

## The Perimeter

by Chris Beckett

Chris Beckett's short fiction has been regularly appearing in British and US anthologies since 1991, but his first full-length novel, *The Holy Machine* (Wildside Press), wasn't published until 2004. Slow though it may have been in coming, reviewers seem to like it. In this magazine, Paul Di Filippo described it as "a triumph." Chris is now completing a second novel, provisionally titled *Marcher*.

\* \* \* \*

The first time Lemmy Leonard saw the white hart it was trotting past a sweet shop on Butcher Row at ten o'clock on a Wednesday morning. He'd never seen such a thing and would have followed it then if he hadn't seen PC Simon approaching. Lemmy was supposed to be in school and the authorities were having one of their crackdowns on truancy, so he had to slip down a side road until the policeman had passed by. When he emerged, the deer had gone.

It was strange how bereft that made him feel. All day the sense of loss stayed with him. He had no words for it, no way of explaining it at all.

"Are you okay, Lemmy darling?" said his mother that night as she brought him his tea. (She looked like a Hollywood starlet, but without the overweening vanity.) "Only you seem so quiet."

It was raining outside. You could tell by the faint grey streaks that crossed the room like interference on a TV screen.

\* \* \* \*

The second time he saw it was outside a pub off the Westferry Road. It was two o'clock on a Tuesday afternoon and he was with Kit Rogers, Tina Miller, and James Moss. He *really* wanted to follow it then, but Kit had, just that minute, suggested they all go into Grey Town and if Lemmy had proposed something else it would have looked like he was afraid.

"Not Grey Town!" pleaded Tina. I hate that creepy place."

"Are you saying you're scared?" asked Lemmy with a sneer.

"No I never but ... Oh all right then, just so long as we don't meet that beggar. You know, the one who hasn't got any..."

"No, he's always on the same corner these days, over on the Blackwall side," said Kit with a sly look at James. "You won't see him if we go in on this side."

Lemmy and his friends were Dotlanders. They were low-res enough to have visible pixels and they only had 128 colors apiece, except for James whose parents had middle-class aspirations and had recently upgraded to 256. Up in the West End they would all have looked like cartoon characters, even James, but down in Grey

Town they looked like princes, the objects of envy and hate.

It was like descending to Hades, going in there and finding yourself surrounded by all those grainy faces. There were outline faces, even, faces with ticks for noses and single lines for mouths. Greyscale hustlers tried to sell them things, black-and-white dealers tried to do deals, dot-eyed muggers eyed them from doorways and wondered how much of a fight these Dotland kids would put up, and whether they had anything on them that would make it worth finding out. And then from the darkness under a railway arch came the sound that Tina dreaded and that Kit and James had tricked her into hearing

*“Bleep!”*

Tina screamed.

“You said he was over by Blackwall!”

The boys laughed.

“You bastards! You set me up on purpose!”

*“Bleep!”* went the darkness again and a plain text message appeared in green letters in the black mouth of the arch:

Help me! Please!

Guiltily each one of them tossed a few pence of credit in the direction of this unimaginably destitute being who could afford neither a body nor a voice.

“I really hate you for that, Kit!” Tina said. “You *know* how much that guy creeps me out!”

“Yes, but that’s why it’s so much fun winding you up!”

And then they saw the white hart again, trotting through the streets of Grey Town.

“There it is again,” said Lemmy, “let’s go and...”

\* \* \* \*

But they were distracted by a commotion further up the street. A small crowd of young Greytowners were heading their way, laughing and jeering around a tall, solitary figure with an unruly mane of long white hair and an immensely upright bearing who was striding along in the midst of them, like an eagle or a great owl being mobbed by sparrows.

They recognized him as Mr. Howard. He was a big landlord in Grey Town and across the East End, and he came in occasionally to look over his properties, always wearing the same crumpled green velvet suit in true color and at as high a resolution as it was possible to be, with real worn elbows and real frayed cuffs and the true authentic greasy sheen of velvet that has gone for months without being

cleaned.

What was fascinating and disturbing about Mr. Howard was his imperial disdain and the way he strode through Grey Town as if he owned the place. He actually *did* own quite a lot of it, but that was only one reason for his regal manner. The other reason was the absolute invulnerability that came from his being an Outsider. Sticks and stones would bounce off Mr. Howard, knives would turn. No one could hurt an Outsider, or even stop him in his tracks.

“Spook!” yelled a tiny little black-and-white boy from the curb with his little outline mouth. “Mr. Howard is a spook!”

“Peter! Over here! *Now!*” hissed the little black-and-white woman who was his mother.

The little boy looked round, smiling triumphantly, then saw her fear. He burst into tears and went running back to her. And the two little cartoon characters cowered together in the shadow of a doorway while Mr. Howard strode by.

Lemmy looked around for the white hart. But it had gone.

\* \* \* \*

About a week later, Lemmy and the others were hanging around Dotlands Market, checking out the stalls selling low-res clothes and jewelry and shoes (“Never mind the resolution, look at the design!”), the equally low-res food stalls (“It might *look* low-res, darlin’, but do you buy food to look at? The flavor is as high-res as it gets!”), and the pet stores with their little low-res cartoon animals (“These adorable little critters have genuine organic central nervous systems behind them, ladies and gents! Real feelings like you and me!”).

