than he was and the best cricket player in the East Paraburdoo Under-11s, the Cockatoos. Sean knew what his father would do. Sean curled his right hand into a fist and wrestled Tommy to the ground.

When Molly saw them tumbling in the quadrangle, all elbows and knees, she rushed over and punched Tommy in the side. He shoved her away, and she cut her knee on the concrete. Sean yelled at her for interfering in man's business. Molly said she was going to tell their mother, and Sean said she was fat.

When they got home Molly told their mother. "Sean got into a fight," she said.

Sean tried to change the subject. "Molly is singing in the Christmas play."

Their mother waved her finger at Sean, like a pecking bird. "Tell me about the fight," she said.

Sean told how it started. Their mother said, "I hate Wayne Carey."

Molly kept her book bag in front of her knee so her mother wouldn't notice the cut. She didn't.

That night, Molly was nestled deep in her dreams. She was woken from her sleep by Sean shaking her shoulder.

"What?" she said.

"I'm sorry," he said, and she went back to sleep. The next morning she asked him if she had been dreaming. He didn't answer.

\* \* \* \*

**BURNT MEAT**

The twins had lost their father five years before, when they were four. Sean remembered that when his father came home he would smell like soggy wool and eucalyptus and that he had a scar on his ear - although Sean couldn't remember which one. Molly could only remember how her father used to do her hair. Everyone said he was a hard worker, and no one in the family could ever remember a time when he was afraid.

He died on a Thursday. Slowly had found a new way to fertilize the soil. Uncle Bob said they had never had such a good year for both the wheat and the cows. In return, the twins' father had purchased an industrial-sized magnetic coil and a plasma-screen television for Slowly and helped her cannibalize the appliances for parts. Slowly was in the barn telling him what to do, and father was excited. Sean was translating.

Sean remembered a flash of light and the smell of burnt meat, like bacon left on the grill for too long. When his vision cleared his father's skin was darker than the aboriginals' in town. Sean and Molly's father was buried in the backyard, beside the rest of their family for five generations. Forty-three graves had been dug on the property since June O'Bannon first came to the Pilbara.

\* \* \* \*

## **JUNE**

In 1888, fifteen year old Jimmy Withnell was on his way from Mallina Station to the schoolhouse. He was particularly excited that day, because last week Jessica Stampley had opened her Eton jacket and promised to show him what lay beneath her petticoat. A small crow fluttered past, chasing a caroming spinifex twig. Jimmy reached down and picked up a dust-encrusted rock to throw at the bird, only to find that it was a lump of quartz flecked with gold.

The gold rush to the Pilbara brought European settlers, Chinese miners, Japanese pearl-ers, Aboriginal labourers, and a fiery Irish nineteen year old named June O'Bannon. She spent two months living from a swag and a tent, pushing a rusted wheelbarrow cradling her belongings, a pick and a digger's pan in the baking summer heat. She dry-washed her sweaty clothes each night, distilled drinking water from the meagre plant life, and stoically tolerated the desert flies that buzzed about her scorched face. In that time she discovered one gold-quartz pebble and a hand-sized hunk of iron pyrite.

The day Slowly arrived was the hottest one yet. Her arrival was announced by a cracking sound like snapping timber and a dark teardrop that tore through the sky and fell to the ground in a cloud of dusty red earth. What wafted up from the wreckage to confront June looked like a small, shimmering yellow and green will-o'-the-wisp but seemed harmless enough. It followed June for the next three days, and try as she might the thing would not leave her alone. Each day she would walk and dig, dig and pan, and the insubstantial cloud that was Slowly would glimmer behind her, yellow and green, lemon and lime. On the

third day, as she dug, the thing turned lightning blue.

On that day two things happened: June struck gold, and the pair figured out a simple way to communicate.

\* \* \* \*

## **HIDE AND SEEK**

Molly and Sean liked to play hide and seek. Sean forgot to hide his feet, so Molly always looked for a pair of work boots sticking out from the hay bales, the back of Uncle Bob's ute, the closet. Once she saw Sean's red socks poking out from underneath their mother's bed. Molly thought he let her win sometimes, just to be nice, although Sean denied it.

The twins' mother had a scar by the philtrum in her upper lip, and she talked with the slight hint of a lisp. You couldn't notice when she said "Sean", but you could when she said "Shtop it" and "I don't want you shpending sho much time with Shlowly."

