

Theaker's Quarterly Fiction

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Mission Statement

The primary goal of *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction* is to keep going. The secondary goal is to catch up with *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* (in terms of issue numbers). Almost there!

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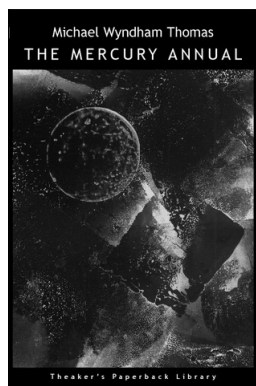
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**Mercury Annual
book launch and signing!**

**Date: Sunday, October 25,
2pm to 4pm.**

**Venue: Borders Bookstore,
Bull Ring Shopping Centre,
Birmingham B5 4BE**

**The Mercury Annual,
by Michael Wyndham Thomas**



EDITORIAL

Crisis on Earth-One!

Stephen Theaker

This issue is out two months late, and that's down to the British Fantasy Society taking a lot of my spare time. I can't complain, though, it's mostly been a lot of fun. First there was the reading of submissions for *Dark Horizons* 55 and all the work involved in putting that together, then organising the BFS Short Story Competition, and then helping out with the online voting for the British Fantasy Awards, and then trying to straighten out the BFA constitution to take into account changes made over the last year or so. It was all very fascinating stuff to be involved with, but didn't leave much time for the magazine you hold in your hands.

Then I went to FantasyCon, held in Nottingham, where I had a great time. I hosted a panel which was nerve-wracking but enjoyable (though next year I must remember to take a watch). I announced the winner of the BFS Short Story Competition at the awards ceremony in a way that would have done Mick Fleetwood proud. On the Sunday I attended the AGM, where it turned out that a book of interviews with horror writers, launched by the BFS at the convention didn't include any interviews with women, despite being billed as an overview of the genre. Disaster!

An apology for this "lazy sexism" was quickly issued by the BFS chair and special publications editor, luckily in time to be included when *The Guardian* picked up the story. We were perhaps also lucky in that two British Fantasy Awards had gone to women, though it was a shame one male writer who lost out pulled a Kanye and said the whole thing was a fix (going so far as to post a clip from The Damned United on his blog, the bit where Cloughie tells the Leeds players to throw their medals in the bin, because they got them by cheating).

The upshot of all that is that next year we'll just have four issues of *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction* so that I can schedule things a bit more sensibly (and maybe even bring out a few more books).

On to this issue: hope you enjoy it and feel it's been worth the wait. I think it contains some of our most interesting and unusual stories ever!

Contributors

SKADI MEIC BEORH is a fantasy novelist presently abiding in Pittsburgh with his girl Amberlynn and their three faery-cats Winkin, Blinkin, and Nod. His books *Always After Thieves Watch* and *Pirate Lingo* are presently in print. More books are forthcoming from Wildside Press, Sam's Dot, and Rebel Satori Press. Much more about this author can be found at <http://skadimeicbeorh.wordpress.com> and on Facebook.

MICHAEL CANFIELD has published seventeen short stories. His work has appeared in *Realms of Fantasy*, *Escape Pod*, *Strange Horizons*, the anthology *Fantasy: The Year's Best 2006* (Prime Books), and other places. For more info, and links to free stories, visit his website, www.michaelcanfield.net.

K.J. HANNAH GREENBERG gave up all manner of academic hoopla to chase a hibernaculum of imaginary hedgehogs and to raise children. Hannah's writing has been accepted for publication in venues including *Doorknobs and Bodypaint*, *Fallopian Falafel*, *Ken*Again*, *Literary Mama*, *Morpheus Tales*, *Poetry Super Highway*, *Shakespeare's Monkey Review*, *Static Movement*, *The Externalist* and *The Lesser Flamingo*.

JOHN GREENWOOD is laughing right now at these very words.

K.J. HAYS lives in Orange County with his churlish dog, Mr Bear. His work has appeared in such publications as *Sex and Murder*, *Bareback Magazine*, *The Flea*, *Dark and Dreary* and the delightfully named *Breadcrumbs Scabs*. He keeps a blog here: <http://illegalfunk.blogspot.com>. It wants followers and commentary.

RAFE MCGREGOR recently celebrated the publication of his historical thriller, *The Architect of Murder*. See www.rafemcgregor.co.uk. To this issue he contributes two reviews.

BEN THOMAS is the author of dozens of short stories, three screenplays, and a perpetually unfinished novel. In 2007, he founded *The Willows*, the now-defunct magazine of Victorian tales and art. These days, he spends much of his free time studying ancient cultures and languages, a passion he hopes will lead to a high-level degree in an archaeological field. He lives in the Los Angeles area with his girlfriend.

JON VAGG mainly writes reports and training materials on social exclusion, deprivation and deviance, often drawing on his own life story. He has previously published fiction under pseudonyms, mostly in niche gothic magazines.

FANTASY

Citadel Ninety-Nine

Michael Canfield

Through the morning, between corral slats, Molyk eyed the detail. By twos and threes, soldiers dragged women and boys to the Commander's velvet tent, and through the morning captive and captor alike found themselves chased away under hails of crashing plates and subhuman growls.

The Commander may have been fickle, but his officers were less so. The most beautiful women and lithest boys were distributed among the generals; captains chose next, then lesser officers. The remainder were left for communal use by whichever common soldiers could fight off their compatriots best, or were sober enough for the inclination.

The Captain of this detail once again led his soldiers back to the prison compound. The Captain's plumed helmet shined, as did the nickel sidearm strapped to his hip. Molyk had noticed other officers sashay with silver-capped sticks or leather crops to strike subordinates, servants, and prisoners willy-nilly. But this Captain did not need to strike anyone. He spoke and all but the weakest soldiers jumped. The weakest cringed.

The Captain wore a gold eye-patch over his left eye. For this reason, more than any other, Molyk tried to hide. He hid the right side of his own face and his own missing eye each time the Captain passed. Molyk did not know why he feared the Captain would notice their similar deformities, but he did fear it. The number of still undistributed prisoners was dwindling and he could not hide forever.

The detail entered the compound and picked through the thinned ranks, moving prisoners aside with their bayonet flats. Old men and a few cripples remained, the women all taken. Able men that had survived to the end of the siege had all been slaughtered in the burning ruins.

The fattest soldier slung his weapon and snatched Molyk's wrist, yanking him up like a calf. "Nother boy, Captain!"

The Captain walked toward them, hand resting on his holstered weapon. He addressed the fat soldier. "Too ugly, Sergeant Felix."

"Some likes 'em that way."

The Captain looked right through Molyk, indifferent to the shared deformity which so spooked the boy. "Rid us of these," he said.

Molyk wriggled from Sergeant Felix's grasp but the Captain caught Molyk by the hair before he could run. "Where do you think you're going?" he said, twisting the fistful of hair.

"Ow! Nowhere!"

The sergeant gasped. "It knows our speech!"

The Captain glared. "By what name are you called?"

Molyk told him, and the Captain attempted to repeat it, defeated by the pronunciation. "Mole-aye-ick? Molk. Are you a spy, Molk?"

Molyk's guts knotted, but he shook his head.

The Captain pointed east, to Verdiin, the smouldering city. "But you don't come from that," he said.

"From Colm," he lied.

"There is no Colm."

"He means Citadel Number Ninety-Six, Captain," explained Sergeant Felix.

The Captain twisted his mouth. "There is no Citadel Number Ninety-Six, sergeant. Just as there is no Citadel Ninety-Eight since this morning."

The sergeant swallowed. "Sir!"

He turned back to Molyk. "So we killed your father and mother in Citadel Ninety-Six but you gave us the slip? One rat or two always does. But we have you now, little shit."

"No sir."

The Captain squeezed tighter. "We do."

"I mean, sir, I never had any parents I remember. Not in Verdiin, not in Colm or anyplace." Molyk told the story that had been prepared for another purpose, that for some years he'd apprenticed with a travelling merchant. The merchant had fallen down drunk on the streets of Verdiin, where he was robbed and his skull split. Since then Molyk had made his way as best he could on the trash-heaped streets.

The story held some truth. He had been apprenticed once, his master had died, but this hadn't happened in Verdiin. Though still a boy, his language skills and wit gained him employment as a spy and diplomat. He had been sent to discover what he could about the ever-advancing legion. He had never counted on getting so close. Still he must hold his employer's offer until the last possible moment; he'd given his word.

The Captain pressed his thumb over the smooth flat skin covering Molyk's eye socket. "Born thus?"

"I don't recall my birth, nor have I met anyone who witnessed that miserable day," Molyk said.

"Being born with one eye is a stupid thing to do, best take double care with it." The Captain flipped up the gold patch over his own eye socket exposing lumped gristle. "How many languages do you speak?"

"Seven."

"Can you see a pair of boots with your one eye?"

Molyk did not know what he meant; some idiom he did not understand?

"Can you lace boots, can you polish them? A translator is one thing, but a translating bootblack, now that I'll feed."

The Captain did not wait for an answer. "Take him to my tent, Sergeant Felix."

"Yes sir. But sir?"

The Captain waited.

"Protocol? The boy must be offered to seniors first."

"If anyone interferes with you say the Commander's Boy will happily discuss the matter. That's me – you understand."

"Yes sir."

"That's what I'm called in some circles, yes?"

"No sir."

"By you?"

"No sir, nor by any good soldiers."

"Not by the soldiers, not by the men. Nevertheless..."

"I couldn't say, sir."

"In some wheezing, girlish circles, where back-line officers hide. Sergeant Felix, earlier I gave you an order."

"Yes sir. The boy."

"Not that. I told you to dispense with the rest of this rabble."

"Oh! Yes sir!"

"Why do they yet breath my air, sergeant?"

"Sir! Yes sir!"

The sergeant ensconced Molyk in a tent which seemed quite large for a mere captain. The Captain had informed Sergeant Felix that he would be in council planning the next campaign throughout the day. Perhaps not knowing what else to do with him, Sergeant Felix handed Molyk a rag to wipe dust from the tent's inside walls. The tent burst with carpets, ceremonial swords and daggers, trinkets and other spoils – the styles of which Molyk recognised only a small portion of from his travels. Woven

tapestries that once hung on the walls of some vanquished palace now covered the Captain's ground.

Sergeant Felix leaned his rifle against a supporting pole. "You do what you're told, never speak, and you will be fine here." He peered through the flap, as if checking to make sure no one was listening, then sat down on a stool, removed his helm and wiped his brow. He loosed his belt and freed his gut.

"He's a good one, the Captain," said Sergeant Felix. Molyk had known men like the sergeant before. Men who could not stand silence, and never kept it. "Do as he says and you will be well cared for. We've been through it all, you know, Captain and I. Conquered seven citadels together. Seven! – in three years. We'll get there. He will get us there if any man can."

"Where?" asked Molyk.

Sergeant Felix glared. He lumbered up and backhanded Molyk. Molyk could have dodged the blow but chose to take it rather than antagonise the man further. "Shut, you! Mum! Never ask that! Never. Not of me and not of the Captain. Where? The Captain knows where. The Commander knows where. That's good enough for the likes of me. The Commander is not sick! The Commander is strong! Strong! Now shut up! Shut up! You talk too much, Molk. The Captain'll rip you to pieces, sure, the way you go on." Sergeant Felix snatched his rifle and turned it horizontal. The bayonet gleamed in light spilling past the loose tent flap.

Molyk slowly took up the rag, resumed wiping the tent walls.

Sergeant Felix kneeled, huffing and puffing – a task with his girth. He cradled the rifle down and rested it on woven carpet. He had to put his arms out to manage it, but got down low enough to touch his cheek against the flat of the bayonet. He rubbed against it, then moved down the length of the barrel, emitting a satisfied hum as he went, and kissed the trigger.

Within the tent stood a draped off area that Molyk took for a sleeping alcove. Molyk tried to slip behind it and hide from the sergeant's strange ritual. He was not stealthy enough, knocking a candlestick into a teetering stack of golden plates.

Sergeant Felix jerked upright as if suddenly remembering Molyk. The sergeant snatched the rifle, pulled the bolt, and aimed in one fluid motion. "Do you know what I do with this!"

Molyk nodded.

Sergeant Felix choked back tears. He cradled the weapon to his chest, then stiffened. He found his way to one knee, and then pressed himself to his feet through great exertion. He backed away from Molyk feeling

for the tent flap behind him. "I haven't time for this! No more lollygagging, you. The men need training! We won't be here much longer, the Commander gives the order any minute! We will be ready."

He slipped into the sunlight.

Molyk spent the rest of the day and much of the night alone in the tent, creating work to occupy himself. The Captain's tent stood very close to the encamped army's centre. Molyk had seen the top of the Commander's much more enormous enclosure not too far away. The camp covered a mile of countryside, its perimeter sandbagged and manned still, even though few – if any – free Verdiinian survived.

The Captain called Verdiin a citadel but it was hardly that. Clay walls and low buildings – even the richest denizens pissed in the streets. Brym was much better, stronger, with double-decked houses and sewers under bricked streets. Still, no matter the size of a town, there existed no army in all the lower world that could rival the Commander's Legion.

Notwithstanding that, nor his duties as spy, nor as diplomat, Molyk considered escape. The soldiers were insane, restless, and they awaited orders to advance on what they called "Citadel Ninety-Nine". That had to be Brym, the city of Molyk's recent patron, the nearest city to the west. Exhausted, he made himself an unobtrusive bed in a corner.

He only closed his eyes when footsteps approached. The tent's flap was thrown open and the interior bathed in moonlight. In strode the Captain dragging a stumbling, fluid girl in one arm and a long wineskin in the other.

The Captain spotted Molyk. "Bootblack! Boy of-Seven-Tongues. Light the lamps."

After lighting them, Molyk looked at the girl.

She was near his own age – perhaps a year or two older – giggling, and, either very drunk or driven from her senses. Someone had tried to paint her face and botched it. They had done worse with her hair. Whatever colour design had willed, it had been bleached into straw in an attempt to make her blonde.

The Captain dropped her to the carpets, then bid Molyk fetch a stool. The Captain took the stool and drove its legs into carpet weave. He sat and stared at the all but unconscious girl. After minutes he jerked his head in the direction of a box. "Bread."

Molyk found the bread – hard, old – and brought it to the Captain. The Captain looked at him as if he were insane. "Eat it," he said. "You're hungry aren't you? I know when a man is hungry. I can read his face."

Molyk tried to bite the bread, but his teeth had become loosened dur-

ing the long siege and small rations of Verdiin, and the crust was too hard.

“Piss!” said the Captain, snatching the bread. He cast it underfoot and broke the crust with his heel. He then poured wine over it.

The Captain kicked the wine-soaked bread back to Molyk. Molyk tore bits off and put them in his mouth.

The Captain left the wineskin uncapped. Placing his foot under the girl’s shoulder, he pushed her onto her back and poured a stream of wine into her open mouth. She gurgled and coughed it back up. The Captain lifted the spout, interrupting the flow. The girl, eyes still closed, settled. When she had, the Captain repeated the action, filling her mouth once more until she choked.

Molyk chewed his bread.

The Captain took no wine himself and, best as Molyk could tell, was cold sober.

The girl settled again and the Captain started to bend the wineskin to drown her a third time.

“She’s no good to you like that,” interrupted Molyk. “These Verdiin girls can’t hold their wine.”

The Captain forgot his game. His eyes steeled. “Verdiin? What’s Verdiin.”

“I mean, these *Citadel Ninety-Eight* girls.”

“You’ll say anything that pops into your one-eyed skull won’t you, Seven Tongues? How about I take a knife, slice your tongue in seven strips for you?” He dropped the wineskin, stood up, dragged the girl by her robe toward the inner tent. “Put these lamps out,” he ordered Molyk. “Stop wasting my oil.”

The Captain closed himself and the girl within the draped inner chamber, and Molyk extinguished the lamps. He stumbled back to his makeshift bed, but could not sleep, hearing the girl. Even almost senseless – with hope, oblivious – she still cried. A quarter-hour later, the Captain dragged her out, throwing her toward Molyk’s corner.

“Move over, Molk,” he said. “You’ve a guest.” The Captain retired again. In moments Molyk heard his snores. The girl was still, but more sober than she’d been earlier. Molyk straightened her on his bedding then found something she could wear and helped her into it. After a moment she spoke, in the language of Verdiin. “Is he your father?”

“No. I’m just a servant.”

“My father and mother are dead,” she told him.

He nodded. “I’m Molyk.”

“Elg,” she said. “I come from Verdiin. Only there isn’t any Verdiin anymore.”

“Sleep, Elg.”

She closed her eyes. He moved a few feet away and laid down his head. In a moment he slept too.

In the morning the Captain woke Molyk with a kick. “Get that one up, too,” he ordered. “Translate for me.”

Molyk shook Elg’s shoulder, she rubbed her eyes.

“Tell her she is my wife and property.”

Molyk translated. Elg put her hands together in the Verdiin gesture of acknowledgment.

“Even so, if she steals from me I will kill her.”

“She won’t steal.”

“Tell her.”

Molyk obeyed.

“Tell her if she sucks any other pricks I will kill her – but first I will castrate her lover before her eyes.”

“She wouldn’t do that.”

“You don’t know women. Tell her.”

Molyk told her. Elg asked him a question.

“What’s it say!” the Captain demanded.

“She doesn’t know what that means. She doesn’t know what you are talking about. Do you want me to explain it to her?”

The Captain scoffed. “You see, Molk. Deceivers all. Tell her again, make sure she understands. And be ready, I will want you later.” He left, marching toward the Commander’s tent.

Molyk tended Elg as best he could. She was perspiring greatly, but her skin was warm, not cold, and he took that for a good sign. Next to her in the bed, he spied a sword wrapped among the fabrics. Elg must have risen in the night and taken it from a stockpile. He did not say anything to her about it.

Elg saw him gazing at the sword. “I am a woman now,” she said. “The women of Verdiin must sleep with swords nowadays – so mother said.” She closed her eyes and pulled fabric over her head to block sun rays that flooded under the tent. Molyk let her sleep.

Sergeant Felix stepped into the tent, then looked anxiously to the draped inner chamber. He tiptoed close, extended his hand to draw the drape. But he reconsidered, giving Molyk the order instead. “Wake your Captain, Molk.”

“He is already gone.”

Felix's eyes widened. "So late! I must hurry."

He turned, but two lean officers appeared and blocked his path.

"At ease, Sergeant Fatty," said one. Both held high rank and, though much younger than the Captain, each carried the white scars of old battles.

"Tell His Self that we are here to see him," said the taller officer.

"My Captain is not in," said Sergeant Felix.

"It that so?" He looked past Sergeant Felix's shoulder. The sergeant shifted to block their views. This angered the tall officer, who feinted a lunge at Felix. Felix flinched, and both officers howled. Felix stammered. "Yes sirs, I've come to see him myself, and he is not here."

The taller walked about the tent, eyed heaps of spoils.

"On your way," he said to Felix.

"Sir?"

"On your way. If you've come for your Captain, but he is not encamped within, your business is complete. Off."

"Yes sir." He paused. "Will your sirs be leaving as well?"

The officer slashed air with his crop. "Off!"

Sergeant Felix stumbled backward, and recovered just enough to keep his feet, turned and ran on his stubby legs.

"Quite a haul," said the shorter officer, tossing aside a goblet.

The tall officer jabbed the shorter's elbow and nodded at Molyk. "This must be the squawk box, the one that kens our speech. It doesn't look like much."

"Missing an eye too. Like to like."

"Prop them up together and they balanced out."

"The Captain and I each have our eye on the right," said Molyk.

The pair gawked at him.

Molyk elaborated. "Stand us together and you would see our eyes are on your left. If I had my right eye and he his left, *then* we would balanced out, as you say. As it stands, we're imbalanced."

The tall officer spoke to his fellow. "And a clown as well. I wonder if they fuck each other through those eye sockets. Might that be the appeal?" He addressed Molyk. "Come along. And where's the little princess he seized? I'll have her too." He pulled the drapes of the Captain's empty sleeping chamber. Elg was still buried in the little corner bed and – Molyk hopped – invisible.

"I'm to stay here until I'm needed, Captain's orders," said Molyk.

"I'm senior. I claim you. Where's the pretty girl?"

"He tossed her out last night."

"Even your Captain's not ignorant enough to throw away a princess."

He grabbed Molyk and tossed him toward the shorter officer, who clenched Molyk's thin arms. The officer pulled, stretching his joints as if to separate him like a chicken.

Slicing with the crop, the tall officer cut Molyk's cheek. "Where did he take her?" the officer demanded. Another cut with the crop.

The officer holding Molyk let his grip relax some. "Forget this. They aren't here," he told his fellow.

"What of it?" said the other.

A third blow, and Molyk cried out.

Stirring under the fabrics, Elg moaned. A grin spread across the tall officer's face. He wagged the crop at Molyk in admonishment, then turned to the bedding. The fabric twisted, as Elg moved underneath. The taller officer stepped over, then straddled her hidden form. "Come out," he said. "Stand up."

Elg did not rise, but thrust the hidden sword up. It pierced the officer between groin and thigh. The blade severed an artery, blood spouted. The tall officer's knees buckled. He sank onto the blade.

The shorter officer pushed Molyk away and drew his pistol. He aimed at the sword, at Elg beneath it. But the shot that came was not from his gun.

The short officer's skull blew open, and he dropped forward. Smoking pistol raised, the Captain stood at the tent entrance, with Sergeant Felix peering from behind his shadow.

The Captain sheathed his weapon, then strode to the tall officer. He was dead, though internal pressures kept the blood squirting and he still hovered upright fixed by the sword. The Captain pulled the body free of the weapon, threw it aside like a sack, then parted the soaked fabrics.

He stood Elg up, stunned, and blood-drenched. The Captain could not even pry the sword from her hands. So instead, he ran his thumb over its edge.

"Do you see this, Sergeant Felix?"

"Sir?"

"What a thrust! It's a trophy sword, Sergeant, with an edge is as dull as its victim." Elg crumpled and the Captain clasped her to himself. He grabbed her wet face wet and squeezed it. "My bride!" he said. "My magnificent bride!"

Gesturing to the short officer's body he said, "Felix, remove that." Then, while supporting Elg in one arm, he clenched the dead officer's hair and dragged the body outside.

Soldiers had gathered at the gunshot, but none had dared enter the

Captain's tent. Now, as he stepped into the sunlight, the soldiers backed away.

The Captain dropped the tall officer. Felix struggled out with the other body and drew it alongside the first.

The Captain displayed blood-soaked Elg for the soldiers.

"My bride is a better killer than any man here." He kissed her open mouth. She cringed and cried out. He slid his hands down her front, scooping up blood to smear over his face and chest.

The Captain drew his pistol again and fired into the corpses. The soldiers bolted again. Their fright made the Captain laugh. Taking Elg's wrist and the still-gripped sword hilt in his hands he them high in triumph. He roared at the soldiers to leave his sight, glaring as they dispersed.

He ordered Sergeant Felix to take Elg back inside, and to stay with her until his return. Felix took her arm. Molyk moved to support her other side.

"You," said the Captain to Molyk. "Some help you were today. Come with me."

The Captain turned and Molyk followed, but he could not resist looking back as Sergeant Felix led Elg, still weeping, back into the tent. The Captain whirled. He looked Molyk up and down, grinning. "You wouldn't have the first idea what to do with that," said the Captain.

"I would treat her like a princess, my Captain."

"It's *my* Captain, now is it?"

"Yes, my Captain."

"Your deference and loyalty moves me. What next, shall I let you fuck me in the ass?"

"She's a princess – the officers said."

The Captain snorted. "Idiots. Any woman with a tooth in her mouth is princess in that Citadel – or queen or duchess. You know this, coming from here as you do."

Molyk swallowed.

"Ah, that's right. You're not from Citadel Ninety-Eight. Where is it again?"

Molyk said nothing.

"The citadel that still stands before us has sent out spies. I've caught them. I've tortured them. One spoke of a boy with one eye and many tongues." He paused. "I've known who you are since last night."

Molyk stared at the Captain's gun.

