

Theaker's Quarterly Fiction

Issue 31

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Mission Statement

The primary goal of *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction* is to keep going.

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EDITORIAL

Merry Christmas!

Stephen Theaker

Welcome to issue 31 of *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction*. I hope you think that this is an issue worth waiting for! We've got eight of our best ever stories, plus nineteen reviews. Hope you've all had a lovely Christmas!

Gone Google

We've pretty much gone completely Google here at Silver Age Books. We're using Gmail for our email, Chrome for browsing, Docs for writing reviews, and we're working on a new version of our website in Google Sites. We'd use Wave for collaborating if we could persuade everyone else to sign up! Not everyone is so happy with them, though: *The Guardian* reports that Ursula K. LeGuin has resigned from the Authors Guild in protest at their deal with Google Books.

Lateness

Sorry that this issue is a couple of months late, especially to our contributors, who have been exceptionally patient! I took on quite a bit of freelance work over the last couple of months, meaning TQF fell to the bottom of the pile for a while. We're still thinking about the best approach to take next year, but we'll let you know as soon as we know. One way or another the magazine will continue!

Robert Holdstock

Robert Holdstock, who died on November 29, was, like J.G. Ballard or James Ellroy, an author I'd enjoyed and massively admired, but always meant to read more of. I loved his Elite novella, *The Dark Wheel*, when I was a kid, and later thoroughly enjoyed his Night Hunter series (written under the name Robert Faulcon), and of course his most famous novel, *Mythago Wood*. I was thrilled last year to be able to publish an interview with him in *Dark Horizons*. He'll be much missed.

Contributors

HEATHER ANASTASIU lives just south of Austin, Texas. She has a Bachelor's in Theology and is currently pursuing her Master's degree in Literature at Texas State University. She has work forthcoming in the literary review *Mud Luscious*.

GLYNN BARRASS information can be found in his dread domain, *Stranger Aeons*, at www.freewebs.com/batglynn/index.htm. His previous work can be found in publications such as *The Yellow Sign*, *Tales of the Talisman* and *Curious Tales of Books Gone Bad*.

JOHN GREENWOOD, both gentle man and gentleman, is the co-editor of *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction* and long-time chronicler of Newton Braddell's adventures.

ZACHARY JERNIGAN is an MFA candidate in University of Southern Maine's Stonecoast program. He writes mostly science fiction, and once ate 80 chicken wings in a single sitting. His turn-ons include: white knee socks, '90s alternative rock, the Oregon coast, and the smell of used bookstores. Tell him he stinks at facebook.com/zacharyjernigan.

DAVID M. KINNE is a podgy American ambling aimlessly somewhere under the milky, overcast skies of Missouri. Presumed harmless.

ALISON J. LITTLEWOOD has contributed to *Dark Horizons*, *Read by Dawn 3*, *Black Static*, *Aoife's Kiss* and the *Potter's Field 3* anthology. She lives in West Yorkshire, England, where she spends far too much time dreaming and writing strange notes to herself on scraps of paper. See her website at www.alisonlittlewood.co.uk.

ALEX SMITH is the editor of *Dick Pig Review* (www.dickpigreview.com) and *Red China Magazine* (www.redchinamagazine.com).

DAVID TALLERMAN can be found online at <http://davidtallerman.net>. His fiction has appeared in *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*, *Pseudopod*, *Hub* and *Dark Horizons*.

STEPHEN THEAKER is the eponymous editor of *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction*. He wrote most of this issue's reviews. He is also the editor of *Dark Horizons*, the journal of the British Fantasy Society.

HOWARD WATTS is an artist from Brighton. He has previously supplied covers for *Pantehnicon* magazine.

DOUGLAS OGUREK and RAFE MCGREGOR (www.rafemcgregor.co.uk) contribute reviews to this issue.

FANTASY

All My Ghosts

Zachary Jernigan

Warmer Lands: March 23

Forty-eight hours after the pack abandoned Lawrence and his son, the final sled dog – the oldest and strongest of the team, Alpha and leader – succumbs to the elements. Blinking sightlessly into the blizzard, he lowers his muzzle and tries to burrow under the shifting snow for warmth. Curled into a tight ball, he whines for himself, alone. All is white, and very soon there are no animal sounds anywhere.

The storm – one of winter's final, vicious death throws – passes several hours later. It has scoured the earth, taking with it the top layers of old snow. Revealed now are patches of brown grass and frozen mud, and the bodies of dogs. Twelve Siberian huskies, brothers and sisters. Curled and gone cold, white and black and grey.

Here, three huddled together, there, a female and a male, white on white, wrapped together, an indistinguishable mass of fur, and further on, three females, brown and black and copper. The remaining four coiled in upon themselves alone, often mere feet from their siblings. Only the leader made it any distance from the pack.

Twelve dogs, all in a ragged line, pointing to the west. To warmer lands.

Howl: March 21

I'm startled out of sleep by a howl. A faraway sound, fading into the distance.

It's a moment before I realise what this means. Like a fool, I lie for a moment, not breathing, straining to hear the dogs. I zip back the tent flaps and step out. The air is sharp in my nostrils, stale and sluggish and cold. It takes an effort to breathe it in. I left my jacket with the small thermometer on the zipper in the tent, but I don't need it. It's damn cold, maybe ten under the bar, frigid enough to kill an unprotected man in less than an hour.

I flip on the torch. All that remains in the snow are the scalloped

shapes left by sleeping dog bodies, and twenty-four pairs of paw prints running into the black space – an ocean of flat tundra – beyond my small beam of light. I examine the stake I hammered into the iron permafrost next to Tom's sled. The line is no longer threaded through the eyelet. The sled has been dragged several feet. The dogs bit through the line and towed the sled a short distance until they were free.

"Daddy?" comes Michael's voice from within the tent.

I curse the dogs under my breath, but it isn't really about the dogs.

"I'm coming," I tell him.

He has soaked through the blankets, but I have no replacements. His cheeks are flushed, his lips dry and bruised red. His thin hair is plastered to his scalp. I kiss his forehead, estimating his temperature at two or three degrees above a hundred.

"Daddy?" His arms move under the covers. "I'm stuck. Where are you?"

I pat his sides. I want him to stay under the covers unless the fever rises. "It's okay, Mike. I'm right here. It's really cold, so you should stay in the covers." I don't want to have to take him out into the snow to cool him down.

He squirms for a moment, and then calms. "But it's not cold. I feel so hot!" His voice, so thin and dry: the smallest puff from a hand bellows. He closes his eyes.

"I know, I know. Go back to sleep." I can tell by his breathing that he's already on his way. Since the fever hit, he has been drifting in and out of sleep. Awake, he's still lucid. It's a good sign, but it means he'll notice the dogs' absence and ask me about it. The dogs are always on his mind.

I do the math. Approximately one hundred and fifteen miles of featureless tundra stretch from here to the cabin. I can walk two or three miles per hour. Assuming I can walk for ten hours – eight during sunup, one after dusk and dawn – we'll reach shelter in four days.

It won't work, of course. We have maybe a day's worth of food, and all of that hard and dry with nothing to boil it in. Michael can't go without food for three days, and if the sheets stay soaked, eventually they'll get cold. I can't carry the tent and Michael at the same time – the pack I brought isn't near large enough – nor am I strong enough to drag everything behind me on the sled.

Nor will we meet anyone to help us on the way. I didn't tell his mother about our trip; I wanted it to be a surprise when we showed up a few days early. Tom and his wife won't be home for another week; even if the dogs make it home, raise bloody hell at his doorstep, no one will know.

Michael will be dead in my arms within a day if we leave the tent. He may last two if we stay where we are, if I chew his food for him. Even if I wrap him in my own clothes while I walk, and walk through the night without stopping, it still won't be enough. The fever and the cold will win.

I've seen death enough to know what it looks like.

When Michael was three months old, I made a small incision behind his ear, where his mother wouldn't notice. Just to see. The doctors hadn't found anything unusual during Mary's pregnancy, and rationally I knew what was going to happen; he bled freely for a minute before his blood clotted, just as any normal child would – just as my other children had. Michael would grow old and die, just as my other children had.

This is a lie. Some of my children died before age could overtake them.

And now: another one to add to the list. Which seems both a heartless and inhuman way to look at it. A list of names and ages – sometimes only names. A mental ledger of statistics and faces that blur into one another. Hadn't they all looked like me in some way?

Here: Michael Dahlquest: seven years old, of Lincoln City, Oregon. He looks like his mother, almost bloodlessly white and thin and frail. I shouldn't have brought him with me. I shouldn't have assumed the dogs would trust me, that I would know how to lead twelve wolf-kin in a land that quickly breaks tough men and freezes small, frail boys in no time at all.

The caveat, of course: I'm not a man in the strict sense.

I watch over my son for a long time, until the tent walls begin to glow with the faint light of dawn.

I make my decision. I've made it before.

"Michael? Sweetie?" I whisper, laying the back of my hand against his forehead.

His eyelids flutter. "Daddy?"

"Yeah." I put a hand behind his sweat-soaked head to support him. "You need to drink something, okay?"

He drinks a little from the canteen, slowly, taking measured breaths between sips. His eyes rove around the tent walls without focusing. I loosen the covers around his chest, freeing his arms. He doesn't seem to notice. "Are the dogs okay?" he asks.

"Yes, son." I open a soft granola bar and offer it to him. "You should eat something."

He doesn't move to take it, so I press it to his lips. He takes a bite and munches slowly, like an old man. I offer him more water to soften the food. Halfway through, he stops opening his mouth for more.

"You don't want any more?"

He shakes his head and closes his eyes. "Can I see them?" he asks. He looks ready to fall back to sleep.

I tighten the covers around his chest. "Not right now, Mike. Why don't you sleep?"

He nods. "Okay. I love you, dad." A minute or two later, he's in a deep sleep.

I watch him for a time, trying to clear my mind. I'm unsuccessful. I lay down next to him – close enough to hear his breaths; to count his breaths; to know their passing, one, two, three. Close enough to know the exact moment his lungs will cease working. After that, I'll bury him. I'll say a few words over his grave. I'll start back to the cabin to tell his mother what happened.

I'll do that?

It occurs to me: on previous occasions there were always people around. I've always found a way to slip into the crowd before my child's mother started wailing her lament. I've never comforted a grieving mother, never watched my own child die.

After re-wrapping Michael so that the driest cover is closest to his skin, I unzip the tent and slip barefoot onto the packed snow outside. The sun has risen, bringing with it no discernible warmth. It drives the frigid winds before it, making the morning, for all its crystal brightness, meaner than the night. I stand a ways from the tent, and reach deep inside for something to combat the cold – something to give my son a chance to live, and begin to kill me in the process.

(Don't, a voice inside me urges. Run, it says.)

I find it, and before I can second-guess myself, pull it loose from its mooring.

Whole seconds pass before I can bring the release of energy under control. Life's fire ignites in my veins, rushes into the pleasure centres of my brain. I fight the temptation to burn out, to go up like a rocket into the sky or melt my way to the centre of the Earth.

I clamp down hard on the flow while I can still control myself, and look down. I'm naked, the ash of my clothes peppering my stomach and loins. I stand in the centre of a snowless radius of cracked, dried mud,

my feet buried in fine, burnt-black humus. I break into a sweat for the first time I can remember, hot and then very cold as the wind hits.

I fall to my knees. My body aches, a sensation so alien to me that I hardly recognise it as pain at all. Far more disturbing is the way my lungs ache for air, as if I can't pull in enough oxygen. The hammering of my heart is equally frightening, pounding in my underarms and wrists too fast, too hard. My body feels stiff and leaden. Distant, unresponsive.

I worry about losing consciousness, but I can feel the energy at my fingertips. I let a little warmth flood back into my system, and immediately feel relief. Reality snaps back into focus; my body is mine once more. I open the floodgates a little further, and the sweat evaporates from my skin. I stand and walk to the edge of mud into the snow. It liquefies under my feet. I know I can run all day and into the night.

But for how long? Though I've built up a hefty reserve of power, it can't last forever. For all my strength now, I'm in reality a fevered man, dreaming, slipping into death – soon to wake from the dream he assumed reality. An immortal god made man. A radiator. Whatever. I crawl into the tent and shoulder the small pack I prepared. I take my son in my arms.

I begin the long journey to shelter.

Bearing: March 21–22

During the first few hours of the day, I stop often to confirm my bearing with the compass and check on Michael. I worry about burning him, though I don't see any evidence of it. I keep the heat constant, with his face angled toward my chest. He sleeps more soundly than I've seen in days. Perhaps it's just an issue of heat; he never protested about the cold in Tom's bare cabin, but he was always within feet of the fire, tending it, keeping it stoked. Did he shiver at night, alone in his bed? He rarely asks me for anything.

Why didn't I ask him if he was warm enough?

His mother is always worrying about his blood sugar, or his heart or his lungs, but all the doctors say he's fine. They say maybe he could use some more B vitamins. They don't say my son is small for his age, and weak and sickly-looking. That he could use some sun and exercise. I've told Maria these things. It's obvious. I don't tell her that I'm disappointed in him – in truth, because I'm not, not really. He's seven, a quiet and uncomplaining boy. There's more than enough time to grow up.

"He has the look of a survivor – that's what truly matters," I said, and meant it.

For hours my shins and feet cut through knee-deep snow effortlessly, my body on autodrive, propelled by the sun at my back. And while Michael seems weightless in my arms, my decision lays heavy on my shoulders. Shamefully, I sweat small stuff – how will it feel to have my teeth rotting in my head? will I go bald, become fat? when will I notice the first signs of aging? – with my son, barely out of toddlerhood, dying in my arms. I can't help it. I want to turn back time. A day. Half a day.

I could have kept Michael alive without the crippling sacrifice. Surely I could have!

Long life hasn't prepared me for this situation. Physical pain is easy; one eventually becomes inured to it. But mental anguish is something else entire, especially when one has nothing to do but think. Shamefully, I'm briefly tempted to end my suffering, to take Michael with me in one great release. I count my footsteps, trying to lose myself in their dogged rhythm. I'm only partially successful.

Somewhere around thirteen thousand I begin to hallucinate. One moment, I'm alone – only the blinding-white, featureless curve of the Earth in every direction; the next, a multitude of figures stride alongside me – spectral companions who disappear if I turn my head, peer too closely. I don't mind or question their presence. They distract me from my compulsive reflection, for as they grow more numerous I think less of the present and future, and more of the past. The ghosts' arrival means something. As the morning progresses their indeterminate numbers dwindle as one becomes more substantial. A woman, I soon realise. Though she evades my direct gaze for a time, I know she's no stranger. Something in the way she walks. Something in her posture, the set of her shoulders. Something about a grassy, wet-blanket of a country.

A disappointing romance.

In life, she never shut up. Her name was Anne, and I met her in Dublin, in 1898. Or maybe '99. We didn't stay in the city, but took to the coast and rented a little cottage. For a short time, we fought and made love and tried to make it work, and the weather that summer was horrible. She tried to write while I tried to paint. It may have been the other way around. I took long, wet walks along the coast just to avoid her voice, and she began visiting friends in the country overnight, probably to avoid my brooding silence. Before long, our romantic relationship crumbled. We moved back to the city. To my surprise, she had it in mind to stay friends. We worked better as friends than as lovers. I found it easier to listen to her talk when I no longer had an obligation to contribute. There was nothing at risk, just listening, and I found it rather enjoyable.

There is a first for everything. She talked of everything, but children especially – she may have been an elementary teacher, and maybe once, early on, she'd wanted children with me – yet now I can't recall any specific moment together. Just patterns, blending together in my mind. No words. Just a voice, a cadence.

And yet the ghost I've conjured won't speak. She walks on my left, somehow matching my larger strides without appearing to hurry. She wears a yellow knee-length summer dress as if out for a stroll on a warm day, but her calves disappear into the snow without displacing it. Nearly expressionless, her eyes meet mine only when I speak to her – “Why won't you talk, Anne? Why are you here?” – and they only linger for a moment before returning to the bundle I carry. She stays a body-length away despite my encouragement. “Come closer. His name is Michael, or Mike. He's seven. Here; look at him.” I raise his head briefly so that she can see his face. She smiles, and this lightens my heart a bit.

Within a short time, however, I become uncomfortable with her presence. I resent her silence, her unresponsiveness. I resent how she stands, six or seven feet away, watching while I stop to readjust Michael's blankets. I resent that she can do nothing to help us. Most of all, I resent that she's dead and has no heavy burden to carry.

She perceives my anger, possibly. She fades into noonday brilliance.

Immediately, it seems, she's replaced. A man walks on my right. When I look at him he looks right back. Though I recognise him immediately, I can't place or name him. His long-legged walk is graceful and smooth; the walk of a man who has spent a lot of time outdoors. At the same time, the posture of his neck and back is unnaturally rigid, his arm movements stiff and precise – like part of the man is trying to march while the other strolls. Unlike Anne, his steps crunch holes in the snow, as if he has a material body. He wears tight breeches, a blousy-sleeved camisa, and an unbuttoned mauve doublet – all dusty and well worn. A young man, he squints like a man of the desert, a prophet perhaps, and his face is as weathered and dark as mahogany.

He speaks first: “You are looking well, Lorenzo.”

I answer in his language – not quite Castilian or Portuguese, but somewhat similar to both. I hadn't remembered it until he spoke. “It is kind of you to say.”

He laughs – an unusual sound; flat, unechoed. “It is an understatement. You have not aged a day.”

Not yet, I think. “I'm sorry, but I do not remember your name.”

“Héctor.” He shakes his head. “And there is no reason you should. To you, I am but a footnote, surely.”

“What does that mean?”

He shrugs. “The destruction of the Seven Cities was a long time ago.”

I remember him, suddenly, and stop walking. “Chile. The Bío Bío?” I search my memory. It was my first time in the New World. To get to Concepción, we went through the straits – one of the wildest experiences of my life. “1589?”

“1598.” He gestures to my son. “Check on him.”

I look down. Michael looks much the same. I’m glad he has slept so soundly, that he hasn’t woken to ask about the dogs or why we’re not in the tent. I drop to my knees to check his blankets. The inner one is still relatively dry. I consider lowering my temperature to check on his, but worry that the sudden cold will wake him.