Once Molly was hiding in the hayloft in the barn. Her mother entered, though she rarely visited the barn; that was where Slowly lived. Her mother yelled at Slowly. The words were hard to make out but they were something about Father. Slowly flashed deep-sea green. Molly wanted to yell, "Leave her alone, she's sorry!" but nothing came out. Instead she just crouched and watched.

Her mother hurled her drink at Slowly, but it passed through her and shattered against the wall. Her mother almost tripped over Sean as she stumbled from the barn.

"Let's clean this up," Sean said, stepping inside and crouching down to collect up the shards of glass in his hands.

Sean and Molly cleaned up the mess, though that wall smelled bad for days, like methylated spirits or turpentine.

\* \* \* \*



## **THE FAMILY LEGEND**

June never cared much for the money; all she wanted was a place to call home. Slowly helped her find more than enough gold to purchase a plot of land in Paraburdoo.

June named her Slowly because that was how she moved, like a cloud sauntering its way across the horizon. Slowly would stay by her side until others came and then disappear into the dirt, reappearing only after they had left. June thought it best, too - most of the other miners were a superstitious lot, carrying rabbit's feet and lucky coins and panning for gold in areas based on wild hunches and itchy feelings.

June married a balding man with a handlebar moustache called John. Their two sons, Michael and Seamus, took to Slowly as if she were one of the family. When Michael was four, June taught him how to milk Butters, their cow. One day in May, as the dawn crept into the shed, Michael turned to June with a lopsided smile and announced, "Slowly wants to go home."

June didn't question how Michael could understand Slowly. But from then on, he - and later Seamus - would translate for their friend. They found out a great deal about Slowly. She hadn't planned on visiting them, and she would need the family's help to get home. As it turned out, she would need their help for a long, long time.

The legend of June O'Bannon was passed down from generation to generation, explaining the story of their magical visitor and their duty to her. Each generation of children would translate for their elders, until eventually they grew too old and stopped hearing her, and another generation of children would take over as translators. Everyone in the family did what they could to help.

Molly and Sean had heard the tale many times over, but they never tired of it. They abbreviated June's honorific to Greatmother June, since they couldn't be bothered with saying great-great-great-great Grandmother June.

\* \* \* \*

## **STORY**

Uncle Bob was a tall man with a neat moustache and a crook knee that meant he had to walk with a cane. He had carved the cane himself, from the branch of an old mangrove tree in Karijini. Uncle Bob was working on Slowly's ship. It was almost finished, but the twins didn't tell him that. That was their

secret.

“Tell me a story,” Sean said.

“Which one?” Uncle Bob said.

Molly scolded him. “You know which one.”

“Once upon a time there was an untamed stallion with a silver tail. He was the wildest stallion in the land, and people called him Flintlock. It took four men to rope him. Scores of men tried to ride him, but Flintlock would throw every single one of them who dared to sit on his back. One day a woman arrived and said she would ride him. Everyone laughed at her, except one man with a black hat.

“She mounted Flintlock and held on tight. He bucked and stomped for hours, but the woman was strong and would not be thrown. Finally, as twilight settled, it seemed Flintlock was broken. The woman dismounted and strode away. But Flintlock bellowed and charged. The man with the black hat jumped the fence and stood in front of her.”

“Because he wasn’t afraid,” Sean said.

“Because he wasn’t afraid,” Uncle Bob said. “Flintlock reared at him, but the woman pushed him out of the way.”

“Because she loved him even then,” Molly said.

“Because she loved him even then. The horse’s hooves clove into her face and chest, and she fell to ground. The man with the black hat dragged her to safety. She was in the hospital for three days, and every day the man with the black hat would sit by her bed. After the woman left the hospital, she went back to Flintlock and rode him again. This time she would not be tricked. She broke him.”

“Mean horse,” Molly said.

“And six months after that your mother and father were married.”

The twins smiled. *No one* told a story like Uncle Bob.

\* \* \* \*

## **UNCLE BOB**

Molly was forever asking her mother for a pony, but Sean would rather have had the autographed number eighteen guernsey of his favourite football player. Their mother used to shush them and tell them not to be so annoying. The twins hushed, but they knew they could afford it. Slowly helped their great-great Uncle Max produce the best Shorthorns and Herefords in the state in the 1930s by telling him how to alter the cattle's feed grain. Uncle Bob just happened to purchase land on top of a prime iron ore deposit just west of Dampier, which he sold in 1962 to Hamersley Iron Pty. Ltd. for twenty times his initial investment. All of their profits went into the family trust.