"You should run, you are thinking. It'll be quicker that way, you think. Quicker than flailing any way – the fate that met your brother spies. You

should have run last night, when you had the chance.” The Captain continued reading Molyk’s face. “Don’t look so shocked. If escape never crossed your mind, then you haven’t half the sense I know you do. But your princess changed things and you stayed.”

Molyk’s cheeks burned.

“Ha! You are too easy. But you’re young.”

“I won’t talk,” said Molyk. “No matter what torture.”

“You would talk. But what of it? What could you tell me? About the guns?”

The news hit Molyk like a slap.

The people of Brym – the city the legion called Citadel Ninety-Nine – were skilled craftsmen and engineers. Along the way they had obtained a gun like the legions carried and studied its principle.

“These guns of Citadel Ninety-Nine. Good?”

“I know of no guns.”

The Captain stared, and Molyk looked down. Weaker, much weaker. As often as not, they misfired, sometimes even exploded, blinding the firer.

“You see, there is nothing I could torture from you I don’t see plain on your face. I don’t care that you are a spy. I don’t care if you have counted every man, horse, and rifle in my legion. This is not a war, Molk. You want to be brave. You believe in bravery. You believe in love and glory. There is only advantage and disadvantage. Fucking and fighting, understand? What happens in this low world means nothing. I needn’t torture you, Molk, when you do it so well yourself. I merely want your language skills. Now come along, the Commander is waiting.”

The Commander’s tent – heaped with loot and housing a central draped chamber – was a version of the Captain’s, but larger, the size of a village square.

Unlike the Captain’s solitary camp, however, the Commander’s tent teemed with people: map-studying tacticians, aged – decrepit, even – generals, cowed servants, and painted concubines. They stopped their hubbub when Molyk and the Captain entered.

Stares darted to him and then to the Captain, marking the blood the Captain had smeared on his face, and the clotted cuts on Molyk from the killed officer’s crop. Servants whispered among themselves. The old generals, their gazes wet, said nothing.

A grizzled general with eyebrows like caterpillars came forward. He looked Molyk up and down. “This is the miracle boy?”

The Captain ignored the general, instead directing servants to go to

pulleys attending four corners of the heavily-draped chamber. "Now you'll see something," the Captain said to Molyk. At his command the servants tugged. The drapes climbed upward. Generals and tacticians stood erect. Servants and concubines kneeled.

On a platform – collar-chain about its neck, cuffs and more chains binding its ankles and wrists – a great beast strained. Covered in silver and brown hair but for its red wolfish snout, nevertheless the beast's hands and limbs looked strangely manlike. The beast snorted and lurched its head, expelling ropes of drool.

The Captain – all the officers – saluted.

"What is it?" said Molyk.

"The Commander," said the Captain evenly. "A grace from the gods of the higher world, the world which gives us guns. It is called a baboon in the true speech."

The beast thrust one curled hand toward the Captain and uttered a deep barking growl.

"What's it say? Translate," the Captain ordered Molyk.

The beast arched its back. Molyk looked at the Captain. "It's not speaking –"

The Captain glared.

"I don't understand its language, my Captain."

"Listen harder! Tell me what it wants. Why does it refuse our sacrifice?"

"It has no language, it's a beast."

"Don't play stupid, tell me!"

"You've said you can tell when I lie. Am I lying now?"

The crowd of retainers had been hushed till then, but now snickers could be heard among the officers. The Captain looked side to side. He gripped Molyk's shoulders and held him within an inch of the beast's reach. It snarled. Breath steamed Molyk's face. The Captain forced Molyk to the ground. "Sit there till you do ken its speech."

The general with the heavy eyebrows spoke. "This is a sad stunt, Captain, even for you."

The Captain seemed unconcerned with the other man's rank. "Shut up and watch. Or are your eyes too old?"

The youngest officers laughed. The general swallowed. "Continue with this ridiculous performance, then. It will gain you nothing."

The Captain ignored that and sat himself, cross-legged, inches behind Molyk.

Hours passed. The Captain refused food and drink. Molyk was offered nothing. The beast became used to the pair and had gone quiet. It sat now

itself, brooding, its barrelled torso rising and falling. Molyk stared at the beast's red eyes, but he was more conscious of the Captain sitting so close behind him, like an angry shadow.

Molyk knew he would die now. There was no beast language to hear, and he could not fool the Captain by pretending. The Captain had the power to see through him like air. Finally he could bear the wait no longer and turned.

Just as he supposed, the Captain was glaring at the back of his head. "It's only an animal," said Molyk. "Only an animal. It does not speak."

A red-faced young officer stepped forward, fingers on a pistol butt.

The Captain raised a hand. Then he spoke to Molyk lowly, but loudly enough that others could hear if they chose. "You tell the truth, but truth is blasphemy in this cursed legion. Do your job. Translate."

He gripped Molyk's head and turned him back around. Then he leaned forward, speaking into Molyk's ear. "Even dumb beasts have a story to tell. Can't you say when a dog is anxious, or when a horse's spirit is broken?"

"No more than you."

The Captain spoke loudly. "You are a boy, guileless. Let's hear it from you."

The beast ran a forearm across its snout several times, scratching an itch.

"It says it has fleas."

The entourage burst into laughter. The beast shook its head as if trying to fight the sound out of its ears. The Captain thumped Molyk between the shoulder blades. "Its eyes. What do the Commander's eyes say?"

The beast's eyes did not dart, or scan the corners the scene. Slow eyes, focused only on what came close into the beast's small circle of space.

"It's scared."

The tent was hushed.

"Tell us what it is saying, not what you yourself are feeling," said the Captain.

Molyk reddened. In frustration he banged his fist on the ground. "It's tired, you idiots. You killers. It's sad and tired. You don't need me to tell you. If you had any sense you'd see for yourselves!"

The crowd gasped. The old general let his mouth fall open. He recovered. He came near, looking very sincerely at Molyk. "What must we do? How can we please the Commander? Make him strong again?"

"Let him go."

The Captain spoke sternly. "That's you talking. Your wish."

“His too.”

“Nonsense,” said the Captain.

“Why must you keep him chained?”

“To keep him from tearing your head off. And mine. The Commander is not chained. We are.”

The general prostrated himself, before the beast, clasping his hands together. “We’ve come so far, Commander, don’t abandon us now!”

The Captain went to him and stood him gently up. He put hands on the old man’s hunched shoulders. “Rest yourself, general. Do not show your weakness before lesser men.” The Captain touched the corner of the general’s left eye. He rubbed his fingers together, slippery. He smiled with one side of his mouth. “Dry your womanly tears.”

The general’s eyes went wide with shock, and he returned to his senses, wiping his wet eyes, but the damage was done. “No! No!” he said.

The younger officers snickered, the servants buried their faces to try and suppress their laughter. The other old generals and tacticians looked at the ground.

“I merely... I am merely paying fealty to the Commander.”

“No. You were crying and begging. You are not strong.”

“I am strong! It was the moment! Only the moment.”

“And now you make excuses. More womanish yet.”

The general sought the eyes of a friend, any friend, finding none. His face hardened. He hands went to his belt, he unbuckled it and let it fall to the ground. A low-ranking officer snatched it, grinning. The general moved to release his helm. The nearest man yanked it away before he could even untie the strap. He pulled off his leather jerkin and dropped it. An officer tried to seize it but Molyk’s Captain stamped his foot upon it. The officer backed away.

The general started to unlace his breeches, but fumbled; the others grasped at his remaining vestments, upending him to snatch his boots and even his undergarments. When there was nothing left to steal, the general righted himself with as much dignity as he could muster. The general did not flinch when a servant ran up to him, pointed at his shrivelled penis in mockery. The general left the tent.

A number of the others followed.

“Pick it up,” said the Captain to Molyk, removing his foot from the leather jerkin he’d claimed. “Now is as good a time as any for our exit.”

Molyk did as told and followed his Captain out. The naked general marched steadily. Common soldiers joined in now, shouting and laughing, pelting the general with mud and manure.

The Captain's tent lay in the other direction and the Captain bid Molyk come away with him. The Captain noted Molyk's solemnity with a scowl. "Sympathy for your enemy?"

"He is not my enemy."

"Forgotten where you are? How many mouthy boys do you think he has killed in his day? Every man here is your enemy."

Molyk looked down. Of course. "What will happen to him?"

"When they tire of throwing shit, they will start throwing fists. In paradise he will be restored to his former dignity. Right now, it's just fun for the men. You did well today. They laughed at you, but you still told them the truth."

"I did nothing. But at least you got this handsome jerkin."

His Captain looked almost hurt. "I got that for you, Molk. It's far too long, but the general had a narrow chest, it will fit you well enough."

"I'll never wear it."

The Captain snatched the jerkin and flung it in the direction of the mob, and men scrappled for it. "You'll wish you'd kept it one day. It's good leather. Tough enough to stop glancing blows." The Captain's face twisted. Then he made himself calm. He took Molyk's arm and linked it with his own. Soldiers and officers often walked linked that way within the camp – but only with equals. Molyk shuddered.

At the Captain's tent the area still stood in disarray. The bodies of the two officers had been stripped, but the naked corpses had been left in the open air, bringing clouds of flies. They found Sergeant Felix inside the tent sitting on a foot stool, rifle across his thighs, staring at Elg. She was still filthy with the blood of the dead officer. Apparently she'd tried to clean herself by wiping with various cloths. The Captain seized a water pitcher, then cast it aside when he found it empty. He barked at Felix. "What have you been doing all day!" He looked at Elg, who was sitting motionlessly. "Do I have to do everything myself?"

He ordered Felix to fetch a tub and told Molyk to heat water for it. Soon he grew impatient with the pace of the work and commandeered some idle soldiers to assist.

The water was boiled outside the tent. Felix and Molyk shuffled back and forth with steaming pitchers to fill the tub. The sun was down and the evening had drawn cold; gripping the porcelain pitchers and feeling the steam rise off the water felt pleasant to Molyk. With the tub three-quarters filled, the Captain tested the temperature with his elbow. Felix arrived to pour another pitcher and the Captain waived him away. "Keep heating the cistern," he said, sending Felix out, "and do something about

those rotting dogs.” Molyk followed the sergeant but the Captain called him back. “Stand ready till I call for more water.”

The Captain took Elg’s arm and stood her up. He held her firmly and examined the clasps of her robe, then unclasped them. Her garments dropped in a heap, and Elg yelped, holding her arms across herself.

The Captain led her to the bath and helped her step in. Sinking into the steaming water, Elg moaned.

Molyk tried to hide his face. The Captain seemed unfazed by Elg’s beauty. He began washing her legs, her arms very methodically. The water turned red as the dried blood came away from Elg’s skin. The Captain rocked her back to clean her hair, combing his fingers through her locks again and again.

He told Molyk to call for more water.

Molyk summoned a soldier, who brought forward a pitcher. Molyk parted the flap to let the man through, but the man –afraid of the Captain probably – thrust the pitcher into Molyk’s hands and turned away. Molyk stood a moment, his back to the bath. The Captain barked at him to bring the pitcher.

Molyk had no choice but to turn. He approached with the pitcher held low, hiding his embarrassment. When he tipped the pitcher to pour its contents between Elg’s feet into the tub, he hunched forward hoping to disguise it still. The thin fabric he wore offered no protection. Molyk upended the pitcher, then raced back to his place at the entrance, but the Captain saw. With a glint in his eye the Captain whispered to Elg. She could not have understand the Captain’s language, but something in his tone nevertheless conveyed joke and she giggled involuntarily.

Shame overcame Molyk. He ran from the tent, leaving their laughter behind him. He hid in the shadows as long as allowed. Finally the Captain hollered for him. He went back in.

After the bathing, the Captain had food brought, fruits and meats from the larder of the killed officers. The Captain’s mood was buoyant when the dishes were set out by Felix and the contingent that brought them. He had Felix stay behind to join the meal, saying he enjoyed watching fat men eat. He ordered Molyk to sit as well. The Captain motioned Elg, who, though dry and clothed again, was still pink-cheeked from her bath, to his own side.

She kneeled, resting her left hand palm upward in her lap, touching food with her right hand only, in the manner of her people. Felix tore at his food as if he’d not eaten in days – and squeezed out farts, causing the company – even Molyk, despite himself – to laugh. The Captain took little food, bits of this or that, spitting them out as often as swallowing. The

foods, native to the area, were unfamiliar to him. Using Molyk to translate he asked Elg to name the various foods, and tell which she liked best.

The Captain was gregarious all night, laughing and reminiscing with Sergeant Felix over old campaigns. He went back further, telling legends of the legion from before his own time, peppering anecdotes with: "this is before you were born, Molk" and "when your father was beardless". The Captain said that no one knew when the legions began, but it was believed the first soldiers were outcasts of the Higher World.

The present legion had split off from another and began counting its own conquered citadels even before the Captain's time. "From the Ninth citadel he liberated me. At less than half your years, Molk. I lucked into manhood early, before pastoral ways gained hold. A soldier became my true father by killing my birth father. But for him I would have been a farmer."

Felix burped a laugh. He tried stifling it, coughing and choking when Captain fixed him with a hard look.

"Who was your father?" Molyk asked suddenly.

"You met him yourself," said the Captain. "Today."

Molyk understood he meant the general who had been stripped and jeered into banishment. He did not ask more questions. He had been translating for Elg, but did not translate this last exchange, and Elg touched his elbow, prompting him. Molyk shook his head, wishing the subject would go away. They sat in silence for awhile.

Sergeant Felix broke it. "Ninety-eight citadels, right Captain? Now the ninety-ninth? That's Paradise, young Molk. When the Commander gives the order, we will march on Citadel Ninety-Nine. We will take her, and enter her and live inside her forever."

"Do you believe so, sergeant?" asked the Captain. "Do your fists believe it? Does your aiming eye? And your blood?"

Felix wiped his mouth, then squared his shoulders. "Yes, my Captain. I believe."

"You are an idiot."

The sergeant sputtered. His face turned crimson.

"Go eat with the men if you want to hear fairy stories." The Captain flipped a bit of fat at the sergeant. "Go anyway, before you eat me into poverty."

The sergeant flinched, struck more by the words than the food. He pushed to his feet and backed away. "It's true!" he said to the Captain with surprising force.

"No it isn't, dunce. Old soldiers once said the same thing of Citadel

Twelve. They said it of Citadel Twenty-One. And the Fiftieth Citadel. Those numbers sounded magical too, until we arrived, we conquered, and we moved on unchanged. Have you noticed? We are so simple, willing to swallow any lie. No wonder the kings of the Higher World give a dumb beast to lead us.”

Felix’s mouth fell open. “The Commander is God. He will give his roar and make us ready.”

“A beast with jaws in one world and innards in the next. An animal that has a stunt it is nowadays reluctant to perform. It’s as sick of us as I am of it. The real gods – wherever they are – have lost interest in your destiny.”

“You tell lies! You tell lies, Captain!” He ran out.

The Captain snorted and tore apart food.

“Why do you follow the beast, if you know it’s a lie?” said Molyk.

“It is a lie that has made me.”

Molyk bit his lip. His diplomatic orders were to make the following offer as a last resort – only when the legion moved, preferably – but perhaps this was the moment that could dissuade the Captain. “Walk away,” he said.

The Captain heard, but did not react.

“They have guns,” said Molyk. “In the ninety-ninth citadel, they have guns.”

“I’ve already gotten that from you. Their guns do not match mine.”

“Guns with barrels eight inches wide.”

The Captain raised his head. “A citadel of giants?”

“Normal men. The great guns move on carriages, three men to a gun. The guns fire heavy balls of lead, or sacks of twisted metal. They do not work well, they often explode and have killed many gunners, but they will kill a great many of your men as well. And they may be much improved now, it’s been half a year since I left the city.”

The Captain shook his head.

“There’s more.”

Molyk had been talking fast, not translating for Elg, and she was looking increasingly distressed at being left out, but he could not stop for her now.

“My Lord in Brym – that place you call Citadel Ninety-Nine – holds an island in the eastern sea. He offers you the island if you will take it. He has built a new road to the sea, a hero’s road, and left many boats at its end for your legion. It is a large island, there are a few villages there, beautiful women. The waters are full of fish and crab. You have only to go there. Turn the legion, and go there.”

"If I wanted his island, I could take it."

"You could and he knows that, but the fight will be bloody with guns on each side."

"I wonder what it feels like to have bullets enter one's flesh? I've never met them in battle."

"Your soldiers are scared, they live by the gun, but believe only they can have them. How will they react facing them the first time?"

"We will see."

"My Captain, take the eastern road. It could be the paradise your men are looking for. No more fighting, isn't that the promise?"

"Yes that is the promise, but the promise was made a long time ago. No legion has ever walked away from a fight."

"And where are they now?"

The Captain shrugged. "On other roads."

"Or gone. When did you last hear news of any other?"

"This world is almost dead, there cannot be an infinite number of citadels to take. There is no paradise to go to, but that does not mean I have no purpose here. But tell me about the Higher World. The world of your birth."

Molyk swallowed. Even Elg, without knowing the words, could see their effect on him. She brought her hand to her mouth.

"You *are* from the higher world, you can admit it to me now," said the Captain.

Molyk stammered. "I don't know. I don't remember where I came from. I must have been very young when I was abandoned in this world."

"But you know it's so."

Molyk nodded his head. He remembered nothing of the Higher World, but he knew.

"I have met a number like you, here and there on the roads. None so young. All able to see – how should I put it – all able to see the ins-and-outs of a thing. In the Higher World one is not bound by destiny, and perhaps it is very amusing to you to see us so bound. But you're here now. Maybe you committed some sin, or fell by mere accident. I can't know. But you are in the lower world now; you will die in it one day. Until then, you ought to learn to live in it, as I have done. Every fallen king of the Higher World – every one like you I have found – has gone insane because he did not learn to live in this world as it is made."

"How did you lose your eye?"

The Captain smiled and poked at the scar tissue under the leather patch. "In battle," he said. "A dozen years ago. Battle remade me in your image, great king of the Higher World."

The Captain rose. Taking Elg by the arm, he guided her toward the sleeping chamber. He whispered to her and Molyk just caught it. Badly pronounced and using the infinitive rather the correct verb tense, but in her language and understood nevertheless: "*Iya sur dogo, gosh i dogo.*" That is: he (meaning Molyk) is evil (or demonic).

Devil god.

Elg gaped at Molyk in horror.

"Sleep well, boy-king," said the Captain, and drew his chamber curtains shut.

Molyk twisted and turned, his bed damp as a fever victim's. The encampment was deathly quiet. No crickets sang. Soldiers usually stayed up carousing until dawn, but tonight there was none of this.

There were no moons tonight, and darkness was absolute. When Elg came to him, it was the rustling of her robes that told him, and her scent. Eyes wide, he could see nothing.

She crawled to his side. She rested her arm across his narrow chest and sniffed. Her tears stung his skin. He opened his mouth to speak; only weak words came. "I'm not a god," he said, voice cracking.

"Why not?" she asked.

He shut his eyes to fight his own tears. Her breast began to rise and fall, she was quickly asleep.

Before dawn, the red glow of a lamp and the prodding of the Captain's boot woke Molyk. He jerked upright, waking Elg with a start. The Captain watched without emotion. The bedding fell loose leaving Molyk's bare shoulders and chest freezing in the cold air. Autumn had come with the morning. Molyk saw the Captain and reflexively put an arm up to shield himself.

"I'm not about to stomp you, little Molyk," said the Captain, correctly pronouncing the name. He turned one palm up and bent his head extravagantly. "I am your mere servant. Arise now. There's much to do." The Captain's lamp popped.

Molyk whiffed more smoke in the air than one lamp could cause. "What's happening?"

"We'll see."

Molyk quickly dressed, as did Elg. "She is coming with us," said the Captain. "Good sword arm or no," she is not safe alone today. The Captain told Molyk to light a lamp, and they walked the camp's lanes close together, Elg between them.

As they approached the centre of camp and the Commander's tent, the

way filled with soldiers. Molyk had never seen the camp's lanes so crowded. The soldiers had become lazy drunks since the end of the siege and often slept half the morning. Not today.

The trio's presence was noticed. Soldiers grimaced or sneered, but looked away if they happened to meet the Captain's eye. Most of the men carried baskets or empty pouches.

Near the Commander's tent, the Captain took one ugly soldier's basket from him. "What's this?" he said with contempt and cast the basket aside. The ugly soldier backed away glaring.

The crowd thickened around the tent.

The tent stood on a three-step platform and the Captain – Molyk and Elg in tow – pushed men aside to reach it. At the steps the Captain came up short. Sergeant Felix, of all people, faced him blocking the way.

"You're up early," said the Captain. "Step aside."

"Blasphemer," said the Sergeant.

"Step aside, Felix, or be cut down."

"It's you who will be cut down!" hollered Sergeant Felix. "Blasphemer."

"Don't talk rubbish. Stand aside."

Sergeant Felix raised his rifle. "Hail the Commander! The Commander is strong! Fight! Fight! Fight for the Commander!"

At Felix's lead the soldiers chanted. The Captain shunted him aside with a shoulder into the sergeant's chest, and took the platform. He began leading the chant himself, pumping his arm with the men.

He shouted over them. "Listen! Listen men! Be ready! Be ready to receive blessing from the Commander!"

The soldiers roared.

The Captain chose his moment, motioning Molyk and Elg with him into the tent.

Inside generals and tacticians cowered behind the servants. A few brightened when they saw the Captain. The Captain looked at the scene with undisguised disgust.

The Commander's inner chamber was still draped.

The Captain ordered the drapes lifted. The beast was revealed curled in a ball, limp, only just breathing.

"He is dying," wailed an old tactician. "We're lost!"

"Shut up!" said the Captain. Then to Molyk, "Speak to it, make it listen, quickly."

"I can't..."

The Captain yanked his arm. "There is no time. Ask it what it wants!" Molyk shouted. "I can't speak to it! Turn the army. They listen to you."

Even the generals do. They will follow you. You can do anything! Turn the army east.”

“Very well! Don’t help.” He knocked Molyk to the floor. Elg gasped and went to Molyk’s side. She spoke in her language. “Please spare us.” For an instant he thought she was concerned for him, trying to protect him from the Captain. The he read the fear in her eyes, and the pleading. She bowed her head. It was he she feared, she believed what the Captain said, she believed Molyk was a god, and she feared his wrath.

The Captain drew his side arm, taking aim at the beast. The others gasped, and the Captain fired four shots at the ground before the monster. “What... do... you... want?”

Outside, the crowd’s din rose with the pistol shots. The beast snapped its head up, and barked at the Captain. It crouched for attack, lashing out with the manlike claws.

The servants, tacticians, generals – even Molyk – backed away. All but the Captain, standing tall, pistol raised.

Elg had jumped behind the Captain and now peeked out, clinging to the Captain’s forearm with both hands.

The beast raised its snout. Moving back onto its haunches, its gaze transfixed by Elg. It reached out trying to strangle the air around her. The Captain holstered his weapon. “Oh,” he said. “Naturally.”

The Captain seized both Elg’s hands in one of his own, and began to drag her forward. She recoiled.

“No!” shouted Molyk.

Elg wailed and tried to fight free of the Captain’s grip. Furious at her resistance, the Captain clenched his arm around her neck. Molyk sprang, but a dozen men swarmed him. Elg dug her toes into the carpet, clawing and biting at the Captain’s arm. She begged, jabbering rapidly, crying, but slowly she was forced toward the beast’s outstretched claws. She looked to Molyk. “Save me, Lord! Please!” she begged him.

Molyk begged too. “No, Captain! No!”

“We are not farmers, Molyk. We are what we are,” said the Captain.

“She is innocent!”

The Captain’s face twisted, momentarily into sadness, then ultimately into rage. “No matter.”

Elg’s body arched when the Captain thrust her forward. So forceful was the thrust that her arms were flung behind her like wings. Seeing her exposed throat, the beast roared. One swipe of its man-claw was all. She folded before the beast. Her larynx torn open, she died without a sound.

The men holding him relaxed but Molyk found he still could not

move. Servants rushed to unchain the beast. Molyk hoped it would come for him next. But the beast was calmed, turned inward.