“The temperature gauge on the coat,” Héctor says. He has dropped into a crouch to watch. “You should not have left it in the tent. You could have used it on the boy.”

I curse my lack of foresight. I could have kept it under the covers, close to Michael’s body.

“He looks well,” Héctor offers. “You are doing what you can.”

I shake my head. I took too long to make a decision. I could have been on my way... “How do you know about the thermometer?”

Héctor stands. “We should resume walking. Check the compass.”

I straighten and get my bearings. We start walking again, Héctor a bit ahead of me, apparently avoiding my question. In the end, I wonder what point there is in questioning him. He’s long dead, yet here he is: it’s hardly the time to question miracles.

The last time I saw him, I’d just taken his place on a defending line of Spanish soldiers arrayed along the muddy northern bank of the Bío Bío. I looked back, once, before the Mapuche sent their first salvo of arrows, to see him silhouetted against the night sky as he ambled over a nearby hilltop. He’d been on his way north, to his wife and his daughter.

We walk, and slowly I catch up with him. “Did you reach Santiago?”

I can’t see the expression on his face. He’s looking north, off into the featureless tundra. He nods, almost imperceptibly.

“Your wife and child? You met them there?”

“Yes.” The word is nearly lost to the wind. “Yes. I took them to Mendoza, and then to Montevideo.”

“And?” I ask, wanting to press him for more – you lived happily ever after, right? your daughter grew into a beautiful woman and you and your wife lived to see grandchildren? – but I don’t.

“Lorenzo?” he says after long time. “You saved my life, that night, and that of my wife and daughter. I want to –” His throat catches. He coughs into his fist. “Words cannot express –”

“Don’t,” I say, stopping him. I look away, fearful that his eyes will meet mine. “Obviously, you know what I am. Or what I was. You know how small my sacrifice was that night.”

Clearly now, I remember the twang of bows sending arrows, missiles flying unseen through the night toward their targets on the bank. Screams of anguish, alone in the wet darkness. Quickly, we sent back at the enemy, who cared just as much for his children as Héctor or his compatriots. They fought for land, tradition, their wives and mothers.

And me? Striding into the river, fighting because there was a fight to be had. I carried two kukri knives in those days. I was fearless, confident whatever wound I suffered would heal in time, that I would go on living.

“It cost me nothing,” I say.

Héctor doesn’t respond. We lapse into an uncomfortable silence. When I finally look over, he is gone.

The sun is close to the horizon when my third visitor appears. I come upon him unexpectedly, which is patently impossible on tableland. It’s as if I’ve just rounded a corner, to find him standing, waiting for me. I stumble, surprised, nearly dropping Michael. Disconcertingly, a sharp twinge – more discomfort than pain – flares in my knee as I regain my balance.

“Careful, there,” the man states needlessly.

I recognise the voice immediately. No one I want to talk to. I grunt in response and stop again to check on Michael. I kneel and unshoulder the pack, retrieve the canteen, and set it down to see if it melts the snow. I have no idea how hot the water has become. I ignore the ghost and coax Michael to drink. He does so without opening his eyes, responds with unintelligible mumbles to my questions. Perhaps he’s still dreaming. His cheeks are flushed. I hope his fever hasn’t become worse. The wind has died, but the temperature will plummet come night. With only a flashlight to monitor his condition, I run a greater risk of burning or freezing him.

“That’s true, Lou,” my visitor says.

I look up. The man is short and thick, his skin the waxy red of the perpetually sunburnt. He spoke Classical Greek, roughened with some northern accent. He is Learo – philosopher, scholar, poet, aristocrat, philanthropist – idiot. Asshole. For nearly a decade I debated with many men in the streets of Athens, and liked him least – for his barbaric ethos, his

smirk and his overgrown gut. Even now his toga is mottled with grease stains.

I shoulder the pack, pick up Michael, find my bearing and start walking.

Learo breathes loudly at my side. "He's a fragile-looking thing, to come from you."

"What does that mean?" I ask, without turning to look at him.

"Well. You always were a strong one, not that I ever heard any of the ladies or young men talk about you" – Learo was a frequent customer of Athens' whorehouses – "and now that I know what you are..."

Were. "Don't talk about my son."

He shrugs. "I'll do what I want, Lou. You never intimidated me when I thought you were a man, and you don't intimidate me now. Impressive as your constitution is, I'm dead, and beyond your reach."

Not so. In another fifty or sixty years, he and I will be in the same boat.

"That's true!" Learo chuckles. "And just think: you did it all for a weakling runt."

I walk faster. The sun has touched the horizon, its light multiplied blindingly orange on wave upon wave of smooth snow. I reposition Michael and pull the flashlight free.

Learo matches my pace. "All for a normal child, Lou. You must've had hundreds of kids – thousands. All of them dead as doornails. Why choose to try and fight death now? You can't hold it back! Why, Lou? Why?"

I don't answer. Can't. Don't want to think about it. The sun is halfway gone.

"I suppose you don't need to answer, Lou. I can hear you – everything inside you. And I can tell you, even if you don't want to admit it to yourself: you've made the wrong choice."

I say nothing, try to think nothing, pressing on toward the dying light. Far too soon, night black and moonless closes in, and I walk alone once more.

For hours it seems I'm unaccompanied, though the darkness could hide any number of spectres. I check on Michael more often, cautiously increasing my temperature as the night wears on. I gradually realise that I too feel the cold. I begin to catalogue every sensation. Is it my imagination, or do my thighs burn with fatigue? Are my arms sore, dully aching in the joints? It seems ridiculous to have these concerns; I still feel very little. But I remember the twinge in my knee earlier – obsess

over it. My body has never failed me, and now it surely will. It's a matter of time, and time only. Nothing can prevent me from growing old.

And the heat I give to my son! Every time I increase it, I quicken the process.

Though he is gone, Learo's words stay with me.

I thumb the flashlight on, and in its illumination a man is revealed, crouching before me, his forehead nearly touching mine. I flinch, but keep from dropping Michael. I've been expecting a visitor for some time. After Learo, I was hoping for someone sympathetic.

Shit. "Hello, Ben," I say, in Greek once more.

The warrior grunts and doesn't look up. He is old and nearly as dark as Héctor. His forearms are thick and sinewy – a sword-wielder's arms, crisscrossed with old scars. He is dressed in a leather kilt and a sleeveless wool shirt, and his feet are bound in hardy leather sandals. A buckle and a short sword hang from his belt. A fused whorl of skin covers his right eye. His features, a mess from a lifetime of fighting, reveal nothing about his ancestry – an ironic fate for a man who claimed to be Julian the Apostate's only Jewish General.

Now he speaks: "I've been tracking you for a long time."

I finish checking on Michael, turn off the flashlight, and stand. "In that case, you could've taken me from behind. I'd never have seen you coming."

The old man sighs and falls into step beside me. He says nothing, and his steps are very quiet on the snow. It suits me fine if he doesn't want to talk. There are few men I want to talk with less.

At one point, I considered him a great man – a father figure almost, though in 360 I was already far, far older than he. I gladly followed him into battle. Among Julian's ranking men, he stood out as competent, even compassionate. For three years I kept with his company, and in 363 we set out with Julian to take Ctesiphon. Despite several victories, we failed to breach the city walls and retreated. On June twenty-sixth, the Persians attacked near Samarra, and Julian was killed. I was the sole witness to the thrust that did him in: Benjamin ben Yeseeph, wielding a clever knife fashioned from a Persian spear-point, closed in on the emperor and slipped it into his side. He'd been bought by the Christian bishop in Caesarea.

A year later, Benjamin's wife and two sons were killed in an anti-Jewish riot in Alexandria – an event I feel he was responsible for. The historical repercussions of his treachery were immense.

"You blame me for the state of the world?" Ben says, rousing me from

my reverie. "Everything, just because I took a little money from a fat priest and killed that ugly bearded pagan?"

I nod. "It started there."

"No one act changes history. It would have happened anyway."

"No."

We walk in silence. After a long time, he speaks again: "And what about you, Lawrence?"

"What about me?"

"You think you've had no effect on the world?"

I don't answer. Ben sighs. "It doesn't matter. You have only one life now, and that isn't enough time to redeem yourself. Why would the world forgive a man for the sins of a god?"

I shake my head. The wind suddenly gusts, and I increase the flow of warmth slightly, pulling Michael closer to me, adjusting the blankets around his face to keep the cold from reaching him. All at once, and despite my infusion of energy, he seems heavier in my arms.

The next time Ben speaks, the words come to me faintly, dissolving into the frozen air:

"What about all the others?"

The temperature drops further. I can feel it as a slight ache in my feet and shins – barely a suggestion, yet frightening. I increase my output of heat, but it fails to put a spring in my step. I stop to adjust Michael's blankets and induce him to drink some water. For the first time in almost a day, he opens his eyes and looks around. At the sight, my heartbeat throbs heavily in my temples and throat. I lean in close to keep the wind from touching him, but also to obscure the stars above.

"Why are you so close to me, Dad?" he asks, moving his shoulders under the swaddling. "Am I on a bed?"

"Yes, son," I whisper. "I made a bed for you, but it's cold in the tent. That's why I'm so close. To keep both of us warm."

His eyes meet mine before closing. "Oh. Okay, Dad."

"Michael?"

He murmurs softly, indistinctly.

"Sleep well." I close my eyes. "I love you."

And that's it. He falls back to sleep in a moment, and I stand slowly. The muscles in my legs protest, but it's a dim, far off pain. I sway, dizzy and unfocused for a moment. I take my bearings and start moving again. I fight the urge to close my eyes while I walk. I check the compass often. Travelling in a straight line is all that matters.

I'm never alone from then on, but I rarely look at my visitors. It's too dark, it takes too much energy, and when I turn my head my feet tend to follow. I recognise many of them by their voices, but very few can I place by name. "Have I really known so many people?" I ask one man. He answers, "Yes, Lawrence, but you're not really the remembering type." Some chide me for various things – women for matters of the heart, most often, and men for everything else. Some tell me stories, events I've forgotten.

One man – a singer, he tells me, but I don't remember him – says: "Have you heard the one about the heavenly angels, Lawrence? No? Pay attention, then. Back sometime in biblical time they came to Earth on vacation and met some ladies. I don't know how many. Anyways, they had a good time and left, and then nine months later the ladies gave birth to half-angel kids. And you know what? They became giants, all of them – demigods. They found their bones in Peru or someplace in the seventies, but the government covered it all up. But seriously, giants! Who needs that? No one, that's who. Stop and check the compass." An old woman – she says her name is Ilowe, that I saved her from a life as a harem girl in Morocco in 1783 – tells me: "You have done the right thing, mister. You needed to become a man, and stop being a boy. Mister, I admire you for what you have done. I would have done the same. Check that direction finder!" Another woman in Minoan dress – her name on the tip of my tongue; she obviously hates me, and won't identify herself – spits every word: "Check the compass. Go home to that woman. Raise your boy strong. Grow old and die. Especially the last part. Grow old and then you'll burn for everything you failed to do for me. Do you think one good deed saves you after what you've done? I said check the compass. Now, Lawrence. Stay awake!" "You take a straight line," another man – I remember him well; a college professor who lived next to me in Berkeley in 1968 – says, "and you think it'll just go on forever the way you set it. But watch out. Don't believe nothing no geometrist tells you, because before long that straight line'll be back at its source. It'll go through every curve imaginable. Eventually, it'll be every place because the world's not straight. Life ain't a cube. It's all curved, everything – you, me, everybody everywhere. Remember this, especially now, when you could get sidetracked. Take out that compass and make sure, again and again and again, cause one foot may wanna bring you back to where you were, but you can't go back. Don't even look back, cause a line goes forward. It can always be turned and misled, but it only goes forward."

There are so many. A never-ending succession of ghosts throughout

the night, exhorting and damning me. When the sun rises at my back, stretching my shadow miles into the retreating darkness, I fear that all their words have confounded me, that I haven't taken my bearings correctly – that I'm miles and miles off course.

I kneel in the snow and concentrated on the reading. I'm still facing home.

The final voice falls silent. For this I'm grateful, as my head felt ready to implode under the weight of words. I walk alone, and my shadow becomes shorter and shorter before me. By mid-morning, my legs are burning with fatigue. The heat I exude remains constant, but my body is stiff and ungainly. My arms are locked at the elbows; when I stop to check on Michael I no longer set him down for fear of being unable to lift him again. I sit the compass on his chest and keep an eye on it, mindful of the advice the teacher gave me. I very much wanted to stop and rest, but don't.

And yet, when my father rouses me some time later, it isn't at all clear that I haven't given up.

Son: March 22–23

He isn't really my father. From a young age I knew this, yet it never seemed to matter. I came to love and resent him as any son would. I suppose he felt something similar for me. We never spoke of it – never spoke of much, really, nor possessed the words if we'd wanted to. It was a simple language, and we, a small group of grubby men and women trying to eek out a living from the cold earth, had no time to ruminate. Where we were, what we spoke, I'll never know, for after he died I travelled in confusion, without compass or knowledge of the stars. I knew eventually that I was different. I knew from violence and the passage of time that I wouldn't die. Many more found out – some even worshipped me – before I learned to hide my talent. By the time I reached the civilizations of the Fertile Crescent, I'd carefully cultured a forgetfulness, a blandness and a mutability; I sought to blend in and influence nothing by remaining undistinguished. I'm my father's son, after all. A product of the long-suffering people who raised me.

We don't talk about my lapse. Thankfully, it was short. Michael is still warm in his blankets, soundly asleep. I concentrate, open the floodgates again. It's becoming more difficult to sustain. My limbs warm, but I'm not reinvigorated. I stand painfully and start moving.

Of course, I recognise the man who woke me. In truth, he is the only

person I haven't expected. It's been a long time since I thought of childhood. Oddly, I don't know his name – he is Papa, or Dada (had I ever called him anything else?) – and I feel uncomfortable addressing him. Thus, we walk in silence for a long time. I try but fail several times to begin a conversation. What would I say?

“Why are you here, Loren?” he finally asks me, in English.

“I –” My mind empties. The question is ludicrous. “In Alaska? I brought my son and his mother here on vacation.”

“Why?”

I shake my head. “To see things. It's a beautiful place...” Why is he asking this question? “They've never been before, and she had some time off from work.” I look down at Michael's face. “He's such a small boy, so shy, and I thought he'd enjoy seeing the wilderness. And he loved Tom's dogs so much. And even though it had been a long time since I led a team, I thought it would be fine. Then, he got sick so suddenly, and the dogs left and...” My eyes fill, spill over. “And then I took so long to make my decision, and I don't want to die – I don't want my boy to die. And I don't know how far – how could I fall asleep?” I watch my feet. Tears freeze on my cheeks.

“I understand,” my father responds. “But, after the trip? I think you were going to leave them, some day. You were going to pretend to die. You were going to do that to your family.”

I breathe long and deep. The muscles of my chest tighten, squeezing my ribcage, constricting my heart. “Yes. I was.”

“Why?”

“Because I don't like to hurt people.”

“Leaving them doesn't hurt them?”

“No. Yes. It would hurt his mother more to see herself age while I stayed young.”

My father raises his hands, makes a horizontal cutting motion. “No. I think it is the other way around, Loren.”

I close my eyes. “I don't want to die, papa.”

My father says nothing while I cry. Time stretches. Our long shadows merge behind us as the afternoon sun descends slightly off centre.

We speak rarely in the hours before dusk, both of us simply walking, walking. I fall into a tired cadence, my legs on autopilot, heat constant but dull. My arms are completely rigid; I can't feel them any longer, can't lower them even if I wanted to. I keep my eyes closed more often than not, opening them only to make sure I remain on course or to confirm that my father is still beside me. He walks easily, with a slight and

fluidly economical limp to the right. I don't remember him having it. Nor do I remember how stooped his back is – or the patchiness of his beard. He's ugly, his body worn and inelegant, but he walks with me. He walks, and doesn't try to tell me anything. He has no words of wisdom, no offers of absolution, yet when he leaves – as I somehow knew he would with the last light of day – it's as if the population of the world goes with him. As if, finally, I'm truly and entirely alone.

When I open my eyes, the stars shudder, jerking dizzily above me in triple-fast time. I feel now that my body is fevered – a disturbing feeling I recognise only from description. I ache continually. My feet and calves throb with cold. My throat is an open wound, scoured raw with dry, frozen air. As it becomes colder, I reach for more heat, but none comes. I worry I've nearly used up my store of energy. I no longer stop to check on Michael, for fear that my legs won't start again. They seem out of my control and I don't want to upset their rhythm.

I've lost the compass. It slid from the blankets and fell to the snow – three, four miles ago. I saw it happen, was powerless to retrieve it. It doesn't matter; I couldn't read it in the dark, anyway. Though probably pure fantasy, I believe I've moved beyond needing it. My feet know the direction instinctively.

I lurch from side to side to keep momentum. I shake my head to keep from blacking out. Gradually – hours? a matter of minutes? – I wind down. I shuffle.

The starlight illuminates my son's face. I lean down and feel his breaths, measured and healthy. He sleeps soundly, like he did as a baby. Dreaming good things. He's shrugged off his fever. He's a survivor; I was right.

Of the two of us, only I suffer any doubts about the outcome of this journey.

We'll reach home, and that will be the beginning.

Home: March 23

Forty-two hours after the pack abandoned Lawrence and his son, the twelve sled dogs are caught in a violent snowstorm. The temperature drops thirty degrees in less than a minute. For hours the twelve struggle, moving doggedly west, against the wind. They stay together, keeping in constant contact as the oldest and strongest of the team, Alpha and leader, leads them unerringly in a straight line towards home.

FANTASY

Under the Blighted Tree

Heather Anastasiu

An angel came to me today and said I needed to find a red snake and tie it around a tree branch so it could bake in the sun, and that aroma would be pleasing to God and he would let me into heaven. I said okay, because I want to go to heaven, doesn't everyone? and packed a bag and left to find the red snake.

I came to a bridge and a troll blocked my path. At first I thought he was just a midget, and I did not want to be rude by staring at him. But then he held up a sharp ax with a handle made of bones, and said that I could not pass without paying a toll. I laughed, because first of all I had never seen a troll and wasn't completely sure he wasn't just joking with me, and second, no way was I going to pay money to cross a bridge that I'd already forked over taxes to the state for.