That was at least part of the reason Uncle Bob worked so hard trying to help Slowly, though not all. Even when the parts they needed weren't going to be invented for years, if ever; even after another attempted ship failed to work - like great-great grandfather Patrick's boomerang ship - Uncle Bob would struggle on. He would have Sean and Molly ask Slowly more questions, so he could try to come up with a work-around.

He was working in the barn when Molly came running in to fetch him for dinner. His forehead was shiny with sweat, and when she entered he leaned against the wall rail and rubbed his sore knee.

"Coming, Uncle Bob?" said Molly.

"I think I'm going to be a little late for dinner tonight. I'm almost finished."

"You're working too hard. Come on, Mum'll get mad at you." Molly motioned him over.

"Come help me," Uncle Bob said, prying himself from the wall with a groan. Molly trotted to him and took his hand. As they left the barn, he felt the cool evening wind brush his skin, and he stopped, sucking in great breaths of air. "What is it like, when Slowly talks to you?"

“Don’t you remember?” Molly said.

“Less and less every day,” he said.

“It’s like eating her dreams. They fill you up, like fairy floss, and then you know what she’s thinking.”

Uncle Bob craned his neck and looked into the night sky, then turned back to Molly. “I remember. Now all I can do is try to read her colours; it’s like I’m listening to a foreign language.” He bent down and kneaded his leg, making great waves of flesh around his knee. “I miss it,” he said.

“Mum says Slowly is just using you,” Molly said.

“That’s because she’s never heard Slowly, she’s never tasted her dreams. Your mother was too old to hear her by the time she married your father. Your father knew what it was like, though. He could hear Slowly when he was fourteen. I stopped hearing her when I was twelve.”

Molly grinned. “It’s like she wraps you up in a blanket of dreams.”

Uncle Bob nodded. “That’s why I’ve been working so hard,” he said.

\* \* \* \*

## **SECRETS**

Uncle Bob finished working on Slowly’s ship. After a hundred and nine years, only the fifth ship was ready. Slowly flashed camel-tan and said she needed to leave tonight; the next window would be three years from now. The twins didn’t tell Uncle Bob that. Instead, they said Slowly needed more parts; they would continue next week.

Molly and Sean had never told Uncle Bob that one of them had to go with Slowly - they never told their mother, either. They knew the adults would be upset, and they might even say no. Slowly had said she needed one of the twins to be the engine for her trip. She said it might hurt a little, but she couldn’t do it without them. The adults didn’t have the right fuel.

Sean was worried after what had happened to his father. Slowly said that was an accident, a test run. He had asked Slowly if she were sure they would be all right. Slowly had flashed an amber, a slightly too-amber “Yes,” and Sean had made up his mind.

The twins stood together in the shadows of the barn entrance, where their mother couldn't see them through the kitchen window. Molly grabbed Sean's shoulder, harder than either of them expected.

“Let's both go,” Molly said to him.

The beginnings of a smile flickered across Sean's face, then he shook his head. “Someone's got to stay here with Mum.”

“I don't want to stay.”

Sean screwed up his face. “Well, neither do I.”

“So what are we going to do?”

They started to draw straws to see who would go with Slowly, only they couldn't decide whether the short straw was good or bad. Molly didn't want to toss a coin, so instead they took Sean's collection of Wrigley's football cards and shuffled all of the Kangaroos players - he had over forty cards altogether, including doubles. The one who drew the player with the highest number would go with Slowly, the lower number would stay with their mother.

Molly drew first. She drew Jess Sinclair, number nine. Her face dropped, because she knew her chances were slim. “This is unfair,” she said, before Sean had even picked his card. “I don't want to stay with Mum.”

“Look at it this way,” Sean said. “If you go with Slowly, you won't get to sing in the school play.”

Molly shrugged. “I won't mind,” she said, though they both knew she was lying.

Sean fanned the cards out in one hand. He withdrew a card and frowned.

“You win,” he said, bending the card in his hand. “You get to go with Slowly.” Molly ran and hugged him, but Sean didn’t hug her back. His shoulders sagged, and he jammed his hands in his pockets.

\* \* \* \*

## **FUEL**

The twins’ father was buried on a Monday. The clouds drizzled all the way to the church, and Molly squirmed in her damp Sunday dress. She and Uncle Bob sat in a pew at the front. Behind them a man was crying. Molly cried too, though she wasn’t sure why.