“Look, Lemmy!” James said, pointing past the stalls, “There’s that white animal again!”

Lemmy took over at once. “Okay. Listen. Be quiet and follow me!”

The deer was in a small dark alley between two old Victorian warehouses, grazing on tufts of grass that grew up through cracks in the tarmac. It lifted its head and looked straight in their direction. They all thought it was going to run, but it bent down again and calmly continued with its grazing.

“What *is* it?” Lemmy whispered as they drew up with it.

He reached out and touched it. The deer took no notice at all.

Kit shrugged.

“I’m bored. Let’s go and do something else.”

“Yeah let’s,” Tina said. “I don’t like this animal. I’m sure it’s something physical.”

Lemmy and his friends didn't really understand "physical" but there was something threatening about it. Lemmy had come across a physical piece of paper in the street once, skipping and floating through the air as if it weighed nothing at all. And yet when it fell to the ground and he tried to pick it up, it was hard as iron to his touch and he couldn't shift it any more than he could shift a ten ton weight. And Outsiders were physical too in some way. They had some kind of affinity with physical objects. That was what defined them as being "outside."

"Physical?" Kit exclaimed, taking a step back. "Ugh! Do you really think so? I didn't know animals *could* be physical. Except birds, of course."

The deer lifted its head again and looked straight past them down the alley. How could a creature be so alert, yet be so completely indifferent to them even when they were so close? What else was there in the world for it to be scared of ?

"Of course it's physical," James said. "Just look how high-res it is!"

"Yeah, even more than you, Smoothie," said Kit.

And it was true. The deer wasn't at all like the cheerful little low-res dogs and cats that people in Dotlands kept as pets. You could see the individual hairs on its back.

But none of this concerned the white hart. It finished the tuft of grass it was eating and moved off slowly down the alley, as indifferent to their judgment as it was to their presence.

"Are you coming, Lemmy?" called Kit, as he followed James and Tina back to the cheerful market.

\* \* \* \*

But Lemmy followed the white hart. He followed it right across London, through back streets, across parks, over railway tracks, in and out of low-res neighborhoods and high-res neighborhoods, across white areas and black areas, through shopping centers, across busy freeways.

It was slow progress. The deer kept doubling back on itself or going off in completely new directions for no apparent reason. Sometimes it stopped for twenty minutes to graze or to scratch with its hoof behind its ear. Sometimes it would run and skip along at great speed and Lemmy could barely keep up, though at other times he could walk right beside it, resting his hand on its back. Once it lay down in the middle of the road and went to sleep. Cars honked at it. One driver even got out and kicked it, which would have made Lemmy mad if it wasn't for the fact that the deer didn't even stir in its slumber and the man hurt his foot.

"Bloody Council," the driver said, glowering at Lemmy as he hobbled back to his car. "I thought they were supposed to keep these damned things out of here."

He, and all the cars behind him, had to drive up onto the curb to get around

the sleeping animal.

What things? Lemmy wondered. What things were the Council supposed to keep out?

Five minutes later, the deer woke up and moved off of its own accord.

Another time it went through the front door of a small terraced house, not through an open door, but through the shiny blue surface of a closed one as if it was mist or smoke. It was a shocking and inexplicable sight, but such things happened occasionally in London. (Once, when Lemmy was little, he and his mother had been walking down a street when the whole section of road ahead of them had simply disappeared, as if someone had flipped over channels on TV and come to an unused frequency. A few seconds later it all returned again, just as it had been before.) Lemmy waited and after a few minutes the deer's antlers and head and neck appeared again through the door, looking like a hunting trophy. Then it came right through and trotted off down the street. (The blue door opened behind it and a bewildered couple came out and stood there and watched it go, with Lemmy following behind it.)

On they wandered, this way and that through the suburban streets. But as evening began to fall and the street lights came on, the deer seemed to move more purposefully northward. It was as if its day's work was done, Lemmy thought, and it was going home. It seldom stopped to graze now, it never doubled back. At a brisk trot, occasionally breaking into a run, it hurried on past miles of houses where families were settling down for the evening in the comfortable glow of television. A few times Lemmy thought he'd lost it when it ran ahead of him and disappeared from his view. But each time, just when he was on the point of giving up, he saw it again in the distance, a ghostly speck moving under the street lights, so he kept on going, though he was miles away from home now and in a part of the city he had never seen before.

\* \* \* \*

And then the white deer came to the last house in London, and the city ended.

Lemmy realized London wasn't limitless, of course. He knew there were other places beyond, there were stations, after all, with gateways you could go through and visit New York or Florida or Benidorm or Heaven or Space, but it had never occurred to him that there might be a point where the city just petered out.

In front of him there was a row of orange lights that stretched away, up and down hills, in a long winding line to the east and west, along with a sign put up by the Council, one sign for every five lights:

### **Perimeter of Urban Consensual Field**

To the north, beyond the lights and the signs, the glow of the orange lights continued for some yards but then stopped. After that there was nothing: no ground, no objects, no space, just a flickering blankness, like a spare channel on TV.