The Captain kneeled and put his arms under Elg's limp corpse. He climbed to his feet, then carried the body toward the tent's opening. He turned, then said to the others of Molyk. "Bring him, he wants to see."

The gathered soldiers were silenced by the Captain's appearance with Elg's corpse. But when servants led out the beast, the crowd cheered. The Captain raised Elg's body above his head and flung it forward. It disappeared within the mob. Then every man raised his basket, or opened his pouch, and held it out.

The beast knuckled to the edge of the platform, energised again by the chants and screams of the mob. The nearest ranks recoiled in fear, but the beast did not go for them. It rocked back on hind legs, and craned its neck at the sky, jaws wide. Its hard torso contracted, and, in a heave, a fountain of shining bullets began to spew forth from the maw.

Hundreds – thousands – of bullets erupted into an arc that rained down on the mob, who danced and screamed, and filled their baskets.

Molyk collapsed.

The orgy of bullets lasted for he had no idea how long. The beast, exhausted and emptied, finally collapsed. Servants dragged it back inside to its chains. The soldiers, jubilant, scampered away, to strike tents and bridle horses, leaving Elg's trampled and forgotten body exposed in the muddy lane.

Molyk barely felt the Captain's gravestone grip on his shoulder. "We go to fight now, son. You'll wish you'd taken that leather jerkin I offered yesterday." He drew his pistol, and held it butt first toward Molyk.

"I won't fight for you."

The Captain sighed. He pushed the pistol at Molyk.

Molyk seized it in both hands. His fingers were barely long enough to wrap around the trigger, but, using the last of his strength, he aimed at the Captain.

"The first is the hardest. Soon you'll find continuing easier than stopping."

Molyk fought himself. His hands shook. In the end, he thrust the gun away.

The Captain stood looking at him a moment, then with disappointment picked up the weapon. "You won't release me." He looked down the barrel, and blew a bit of sand away. "You must learn to treat your tools more kindly, Kinglet."

The camp was disassembled with supernatural efficiency; before mid-

day the Commander's tent was struck. The beast, sleeping, was loaded into an armoured wagon.

Sergeant Felix came up, leading a white horse plumed for war. He handed the reins to the Captain. With his right hand, the Captain rubbed the sergeant's belly. "Here we are again, old friend. All forgiven?"

"Yes sir," beamed Felix. "Onward to paradise."

"Onward," said the Captain. "Paradise."

The Captain mounted, and held his hand out for Molyk.

Molyk glared.

"Come along. You must want to see the big guns."

Molyk held out his hand, and the Captain pulled him into the saddle in front of himself.

Molyk was looking at Elg's trampled corpse, and the Captain ordered Sergeant Felix to have it removed. "See she is buried somewhere fine, sergeant." Felix nodded and had the body taken away on the back of a flea-ravaged mule.

Columns assembled. The sun was sinking. The Commander's wagon was moved to the rear, and the Captain rode with Molyk to the legion's head. The legion marched through the night.

A day, and another night. More days.

The legion drove toward the walls of Brym, making short work of towns along the way and then the piquet outside the city itself. Brym lay in a valley not easily defended, and Molyk could see the great-barrelled guns being rolled out on their man-tall wheels from rather far away. The legion saw them too. Despite hollow laughs, they gripped their weapons tighter and marched where the Captain and other saddled officers led. Molyk was in the saddle with the Captain's arms holding reins on either side of him. The Captain watched the guns, and the Captain's arms tightened against Molyk's sides.

"Magnificent," said the Captain of the large guns. "What do you suppose is their range?"

Molyk said nothing.

The nearest battery boomed smoke. One gun exploded, tumbled, its blinded gunner screamed, but the other guns fired true. The first shots sang over Molyk's head, tearing into the heart of the lines. Men screamed and fell, but the legion kept marching. Behind the large guns, rows of infantry primed primitive long-barrel rifles at lightning speed, waiting for the legion to move into range.

Smoke seared Molyk's eye, and the Captain took both reins in one hand so he could clear his own good eye. Their bodies so close together, Molyk felt the Captain shake.

The Captain raised a fist above his head, driving the legion onward. The artillery of Citadel Ninety-Nine let loose its second volley. "Look at those guns," the Captain muttered. "Magnificent. Molyk! Do you see?"

SCIENCE FICTION

DeadSoulsCon

Jon Vagg

At the other end of the bar was a middle-aged man, thin strands of grey covering his scalp. He was dressed conspicuously, for this environment, in cheap grey trousers, blue shirt and a mildew-coloured bomber jacket.

He nodded gloomily at Ian, the nod of a professional alcoholic needing an audience. "It's changed a lot," he observed. "In the beginning there were only a few dozen of us, and it was all real science. The future of computers and how we might really be a colony founded by aliens from another planet. Jacket and tie formal dinners, after-dinner speeches. Now it's a mess, all supernatural fantasy, role-playing and slasher movies."

Ian looked around the bar. The afternoon sessions still had ten minutes to run. There were three metalheads, two goths in luminescent falls, black net and Victoriana, and a couple in shirts and neatly-pressed jeans. "I only just arrived," he said cautiously. "I haven't looked at the programme yet."

The older guy gestured dismissively, slopping beer from his glass. "You don't need to," he asserted. "The real action is outside the sessions."

"Are you an author, or...?" Ian asked diplomatically, letting the question hang in midair.

The guy laughed, or at least his throat rattled. "No, I never had the talent. I'm Paul. Paul Brown. Retired now, more or less. I used to come here back in the seventies, even before it was called DeadSoulsCon. And suddenly here I am again, because there's someone here I want to see."

Ian sipped his beer, figured Paul Brown was a lonely old man and professional drinker, almost certainly eccentric in some yet-to-be-revealed way, but probably harmless. So when Brown leaned forward to confide that Ian was the person he wanted to meet, he was understandably surprised.

"I've been paying attention, you see," Brown murmured. "There aren't many people who would credit my story but I think you're one of them."

Ian had a sudden flash of annoyance, the kind that rose in him when he answered the phone and found himself talking to a mobile phone company salesperson, or opened the door to people who wanted to know if he'd heard the word of the Lord. He tried to be polite, hide the reaction.

Brown rubbed a poorly-shaven chin. "Let's just say you're open-minded. And I can prove my story. Some of it anyway. Don't worry, I'll catch you later." Finishing his beer, he put the glass carefully on the bar, turned, walked away with a steady gait that suggested he was less drunk and less decrepit than he looked.

The room filled with people and noise as the afternoon sessions ended. Ian dodged the crowd and checked the publishers' hall. Annoyingly, while his own books were on display, they were at the back of an agency stand representing half a dozen companies. All the action was around the two current big titles with huge advertising budgets.

The market hall on the second floor offered DVDs, goth clothing, makeup, prosthetic horns and canines, re-enactment gear, RLP and tabletop gaming rulebooks, painted figurines of dragons, faeries and scantily-clad warrior princesses, and second-hand books. Ian's older work featured prominently on these stalls.

On the way out he ran into Ossie. Large, florid and with a navel-length beard, Ossie had always managed to look as though he was in charge despite having been removed from the organising committee years ago. Not for rank incompetence, which was nothing unusual on any committee; for, however unfeasibly, seducing the partners of not one but two other committee members. At the same time.

"Young man!" Ossie's voice boomed, echoing off the narrow corridor walls. Pinned against the wall by the man's vast bulk, Ian opted for a polite nod of greeting. "There's someone here who wants to meet you," Ossie declaimed. And in what, for him, was *sotto voce* he added, "If I were you, though, I'd have nothing to do with him."

Ian nodded. "He's already found me." And then: "He sounded harmless but annoying. What do I need to know about him?"

“Brown’s been around for ever,” Ossie explained. “He was one of the radical members, always on the fringes, suggesting things like how faster-than-light space travel could only be built by a communist state that could direct resources centrally. He went off the scene for a time and there was a rumour he had a nervous breakdown. I don’t know why he’s back, but I can guarantee he’ll be trouble.”

Later there was a bar full of vampires, werewolves and zombies, re-enactors in Regency wigs and swallow-tail coats, goths and geeks, ageing hippies and tweedy men wearing intensely-patterned cardigans. The evening passed in a blur of vodka and Jägermeister, discussing why teenage goth girls and ageing men would share an interest in old comics and contemporary graphic novels.

It was just past midnight when Ian made it back to his room.

An envelope had been pushed under the door. Written in a spidery purple ink, the message gave directions to a nearby Indian restaurant.

No explanation, no signature.

Sighing, Ian headed out towards the night. Passing through the foyer, he noted two vampires in full evening dress, starched stand-up collars and cloaks, one leaning on a walking cane, who exchanged glances and moved to intercept him. He put on a quick burst of speed, darting sideways out of the door and up the exit ramp of the adjacent car park, positioning himself behind a pillar.

Blood pounded in Ian’s ears. He hadn’t run anywhere for months. Writing stories mainly involved sitting at a desk.

If they’d been real vampires, the kind that appeared in his own work, they would have heard his breathing, picked up his body heat, or tracked his scent. Instead these two looked up and down the street, had a muttered conversation, and eventually went back into the hotel. Even so, Ian erred on the side of caution. He went up a level and worked his way through the structure, staying in shadows whenever he heard footfalls, and emerged on the far side. He avoided the well-lit pedestrian access, preferring the vehicle entry ramp.

The restaurant was close by. He could walk. Instead he hailed a cab, directed it to the train station, walked a block and took another cab back to the city centre, finally approaching the Mumbai Curry House on foot and from the opposite direction to the convention hotel. Ossie hadn’t said Brown was deluded or dangerous. He’d said “I can guarantee he’ll be trouble”. Not the same thing at all.

The place was a time-warp, exactly – he thought – how Brown would have liked it, with a well-worn and stained carpet, red walls and deep

shadows. Brown wasn't there; he slipped in twenty seconds later, murmured that Ian was too easy to follow, and signalled a waiter for a table.

In a dark rear corner, Brown sat with his back to the wall because he wanted to see the room. Ian waited resignedly for an explanation, enduring Brown's idea of smalltalk until his chicken jalfrezi and Brown's vegetable biryani were set in front of them.

"The violet ink, incidentally, is a good precaution," Brown began. "Their sight is sharper than ours, but they evolved on a different world – their eyes register some infrared, but violet is beyond their visual range."

Ian chewed his chicken, swallowed, spoke deliberately. "See, that's instantly two things I want to query: 'they' and 'different world'."

Brown nodded as though he understood, but immediately launched off in a different direction. "It started as a routine thing. I worked for the police and got seconded, to – well, that part doesn't matter. You have to remember the Cold War was still going on, and we did a lot of surveillance. All kinds of people were being monitored, even left-leaning sections of the science fiction and fantasy community came under suspicion. Just because they liked SF didn't mean they weren't active in other directions. Remember some of these people actually worked in defence while others were members of radical groups; anarchist, libertarian, socialist revolutionary. Some of them even used SF conventions as cover for meetings.

"It took five years – *five years* – before I started to suspect my superiors. In that time I'd seen people I gave reports on have strange accidents. I'd helped move a mutilated body from one of our safe houses and asked no questions. Can you imagine that? Even for the security services, operating procedures mean that sort of thing happens only with very high-level approval. And what we do wouldn't leave those kinds of marks on a corpse..."

"Then I came across a document. I was detailed to break into an office and remove it. The man who 'lost' it died in an accident a while later, but that's not relevant. I read it, which I wasn't supposed to do. It was a manual for how to manipulate people, how to carry out surveillance, making sure people who did surveillance were spied on themselves to make sure they didn't step out of line and find out the wrong things. Manuals on such things have been around since Machiavelli, but here's the punchline: it talked about 'us' – and about how to deal with 'humans'."

"The implication being that it was written by aliens?" Ian blinked slowly. "And it was written in plain English, for the benefit of any casual human reader?"

Brown's spectacles glinted in the half-light as he nodded. "My view

is, my superiors – and their superiors – were not human. But some humans were being initiated, recruited, trained up, and the document was a translation for their benefit.”

Ian only vaguely took in what followed. Someone must have known Brown had looked at the paper, or decided on principle that there was a risk he'd done so. Two days later, presumably courtesy of some drug seizures, his office tea was spiked with LSD. He was taken into custody that evening by local police, raving and incoherent, trying to break into an unmarked, anonymous industrial warehouse. After a perfunctory psychiatric examination he was pronounced unfit for duty and given the choice of early retirement with pension, or discharge without.

His persecution continued after retirement. There was “electromagnetic harassment”, suggestions beamed into his head electronically at night, clandestine searches of his apartment, listening devices he discovered in various locations, unknown circuitry in his car... enough to make someone insane. Brown took countermeasures, sweeping his apartment for bugs every day, setting passive infrared detectors in every room, using a frequency scanner to check for unusual transmissions, jury-rigging a microwave oven to create static at variable wavelengths...

Ian didn't get it. Brown was mad, or there again he might not be. If he was mad, he'd have been retired and his paranoid delusions would account for the rest of the story. If he wasn't, there was a conspiracy and the things Brown described might have been real – but since they sounded insane, he'd be discredited and ignored. But then again, it sounded like any efficient and effective conspiracy would have arranged to have Brown dead, rather than tormented.

The balance of probabilities lay with Brown being delusional and paranoid, though admittedly a practical joke involving spiked tea and an already unbalanced personality could account for much of it.

No wonder Ossie had tried to warn Ian off.

“I can see you're thinking I'm deranged and wondering why I'm telling you this,” Brown continued smoothly. “And of course any documentary evidence wouldn't be worth the paper it's written on unless you could check its authenticity, which is impossible. But what I can do is this.” From a battered briefcase he pulled out something about the shape and size of a TV remote, obviously home-made, with holes roughly drilled through the plastic for buttons, and a small screen secured to it with insulating tape. Inside the semi-transparent casing was a thin layer of foam, a couple of standard nine-volt batteries, some kind of circuit board. Calmly, Brown fingered the buttons, apparently consulting a

menu on the small screen. Then he pointed the device at Ian's face and punched one of the controls.

...there's no point it's all falling to dust might as well end it now plunge the knife into your eye defeated before you start just close your eyes and walk into the traffic how many people every day find peace in endless oblivion...

The waiter was standing solicitously over him. "Are you alright, sir?" Brown waved the man away. "My friend is fine. He was just overcome by a bad feeling. Perhaps a brandy would help." The man nodded, managing to convey relief that if Ian was a weeping drunken weirdo, at least his friend was taking responsibility for him.

Ian was suddenly aware of the tears that had coursed down his cheeks, recovered himself, blew his nose on a paper napkin. Had he cried out? Knocked something over?

"I mentioned electronic harassment? That's what this device does. It transmits microwave energy at frequencies that can affect brain activity. Hence it also induces certain thought patterns. It took me months to work out what was going on, and I assure you it was quite frightening."

"So what exactly did you have in mind by telling me all this?" Ian could hear the quaver in his own voice, the irregularity of his breathing.

Brown shrugged. "It would make a good story. You'll tell me a story is just a story and no one takes it seriously. But I assure you it will be taken very seriously. How many situations have been imagined within the SF world and then, a decade or two later, people realise they're real? The same principle applies here. Write the story, and people will start wondering *what if*. When they reach that stage, more evidence will start coming to light. You'll see."

Ian left the curry house fifteen minutes after Brown. The man had spoken to the waiter and exited through the kitchen, leaving Ian to pick up the tab.

His head felt like a pinball machine powered on an alternating current of rationality and delusion, thoughts bouncing off bumpers and kickers labelled *why*, *who*, *how come*, and *what if*.

Brown's device was in Ian's pocket. He'd smiled beatifically and left it as "proof". "Don't worry," he'd told Ian. "I've got others."

The hotel bar was still packed. Pushing through the noisy crowd, Ian sought out Ossie. He was standing by a pillar conveniently near the bar, holding court with expansive gestures. Three geeks and a couple of goths were hanging on his every word. Ian arrived towards the end of what had probably been an impromptu lecture.

"...human rights abuses and the New World Order. The world is full

of horrors that we choose not to see, and instead we frighten ourselves with stereotyped imaginings and tell ourselves that somehow they mean something because they're buried in our collective psyche. Welcome to our seminar on the reality of terror, Ian." And, proffering an empty glass, "You're just in time to buy me another."

Ian squeezed into the group and spoke quietly. "I need to pick your brains. Privately."

Ossie groaned exaggeratedly. "Brown. The convention is filled with freaks of every nature and description, and you had to find *him*. What now?"

"This." With the device still shielded in his pocket, Ian gave Ossie a three-second burst. The effect was dramatic. His victim's eyes went vacant, his mouth gaped open and the empty glass was dropped, instantly lost in the press of feet and legs. An inch from Ossie's ear, Ian told him "Whatever you just experienced, *I did it*. So we need to talk. Now. Alone." Nodding to Ossie's acolytes and possible bedfellows, he explained that they needed a little fresh air and would be back shortly.

Outside the hotel reception, under cover of the entrance awning and in the company of two or three die-hard smokers, Ossie recovered himself. "What in the name of Satan did you do to me in there?"

"Proved a point. What Brown said happened to him, it could have happened. The gadget I used on you was the same type Brown claims was used on him. So what do you know that you haven't told me?"

"Gadget?" Ossie was puzzled.

"You and I," Ian explained, pulling it from his pocket, "are both long enough in the tooth to remember when information came out about psy-ops programmes like MKULTRA and COINTELPRO. They developed stuff like this. It's just that I don't understand why they – whoever – didn't just kill him outright, instead of letting him stick around to make the claims?"

Ossie shrugged. "Ah, but those who the gods will destroy, they first make mad. Allegedly from Euripedes," he elaborated, "but apparently misattributed. No one knows where the quote really came from. But, as usual, I digress. The answer to your question may be: there are no gods. Or aliens, or vampires, or even a New World Order. That would explain why Brown hasn't been killed. And if he made that gadget, and it produces the symptoms he experienced, doesn't that suggest the device caused them?"

"You're suggesting he's mad enough to have invented a brainwave-distorting device that then made him mad?"

Ossie gestured expansively. "Occam's razor. It fits the facts we know,"

and doesn't require elaborate world takeover plots by aliens or vampires. Although, look you, there are plenty of people who'd be only too glad if there *was* such a plot. They fantasise about it. Like those two."

The two vampires from earlier, in evening dress and capes, one leaning on a highly decorated walking cane, were sharing a cigarette on the opposite side of the hotel entrance.

The device in Ian's hand vibrated. Puzzled, he inspected the display. "Transmission detected", it announced. The menu gave the options of "sample", "trace" and "block".

"Psy-ops." Ossie sucked his teeth. "They were allegedly wound up in the seventies, though no one seriously thinks governments suddenly stopped developing the technology or playing dirty tricks. And one part of that picture was—"

"—microwave harassment, using electronic signals to disrupt brain patterns, cause headaches, induce confused thinking and so on." Ian finished the sentence for him, at the same time looking at the display and selecting "trace". The display changed to give a directional reading and a bar that seemed to indicate signal strength. Looking over Ian's shoulder, Ossie commented: "I'm not just a pretty face, you know. Once upon a time I did a physics degree. Look, basically that's going to be an electrosmog detector, and they're been around for years. How do you know it's not just picking up a mobile phone signal?"

"I *don't* know what it's picking up. So we should follow the signal and find out."

He turned to go back into the lobby and came face to face with the two vampires. They were young. They were drunk. And they had well-developed canines.

"You're that writer," one accused Ian. "The one who says science fiction should go back to writing about science."

Glancing over their shoulders, Ian realised that since he couldn't see the reception desk, the night receptionist couldn't see him. No help there, then. His eyes narrowed, trying to gauge the duo's intention. He didn't need to try hard because the vampire's cane was a sword-stick and the blade was already halfway free. He went for the simple option, barging into his attacker, pitching them both sideways down the entrance step. The vampire seemed to land lightly, roll, come up from a crouch still trying to draw his weapon. The cloak fouled his wrist and he stepped back, giving himself space to free the sword. Ian rolled to one side and fetched up against the edge of the step, breathless, and shaken, eyes searching for anything that could be useful in defence. He still clutched Brown's

device, but the back of his mind coolly calculated that he couldn't navigate the menu to select "send" before the steel would be at his throat.

Something smacked into his attacker's head with a clang, felling him instantly and bouncing away. When it stopped rolling, Ian recognised the bollard-sized ashtray from outside the hotel door.

"May I present," Ossie said, breathing heavily and gesturing toward Ian's assailant, "one of our younger and more impetuous authors, Bart Somker. I'm sure you can work out what that's an anagram of. He has a certain reputation for being... *protective* of vampire culture."

The second character, the assistant vampire, was slumped against a pillar. Ian surmised Ossie had used his considerable bulk to pin him against it and asphyxiate him. Something like being squeezed between a rock and a mountain of blubber. "There hasn't been," Ossie continued, "any physical violence at this convention for a good ten years." He made it sound like a regrettable oversight. "On that occasion," he continued, "I confess it was me who started it. Too much cocaine and absinthe." He shrugged. "That's how it was back then, I'm not admitting anything terrible."

But Ian was focused on the gadget's display and moving into the foyer. Sweeping the device around, he was puzzled by the fact that no direction gave a stronger reading than any other. As Ossie caught up with him and he turned, momentarily raising his hand, the reason became clear. The signal originated somewhere above them.

The night receptionist looked up from a romantic potboiler, cast a disinterested glance at them as they crossed to the stairs. Given the frequency of vampires, werewolves, aliens and roleplay or period costumes among the convention guests, they probably looked drab and dull.

"Are you sure..." Ossie began, breathless after just two flights of steps. "I mean, think of what your signal did to me... you don't know what..." He had a point, Ian had to admit, but so far he wasn't hearing any voices in his head. And the device had a menu item for "block", which presumably jammed the signal.

Fourth floor. Stronger now. And murmurs in his head, faintly, jumbled words.

...no point... pills... all failed... we have information... you will be nothing... quick and no blood...

Fumbling the controls, Ian selected "block signal". The voices faded.

Blocking the signal lost the strength and direction indicators, so from this point on it was guesswork. Ian headed down the corridor, alert to any sign of strangeness. It occurred to him also that he had no idea what he

might find and whether a weapon – the vampire's swordstick came to mind – would have been useful.

The sixth door on the left was ajar. Moving cautiously (why? what was he expecting?) Ian rapped on the door, called out. No answer. He pushed gently, used one end of Brown's device. The door swung open easily, revealing nothing, because like all the rooms in the hotel the door opened to a short passageway. The bathroom was to the left and the sleeping area not immediately visible.

There was an acrid, metallic bite to the air. Suspiciously, a tangle of wires on the floor terminated in a plastic box that looked like it had been flash-fried. Further into the room were more home-made electronic projects, similarly burned out. One buzzed and fizzed threateningly, sparks visible across contacts inside the translucent casing.

Moving past the wiring, Ian saw Brown on the bed. He was naked and shrivelled, in a foetal position, wired into the equipment, and at peace. Livor mortis had just begun to set in, with blue and purple mottling to his right leg.

Cautiously, Ian pulled all the wall plugs he could see from their sockets.

Footfalls in the corridor. Ian looked up, expecting Ossie. Instead he found himself looking at Bart Somker. Blood dripped from a wound on his forehead, trickling down his face and neck to stain the collar of his dress shirt. This time, his sword was drawn.

He looked like hell, and Ian took a second to realise that not only had he been smacked with the hotel entrance ashtray, but was presumably suffering the effects of the electrosmog while Ian himself was protected from it. Bart staggered, leaning against a wall for support, and tears rolled down his cheeks.

He waved the sword feebly, dyskinetically, risked a step towards Ian – and collapsed abruptly in a crumpled heap, the sword falling harmlessly onto thick carpet.

Behind him, and filling the passageway, there now appeared the portly forms of the bewigged and swallow-tail-coated gentlemen Ian had seen in the bar earlier that evening.