Sean stayed by his mother’s side, and when he tried to leave she only wrapped her arms around him tighter. She clasped his hand through the entire service. Once, when his hand was moist and itchy and he couldn’t stand it any longer, he tried to slide it out from hers. She clamped down so hard he winced.

Afterwards, they milled around outside even though it was still raining. Molly splashed in puddles until Sean screwed up his face at her. Lots of people approached their mother and spoke to her in low, hushed tones. She never replied to them; she would only nod and shuffle away until someone else came.

When they returned home the twins went to the barn to check on Slowly. She was glowing a soft, apologetic ocean green, but the twins didn’t blame her. They knew she didn’t do it on purpose. It was an accident; Slowly had just been trying to jaunt from one side of the barn to the other. Their father just wasn’t the right fuel.

\* \* \* \*

## **WENCESLAS**

After dinner, the twins cleared the table and excused themselves to do their chores. Afterwards, they slid into their mother’s room to say goodnight, but she was already asleep. The television was still on, and the bottle was still open on the nightstand. Molly screwed the lid back on, and Sean pulled the bed covers up to his mother’s chin.

They went back to their room. Molly dressed in a Polish court costume with a gold clasp at the collar, then worked her hair into a French braid which Sean fixed in place with a sky-blue ribbon.

“That’s just like dad used to do,” Molly said.

Sean crinkled his nose, as if he had smelted something bad, and placed a tin coronet on her head. “It’s not the same as in school,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

Sean was too noisy, so Molly put her finger to her lips and shushed him. They propped open the window by Molly’s bed and slipped outside. The leaves were dry and crackly, but once Sean turned on the flashlight they had little trouble sticking to the quieter dirt path. Behind the barn, Slowly was waiting for them.

Molly sang while Slowly pulsed a bright, brilliant citrus orange.

“Good King Wenceslas looked out, on the Feast of Stephen. When the snow lay out about, deep and crisp and even.”

“*Round* about,” said Sean.

\* \* \* \*

## WINDOWS

Inside the barn they gathered around Slowly’s ship. It looked like a square metal window frame, a little taller than Molly. The frame stood amongst a heap of discarded electronics: wires, circuit boards, a television carcass, a butchered stereo.

Slowly flickered ghost white.

“I’ll miss you, too,” Sean said. He turned to Molly. “And you too, ugly.”

Molly hugged her brother, and he tousled her hair. "Wait," Molly said. She reached into her pocket, then briefly placed her palm in his. Molly punched Sean on the arm and hurried back to Slowly. In his hand was her football card: number nine, Jess Sinclair.

Molly stood in the metal, and it framed her like a painting. Slowly began to circle around the window, and as she did the window filled with colour, desert yellows and neon pink. Shadow-black lightning snaked across Molly's face. She twitched. Her brows knit together in pain, but she stayed silent. A sharp breeze tugged at Sean's skin. The ebony lightning flickered again, then again, each stroke broader and darker, until darkness filled the window completely. And then it stopped, suddenly. A soft wind ruffled his hair, then everything was still.

"Molly?" Sean said. She was gone.

Her football card lay crumpled in his palm. He smoothed out the cardboard as best he could and slid it into his pocket, next to number eighteen, Wayne Carey. He wondered whether he had done the right thing. Then he thought of his father.

Sean shuffled through the darkness to the back porch and hunkered down into the steps. From where he sat, he could see in through his mother's window. She was still fast asleep. Above his head, the stars were pinpricks of light in the sky. A kookaburra cackled in the melaleuca trees, and a stiff breeze rustled the fallen leaves in the yard.

\* \* \* \*

That is the story of my grandfather, Sean. Eventually, he graduated with Honours in Engineering from the University of Western Australia and joined the army. He was stationed in Turkey for two years, then Hungary for two more. He met my grandmother, Yvette, in Budapest. My father and his two sisters were born there, though my father returned to the family estate before his twentieth birthday. I think he was curious about the truth behind the legend of Greatmother June. Grandfather stayed in Budapest with his Yvette for twenty more years, until she passed away from an undiagnosed brain tumour. Then he came back to the Pilbara, to the old house and the barn and his memories.

Grandfather tells us he'd spent years hoping Molly or Slowly would return, wondering if they would appear after every thunderclap or lightning strike, a sudden cloud of dust in the distance. Now he says he hasn't thought of them for years. We don't believe him, though. He spends most of his time these days on the front porch, looking out along the road that leads past our house and towards the centre. We see him start when there's a sudden wind or a willy-willy comes marching through the burnt ochre dust, and we know what he's thinking.