Lemmy hardly ever went to school and he could barely read, and in any case it was his practice to ignore official signs. What seemed important to him at that particular moment was that the white hart had already trotted forward under the orange lights and into the bare orange space beyond. Lemmy's Dotlands sense of honor dictated that he couldn't stop. Even if he had no idea what a *perimeter* was, let alone a *consensual field*, and even if it meant going into still stranger territory when he already had no idea where he was, he couldn't stop now any more than he could refuse a dare to go into the middle of Grey Town or to walk up to Mr. Howard and call him a spook to his terrifyingly high-res face.

And yet, almost immediately, he *did* stop, not because he'd changed his mind but because, when it came to it, he simply had no choice in the matter. He was just walking on the spot. It was impossible to go forward. And words he had seen on the signs appeared again, but this time flashing on and off in glowing green, right in front of his eyes:

Perimeter of Field!  
Perimeter of Field!  
Perimeter of Field!

There was nothing he could do but stand and watch the white deer trotting away to wherever it was that it was going.

Out in the orange glow it turned round and looked back in his direction. And now, oddly, for the first time it seemed distinctly alarmed. Had it finally noticed his existence, Lemmy wondered? And, if so, why now, when several times it had let him come up close enough to touch it and not seemed concerned at all? Why now, when it had been happy to lie in a road and be kicked?

But whatever had frightened it this time, the deer fled in great skips and leaps.

And as it crossed from the orange glow of the lights into the flickering, empty-channel nothingness, it disappeared.

"I'm sorry. You were watching him, weren't you?" said a woman's voice. "I'm afraid it was me that scared him off."

Lemmy looked round. The speaker was tall, extremely ugly, and much older than anyone he had ever seen or spoken to, yet she was *very* high-res. You could see the little marks and creases on her skin. You could see the way her lipstick smeared over the edges of her lips and the coarse fibrous texture of her ugly green dress.

"Yeah, I was watching him. I've been following him. I wanted to know where he was going. I've been following him halfway across London."

"Well, I'm sorry."

Lemmy shrugged. "He would have gone anyway, I reckon. He was headed in that direction."

He looked out into the blankness in the distance.

“What I don’t get though, is what is that out there and how come he just vanished?”

The woman took from her pocket a strange contraption consisting of two flat discs of glass mounted in a kind of frame, which hooked over her ears. She placed it in front of her eyes and peered through it.

“No, he hasn’t vanished,” she said. “He’s still out there, look, just beyond the fence.”

She clicked her tongue.

“But will you *look* at that big hole in the fence there! I suppose that must be how he got in.”

“I can’t see him,” Lemmy said.

“Look just beyond the wire fence. In front of those trees.”

“I can’t *see* no fence. I can’t see no trees neither.”

“Oh silly me!” the old woman exclaimed. “I wasn’t thinking. They’re beyond the consensual field, aren’t they? So of course you wouldn’t be able to see them.”

Lemmy looked at her. She was *so* ugly, yet she behaved like a famous actress, or a TV presenter. She had the grandness and the self-assurance and the ultra-posh accent.

“How come you can see it then? And how come that animal can go out there and I can’t?”

“It’s a deer,” she said gently, “a male deer, a hart. The reason it can go out there and you can’t is that it is a physical being and you are a consensual being. You can only see and hear and touch what is in the consensual field.”

“Oh I know it’s just physical,” Lemmy said.

“*Just physical?* You say that so disparagingly, yet every human being on earth was physical once.”

Lemmy pretended to laugh, thinking this must be some odd, posh actressy kind of joke.

“You don’t know about that?” she asked him. “They don’t teach you about that at school?”

“I don’t go to school,” Lemmy said. “There’s no point.”

“No point in going to school! Dear me!” the woman exclaimed, and she

half-sighed and half-laughed.

“Well, it’s like this,” she said. “In the city, two worlds overlap: the physical universe and the consensual field. Every physical thing that stands or moves within the city is replicated in the representation of the city that forms the backdrop of the consensual field. That’s why you could see the hart in the city but not when it went beyond the perimeter. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“Nope,” said Lemmy shortly with an indifferent shrug.

“But how come it couldn’t seem to see *me* though?” he couldn’t help adding. “Not even in the city?”

“Well, how *could* a wild animal see the consensual field? Animals don’t know that the consensual stuff is there at all. You and I might go into the city and see busy streets bustling with people, but, to the deer, the streets are empty. He can wander through them all day and meet no one at all except, once in a while, the occasional oddball like me.”

Lemmy looked sharply at her.

“Like you? You’re not a... ?”

The woman looked uncomfortable.

“Yes, I’m a physical human being. An Outsider as you call us. But please don’t...”

She broke off, touching his arm in mute appeal. Lemmy saw for an instant how lonely she was, and, having a kind heart, he felt pity. But he simultaneously wondered if he could run quickly enough to get away before she grabbed him.

“Please don’t go away!” the old woman pleaded. “We’re just people, you know, just people who happen still to live and move in the physical world.”

“So, you’re like the animal then?”

“That’s it. There are a few of us. There only can be a few of us who are lucky enough and rich enough and old enough to have been able to...”

“But how come you can see me then, if the animal couldn’t?”

“I can see you because I have implants that allow me to see and hear and feel the consensual field.”

Lemmy snorted.

“So you have to have special help to see the real world!”