“An unfortunate intrusion,” the older of the two noted, absently pocketing what looked like a more professionally-made version of Ian's device. He regarded Brown's body with curious detachment, sniffed the air. “He is dead, yes? I can smell it on him already.” He beckoned languidly, and Ossie appeared behind him, moved past to grab the unconscious vampire in one hand and his sword in the other, and drag him from the room.

“You write?” This was the younger of the men, in a mustard-yellow coat with blue formal knee-beeches, buckled below the knee and showing white silk hose. Ian nodded mutely. The man shrugged. “Of course. Not that it matters. You will no doubt tell this story, and your species will think it a very clever fantasy. How easy it is to disinform them.”

Ian's mouth was dry. On the third attempt he formed a single word. “Why?”

The other pulled a lace handkerchief from his breast pocket, fastidiously polished a metal button on his sleeve and sighed. “No doubt Brown told you what he knew. The rest I am sure you can invent. I'm sure you can sufficiently account to your police for your presence here.”

He turned as if to leave, but in far less than a heartbeat he was standing over Ian. “One more thing. Brown's device, if you will?” He held out a hand for it. Ian was unnerved by the man's sheer physical presence. Close up, he could see the pores in the man's face, the two slight bulges to each side of the lower lip where the canines rested. There was a slight coppery scent to him. Ian registered that the gadget was no longer in his hand.

The man nodded amiably to his companion, and they were gone.

It took Ian half a minute to work out that whatever transmissions the machine had blocked were no longer there.

The rest of the con passed in a blur of police interviews, written statements, waiting in featureless rooms with table and chairs bolted to the floor. Yes, he'd met Brown. Yes, they'd had a meal together. Listened to Brown's story and strange allegations. Speculated about his mental health. Gone to his room, found him dead among the equipment. Why had he gone there? What alibi did he have for the time of Brown's death?

One of his inquisitors had a slight odour of copper.

And then nothing: no information, not even a mention of the man's cause of death. A week later he called the coroner's office to find out if there was an inquest, a date for a funeral. No death had been registered.

Suffering from insomnia and fatigue, a week after that, Ian saw his doctor and walked away with a script for dosulepin, 75mg nightly for a month. Taking matters into his own hands, he ordered an electrosmog detector from an online shop. At one time kit like that had been for professionals only; but like most consumer electronics, prices had become highly competitive.

It registered a strong field through his entire apartment. There was no obvious cause.

Two weeks after that, he ran into Ossie. A random meeting at a new exhibition, at the Museum of Modern Art. Ossie found him studying an

assemblage of works that were supposed to represent the debris of a crashed UFO, but looked like they'd been fabricated from washing machine components.

"You owe me an explanation," he told Ossie. "It was you that took Bart out of the room that night."

Ossie shrugged, a pink roll of flesh on his neck squeezing from his collar. "I was just helping out. He wouldn't have wanted to be involved... by the way, did you know he died? Word is, he was playing with his blasted swordstick a couple of days after the convention. Fell and ran the blade through his own throat while taking a self-portrait on a digital camera."

Ian closed his eyes, let the shiver down his spine dissipate. "You know the two guys in the Regency costumes, yes?"

Ossie beetled his brows as if trying to decide how much information was safe to give. "What they say," he announced finally, "is that this world is one of their former colonies. They feel it needs taking in hand again."

"At a *science fiction convention*?" Ian was incredulous.

"Ah, ours not to reason why. Believing them is not obligatory, you know. You have to discover your own truth in such matters. After all, Brown was only at the convention because he knew he'd meet you there."

Weeks passed; a month, then two. Ian compiled everything he knew, or thought he knew, into one file. It became a story; then a novella; then half of a novel. He neglected his appearance, his diet, his personal hygiene. He had no professional obligations for which any of this mattered.

He could find no theory, no explanation, no resolution that was consistent with the material he'd written.

His dining table became increasingly cluttered with radio frequency, magnetic, and EMF detectors, and a Geiger counter. He added their readings to his notes each night. Sometimes he thought he could catch the faint tang of copper in the air.

SCIENCE FICTION

Just One Case of Flash: Another Chimera Tale

K.J. Hannah Greenberg

Penning short fiction was nothing. Friendly exchanges of opinion and counterpoint, too, seemed naught. Even posting poetry on the internet meant little to Doris. She derived a small measure of satisfaction, however, in composing scholarly essays.

Since the school year was over, Doris was able to redouble her devotion to interweaving amorphous topics. While other graduated seniors spent their last “free” moments gulping ice cream, sunning beachside, or locked in hot sex, Doris’s summer months were devoted to unhurriedly interpolating prose. Finding her sway in pithy critique, Doris built a family of oblique deconstructions of commonplaces and then set about finding ways in which to relate them to each other. Doris meant to invest her verbal dalliances with messages about global powers, about convergent media, and about other sorts of items ordinarily considered taboo by her mom.

However, Doris’s mother remained determined to wean Doris of cerebral activity in order to prepare Doris for marrying Wilson. Mom had learned, by dint of the post mistress, that Doris was pregnant. To wit, she had carried a shotgun in the direction of Wilson’s home. Mom wanted a white wedding.

Charles would have liked to have gotten partnered, too, but chimeras don’t usually mate until they are at least three hundred years old. That left the hatchling with roughly two hundred and ninety-nine and one half years in which to find a female with whom to align. Charles hoped that during that interval he could also free his sister and find his mother.

For the moment, though, his most immediate concern was his domicile. Despite the fact that neither Doris nor Mom had realised that Charles had taken up residency in their mailbox, Charles needed new quarters; as the days passed, he was growing too large to continue to

wedge himself among the bills and charity requests. Plus, the letter box made a poor home for someone with an impulse control disorder. Charles remained habituated to relieving stress by watching things burn or smoulder, and, when necessary, by setting them on fire. Mail made splendid tinder. Ash made messy furnishings.

Whereas Dr Hichkins was forcing Jessica, Charles' sibling, to understand the unconscious process behind her pyromania, Charles, thus far, had successfully avoided the grasp of that creepy-crawly. It was bad enough that Maurice Hichkins was a headshrinker with little experience in the ways of ancient beasts. Worse was that Hichkins had sired that bad seed, Wilson.

Having completed his world travels, Wilson had returned to his father's hamlet, from where he carried on with his hobby of womanising. He had taken up with Doris before his expedition only because he was fond of Doris's ability to tweak text and thus to improve his scholastic records.

Doris, cognizant of Wilson's philandering, considered castrating the boy. She refused to believe that a woman's role in interpersonal connections was merely to influence her man's media choices or to fetch the remote for him. It had been Wilson's indifference to Doris's position on important matters, not his habit of collecting panties, that had raised her anxieties and thus had endangered him.

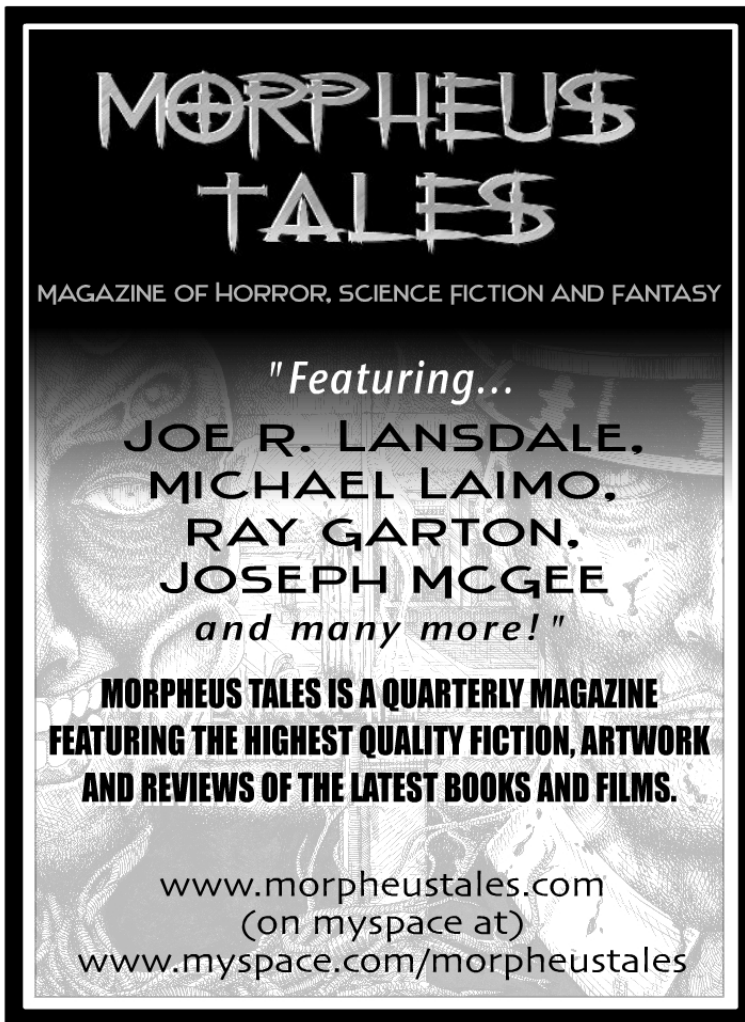
Wilson's failure to provide Doris with ongoing acknowledgements about her intellectual prowess made Doris feel like an imaginary entity. It was no good that Doris's prose was acclaimed by keepers of the academic hegemony; her barrenness could only be altered by having her mentations matter to a lover. Doris tried, autonomously, to reify the importance of her work published by The University of Tasmania and showcased by Flinders University Press, but her emotional abyss remained raw and empty. Even the honourable mention she had won in the Queensland Rhetoric Contest, for her essay on ways in which the general public could bring about a redefinition of social stratification, was as nothing to her.

Meanwhile, Charles, who considered knives to be a highly overrated means of doing away with pests, contemplated aiding Doris with a bit of flame. The young chimera imagined giving Wilson a "shave and haircut", by way of his dragon-like, not-quite-so-laser-precise pyrotechnics. It was not so much that Charles was indifferent to the consequences of applying fire to life or property, as it was that Charles had a physical response to perceived indignities.

Unfortunately, while Charles was busied with his brutish plans, he

failed to notice Dr Hichkins sneak up on him. While the dwarf she-oaks, among which the youthful critter was hidden, ought to have been adequate cover, they proved unreliable.

Dr Hichkins was an imposing figure. His height was matched only by his jowlish face and dark, full moustache. The traditional, businessmen's blue shirt which lay starched beneath his white lab coat, and his straight-forward brown trousers, spoke leagues about his perspective. The only element the good doctor missed was that she-oak wood, as a fuel, burns with little ash. At least some of his injuries were only second degree.

The image shows the cover of 'Morpheus Tales' magazine. The title 'MORPHEUS TALES' is written in a large, stylized, white font with a black outline. Below the title, it says 'MAGAZINE OF HORROR, SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY'. The background is a dark, textured image of a person's face, possibly a character from a horror or sci-fi story. The text is centered and reads: 'Featuring...' followed by the names 'JOE R. LANSDALE.', 'MICHAEL LAIMO.', 'RAY GARTON.', and 'JOSEPH MCGEE' in a bold, white font. Below the names is the phrase 'and many more!'. At the bottom, there is a bold statement: 'MORPHEUS TALES IS A QUARTERLY MAGAZINE FEATURING THE HIGHEST QUALITY FICTION, ARTWORK AND REVIEWS OF THE LATEST BOOKS AND FILMS.' and two website URLs: 'www.morpheustales.com' and 'www.myspace.com/morpheustales'.

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SCIENCE FICTION

Newton Braddell and His Inconclusive Researches into the Unknown: Cigarettes of the Gods

John Greenwood

“No,” I said, “This is English.” I translated the words for them.

“But what can it mean?” asked Yewtree, looking almost as confused as Kangkar.

I honestly didn’t know. “Perhaps it belongs to the King,” I guessed.

“King? What King?”

Yewtree took the object from me. “Maybe the message continues inside,” he said, and proceeded to unwrap it. “Hmm... looks like somebody’s tried to set fire to it. Very odd.”

“There won’t be anything written inside,” I warned Yewtree. I guessed that he was reminded of the old communication system in City Hall, in which messages were rolled into water-tight capsules then floated through a labyrinthine plumbing system.

“No, you’re right,” said Yewtree. “Just a lot of fluffy stuff. Doesn’t smell too good.”

He threw the shreds to the ground, then said to Kangkar, “I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” as the Bugis picked up the peeled filter and put it in his mouth, chewing thoughtfully.

“How did you know there would be no message inside?” asked Yewtree.

“It’s a cigarette,” I said.

Yewtree frowned. “A what? Your damned machine’s on the blink again.”

But for once the Dover and Somerset was working perfectly. There was no analogy in Cithallian for this old Earth word. I tried to explain what little I knew about the ancient practice of smoking tobacco.

“And so this is something only the King was allowed to do?” asked Yewtree with a note of scepticism in his voice.

“Well, no, not exclusively, as far I as know.”

“But you said...”

“I don’t pretend to be an expert.”

Kangkar interrupted. “What are you two talking about?” he said angrily. “I can’t understand a word you’re saying? Are you Bugis, or not?”

His question put us both on the spot, but it seemed that this was no more than a rhetorical insult, for he went on, “I can hear someone else talking, talking but not talking, not real words. I can hear them all the time! What’s happening?” He looked around fearfully. “We are being watched! Listen, can you hear them?”

We sat and listened, Yewtree and I feeling rather foolish, but we heard nothing.

It was only when Yewtree broke the silence and said, “Alright, can we go now? I think my foot’s gone to sleep,” that Kangkar motioned us to silence again and whispered, “There it is again! It’s a trap! The gods have left a trap for us!”

To my mind it was rather an odd notion that a deity would stoop to laying booby traps for mere mortals, but Kangkar’s words intrigued me. His confusion over the unseen speaker was easily explained, but I was not about to offer any explanation that placed Yewtree and I in further danger. Kangkar had been fooled by the Dover and Somerset. Under normal circumstances, interpreting between just two languages, the device spoke in a single voice. But when faced with interlocutors of several tongues it had translated my words into both Citihallian and the Bugis language simultaneously, and performed a similar job for Kangkar and Mr Yewtree. How many different languages the Dover and Somerset could cope with at once I was not sure, and as I have remarked earlier, I was unwilling to push the machine beyond its normal operational limits, suspecting that it was not far from a fatal malfunction.

A cacophony of competing voices was avoided by a process of sonic targeting that I do not pretend to understand even partly, and so will not attempt a technical explanation. Each listener only heard the stream of speech directed at him. If one listened very carefully once could hear the faint whisper of other voices, intended for other ears, and it was this which had distressed our Bugis guide. Perhaps the hunter’s ears were more sensitive than Yewtree’s or mine. Try as I might, I could not detect any hint of the second voice, but it placed Yewtree and I in a pretty pickle. So far we had managed to fool the Bugis into believing that we

were of their kind, Ensouled Speakers, in their terms. But the artifice was on the verge of being unmasked. I had to think fast.

“You have trespassed into a sacred place,” I said to Kangkar. “You are right: a god has been here and left this token of his presence.”

I pointed to the unfurled cigarette end in the earth. “We have offered the god a grave insult.”

Yewtree narrowed his eyes at me, and looked like he was about to laugh out loud, but my words had a very different effect on Kangkar. His eyes widened with fear as he recalled having only moments ago spat out the remnants of this holy relic.

I cocked my ear, pretending to listen to a ghostly voice, then said, “We should go.”

“Yes, by all means,” said Kangkar, and he led us crashing back through the bracken. He had lost all enthusiasm for continuing our patrol of the Bugis lands, and wanted only to return to the village, to make sure everyone was safe there. I had laid it on pretty thick about the wrath of the gods, and while I knew not the first thing about the religious beliefs of the Bugis, Kangkar appeared to accept every lie I told him without question. I decided, for my own convenience, to dub this cigarette smoking deity The Earthman. Kangkar had some trouble with the pronunciation of the name, but he understood the wrathful and fickle nature of the Earthman readily enough. The Earthman would have to be appeased, I urged Kangkar, but left the details vague for now.

“May I ask you a question?” I said to Kangkar as we picked our way through a foul-smelling marsh on the outskirts of the Bugis village. “Why did you ask us whether we were gods?”

Kangkar hesitated and I guessed he was struggling to decide how frank he could be with us.

“One of the gods visited us,” he replied. “He must have been this Earthman you speak of, but he went by a different name.”

Kangkar spoke the name, but my Dover and Somerset could make nothing of it, and stuttered out a string of nonsense syllables.

“What did he look like?” asked Yewtree.

“He took the guise of a man, but he had two pairs of eyes. One of the pairs he could remove from his body, so that he could see things without being there.”

“Very convenient,” remarked Yewtree with a snort, but I immediately thought of the spectacles the Earthman had worn.

“His face was beardless, like a boy’s, and he carried fire in his pockets.”

Yewtree smiled at me and whispered, “Just some impostor from a

more advanced culture, with a fire-lighter and a box of tricks. Well, he can't be far away. I told you we'd find civilisation soon enough."

I hardly knew how to respond, knowing what I did about this "god", but the truth raised more questions than it answered. How had another Earthling found himself on this far-flung planet? If as in my own case it was by accident, then this was a coincidence of astronomical proportions.

"How did you know he was a god?" I asked the Bugis man.

"At first we did not know, and thought him non-Bugis, for he would not speak to us. But when we came near him he vanished into the void. He came back later, three times in all, but would not let us approach him."

Again I felt the huge relief of knowing that someone else had experienced the same impossible thing that I had, and that the vanishing Earthman was not a product of my madness. Recalling the circumstances of our introduction to the tribe, I was not surprised at the Earthman's reticence to get too close to the Bugis, but this vanishing trick baffled me. Unlike the Bugis I did not subscribe to a supernatural explanation, but I had no better alternative to offer. Nothing of the sort had, as far as I knew, ever been developed on Earth, at least by European scientists.

"Probably some sort of trick with mirrors," scoffed Yewtree. I did not demur.

"Why did the god visit your village, Kangkar?" I asked.

"We don't know. He would not speak a word to us. But he carried the sacred signals, just as you do."

I started. "Sacred signals? What do you mean?"

"The ones in your coat pocket. We searched through all your belongings while you were asleep," he explained without embarrassment. "Don't worry – we didn't take anything."

Feeling aggrieved, I felt in my pockets and pulled out a small blue and white box.

"What's that?" asked Yewtree, craning his neck to see.

"The sacred signals," said Kangkar with an air of reverence. We all stood still on the edge of the village as I flipped open the top of the box to reveal rows of cigarettes neatly stacked inside. I withdrew one and twirled it in my fingers, my mind a complete blank.

The Earthman must have slipped them into my pocket, I thought. It was the only sensible explanation.

"What are you going to do with that?" asked Yewtree impatiently. "Set fire to it?" All this mystery had put him in a bad temper.

“No,” I replied, then said to Kangkar, “Come here. Hold out your hands.”

The Bugis silently obeyed.

“This sacred signal I bequeath to you, to all the Bugis. It belongs to the Earthman, but you must take care of it. It must not be burnt, nor eaten.”

Understanding the magnitude of what was taking place, Kangkar suddenly withdrew his hand and said, “No! You must not give this to me!”

“Why not?” I asked, fearing that my scheme was close to failure.

“Come, there is another,” said Kangkar, and led the way into the Bugis village. As we wound our way amongst the thatched huts, Kangkar made a strange ululation with his throat, clearly a call of no small import, for very quickly the huts emptied out, and their inhabitants massed around us in a chaotic but dignified procession. None of the Bugis dared approach Yewtree and I, apart from a few ragamuffin children who were sharply snatched out of our way by the village crones who looked after them. They hastened to make a path for us that led to the door of a hut that was larger than the others, but in no better repair.

I could see now that Kangkar’s hesitation had been political rather than spiritual. He had not wanted to upstage the village elder who now appeared in the doorway. Never has that epithet been more judiciously applied. I could not imagine how any man could be more wizened, bent, shrunken and toothless than this fellow. Alone among the Bugis males his hair was as long as his beard, and matted to a solid crust like a beaver’s tail. On either side of him stood two women almost as old as he, presumably there to prevent him from collapsing on the spot, but whether his servants, wives, concubines or daughters, it was impossible to guess. Kangkar approached the elder and made some obscure gestures of obeisance before him. I considered whether Yewtree and I should ape this greeting, but decided against it: we were, after all, messengers of the gods, and it would hardly behove us to grovel before this decrepit patriarch.

Kangkar spent a long time whispering into the old man’s ear, but his momentous news made no visible impression on him. When I judged the moment was right, I stepped forward and presented the white and yellow wrapped cylinder of tobacco to the old man. Kangkar had to step in and transfer the gift gently into his shaky, cupped palms.

I could hear Yewtree sighing impatiently behind me, so I cut short my speech, restricting my remarks to the great honour and responsibility that had been bestowed on the Bugis Village by this sacred gift.

I could not be entirely sure that the elder understood what I was try-

ing to impart, for he remained silent throughout the impromptu ceremony, either through respect, tribal taboo, or simple senility. He handled the cigarette with appropriate reverence, passing it carefully to one of his ancient assistants.

The price of this great honour, I told the elder, was high: never again must the Bugis hunt any creatures who walked on two legs, nor eat their meat. Of course, my intention was to impress upon the tribe the immorality of cannibalism *tout court*, but that was not so easy to explain. There was no word for human being in the Bugis tongue: creatures were either Bugis or non-Bugis, according to their ability to speak the Bugis tongue. My new rule complicated that stark and terrifying distinction, but by the gasps of consternation from the crowd behind me, I felt sure that they had grasped the essential concept.

“Ah-hah!” said Yewtree, understanding now my scheme and sounding pleased with it. Of course, it would mean that any other bipedal mammals who might inhabit the area, and any birds too of course, would escape the Bugis barbeque, but that could not be helped.

The Bugis, I explained to the assembled village, had profaned the Earthman's sacred gift. I mentioned no names, but Kangkar would not meet my eye. Nevertheless, the god had decided to forgive the Bugis, on condition that they obeyed his inflexible law.

In a moment of pure inspiration, I rummaged in my pockets and produced the pair of the night-vision spectacles I had been carrying around with me. Even after Yewtree and I had gone, I went on, the eyes of the Earthman would be on them, vigilant against any infraction of the prohibition. I jammed the arms of the spectacles in between the struts of the village elder's hut, so that the two telescopic lenses glared out from the wall at head height. The Bugis already had experience of the Earthman's removable eyes, and so were predisposed to take this new item of dogma at face value. The eyes in the wall certainly caused a stir in the crowd. Several of the villagers fled from the sight of those unblinking eyes, and those who remained were clearly ill-at-ease in their presence.

Lastly, I told the assembled Bugis that one day, no-one knew exactly when, the Earthman would return to retrieve his eyes and to bring a great reward for those who had obeyed his stricture, and terrible punishments for the transgressors.

For aught I knew, this last pronouncement might have been true. I had no more idea than the Bugis themselves who the Earthman was, and how and why he had visited here, or what his business on Kadaloor was in the first place. Perhaps he was a god after all. His manner of arrival certainly

seemed divine, which is a word men have often used to describe phenomena beyond their ability to explain.

Yewtree and I left the Bugis village not in a state of religious ecstasy, but subdued and serious, impressed, or so I hoped, by the gravity of the responsibilities that had been placed on their shoulders.

We left just as we had come, on foot, unwashed and unkempt, and hungry too, having refused all offers of gifts from our hosts. Once again we headed north, or as near to north as the terrain allowed. I was relieved when we climbed out of the valley and could walk along the ridge, with the Bugis village far below us just a muddied patch of earth dotted with the circles of thatched roofs. I was even more relieved when we crossed the path that marked the furthest reach of land the Bugis claimed as their own. Not that I had any real fear of further molestation but the whole episode had left a bitter taste in my mouth, not merely from my breakfast of smoked liver, nor from the unpleasant habits of the Bugis in general, but my own actions too had fallen somewhat short of any reasonable standards of decency. Yewtree touched a raw nerve when he said, "So you enjoyed playing God back there, I take it?"

"Not at all," I replied, without conviction, for the sense of power over the ignorant Bugis had been at times exhilarating. "But at least it provided us with a graceful exit. And who knows? Perhaps the Bugis will mend their ways and refrain from hunting men."