You dare laugh at me? He growled, a menacing expression on his ugly, wart covered face.

No, I tried to protest, holding up my hand for him to stop, but his little body was hurtling across the bridge toward me now. He let out a war cry and held up the ax. I tried to jump past him, but he swung the ax sideways just as I passed and it landed in my thigh with a sickening crunch. I screamed in pain, and with my continued momentum, flung the heavy little troll off the bridge into the murky water below, ax and all.

I limped away down the street, shaking and trying to get to a well lit area before I checked the damage on my leg. It was like pulling a dead weight. I hailed a taxi, but the taxi driver took one look at my bloody leg and drove off again. I stared after him in anger and shook my head, glad I'd be getting off this fucking planet soon and into heaven. I dragged my body down the road and into a gas station. The attendant looked at me a little oddly when I bought a bottle of vodka and some bandage wrappings, but he didn't say anything.

I sat down on the sidewalk outside and peeled my ripped jeans away from the wound. I grimaced at the sight of the deep bloody gash and glimpsed a bit of white I thought might be bone. The smell of my own

blood sent my reeling stomach over the top, and I leaned over and threw up. Then I sat up, wiped my mouth, unscrewed the vodka cap, and poured it all glug-glugging out over the wound. I yowled like a screaming animal, then tipped the bottle up and drank down the last bits.

I tried to hold the slashed sides of flesh together while wrapping the gauze as evenly as I could, but my vision was blurring and I felt like passing out. Just as I was finishing tying it up, a prostitute came up and asked me if I had any change to spare. I asked, Are you freaking kidding me? Can't you see I've almost lost a limb here?

She glanced down at it, but did not seem impressed. I sighed. Fine, I said. If I give you some money, what would I get in return for it? She looked at my bandaged, pus-seeping leg, and said she would let me watch her with her other clients, twenty bucks a pop.

I'd heard that porn is a good pain-killer so I said, okay, I had forty bucks on me. I gave her twenty and said I'd give her the rest after I saw the first show. She took me to a motel across the street and got a room, telling me to sit on a chair and not make a move. She was excited and said that I'd be a good selling point with her clients, having a bloody-legged chick watching. Kinky stuff, she said. I nodded, a little hurt. But then I felt better, because after all, I was about to watch a prostitute in action.

But it was over pretty quick. I mean, he slapped, she moaned, bed springs squeaked, then she got up off of him and wiped herself off. The skin of her vagina was leathery and drooping. This didn't seem exciting at all. I gave her the other twenty out of pity, then grabbed her umbrella to use as a cane and hopped on my one good leg back into the night.

Next I walked by a nightclub that had an angel standing watch outside. I don't know if other people could tell he was an angel or if I was just becoming more attuned to the supernatural. I asked him if he was there to keep people out or to lock them in. He didn't say anything, and I wondered if he was like those British guards, who you can yell right in their face and they won't even flinch. I got up into his face. He looked down at me, leaning his face to the side. He wasn't very handsome, and he did not glow at all.

Haloes are heavy, he said, then continued, Will you wear mine? Just for five minutes while I go get some sin, then I can wash and take it up again?

I was totally skeezed out by his request, and wondering if he was going to go looking for a prostitute. I told him no, and he leaned down one large ruby finger to touch my cheek. It reminded me of a mother cupping a child's cheek, but just as I was about to lean in against his hand

and relax, the rubies turned to coal and scraped off my skin, burning down to the bone. I screamed and jumped back, holding up my jacket to my burned face and trying to balance. He did not say another word, just stood there again like a statue. I leaned down, picked up a few discarded cigarette butts and threw them at him. Then I hopped away fast.

Damn celestial being, I whispered, touching my cheek gingerly and looking in a storefront window like a mirror. At least the burning singed the wound so it wasn't bleeding a lot. I better get into heaven so I can get the hell out of here, I thought. No more letting myself get sidetracked, now I need to focus, and focus hard. Forward motion, leg moving, lean on the umbrella, swing the good leg forward, that's nice, real satisfaction. Get myself into the present, present tense.

A goat with a grin steps into my path.

I try to sidestep it and keep going, but it butts its head in my one good knee to make me stop. I'm really upset for a second, because I almost fall over, but then I look down at the goat and freeze. My spit dries up. My throat constricts. Holy Beelzebub, I think it might be the devil himself. Isn't he supposed to take the form of a goat? I make my eyelids hoods, covering up the centre to my soul. I must be careful not to sign any contracts with this goat.

The goat shuffles back and forth, making the little bell around his neck ring. His hooves thud on the sidewalk concrete.

"What do you want, Father of Lies?" I ask.

He doesn't say anything. The bad kind of mischief is in his eyes. I smile a small smile, and keep my face blank and even. I'm just going to stand here, still. He stands still. We stand. Still.

Then his little neck bell rings even though he never moves, and in spite of myself, I flinch. This makes me mad. He must know about my pact with the angel, and is surely here to tempt me and keep me from my task. I cringe, hoping he and God haven't been talking about me. I don't want to get stuck dehydrated in the desert, scraping my boils with flint stones and dog spit. This is all getting more complicated than I thought. Getting out of hand, verily.

"I don't need any knowledge," I say to the goat, "and I'm not hungry for apples."

He looks at me with those deep liquid eyes. I wonder if he can only see me in black and white. He cocks his head. He opens his little goat-mouth. "Power?"

I shake my head no.

"Money?" he says.

"No."

“Sex?”

“Now you’re just guessing,” I say.

“There’s always something,” says the goat, sounding cryptic even for a goat. As I turn away, I hear the bleating laugh behind me.

I pause. Satan doesn’t give second chances, and I really ought to think about his offer before scampering away. I remember my quest.

“No, I couldn’t,” I whisper to myself.

“I’ll do it,” the goat says.

I turn around, surprised that he knows my thoughts. “I thought only God was omniscient.”

He bleats again. Oh well, I think, walking forward, I should have known this couldn’t end well. The goat allows me to pass, then joins my side.

“Ok, let’s go,” I say, to make me feel like I’m still in control.

We walk a long way outside of town, the texture under our feet changing from asphalt and concrete to grass and dirt. By the time it turns to sand, my bad leg is aching and I’m developing a callus from clutching the umbrella-cane. Still, there must have been kind of magic or something, because no way did I walk all the way out to the desert. I look over at the goat, but now he is a black snake. I glance backward at my footprint in the sand, trying to see where the hoof prints stop, and the slither marks start. I just see one set of footprints.

We come to a tree, the only tree around. It is withered and dry, lots of cracking branches in the wind, but no leaves. The snake slithers up the trunk. He lies obediently while I take his tail and tie him up as best I can, using an old fisherman’s knot. This is odd, because I don’t know any old fishermen.

I step back to look at my work.

“No, that’s not right,” I say. “Why aren’t you red? I thought you said you could read my mind.”

“Never sssssssaid that,” the snake hisses.

“But you said you were omniscient,” I say, pulling a stick of red lipstick out of my purse.

He shakes his triangle head. I shrug and rub the lipstick back and forth for the fullest coverage, but snakeskin doesn’t pucker like lips do. There are still long patches I haven’t covered before the lipstick is just a nub. Not the letter of the law, but hopefully I’ll get points for trying.

“Ready?” I ask the snake. It curves its wide cottonmouth into a smile. I shiver. Feeling symbolic, I strip naked and pull my long brown hair in front to hang over my breasts.

The sun is warm.

I look up at the snake, wondering if I've knotted him tight enough. Then I wonder if God will honor a promise he made me when I made another one with the devil in order to fulfill the first. Maybe Satan knew he wouldn't, and that's why he's playing along. Sneaky bastard. That would be just like him, I think petulantly. I sigh again, really feeling tired by all this cosmic drama.

The sun rises higher.

Watery heat waves rise off the sand. Is this what Jerome saw in the desert when he thought it was a woman dancing naked to tempt him? No wonder all those desert monks went crazy. Myself, I'm already feeling a little woozy. I shouldn't have agreed to this. I stretch and give a yawn, feeling tired. Satan flicks out a pink tongue and hisses a little. I give him the finger and lay down on the sand under the tree. He's above me, shadowing an S on my body.

The lipstick is melting in the sun. A blob of it lands on my cheek. I lift a hand to wipe it off, and it comes away smearing like blood. I start to turn over in the sand, so if any more drops on me, at least I won't have to look at it.

Lightning falls from heaven in the same moment, lighting the snake on fire. The snake gives a very un-snakelike shriek. I wonder if this is not what he expected. He falls from the tree, mouth open wide. The teeth sink into my neck. I laugh. Vampire, I think. I slump over and die. Then I wonder, was God satiated? Did I pass the test, or was he mad about the whole bargain-with-Satan thing? Have I been sanctified? Am I approaching glorification in heaven, crowned with many crowns, washed in the blood fountain?

I open my eyes. I am surrounded by robots. I wander out an arched doorway and onto a street. Once there, I am very surprised. Sure, there are hovercrafts, but there are horse drawn carriages too. And camels. And boats, and steam engines, and bicycles and yaks and people with jet packs. They are all on the street together, and while there seems to be some pattern to the traffic, I can't quite figure it out, especially the three dimensional traffic laws for all the people flying.

I walk by a man on stilts and smile. He does not smile back. I wonder if he can see me. Maybe I should find a mirror to see if I can see my reflection. I walk down the street into a park. I look back at the road, curious. It doesn't seem to be paved with gold. But it doesn't look like a boiling lake of lava either. A real conundrum, I think, resting on a tuft of blue grass and looking at the green sky.

HORROR

Little Yellow Bird

Alex Smith

The sun rounded the Earth's corner, rays splayed around the taller ash trees to the muddy ground below, and morning spread over the Virginian hills. Sheriff Brady's bedside clock ticked down to its inevitable alarm. His other alarm – two greying ten year-old rotties who slept in the kitchen – stirred on their mats, an urge growing in them to be let out. Yet Brady remained asleep, wrapped in a dream that strangled at his will, a dream he'd had before. Small pearls of sweat quivered on his forehead. The sheets coiled in his tightening grip. And though he slept he breathed fast, sucking in sips of air and blowing them out of pursed lips. The caves. These were what he dreamt of. He felt the cool air of them. He was blinded by their darkness, a darkness that feasted on the amber glow of the hanging lamps. In the caves darkness stalked around every corner. He feared what lurked in those recesses.

And he saw the bodies, limbs strewn in impossible angles, camouflage shirts covered in dust. The worst of it – the man huddled over his son, both of them in the kneeling position – he set his gun-light on them and thought them alive, at first. Then he saw the growing wet-spot, the small pool of blood below them. A single round had gotten through both of them, each's dead weight holding the other in place. There were bloody bubbles on the tips of each of their mouths, as if something were waiting to emerge. He looked closer at their mouths. There was something waiting within them – something alive. Just as he began to see what this was he awoke to the alarm rung. Eyes wide, body startled, he greedily sucked in a gasp of oxygen, and then felt around him for his M16. It wasn't there, and as he came to his senses he surmised as much. He was in Virginia. His dog's warm lap at his wrist confirmed it. He'd been home for three years. And yet the sweet smell of death lingered in his nostrils as if he'd been down there again, blindly firing his weapon. He'd sweat right through his sheets. Afghanistan.

He obliged his dogs, sending them into the yard, and brewed himself a cup of coffee. He stood nude in the kitchen. His hair was still wet with

perspiration from the nightmare. He stared off into the yard. The dogs had done their business. Now they romped, shaking out their muscles in the growing warmth of the morning. Their paws kicked up slivers of hard-packed dirt as they pounced and chased each other. "Afghanistan," he said, gulping his coffee. He'd had to say it, to acknowledge it. He had to. For him Afghanistan wasn't just a dream.

This was what he thought of as he drove to the station. He parked his Jeep and came straight into a call. His deputy told him that Beverly Danziger had phoned twice and would only speak to Brady. Besides his parents, Beverly Danziger was the last person Brady had seen before shipping out. It was the night before he left, and he went to a party with friends, where they struck up a conversation near the keg-line. She was Beverly Martins, then, and she spoke of getting together the money for a semester at the community college. He told her he was going to basic training, then the Middle East. She seemed frightened but proud. She smiled at him and kissed him on the cheek when they parted. She swore she'd see him again. Though they'd never been close it was her face – that goodbye – that he thought of on tougher nights, when all there was between him and the rocky desert floor was a ruddy sleeping bag, those awful caves looming in the nearby mountains.

When he returned she was Mrs William Danziger, and she was pregnant for the second time. She'd given him a kiss when she saw him – he was lucky enough to be in his regalia for an interview at the Sheriff's station – and this was when she told him that love had interfered with her education. But since he'd been Sheriff he'd gotten to know her husband pretty well. He'd removed him from Slow Moe's and the bar over at Applebee's, and he'd responded to domestic disturbances at his home several times, so he had an idea of what he was in for when he got Beverly's calls. Will was all the two of them spoke about. So he'd expected her call, especially since he'd heard things over the past weeks about Will, things besides the usual. When he phoned back she explained that Will had been missing all through the long weekend.

"To think," Beverly said, her voice restrained, shaky over the line, "that he might have suffered that big storm out there in his little hole." She tried a laugh, though Brady could tell she was too concerned for such a gesture: it came out in a messy giggle. "I mean, John. Even you'd feel sorry for him if he were out there in that shack in those storms. If that's where he is." She explained that she couldn't leave the children alone to go fetch him, and that she wouldn't dare take them to pick up Will, so she was stuck. "To be honest, part of me doesn't even think he's out there in his shack. Part of me thinks he's finally left us. He kept

promising he would.” Her voice crumbled momentarily, then returned to its usual firm but sorely pleading tone. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Well,” he said, “I’d be surprised if your husband weren’t sleeping away a rough one in his shack. I’d be damned surprised.”

“God, I know I must sound crazy. But... three days. That’s different. You tell me that isn’t different. Three nights.”

“We all have rough weeks,” he said. It was clear enough to him that she didn’t think it funny, or reassuring, when she waited in silence for him to go further. He fiddled with the keys on his belt, thinking. “I’m sure it’s not different,” he tried. “But that don’t make you crazy. You’re just concerned.”

“That’s right,” Beverly urged, “I’m just concerned. I’m wondering if he’s gone. If he won’t come back.”

“I understand.”

“So would you check the shack, John? Just do me another big favour?”

He told her he would, and was on his way soon after.

He drove to the outskirts of town, weaving in and out of the Appalachian hills before pulling off to the mining road. At noon he parked his jeep, and started into the forest toward Will’s crash shack. This was where Brady expected Will to be, sleeping in a puddle of vomit and reeking fiercely of alcohol. Picturing this, he cursed aloud and checked the chambers of his pistols for bullets. He liked to check his pistol when he was angry – and though he’d have liked to, he knew he’d never use it, especially not on Will Danziger.

The sun pierced down through the thickly trees, heating up the wet foliage that churned under his boots. The undergrowth gave off a muddy scent. He let the aroma ease his nerves as he left the gravel road behind him for the narrow footpath that snaked through the woods. The high branches swayed in the dawdling wind, their water-gorged leaves blotting out the sunlight and leaving a sallow gloom.

The shack stood a quarter of a mile down the path. Sheriff Brady knew that Will liked to sleep off his drunks in that shack. It was closer to the mine and the bars than his house, so he could leave his truck and walk if he needed to. The shack was illegal in about a thousand ways: Will had no licence to live out there in the woods, no ownership of that land to build on. But Brady never came down on Will about that. If Danziger happened to make it all the way home after a night of drinking – all the way to Beverly and their two daughters – then Sheriff Brady was twice as likely to be at the house the next morning, sorting out some complaint against the brutality Will so often inflicted on his family.

When he got these kinds of calls his heart always sank. He would get a call at 1.00 am, or 8.00 am, and he'd sit there in the house with the two of them like a principal with his students. He'd fixate on a shattered lamp on the ground while Beverly told him that, no; she wouldn't be pressing charges this time. "No, no," she would say, her lower lip trembling. "There's no need. It's an isolated incident, you see." That time, she'd said "isolated incident" as if she'd been rehearsing it, as if Will had shoved the words down her mouth right as Brady was pulling up in his car. As Brady was leaving Will prodded him. "Sheriff Brady you ever shot someone before?" Will had leaned back on the couch. He put his arm around Beverly, and curled one of his lips. His eyes threatened laughter.

"Please, Will," Beverly said. "We're just through this."

"I'm just a gentleman asking a gentleman a question." Brady stopped in the door and turned. There were bruises on the knuckles of Will's fist, a small cut on the back of his hand. "Have you ever killed anyone?" Will asked again.

"Not on American soil," Brady said. His answer seemed to get into Will's eyes, and he left the man sitting there, trying to laugh it off.

These incidents troubled him. He was only a sheriff, no white knight. Every time Will hurt her, every time she was in danger and he arrived to do nothing but briefly interrupt the pattern, was a reminder: his badge didn't give him the power to help her.

Brady parted a weave of branches and stepped over a loose rock. He had been on the footpath long enough now to make out the place where the trail widened some, then opened out to the grove where Will's shack stood. He'd been out here before: he'd dumped a bucket of cold water on Will's face and hauled him by the cuff of his shirt back to the mines for work.

Brady had spoken to Will's boss the Friday before. He'd been at the Applebee's finishing a beer, when Old Billy Welker – a shift supervisor at the mine – stole Brady's ear: "He's running a scheme down in the mines, John," he'd said, jowls jiggling slightly as he spoke. "He's into something and I don't like it." Welker apologised now – as was the custom between men speaking of other men. Brady knew he'd been looking for a solid excuse to fire Will for over a year now. If Will lost his job, he'd take the pains of it out on Beverly. So when Welker said, "He's a good enough man, you know," Brady knew Welker was talking more of Beverly, and how Will needed to be under control, because his wife's safety depended on it. Brady cursed Will, a man surrounded in kindness and not a lick of it to offer in return. "But he's walking a thin line."

“He’s going through a rough patch, is all,” Brady said. “He’ll come around.”

“I know what you’re saying.” Welker gulped his beer. “And it’s not like that. It’s different.”

“Different how?”

