

## The World Within the World

by Steven Utley

Steven Utley tells us he is “still the internationally unknown author of the story collections *Ghost Seas* (Australia, 1977), *The Beasts of Love* (USA, 2005), and *Where or When* (United Kingdom, 2006).” An anthology that he co-edited with Michael Bishop, *Passing for Human*, will be out soon from PS Publishing. Unknown or otherwise, this author’s fiction, poems, and, most recently, a cartoon, have been appearing in *Asimov’s* since 1977. In his eerie new tale, we catch a glimpse of ghosts and machines and...

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“Damn jump station’s haunted,” Summers growled, frowning at the momentarily dormant machine. One of the monitors had just beeped inexplicably. He looked around at his co-worker, Cullum, and their two visitors, Lane the Navy doctor and Cutsinger the physicist.

“Summers here thinks we have spooks,” said Cullum. “I think we have a lunatic.”

“Really. Spooks.” Summers nodded at the monitor that had beeped. “It’s always doing that.”

“It’s always *done* that,” Cullum said, “as far back as I can remember.”

“Short circuit somewhere,” Cutsinger said.

Summers shook his head vehemently. “We’ve taken it apart and replaced everything in it six, eight times. It *isn’t* electrical. It’s—” he pondered word choices for a moment “—ectoplasmatical.”

“I have no idea in hell what you’re talking about,” said Cullum, “and I’m willing to bet you don’t, either.”

Summers addressed himself to the other two men. “It *isn’t* just the monitor registering something when there shouldn’t be anything there to register. Every now and then, when we’re alone in here, I sense we’re *not* alone in here. Like ... disembodied entities are moving around and past and *through* us. Gives me kind of a little chill down my back. You never get those?”

“Everybody gets those,” said the doctor. “Just a glitch in the nervous

system.”

Cullum made a wry face at Summers. “‘Disembodied entity’ is kind of an oxymoron, isn’t it? You’re probably just high on ozone.”

“A ghost is supposed to be—”

“*Supposed* to be!”

“—*supposed* to be some kind of psychic residue left at the scene of a violent or at least traumatic incident.”

“Yes, so?”

“So, what could be more traumatic than going through a spacetime anomaly, being shot across hundreds of millions of years into prehistoric times? *We* all came through, and it felt like being worked over with a baseball bat.”

“Maybe that’s the answer,” Cullum said drily. “You got hurt in your head when you came through.” He nodded significantly at Dr. Lane. “Undiagnosed concussion.”

“Perhaps,” said Cutsinger, “the blip on your monitor is an electronic echo of the person who goes through. A kind of human non-being. It might even have the person’s memories and ideas and emotions.”

“What about the *stuff* that comes through?” said Cullum. “Ghostly toilet tissue for ghostly bums?”

“Go ahead,” Summers said in an offended tone, “make jokes, reduce the epistemological to the scatological.”

“At least I’m making *sense*. Do you even know what any of the words you use mean? Listen. The blips last less than a second, right? So what good would memories—never mind ghostly supplies and equipment—what good would ideas and emotions do your ghost?”

“To a ghost a split-second might be a whole eternity.”

“With all the people who have come through here, to say nothing of all the *stuff*, why aren’t the monitors just screaming all the time?”

“How the hell should I know?”

Cutsinger made an amused sound and said, “Perhaps I can contribute to this body of speculation. Let’s say that for all ghosts all eternity is crammed into the same nanosecond. Or perhaps some kind of charge builds up and all those echoes of people and things keep coming back into existence and doing whatever they do. Living out lives just like the original people, doing the same things, thinking the same thoughts. Or perhaps the scenes replay themselves with minute or not-so-minute variations, but all variations on the same theme. And always the ghosts believe they *are* the real thing. Then they pass right out of existence again, until the charge builds up again. Repeat and repeat, world without end. A whole world created and extinguished in a nanosecond, and it makes just enough of a disturbance to register on that monitor.”

“Just enough of one,” said Summers, “to send a chill down my spine.”

“I’ve come through the anomaly three times,” the doctor said, “and gone back twice. Does that mean there are five electronic ghosts of me vying for primacy in the same nanosecond of existence? Wouldn’t their individual timelines get a bit tangled?”

“Timelines!” The physicist rolled his eyes. “I’ve wasted enough time over the years trying to explain why it isn’t time travel.”

Lane seemed not to take offense. “Very well, then. All of those alternate universes you’re always going on about confuse the hell out of me. Imagine how confusing it must be for all of my ghosts.”

The physicist smiled. “Actually, I can imagine it.”

“Really now.”

“Of course I can. If I’m able to imagine multiple worlds, a series of universes receding into infinity, I can certainly imagine ghosts. Doesn’t mean I believe in them, though. Only that I can imagine them.”

“ ‘I and this mystery,’” said Dr. Lane, “‘here we stand.’” He saw the expressions on the faces of the other three men and laughed good-naturedly. “Walt Whitman.”

“It’s getting metaphysical *and* poetical around here,” Cullum said. “I may have to transfer to another shift.”

Summers glanced at the clock. "Speaking of shifts, where's our relief?"

"I'll go ask."

Cullum went to the door adjoining the jump station, stuck his head through, and spoke to somebody. The physicist and the doctor drifted along in Summers' wake as he moved around the confines of the jump station taking readings and making minute adjustments.

All three men looked up sharply as the monitor beeped again. They were still regarding it thoughtfully, in silence, when Cullum returned and told Summers, "Charlie and Zeke are here."

The physicist started. "What?"

"What's the problem?"

The doctor blinked. "Nothing. Just—oh, nothing. Never mind."

"Come on," Cullum said to Summers, "let's go. I'm starved."

"Me, too."

They left Cutsinger and Dr. Lane with Charlie and Zeke and said nothing to each other until seated across from each other in the ship's mess. Then Summers looked up from his plate and said, "That physicist believed me. And that doctor—"

"That physicist was just rhapsodizing. And that doctor believes you're nuts. Probably he believes the physicist is nuts, too. Probably that's why he goes around with him. He's the physicist's doctor."

"You didn't see the look on his face when the same monitor beeped again."

"The monitor again. The monitor's *always* beeping for no reason."

"Nothing happens for no reason. But this is the first time that guy Cutsinger ever *thought* about it, I could tell."

Back in the jump station, Charlie and Zeke checked readings and made adjustments and paid no attention to Cutsinger and the Navy doctor, who seemed frozen rigid with expectation until one of the monitors beeped. Only then did they

relax.

“Wish I could figure out what the hell that is,” said Charlie.

“Beats me,” said Zeke.

Dr. Lane nudged Cutsinger. “It cold in here to you?”