"Exit?" blustered Yewtree. "We had no need of an exit! Those people were harmless! They posed no threat!"

"They were cannibals. They admitted as much themselves. We've had this argument before," I sighed. Increasingly we were behaving like a married couple bickering over the same points again and again. I wondered how long Yewtree and I would remain travelling companions. So long as we were alone together in the Kadaloorian wilderness, we counted on one another for survival, but if we ever did happen upon a truly civilised human culture, or rejoined the wandering tribe of City Hall, then I could not predict the path our friendship would take.

"And yet you presume! You presume to know what's best for these people!" Yewtree continued, waving his arms in indignation. "Encouraging their irrational beliefs, exploiting and reinforcing them! All that nonsense about sacred... what did you call them?"

"Cigarettes," I said glumly.

"Those cigarettes are no more sacred than my shoes."

"I agree," I said. "But nevertheless they want explanation."

Yewtree, who had been walking ahead on the windswept ridge, talk-

ing to the empty air and unconcerned whether the wind carried his words away, looked back sharply at me.

“Well, where do you think these came from?” I asked, brandishing the little blue and white striped box.

“Who knows?” cried Yewtree throwing up his hands. “Maybe you’ve had them in your pocket all along, and just forgot about them.”

I paused. There was an outside possibility he was right. Since meeting Eunós it had become almost second nature for me to doubt my own mind. But our encounter with the Bugis had taught me that at least some of my past fits of lunacy had a basis in fact. The wolf-creatures who had tried to apprehend me on the night of Marsiling’s death had released me as soon as they heard the voice of my Dover and Somerset speaking their language. I vividly recalled one of the creatures shout in alarm, “The food spoke!” That chimed with the Bugis belief in the location of the soul in language, specifically theirs. Perhaps there were several tribes of Bugis, all sharing roughly the same cultural mores, widely dispersed over this continent, even unaware of one another’s presence. But that was another matter. The important point was that not all the peculiarities I witnessed on Kadaloor could be put down to mental deficiencies on my part.

“If I’d had these in my pocket all along, Raffles would have eaten them by now,” I argued. “He’s already had a go at nibbling through the packet.” I showed Yewtree the tiny teeth marks on the corner of the box.

“I don’t know why you keep that disgusting creature around,” said Yewtree. “It’s unhygienic, not to mention childish.”

I have mentioned before how the Citihallians looked on keeping pets as a pursuit solely for the very young or as a therapeutic tool for the emotionally impaired. I could not argue with Yewtree on that point: I was not sure why I still felt an attachment to the snake-mouse, since the creature did not exhibit any behaviour that could be described as affection. But I took exception to the charge of being unhygienic. We neither of us had bathed properly or shaved, or washed our clothes for weeks, and Yewtree was less particular in this regard than I, often claiming that it was counter-productive to wash oneself too thoroughly, as the dirt provided an extra layer of insulation. But any mention of this would only fuel his acrimony, so I said, “It seems I have little choice. He just follows me around. I don’t force him to accompany us.”

Just then Raffles was riding atop my head in a nest he had made in a fold of my turban. This enabled him to reach low-hanging branches more easily, and sometimes he would leap off, coiling his limbless body around a twig, then shimmying upwards into the tree and out of sight, in

search of berries, insects or whatever else he could cram into his insatiable jaws. He might be gone for hours, but always managed to find his way back to me.

“Of course it follows you,” argued Yewtree. “It’s been removed from its natural environment. It doesn’t know how to survive on its own any more. It probably thinks you’re its mother.”

Now Yewtree was spouting patent nonsense, and I lost no opportunity in telling him so. “What are we really arguing about?” I said. “Surely you haven’t got yourself so worked up about Raffles?”

Once again I was uncomfortably reminded of a married couple’s quarrel.

“I just disagree with all this... all this lying,” said Yewtree. He increased his pace and strode ahead, indicating that our conversation was at an end.

Yewtree’s character being what it was, his coolness towards me did not last the day, but his accusation continued to sting me long after the matter had gone out of his head entirely.

I was not proud of the deceptions I had practiced on the Bugis, but at the time it had seemed the best, indeed the only course of action open to us. We had found them already in the grip of an irrational and morally abhorrent belief system. My intervention had only added a new twist to their mythology. What would Yewtree have rather done? Initiate them in the scientific psychotherapeutic traditions of City Hall? That was inconceivable. Or leave them to their cannibalism, hunting the men of neighbouring tribes while wearing the heads of wolves? But I never had the opportunity to put these arguments to Yewtree, not only because we both consciously refrained from bringing up the topic again, but also because in a matter of days I was proved comprehensively wrong.

HORROR

The Periodic Honking of the Fruit-Seller's Truck

Ben Thomas and Skadi meic Beorh

Early summer 1952

Tad Goodson watched the fruit truck approach his section of the block, his toes wiggling with anticipation. The old brass alarm clock read quarter of five in the morning, and he knew he shouldn't be awake, but the truck would have jolted him out of sleep anyway. Tomorrow at breakfast, his mother would ask him if he'd stayed up past his bedtime again, and he'd answer the same way he had every morning this week:

"It's not my fault; it's that damn fruit truck, mom!"

Only he wouldn't say 'damn' this time. He wanted to keep what was left of his weekly allowance.

He pressed his palms against his window, feeling the sting of frost even though it was already May. His breath formed a murky pattern on the glass: two thin trails with a fuzzy circle beneath, like tears dropping into a puddle.

The truck rounded the corner of Mulberry Street, its engine rumbling like Grandpa did when he snored. Now Tad could see the garish pictures on its side: oranges, lemons, plums, bananas... all looking like a right-handed artist had painted them left-handed. Beneath this cornucopia, the word "FRUTAS!" was printed in multicoloured capitals.

A moment later, the noise Tad – and the driver – dreaded: the truck's horn. "*De-de-de-dee-DEE! De-de-de-daw-DEE! De-daw-de-de-de-de-Deeeeeee!*" The melody of "La Cucaracha" made discordant by a short in the wiring. Or something.

Tad watched the vendor as the nasally blast erupted. Like every night, the poor Mexican driver jumped in his seat at the first note, then sank into an expression of mingled horror and disappointment. His tired eyes bulged as he cast them around the cab, his wide hands gripping the large wheel. The instant the noise ended, the man winced, then slammed his foot on the gas pedal. With a jerk and a growl, the truck rocketed to the end of Mulberry, kicking a puff of exhaust behind it reminding Tad of

Mrs Twiddle's blue hair. A burning of rubber took the stepside's bulk roaring around the corner and out onto Grand Avenue.

Tad stared after the vehicle for a moment, then allowed himself to be sucked back down into his warm, blanketed bed. He did his best to fall asleep, but behind closed lids, his mind refused to stop playing that cinema of images: the clumsily-painted fruit, the shaking driver and his shock when the horn sounded, the truck peeling out of the neighbourhood toward parts unknown.

When Tad did finally drift off, grateful it was Saturday, the sun was throwing its first rays over his town of Morningside. Dreams overtaking him were filled with wild-eyed, shivering fruit sporting moustaches and dancing the Cha-Cha.

"*Dios mio*, Juan!" said Angelina Martinez.

"She did it again tonight," Juan replied. "I didn't touch nothin', an' she honked, right when I was drivin' by that same house! I can't do nothin' to stop her... she's... she's..."

"*Dios mio*," Angelina said again, but this time it was more of a sigh. She collapsed onto the couch and lit a skinny cigar. As she took a few drags, Juan watched the smoke wisp toward the brown stains on the ceiling.

"Okay, fine," his wife said at last. "You wanna have your lazy good-for-nothin' cousin Mario look at her? Maybe he can do a better job with the fruit pictures while he's at it, no? I married you 'cause I thought you was an artist! An' here! Look at you! Forty-five years old, sellin' *fruit* for a living. *Dios mio*! An' you're even too lazy to go pick it yourself! Why don't you take on some real responsibility an' be a man for once in your life, eh?"

Juan groaned, wondering what had happened to his sweet-tempered Angelina of not so terribly long ago. Who was this dumpy, loud, cigar-puffing thing he came home to every evening?

Tonight he would take Lucille out again, try to talk some sense into her, figure out why she honked at the most inopportune moments. Not so far in the back of his mind he wondered if she might be haunted. And if this was the case, how had this happened? Well, she *was* getting old, and he *was* her fourth or fifth owner, but...

"*What* kind of fruit truck kept you awake again last night, son?" Tad's father asked.

"I'm sorry dad. *Darned* fruit truck."

"You *will* be sorry if you keep spending time with that downtown

drugstore crowd, Theodore. *Especially* the Head brothers. I'm sorry, son, but you've just forfeited your allowance for the remainder of the school year."

"But dad! That's almost three whole weeks! And Dick is teaching me how to work on lawnmower engines."

"You forget that I went to school with their father Richard, Tad. *And* their mother. I'm aware of a few things about the Heads that you aren't, and breakfast on a Saturday morning is not the time to talk about it."

"Why not? I'd like to know why..."

"Another word, son, and we will add the Summer months."

Tad dropped his head and asked to be excused from the table.

"Finish your pancakes first, sweetheart," his mother said, a consoling tone in her voice. "Then you can go watch Howdy Doody."

"It's over already," Tad said as he crammed the last of the syrup-covered bacon into his mouth.

"What'd you do, mang, leave raw meat in dere?" Mario Hernandez said as he scratched the prodigious gut stretching out his greasy white tank-top. "You tryin' to barbecue up somethin' 'cause that cow you got hitched up to don't cook no more?"

Juan stuck his head under Lucille's popped hood. He was instantly assaulted with a smell so rancid that he jerked back, his crown connecting with the solid steel above him.

Mario snorted while Juan rubbed his bald spot and muttered a string of pejoratives about the truck's mother. He drew in a breath, held it, and poked his head into the engine again. In the dim light of his cousin's garage, he thought he must be seeing an odd pattern of shadows, but the latticed shapes were too well-defined for him to remain incredulous. The entire engine lay encrusted in a delicate white lace, stained deep burgundy in patches. It reeked of rotten meat.

Juan pulled his head out, this time more carefully. "What is it? Like, some kinda fluid leak? She *was* always kinda rank, now I think about it. But damn!"

Mario scratched his belly again and shrugged. "Watn't there when I changed out her radiator last month."

"So, you didn't notice nothin' strange then?"

"No. But, listen, mang. Dis truck got like way over two hundred thousand miles on her." He snapped his fingers, making a *poof* sound. "They just go, *mang*. *Bang!*"

Juan was silent for a long time, massaging his moustache. Finally, he rubbed his watery eyes. "Well, she still drives okay."

“What you gonna tell Angelina?” Mario asked. “She been ridin’ you like the Kentucky Derby!”

“I’ll tell her to back off, mang,” said Juan, and they laughed.

“There’s no such thing as haunted fruit trucks, *Taaaad*,” said Bucky Hardin. As he sneered, his braces gleamed in the early summer sun, and the blubber on his arms jiggled as he pushed Tad out of the way.

“Don’t tell me you haven’t heard it,” Tad replied as he ran alongside Bucky, Francine Laurel bringing up the rear, waving a stick in the air. They were what passed for a gang on suburban Mulberry Street.

Bucky didn’t exactly run so much as waddle like a penguin. Tad shot out in front of him, blocking his path. “Why would he honk it every night, Bucky? Nobody buys fruit at five in the a.m.”

Bucky stopped, staring at Tad with his mouth hanging open. “Oh, of c-c-course!” he finally said in his best Lou Costello voice. “There must be a *gh-gh-ghost* honking that horn!”

Francine stood prodding an ant bed with her stick. “Does the driver really look scared, Theodore?” she asked, frowning her brow. “About his own horn honking?”

Tad nodded. “Turns pale, shivers, and everything.” He grinned and pushed his fingers through his fresh crewcut. “Just the way Bucky looked when we went to the bijou to see ‘Frankenstein Meets the Wolf-Man’!”

Bucky flipped his long bangs back, roared, and tackled Tad. “Theodore! *Theodore! Kissy-kissy, Theodore!*”

“Roger? Have you seen my wedding gown?”

“No, my love. I didn’t eat it.”

“Roger!”

He raised his eyes from the stocks page of the *Times*. “What is it? Are you mad at me, dumpling?”

“No, I’m not mad at you. It’s just that you never really *listen* to me.”

“I listen to you. Where’s Tad this fine morning?”

“Out with Francine and Bucky.”

“Oh, the Laurel girl and the Hardin boy. Good kids. I approve. Toast and coffee?”

“Love some... after I find my wedding gown.”

“Your wedding gown?”

“See. I knew you weren’t listening to me.”

Roger folded his paper. “Maybe Tad knows where it is.”

“Are you insinuating something about our son?”

“And if I were?”

“I’d... have no problem with it. Would... you?”

“Not in the least. But don’t say that too loud. I’m not too sure our Morningside neighbours would agree with us... or any *other* Americans, for that matter.”

“You’re very special to me, you know that?”

“I should hope so, pumpkin. Here. I’m done with the newspaper. Let’s look for that wedding dress.”

“Roger?”

“Hmmm?”

“I miss my sister.”

“I know you do. I miss her too. Maybe we should have moved.”

“Well, we had just *bought* this house, and... I miss her so much. Next Friday will be the... fifth anniversary.”

“That soon, huh. Well, let’s try not to celebrate it. And you know what? We can still move if you want to.”

An exhausted sigh escaped her lips. “But Tad. He’s in the middle of everything now. He’ll be starting high school soon. He has so many friends. Morningside is all he knows.”

“You’re right as always, sugar. We do need to think about Tad. Still want to look for your dress?”

“No. Just hold me please.”

“I’ll never tell you anything again. I make that promise to you, Angelina.”

Juan dropped his head in quiet disgust.

“If you are going to talk about rotten meat engines an’ wedding dress lace an’ Jesus knows what else, then I hope you don’t! *Dios mio!* An’ stop bringing oranges into this house! I have seen enough oranges to last me all my days an’ nights! Go cut the grass or something!”

“So what are you telling me, Roger?”

“Just that, Jack,” said Roger. “Julie was killed on her wedding day right in front of our house.”

“Crossing the street to pick wildflowers. My lord, that’s sad. Nothing sadder, I don’t think. And you say she still had her wedding gown on?”

“Yep. Her new husband – Cyril his name was, poor fellow – was standing on the sidewalk waiting for her. I could tell by his expression that he was going to really make a fuss over the daisies she had broken away from him to pick. They were such a happy couple, just as Gloria and I had been.”

“So what makes *this* year so... special. I mean...”

“Well, in a weird pact the sisters made when they were little girls, Gloria and Julie promised one another that on the fifth anniversary of whomever got married last, they would exchange wedding dresses with one another. For keeps. One of those silly little-girl promises which acted as a bond between the two.”

“Whew! Where’s my handkerchief? If this gets any worse, I’m going to have to take the rest of the day off. So, I don’t know if I should even ask. What kind of vehicle killed her?”

“A spankin’ new ’47 Chevy 2T. That I’ll never forget. Hit and run. They never caught the guy. But the weirdest thing is...”

“What?” Jack pulled at his suit lapel, trying to stave off the shudders.

“The girls made a second promise. If one of them should be dead...”

“Damn, man. This is giving me the chills...”

“If one of them should be dead on the fifth wedding anniversary, the, ah, *deceased* would... come back to visit her sister. Sometime after thieves watch.”

“Thieves watch?”

“Yeah. Nine o’clock-ish.”

“So, Julie’s going to *reanimate* you mean? Like in one of those creepy pulp rags?”

“Something like that, I guess. Gloria is terrified. She’s a wreck. She’s not sleeping at night. She’s...”

“I’d be getting the hell out of Dodge myself, friend.”

“That’d be ideal. But their promise, Gloria says, had no boundaries. *‘Wherever the other will be, there the other will come, over the land and the sea, through death, beyond death, the sun,’* the words went.”

“Egad! So, which one was trying to be a poet?”

“I’m *not* scared of ghosts, all right?”

Bucky slurped the last of his popsicle, which the afternoon heat had melted prematurely. His lips and tongue were stained purple, and he wiped his sticky hands on his older brother’s *Action Comics* – the one introducing Superman.

“You wouldn’t have knocked Theodore down like that unless he made you mad,” said Francine. “Hey, isn’t that Gerald’s comic book? You shouldn’t do mean things like that. It could be worth some money one day, you know. It has a number one on it.”

“You hurt me, you big blowhard,” said Tad, rubbing the back of his neck.

Bucky grinned, folded his arms. “See, I ain’t afraid of nothin’. Not even you, *Taaaad!*”

“No, it’s you *aren’t* afraid of *anything*,” Francine said.

Bucky crinkled up his freckled nose. “Yeah, that’s what I said, horse face!”

“Stop callin’ me names, fatty-fatty-two-by-four!”

Tad hopped to his feet. “Look, why don’t we settle this once and for all, gang. We’ll all be gettin’ called in for dinner in a couple minutes, right?”

“It’s hot dog night,” said Bucky with relish.

“Uh, right-o. So anyways, we’ll all meet back here when it gets good an’ dark, an’ go find out for sure if there’s such a thing as ghosts... *and* if Bucky’s scared of ’em.”

“Just what are you planning, Theodore?” Francine folded her hands on her knee, but her eyes danced.

“We’ll head off down Grand Av, and sneak into Shady Grove.”

A moment of silence ensued.

“You mean the cemetery?” Francine made it sound like Tad was suggesting robbing a bank. “Isn’t that where your Aunt Julie is buried?”

“This is stupid,” Bucky said as he averted his eyes.

“I knew it!” Tad said, pointing his finger at Bucky. “You *are* scared!”

“No...” Bucky drew out the sound, turned it into a nervous snicker. “It’s a waste of time, that’s all. Plus I got math homework to do anyways.”

“Francine!” Mrs Laurel’s soprano echoed. “Have you practiced your clarinet today?”

The kids heard the *tap-tap-tap* of the lady’s high heels on the walkway. Francine winced. “Coming, Mom.” She shrugged an apology and skipped away, doing her best to appear unhurried.

“Wanna play Cowboys and Indians?” Bucky asked.

Tad considered the likelihood that he would be cast as an Indian, and shook his head. “Nah, I’m gonna go work on my model airplane,” he said. “My dad got me a B-17 Flying Fortress for getting an E-100 on that Geography test. So, are we on for tonight, or what?”

Bucky pushed some gravel around with his toe. “Fine,” he said at last. “See you at seven. The Spook Tree at the old Bandager place. 10-4?”

“Roger that, Bucko.”

“You really gonna drive Lucille, wit’ her all smellin’ like dat, *ese*?”

“She don’t smell no worse than *tu mama*.”

Mario chuckled, rubbed his gut. “Dat’s, uh, *tu hermana* you talkin’ ’bout, mang.”

“She *is* smellin’ worse, though. You right.”

"It keeps goin', you ain't gon' have to worry 'bout no horn. You gonna wake up them *gabachos* wit' her stink."

Juan drew a deep breath, then expelled it in a disdainful sigh.

"Angelina gonna kill you if you don't start sellin' more fruit." Mario put his meaty hand on his cousin's shoulder.

Juan shrugged. "She gonna kill me anyways."

"I *told* you let me show you how to work on cars, mang. It's a good livin'."

"I can see that, Mario."

"You makin' fun of me, *ese*?"

"No. I'm serious. You got a *good* life. A good wife. Your kids is behaved an' all..."

Mario fell silent for a minute. His mouth worked, but he seemed unsure of what to say. Juan raised his eyebrows and held them there.

"So," the mechanic finally said. "You still takin' Lucille out tonight?"

"Got to, chico. Got to."

"What you expect to find out?"

"Listen to me, Mario. I found somethin' in Angelina's stuff. I mean, I found somethin' she cut out of the newspaper."

"Oh, mang! She gonna kill you!"

"Listen. It's some articles about that hit-an'-run a few years ago."

"What hit-an'-run? How many hit-an'-runs we got here? Every month or two. A *lot*! How do I 'posed to know what hit-an'-run you talkin' 'bout, huh?"

"You remember it! It was all over the radio. The girl just got married that same day. *Bam!* Just like that. The Stepside Killer they called the guy. They never caught him."

Mario scratched his head. "*Que?*... Oh, mang! *Now* I remember! She was just got married, right? I mean, just that day, right?"

"Yeh. Well, so any of this makin' any sense to you, Marito?"

Mario rubbed his stubbly face with his greasy fingers. "No."

"What kind of truck we lookin' at here? What am I drivin'?"

"Your '47 Chevy 2T stepside, Juan... Oh! *Mang!* So what you sayin'? You sayin' dis lacey stuff an' meat all down in there is that *lady*? *Jesucristo y todo los ángeles!* Get dis thing outta my garage 'fore I lose my friggin' mind! *Jesucristo y dél Santo Madre!*"

"That's what I'm sayin'."

"So why you gonna drive her back out tonight again, then? *Jesucristo!* Where's my gasoline can? I'll take care a' this li'l *problemo* right now! *Jesucristo el hijo de Dios y Maria y todo los santos de Cielo proteger mi familia y ahorrar mi familia!*"

“*Hey-hey-hey!* Calm down, Mario! You not gonna burn up my truck!”

“Why you gonna drive her... why you...”

“Cause of what the newspaper clippin’ says.”

“So... what’s it say? Mang, you scarin’ me...”

“It says tomorrow night a promise the lady made to her sister is gonna happen.”

“What she promise?” Mario’s eyes were bulging. “What she promise!”

“That she gonna come back alive.”

“*Jesucristo!*”

“It gets worse.”

“No!”

“*Sí.* They got to exchange wedding dresses.”

“*Ahh-eeeeee!* Get dis thing outta my garage! Oh, *Dios y Maria y todo los santos!* Why you takin’ her back out tonight? *Why you takin’ her back out?*”

“Cause I know somethin’s gonna happen to Lucille tomorrow. It’ll be our last night together.”

“Oh mang. You is *loco.* Now you makin’ love to a *truck...*”

“Roger? I... I found it.”

“I think Tad ate it, sweetcakes.”

“Roger!”

“What?”

“I found... my wedding dress...”

“Oh... where was it?”

“I had taken it up to the attic, and then forgot I did.”

“Well... now you have it. You don’t think...”

“I *know* she will, Roger. Just like I would... if... if *I* were the one gone.”

“Then what are we going to do?”

“Pray. Pray... she, that she... you know...”

“I know. God, I know. We don’t need any Monkey’s Paw scenes...”

“Any monkey what?” Gloria asked, tears pooling in her eyes.

“I’ll explain some other time, sweetheart.” Roger’s eyes wandered to his roll-top desk. “Have you seen my pipe?”

The gang shivered, making their way through the twilight gate of Shady Grove.

“It’s spooky in here,” Francine said.

“No kidding,” Bucky replied, his voice unsteady.

"It supposed to be spooky, fellas," Tad said. "It's a graveyard."

The gang made its way over berms and around statuary. Soon they arrived at a place Tad recognised from the funeral. They spread out to explore.

"Oh my goodness! I found it..." Francine said as she stumbled over the marble gravemarker.

"I knew we were close," said Tad as he trotted to her side. "Hey, where's Bucky?"

"I'm over here... Hey fellas! Get a load o' this! What's a... *aieeeeeeeeeeeee!*"

"What's wrong! What's happened! Theodore I'm scared. What's happened to Bucky! Theodore? *Theodore!*"

Francine stood in the cemetery beneath swaying oaks and willows, rooted to the earth by her fear, her eyes shut tight but not able to keep out the visions playing on her mind.

"Theodore!"

"What?" Tad's voice sounded from the other side of a hillock. "Get over here! Look what Bucky's found!"

"Yeah, Frankie! Look what I found!"

"What is it?" Francine squinted in the darkness. "Why did you scream, Bucky?"

"Looks like a truck engine to me," Tad said.

"Ooh! It stinks!" Francine grabbed her nose and nearly puked. Bucky *did* puke, all over Tad's brand new Chuck Taylor All Star Converse sneakers.

"*Ahh!* Crimeny, Bucky! These are my new hi-tops! *Damn!*"

"Eeww!" Francine stepped away.