“He’s been coming in sober, for one.”

The sheriff smiled. “Well I’ll be damned.” He raised his mug in cheers.

Welker pulled down Brady’s arm and whispered urgently. “This ain’t no joke. I’m worried. And the men are worried. It’s affecting morale maybe. The man insists on staying down there all day. It’s too familiar, is all.” He turned down his eyes to the bar, embarrassed of himself. “I’m telling you, and I’d tell you more in particular if’n I knew his plans.” The hand on his lap curled to a fist.

“Alright,” Brady announced. “Alright, I see you’re concerned. I tell you what: take my card – there’s the number to the station. I’m gonna write down my cell here on the side. That goes straight to me.” He did so while Welker lit a cigarette, watching. “You keep an eye on the situation, and you tell me if you need me. I’m your backup if Will starts acting up.”

“You’re my backup?”

“Right.”

Brady thought of his conversation with Welker when he saw Beverly on Sunday. She came in with her girls to Mass and Will wasn’t with her. Whether drunk, sober, angry, boisterous, or plain mean while he attended, Will rarely missed the Sunday service.

So Brady couldn’t help but feel the heat of anxiety in him as Will’s shack came into sight. It stood six or seven feet high. Rusted aluminum siding formed the walls and an old Play-Toy plastic roof covered the top. The door was on the other side, but on his side there was a grease and weather-stained window. He took a step out into the open grove.

“Will?” He called out. “Will Danziger?” A bird cried out behind him, to which he whipped his head about, then ruefully returned his gaze to the shack. “It’s John. Your wife’s worried about you.”

He stepped closer to the shack, and felt a draft of cold air in the heat of the noontime. He walked closer still, tried to look into the window. He peered in close, trying to remind himself of the shape of the room, the feel in there. Through the filth of the window he made out a square shape in the centre of the room, but could not see much else.

“Comin’ around now,” Brady said, and did so, moving in strides around the structure and coming to the door. This too was small and

warped. He bent down and rapped on the door. "Will?" He begged. "Will, I'm coming in."

He could almost feel the empty silence from within the shack. As he neared the door he felt even more cool air issuing from the corners of the warped door. The doorknob surprised him. It was cold to the touch even under direct sun. Brady looked off in the direction of the woods. He'd walked these hills with his father many times in his youth. He knew them well. In the length of twenty minutes he could circle around and be back on the gravel road. Will hadn't answered his cries, after all. Then he remembered Beverly's quavering voice... her strength in spite of it all. In Beverly's voice he heard the pestering need for him to see it all through.

He turned the knob and swung open the door, casting a sliver of light onto the dirt floor of the shack. In the centre of the floor near a plastic footstool was Will's air mattress. It was almost completely deprived of air – though he saw no obvious gashes or holes in it – and it lay in the centre of the room. On all sides: beer cans, coal dust, cigarette butts, but no Will Danziger.

Where was he? Why wasn't he simply lying on his air mattress, drunk, the air stinking of old vomit and alcohol? But no, there was nothing save a very unseasonal chill in the room. As Brady bowed his head and turned to quit the shack, he noticed a depression in the centre of the room. Yes, there was a void underneath the mattress. He kicked it away and a rush of cold air swept over him. There, where the mattress had been, was a wide hole. Brady drew his flashlight, turned it on, and directed it at the hole. It was a tunnel – wide enough for a man of Will's generous size and leading in the direction of the mine.

He could see his breath in the draught of air exiting the tunnel. Though its blood ran through most men in the town – thus protecting his job – he hated the mines. He didn't like the feeling of walls closing in on him. He'd gone down there many times to visit his father when he was young but he learned while on tour that the mine had finally choked his father to death. The mines, like the mountain caves he'd spent most of his time in while abroad, were dismal places. Brady wasn't shy to admit it after a can of beer. But he had never opened his mouth about the war. No one asked him what he'd seen down in those caves and his memory of those times was so confused. And it only grew worse with time. He knew he'd walked freely among the dead as if in a mausoleum that he'd seen populated in seconds of gunfire. He remembered the father and the son. He had always wondered, after finding those two, if that round was one of

his. He would never know, because this, like the rest was patchy, shrouded and only manifest in the violence of his nightmares.

So, no, he would not go toward the mine. He would not go down that tunnel. Hell, no. He would call old Welker and have him go down there with his men. They were the drunken spelunkers, the diggers, not him. He was done with the underground. He heard something coming from the tunnel, a curdling moan that vaguely resembled a man's. At this Brady felt as if a fine webbing had been drooped onto his naked back. "Will?" He called out. Something bubbling and wet reached his ears, another moan. "Is that you, oh god," he said, cursing how stupid he must have sounded. But he had to go down, just to see if it was Will, if it was some cave-in or disaster. He didn't need to delve deep into the tunnel, just go a bit further in. He would check for any survivors, count the dead. He'd done it tens of times in Afghanistan: walk in, recon the area, and copy that intel to the men upstairs. This time, instead of reporting to his commanding officer, he would find his father's forest in silent waiting. He stepped one unstable foot into the tunnel, then another, and with each the cold further enshrouded him, grabbed his arms and his neck and squeezed. He never remembered the caves being so cold. He took another step, almost lost his footing, cursed, and then righted himself with his free hand. Now, utterly submerged in the tunnel, he could almost stand, and he heard that sound – that moaning sound – from further down. He shined his flashlight in its direction, only to catch something with the column of light – something that could have been alive, could have been a rat – only to watch it step out of the line of his sight, lost in the surrounding murk.

He wouldn't call out Will's name again like a fool, not until he'd seen something, heard something alive again, so he began a sideways stride down the tunnel. Minutes passed, him stepping cautiously over the rock, and he knew – he knew – that he was coming closer to the mine itself. He could smell something, the coal, the cut rock, the dust in the air, and just then he felt wood on the walls. He turned his light on this change in the texture; they were old columns erected to support a tunnel. The sheriff bowed his head, relieved.

Will, dumb as he was, had found an old mine shaft that could take him straight to work. The clever bastard had found a short cut. Surrounded by the more familiar shapes and forms of the mines, he was actually a little relieved. He chuckled to himself, and then heard, again, the moaning sound. Brady followed the sound, nearing the active mine as he did.

Something brushed past his shin, leaving the cuff of his pants to sway back and forth. He turned his light on the ground and again saw some-

thing that looked almost like a rat – something furry and small. He heard another one skitter by his head, and he leapt to the right, turning his flashlight to the wall. This time he saw not an animal, but an opening in the rock that looked freshly cut and devoid of any dust. The cut was sheer and at perfect angles like it'd been engineered, broken from a mould. He knew the moaning was coming from this foreign space, that he was close. It looked like Will was digging an underground drinking hole, something a little closer to work. But he could be hurt, and Brady would have to help him if he was. His instinct was to gather the wreckage of men and to finish off his enemies. He remembered – for the first time in years – the smell of the gun oil wafting from the barrel of his rifle, the sweat chilling on his chest. He remembered the desert caves and the father and son he'd found there years ago, and how skilled he'd been at finding the living in the realm of the dead. They'd trained him well.

He knelt down to enter the new opening. With his hand he felt the wall. It was smooth and cold under his palms. He pressed his flashlight to the wall to examine it: it seemed slick, made of something that was not so much rock but a gel that came away wet and sticky on his fingers, and beneath this were – what were they? – drawings on the wall, glyphs of some sort – only more complex. One image depicted a smaller creature sitting within a larger creature as if it were a car. He smoothed his finger over this image, and suddenly, as if he had flipped a switch, a tiny needle spit from the wall. It flew by his earlobe and landed in the ground near his heels. These drawings were not just drawings, the Brady thought, but sensitive to the touch, like an operating board, though probably much better used by a smaller hand. As he stepped further the viscous gel grew as cold as to burn. This was the source of the freezing air.

“Hullo?” someone said. The voice was choked in liquid. “Hullo?”

“Will,” the sheriff said. He looked down the cave, saw that it ended abruptly about six feet off where a man crouched, facing him. An irrevocable shudder seized him and left his fingers trembling.

It was Will: soaked in the gel, his chin up-turned, red beard set in clumps against his cheeks. He turned his beady eyes to look up at the sheriff. “Oh, ha, it's you,” Will said. “Ha ha.” He blinked his eyes against Brady's light. “Can't barely see no more. So you've come to meet my friends.” He seemed stuck in place, pinned to the wall in a sitting position.

“I'm taking you home,” Brady said.

The bilious green light gave the man's skin a sickened pallor. “The war hero come to save the drunk, huh?”

Brady waited, flashlight trained on Will's face. "On behalf of your worried wife. Come on, Will." He walked closer to him.

"Oh, Beverly. Beverly, I love you and I'm sorry. Okay? I'm not going anywhere. I've been so selfish. But down here I'm the good guy." Brady could see now, that Will was attached to the wall. Tubes from the wall stuck into his arms, his back. They were as thick as fingers.

"Let me help you," Brady said. He knelt down to look closer at these wounds: he could see through the tubes. A bluish fluid was being pumped into Will from the wall. Brady leaned his flashlight in the direction of the man and pulled out his knife. "Now hold on, Will," he said. "I'm going to cut you out of this damned thing." He pressed the edge of his blade into one of the tubes. The flesh of the tube resisted, so he sawed at it. The tube opened, spilling a swathe of blue gel onto his boots. Will yelped. He turned and stole the knife from Brady. A churning sound came from the wall, and then some something more solid issued from the tube. Brady grabbed his flashlight from the ground: a brown fleshy egg was opening on his feet. "Give me back that knife, Will." He shone it on the man's face.

He was smiling. "I'm helping them." He motioned around with his chin. At Will's gesture, Brady heard shifting around him. One of the small, furry rats Brady had seen before dragged itself over Will's arm and onto the ground, where it scurried out of sight.

"Give me the knife!"

"They're ready to play. Do you see? They want to come out and play." At these words his eyes bulged, and a dense current of spit and blood poured from his mouth. Brady couldn't understand how so much could come from one man's gut. After this purge, a bubble of blood formed from within his mouth and grew to fit his lips. It trembled there while Brady's legs and arms softened to all but slack ropes on a crude doll. He breathed once. His skin felt tight. His body was in total arrest save the thud of his heart against his ribs. He would see what waited behind that bubble. He'd almost seen it in his dreams. In Afghanistan it was always right around the corner. Now it had come alive in Will. It was ready to accuse him of all his wrongdoings.

The red bubble burst. A thin, blackened arm reached out from the mouth. It hooked its elbow and grabbed Will's beard for purchase. Then another arm stretched out, gained a hold. Finally, a head began to emerge. Will's jaw unlatched in a cracking sound to accommodate the thing's torso. It was wet, deformed, but it was – and this struck in Brady's gut like an axe-blow – humanoid. It had an upturned, porcine nose and tiny black soulless eyes covering its face. Short, thin fur grew

from its skin. Finally it pulled forth its legs. Totally emerged, it stared up at Brady's flashlight and cried out, then dragged itself from its birth canal and off toward the walls.

Will's eyes stared into Brady's soul, as if indicting him for the terrible violence before them. But he could no longer speak. His jaw hung out, tongue speckled with cuts. His left eye began to move independently of the other. Brady stepped away, drawing his pistol, but he caught his heel on something and fell back, colliding with the freezing floor. Blood trickled from Will's eye then it sank briefly back into his head. It rolled out of its socket, mangled and burst. It leaked as it rolled off of his chin and came to a stop on his lap. All through this Will growled and moaned, dying.

Brady had crushed something in his fall. He felt it writhing in its death throes directly beneath the bottom of his pants. He clambered to right himself but in so doing put down his flashlight, only to see it stolen away into an opening in the wall. When he turned back to Will he saw that the man's legs had long been destroyed. The things had emerged from this flesh earlier. How had he survived so long? Brady finally stood, and here he came face-to-face with the imp that had exited Will's eye. It looked at him, naive and stupid in its first waking moments, defenceless, even, and then it reared back and spat in his face. Brady raised his pistol level to the beast and pulled the trigger. The round connected with the creature. It instantly drooped down, inanimate. Creatures in the nearby radius squealed. Will began moaning, choking. He was still alive. Brady fired his pistol into Will's head. And then he fired again, and again, until he was out of bullets.

Then he turned to run.

He felt a sharp pain on the tip of his pinky finger – a bite, no doubt – as he ran in the direction he came (so he hoped). He stumbled once, almost tripping over the little creatures on the floor of the mine, and then ran further down. As it grew warmer he knew he was going the right way, but he could hear the creatures giving chase.

Slivers of sunlight descended into the darkness in the distance. As he cracked a smile, he was tripped. He hit his shoulder hard on the ground, and felt a stabbing pain in his heel. He tried to right himself, but then felt the moist, cool things all over him, weighing him down. He grabbed at them and shooed them. He flung them away but still more came. They pulled him closer to the ground. His lungs burned from the coal dust on the floor. Choked, he felt the darkness closing in on the sides of his eyes. At first the bites shocked him, but now there was no acute pain, only a dull ache all over his skin, in his muscles. He let himself drop his emp-

tied pistol underneath their weight, began to give in, and then something came over him, a rush of tension, of rage. He saw Will's face, saw Beverly's, and let himself believe that Will – the poor bastard – was at the bottom of all this. And Brady would not let Will Danziger be the man to kill him.

He dug a knee under his chest and, shaking himself loose of a half dozen of the gnawing creatures and dragged himself closer and closer to the light. Some let go as he went, leaving him to the outdoors, and with that added freedom he broke into a run, dragging the remaining creatures with him. He exited the shack, felt the heat of the sun on him again, and ran into the woods. In seconds he was free of them all. The trees swayed under the slight breeze that had gathered in the half hour he'd been submerged. He dropped to the ground, rubbing his hands over his swollen, sweaty body, checking for the creatures, but they were gone.

He saw what was left of the creatures lying around him. Soft, cartilage-like remains slathered in gel sizzled and bubbled like snails caught on black top. They burned at this temperature. Then the cartilage dissolved as well. They were gone, having completely melted under the sun. He would be the last to see them, and he would have to live with it. It was as it had always been. They always sent him first. Why, after plugging their ears with yellow foam and emptying their magazines into the darkness, did they send him on recon? They thought he could handle it. Was there a device lurking about the corner, waiting to explode as he passed? Did they get them all in the firefight? Or was there one or two left to breathe their last breath, or squeeze out their last bullet? They sent him in – the stable one – to sniff around while the dust settled, while the enemies' souls still lingered on the brink of eternity. He should have known that if you spend too long somewhere, no matter where, it becomes home. A father and son, holding each other, their final position destroyed: Brady had kicked the two apart long before his squad came bursting in, laughing and lighting cigarettes. They were wrong. He couldn't handle it. He'd forgotten it for a while, but he'd never handled it.

Breathing heavily, he rolled on his back and cried out, then turned on his side. He coughed, then gagged, his body heaving against his empty stomach. The trees stirred above him. He fell on his back, heaving. He lay there for a moment, staring into the upper canopy and listening to the breeze. The swaying of the trees hypnotised him into unconsciousness.

He awoke under a light drizzle. The failing light at first alarmed him. He rolled onto his stomach and got onto his knees. Only a foot away he saw a yellow bird. It preened itself in the rain, hopped up to a branch. It

was a canary – so close to him that he could reach out and grab it – he realised this as it fluttered off. He arose in the growing rain. He did not look back at Will's shack. He would see it again soon enough.

He drove down the gravel road toward home, considering a plan. Already the morning glow of lost memories seemed to threaten his recollection. He was not sure of what he'd seen. He certainly wouldn't dare to recall it to anyone else. It was, and had always been, his duty to soak such things in and forget them for the benefit of everyone else. He wouldn't go to the station or Beverly. He would go home first, but he could not yet stay home, sleep, drink, and decide whether he'd let what he'd seen make him go mad. No, he had things to do before he could do that.

His rotties greeted him from the yard, howling at the rain and panting to be let in. After greeting him with their wet nostrils they begged off. He drank coffee and watched them as they ate. They could smell the death on him, he knew. In the shower he was surprised to find that he only had a dozen or so pricks and scrapes. He put on a fresh uniform and brushed his hair. The kindness of the dogs returned soon after.

Back at the sheriff's station he took a stick of dynamite he'd confiscated from the fishers. Then he drove back up the gravel road, and walked out to Will Danziger's shack. Once inside, he peered down into the god-forsaken tunnel. He did not hesitate to light the stick of dynamite; he heard the scurrying, the dragging as he took out his matches. He let the fuse burn down a bit, then threw it down the tunnel as far as he could, and hid behind a tree. For a while he heard nothing, and then a loud *thump!* and a whoosh of air issued from the shack. He waited for the dust to settle and stepped inside. Dust covered everything in the shack. The tunnel had collapsed, just as he'd hoped, leaving only the shack standing. He left the air mattress atop the filled hole.

The second thing Brady had to do would be harder: he would have to talk to Beverly. He didn't want to hurt her and didn't want to frighten her. He visited her at home. It was 10.00 pm by the time he got there: "I drove out there." He stuck his hands in his pockets and shifted his weight.

"And?" She kept her fingers knit together in front of her chest. Her glazed eyes sagged in the amber light of the porch lamp. "What did you see?"

"Will's shack was empty, if a little dusty."

"Oh," Beverly said.

"He's likely out bending somewhere."

She leaned against her door-frame and looked out on to the street. "I

had the feeling he wasn't in the shack," she said. She put her hand over her nose and mouth and winced, pushing tears from the sides of her eyes. "Like it was over. Like he's gone."

She re-closed her jacket over her night-gown.

"There's no reason to think he's gone. He ain't ever left you before."

"Shut up," she said. She pushed her head into Brady's shoulder. He could hardly hear her cry over the television's buzzing from the living room. She pushed back and they regarded each other. "I hope he's gone, John. I always thought it would be us standing here. That you'd be the one to tell me." She shut the door behind her and led him to a bench on the porch. They sat looking out on the road. A van drove by, then a semi-truck. Each whipped up a cloud of dust behind them.

"I hope he's gone forever," she said.