“Well, some might say that the real world is that which is *outside* of the consensual field.” She pointed out beyond the orange lights. “Like those trees, like



those low hills in the distance. Like the great muddy estuary over there to the east, like the cold sea...”

She sighed.

“I *wish* I could show you the sea.”

“I’ve been to the sea *loads* of times.”

“You’ve been to manufactured seas, perhaps: theme park seas, sea-like playgrounds. I mean the *real* sea which no one thinks about any more. It just exists out there, slopping around in its gigantic bowl all on its own. Nowadays it might as well be on some uninhabited planet going round some far off star. So might the forests and the mountains and the...”

Lemmy laughed.

“Things out there that no one can see? You’re kidding me.”

The old woman studied his face.

“I’ll tell you what,” she said. “You can’t *see* the trees but if you listen, you will surely be able to hear them. Listen! It’s a windy night. The sensors will pick it up.”

Lemmy listened. At first he couldn’t hear anything at all but gradually he became aware of a very faint sound which was new to him: a sighing sound, rising and falling, somewhere out there in the blankness. He could have listened for hours to this sound from a space that lay outside of his own universe.

He wasn’t going to tell *her* that though.

“Nope,” he said firmly. “I can’t hear nothing.”

The woman smiled and touched his cheek.

“I must say I like you,” she said. “Won’t you tell me your name and where you come from?”

He looked at her for a moment, weighing up her request.

“Lemmy,” he then told her with a small firm nod. “Lemmy Leonard. I live down Dotlands way.”

“Dotlands? My, that’s a *long* way to have come! That *is* halfway across London! Listen, Lemmy, my name is Clarissa Fall. My house is just over there.”

She pointed to a big Victorian mansion, perhaps half a mile away to the east, just inside the perimeter, illuminated from below by a cold greenish light.

“Why don’t you come back and have something to eat with me before you go

back home?”

He didn't fancy it at all but it seemed cruel to turn her down. She was *so* lonely. (I suppose they must *all* be lonely, he thought. No one wants to talk to them, do they? No one wants to meet their eyes. People in the street even tell their kids to come away from them.)

“Yeah all right,” he said. “Just for a bit.”

\* \* \* \*

They came to Clarissa's house through a formal garden, with geometrical beds of rose bushes and stone fountains in the shape of nymphs and gods, standing in dark, glittering ponds. Pathways wound through it, from one strange tableau to the next, illuminated by electric lights set into the ground.

“The statues and the lights are physical,” Clarissa said, “but we had to get rid of the physical roses and the physical water. It was all getting too difficult to maintain. So the roses and the fountains you can see are just consensual. They're part of the Field. If I switched off my implants, all that I would see here would be stone statues and ponds with nothing in them but dry mud and the skeletons of frogs.”

She looked at Lemmy and sighed. The lights along the pathways had a cold greenish edge, like radiant ice.

“And of course you wouldn't be with me anymore,” she added.

“What do you mean I wouldn't be here? Where else would I be?”

“Well ... Well, I suppose that to yourself you *would* still be here. It's just that I wouldn't be able to *tell* that you were here, like the deer couldn't.”

He could see she wanted to say something else but that she thought she shouldn't. And then, in spite of herself, she said it anyway.

“Well really the deer's eyes didn't deceive it,” she blurted out, “because really you *aren't* here, you are...”

“What do you mean I'm not bloody here?” demanded Lemmy hotly.

She looked at him with a curious expression, both guilty and triumphant. It was as if she was pleased to have got a reaction of *any* sort from him. Like some lonely kid in a school playground who no one likes, Lemmy thought, winding you up on purpose just to prove to herself that she exists.

They had come to Clarissa's front door. She turned to face him.

“Don't take any notice of what I said just now. *Of course* you're here, Lemmy. Of course you are. You're young, you're alive, you're full of curiosity and hope. You're more here than I am, if the truth be told, *far* more here than I am.”

She pushed open the door and they entered a cavernous marble hallway.

“Is that you, Clarissa?” came a querulous male voice.

An old man came out of a side room, his face yellowy and crumpled, his body twisted and stooped, his shapeless jeans and white shirt seemingly tied round the middle with string, and yet, like Clarissa, so high-res that he made Lemmy feel almost like a Greytowner.

“You’ve been out a long time,” the old man grumbled. “Where on earth have you been?”

“Terence,” she told him, “this is Lemmy.”

The old man frowned into the space that she had indicated.

“Eh?”

“*This is Lemmy,*” she repeated with that firm deliberate tone that people use when they are trying to remind others of things which they should really already know.

“*Implants,*” she hissed at him when he still didn’t get the hint.

The old man fumbled, muttering, at something behind his ear.

“Oh God,” he sighed wearily, seeing Lemmy for the first time and immediately looking away. “Not *again*, Clarissa. Not this all over again.”

\* \* \* \*

Clarissa told Lemmy to go into the lounge.

“Sit down and make yourself comfortable, dear. I’ll be with you in just a moment.”

It was a high, long room lined with dark wooden paneling. On the walls hung big dark paintings of bowls of fruit, and dead pheasants and stern, unsmiling faces. A fire, almost burnt out, smoldered under an enormous mantelpiece with a design of intertwining forest leaves carved heavily into the dead black wood.