"There's that '*damn*' again, *Taaaad*," Bucky said as he wiped his mouth on the tail of his shirt, his fat belly bobbling. "I bet if I told your dad, he'd take your allowance away for a whole damn year."

"I'm getting away from here..." Francine said.

"Me three!" Bucky added.

"But... come on, gang! What? You're gonna just leave me here with this smelly engine, an' leave an' just go home like nothin's even happened?"

"Who's that?" Bucky sidled up to Tad and grabbed his shirt.

"Hurry! This way!" Francine said, and the three raced toward the biggest oak in the yard.

"What you mean, Juan? I don't wanna be here... It's Friday night. I should be home wit' my kids..."

"Then what you come with me for then? Don't be so panicky. You makin' *me* panicky!"

"I'm not panicky. *Too* much anyways."

"I *know* we'll find it here."

"People just don't steal a engine out of a truck an' move it to a graveyard, mang."

"You forgettin' the story."

"I am *tryin'* to forget the story. It's been makin' me sick all day. I have a family!"

"What? You think a little married dead girl is gonna kill you for doin' a little lookin' around?"

"How you know? You a priest all a sudden? Well, I hope you got your cross wit' you! What we gonna do if we find it? Steal it back? I ain't *touchin'* that thing!"

"Hey! What you got on your back? *A machete?*" Mario tried to control the smile blooming across his face. "You're a piece of work, you know that?"

"Hey. Better late than sorry, mang."

"*Shhh!* You hear somethin'? It sound like a *girl* voice..."

"He's got a machete, Theodore..." Francine said.

"I know. I heard."

"We're dead. I just know it, *Taaaad*. We're dead, and it's all *your* fault!"

"Shut up, Bucky. I'm tired of hearing your gums flap. Zip it!"

"Golly willipers! I didn't know you could talk like that, Francine."

"He just finally got my goat, Theodore."

Bucky stood stunned, his pudgy fingers clutching his own throat.

"Shhhhhh, everybody. Here they come," Tad said. "Wait! What time is it? *Mom!* I gotta... we gotta go!"

"Theodore! Why? What..." Francine cast a glance at Bucky, who seemed as baffled as she was.

Tad was already through a bent part of the old iron gate and out of sight before Bucky could squeeze through, Francine pushing his rump from behind.

"Don't you *dare* do what you're *thinking*, boy!"

"How'd you know I was thinkin' that?"

"Just *don't*, or you'll be sorry, Buckminster Hardin!"

"Don't call me that!"

"It's your name, isn't it?"

"Just push, please. I'm stuck."

“*God!*”

“You hear that, Juan? She cryin’ to God for help! I bet she beggin’ for her *revenge*...”

“Now you soundin’ worse than me. That’s just some little girl out playin’.”

“In a graveyard? At night? Nah, *ese!* Listen, she gettin’ closer!”

Juan hushed his cousin. He listened for a moment, waiting for another ethereal cry to echo from the darkness. The next one was much closer:

“At last! Free!”

Mario screamed. “See? She breakin’ outta her grave!”

“Thanks for bustin’ me out of there,” said Bucky.

“Thanks for... um... restraining yourself,” Francine replied.

“So what do we do now, Frankie?”

“Where’s Theodore, anyway?”

“Ran home to his mommy.”

“Bucky! This is serious! Do you think the machete men are still wandering around in there?”

Bucky wasn’t listening to her. His head was cocked, his eyes focused on something in the distance. Then Francine heard it: the bouncing of worn-out shocks, the squeal of balding tires on slick grass. Twin beams of light swung from behind a nearby hill. From somewhere in the darkness, Tad was crying “Fellas! Look out!” He crested the berm and bounded toward his friends, screaming at the top of his lungs.

“*Bah-jang! Karaaang!*” And down went the rusty gate.

“There’s more of them! They’re everywhere! It’s *zombies* comin’ up outta their *graves, ese!*”

“*Dios mio*, calm down, Marito! It’s just some kids. Look, we found it.”

Lucille’s engine was coated in blood-speckled lace. It squatted on the lawn, looking like a bizarre modern-art headstone. Suddenly the sprinkler system came on, soaking the cousins with its icy spray. They stumbled over a row of headstones, trying to find footing in the newly-wet grass.

Juan went down first. His leg shot out and tripped his cousin, who bumped his head on a gravestone and was out cold. From everywhere and nowhere, Martinez felt the rumbling of the engine. Then he watched it scoot across the grass, as though dragged by invisible hands.

And the lace was... growing, somehow. The stained patches crawled

over the belts and fan, spreading like something spilled. They gathered at the top of the engine and rose into a column, a spike of lace and blood rising into the night sky. The lurid fount thickened, joined by more growing lace. Before Juan's bulging eyes, it took on an hourglass shape, sprouted shoulders, arms, a head, a *veil*.

In front of the terrified fruit seller stood a ghostly bride, solid as the stone beneath his back. With a deep liquid *r-r-r-rip* she tore herself from the fibers encrusting the engine and stepped to the wet ground. The blood caking her dress mingled with the spray of the sprinklers, scattering red droplets across the graves. Then, another sound; an all-too-familiar one: "*De-de-de-dee-DEE! De-de-de-daw-DEE! De-daw-de-de-de-de-Deeeeeee!*"

Mario opened his eyes, rubbed the rising bump on his head, blinked a few times, and fainted dead away. Juan then heard another rumbling, but from the opposite direction.

"It can't be," he said. But he knew it was. With her grill misshapen from impact with the cemetery gate, across the lawn cruised the engineless Lucille, bounding over graves, squealing as her tires tore up the soaked lawn. Three kids careened out of her path: a chubby boy with torn khakis, a girl who looked like a young version of Juan's second-grade teacher, and in the lead, a scrawny boy with a blond crew-cut.

"Theodore! *It's your Aunt Julie!*" the girl cried. "She's alive! I *think!*"

"My lord, Gloria. She's here."

"Oh, god, Roger... How do you know?"

"Because I just watched her park a truck and come up the walkway."

Then, in a nauseating whirl of horns, Mexican curses, and the pitter-patter of prepubescent feet...

"Mom! *Mom!* The fruit truck! Aunt Julie! Get your dress! She's... she's *pretty*, Mom! Don't be afraid. She's pretty."

"I'm... I'm not afraid," Gloria said as she collapsed into her husband's arms.

"*Ahh-eeeeee!*" Bucky screamed as he fell to the lawn and hid his face. "The machete men followed us!" Behind his crouching form swept the graceful bride, her elegance all the more ravishing in its strangeness. *Exquis cadavre*.

"Oh! You're so *beautiful*," Francine said as she took one of Julie's bloodied hands and waited for the door to open.

HORROR

The Zombie Who Went to Town in Style

K.J. Hays

On a gelid, sun-struck morn a carriage ambled nobly whilst its giant wooden wheels created a charivari-like clatter that drowned out the chirps of the peacocks that flashed their tail feathers, which had greener greens in them than all the perfectly cut grass blades at a graveyard, and stood perched atop the stony lion statues on either side of the entryway to the dirt road. On the road the vessel passed verdant arbours with limbs that grazed the cloud-cover, topiary vines in the form of fairy tale creatures, statues of people fornicating in silly positions that were covered with cobwebs that looked like wigs for the elderly, cats batting at moths, white flamingos, a lost seafood delivery man, several artists painting landscapes, one rare white elk, and a mailbox shaped like Windsor Castle. Then the dirt turned into a wide corkscrew path of tiled marble. Each tile had a small drawing of a child running, pointing, or holding a sign entreating a traveller to follow the children to the other children who would lead still to more children who would lead the way. The carriage suffered the exhortations of the depicted little ones and jostled along on the hot, rocky, loopy circle wound up like a conscientious rattler sunning itself on a cool rock and trying to forget about the slavering raptors circling overhead. Windows on the carriage lightly vibrated because the liveried footman had stopped the carriage at the end of the childish corkscrew that linked to a straightway to the desired address.

The footman, clad in black, churned his butt squeamishly in his seat because the decor on the straightway was not within what he considered decorum. His eyes and brow wrinkled at the faux pas. He cursed about buggery under his breath then cracked the barbed whip on the longish backs of the white mares that had given up on hesitating after the first tails of the whip coerced the muscles in their backs into fearful locomo-

tion; the carriage went onto the lane of the straightway which was made of linoleum like a bad kitchen.

As the carriage rolled, it passed a row of twenty cauldrons bubbling over with the bright red, O positive blood of people who died in motorcycle accidents. A great wooden paddle stuck out of each cauldron. Before each cauldron stood a pale, geriatric, vampirish looking woman, and between each cauldron walked a small boy with golden, hair, cobalt blue eyes, and who wore a cape, and private school attire. There were ten boys; all of them dressed the same. They walked between two cauldrons at a time and ten of the cauldrons had sweet tasting blood, and the other ten had sour, old blood. Each time a boy walked to a cauldron with sweet blood an old woman would spoon it to him from a silver spoon that she kept in her pocket, and the boy would say: "That's yum!" When a boy reached a cauldron with sour tasting blood an old woman would spoon the sour blood into her own mouth and spit it at the little boy who would shriek, which sounded like someone shouting the letter E in rapid succession. The boys walked so that the boys who had the sweet blood coming ended up saying "That's yum" right before the boys who were hit with the sour blood screamed. This made it sound like the boys who swallowed the yummy blood relished it thoroughly. In reply, the twenty women always smiled with their pink, stained, acrylic fangs and said: "We made it just for you." This always made five of the boys feel neglected, and made the other five feel slightly more important. But because they took turns walking between the two cauldrons each boy had a turn to feel both emotions and taste from both cauldrons; this alternation prevented them from feeling miserable.

The footman just felt bad for them all, but felt sure he would feel better once he got far enough along the straightway to look past them. Glass whip bits put a rush in the pale steeds that knew not the purpose of the place they walked in. The driver felt rather that if this place existed and had a purpose then he could no longer have one and so he decided to allow the steeds to steadily proceed and lashed them no further because his life had lost the fun greenery of meaning that once filled his head with *Whim*. The horses suffered less because this place and the footman suffered all. Still the carriage rolled. To add to the grief of the footman, his rumination about the horses did not occupy him long enough to get by the cauldrons, and he glimpsed one last boy wailing at the acrid taste of the blood pooling in the back of his throat and making him feel like the forsaken, bastard child of a blind and horny god who wasted time in the form of new children. Cords in his neck wound, and he tightened his black coat more tightly around his person. He hoped the shivering of his

disquiet would end. Before the image of the boy tasting blood could re-emerge in his mind, the linoleum stopped before a row of tree stumps that marked the path's end. The footman reached into the depths of his black coat and pulled out a gold pocket watch; he checked the time. After reassuring himself that time still existed, the footman pulled on the reins to halt the horses. He then placed the watch back into his coat pocket, stepped off the carriage seat, and climbed down the wrought iron ladder on the side of the carriage, and onto the linoleum. He gathered himself, straightened his onyx garb, and walked to the door of the carriage with the ivory handle.

With his right hand he squeezed the ivory handle, and with his left hand he knocked. He knocked again. He knocked a third time. Then he let out a muffled sigh tinged with some melancholy at the advent of this routine which he repeated often. A knock came from the other side of the door, his ears pricked; he twisted the ivory handle and opened the door. A gust of perfumed air seeped out of the carriage that smelled of roses, wilted marigolds, and old oranges. The footman smiled not. He stuck his hand into the opening of the carriage, and then he averted his gaze back towards the boys swallowing blood and making yummy sounds, wishing they were still in sight. When he felt the pressure of a hand he began to back away from the carriage, but when he backed away he found himself holding only a long, white, silky glove. A rolling titter came from inside the carriage that almost demolished his tottering ego. The footman tried not to sigh.

He sighed some.

From within the carriage came a dour, breathy, cutting, womanly voice that tinkled like coins might if each one fell onto a tiled floor in just the right order: "Simon, my footman, please drape that lovely glove of mine on my hand this instant or it's curtains for you!"

The footman stifled a wince, forced a sad smile and replied: "My most esteemed madam, I had no desire to purchase any curtains on this robust, verdant, spring day, yet I do appreciate your largesse as always."

A strained, virulent, timbre came from within the carriage: "Footman! Are you implying that you have always been fond of your employer's grand posterior?"

An insensate expression broke across the footman's face: "I meant only that I appreciate how generous you are, Madam Lucinda."

Lucinda shot back: "So, you do not notice my backside?"

While trying to remain calm, the footman smiled wanly and said: "Lucinda, I think that your beginning rewards as well as your ending."

The footman hoped for silence. He could almost hear the hearty, pink flamingos chirruping.

Lucinda did not relent: "What of my middle?"

"Your middle glues together the lovely craft work of your person, Madam. Will you allow me to help you out of the carriage?" said the footman, offering the glove to the inside of the carriage.

Silences seeped from the blackness within the carriage.

Deftly the footman extended the glove and the darkness snapped the white glove out of his hand. He recoiled in bemusement and ennui.

Before the footman could compose himself the air crackled with her voice that rustled like wads of cash: "You said you were going to offer me a hand. What kind of chicanery do you intend, footman? I would like to get out of this carriage before it would be reasonable for it to serve as a catacomb for my entire lineage!"

The footman closed his eyes, reached into his pocket, donned a blindfold, and stuck out his arm in the most, inviting, gentle fashion he could muster, which ended up making his limb look like a turgid, soup noodle that had frayed at the ends. He felt a pressure and he flexed the tired muscle in his shoulder to support Madam Lucinda, in all her... largesse.

Lucinda stepped nimbly down from the carriage; one of her feet made a clicking sound on the frigid linoleum. Simon removed the blindfold, and twisted the ivory handle again and shut the door to the carriage. Once both feet clicked on the ground she asked the footman to do something for her: "Sir, can you look your Lady over and tell her whether you see anything on her person that looks amiss?"

"Certainly, madam, I shall needle you over with my eyes until I can see that you are hiding no beauty from the world whatsoever." The footman rejoined. He focused his gaze upon Lucinda and weighed each ounce of her body, raiment, and mien with his practiced eye for haute couture.

He tilted his head back slightly, pulled a lorgnette out of a breast pocket inside his black coat, and let his eyes roost on Lucinda. She had a lot going on. Simon scrutinised all five foot eight of Lucinda with his Asiatic and supra-Asiatic retina:

Her black bangs bent slightly before touching her forehead, for she had curled them overnight. The locks of her sable hair hung from her scalp, in resplendent, spiralling tresses that cradled the sun's light like a curved mirror might in a woman's compact make-up kit. In the midst of this blackness, a shock of argent hair lurked, but she had braided it into the darker strands that she felt others were more likely to appreciate. The lovely, silvery braid ran out through the middle of her streams of black

water and stopped at her shoulders with the rest of the currents. He did not see a snarl. Only the fine, smooth, crowd of black locks played with the light his eyes took to see them. Her skin was a cultivated paleness. She had taken pains to avoid the sun's rays at all costs for she feared anything that might hurt her like all things did a little. A smooth milk-cream colour betrayed her entire person. Two unfathomable dimples lent an understated happiness to her every expression. Her face looked like the best parts of modern art's efforts to sculpt Helen of Troy's mug; a strained effort at some sort of beauty that never should be again. Whitest gloves hid her delicate, porcelain hued hands. Arms as soft as pinewood, and long as king snakes dangled from the blue, acetate dress she wore that was supported by a crinoline structure, a bustle, and panniers. Her torso sprouted and flowered out of the bulging circle of petals made by her bustle. The black, beaded bodice she wore had a rose vine design on it and the thorns on each vine overlapped onto others making the pattern look particularly busy. She wore a corset under the bodice that crushed her diaphragm, made breathing hard, thinned her already willowy figure, and pushed her breasts up into the overflowing cups of the brassiere, which could not charm all of the bosom-serpentry rippling within them. The blue dress hid her shapely feet but the tips of the ivory-coloured Victorian high-tops she put on that morning peeked out from the bottom of the rolling folds in her apparel. Perhaps the extra layer of powder on her face and arms compensated for the lack of shade a straw hat or large brim hat might have offered.

Simon removed the lorgnette slowly from his nose, tucked it into the pocket inside his coat and wondered whether he should tell her to lift the ends of her dress up from the linoleum. He let that thought go.

Then he looked Lucinda square in her emerald green eyes and said: "Madam, you are a portrait of fine-breeding, adorned with the most luxurious fabrics that man can fabricate. My eyes envy you, even if I pretend that I do not."

Lucinda smiled revealing a row of shiny, minute teeth and said: "Of course you do, Simon. That is the only thing you can say."

Then a frown pushed on Lucinda's dimples and she puzzled: "Simon, I fear I am missing some accoutrement. Look on me a second time."

Simon did not reach for the lorgnette. He merely noticed the sunlight that made her face glow like a crescent moon, and that struck him as odd. He decided to mention this: "You know, Madam, you usually have some kind of protection from the sun in addition to the layer of powder you liberally apply to your person. Did I forget that when I prepared the carriage?"

Lucinda exclaimed: "My parasol! Where is it?! The sun chisels away at my soft skin as I speak! Simon, climb into the carriage at once and retrieve it immediately so that I might shed this light off of my fair flesh."

Simon threw open the door to the carriage, dove in, fondled about for a mite, and then sprang from the carriage onto the linoleum with the parasol in hand. He straightened his long black coat and presented Lucinda with her parasol saying: "Here, please forgive me for not remembering your... parasol."

Lucinda smiled a wry smile and said: "Charming pauses in your speech will not compensate for your lack of consideration regarding my appearance, Simon. However, I think this parasol might provide enough cool shade to soothe my mood on this matter." Then she opened the parasol and her smile ossified on her bony face as the accoutrement cast a dim greyness over her.

Simon stood quietly awaiting the next word from Lucinda.

Lucinda looked irritated at Simon for withholding a reply: "Simon, what point do you make in your silence? We've come far enough together, and the path ahead welcomes feet only. Look at these infernal stumps!"

Simon: "Well madam, I would say I've been stumped."

Lucinda: "Simon, if you'd like to piss off then feel free to spread your legs and do so."

Simon hopped onto the carriage and was gone in a whip snap. The carriage rolled off like a sentient marble.

Lucinda looked out past the stumps and saw small stone discs set into the earth. She lifted her leg over the stumps and placed the soft white boot onto one. Each disc led to another. And soon she was far away from the stumps. The heat of the sun drilled through her parasol and into her cheeks, and she day-dreamed a dream to trick her misery:

The bullfighter drew the sword.

She sees the bull snorting sideways in the dirt. The sword rises with her heartbeat.

The sword dives and breaks its neck on a bone. The horns hop up and in. The bull tosses the man like a meaty, silk and damask piñata. What a surprise, and yet not. The body lolls to and fro as the bull gallops about frantically. The blood splatters out on the crowd like candy. Some of the women stop gossiping and crowd around the gore to catch some in their skirts. She stays put. She wants to feel apart and clean.

She stands alone in her seat. Everyone goes back when all the pints of blood are milked.

The woman next to her got lucky. Her face looks red as a sandy sunset.

She tosses her neckerchief on the woman's face and all of her etiquette with it.

Her hand had come to rest on her breasts; they matted her dress with sudor.

& there was nothing to do then but accept that her hand loved her always.

When the dream ended she stood on the last stone disc before a black fence that looked like a map of a netherworld drawn by a soothsayer who sold his lies for money. She took her hand off her breast, realised the dream had parts real and parts dream, and laid her hand on the brass button on the fence's intercom. A buzz came and she twisted the glass knob, and came through the gate and into a garden. The gate closed itself behind her. As she leaned her parasol against the gate, she saw a man in a wicker, papa-san chair smoking a long, unfiltered cigarette.

He hailed her: "Lucinda, I see you've come costumed as the coquette I wanted forever."

She called back: "And I can see, Oswald, by the robin, boutonniere, tuxedo, spectacle, and top-hat covering your short blonde hair that you impersonate the man of show and fashion I long for in the spark of my dark, fiery heart."

He entreated her to sit in the papa-san chair across from him. She sashayed over to it and sat.

She paid him a compliment: "Oswald, you look good in whatever you wear."

He spent it: "Then you must always wish that I am dressed."

"So, that is quite a peculiar looking gate you have. What does it depict?" she asked.

"Oh, I think it is a map of a graveyard, but I have never been able to find it. I believe I inherited it. I do not think it exists. I have never had a proper respect for the dead. Anyways, it is just something scary I keep for frightening trespassers; I do not want to dig into the matter now."

She grinned. "What are you up to besides keeping weird fences, Oswald?"

"Well since you're early and the other guests have not arrived I might as well tell you. I am planning a big hunting trip for myself this coming August with lots of travelling. I want to go to Africa to hunt things and

take pictures of myself. I am hoping to kill a lioness, and bring her back to mount on my wall above a plaque with my name on it. I like putting my name on things.”

“I have thought about getting a tattoo, Oswald. Do not tempt me,” she gibed.

“You would never get my name on your body, Lucinda. You do not have the pain tolerance, and if you did, the tattoo artist would tire of your whining and he would probably leave you with the name Oz instead, just to save herself the trouble of spelling Oswald on your delicate, soft flesh,” Oswald shot back.

“You are right, henna would be more fun. Then I can always wash you off, when you are off mounting lionesses,” she said.

“Have you any interest in coming along? We could take lots and lots and lots of photos and have lots of experiences and inflict them on other people with our bad stories,” he said.

“Hmm. Maybe I’ll go with you. I had planned on seeing a stage show next August, but I suppose it would be more fun to share my life with you than live my life through a stage I can never stand upon. I will think about it Oswald... Say? When do you expect your other guests?” she wondered.

“Oh, anytime. You always come a minute or two too early Lucinda.”

She got out of her chair and started walking towards him. He grinned. She smirked at him.

She sat on his lap, took off his top-hat and right before she placed it on her head a white shriek ripped across Lucinda’s ears causing her to drop the top-hat. Oswald did not move.

“What could that be?” she asked.

Oswald replied: “Oh it is probably Jose the groundskeeper refreshing the blood for the boys. He gets squeamish sometimes. He is kind of a nut anyways. He reads books, talks to few people and never comes along on any of my trips. He prefers to be on his own. He is a queer one. I never understood the rustic, simple types. He used to be a bullfighter in Catalonia... queer.”

Another bloodcurdling scream came, and then they heard the gate rattling back and forth as if a great curse were trying to burst through the gate that kept two humans secret within the garden. They heard the sound of metal bending. Another scream and then the screaming bounced against the fence, and fell silent. Lucinda and Oswald stood frozen.

“I think one of the guests mentioned coming as a monster. Perhaps he is playing a joke on us.”

The gate fell down. On the other side stood one lone, nude zombie with pieces of dinner guest caked on its person. The zombie's visage was contorted, as if it were swallowing a billiard ball. In its hand it held either a forearm or a shin, but blood was spurting from where the hand or foot should have been. The zombie dropped the shin or forearm, and started to lumber towards them... an imp with tumescent skin on a killing spree.

"Oswald, do something!" Lucinda shouted.

Oswald quaked with fear: "I packed my guns for my hunting trip. I already shipped them to Africa."

The zombie lurched towards them and then stopped. It spat out half of the glass knob on the ground and its face returned to a more recognisable shape, although it was putrid and greenish.

Lucinda turned to run, but her Victorian boots were awkward and the hoop in her dress tripped her and she toppled onto the grass. Oswald looked at her and as he turned to run two undead hands shot out of the earth and grabbed his ankles.

The zombie spit out the other half of knob and came forward.

It hissed something to Oswald: "Now you know where the graveyard lies..."

Oswald begged and pleaded with all the whimpering a well-meaning child would fake when deprived of a lollipop. The zombie stretched its hand out and palmed his head. Oswald started to blubber. Tears streamed down his face, and then blood, as the zombie dug its nails into his skull. Oswald whined for his life. The zombie snapped its hand together and Oswald's grey, steaming brains gushed out between the webs in its hands.