HORROR

Street Lights

David M. Kinne

Detective Linden,

I know that I am still under suspicion of kidnapping. I'm not sure what good my writing you will do, as you've no reason to believe the unlikely story I am about to share. I suppose this letter is for my own benefit if anything. I feel as though putting the memory to writ and sending it away will allow me to block out that night and let it burden someone else. I fear, however, that nothing will ever cause me to forget that night.

I can't imagine that the investigation is going well, and I mean that as no insult to you or your men. At least in my instance of the disappearances, there couldn't have been many witnesses. Aldenbury is a lonely street, detached from the the life and bustle of our small town down in its little valley. My neighbors are all diligent folk who take to bed early in the evening, and I doubt many of them were awake until after the scream had rattled the neighbourhood. Though I know what actually

happened on the night in question, I stand no chance to clear my name. I ask for your indulgence.

It began some nights before, I had been out drinking with friends until the later evening. You may nod your head smugly here, thinking this explains what follows, but I insist upon you that I did not drink myself into a stupor. I would not deprive my students of their Wednesday class simply because I grant myself a pint with friends. When I tore myself away from the revelry I was more than able to amble home, though sore and eager to collapse for the night.

I don't mean to seem theatrical, but you must've noticed how truly dark that night was. The sky had been wrapped in storm clouds all that day, and not a ray of star or moonlight could pierce through that pitch coal veil. I had never before in my life been more grateful for the invention of man-made light. Each street lamp along my route was like an oasis sparing me from the hungry black void that drowned out the world around me. Each was blindingly white in that darkness, sitting regally atop their posts and casting light in all directions.

The posts became fewer and farther apart as I left downtown. The rural roads were only afforded a few scattered lights, and between each one was a yawning space of true dark that left me anxious to find home. Far below in the valley I could see the distant shining of the light on Aldenbury, with a half a mile of empty void between us. With the way I kept my eyes locked upon that earthbound star, I might as well have been one third of a troop of wisemen here to meet salvation.

The closer I came to home, the more I noticed something that sent a nervousness crawling through my flesh. There was something strange about the light on Aldenbury and I could not account for why it bothered me. I felt an odd tugging instinct to turn back the way I came, but I dismissed the fear. I berated myself internally for such infantile thoughts.

I'd passed the lamp countless times before on my way to town and had never once given it a single moment's thought. It was only when its light was my entire world that I ever truly saw it. Standing like an obelisk, it seemed so much older than the other posts by both material and design. More stone than iron, immense, needlessly large, with an oddly cobbled-together bulb and cage. While it could only be a gas light, I never recalled seeing the lamp lighter on this side of town.

There was something strange and "other" about it. The light of the other lamps felt wholesome, harmless in their familiarity. But THIS... this was as if an impressionist's painting had been brought to life. Indistinct and yet your mind filled in the blanks. It shed its light visibly in oily wafting little tangles and smouldered with a private radiance. I

could not look away from that dull and yellowed light, feeling some kind of sleepy draw toward it. Yet in my creeping skin and racing heart I found a primal fear urging me to get away.

My trance was broken by the Henley boy, who came out of the gloom to accost me for a fiver. I found myself dazed and absent minded and it was only when he persisted in harassing me that I was shaken free. I listened half delirious as he tried to coax whatever coins he could from me, no doubt to have a drink at my expense. I wanted nothing to do with the troublemaker, and made to get away.

He got a grip of my sleeve with a bit more strength than you'd expect. Having noticed my interest in the lamp, he tried to wager he could shatter it within two stones. The brat was doggedly persistent and I wasn't able to quiet him before my temper snapped.

I won't deny that I was severe with him. I have no patience for children or their impudence. Yet no matter how vicious my words became, he never lost that contemptible smirk of his. It wasn't until I stormed away that I found a moment's peace.

Bed awaited as the door was locked behind me. I wanted nothing more than to drift into a dreamless rest but all that night I wrestled with a haunted mind. That aberrant amber light held my thoughts transfixed. Though I call myself a man of reason, I fussed like some coddled brat at imagined terrors in the night. Yet I knew there was something terrible and true about this fear that I could not banish from my mind. It was only when the dawn had come that I found a moment's rest.

That morning I staggered through the motions of my daily teachings, absolutely useless to my students in my sleepless daze. My mind was occupied by a manic need to explain the night before. I need only find the truth, I thought, and then these addled thoughts would fade.

I made inquiries to every one that I could think of: neighbours, town historians, and the construction crew. Not a single one could offer me a clue and I began to question whether the lamp bore a significance at all. I'd been drinking, surely I imagined something where there really wasn't. So when my colleagues came to fetch me for our common evening beer, I refused them flatly. My body ached for a sorely needed rest and I would hear of nothing short of bed. Plodding home against the setting sun, I nearly wailed to see my greatest fear realised. Nestled in the valley far below was the light, perhaps more awful than before to my sober eyes. Just glancing at it held me trapped until my will took charge. How I lived before oblivious to that terrible light, I do not know. Marching with my face to the ground I would not let my eyes meet it a second time. I shut the curtains of my house and felt a throbbing ring persisting in my

ears as I slumped onto my bed. I struggled to find an hour's rest that would never come. Through my ragged breathing, I determined to find some explanation.

The following day I barged my way into the municipal record house and seized permission to scour each and every file. I was certain that in that sea of mind-numbing trivia, where every waking detail of our town's tedious past had accumulated uselessly, that I'd find some note or thought about that thing. I read every mention of my street, hoping that some might become some lead. I could find nothing but an alarming absence of information: the lamp lighter's route came nowhere near the valley. Receipts of construction were available for every other post, but for this one there was no record. It could not be so old that it escaped the hawkish eyes of bureaucrats!

My days wasted away in the record hall, and my appearance waxed shabbier with each passing visit thanks to this obsession. The quiet murmurings of my dishevelled look were not so secret that I could not overhear. Such accounts of my unwholesome look will not help me prove my innocence. I had no time for anything but the search. I could do nothing to banish that light from my thoughts: though I blocked my windows, lodged in the house of friends and covered up my eyes, I could think of nothing but that sickly amber light.

It was when I was at my most desperate that I heard the voice. Though I know myself to be perfectly sane, I cannot deny I heard it. A simple whisper in my ear, plain and clear and nothing like the sound of my own thoughts. Destroy the lamp, it merely said as clear as day. After all the misery spent chasing an answer or a moment's peace, I could not imagine a more elegant solution.

I determined haggardly to make it so. Yet, I did not know precisely how to go about it. I had never caused an act of vandalism, and demurred at the very thought. It was then that I recalled how Jacob Henley had offered to break the bulb and knew I had to seek him out. His family, the loathsome lot, had not the slightest idea where he was and could not be bothered with such matters.

Through hunting young rogues in back alleys, I was eventually able to track down the brat. He was enormously amused that I had come to him and of course once he knew I needed the task done he haggled for every penny he could squeeze from me. I urged him to do it now, but he was not so bold to do it in the light of day where he might be apprehended. There was no persuading him on this, so I resolved to wait and watch him through my bedroom window. I waited anxiously for him to come out of the darkness, half expecting him not to show at all. But he would-

n't see a penny until the job was done. After what seemed an eternity, I saw his figure step through the relief of shadows into the lantern's light.

There, he seemed to pause as if he suddenly saw the thing as it really was. I feared perhaps that whatever madness I was suffering now would spread to him, but he shook himself out of the bewitchment more readily than I and began to cast his stones.

His aim was true from God knows how many acts of petty spite and I could hear the stones chinking off the Lantern glass. It was oddly resistant, it took five blows before it even cracked. It was too well made to shatter, but a jagged oval hole was made. I nearly leapt as the lantern dimmed. Had the wind snuffed it out already?

There was no such luck. I saw what followed all too well. The light inside twisted like a coiled rope before threading through the hole. The light, the smouldering yellow light, I hesitate to compare it to a snake because it had no substance like a snake. It had no body but was densest in a long and narrow form that curled through the air weightlessly. The boy and I were catatonic as it carved through the sucking black. The glow it tailed filled the dark like oil pouring into water. The splotchy light it spread felt worse than any dark a man could suffer. Sick and deeply wrong. Yet it spread and spread, and I could feel nothing but a fevered panic I could do nothing to abate.

Could I not take my eyes away? It tangled itself around the child, whose screaming jarred me to reality. Though dumbstruck by what I was witnessing, I tried desperately to find the wit to take some kind of action. Yanking out my dresser drawers, I tore apart my room searching for something, anything. My revolver tumbled to my feet, and taking it in trembling hands, I resolved to use it.

What good I thought to do, I do not know. I charged out into the street and nearly dropped the gun. The boy had vanished and all I found was the spreading tangles of that serpent light. Assured my life was through, I readied my aim before it seized me too.

Lights throughout the neighborhood began to flicker on. Every soul upon that street must have been awoken by that dying scream. The abomination recoiled as lanterns of real and wholesome light began to pour into the road and it shot to the ground where it snaked along in a whipping panic before threading through a sewer grate before another set of eyes could spot it. I was the one they saw at the scene, and within the space of a bell toll your men came with admirable haste to seize me with suspicion.

I was dazed and distant during my interrogation, between my lack of sleep and trauma. I was held over night, and your men must have

reported how I pleaded and begged for a lantern in my cell. I was terrified that that thing would come for me, and knew it would not touch me while I was guarded by a real and healthy light. I had never before in my life lost myself so much to fright.

The boy, of course, did not turn up again by morning. I insist upon my innocence but understand how accusing me is the only feasible thing to do. Jacob Henley is no more, and I am the man found with a gun where his scream was heard. Though I would point out that no shots were fired on that night, I expect that people will dream up whatever memories they assume ought to have occurred.

Day and night, Jacob's grieving mother cries for my blood and protests the postponing of my trial. But there is no sign that the disappearances will stop, even while I am locked in this cell. I dread to think that my innocence may be proven by the continuing deaths of others. I suspect, however, that I will simply be judged an accomplice of a greater criminal. Time will tell whether I will swing from the gallows.

I am ashamed to think of my own freedom at a time like this. I will let the jury do with me what they will. After all of this, I am a wasted human being. I want only that someone should hear the truth from me, even if it cannot be believed.

From what I have heard, the disappearances have drifted farther south into the countryside. Our little town has been spared more of this kind of grief, yet I can only fear that there is no stopping this thing. How do you hunt such a creature? Damn me should I distract you from managing such a feat, as I can name no greater work than this.

I have yet to truly find a good night's rest. My mind can simply not account for that thing existing. Though in my restless ponderings in what may be my last few days, I have remembered something dimly. Stories my grandfather told to scare me away from wandering at night. How there were lights in the deepest parts of forests called will-o'-the-wisps that would lead people toward their deaths. As that bright and haunting death creeps deep into our darkened corners, I think upon that story and wonder how such a thing could be held with glass and stone.

Professor Jerald Walton

SCIENCE FICTION

Day of the Bromeliads

Alison J. Littlewood

Two men in radiation suits walked through the compound. Small flowers rose from the dry earth, their tiny red petals like drops of blood. The red hearts.

Jake Pierce stooped and took a reading with a Geiger counter, the clicks sounding like sleepy crickets. "We still need the soil samples," he said. "But the reading's down. They seem to be working."

Back in the lab Jake watched his colleague, Thomas Rafferty, begin analysing the sludge made from soil and distilled water. Strange, he thought, that he should be here, witness to these experiments on the earth. He'd always felt more at home with metal and glass. Their forms were somehow familiar to his hands: he had a talent for taking things apart and putting them together again, better than before.

"So how does it work?" he said.

Thomas rubbed his eyes. "We know the hearts are taking up trace uranium and changing it, somehow," he said. "But, essentially, we don't know." He bent over some papers, pushing back his sandy hair. He ran a finger across the lines on a chart and tapped one of the peaks. "The radioactive properties are being neutralised. But it's impossible. It shouldn't be possible."

"So how did he do it?"

Thomas mused over the options, realised that he had none. "We have no idea. He has no real equipment, no means of monitoring radioactivity and – we hope – no uranium." He grinned. "We just know he did."

"So. Does the old beggar know what he's got?"

"Oh, he knows. He wants to save the earth, turn back the clock. That's why he developed these little beauties in the first place."

"Yes – but does he realise what he's *got*?"

As Jake stepped out of the Jag a thousand scents assaulted his nostrils with another time, another place. His father's garden, though not so large

as this, had smelled just the same. He had to cross it each summer night to tell his father to come in, that dinner was ready. His father would be pushing seeds into trays in the shed, or transplanting new shoots into pots. The kind of things he told Jake he should be doing instead of dismantling his bike. "You should grow things, lad," he'd say. "Now, that's a thing worth doing."

Kenyon was making his slow way across the top of the garden. As Jake approached, the white haired man picked a sprig off a shrub, crushed the needle-like leaves between finger and thumb, and sniffed.

"Another amazing invention?"

Kenyon looked up, squinting into the afternoon sun. "Rosemary," he said, and added it to his trug. It was loaded with carrots, beans and potatoes.

"Thanks for agreeing to see me, Mr Kenyon." Jake picked his way across the lawn, his shoes slipping on the grass. He stuck out a hand to shake, revealing gold cufflinks. He had known they would be out of place, that the old man would see them and judge him. He had worn them anyway.

"Ben." The old man brushed his hands together, a cloud of dry earth flaking off. He inspected them before holding them up, showing them to be browned from the soil.

Jake smiled and dropped his hand to his side.

"What did you want to see, lad?"

"Well, I've been working with the red hearts. I mean, I know what you've achieved. Amazing. I was hoping you'd give me a tour."

Ben's eyes narrowed. "Show you what else I'm cooking up, you mean?"

Jake laughed. "I can't deny I'm curious."

"If you've come here for profit, lad, you're wasting your time. Anything I do here is free. Free to all comers."

Jake's smile was frozen on his face. "Wonderful," he said. "Wonderful."

Ben led Jake around the garden in a slow, steady shuffle. He showed off his prize-winning leeks, fat peas and plump cabbages, nibbled at the edges by caterpillars. "All organic," he said. "If you can't spare a bit for the butterflies..."

He led the way to a wilderness of strawberry plants, masses of leaves hiding the bounty within. "Try some," he said. Jake did, checking for any trace of earth or insects. They tasted sweet and wild, like strawberries should taste but rarely did.

From there he showed herbs, what he called his “medicinals”, and of course the flowers. Everywhere was a riot of blooms, and to Jake it seemed there was no order, no structure. Just a confusion of colour and shape: some trailing, some climbing, some creeping along the ground.

“Here.” Ben gestured towards some ragged blue-purple blooms. “Not quite a blue tulip – it’s a hybrid – but I’m working on it.”

Jake forced a smile. “How did you develop the hearts, Mr Kenyon?”

“Impatient, aren’t you?”

Jake lifted his hands in a placatory gesture.

Ben set down his trug and nodded towards the house. A wooden out-building ran the full length of the back. “Come on, then,” he said.

Jake followed him up the lawn, taking tentative steps in his Italian shoes.

The shed smelled green and organic with a tang of potting compost and the musk of warm, spidery shadows. Most of all, it smelled of growth. Jake was reminded once again of his father.

Ben pressed a switch and strip lights flickered on. They had a blue cast and were positioned low over benches that stretched away into the distance. “Grow lights,” said Ben.

Jake cast his eyes around. He could see nothing scientific, not even blades that could be used for cutting or splicing. The benches were bare, and swept clean for the most part, but with an array of cobwebs in the corners. In the shadows beneath were nested piles of plant pots and discarded seed trays.

“Not much time for cleaning,” Ben said, following Jake’s gaze. “Besides, the spiders keep the aphids down.” He chuckled and strode off down the shed. Jake could see the patches at the elbows of his checked shirt.

“Is this where you work?” said Jake. “There’s no equipment. Nothing you’d need. How –”

Ben waved a hand in the air. “It’s not equipment you need,” he said. He tapped a finger against the side of his nose. “It’s understanding. And time. And, if you like, a little persuasion.”

“Persuasion?”

“You have to *persuade* the plants,” Ben said, as though Jake were being slow. “In their own way, of course. Allow them to become everything they want to be. It’s all about potential, showing them the way. A bit of a nudge. I just– I help them. They’re happy enough to do the rest. Simple, really.” He frowned.

Jake stared, but the old man was already turning away.

Ben dragged a heavy piece of sisal from under a bench. It was covered in spiky green bundles that looked like curled-up insects. He prised one away from the rest, pushed some wire through its centre and bound it to a piece of bark.

“Meet the bromeliads,” he said, and laughed.

“Amazing,” said Jake.

“Not really. Any child could grow them. They’re known as air plants, since they don’t need soil.”

Jake glanced down to where more of the growths protruded from clay pots. Ben took hold of one and pulled. The bromeliad popped out and he demonstrated, like a magician, that there was no soil inside.

“They have scales on their leaves that take water from the air. They feed the same way. They don’t need roots, since their leaves *are* their roots. They’re quite happy here.”

He cast the pot aside and placed the plant on his palm.

“They grow in the rainforest. Humidity, you see. Semi-shade. Most of them like a bit of sunshine...” He stared down thoughtfully, rubbing his chin. Dust flaked from the bristles onto his torn shirt: earth or skin, Jake couldn’t tell.

Outside, Jake paused. Kenyon’s face had an orange cast from the failing light. The glow seemed to settle on him. His eyebrows were highlighted for a moment. They were long and straggly, and made Jake think of scissors.

“Do you like my latest project?”

Jake nodded. “Do you have anything else? Like the hearts?”

“Depends what you mean. I don’t have anything that works in quite that way. My little alchemists.” He chuckled. “Plants, you know. They love the earth. They want to help, if we only let them. You don’t need laboratories, white coats, all that.” He smiled. “Magic, hmm? A little magic. That’s what the earth needs now.”

“You know what, Mr Kenyon –”

Ben smiled. “You have to go.”

“He hasn’t a clue.” Jake made the call before he’d reached the end of the drive. “He’s half crazy. He knows what the hearts can do but not what they’re worth. And he’d give it away to anyone who came asking.”

He listened. “Nothing of interest.” A pause. “No. We’ve been watching. No one else has come sniffing, but they will.”

He nodded, pushing down the accelerator as he neared open road. “Do it,” he said. “Close him down.”

* * *

Inside the chamber, red hearts grew. Some were tall, the height of a man, but looked weak and sick. More grew inside deep cylinders of translucent, gel, but they too looked close to death.