Lemmy sat himself awkwardly on a large dark-red sofa and waited, wishing he’d never agreed to come. Outside in the hallway, the two old people were having a row.

“Why shouldn’t I switch off these damned implants in my own house? Why shouldn’t I live in the real world without electronic enhancements? I don’t ask you to bring these ghosts back with you!”

“Why can’t you face the fact that their world *is* the real world now, Terence? They’re not the ghosts, we are!”

“Oh yes? So how come they would all vanish without trace if someone were to only unplug the blessed...”

“How come in twenty or thirty years time *we'll* all be dead and forgotten, and they'll still be here in their millions, living and loving, working and playing?”

“That's not the point and you know it. The point is that...”

“Oh for God's sake leave it, Terence. I'm not having this argument with you. I'm just not having this argument. I have a guest to attend to, as it so happens. In fact, *we* have a guest. We have a guest and I expect you to treat him as such.”

She came into the room to join Lemmy, forcing a smile over a face that was still agitated and flushed from the fight in the hallway.

“Why don't you have a chocolate bun?” she cried, much too brightly, indicating a plate of small cakes.

Lemmy was ravenous and he reached out at once, but it was no good. He could touch the buns and feel them but he couldn't move them any more than he could move a truck or a house.

“Oh,” Clarissa said, “I'm sorry, I quite forgot.”

*Again?* thought Lemmy, remembering how she had “forgotten” earlier that he couldn't see beyond the perimeter.

“Never mind,” she said, leaping up and opening a cupboard in the corner of the room. “I always keep some of your kind of food here. I don't often have visitors, but one never knows.”

She came back to him with another plate of cakes. They were luridly colorful and so low-res that it was as if she had deliberately chosen them to contrast as much as possible with her own handmade food, but Lemmy was hungry and ate six of them, one after the other, while she sat and watched and smiled.

“My. You *were* hungry.”

“I came all the way from Dotlands,” Lemmy reminded her. “I ran quite a bit of it. And that animal didn't go in a straight line, neither. It was this way and that way and round and round.”

She laughed and nodded. Then, as she had done before, she started to say something, stopped, and then said it anyway. It seemed to be a pattern of hers. But when you were alone a lot, perhaps you forgot the trick of holding things in?

“Do you know how that food of yours works?” she asked Lemmy. “Do you know how it fills you up?”

Lemmy didn't have time to reply.

“Every bite you take,” she told him, “a computer sends out a signal and far away, a series of signals are sent to your olfactory centers and a small amount of nutrients are injected into the bloodstream of your...”

Lemmy frowned.

“Why do you keep doing that?”

“Doing what, dear?” She assumed an expression of complete innocence, but the pretence was as fragile as fine glass.

“Trying to make me feel bad.”

“What do you mean, Lemmy dear? Why on earth do you think I’m trying to make you...”

Then she broke off, ran her hands over her face as if to wipe away her falsely sincere expression and for a little while fell silent, looking into the almost burnt-out fire.

“It’s jealousy I suppose,” she said at length. “It’s just plain jealousy. I envy you the bustle and banter of Dotlands. I envy you the life of the city. All my true friends are dead. There are only a few hundred of us Outsiders left in London and most of us can’t stand the sight of each other after all this time. We can’t have children you know, that was part of the deal when they let us stay outside. We had to be sterile. Of course we’re all too old now anyway.”

She gave the weary sigh of one for whom sorrow itself has grown tedious like a grey sky that will not lift.

“And out in the streets, well, you know yourself what it’s like ... You were unusual in that you didn’t run as soon as you discovered what I was, or jeer at me, or get all your friends to come and laugh at me and call me a spook. That was good of you. And look how this stupid old woman shows her gratitude!”

Suddenly she picked up the plate of real physical chocolate buns, strode with them to the fire and emptied them into it. Pale flames, yellow and blue, rose up to devour the greased paper cups.

Then, for a time, they were both silent.

“Do you know that Mr. Howard?” asked Lemmy at length. “The one who owns all that property down in Grey Town.”

“Richard Howard? *Know* him? I was married to him for five years!”

“Married? To Mr. Howard? You’re *kidding*!”

“Not kidding at all,” said Clarissa, smiling. “Mind you, most of us survivors have been married to one another at *some* point or another. There are only so many

permutations for us to play with.”

“So what’s he like?”

“Richard Howard? Well, he never washes, is one thing about him,” Clarissa said with a grimace. “He smells to high heaven.”

“Smells?” said her husband. “Who smells? Who are you talking about?”

The old man had come into the room while they were talking and now he began rummaging noisily through a pile of papers on a dresser behind them, shuffling and snuffling, determined that his presence should not be overlooked.

“I still don’t get where that white animal went,” Lemmy said, “and why I couldn’t follow it.”

“White animal?” demanded the old man crossly, turning from his papers to address his wife. “What white animal was that?”

“It was a white hart,” she told him, “an albino, I suppose.”

“Oh yes, and how did he get to see it?”

“Well, it must have got in through one of those holes in the wildlife fence.”

“Well, well,” chuckled the old man. “One of those dratted holes again, eh? The Council *is* slipping up. All these great big holes appearing overnight in the fence!”