The zombie tasted Oswald's brain and then made its way to Lucinda who tried to scamper away on all fours before a pale hand emerged from beneath the earth and squeezed her foot till it shattered. Lucinda screamed, vomited, screamed, vomited, dry heaved, and gasped and gasped and then the zombie closed in and had her in its grasp.

She tried to get away, but the zombie had a handful of her silver hair, and yanked her to the ground.

Lucinda wondered: "What are you going to do!?"

The zombie replied: "You seem to appreciate pick up lines. Well, how about this one: Would you mind going down *in* me?"

"O fuck," she chanted.

The zombie lifted her up and tilted her head sideways so its eyes could watch the green veins pulse in her neck like snakes trapped under some kind of translucent peach fruit. Yellowish teeth nestled into her jugular and blood spouted from Lucinda in a vibrant, black, wet peacock feather

as a death rattle left her throat and the zombie moaned and chewed her neck. A red mist floated through the air as Lucinda's limbs flapped wildly against the zombie's chest. Once the flailing stopped it scalped her with its nails and ripped her brain free as messy scarlet gobbets fluttered out onto the grass. The zombie bit into her brain feverishly like a child might eat watermelon on a summer day. Its eyes widened. It liked her brain. She had a yummy brain. It sat down and munched away. With all her brain swallowed, the zombie wandered over to Oswald's corpse, and scooped up a handful of the pulp that passed for his conscience and sampled it.

"Hmm... Needs more brain," it said, and cast the remnants of the pulp into a bush in the garden, and made its way past the downed gate and towards the linoleum, the boys, the old women, and the cauldrons of blood.

When the zombie arrived at the point in the linoleum path where the blood sipping kids walked back and forth, they ignored it. The zombie stumbled towards them hastily and when it got its bony claws on the first old woman it went on a murderous frolic more depressing to witness than being forced to feed all of one's loved ones to a group of naughty, toothless crocodiles:

All cauldrons tipped save one. Brains and blond boy hair flew through the air. Old women bones cracked one after the other against the linoleum. A zany, wild, gut fracas broke out with entrails squishing under the zombie's heels. Screams enveloped the whole affair as torsos danced in the morning sky with spumes of blood jetting off of them in every direction. Brain after brain splashed into the crimson vat. Little hands pushed old, frail bodies to the zombie. Leathery hands clawed dead flesh desperately. White eyes beseeched yellow eyes for hope beyond death with none in sight. Arteries coughed plasma everywhere. Faces regained their humanity from blood-tasting only to whimper and be eaten. No one desired anything but blackness, and to embrace the cold end. A desperate group effort began with the last ten of them piling on. The zombie crushed those closest to it and bit its way out of the pile... a satanic caterpillar. All the old women lay dead. One boy remained. A spoon plunged into his soft skull; he fell and his teeth chipped on the floor. The last brain dropped into the one standing black pot with a wet, sloppy flourish of gore.

It picked up the spoon that felled the boy. They had all died for the zombie's noble cause: hot soup.

The zombie savoured every nibble of brain it got. It took its time as if

it waited for a carriage. It supped. Hours passed till midnight fell and twilight painted the skies an ultramarine hue.

Then the zombie noticed a carriage led by a grouchy old footman with a black outfit. The carriage stopped before the zombie. It noticed the footman had not looked at it.

Simon said: "Lucinda, I've left the carriage door unlocked. It is late. Please get in now without any tomfoolery."

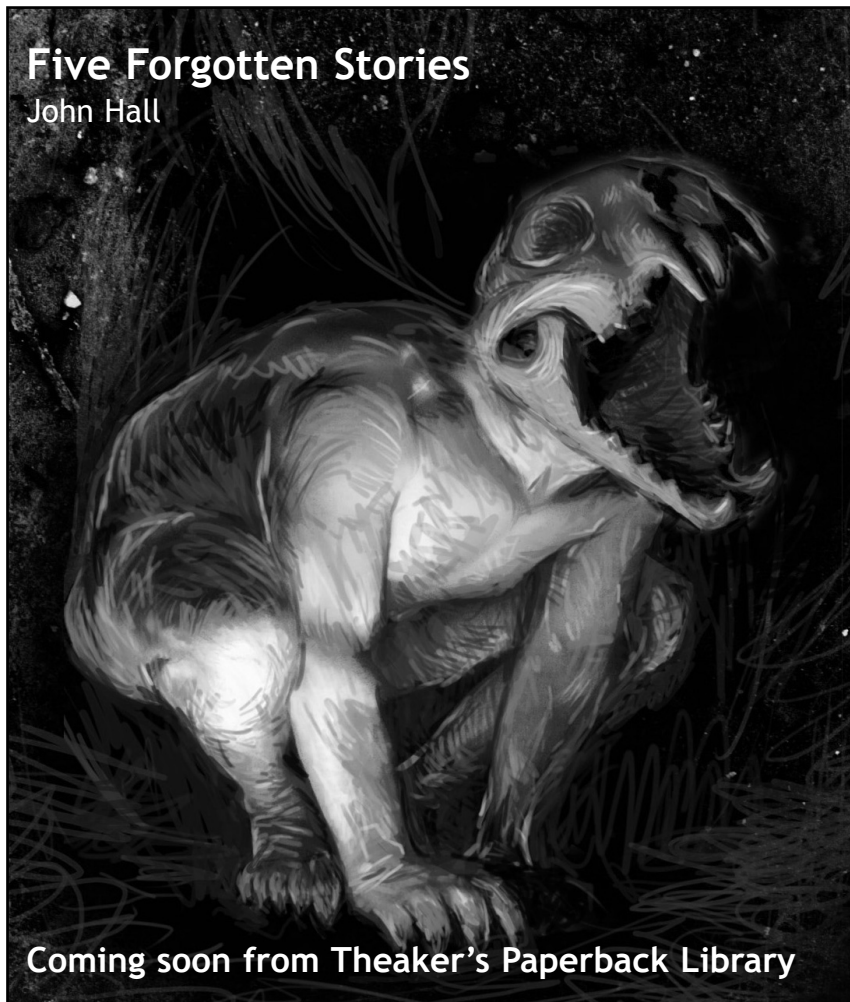
The zombie tried to mimic a feminine voice; it came out rough and grating: "OK, take me home."

"Then get in!" Simon said.

The zombie climbed in and closed the door.

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John Hall



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REVIEWS

The Quarterly Review

THE BRITISH FANTASY AWARDS

The Graveyard Book

Neil Gaiman, Dave McKean

HarperCollins, hb, 307pp

My goal for October was to read and review all the British Fantasy Award-nominated novels. They're mostly still in hardback, so it could have been an expensive proposition, but as ever Birmingham's library reservation system provided.

That did mean, however, that my copy of *The Graveyard Book* had been through the tender hands of one library's teenage reading group, and it was missing pages 165 and 166. The latter was an illustration, but if anything important happened on page 165 I'm afraid I missed it.

Nobody Owens is a little boy who lives in a graveyard with lots of friendly ghosts, while the man Jack, who killed the boy's family, searches the world to find him.

Like almost every book I've read by Neil Gaiman (*The Wake* being the painfully dull exception) this was a profound pleasure to read. The tone is intimate and friendly, charming even as it frightens. His writing seems casually brilliant, which probably means he works very, very hard to make it so good.

Gaiman acknowledges a debt to Kipling's *Jungle Book* in the acknowledgments – you can see it in the title, of course, and in Nobody's chats with the various inhabitants of the graveyard. It's also strongly reminiscent of Diana Wynne Jones, though it lacks her trademark realignments of reality. The plot is pretty much the Harry Potter series done-in-one. For me this was a slight tale told with incredible skill.

I read the edition with artwork by Dave McKean, but it wasn't at all what you might expect. Here he uses a black ink and grey wash style that's reminiscent of the work Scott Morse and Troy Nixey have pro-

duced for Oni. He was nominated for the British Fantasy Award for best artist for his work on this book, but lost out to Vinnie Chong.

I read quite a bit of this book while my youngest daughter was tottering around a stay-and-play session, and I had great fun asking the older children at the playgroup if they wanted to see something really scary, before showing them page 167, a scary cup of coffee! The joke didn't quite work, though, since they all agreed that for four-year-olds hot drinks are indeed rather scary. 7

Memoirs of a Master Forger

William Heaney

Gollancz, pb, 320pp

The cover design of this book led me to expect a pseudo-Victorian adventure, but this is actually a modern, urban book set in a London of lobby groups and homeless shelters.

William Heaney got involved in some supernatural shenanigans at university and now, middle-aged, is up to his ears in dodgy deals that are starting to fall apart – and he sees demons everywhere. In the middle of this he meets an fascinating and beautiful young woman who takes an unaccountable interest in him, but he still feels guilty about the way his previous relationships ended.

This was a good book, but the fantasy stuff seemed like a bit of icing to make a mainstream novel about a middle-aged guy falling for a younger woman more interesting. The demon stuff seems a bit intrusive even from the very early pages, like a bit of Piers Anthony being ladled into a Melvyn Bragg novel.

I'm happy for people to write relationship novels, but it's just not what I really go for. Relationships, emotions, love – in the books I tend to like best that stuff is all there to add ballast to a book, to give the protagonists a reason to fight the monsters, or the aliens, or whatever... What disappointed me with this book was that as it went on it became clear that the relationship stuff was the meat of it. The supernatural elements could have been almost completely removed without affecting the plot at all.

Of course, that doesn't make it a bad book, just one that didn't appeal to me. I realise that makes (or is one of the many things that make) me a buffoon!

There were some quite bad mistakes in this edition, though, to the point where I started to wonder if it was some kind of metatextual element that would lead to a flourish at the end... Antonia magically knows

Otto's name (p. 81 – probably the result of dialogue being trimmed incautiously), a CID interview is referenced that doesn't come up anywhere else (p. 94 – maybe a scene was cut?), and then there's "bare to repeat it" (p. 162), "want her to now it" (p. 143) and "my tongue froze to roof my mouth" (p. 162). You expect that kind of thing in self-published and small press work, but it's a surprise to see it from a major publisher. Even the title is annoyingly inaccurate, since it's really the memoir of a master forger's friend, the guy who sells the forgeries. By the end you could say it's been justified, but only barely – sorry, barely.

This novel did in fact win the British Fantasy Award, and though it didn't get my vote, I can see why other people loved it. 7

The Victoria Vanishes

Christopher Fowler

Doubleday, hb, 320pp

Bryant and May are a pair of geriatric detectives working the mysterious streets of London, taking the time to puzzle over crimes whose patterns are not immediately obvious, finding connections that might be missed by a policeman working the beat and looking to meet his targets. In this, the first I've read in the series, their Peculiar Crimes Unit faces closure, their health deteriorates, and a man is murdering women in the middle of crowded pubs.

Bryant and May are similar in many ways to Holmes and Watson, but now that Holmes's methods have been embraced by the everyday police, to stand out from the crowd takes a bit more effort. But funnily enough, though there's lots of talk of how unconventional their methods are, in this volume at least their approach has more in common with Frost or Morse than with, say, Dirk Gently.

Nevertheless, this was a highly enjoyable book. Unshowy, straight-ahead prose, fifty short chapters, a good mystery, fascinating stories of London history and marvellous characters... In short, it was as readable as any book I've ever read. It's propulsive, exciting and overall a smashing book – but I've no idea why it was up for a British Fantasy Award, since it's a mystery novel with no fantasy elements whatsoever. It must be the combination of Christopher Fowler and pubs, two of the British Fantasy Society's favourite things!

Having finished two of the other nominees (*Memoirs of a Master Forger* by William Heaney and *The Graveyard Book* by Neil Gaiman), while getting a bit stuck on Simon Clark's *The Midnight Man*, this was

my favourite of them so far, but it wouldn't have got my vote, just because it's not a fantasy book. Nevertheless, highly recommended. 8

The Midnight Man

Simon Clark

Severn House Publishers, hb, 224pp

Next in my run at the British Fantasy Award nominated novels was *The Midnight Man*, by Simon Clark (best known perhaps for his sequel to *The Day of the Triffids*). Like *The Victoria Vanishes*, this isn't one I'd have picked up to read if it wasn't on the BFA list.

To begin with it seemed like *Anno Dracula* with Vincent Van Gogh instead of literary characters. The story is told from the point of view of two young women; Ty, a prostitute fascinated by the red-headed lunatic who paints in the fields, and Nidabi, an Indian slave/servant/whore rescued from a miserable existence by Pastor Hux, an intense young man who egg-sliced her former master's face with a wire fence.

It took me a while to get into this book. It's a slow burner, and I'm not a fan of epistolary or diary novels at the best of times – too much unnecessary faff – so I put it to one side while reading *The Victoria Vanishes*. I got on with it much better the second time around. Like earlier Gothic novels such as *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, it needs time to catch you in its mood and tempo. It's an interesting gaslight thriller, but...

It's not a fantasy novel in the slightest. Bit of a stretch to even call it horror (though that's how the publisher has categorised it on the copy-right page). So, good as it was, it didn't stand a chance of getting my vote in the British Fantasy Awards. Non-fantasy horror is eligible in the awards, but it's not where my votes would go. 7

Rain Dogs

Gary McMahon

Humdrumming, hb, 224pp

Three years ago Guy Renford found a knife-wielding burglar in his baby daughter's bedroom. He forced him down the stairs, then out of the house, and smashed his skull to pieces on the road outside (it's never quite clear why he feels so guilty about this!). He's now out of the clink and hoping to reconnect with his family, but the family of his "victim" have other plans, plans that get out of hand. Rosie is an ex-stripper, plan-

ning to leave her abusive American husband after her latest trip to the hospital. She can see dead people. Chapters generally alternate between Guy and Rosie, eventually bringing them together.

This is a good book, but it lacks a bit of polish, especially in the first half of the book. There are too many wasted words (“for the marriage they’d shared which had been doomed from the outset”, p. 68; “She filled the kettle with water from the cold tap”, p. 123), too many stock phrases (“low moaning sound”), and too many places where a phrase could have done with a bit more work, such as “he’d been moulded by familial abuse into a fractured human being” (p. 68). Worst of all is a scene where Rosie’s abusive husband rapes and then tries to kill her, with “the tip of his now softening member poking out of his trousers like the moist snout of a curious animal” (p. 66). Inappropriate, trite and gross in a single sentence!

I’m not a fetishist of fine writing. Though I do enjoy the work of styl-ists like Vance, Wolfe and Blaylock, many of my favourite books are marked by much less elegant, even functional prose – Philip K. Dick would be a prime example. His writing is often clumsy, but like Vance’s it furthers the story. I’m more interested in what the words have to say, in the story they’re telling, than in the precise word choice. The problem here is that the prose distracts from the story, by making you wonder about moulding fractures, curious animals, and so on.

At least that’s how I felt at about the half-way point: that kind of thing becomes much less frequent as the novel progresses towards a thrilling conclusion – basically, once things are happening and the writer has something to describe other than people moping around.

There are other problems, though: Bella, Guy’s wife, makes an absolutely ridiculous decision towards the end of the book, throwing herself and her child into appalling danger at the least provocation to set up an exciting conclusion. The book features that unwelcome speciality of male horror writers: a woman being killed by something entering her vagina – previous entries in this unlovely series include slugs in the work of Shaun Hutson and stretchy vampire penises from Brian Lumley. It’s also a bit repetitive early on, its flashbacks to the backstories of Rosie and Guy having a tendency to lay out the broad strokes before returning to fill in unnecessary detail. The ending is unsubtly telegraphed three quarters of the way thanks to that old horror canard, the magic professor who knows exactly what you need to know; the only question is who precisely will survive. Then there are a few plain errors, like “You’ve been watching too many Jennifer Lopez movies-of-the-week” (p. 53) – it should have been someone like Melissa Gilbert, since Jennifer Lopez

doesn't do TV movies. The word "hovel" (p. 79) seems to be used to describe a town. A three or four-year-old girl is said to be "regressing to infancy" (p. 188) which can't have been a long journey. And there's a glaring mistake on the contents page. The overall impression is of a book that was rushed to publication.

Having made all those criticisms, you may be surprised to hear I really liked it, and with only Ramsey Campbell's *Thieving Fear* to go it was very much in the running for my vote in the British Fantasy Awards.

The last hundred pages are exceptionally exciting. Every scene featuring the Rain Dogs of the title terrifies, their power and brutality unforgettable. It's all about the implacability of water, and McMahon conveys this in a way that'll resonate with anyone who's suffered a leaky roof or a dripping tap (never mind anything more serious). I was also glad to read a BFA-nominated novel that wasn't largely set in London. The depiction of a father's feelings for his child is spot on, something it shares with *One*, by Conrad Williams, who contributes a foreword to this book. Though the ultra-modern cover set me up to expect something a bit more edgy, this is a good, traditional horror novel in the vein of early James Herbert. It could have done with a bit of touching up here and there, but most of those issues could be easily fixed and I very much doubt that this will be the last edition we see of this novel. As a £25 limited edition hardback it was maybe a little out of its depth, but as a cheap paperback it would knock your socks off. It would make an absolutely fantastic movie.

Note that the best way to get a copy of this book now is direct from the author, who bought up the stock when Humdrumming went out of business. 7

Thieving Fear

Ramsey Campbell

Virgin Books, pb, 320pp

Four friends camped at the coast as youngsters, and had a very bad night's sleep. Years later, returning to the spot as adults, something is triggered, and things rapidly decline for them, in very subtle ways. They can't seem to communicate properly with each other. Their lives are turning to crap, and there doesn't seem to be anything they can do about it.

One of the most common complaints about horror films is that if peo-

ple just told each what's going on, most of their problems could be solved (Lost has always been notorious for the same thing). That could easily have provided the inspiration for this book. Why don't they talk to each other? What if they can't? What if something is stopping them? So it's all about characters who talk at cross-purposes, mishear and misconstrue words, and run everything through the filter of their own misery. In short, it's extremely realistic!

That makes this a profoundly miserable and often frustrating reading experience, but a brilliant one. I haven't read anything so determined to make (and unafraid of making) the reader miserable since Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*. For example, it begins with one lead being unfairly accused of racism in an employment tribunal... The weak point of human society and relationships (or maybe the thing that makes society possible!) is the imperfection of communication between us, and this book hammered away at that until it gave. It was very ambitious and difficult – you'd have thought it the work of an angry young man, if it wasn't for the absolute confidence of every word. I loved it.

Except for one thing, that is: the absence of commas before speech. I read an afterword by Campbell to one of his books where he had a little rant about small-minded proofreaders adding commas to his work. It's easy to overdo them, but they're generally useful and their absence in some circumstances causes confusion. The problem here is that if someone's talking, it says something like: he said "Goodbye to the world". The comma that should appear after "said" tells you something, it tells you to break what follows off from the descriptive text, it's a separate utterance by a different person, the character instead of the narrator.

Its total absence in this book means the reader must constantly back up after realising some speech is being reported. Yes, it's a little thing, but it isn't half infuriating, and in at least one place here it is difficult to be sure whether the text within the quote marks has even been said. Maybe it's a small thing, but those conventions are there to help the reader, and omitting them is like leaving marbles on the stairs of a story.

Somehow, though, I survived the absence of commas to finish *Thieving Fear* just an hour before the close of voting. This was the first Ramsey Campbell book I've read, and a BFS member told me it wasn't his best. Well, if that's not his best, I've got some good reading ahead of me! I suppose I was hit with all his good qualities at once, whereas an existing fan would compare it as much to his previous works as to the other nominees. For me this was in a different league to the other books (though I think the best individual scene of any of the novels was in *Rain*

Dogs, in the flooded estate, with the creatures coming up out of the water to tear people apart), and it had to get my vote. 8

BOOKS

Bad Thoughts

Dave Zeltserman

Five Star, hb, 276pp

I was disappointed when I first read *Bad Thoughts*, fresh from Mr Zeltserman's *Small Crimes*, his "breakthrough" 2008 crime novel. I felt that he had – to some extent – "cheated", and put the book away thinking that I probably wouldn't look at it again (except to gaze at the cover, which is one of the best I've seen in the last few years). A few months ago, however, in the course of trying to educate myself about speculative fiction, I read Orson Scott Card's *How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy* (Writer's Digest, 2008). Mr Card is clear that it's essential for any writer in either genre to establish the rules and possibilities of his fictional universe as quickly as practicable. I reflected that this was exactly what had bothered me about *Bad Thoughts*, which is probably best described as a crime-horror crossover.

The novel follows police detective Bill Shannon as he investigates the grisly murders of women in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Basically, the plot revolves around the device of Shannon's blackouts, which introduce the possibility that he is committing the murders himself. He is intelligent and honest enough to see that there is even some evidence that he's involved, all the while being plagued by disturbing dreams dating back to a childhood trauma. The detective as unwitting killer – hunting himself, in effect – is a fascinating concept, dating back to Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Edgar Allan Poe's *The Man of the Crowd* (1840), and perhaps beyond. Without giving away the plot of *Bad Thoughts*, there is a supernatural element in the denouement, and this was what disappointed me at first, although I couldn't pinpoint the reasons for my reaction until I'd read Mr Card's comments.

Putting the crime-horror crossover in perspective, however, I remembered William Hjortsberg's classic – and incredibly underrated – *Falling Angel*, first published in 1978 and filmed as the excellent *Angel Heart* in 1987. Again, at the risk of giving away too much, there are many clues

suggesting the occult, but one can't be sure what has actually been happening until the very end. When I reconsidered the structure of *Falling Angel* – to all intents and purposes a hardboiled detective story – I thought that maybe Mr Card's comments weren't applicable to crime stories with supernatural themes or elements, and returned to *Bad Thoughts*.

Second time around, I really enjoyed the book, which I can recommend to anyone who enjoys that murky literary ground where horror and crime meet. The novel deserves a larger audience than Five Star are likely to reach; at the time of writing, the hardback is still available on Amazon US, though I fear it may be sold out by the time this goes to print. There is good news on the horizon, however: *Bad Karma*, the second in the series, is due from Five Star in October this year; and Mr Zeltserman's *Essence*, another supernatural crime story, is due from the Overlook Press in the next. He keeps his readers up to date on his blog, at www.smallcrimes-novel.blogspot.com, which also has links to free short fiction on his website... well worth the browse, both. – *Rafe McGregor*

Broken Symmetries

Steve Redwood

Dog Horn Publishing, pb, 200pp

A highly entertaining collection of short stories, of which I've been lucky enough to read an early version. Each is almost completely different to the rest, except for the fact that they're all so good... Some are funny, others deadly serious; some are bafflingly erudite, others are fluffy confections. Some, like "Sanctuary", seem serious at first, but end up being extremely silly – in a good way!

"Damaged" opens the collection, taking us with John William Smith on his visit to the library – he's there to renew his most recent loan. "The library shelves were unusually well-stocked that day, with golden-skinned women dangling languid bare legs over the edges." If that gets you thinking of sauce and Sidney James, stop right there: Steve Redwood's writing is characterised by a real fury at the way men treat women.

For another example see "Epiphany in the Sun", a non-fantasy story about a couple driving through Turkey. They find a dying dog and John insists on trying to find help for it. The disregard he shows for his wife is appalling, yet totally believable. Men do ignore their wives in this way

all the time, and it clearly makes Redwood angry. Even more scathing of our fallible gender is “Expiry Date”, where Peter receives a post-Advent calendar that catalogues a history of one man’s dismaying behaviour towards women.

Other interesting stories here include “Going Back”, a new spin on time travel (I didn’t think there were any to be found at this point), which again hinges on the evil that men do; “Fowl Play”, a tribute to Rhys Hughes (interesting, since I read that author’s *The Smell of Telescopes* at the same time as this book, and the two complemented each other very well); and “A Helping Hand”, about one man’s war with a beggar. A particular favourite of mine was “The Heisenberg Mutation” where Charles Algernon Soames, “who occasionally lent money to the Sultan of Brunei”, begins to flatten... Another was “Two Legs Bad: a Love Story”, which does, as its subtitle promises, feature “unusual sexual practices”, though not the kind you might expect.