“We can’t isolate the active component,” Thomas said.

Jake looked around. The lab was full of research microscopes, chromatographs, gas and other particle analysers, other things he couldn’t name. “You don’t seem to understand the urgency.”

“You don’t understand the difficulty. As soon as we interfere with the basic plant structure, the Kenyon structure, the plants don’t flourish.”

“However they work, we need to accelerate it. It has to work better. Instantly.”

“It isn’t like that. It takes time to act. Months.”

“So far.”

Jake gazed into the chamber, where everything was controlled. Temperature. Humidity. Pressure. Everything, it seemed, except Kenyon’s plants. He shook his head. “We need this. It isn’t just a matter of radioactive clean-up. If we can perfect this, we could use it anywhere. If we could turn it into other kinds of material...”

“You really think we can do that.”

“Don’t you? Think about it. If we can create a shield...”

Thomas turned an incredulous eye on Jake but the younger man stared steadily back. “A defence system, Thomas.” He said. “Not what Kenyon had in mind, but...” he let his voice trail away.

Thomas remained silent until Jake turned to leave, then called him back. “About the old man,” he said. “He wants to see you.”

Ben looked fragile against the whiteness of his room, pale without the grains of earth lining his face and hands. The harsh lighting made his worn clothing look unkempt, more vagrant than gardener. The white hairs protruding from his eyebrows and ears added to the effect.

“Mr Kenyon,” Jake said. “I trust you have everything you need.”

“Not really, son. Not really.”

“I’m sure it’s just a temporary precaution.”

Jake paused as Ben broke into a fit of coughing.

“Aye, lad. You would say that. You know and I know I’m not going home.”

Jake began to protest, but Ben cut him short.

“I was wrong, lad. You know that? I was trying to help. The hearts, they could be used for so much good. If we only let them.”

“I’m sure they will, Mr...”

“No.” Ben’s words were interrupted with more coughing. “No, they won’t. You’ll keep them to yourself. And people will suffer for it.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way.”

“No, you’re not. Not yet.”

Jake shook his head, and looked around the room to avoid Ben’s eyes. There was a plastic chair, a plastic table, an iron bed. There were no windows. But under the table, on a piece of old cloth, things were growing. Silvery green plants that looked like so many curled, dead spiders.

Ben followed his gaze. “An old man needs something,” he said. “At least leave me my hobby.”

That night, Jake dreamed of his father. The old man had become frail after Jake’s mother died. He was in a home, and it stank of disinfectant and age. He shuffled around in his slippers, from chair to chair and room to room.

“Sit with me, Dad,” Jake said, but his father was restless, always wanting to be somewhere else. And although his father had chosen the home himself, there was always this undercurrent of resentment. Occasionally, when he knew that Jake was watching, he would pick a desiccated plant off a windowsill and prod at its base, scattering dry leaves and soil.

In Jake’s dream, the flaking leaves filled his lungs and he began to choke, trying to dislodge an itch that wouldn’t be shaken off. He woke, still coughing, his body shaking.

The next time Jake saw Ben Kenyon, the old man was dead. He had been laid on a slab and covered by a white sheet. Jake lifted it and saw protruding ribs and grey, wasted skin. Kenyon had seemed so healthy before, weathered and lined, but tanned and wholesome.

He stared before putting a hand to his mouth and letting out a hacking cough, doubling over with its force.

Another coughing fit racked Jake as he left. He put a hand to his chest as a pain gripped him. He tried to draw in a deep breath and doubled over, feeling the air bubbling and wheezing in his lungs.

He thought of Ben Kenyon’s wasted body. And he wondered, for the first time, how he had died.

Thomas was poring over the red hearts and did not look up as Jake entered the lab.

“Getting anywhere?” Jake said.

“Nowhere significant.”

“I need to ask you about Kenyon.”

Thomas paused then turned to face him. "Poor old devil. He shouldn't have been locked away in there. Not for his last days."

"Did you see him? Before?"

"I did. And you know what? He said you'd come around. When he was gone."

"Why?"

"He just said, given some time, you'd want to listen. He asked me to give you a message."

Jake waited.

"He said, if he'd wanted to save the earth, he was aiming at the wrong thing," Thomas said. "The wrong thing, entirely."

Jake was in his room on the compound when they came. For a moment he thought they were looking for radiation and checked the levels on the monitor he always wore. It was well within limits.

"We need you to come with us." The voice, through the breathing apparatus, was distant and metallic.

"Why?"

The man didn't answer. He just held out his hand.

What had killed Ben Kenyon?

The question played again and again through Jake's mind as he lay inside the isolation tent, tended by people whose faces he could not see. They came and went, checking monitors, writing on clipboards. They wore breathing masks in spite of the plastic that framed him like a shiny mosquito net.

The pain was fierce now, like knives in his chest, and yet distant as though it was happening to someone else. He glanced at the drip in his arm and wondered how many painkillers they were giving him. It hadn't stopped the coughing.

He couldn't remember if it had been three days or four, but he knew that he was wasting. He was thinner now.

That afternoon they brought someone in on a trolley. Jake saw sandy hair, greasy and plastered to the skull. It was Thomas. He slept for a long time, shaking now and then with great, rasping coughs. His breathing, like Jake's, sounded asthmatic.

"So. Me too." Eventually his voice, thin and quiet, rose from the sheets.

"What happened? What is it?"

"People are down with it all over the base. It's spreading."

"Thomas. Tell me. What the hell is it?"

His colleague let out a rasping laugh. "A parting gift. The old man was working on it right under our noses." Then he slept.

"Bromeliads," Thomas said later. "It's a sort of plant." The medics had roused them both, encouraging them to eat.

"They're lodged in the lung tissue. They found it in the old man. His body was riddled with it." He turned his head to look at Jake.

"That's when they went for you. They'd heard you coughing, just like him. That's how it starts. The seeds are so small you can't see them. And when you cough, it spreads. Just like cold or flu."

"Can't they take it out?" Jake thought of green coils, feeling their way through his body.

Thomas gave a grim smile. "They lodge too deep. Get entwined, right inside the alveoli. They tried to extract it with you – don't you remember? But short of removing your lungs..."

"It's growing inside me?"

"Perfectly adapted. It likes the humidity. Takes nutrients from the air, as it passes into the lung. It even likes the dark. We don't know how he did it. No one should be able to do it."

"They wanted to help," said Jake under his breath, and lay there for a while, listening to the hum of quietly working monitors.

Then he turned to Thomas. "How long?"

"They don't know. They can't be sure when Kenyon infected himself. But they suspect it didn't take long. And this..." Thomas waved around at all the trappings of quarantine. "It's too late. It's out. How many times have you been off base since you saw Kenyon? How many times have I? I saw my wife. My neighbour. How many people do you cough over in a trip to the supermarket?" Tears gathered in the man's eyes. "How many?"

Jake dreamed again that night. His father was looking out over the garden, his bags in the hall. For a long time he stood, ignoring Jake's questions of "Is it time to go, do you think?"

The herb garden was dug in, the shed dismantled. It had been a long time since his father had been able to manage. Eventually, as ivy crept over everything and dandelions sprouted, Jake had suggested a gardener.

He had cut back the shrubbery and turfed over the vegetable patch. It would make it easier to manage, said Jake.

"Easier to sell," replied his father.

In his dream, Jake's lungs were filling with the detritus of his father's life. As he breathed, grass clippings entered his nostrils, filling his head

with their sappy scent. He opened his mouth, trying to take in fresh air. He could smell the dry, earthy residue of empty pots, the mulch spread across the beds. There was a plastic smell too, the black sheeting he'd bought to underpin the new gravel, to prevent anything from growing through it. He tried to speak. Tried to breathe, but it wrapped itself around him, tighter and tighter.

His father took it from him. "Never mind this," he said. "You should grow things. Let them be."

And Jake felt them, entering his lungs. Finding a place to take root.

"I am, Dad," he said. "I am. We all are."

SCIENCE FICTION

Friendly

David Tallerman

I tell you truly, it wasn't the most interesting sporting event I've been to.

In terms of location, it was something like being at the Super Bowl, if the Super Bowl was bright lilac and had water running down the tiers. There was water everywhere on the Xoob home world; thanks to one of many biological peculiarities, they liked to stay in contact with it at all times.

That aside, the major difference from the Super Bowl, or any other Earth-bound sporting event, was that absolutely nothing was happening.

My attaché had tried to explain the rules beforehand: I knew there were six players on each side, that there were goals at each point of the triangular pitch, and that the match ran to about three earth hours, give or take. After that the language barrier had started to cause problems... something about there being two balls, one real and the other imaginary, at least I thought that was what he'd said.

What I'd managed to gather for myself was that it was less about what you did and more about how you did it. Imagine if you will a cross between netball, ballet and street-theatre, except with a lot more tenta-

cles. What you'll end up with is something like what I sat watching: a dozen weird-looking aliens standing up to their hind flippers in lukewarm water, doing not a lot of anything.

Two and a half hours in the only thing keeping me awake was diplomatic responsibility, and that only barely. Phil seemed to be enjoying himself, though. Every so often he'd lurch out of his seat and give a gurgling cheer, which would be echoed from around the stadium. Occasionally he shouted something in his native tongue down at the pitch.

None of the excitement seemed to equate in any way to what was going on beneath us.

Maybe it would have helped if I could speak their language. Yet I couldn't honestly feel bad for not learning it; the average sentence sounded like somebody loudly breaking wind while eating spaghetti. I did wish I could at least pronounce their names, though, or at least that of the Xoob who'd been looking after me for the last two weeks. I'd taken to calling him Phil, which was fairly embarrassing given how well he'd grasped Earth Uniform.

After one particularly spectacular display of non-eventfulness from the pitch, he turned to me and said, "So my friend, you are enjoying, yes?"

"Yeah Phil, I'm thrilled." Fortunately the Xoob have no concept of sarcasm. Still, I didn't want to risk causing offence. From what Phil had told me, this was the final event of the season, and for me to have been invited was a rare honour. So I added, by way of explanation, "But our sports back home... they're a bit more physical, you know?"

This was no off-hand remark. Perhaps I couldn't have declined the offer without sparking a diplomatic incident, but either way I had my own agenda. In a way, the fate of our two races hung on Phil's response.

For a long time humanity had been shame-faced about its inherent tendency towards violence. A couple of centuries ago we'd finally grown out of that, and accepted that a mix of pushing, shouting and hitting, with the occasional act of mass slaughter, was pretty much where we were at as a species.

After that, the only trouble had been finding like-minded races. We wanted to trade, gain knowledge and perhaps expand our sphere of influence a little, but we sure as hell didn't want to do it with anybody who got on their high horse with us. And that, unfortunately, had been just about everybody. For most, spiritual enlightenment and pacification had been an integral part of their ascent to the stars.

The last thing we needed was a repeat of the Barbelii fiasco. One

minute they were all smiles and flowers, the next they were leaning on us to disarm our warship fleet. Things had quickly turned sour between us; from what I hear, their home world still glows on dark nights. After that, our intergalactic rep became pretty lousy.

But the Xoob wanted to talk to us. Hell, they'd gone out of their way to find us.

So here I was in the heart of their empire, with soaking wet feet, watching the dullest entertainment ever conceived by a sentient race. "For us, Phil, sports are a way to manage our aggressions. Sure we have others, plenty of them, but a good game of football or grapple-grav is by far the safest. Nobody gets seriously hurt and everybody feels a whole lot calmer afterwards."

You see now why it was such a loaded question? In two weeks on their planet I hadn't seen so much as a mugging. Their trade portfolio looked promising, they were offering us some juicy tech, but if their sport was as peaceful as the rest of their culture then the deal was surely off.

Phil dragged his attention away from the "action" on pitch with some difficulty. Perhaps there was something particularly thrilling going on that I was missing. "Ah yes, my friend, we have heard you are an aggressive people." While it didn't sound like a criticism, it was hard to tell with that accent. "We too think violence is good fun, when the time is right."

Well, that was inconclusive, to say the least. I was curious as to when this right time might be, but I didn't want to press it right then. Something told me that the on-pitch excitement was drawing to some kind of a climax.

Both of the teams were naked, the Xoob don't hold with clothing, but I knew that one lot were from the southern hemisphere, the others from the far north. The northerners were pale-yellow in colour, the southerners a deep orange like Phil, and since he was backing his home team I'd decided it would be politick for me to do the same. Out of sheer boredom I'd named them after players from my own home team, the Istanbul Lemurs. At the moment, Mardin and Nesin were concentrating on a leisurely passing game with the real ball over towards the top-right corner of the triangle. As far as I could tell, though, the serious play was with Byzas down in the bottom left. From the way he was flailing his tentacles I figured he must have hold of the imaginary ball, and be about to do something dramatic.

If he did it passed me by completely; after five minutes of writhing appendages, I gave up again.

"Phil," I said, "you seem like a very happy people, very calm and

untroubled. I respect that, I do, Lord knows we humans haven't ever managed to be peaceful for very long."

"Yes," replied Phil, without turning to look at me. "Most times we are happy. Most times we are at peace."

He was totally concentrated on the match. Perhaps I should have just left him alone, but I was so damn sick of his stupid sport, and for that matter of his stupid planet. "So, about this deal..."

"Yes, good deal, eh?" he replied, still not looking at me. "We have many wonders to trade, many lovely devices."

"Sure Phil, that's all great. I guess what I'm worried about is – well, are we *culturally* compatible, you know? A good treaty is like a good marriage –" At that point I remembered that the Xoob reproduced asexually. I should never have got into the habit of calling Phil "he" – or calling him "Phil", for that matter.

Luckily, he wasn't paying me a shred of notice. "Excuse me my friend, it is nearly done, just this point to be scoring and the glorious south will be victors..."

Sure enough, down on the pitch, Byzas was making a break for it. Actually, that's an overly melodramatic phrase for what was really going on: he was trudging slowly across the field, with much wild flailing of tentacles and jiggling of eye-stalks. Nobody on the opposition team was making any effort to stop his flamboyant waltz to glory.

Finally, half way to the far point, Byzas stopped, with a particularly extravagant gesture towards the goal. There was a moment of stunned silence, and then cheers erupted in all directions, sounding to my human ears like an army trying to yodel with their mouths full of peanut butter. Beside me, Phil leapt out of his seat again and took up the chant, showing more enthusiasm than I'd seen him put into anything else over the last two weeks.

Meanwhile, at the edge of the stands, the crowd had already begun clambering over the low barricades, in the first wave of a pitch invasion that was more spectacular than the game that had preceded it. As each row cascaded onto the field, the one behind jostled eagerly to follow.

Ah, I thought, that's one thing we've got in common at least; they're probably going to carry off Byzas on their shoulders. Not that they really have shoulders...

But the crowd were ignoring Byzas and his fellow victors. Instead they were going straight for the losing side, who were huddled in the centre of the field. While even after two weeks I still wasn't much good at reading Xoob physiognomy, if I'd had to gamble I'd have described the look on their faces as one of abject terror.

Soon the lemon-yellow bodies of the defeated northern team were invisible beneath a sprawl of tangerine-coloured southerners. I stood gaping, wondering what on Earth could be going on down there.

A moment later it became abundantly clear. Turquoise blood geysered from the centre of the huddle and rained over the spreading crowd. It was followed by a hunk of livid yellow meat that arced from the centre, only to be caught and hurled further outwards until it ended its journey with a wet slap in the stands.

The screams from the centre were muted by the weight of bodies and by the frenzied cheering of the mob. They were no less appalling for all that.

Phil tapping me on the shoulder dragged my attention away from the gory drama below. I realised that the row in front of us were already hurrying down, and that we were next. Phil was poised, with one flipper already on the lower level. He waited long enough to shout, "I'm sorry, my good friend, since you are not of our kind I cannot invite you to the victory dismemberment," before charging off to join in the excitement.

"That's okay, Phil," I called back, "You knock yourself out."

I grinned at his retreating back, full of the warm and fuzzy feeling of one who gets to go home with good news.

"And once you're done we can talk about getting that treaty signed..."

SCIENCE FICTION

Nu-Topia: Before the Fall

Glynn Barrass

Police Captain Jan was sat before his desk reading progress reports when the call came through, first from a subordinate and then from the August Array itself.

“Sir, sorry to disturb you,” came the voice inside his ear mike.

He sighed, dropped the plastic sheet he was examining and said, “Go on.”

The voice became more hesitant now. “Well... I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but the AA wants an audience with you.”

“Oh crap, nice one,” came his first reply; he hated speaking to the satellite, it always came across so... surly. This thought made him revise his next words.

“Okay son, thank you. Patch it through.”

The August Array didn’t apologise for the interruption, it didn’t even say hello. Instead, its abrupt, artificial voice stated, “LOSS OF SIGNAL IN YOUR SECTOR. INVESTIGATE.”

Jan rubbed his stubbly scalp, newly shaven by his wife the night before. “I run a big sector. How about some clues?”

In way of reply, a transparent rectangular screen appeared across the empty air before him. It flickered and its surface became a map.

Just hack into our computers, why don't you? he thought and tutted.

The map displayed Gen-City, his city, with his sector shaded pink. The map grew, closing in on his sector before dividing it neatly into grids. The pink disappeared and a square near the top right-hand corner turned red.

“That’s still a large area to cover.” Jan reached into his shirt pocket and removed a tub of indigestion pills. “But if I had more men?”

“THE ALLOCATION OF RESOURCES IS NOT IN ISSUE.” The reply was as sour as the pain in his gut. “I WILL NARROW DOWN THE SCOPE OF YOUR MISSION PRESENTLY.”

“Of course...” Jan muttered beneath his breath. He popped and swal-

lowed two yellow pills. The tub went back inside his pocket. "How long will it take?"

"YOUR MISSION: UNKNOWN AND DEPENDANT ON THE EFFICIENCY OF YOUR MEN. MY SEARCH: UP TO 48 HOURS."

Jan sneered. "That long?"

The Array was quick to retort, "THE SIGNAL IS WEAK. GOODBYE."

And at this, the screen disappeared and the Array was gone. The pain in his stomach eased considerably. Jan sighed. He was about to return to his work when a buzz at the door intercom had him turning to glower in its direction.