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## **PUBLICATIONS**

The publications listed below actively seek original Australian science fiction, fantasy, horror and weird fiction. Check the websites or ask your local library about the books and magazines.

*Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*. A bi-monthly magazine of local and international speculative fiction. ISSN 1446781X. Subscriptions from Andromeda Spaceways Publishing Co-Op Ltd, PO Box 495, Bentley WA 6982, Australia, <http://www.andromedaspacesways.com>.

*Antipodean SF*. A monthly ezine, featuring ten new flash fictions every issue.

[www.antisf.com](http://www.antisf.com), or email the editor at: [editor@antisf.com](mailto:editor@antisf.com). *Antipodean SF* is archived in the National Library at the following address: [purl.nla.gov.au/NET/antisf/](http://purl.nla.gov.au/NET/antisf/).

*Aurealis*. Australia's longest running speculative fiction magazine. ISSN 1035 1205,

ISBN 0975214322. Can be ordered direct, or through your local bookshop. Subscriptions available from Chimaera Publications, PO Box 2164, Mt Waverley, Victoria 3149, Australia, <http://www.aurealis.sf.org.au>.

*Australian SF Forum*. A periodic ezine of new science fiction stories and articles,

<http://www.ozscififorum.com/>.

*Borderlands*. SF magazine from Western Australia. ISSN 1448224X. Subscriptions

available from [subscriptions@borderlands.com.au](mailto:subscriptions@borderlands.com.au). <http://www.borderlands.com.au>.

*Cosmos*. Science magazine which includes SF. Stories are reprinted online a few months after the original publication. The website also has some original fiction,

<http://www.cosmosmagazine.com>.

*Dark Animus*. Irregular horror magazine. ISSN 14473747. Subscriptions from PO Box 750, Katoomba NSW 2780, Australia, <http://www.darkanimus.com>.

*Fables & Reflections*. Magazine with fiction and some articles on the fantastic. ISSN 14461900. Back issues from PO Box 979, Woden ACT 2606, Australia. <http://www.Fables-and-Reflections.net>. Sadly, *Fables & Reflections* published its final issue in 2006.

*Infinitas Newsletter*. A bookshop newsletter which includes the occasional short story. Infinitas Bookshop, Shop 22, 48-50 George St, Parramatta, NSW 2150, Australia, <http://www.infinitas.com.au/>.

*Orb: Speculative Fiction*. An annual magazine/anthology series. ISSN 14425580. Subscriptions available from Orb Publications, PO Box 1621, South Preston, Victoria 3072, Australia. [home.vicnet.net.au/~Orb](http://home.vicnet.net.au/~Orb).

*Shadowed Realms*. An ezine dedicated to short horror fiction. <http://www.shadowedrealms.com.au/>.

*Specusphere*. A website dedicated to exploring all aspects of speculative fiction in Australia. Publishes short fiction and articles, [http:// www.specusphere.com/](http://www.specusphere.com/).

*Ticonderoga Online*. An irregular ezine dedicated to original science fiction, fantasy and horror, <http://www.ticonderogaonline.org/>.

*Visions*. Website and occasional ezine, supported by Fantastic Queensland Inc. <http://www.fantasticqueensland.com>, and <http://www.visionwriters.org>.

*Wyr/efd*. An irregular new ezine featuring short stories, flash fiction, and reviews,

<http://www.wyred.frih.net/>

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## COLLECTIONS

We found mention of these collections published in 2006. (Addresses are given for independent presses, where known.)

Lee Battersby, *Through Soft Air*, Prime Australia, ISBN 0809556464,

<http://www.primebooks.net>.

Simon Brown, *Troy*, Ticonderoga Publications, ISBN 0958685665. Ticonderoga

Publications, PO Box 611, Bentley WA 6982, Australia, <http://www.ticonderogaonline.org/>.

Terry Dartnall, *The Ladder at the Bottom of the World* (e-book), Trantor

Publications ISBN 0975279114, <http://www.trantorpublications.com>.

Terry Dowling, *Basic Black: Tales of Appropriate Fear*, Cemetery Dance

Publications, ISBN 1587671239, Cemetery Dance Publications, 132-B Industry Lane, Unit 7, Forest hill, MD 21050, USA. <http://www.cemeterydance.com>.