Puzzled, Lemmy looked at Clarissa and saw her positively cringing under her husband’s scorn. But she refused to be silenced.

“Yes,” she went on, in an exaggeratedly casual tone, “and according to Lemmy here it wandered right down as far as Dotlands. He followed it back up here to try and find out where it came from. Then it went back over the perimeter and he couldn’t follow it any further. But Lemmy doesn’t...â€• she broke off to try and find a more tactful form of words, “he doesn’t understand where it’s got to.”

“Well of course not,” the old man grumbled. “They aren’t honest with these people. They don’t tell them what they really are or what’s really going on. They...”

“Well, what *is* really going on?” Lemmy interrupted him.

“What’s really going on?” Terence gave a little humorless bark of laughter. “Well, I could show him if he wants to see. I could fetch the camera and show him.”

“Terence, I’m not sure that’s such a good idea,” began Clarissa weakly, but her objection was half-hearted and he was already back at the capacious dresser, rummaging in a drawer.

He produced a video camera and some cables which he plugged into the back

of the TV in the corner. Part of the mantelpiece appeared on the screen, blurred and greatly magnified. Terence took out one of those glass disc contraptions that Clarissa had and placed it in front of his eyes. He made some adjustments. The view zoomed back and came into focus.

There was nothing remarkable about it. It was just the room they were sitting in. But when Terence moved the camera, something appeared on the screen that wasn't visible in the room itself, a silver sphere, somewhat larger than a football, suspended from the middle of the ceiling.

"What's that?" Lemmy asked.

"That's a sensor," the old man said, answering him, but looking at his wife. "Damn things. We have to have them in every single room in the house. Legal requirement. Part of the penalty for living inside the perimeter."

"But what is it? And why can't I see it except on the TV?"

"He doesn't know what a *sensor* is?" growled Terence. "Dear God! What do they *teach* these people?"

"It's not his fault, dear," said Clarissa gently.

"Yeah it is, actually," said Lemmy cheerfully. "I don't never go to school."

Amused in spite of himself, the old man snorted.

"It's like I was telling you earlier, dear," Clarissa said to Lemmy. "Sensors are the things that monitor the physical world and transmit the information to the consensual field..."

"...which superimposes whatever tawdry rubbish it wants over it," grumbled the old man, "like ... like those ridiculous colored air-cakes."

He meant the low-res cakes that Clarissa had put out on a table for Lemmy. And now Lemmy discovered a disturbing discrepancy. Within the room he could see the plate on the table with three cakes on it still left over from the nine she had brought in for him. But on the TV screen, though the table and the plate were clearly visible, the plate was empty and there were no cakes at all.

"Why can't I see the cakes on the TV? Why can't I see the sensor in the room?"

"The cakes are consensual. The sensor is physical," Terence said without looking at him. "A sensor detects everything but itself, just like the human brain. It feeds the Field with information about the physical world but it doesn't appear in the Field itself, not visually, not in tactile form. Nothing."

"Actually they're a nuisance for us, Lemmy," Clarissa chattered. "They're an eyesore and we bump our heads on them. But it's all right for you lot. You can walk

right through them and see right through them. They don't get in your way at all."

She looked at her husband.

"Are you going to ... I mean you're not going to point the camera at him are you? You're not going to show him *himself*?"

She was pretending to warn Terence not to do it, Lemmy noticed, but really she was making quite sure that he wouldn't forget.

"Yeah, go on then, show me," he said wearily, knowing already what he would see.

The old man swept the camera round the room. On the TV screen Lemmy saw Clarissa sitting in an armchair. He saw a painting of dead pheasants. He saw the dying embers of the fire and the corner of the dark-red sofa where he was sitting. And then, though he really didn't want to look, he saw the whole sofa.

Of course, just as he had guessed it would be, it was empty.

"All right then," Lemmy said in a tight voice. "So if I'm not really here, then where *am* I?"

"I can show you that too if you want," said Terence, still not looking at him, but addressing him directly for the first time. "Come upstairs and I'll show you..."

"Oh Terence," murmured Clarissa. "It's an awful lot for him to take in. I really think we should..."

Yet she was already eagerly getting to her feet.

\* \* \* \*

Lemmy followed them up the wide marble staircase to the first landing. Progress was slow. The old man was really struggling and had to pause several times to rest the camera and catch his breath.

"Let me carry it, Terence!" Clarissa said to him impatiently each time. "You know you don't like the stairs."

"I'm fine," he wheezed, his face flushed, his eyes moist and bloodshot. "Don't fuss so."

On the landing there were three glass cases, the first containing fossil shells, the second geological specimens, the third a hundred dead hummingbirds arranged on the branches of artificial trees. Some of the little iridescent birds had fallen from their perches and were dangling from strands of wire; a few lay at the bottom of the case. The old man hobbled on to the second set of stairs.

"Here's another sensor," he said, glancing, just for a moment, back at Lemmy.



He laid down the camera, stood on tiptoes and, gasping for breath, reached up to rap at something with his knuckles. It was a bit like the wind in the trees again. Lemmy could clearly *hear* the hollow sound of some hard surface being struck, but all he could *see* was Terence's liver-spotted hand rapping at thin air. And when Lemmy stepped forward himself and reached up into the same space, he could find nothing solid there at all.