"Come in," he growled.

The door slid open and one of his officers stood revealed between its frames. Detective Kayleigh. *Good officer*. Uniformed in black she held her cap in her hands and appeared nervous in demeanor. News of his contact from the Array must have gotten around. Her shaven head bore perspiration across the brow.

"Sir, what's the news?"

He waved her in. Stepping forward, Kayleigh raised her hand and performed a quick salute.

The door slid closed and she approached the desk. Turning to face the desk himself he addressed the precinct's own, earthbound computer.

"Sissy." Their pet name for it. "Bring up the map the Arsehole Array just showed me."

Kayleigh halted beside him. He smelled gun oil and vanilla.

A female voice, Sissy's, said, "Here we go, sir." The map re-appeared, highlighted grid and all.

"Another one!"

Jan turned at his subordinate's outburst. Her pretty face bore a dour expression.

He gave her a nod before turning back to the screen. "That's eighteen this year, Kay, and it's only June."

"Idiots," she replied, "why the hell disable your mood chip? It's what makes life bearable."

Jan nodded in agreement, the chip behind his ear itching in silent acknowledgement.

Again turning to the detective, he said, "Gather a team. Advise them: Dissident Code 3."

Kayleigh, saluting, said, "Yes sir."

"Dismissed," he said.

She turned away. He turned back to the screen.

Half a dozen footsteps later and she was gone.

“Nowhere to run,” he said, addressing the now empty room. Beyond the map, and mounted to the wall beyond his desk, lay a row of medals and citations.

He did a good job, both for his sector and the Array.

“Where in Nu-Topia did you find that grotesquerie?”

Brother Pele, as usual, had succeeded in finding an obsolete word to use in a sentence.

Sweet Seena, snorting in Pele’s direction, said, “Where d’ya tink he found it, in a skip of course!”

“Nope,” Long John said, patting the “grotesquerie” he stood beside. “I got it from the goodwill story below East 53rd.”

Seena snorted and guffawed, “You bin slumming it boy?”

Eunjee observed this interaction with a headache on her mind and a yawn stifled in her throat. She missed Long John’s retort because now that she knew the “where”, she was trying to discern the “what”.

John’s latest prize (and he was a yard-sale-king-rat) bore an air of mystery about it. Sweet Seena and Pele flanked it to the left, Long John standing to its right. And atop a table and between the three: a three-foot tall metallic box, riddled with holes and a tarnished brass in colour. It stood there looking macabre, archaic, and quite useless in function.

Hell I’m turning into Pele! Eunjee laughed, and all heads turned to her.

“Whut?” Sweet Seena asked, Eunjee replying with, “I just wanna know what it does?”

“If anything,” Pele added in solemn tones.

“Well,” John said, “I’ve tried this...” He stuck the fingers of his left hand into the box. Then, standing a little before the box, he lowered his lanky form and placed the fingers of his other inside it. He proceeded to grunt, and grunt. Then, he roared a little.

“Better hope there’s nothing residing in there.”

Brother Pele, of course.

“If so I would think it’d be dead by now,” Long John said, releasing the box and ending his struggle. He turned to face the three. “I’ve tried shaking it too, and prodding the insides with a stick.”

“And?” Eunjee released the yawn. Held back for an age, it escaped with a whisper.

“And?” Seena repeated.

“I think it’s got clockwork innards.”

“Oh.” Seena mouthed the “O”.

Brother Pele slapped himself across the forehead. “Doh!”

Eunjee shook her head. Long John looked at her, then the others, and by the look on *his* face, this was not the response he was expecting.

“So whut did this box of clockwork crap set ya back for?” Sweet Seena asked.

Eunjee missed the reply because her head was starting to thump intolerably. Again.

The headache had started three days earlier, not long after she'd illegally disabled her mood chip. None of her friends were aware of this, and her fear of being discovered and taken away by the authorities had proven unfounded, so far.

But she did bear quite a different mindset than she had a few days earlier. This is probably why she found herself standing and saying, “Screw this guys, I'm going home.”

Sweet Seena's pink Mohawk shot up in alarm. Everyone knew that Seena had a girl crush on Eunjee.

“Home already?” Seena blustered, but Eunjee, having retrieved her kagoul from beside her chair, was already heading toward the door.

She needed space, and some way to escape her pounding headache.

“Hey, well I was gonna get some drinks in,” Long John protested.

“Thai sushi too,” Brother Pele added before nodding and saying, “Hey, hey?”

But Eunjee had already dragged on her kagoul, its blue nylon snug around her as she zipped it up.

“Eunjee, hey?” Seena said.

“Not well guys, later,” Eunjee muttered as she reached and opened the door. It was raining outside, the emerald-green of Nu-Topia's sky dotted with bubbling black storm clouds. Eunjee pulled the door shut, pulling on her hood a moment later.

“What's the matter with her?” Long John said to no one in particular. He was on his knees now, poking at the box with a screwdriver.

Pele scratched his chin. “Time of the month perhaps?”

Seena scowled at him and swore.

The roofed corridor provided a little shelter, but the rain seemed determined to defy gravity and get at her regardless. Thus, as she turned left from Long John's apartment she found herself being spattered with rainwater.

Long John's building looked grubby today: dirty bricked and full of dank, cobwebby corners. The concrete beneath her feet lay cracked and dotted with sputtering pools.

“Everything's friggin' grubby!” she snapped while turning a corner.

Her loud retort dislodged a pigeon trying to shelter from the rain. Shocked, she shrieked as it flapped away towards the sky.

Dirty wings tossed water into her eyes. She waved a fist at the departing pigeon before continuing on her way.

Halting before the elevator she said, "Ground floor please," tapping her foot in a puddle whilst waiting for its arrival. She'd never been so impatient, or so quick to anger at inconsequential things.

Not until the demise of her chip, anyway.

The trouble began when a guy she'd met in a bar started telling her about old Earth myths. His smile had been way too nice for his pock-marked face and yellowing, uneven teeth. He'd attempted charm and intellectual converse regardless.

The guy's chat up lines had failed, but upon going home (alone), Eunjee, her interest piqued, booted up her laptop to perform a Google search using the parameters: "urban myths old earth".

Amongst the plethora of crap such as: "Spring-heeled Jack, THE TRUTH!" and "David Icke was right – monsters beneath us", she'd discovered a page titled: "Disable your implant chip, live a real life." Beside it had been the words: "Right click the link and press print, DO NOT access the site directly."

Eunjee had followed the instructions to the letter, causing the printer beneath her bed to screech loudly for paper. For want of new sheets she'd utilised the backs of old college papers. She'd then followed the printed instructions tentatively, and with curiosity. Her world had gone mad from then onwards.

The elevator opened and a neutral voice within said, "Please enter, miss."

Eunjee obeyed absentmindedly as she replayed the events that had led to her awful headache.

After disabling her mood chip, she'd slept the night normally, only to wake with the headache beating heavily against her skull.

That had been symptom the first. It was no hangover for she hadn't drunk any alcohol the night before.

Throughout that day, a Saturday and a day off work, the first major difference she noticed was the anger she felt when her mutant tarantula, Cat, crapped on the kitchen floor. She'd put the spider out and cleaned the mess up while swearing like a sailor.

Symptom two: overt anger.

Then she'd gotten all upset whilst watching a TV show, and that night was the first time she'd suffered insomnia in her life.

But during that first, ominous day, her head had felt clear like never before. Something inside her had changed radically.

The elevator door opened and she hadn't even realised it had been speaking to her. "Miss," it repeated, its artificial voice rising in concern, "are you okay?"

Flustered, Eunjee left the elevator. Two people had been waiting to enter its confines, an old lady now staring at her from bug-like, artificial eyes, and a grinning Chinese man dressed in a gaudy purple suit.

She stepped between them with her head down and a small apology on her lips. After quickly checking the street for traffic, she crossed it without looking back.

She quickly reached the opposite pavement, an area strewn with puddles and flanked by a waist-high metal safety rail. The rain had diminished considerably since her elevator trip and now attacked her and the puddles with feeble, halfhearted taps.

Halting at the rail, she found herself looking down at the canyon-like depths of the undercity and the thought appeared unbidden: how simple it would be to commit suicide here.

"Jeez!" she said, "where did that come from?" The view below, that of decrepit buildings and packed spaghetti junctions, bore no reply.

A sudden wave of vertigo sent Eunjee staggering back from the rail. She'd never suffered from a fear of heights before either.

Symptom the... Oh there were too many now!

She headed down the path with the handrail looming ominously on her right. A cloud of smoke spewing up from a drain-hole forced her to veer back towards the handrail and her heart skipped a beat.

Everything about her world was turning ugly, and frightening.

But more beautiful too... as she discovered that very night whilst staring up at the stars beyond her skylight.

In bed now, she'd just towelled herself down after a steaming bath of water and lavender. Her headache seemed to have finally given up the ghost; sucked down the plughole with the water and perfume she'd immersed herself in for well over an hour.

How the stars were different Eunjee couldn't say. They just appeared more... invigorating? She didn't know. Eunjee just felt glad that there was some sweet to accompany the bitter she'd felt whilst heading home from Long John's.

That bitterness had continued after she'd stepped inside her apartment to discover eighteen missed call logs, all from Seena. Improving her mood after that had taken a while, the rest of the afternoon in fact. But

she now lay naked on her bedcovers gazing up at a sky that appeared different in strange and unknown ways.

“Greenwich Invisibles,” she said.

The stars beamed down on her impassively. She placed her hands behind her still-wet hair and continued staring up at them. A few minutes later and she had an idea. “Computer, when does the B-9X Nebula pass into view?”

“Two hours and fifteen minutes, miss. Shall I wake you when it is in view?”

“Please,” Eunjee said, wondering how beautiful *that* would look when the humble stars bore such a brilliant effect. Then, “Is Cat asleep?”

“Yes, miss. Should I wake her?”

“Nope,” Eunjee replied. She turned on her side hoping that the gods of sleep would be generous to her too.

Eunjee did sleep, right through the alarm and only waking when the nightmare she was suffering became too much to bear.

Armed men, wearing gas masks and shiny black beetle armour, had burst into her bedroom and surrounded her. They were pointing ugly machine-guns at her face, their trigger fingers ready. The intercom said, in Seena’s squeaky voice, “You’re not a Greenwich Invisible now sweetie!” and the men opened fire.

Eunjee woke with a scream, wet with sweat and wrapped uncomfortably in her bedsheets. She freed herself with difficulty and after a few moments of disorientation realised that it was daytime and then realised that this was wrong.

The spider was scratching at the door, hissing for breakfast. Rubbing her eyes clear of sleep, Eunjee blinked at the skylight and saw green where there should have been nebulae. She also felt like shit. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d suffered a nightmare.

Still nervous of the phantom guns and icky with sweat, she pulled the sodden sheets around her and said, “Computer?”

Cat complained loudly at the sound of her voice. The computer said, “I was unable to wake you, miss, but felt that you needed the rest.”

“S’okay.”

Eunjee yawned, stretched, and sat up. She felt far from okay. At least the headache hadn’t made a reappearance.

She pulled on her slippers before heading for the shower, still naked. The spider assailed her legs as she left the bedroom but she said, “Shoo, puss.”

Pausing at the bathroom door she said, "Computer, how many sick days do I have left?"

"Three, miss."

"Well, contact work and tell them I'm still ill."

She hadn't felt right for work for two days now, not since the morning after she'd disabled her chip. As she stepped into the bathroom Eunjee wondered whether she would ever feel right again.

"Medium hot," she said, and the water in the shower unit started pumping.

Minco Pharmaceuticals would have to do without their marine biologist for at least another day.

The end of the shower left Eunjee with two options. One: hand herself in to the authorities and explain what she'd done. Two: roll with it and see how things went.

Stepping from the shower unit she retrieved a towel and rubbed herself down. Noticing her steam-soaked reflection in the sink mirror she stepped towards it to rub a patch clear.

A sad-eyed, olive skinned face stared back at her.

"Eunjee, what have you done?" she asked and the reflection mimed the words back.

Her first option might see her imprisoned, or worse, the second... a world without end?

Eunjee left the bathroom, got dressed in the bedroom, and finally fed the still complaining spider.

Minutes later and she was sat on the kitchen worktop eating a breakfast banana. The spider jumped onto the worktop with a squeak and began nuzzling her side. It tickled, she giggled, and placing the now empty banana skin beside her she pulled the spider onto her lap and began petting it. The striped fur felt good beneath her fingers. The content sounds her attention elicited made her feel content also.

Petting the spider never used to feel this good. *Have I spent my life numbed?*

Moving the spider from her lap she headed towards the bedroom. This was where the printouts lay, and Eunjee needed to examine them again.

Crouching on the carpet she retrieved the sheets. Crossing her legs she started to read. Apart from the instructions for disabling the chip there wasn't really much information to be found, or propaganda either. And there was no telephone or vidphone number to call once the task had been completed.

Just these words at the bottom of the second page: *"New sensations,*

experiences! Now that you see the world as it really is, share your future. You have the power! – Greenwich Invisibles.”

Greenwich. Was that their base of operations?

Greenwich was miles down south and she doubted whether they had a directory listing. And searching for them on the authority monitored web? Dangerous.

A bird's twitter of a signal informed her the phone was ringing. It ceased after a few seconds, the computer having answered it.

“Miss,” the intercom said, “Seena is on the line.”

Eunjee licked her lips. “Put her through,” she said, folding the print-outs into a square before placing them in her jeans pocket.

Share your future. You have the power!

And she was going to share it.

The elevator opened and Jan found himself looking out at the precinct's wide, flat-planed rooftop. It doubled as a landing bay. Its grey expanse was dull in comparison to Nu-Topia's clear morning sky, the monotony of the grey dispersed only by the bright yellow landing stripes, and the grounded shuttles.

The sun was bright and sent the most distant parts of the roof hazy with the heat. He took one last drag on his cigarette before tossing it to the tarmac. The shuttles lay before him like huge misshapen bugs.

Striped in grey and yellow, they carried bulky round antigravity units on their sides and bore cockpits jutting with guns. The one nearest him had a small group of armour-clad police officers stood beside its rear hatch. Dressed in the same black beetle armour as him, they held machine pistols at their waists and bore smoke grenades clipped to their chest-pieces. Jan approached them quickly: this was his gig to order.

Word from the array, received earlier that morning, had given Jan a far narrower field for finding this latest dissident. Having minutes earlier ordered his officers to mobilise, he approached them wondering just how much death the morning would bring.

Where disturbed citizens were concerned, things sometimes got messy.

Twenty feet away and they ceased their conversation and turned to salute him. Kay was there, the only female in the group, plus Bryant, Shylock and Tannhäuser.

Good officers. Even the humans.

One of the precinct's many worker androids was waiting for him. A blue-shelled, hulking bear of a machine, its muzzled face lay covered in antenna. Bigboy was tapped directly into the array and was to be their

sniffer dog once they reached their destination. His body was bulletproof and his wrists were rimmed with guns.

Ten feet away now and Bryant turned to the open hatch and shouted, "power up!" He turned back and he, like the others, stared at Jan expectantly.

Kay smiled. Tannhäuser's face could not disguise his nervousness.

Pausing before them, Jan saluted. "Saddle up, lock and load."

"Yes, sir!" came many voices at once. Beside them the shuttle hummed to life.

Bigboy entered first, the shuttle creaking loudly at his weight. Jan's officers followed.

He followed them inside feeling a nervousness he dared not share.

"You did whut to your whut now?"

Sweet Seena, sat before her in a biker jacket, gloves, plastic shorts, ripped holdups and a pair of Snake Plissken boots, was punked up to hell in her exasperation. Her Mohawk, dyed blue to match the colour of her stockings, formed a question mark. Her eyes, thick with mascara, glared wide.

"I tried life without my chip. That's all."

"That's all?" Seena's voice turned all jittery. The puppy-like attention of hugs and kisses she'd assailed Eunjee with upon first entering her apartment were now things of the past. The bag of doughnuts she'd brought lay unopened beside her feet.

Eunjee sat cross-legged on the carpet, the spider on her lap and a steaming mug of camomile tea in her hands.

The Greenwich Invisibles' printouts lay between her and Seena. Seena was cross-legged herself, sat on the couch facing Eunjee.

Seena put her hands to her face with drama queen efficiency. It looked tiny between the thick leather gloves.

"This is sooo bad-done-by." Seena rocked back and forth a few seconds before stopping and slapping her palms onto her knees. Cat jumped and Eunjee spilled her tea.

"I know," Seena said, her face all smiles where mere seconds earlier she'd fronted a mask of despair. "We just say it was by accident! Call the hospital and say it was so!"

Eunjee stared. Seena stared back and gawped.

"Yeah?" said the gawping mouth.

Eunjee petted the spider and continued to stare.

It was time she took advantage of Sweet Seena's Eunjee-devotion.

“Read these pages,” she said, putting her mug down on the carpet, followed by, “and know that you can trust me implicitly.”

Seena looked at the pages hesitantly before saying, “They won’t hurt me will they?”

She gave Seena her best false smile. “Not in the least.”

Climbing to her knees, Seena proceeded to pull her gloves off with her teeth, spitting the right one to her left and the left one to her right.

She picked up the sheets and started to read; she mouthed the script silently as she did.

Eunjee’s impatience was balanced only by the fear of what she was about to do. Seena put the sheets down. She stared at Eunjee in dumb-founded innocence.

“I dunno,” she said, pouting. Her Mohawk had slumped considerably. “I don’t tink I get it.”

But Eunjee got it; she was going to have to be forceful to get her way.

She stood, held out her hand, and said in a voice dipped with honey, “Trust me.”

Seena looked up, all doe-eyed and hesitant, before reaching out and accepting the proffered hand.

She said, “Okay let’s do it.”

Eunjee led her to the kitchen, the spider being cheeky at her heels for extra kibble.

Minutes later and the procedure was accomplished.

“Ow!” Seena cried. She clutched her head and stamped her feet. This action sent the spider skittering towards its den. “You didn’t say it’d hurt!”

Panicked, Eunjee approached Seena and embraced her. Petting her friend’s back she hoped most of the reaction was mere drama queen overdrive.

“You didn’t say there’d be a headache,” Seena whispered accusingly before pulling away.