Paul Haines, *Doorways for the Dispossessed*, Prime Australia, ISBN 0809557401,

<http://www.primehooks.net>.

Trent Jamieson, *Reserved for Traveling Shows*, Prime Australia, ISBN 0809556022,

<http://www.primebooks.net>.

Margo Lanagan, *Red Spikes*, Allen & Unwin, ISBN 1741146577.

Sophie Masson, *Walking in the Garden of My Mind*, Altair Australia Books,

<http://www.altair-australia.com>.

Tony Shillitoe, *Tales of the Dragon*, Altair Australia Books, ISBN 0975720864,

<http://www.altair-australia.com>.

Lucy Sussex, *Absolute Uncertainty*, Aqueduct Press, ISBN 1933500069, Aqueduct Press, PO Box 95787, Seattle, WA 98145-2787, USA. <http://www.aqueductpress.com>.

Kurt von Trojan, *When I Close My Eyes*, Altair Australia Books, ISBN 0975720856,

<http://www.altair-australia.com>.

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## **ANTHOLOGIES**

We found mention of these anthologies published in 2006. (Addresses are given for independent presses.)

Jeremy G. Byrne & Jonathan Strahan (editors) *Eidolon 1*, Eidolon Books, ISBN

0958686475, Eidolon Books, PO Box 225, North Perth WA 6906, Australia,

<http://www.eidolonbooks.com>.

Angela Challis & Shane Jiraiya Cummings (editors), *Australian Dark Fantasy &*

*Horror, 2006 Edition*, Brimstone Press, ISBN 9780980281705, Brimstone Press, PO Box 4, Woodvale WA 6026, Australia. <http://www.shadowedrealms.com.au/>.

Angela Challis (editor), *Book of Shadows Vol One*, Brimstone Press, ISBN 0980281717, Brimstone Press, PO Box 4, Woodvale WA 6026, Australia.

Noel Cladingboel (editor) *FlashSpec Vol One*, Equilibrium Books, ISBN 192076481X, Equilibrium Books, PO Box 853 Rockingham WA 6968, Australia, [www.equilibriumbooks.com](http://www.equilibriumbooks.com).

Nicole R. Murphy (editor) *The Outcast*, CSFG, ISBN0977519201, CSFG Publishing, PO Box 1533, Woden ACT 2606, Australia.

Cat Sparks (editor), *Agog! Ripping Reads*, Agog! Press, ISBN 0809562383, Agog! Press, PO Box U302, University of Wollongong NSW 2522, Australia.

Robert Stephenson and Kain Massin (editors), *Tales From the Black Wood*, Altair Australia Books, [www.altair-australia.com](http://www.altair-australia.com).

Keith Stevenson & Andrew MacRae (editors), *Cock*, Coeur de Lion, ISBN 0646462067, [www.cock-anthology.com](http://www.cock-anthology.com).

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**RECOMMENDED READING: 2006**

Arnold, Ashley, 'Gravity Well', *Infinitas Newsletter*

Blum, Jonathan, 'Key', *Collected Works*

Brown, Simon, 'Along Came a Spider', *Agog! Ripping Reads*

— ‘Tarans’, *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine* 24

Browne, Adam, ‘Bladderwrack’, *Agog! Ripping Reads*

— ‘The Sun King’, *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine* 22

Butterworth, Jacinta, ‘Love Affair’, *Cock*

C.A.L., ‘The Rising Tide’, *Interzone*

Caselberg, Jay, ‘Empties’, *Aurealis*

Cavanagh, Steven, ‘Finding the Words’, *Shadow Realms*

Cummings, Shane Jiraiya, ‘Stealing fire’, *Book of Shadows Vol One*

Conyers, David, ‘Aftermath’, *Agog! Ripping Reads*

Daniels, Cory, ‘Lady Bound ful’s Lies’, *Agog! Ripping Reads*

Dann, Jack, ‘Cafe Culture’, *Asimov’s SF*, Jan

— ‘King of the Mountain’, *Postscripts*

— ‘Method’, *Postscripts*

Dedman, Stephen, ‘Dead of Winter’, *Weird Tales*

Dix, Shane, ‘Three Wishes’, *Borderlands*

Dugan, Grace, ‘The Conqueror’, *Eidolon*

Flinthart, Dirk, ‘One Night Stand’, *Agog! Ripping Reads*

— ‘The Red Priest’s Vigil’, *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine* 25