"Terence disconnected this sensor once," said Clarissa. "Very naughty of him, we had to pay a big fine, but he unplugged it and..."

"I'll tell you what, I'll unplug it now," Terence said, reaching out. "I'll unplug it now and show this young fellow how his..."

And suddenly there was no staircase, no Clarissa, no Terence, just a flickering blankness and a fizzing rush of white noise. When Lemmy moved his foot there was nothing beneath it. When he reached out his hand there was no wall. When he tried to speak, no sound came. It was if the world had not yet been created.

Then a message flashed in front of him in green letters:

Local sensor error!

...and a soothing female voice spoke inside Lemmy's head.

"Apologies. There has been a local sensor malfunction. If not resolved in five seconds you will be relocated to your home address or to your nominated default location. One ... Two ... Three..."

But then he was back on the stairs again, in Clarissa's and Terence's decaying mansion.

"Reconnect it *now*, Terence!" Clarissa was shouting at her husband. "*Now!* Do you hear me?"

"Oh do shut up you silly woman. I already *have* reconnected it."

"Yeah," said Lemmy, "I'm back."

"I'm so sorry, Lemmy," Clarissa said, taking his arm. "Terence is so cruel. That must have been..."

The old man labored on up the stairs.

On the second landing, there was a case of flint arrowheads, another of Roman coins, and a third full of pale anatomical specimens preserved in formaldehyde: deformed embryos, a bisected snake, a rat with its belly laid open, a strange abysmal fish with teeth like needles.... Between the last two cases there was a small doorway with a gothic arch which led to a cramped spiral staircase. They climbed up it to a room which perched above the house in a faux-medieval turret.

The turret had windows on three sides. On the fourth side, next to the door,

there was a desk with an antique computer on it. In the spaces between the windows there were packed bookshelves from floor to ceiling. Books and papers were stacked untidily on the desk and across the floor, most of them covered in thick dust.

“Terence’s study,” sniffed Clarissa. “He comes up here to do his world-famous research, though, oddly enough, no one in the world but him seems to know anything about it.”

Terence ignored this. He placed his glass contraption on his nose and groped awkwardly behind the computer to find the port for the camera lead, snuffling and muttering all the while.

“Are you sure you want to see this, Lemmy?” asked Clarissa. “I mean this must all be a bit of a...”

“*There* we are,” said the old man with satisfaction as the monitor came to life.

He carried the camera to the north-facing window, and propped it on the sill. Lemmy followed him and looked outside. He could see the garden down below with its ice-green lights and its fountains and roses. Beyond it was the procession of lights and signs (one sign for every five lights) that marked the edge of the city. Beyond that was the spare-channel void, flickering constantly with random, meaningless pinpricks of light.

“You won’t be able to see anything through the window,” said Terence, glancing straight at Lemmy for a single brief moment. “You’re relying on sensors and they won’t show you anything beyond the Field. But, of course, the room sensor will pick up whatever’s on the monitor for you because that’s here in the room.”

Lemmy looked round at the monitor. The old man was fiddling with the camera angle and what Lemmy saw first, jiggling about on the screen, was the garden immediately below. It was different from what he had just seen out of the window. The lights were still there, but there were no roses. The ground was bare concrete and the ponds were bald, empty holes. Beyond the garden, the lights and warning signs around the perimeter looked just the same on the screen as they had looked out of the window, but beyond them there was no longer the flickering blankness. The tall chainlink wildlife fence was clearly visible and, beyond that, night and the dark shapes of trees.

The old man stopped moving the camera about and let it lie on the sill again so that it was pointing straight outwards. And now Lemmy saw on the screen a large concrete building, some way beyond the perimeter. Windowless and without the slightest trace of ornament, it was surrounded by a service road, cold white arc-lights and a high fence.

“*That* is where you are, my friend,” said the old man, leaving the camera and

coming over to peer at the screen through his glass discs. “That is the London Hub, the true location of all the denizens of the London Consensual Field. You’re all in there, row after row of you, each one of you looking like nothing so much as a scoop of grey porridge in a goldfish bowl.”

“Oh *honestly* Terence!” objected Clarissa.

“On each of five stories,” Terence went on, “there are two parallel corridors half a mile long. Along each corridor there are eight tiers of shelving, and on each shelf, every fifty centimeters, there is another one of you. And there you sit in your goldfish bowls, all wired up together, dreaming that you have bodies and limbs and genitals and pretty faces ....”

“*Terence!*”

“Every once in a while,” the old man stubbornly continued, “one of you shrivels up and is duly replaced by a new blob of porridge, cultured from cells in a vat somewhere, and dropped into place by a machine. And then two of you are deceived into thinking that you have conceived a child and given birth, when in fact...”

“Terence! Stop this *now!*”

The old man broke off with a derisive snort. Lemmy said nothing, his eyes fixed on the monitor.

“Of course you’re wonderful for the environment,” Terence resumed, after only the briefest of pauses. “That was the rationale, after all, that was the excuse. As I understand it, two hundred and fifty of you don’t use as much energy or cause as much pollution as a single manipulative old parasite like my dear Clarissa here, or a single old fossil like me. But that doesn’t alter the fact that there isn’t much more to any of you than there is to one of those pickled specimens I’ve got down on the landing there, or that your lives are an eternal video game in which you are fooled into thinking you really *are* the cartoon characters you watch and manipulate on the screen.”