Many of these stories previously appeared in small press magazines, like *Midnight Street*, *Polluto*, *Roadworks* and *Whispers of Wickedness*, and Redwood is a small press editor’s dream: a fine writer with big ideas who doesn’t quite fit established pigeonholes. But what’s good for the small press isn’t necessarily good for him! He deserves to be better known, and I hope this collection will do the trick. 7

Dust and Shadow: an Account of the Ripper Killings by Dr John H. Watson

Lyndsay Faye

Simon & Schuster, hc, 336pp

Holmes vs. the Ripper might be the ultimate fiction/non-fiction crossover, but it’s also an ideal breeding ground for the crime/horror crossover, regardless of whether the supernatural is permitted to feature. My initial concern when I heard the news of Ms Faye’s deal with Simon & Schuster was that almost every possible explanation has already been explored either in print or onscreen, beginning with *A Study in Terror* (directed by James Hill) in 1965.

Nonetheless, I approached the novel with somewhat higher expectations after reading two of Ms Faye’s shorter pieces: “The Colonel’s Madness” was, for me, one of the joint highlights of the recent *Sherlock Holmes in America* anthology (Skyhorse Publishing, 2009); and “Conflict of Interest” (*The Baker Street Journal*, Volume 59, Issue 1) is an excellent essay about the problems of writing Holmes vs. Ripper. The

first obstacle identified by Ms Faye in the latter is that of the “the brilliant protagonist”, as she quite correctly asks how the world’s greatest detective could have failed to catch a murderer who made his first kill on August 31 and his last on November 9. We are accustomed to Holmes wrapping up even his most complex cases much quicker than this.

The point is insightful, but never really answered in *Dust and Shadow*. I don’t normally include spoilers in my reviews, but can’t justify the criticism any other way: given the circumstances surrounding the Ripper murders, surely any astute detective would have at least considered the idea that a law enforcement agent, or someone connected to one, was responsible? It takes Holmes a couple of months (at least) before he formulates a fairly obvious theory. This is a theme which has already been taken up in *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story* by Michael Dibdin (Holmes as Ripper), “The Case of the Baker Street Dozen” by Arthur Douglas (Watson as Ripper), and *The Adventures of Inspector Lestrade* by M.J. Trow (Melville MacNaghten’s daughter as Ripper).

I had hoped for something more original. While Ms Faye has reproduced Conan Doyle’s style admirably, I can’t help feeling that the story would be better served with more of the atmosphere we traditionally associate with horror fiction, like *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story* – the best of the Holmes vs. Ripper so far. Matthew Pearl, Les Klinger, and Caleb Carr have all given the novel the highest praise, however, so perhaps I missed something. – *Rafe McGregor*

The Smell of Telescopes

Rhys Hughes

Eibonvale Press, hb, 464pp

This is a new edition from Eibonvale Press from 2007 of a collection of short stories first published by the highly respected small press, Tartarus Books, in 2000. I don’t have the original version for comparison, but this one has a couple of oddities: like the other Eibonvale books so far, each paragraph begins with a gigantic indent, creating hundreds of unintentional ellipses, and full stops are followed by two spaces instead of one, which gets annoying over the course of a whole book. Also, the space between each story includes two to four blank pages: providing time to decompress, perhaps, but adding up to about sixty blank pages in total. On the other hand, this edition adds striking illustrated title pages to each story, and the author has said that this is his preferred version of the text.

Though each of the stories works alone, there are connections between them. Largely they fall into four categories.

One set deals with Captain Morgan's retired pirates, scoundrels such as Spermaceti Whiskers, Thanatology Spleen, Muscovado Lashes, Lanolin Brows and Omophagia Ankles. These were the stories I had most trouble with – the first couple I found almost entirely impenetrable – I had to nail my eyes to the page to stop them running away. "Lanolin Brows", though, was brilliant: a pirate makes himself a suit of armour from wood, and goes on to create an entire city from the stuff. "Omophagia Ankles" ties together many of the book's threads for a very satisfying conclusion.

Four stories tell of two troubled lovers, Myfanwy and Owain, and their travails with pies, imps, trousers and souls: "The Blue Dwarf", "The Orange Goat", "The Yellow Imp" and "The Purple Pastor". The first was almost painfully quirky, but the last was superb, leaving the hero in a most unusual position.

Five stories concern the strange town of Ladloh, its inhabitants and politics: "Ten Grim Bottles", "The Purloined Liver", "A Person Not in the Story", "Burke and Rabbit" and "The Hush of Falling Houses". These were my favourites in the volume, in particular "The Hush of Falling Houses", in which Ladlow must face its final fate – again.

Twelve stories are more or less standalones, including "The Banker of Ingolstadt", "The Squonk Laughed", "Telegraph Ma'am", "The Tell-Tale Nose", "A Girl Like a Doric Column", "Nothing More Common", "Bridge Over Troubled Blood", "The Haunted Womb", "There Was a Ghoul Dwelt by a Mosque" and "The Sickness of Satan". All of these were very good, and are the most accessible. My favourites from this group were "Depressurised Ghost Story" and "Mr Humphrey's Clock's Inheritance", a story on the perils of licking furniture.

This was a very challenging book to read. Every line is so dense, so filled with allusions, in-jokes and puns that I halted and stuttered in my reading, reminding me of when I began to read novels in French for the first time. Every line needed to be decoded, sifted for meaning before I could understand it or move on to the next. But the more of it I read, the more I settled into it, the more I enjoyed it. I started to pick up on the internal connections, stopped worrying so much about catching every nuance, and stopped looking up the words I didn't know in a dictionary. By the time I finished *Le Comte de Monte Cristo* I was reading French very well; by the end of this book I wouldn't say I was fluent in Hughes, but I was making my way with more confidence, and looking forward to the next volume.

When you read a book of short stories, it's easy to assume the stories appear in chronological order. I don't know if that's the case here, but even allowing for my steady acclimatization to Rhys Hughes' writing, my impression was that as the book went on the puns became less laboured, the twists became more natural, and the stories were better. The first edition of this book dates back to 2000, the stories I imagine are even older: I'm very much looking forward to reading the author's subsequent work, especially the forthcoming *Twisthorn Bellow* from Atomic Fez. 7

The Postmodern Mariner

Rhys Hughes

Screaming Dreams, pb, 160pp

I went from *The Smell of Telescopes*, one of Rhys Hughes' earliest books, to this, one of his most recent. The decade or so that separates them is immediately obvious (or at least it seems to be – perhaps these stories date from the same period and I'm just imagining a difference!): the lines are cleaner, the twists less superfluous, the jokes funnier. There are three distinct sections. (I rather wish *The Smell of Telescopes* had been divided up in the same way to save me a bit of brainache!)

Part One features seven amazing adventures of Castor Jenkins, the Baron Munchausen of Porthcawl, of which more below. Part Two is "The Lip Service", a tale of a man who posts himself to his girlfriend and ends up in a far-off magical lost parcels depot. It's funny, silly and rather sadder than the other stories, being all about the steady disappearance of love from the world.

Part Three is a novella about the Postmodern Mariner in person, "Rommel Cobra's Swimming Carnival", in which the Mariner (a blogger) goes in search of adventure with pirates in a gigantic cup of tea – adventure on the high teas, one might say! Astonishingly, in a novella filled to the brim with groan-worthy puns, Hughes neglects to make that one, the most obvious of all. I can only guess it's a deliberately open goal, left by way of invitation to the reader to join the game!

[In this, as in so many things, I was wrong. The author, reading the original draft of this review on Goodreads, noted that such a pun could be found on page 118, about halfway down. Said Rhys: "I was mildly shocked at the thought that I might have missed a pun! I went mildly pale, began mildly shaking, nearly collapsed with a mild heart attack!"]

Two marvellous opening paragraphs from the Castor Jenkins stories

should serve to give a taste of the pleasures of this book. "The Plucked Plant" begins thus: "Castor Jenkins has a bad habit of advocating outlandish ideas and even his mildest beliefs are routinely uncommon. If you ask him about the Primeval Soup he'll insist it was leek and potato. He denies the existence of the colour purple, the number seven and the note G#."

And "Interstellar Domestic" opens with: "Nobody outside Porthcawl, and hardly anyone inside it, can remember that Wales once had a space program that enjoyed greater success than the combined efforts of the Americans, Russians and Chinese. ... What's more, it was done on the cheap, without even the need to build a spaceship."

If you like those extracts, you'll enjoy this book immensely. The book reviews itself! But I should try to contribute; what I like about these stories is that they are all about extrapolation. I like stories where one thing follows on from another, where premises are built upon, notions are followed through. For example the way the apocalyptic ending of Joe Hill's *Gunpowder* follows logically from its small beginnings, or Racine's protagonists are propelled to their doom, or Superman shaves his beard with his heat vision.

The speciality of the stories in this book is taking a silly (and sometimes not-so-silly) premise and following it through to an apparently logical but ludicrous conclusion – and that's why I loved them so much. A review of the same author's *The Crystal Cosmos* dismissed it briefly: "It begins, beautifully. Alas, from here on out it descends into a nonsensical mess." Not having read that book of course I can't argue with the conclusion, but it's worth noting that not all nonsense is a mess, and nonsense isn't necessarily something into which a story descends: sometimes it's something to which a story carefully builds, and that's certainly the case in this collection.

The book's one flaw for me is that it groups together three chunks of storytelling that have little in common. Each section is individually quite fantastic, but they don't quite add up to a pleasing whole. A complete collection of Castor Jenkins stories would have been even better, or a set of three novellas, but as it stands the novella feels like an unnecessary adjunct to the Jenkins stories, or vice versa. Certainly, the unique and very admirable Castor Jenkins stories deserve to be in a book with his name on the cover.

And while we're talking of covers, a note of praise for Steve Upham's marvellous giant octopus! Certainly, the design of this book does it proud, as does the quality of its production. **8**

Wild Robert

Diana Wynne Jones

Collins, hb, 96pp

Not one of Diana Wynne Jones's major works, but interesting nevertheless, and I was thrilled to find it on the shelves of Birmingham Central Library while the children were rolling around on giant cushions.

Heather lives in a stately home which her parents manage for the National Trust. When she idly wishes for Wild Robert to wake up and deal with Mr McManus, the unpleasant gardener, and the tourists who bother her, he does. He plays magical tricks on everyone, but everything's fine by the end of the day.

What's interesting to me is that essentially this is a book about sex, about the way the introduction of sex – or at least boys – into a young girl's life changes everything. I don't mean to say it is a sordid book – nothing very saucy actually happens. Rather, it is all about the confusion and excitement of a girl's first love.

Robert is the archetypal romantic idol, a typical first crush with his shoulder length hair and good looks. When his hand touches Heather "it somehow fizzed against Heather's bare arm so that all the hairs stood up round the place he touched". That his wildness is sexual is flagged by his very first bit of magic – turning a group of teenagers into nymphs and fauns and sending them to rut in the woods (they "will romp until sundown").

Robert changes everything for Heather. From feeling like little more than an annoyance to everyone in her life, she becomes the most important person in the world to him. And, of course, from the moment he enters her life her main concern is to keep him away from her father. "She knew she had to make him believe when he did meet Robert, and there were a lot of things she wanted to think about first."

I found the strawberry scene very interesting too. Until now Mr McManus has always stopped her from eating them, but Robert waves his hand around and McManus is frozen, leaving her free to eat her fill. Is McManus representative of adult, male, threatening sexuality, something to be afraid of, kept at a distance? Once he's immobilised she is free – and barely hesitates – to eat as many strawberries as she would like. But maybe that's pushing the analysis too far.

So although it's a short book, taking little more than an hour to read, its themes make it an interesting complement to *Fire and Hemlock*, per-

haps Diana Wynne Jones's most powerful work, making it well worth reading for that reason alone. **6**

COMICS

Hellblazer: Empathy is the Enemy

Denise Mina

Vertigo, tpb, 168pp

John Constantine makes his way to Glasgow, where something rather nasty is brewing. There's sickness in the air, and it's driving people mad: they're being made to feel what others felt in the moments before their deaths. It's the last thing Constantine needs: empathy really is a liability in his line of work.

Like a lot of Hellblazer collections, a flick through this book makes it look very unappetising: murky, dull and coloured in various shades of black and grey. Once you get into it, though, the artwork serves the story, and it's a good one, one long saga that brings to mind Delano stories like *The Fear Machine*. The end of the book is a pause in the action rather than its end, so I'm looking forward to reading the next in the series, *The Red Right Hand*.

There's certainly no sense here of a big-shot author coming in to show everyone how it's done. Like Kevin Smith on Daredevil she's respectful of what's gone before, building nicely on one story from Mike Carey's run. Just a shame her run was so short, though I've heard nice things about the Andy Diggle issues that come next. **7**

The Compleat Next Men, Vol. 1

John Byrne

IDW Publishing, tpb, 432pp

Interesting to read Byrne working on his own characters. There's some wonderfully dynamic, rough-hewn art in here, but the story is very slow. Some pages (especially in the M4 backup strip) look a lot like Frank Miller, as if to say, I can do that style too, you know, but it only points up the crucial difference between them – Miller's an artist in every sense of the word; much as I enjoy his work, Byrne is an artist in a much narrower sense: he creates the art for comics. Unlike the other artists that

worked under the Legend banner for Dark Horse (Mignola, Miller, Aragones), there's no sense here of a vision being expressed; it feels workmanlike. That's not to say it isn't very entertaining, but it explains why Byrne returned to working on other people's properties, rather than continuing to develop this one. **6**

MOVIES

Dark Floors

Pete Riski (dir.), Finland

During Sarah's brain scan the machine starts to smoke. Her dad throws her in a wheelchair and heads for the lift, a hot nurse in hot pursuit. Joined there by a security guard, a mysterious tramp and an angry businessman, they emerge into a strangely different hospital, where the clocks have stopped, the people have disappeared, and hulking monsters are on the prowl.

Dark Floors is a Finnish film, but British and American actors were imported to play the lead roles, showing a level of commercial canniness that's evident throughout the production. The budget is clearly small, but the hospital setting lets them stretch it a long way, with sets redressed as the protagonists descend from each level to the next. Like everything else about this film, the acting's generally rather better than you'd expect in a straight-to-DVD horror film.

The monsters are used sparingly to good effect. There are a fair few scares, and some surprisingly clever ideas. Huge chunks of Silent Hill and Hellraiser are appropriated, but put to good use. Anyone who got as far as Hellraiser V or VI will find plenty to enjoy here. The director should go on to better things.

So why was it a disappointment? Because this is the movie debut of Lordi, heavy metal winners of the Eurovision Song Contest. You remember: the guys (and one oddly attractive girl) dressed as orcs. This should have been an embarrassing turkey, prime MST3K fodder, but damn them, no: they had to go and make a decent movie. If you didn't know Lordi were a band going in, the film wouldn't have given it away.

Eurovision success may have earned the funding for this movie, but everyone involved deserves credit for putting it to such good use: making the first good (non-documentary) movie featuring a band since It Couldn't Happen Here. **6**

Deadgirl

Marcel Sarmiento and Gadi Harel (dirs)

Rickie and JT discover a naked woman (owner of the most revolting merkin this side of The League of Gentlemen) chained up in an abandoned hospital. JT says they should keep her, and Rickie leaves him to it. He thinks about ringing the police, but mum's boyfriend interrupts so he doesn't bother...

The girl is a zombie, not that it's relevant to the plot. This is a rape film, about a rapist and the pal who doesn't turn him in, and the other guys they invite to take a turn. Sex with a zombie, if not precisely consensual, you might say, is strictly speaking necrophilia rather than rape – the horror equivalent of a sci-fi sexbot! – but consider that before having sex with this zombie JT has to beat her to death because she's fighting back too much. (That's how he discovers her secret.)

Of course you can have good films about bad people – is this a good film? It's atmospheric and sombre, and for those handy with the remote, it has two good pause-the-video moments, including a surprisingly vigorous bowel movement. JT develops into a very creepy villain, especially once he stops wearing trousers, and other than the sound editing – always important for a horror movie – Noah Segan's performance is the best thing about the movie.

But no, for me this wasn't a good film. It felt like a film written by sex-starved teenagers (it actually comes from the pen of Trent Haaga, previously responsible for *Toxic Avenger IV*), or at least to appeal to them. It doesn't rise above the level of a teenage conversation: "Imagine if we had a zombie to shag?" "Yeah, but imagine all the problems keeping it clean."

And the problem with the film isn't just that the characters are immoral people doing terrible things, it's that nothing they do makes sense. For example, one guy who knows just how dangerous the dead girl is decides to free her on his own, with predictable consequences – and then another guy does exactly the same thing later in the movie. Having said that, the movie's second best moment does result from its very stupidest behaviour, though I'd be surprised if it makes it to the commercial release of the DVD, given the tumescent area out of which the dead girl takes an entirely justifiable bite.

Though *Deadgirl* has horror movie elements – such as characters with uniformly poor decision-making skills – at heart it's an indie film about teenage power and powerlessness, with more in common with films like

Brick or Bully than Dawn of the Dead. So don't expect to be frightened – except by a rather scary dog – just revolted.

Deadgirl: the zombie rape film you haven't been waiting for! 4

TELEVISION

Lost, Season 5

ABC/Sky1

The problem with trying to produce a tightly plotted TV series is that, unlike a movie or novel, by the time the last part is being written, the first has already been broadcast. Despite that, in its current season Lost has shown a degree of plot construction that surpasses most films. It's probably not a coincidence that Brian K. Vaughan joined the writing staff, given that he's shown similarly brilliant plotting skills in comics like *Y: the Last Man*, *Runaways* and *Ex Machina*.

Lost is no longer particularly concerned with acquiring new viewers, any more than a novel at page 600 is looking to attract new readers – and the comparison is apt, since the entirety of Lost adds up to a single, huge story.

That presents the reviewer with a problem: who would want to read a plot summary of pages 400–500 of a book? Let's just say that this fifth, penultimate season of Lost sees it delivering more answers and surprises than ever as the characters delve into the history of the island. The stakes are as high as ever, the mysteries as profound, and the fights just as bloody. If the complexity has increased, so have the rewards for the careful viewer.

Reviewing something like *Primeval*, I'm conscious that it's only going to be a short series. For a successful US show, you're talking 140 or 150 hours of television, and that's a big commitment. For Lost, if you don't want to watch every episode you're probably not going to want to watch it at all – and you certainly won't enjoy the episodes you do watch as much as everyone else does. And of course it doesn't matter how well the plot is constructed, if you don't enjoy watching sweaty, beautiful people fighting in the jungle, you won't enjoy Lost.

But for those of us who have enjoyed it, Lost will stand as one of the great happy accidents of cancellation-happy American television, something that shouldn't have existed, couldn't have succeeded, but is adding up to one of the most magnificent television experiences there has ever been. 10

Primeval, Series 3

ITV1

Primeval has always been entertaining and pacy, each season finding a new wrinkle to its premise, keeping things fresh and gradually improving without losing what's good (i.e. lots of monsters). In season two Cutter found himself in a world changed (not entirely logically) by his adventures in the distant past, and realised that the anomalies opened onto the future as well as the past. The twist for season three is a realisation that creatures from the anomalies may have inspired the stories of monsters throughout history.

Other changes this season: Jason Flemyng (Quatermass in BBC4's live adaptation, *Jekyll and Hyde* in LXG) is the new lead. As former cop Danny Quinn he has a rangy, charismatic dynamism that would have benefited any of TV's big dramas. Gwen Taylor-lookalike Laila Rouass joins the team as all-purpose museum curator/scientist/historian Sarah Page, replacing the organisation's redundant PR boss turned overseer (unnecessary supervisors are the bane of fantasy television).

The overdone love triangles of previous runs have gone, replaced by a comfortable family unit; Danny and Sarah as mum and dad, Andrew Lee-Potts (Connor) and Hannah Spearritt (Abby) providing good support as the kids. New soldier Captain Becker (Ben Mansfield) feels a bit Harry Sullivan given that Danny can handle a gun, but he's had some good moments.

This season has been leaner, tighter and scarier. Highlights have included a Gigantosaurus battling a jumbo jet, a medieval knight chasing his "dragon" all the way to the present day and brawling with bikers, and a flock of giant birds attacking an abandoned government research facility. Imagine a half dozen pairs of giant scissors snapping away at your face for forty minutes...

One of the most improved shows this year. One thing's unchanged: Ben Miller still gets the best lines. What a shame that shortly after I wrote this review (for *Prism*, originally) the show was cancelled, but how nice to hear that it's now been granted a reprieve. **6**

Supernatural, Season 4

The CW/ITV2

This year the boys got caught in the middle of a big battle between good and evil – and for that matter between good and good, and evil and evil! All hell is literally breaking loose, the seals that bind Lucifer in Hell

being broken, one by one, and the Winchesters are important – not that anyone will tell them why.

Season 4's arc is by far the best of the show so far, building on plot elements from previous years while bringing in lots of new characters and situations. Misha Collins has been a breakout addition to the cast, bringing immense gravity and weight to proceedings as angel Castiel, his magnificently doleful features doing everything necessary to convey how bleak prospects are for those on the side of the angels. Best of all, he dresses exactly like John Constantine, which points up that this year of *Supernatural* has been the closest anything's ever come to capturing the *Vertigo* feel on-screen. On the other side of the fence, Christopher Heyerdahl has terrified as arch-demon Alastair, chewing his words as if there's human flesh stuck in his teeth.

For me, Jared Padalecki as Sam is still the weak link. He's too whiny and petulant for such a tall guy, and never really convinces when playing angry, vengeful or tough – but the wife doesn't think so, and like everything originating on The CW, how much girls dig it counts for a lot. On the other hand, Kirk-manqué Jensen Ackles has been superb as Dean all year, as comfortable with giddy insouciance as tortured guilt. His best moment comes when telling Sam about his time "away"; it's the scene that drives the season, Dean's painful honesty answered only by Sam's deadly evasiveness, and he really plants a flag on it.

Establishing the Winchesters at the heart of the apocalypse has undone some of the damage done by the road house episodes of previous years, which made them seem like two largely irrelevant hunters among thousands. Unfortunately, brotherly heart-to-hearts are still all-too-frequent. The problem with a small regular cast is that such interactions become repetitive; the upside is that anything can happen to the supporting characters. It's a worthwhile trade-off.

Despite the strong story arc, there's time for the usual format-breaking, fun episodes (often written by *Tick* creator Ben Edlund). One sees the boys as amnesiac office drones, and another sends them after a novelist who's unwittingly been chronicling their adventures in lusty purple prose.

Supernatural will never be my favourite show – its main concerns (getting out of Dad's shadow, learning to get on with siblings as you grow up) are too much those of teenagers – but if there's no movie to watch on a Friday night, it always fills the gap. **6**

All reviews by the editor, except where noted. The film and television reviews previously appeared in Prism, the news magazine of the British Fantasy Society.

ALSO RECEIVED**But Not Yet Reviewed**

Because I spent a month reading the BFA novels, and a month before that reading *Dark Horizons* submissions, we've got a bit behind!

Ultrameta

Douglas Thompson
Eibonvale, pb, 336pp

Two-time contributor to TQF, and three-time contributor to DH!
Review to follow in TQF31.

Skin Trade (Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter, #17)

Laurell K. Hamilton
Headline, hb, 502pp

The Magicians

Lev Grossman
William Heinemann, pb, 400pp

An enjoyable Harry Potter knock-off. Review in TQF31.

Mister Gum

Rhys Hughes
Dog Horn Publishing, pb, 108pp
Filthy fun. Review in TQF31.

Twisthorn Bellow

Rhys Hughes
Atomic Fez, pb, 256pp

Contagious

Scott Sigler
Hodder & Stoughton, pb, 627pp

Murky Depths #8

Terry Martin (ed.)
House of Murky Depths, 82pp

Remove the Eyes

Ralph Robert Moore
Lulu, pb, 209pp

TQF and *Dark Horizons* contributor!

Passing For Human

Michael Bishop
& Steven Utley (eds.)
PS Publishing

Spook City

Angus Mackenzie (ed.)
PS Publishing

The Black Heart

Patrick O'Leary
PS Publishing

The Language of Dying

Sarah Pinborough
PS Publishing

Blue Canoe

T.M. Wright
PS Publishing