Haines, Paul, ‘Lifelike and Josephine’, *Agog! Ripping Reads*

— ‘The Devil in Mr Pussy (Or How I Found God Inside My Wife)’, *Cock*

— ‘Burning From the Inside’, *Doorways for the Dispossessed*

Hanson, Donna, ‘A Vagabond Rhyme’, *Sussurus*

Harland, Richard, ‘On the Way to Habassan’, *Outcasts*

Hood, Robert, ‘Birthmark’, *Cock*

— ‘Touched’, *Fables & Reflections*

— ‘First Moment of Dying’, *Shadow Realms* 11

Hoy, Catriona, ‘Summer Holiday’, *Antipodean SF*

Isle, Sue, ‘Daughter of the Red Cranes’, *Agog! Ripping Reads*

— ‘Mary Bennett Gets a Life’, *Borderlands*

Jamieson, Trent, 'Persuasion', *Reserved for Travelling Shows*

Kennett, Rick, 'Cross Talk', *Antipodean SF 100*

Lanagan, Margo, 'Under Hell, Over Heaven', *Red Spikes*

— 'A Pig's Whisper', *Agog! Ripping Reads*

— 'The Point of Roses', *Black Juice* (Orion, UK edition)

— 'Baby Jane', *Red Spikes*

— 'Winkie', *Red Spikes*

— 'A Good Heart', *Red Spikes*

— 'A Feather in the Breast of God', *Red Spikes*

— 'Daughter of the Clay', *Red Spikes*

Lawson, Chris, 'Screening Test', *Agog! Ripping Reads*

— 'Empathy', *Cosmos*

MacGregor, Peter, 'The Crudest Disease', *Antipodean SF*

— '...at half past four', *Ticonderoga Online 8*

Macrae, Andrew, 'Truckdreamin', *Agog! Ripping Reads*

Martin, Liz, 'Echoes', *Cosmos*

Mascall, Sharon, 'Being Me', *Tales From the Black Wood*

Massin, Kain, 'Counterpoint', *Tales From the Black Wood*

McDonald, Tam, 'My Lady of Silk and Tooth', *Wyr[e]d*, November

McMullen, Sean, 'The Measure of Eternity', *Interzone*

Nahrung, Jason, 'The Pain Threshold', *Agog! Ripping Reads*

Orman, Kate, 'Nobody's Gift', *Short Trips: The History of Christmas*

Peek, Ben, 'theleeharveyoswaldband', *Polyphony*

— 'Under the Red Sun', *Fantasy Magazine*

Riel, Rob, 'Transactional Analysis', *Antipodean SF 100*

Roberts, Tansy Rayner, 'Rosebuds', *Agog! Ripping Reads*

Ryles, Carol, 'The Bridal Bier', *Eidolon 1*

Saunders, Shaun A., 'Copyright', *Antipodean SF*

— 'The Last Book', *Antipodean SF*

— ‘Apollo’s Breath’, *Cosmos Online*

Seluka, Kylie, ‘Awakening the Spirit’, *Outcasts*

Sheringham, Paul, ‘Bloodletting’, *Antipodean*

Slatter, Angela, ‘The Little Match Girl’, *Shimmer*, Spring

— ‘The Angel Wood’, *Shimmer*, Autumn 2006

Sparks, Cat, ‘Blue Stars for All Saviour’s Day’, *Outcasts*

— ‘The Jarrah Run’, *Cock*

Stephenson, Robert N., ‘The Basement’, *Tales From the Black Wood*

Sullivan, Andrew, ‘An Offer Too Good to be True’, *Outcasts*

Sussex, Lucy, ‘A Small Star of Cold’, *Absolute Uncertainty*

Tambour, Anna, ‘See Here, See There’, *Agog! Ripping Reads*

van Walsum, Theresia & Cladingboel, Noel, ‘Behind Closed Doors’, *Flashspec Vol One*

von Trojan, Kurt, ‘The House’, *When I Close My Eyes*

Wardle, Susan, ‘Iron Shirt’, *Ticonderoga Online 10*

Waring, Wendy. ‘Stonework’, *Interzone 207*

Williams, Sean & Brown, Simon, ‘Dying for Air’, *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine 23*

Williams, Sean & Dix, ‘Shane, Night of the Dolls’, *Elemental*

Young, Marty, ‘Finders, Keepers’, *Flashspec Vol One*