“Why do you *do* this, Terence?” Clarissa cried. “Why are you so cruel?”

The old man gave a bark of derision.

“*Cruel? Me?* You hypocrite, Clarissa. You utter hypocrite. It’s you that keeps bringing them back here, these pretty boys, these non-existent video-game boys. Why would you do that to them if you didn’t want to confront them with what they really are?”

He laughed.

“Yes, and why keep cutting those holes in the fence?”

Clarissa gasped. Her husband grinned at her.

“If you didn’t want me to find out, my dearest, you should have put the wire cutters back in the shed where you found them. You cut the holes so that animals will wander down into the city and lure back more boys for you to bring home. That’s right, isn’t it? You’re not going to try and deny it?”

Clarissa gave a thin, despairing wail.

“All right Terence, all right. But Lemmy is here now. Lemmy is *here!*”

“No he’s not! He’s not here at all. We’ve already established that. He’s over there on a shelf in a jar of formaldehyde, or whatever it is that they pickle them in. He only *seems* to be here and we could very easily fix that by the simple act of turning off our implants. Why don’t you turn yours off now if his presence distresses you? Even better, we could unplug the sensor and then even *he* won’t think he’s here. There’ll be only you and me, up here all alone with our big empty house beneath us.”

Clarissa turned to Lemmy.

“Don’t pay any attention to him. You’re as real as we are. You just live in a different medium from us, that’s all, a more modern medium, a medium where you can be young and strong and healthy all your life, and never grow wrinkly and bitter and old like us. That’s the truth of it, but Terence just can’t accept it.”

But Lemmy didn’t answer her. He was watching the monitor. An enormous articulated truck had pulled up outside the London Hub and was now passing through a gate which had slid open automatically to let it in. Oddly, the cabin of the truck had no windows, so he couldn’t tell who or what was driving it.

“Why don’t you go over there and join them then, Clarissa my dear?” sneered Terence, his old eyes gleaming. “Why don’t you get *your* brains spooned out into a jar and yourself plugged into the Field?”

Lemmy crept still closer to the screen.

“Hey look! He’s out there! That white animal. Way over there by that big grey place.”

“Lemmy, Lemmy,” cried Clarissa, rushing over to him. “You’re so...”

“Oh for goodness’ sake, get a grip, woman!” snapped the old man.

He dragged a chair into the middle of the room.

“What are you doing?” she cried.

“I’m going to do what you should have done from the beginning. Send this poor wretch home.”

Wobbling dangerously, he climbed onto the chair and reached up towards an invisible object below the ceiling.

\* \* \* \*

“...two ... three ... four ... five.”

Lemmy was sitting in the corner chair in the cozy, cramped little living room that he shared with his parents, Dorothy and John. John was watching TV. Mouser, their blue cartoon cat, was curled up on the fluffy rug in front of the fire. (The man at Dotlands market had claimed he had an organic central nervous system. Who knows? Perhaps he did. Perhaps at the back of some shelf in the London Hub, he had a small-sized goldfish bowl and his own small-sized scoop of porridge.)

In with a flourish came Lemmy’s mother wearing a new dress.

“Ta-da!”

She gave a little twirl and Lemmy’s dad (who looked like a rock’n’roll star from the early days, except that he smiled far too easily) turned round in his armchair and gave an approving whistle.

“Oh hello Lemmy darling!” said Dorothy. “I didn’t hear you come in!”

“Blimey!” exclaimed his father. “Me neither! You snuck in quietly, mate. I had no idea you was in the room!”

“So what do you think then, Lemmy?” Dorothy asked.

“Yeah, nice dress mum,” Lemmy said.

“It’s not just the dress, sweetheart. Your kind dad’s given me a lovely early birthday present and got me upgraded to 256 colors. Can you see the difference? I think I look great!”

“Here comes the rain,” said Lemmy’s dad.

They could tell it was raining from the faint grey streaks that appeared in the room, like interference on TV. Not that they minded. The streaks were barely visible and they made it feel more cozy somehow, being inside in the warm with the TV and the fire going. It had never occurred to Lemmy or his parents to wonder what caused them.

But, right at that moment, Lemmy suddenly understood. The house had no physical roof. It had no physical ceilings, no physical upstairs floor, nothing to keep out the physical rain that fell from the physical sky. In the physical world there was no TV here, no fire, no lights, no fluffy rug, no comfy chairs, no Mouser or Dorothy or Lemmy or John, just an empty shell of brick, open to the sky, a ruin among many others, in the midst of an abandoned city.

“I *thought* your skin looked nice, mum,” he said. “256 colors, eh? That

explains it.”

Dorothy laughed and ruffled his hair.

“Liar! You wouldn’t have even noticed if I hadn’t told you.”

She sat down next to her husband on the settee and snuggled up against him to watch TV.

Lemmy moved his chair closer to the fire and tried to watch TV with them, tried to give himself over to it as he’d always done before, back in the days before Clarissa Fall let the white hart in from the forest beyond the perimeter.

Copyright (c) 2005 Chris Beckett