Eunjee stared at Seena and held onto her for a little longer.

In a voice far more collected than usual, Seena stared back, smiled, and said, “Well it’s given me a headache... but what now?”

Eunjee had thought of this already. She let Seena go and said, “Come back to the lounge.”

Seena’s heavy-booted footsteps trailed her in. Eunjee took her previous place with Seena following suit.

Something was different about Seena; Eunjee looked her over but couldn’t quite put her finger on it.

But, Seena’s last question bore an answer.

Her own chip's demise had elicited strong emotional responses, and Seena was well known for hers. Most of the time it was false. Eunjee was about to put it to the test.

"Seena, Sweet Seena," she said, retrieving her mug. "Tell me a song that you like. I mean, one that really gets your emotions welling."

Seena put a hand to her mouth and tapped her bottom lip.

"That's easy," she said, "Future Sound of London, Papua New Guinea. That's an awesome track."

Eunjee realised now what was different about Seena, she was speaking without slang. Putting this aside, she looked up and said, "Computer, did you hear what Seena just said?"

"Yes, miss. I hear all."

"Well in that case, locate the song and put it on loudspeaker."

A second later and the computer complied, the room filling with retro ambient house music.

Examining Seena from behind the mug, Eunjee waited for a reaction, any reaction. There was no Plan B.

Seena had slouched herself back against the couch cushions. She sat up straight now, slapping her hands atop her stockinged knees. She looked around the room wide-eyed; tears welled and fell from black mascara rims.

She glared at Eunjee with her Mohawk straighter than Eunjee had ever seen it. Seena looked dazed.

"Wow!" she said. "This is so funky."

Eunjee smiled.

"I mean this is so cool!" Seena jumped off the couch to grab Eunjee by the shoulders. Eunjee spilled her tea. She didn't mind.

Seena was happy, wildly happy, despite the black trails falling down her cheeks.

The music continued. Seena breathed on Eunjee with minty coffee breath. Her voice brimmed with enthusiasm as she said, "Let's try another song!"

Eunjee nodded.

The next step: Brother Pele and Long John.

It was time for them to see, and feel, the truth.

Jan's shuttle sped between skyscrapers dotted with windows turned gold in the sunlight. The morning's air traffic was almost non-existent. The other vehicles avoided the fast moving shuttle anyway.

Below lay a sea of mist which completely obscured the untidy sprawl of the undercity. Like an ungainly metal ladybug the shuttle darted above

this sea, between the pinnacles of mankind's construction on a mission of sanctioned death.

For those within the shuttle, this outside world lay concealed, for now. Their inner worlds lay filled with nervous anticipation over the task ahead.

Jan examined a thin plastic map displaying the shuttle's current destination. The background conversation distracted him. He left his officers to it without complaint.

Talk was good: it calmed the nerves.

"I just don't think I should take her to a restaurant called 'Piss' is all I'm saying." *Shylock*. Just part of his ongoing monologue over the girl he was dating.

"What do you think Kay?" This from Bryant. "You must go out with guys... right?"

Shylock sputtered and laughed.

"Not as many as you Bryant."

Shylock laughed some more.

"But there's worse names for a restaurant," Kay continued. "Just don't order anything from the menu."

More laughter now, from all but Tannhäuser. Jan looked up to see the half-human staring down in deep concentration. Jan broke this and the conversation by passing the map around for the others to examine.

"Getting warmer," the pilot said, seated half hidden behind his chair and Bigboy. Jan didn't know the lad's name. "Five minutes tops till landing."

Jan looked at his officers. All looked back except for Tannhäuser, still examining the map.

Jan stared back, his placid demeanour masking his inner nervousness.

He said, "Bigboy, some info please," and the android on standby shuddered into life.

Bigboy's voice came loud and in a clipped, English accent: "Illegal operation. Invasion of Privacy Legislation 32-B of the Municipal Code. Do you sanction, sir?"

"Yeah," Jan retorted.

Bigboy replied a moment later. "Location: The Pancake-Ra apartment block, 90th floor. Only resident, Eunjee Cho, Marine Biologist, 18 years of age."

"Young for a dissident," Jan muttered, then, "We got a face?"

"Bet she's ugly," Bryant said. Kay hissed him silent.

"Processing," Bigboy said and a flat screen image appeared between Jan and the others.

It displayed a work card bearing a Korean girl's smiling face. Her black hair was cut into a bob and she was attractive.

Jan gulped.

"Always the pretty ones, what a waste," Bryant said. Kay began bickering with him but Jan ignored it. He was too busy staring at the beautiful girl they were about to arrest, or kill even.

Eunjee Cho stared back and smiled in pure innocence.

Have we got the wrong one? It wouldn't be the first time.

"We're landing, folks," said the pilot.

All the bickering and inward introspection ceased as a mild jolt informed them they had landed.

"Stay frosty," Jan said, standing. To his right, the hatch started to lower with a whine of hydraulics.

The bay was flooded with light. Jan squinted as his men and woman shuffled up behind him.

The hatch-now-ramp was down in seconds. Jan stepped onto it to examine his surroundings. A grey-green roof dotted with satellite dishes and skylights surrounded him. It was a grubby place. A rusted and abandoned hover car accompanied by a couple of flattened tents lay in his immediate vicinity. The tents, one bright red and the other dark blue, lay pooled with algae-filled water.

He sniffed the air, it stank.

Jan stepped from the hatch. His officers followed suit. He turned and found all four standing at attention.

He nodded. Smiling at their efficiency he said, "Bigboy, scan."

The android, a hulking shape within the shuttle bay, made a beeping sound before saying, "Infrared scan says no human entities are present."

Jan swore quietly as Bigboy continued the bad news. "Computer says she left the apartment five minutes ago with another female."

"Shit-sticks!" Jan was less than quiet now. His people remained stolid until he said, "At ease and follow me."

The tension left their bodies. He looked between Kay and Tannhäuser and said, "Bigboy, you stay here and search her computer database and voice records."

Turning to Kay he said, "We'll go down and search the place. Bigboy, point out the skylight for Cho's apartment."

Stomping away from the shuttle Jan let his frustration out onto the roof.

He'd get her though. It was only a matter of time.

She'd found John and Pele in the exact same positions she'd left them in

the day before; the former crouched to the box's right with Pele on its left. There were two major differences though: John bore a disrupter gun whilst Pele was holding a blowtorch.

They'd been about to get down and dirty with both when Eunjee and Seena arrived. Things changed rapidly when Eunjee confessed as to what they'd done.

Pele was outraged, still, Long John having spent the four minutes since their arrival poking at the box with the disrupter. It hummed quietly, on its lowest setting. It was a gentle accompaniment to Pele's anger.

"Again," Pele said, glaring. "You did what to your what now?"

Eunjee experienced a sense of déjà vu.

Seena defended them both. "You've got to try anything once right? John, you're a man of science, kind of." *Good call*, Eunjee thought, *John likes to experiment*. "Testing new experiences is good right?"

"Emotion chips removal instigating new sensations, experiences." Long John muttered and Eunjee experienced another burst of déjà vu. His words were almost verbatim to the Greenwich Invisibles. The print-outs were still in her pocket; she hadn't shown them to anyone, yet.

"How did you?" Eunjee asked but Long John ignored her for a minute while he continued to tinker. He then added, "I disabled my chip around two months ago, after masking the emissions that is."

All heads turned to him now. Pele appeared quite flabbergasted. He tried to get some words out but failed.

Eunjee and Seena shared a look that said, "Whoa!"

Long John continued in a deadpan tone, as even and as steady as the sound from the disrupter. "And you know, strange a coincidence as it may seem, one of the holes in this thing's lid looks just about right for a chip."

As his friends continued to stare, John caused yet another surprise by reaching behind his ear and lifting out his chip. Its removal left an ugly red mark. As he reached towards the box Eunjee said, "How did you?" but John hushed her.

He slipped his chip into the lid, somewhere near the centre, before taking a step back.

"Maybe it's just a money box for mood chips," Pele said, "or maybe..." His words were abruptly cut off, but not by John. The box was starting to do something.

First a whirl from within, muffled but swiftly growing louder. Then, near where John had deposited his chip, the lid slid back.

A dark hole lay there for a second before being replaced by the top of

a brass globe. A few seconds later and it stood fully revealed. Lumpy and dented, it looked around the size of a football.

Seena said, "Trippy," then shrieked and hid her eyes as the globe sprang up to reveal a cylinder surmounted by two glassy red eyes.

Eunjee flinched. It didn't end there.

The globe continued to rise, this time taking the surrounding metal with it in long brassy strips. They formed a partitioned cone. The globe ceased its ascent.

Everyone took a breath.

The box's sides, those that Pele and John faced, flipped back on hidden hinges to fold into themselves intricately. They soon resembled wings.

John looked into the exposed partition with an expression of awe. Pele crouched before his bearing his blowtorch like a gun.

Seena, having lowered her hands, said, "I hope it's not a bomb." Everyone but John took a step back.

The box continued its transformation regardless.

The front collapsed inwardly, forming a rudimentary torso. From behind it flipped a pair of arms, each folded up towards the shoulders. Hewn from sinewy brass, both terminated in a long-taloned hand. The shoulders they grasped fronted a pair of delicately formed wings.

The transformation was almost complete. What once stood square and solid, now sat curved and man-shaped.

Only one element was missing, Eunjee realised. Then, as if in recognition of her thoughts, two legs extended out from the torso's base, fronted by feet with clawed toes. Fully extended, they bent at the knee to transform the table into a seat.

The brass monster was frightening to behold, and also a little beautiful too. Eunjee wondered what it was meant to depict, and if it was finished.

Without warning, the cone beneath the head fanned out into a swath of twisted tentacles. Everyone jumped.

The elevator's confines made Jan feel cramped. This was not helped by Kay and Tannhäuser's stifling presence. The box, on a good day, probably held four comfortably; body armour, guns and the stink of BO made this not a good day.

Still, their journey was to be a short one. The building had eighty floors; their target lived on the sixty-ninth.

Cho's computer had provided her destination, relayed by Bigboy who

remained inside the shuttle on the roof. Jan couldn't imagine the cramp if the android had joined them.

The roof of Gunwhale Heights had been little tidier than Cho's building, but at least it bore the elevator they were using. Jan's other two officers remained at Cho's apartment, wiping the evidence from her home and her computer.

A scan from Bigboy had informed Jan that the apartment they descended towards held four occupants: the owner, Eunjee Cho, and two unknowns.

He hoped this wouldn't entail more bloodshed than was necessary, and that Cho would remain there long enough to be apprehended.

"Sixty-ninth floor and your destination, sirs and madam."

The elevator came to a halt gently and the doors opened. A cityscape fronting a green sky was revealed beyond Kay and Tannhäuser. Kay turned to Jan as if to ask, "You want to go first?"

Jan waved her and Tannhäuser forward before following them out onto the balcony.

The elevator said, "Have a nice day, my grand and lawful peace-keeping officers."

Jan followed his officers right towards apartment number one-eight-nine.

"Nice day" was not the phrase he had in mind. Those before him checked their guns. Jan followed suit.

Brother Pele rocked a little where he stood, the blowtorch still lit but dangling from a limp hand. "What the hell is it?" he asked. His voice was filled with awe.

"Damned cool is what it is!" John replied.

Eunjee stood speechless; Seena took a hesitant step towards the thing before quickly backing away. Eunjee knew how she felt. The weird metal squid-dragon was freak-the-hell-out freaky.

She jumped and yelped as the door behind her came crashing in. Eunjee turned and saw a group of armour-clad police officers charging in through Long John's broken doorway, her nightmare come true. Their machine pistols were pointing right at her. Eunjee squeaked. Seena ducked to the ground and started wailing.

"Everybody freeze!" said the policeman to her left. He was half-human, half-something else. She didn't know what. The one to her right was human though, a female with a shaved head. Between and a little behind them stood another man. Bald and fully human also, he wasn't holding a gun. He also looked like the leader.

Eunjee followed the first man's instructions. After raising her hands, she froze.

Behind her, Pele stepped forward, saying, "You can't just—!"

His blowtorch must have appeared threatening, for a second later a shot whizzed passed Eunjee, killing him on the spot.

Eunjee's legs went weak and a low moan escaped her throat; she barely heard it through the ringing in her ears. She found herself turning, arms raised, past Seena's whimpering form and towards her dead friend.

Dazed, she stared down at Pele, slumped face down with his arse in the air. Then she looked to the monster, and then at John. He was shaking with rage, his scrunched-up face gone an ugly shade of purple. Eunjee's hearing cleared up in time to hear him say, "Why you bastard!"

He pointed the disrupter gun past Eunjee. It hummed loudly. Eunjee backed away and turned. She didn't feel stupid that her hands were still raised. It seemed prudent, considering.

The police officer on her left, the one that had just killed Pele, shuddered and twisted. Then his eyes popped out on green stalks.

"Ew!" Eunjee cried.

He staggered forward a little before collapsing to the floor, yellow blood pouring from his eye-sockets and nostrils. As he fell, he narrowly missed hitting Eunjee.

She took two steps to the side to find herself standing awfully near the female officer's gun.

Her face had gone as purple and contorted as Long John's. She pointed the gun past Eunjee and shouted, "Die you scum!"

A moment later the back of her head exploded.

More ringing. Even more dazed than before, Eunjee watched the woman drop to the floor in a slow motion movement. She hit the carpet with a slam, shuddering once before lying still. Blood and brain matter began to spread out across the carpet and Eunjee gulped at how pissed John would be.

She snapped out of her daze when she sensed the surviving police officer stepping towards her. Looking up whilst lowering her hands, she experienced a wave of relief that his gun was lowered now.

He wasn't even looking at her. His pistol still smoking, he stepped between the corpses and then between Eunjee and Seena. Through the diminishing buzz she heard him say, "Excuse me, miss."

She followed him with her eyes. Then her head and her whole body turned to where he was heading.

The policeman halted. With his back to her he stood before the metal monster. His head was bowed.

Eunjee finally noticed the gunpowder smell and sneezed loudly. She heard an answering moan beside her; it was Seena, staring over at Pele's corpse.

Eunjee knelt and helped her up. Seena's mascara was ruined again. Pele was in the worse state.

He'd moved a little since she'd last seen him, but was still quite beyond saving. His eyes were glassy, his forehead marred by a big, cauterised hole. Eunjee felt tears forming. She held them back.

Arms around each other for comfort, Eunjee and Seena looked at the policeman and their surviving friend, "Long John" Johnson.

He was staring at the policeman, the disrupter held towards him with a shaky grip. It was humming still, albeit quietly.

Eunjee stared at her companions, placidly numb now that everything had quieted down.

The policeman interrupted her reverie by saying, "Put that down son, we're all friends here now."

John obeyed. Eunjee watched him switch the disrupter off before placing it on the table beside the monster.

The monster in question lay half hidden now. The policeman fell to his knees, giving Eunjee a clearer look. Its placid, monstrous face stared back at her. The man prostrate before it said, "Master Cthulhu, you answered our call."

The monster's eyes lit up, filling the room with a dull red light.

Letting Seena go, Eunjee stepped forward.

"Master Cthulhu, you are in the presence of the free," he continued. By way of reply, the monster's forearms snapped down. No one jumped; its red light was way too friendly for that. Palms up, it sat as still and supine as a Buddhist statue.

Having stopped behind the policeman, Eunjee addressed the back of his head.

"Is this your God?"

He replied without turning. "For many years now, and many of my fellows too."

"You mean the Greenwich Invisibles?"

He turned from the monster. "Yes. And there are thousands of us, all living without the fetter of emotion inhibiting chips. I've been covering us up for years." His voice was filled with reverence, his face awash with the monster's light.

"Everything changes now though." He nodded towards the monster. "This avatar of His divine presence will show me the way."

"Us too?" Eunjee asked, hesitantly.

Seena stepped behind Eunjee and placed a hand on her shoulder. John appeared by her side. He took Eunjee by the hand. She squeezed it gently. All three stared down at the policeman to await his reply.

“Yes.”

He smiled and turned away.

He said, “Cthulhu has awoken.”

Eunjee repeated his words, the others following suit.

“Cthulhu has awoken,” they said.

The metal monster nodded. From between tentacles twisting with motion He preached words of wonder, and chaos.

The fall was coming.

SCIENCE FICTION

Newton Braddell and His Inconclusive Researches into the Unknown: Some Observations on the Natural History of Kadaloor

John Greenwood

I am aware that as a travelogue my narrative has major deficiencies. I have neglected to convey any impression of the landscapes that Yewtree and I traversed during this period, and the reader would be forgiven for assuming there was little of note in the Kadaloorian terrain, that it differed hardly from the uplands of Europe, consisting of undifferentiated hills, featureless forests and interchangeable grassy plains. Of course the truth was far from this. The lands we crossed were endlessly diverse, sometimes beautiful, sometimes dreary, rarely without their own surprises. I will not pretend that I was not at times acutely reminded of the forests of Bavaria, the Yorkshire Dales of England, or the Norwegian fjords, and I have noted these inexplicable similarities between Kadaloor and Earth throughout my account.

The similarities tended to dissolve on closer examination: what appeared from a distance to be a limestone crag would be revealed at closer quarters as an unusually large patch of bleach-white moss colonising the leeward slope of a hill. What might have been mistaken for large blackberries weighing down the branches of a low, spiny shrub were in fact glossy black eggs, from which emerged tiny sulphur-yellow thread-like caterpillars in their hundreds of thousands, who proceeded to strip their host bushes bare, and then turned on one another in an orgy of slaughter and feasting until the plague of caterpillars that had infested our tents, sleeping bags and beards had been reduced to just a handful of obscenely swollen and sluggish individuals as large as aubergines, who vanished almost overnight, whether into cocoons or some form of hiber-

nation we never discovered. The whole process, from egg to disappearance, had taken less than a fortnight.

Another mystery, partially solved, was that of the creatures which Yewtree and I dubbed "pot shrimps" because of their ubiquitous presence in our cooking pots, mugs, washbasins and any other receptacle capable of holding water. Pot shrimps resembled krill, not microscopically small but barely visible to the naked eye. It was only after several weeks of outdoor living that we began to notice these passengers, and by that stage it was clear that we must have been unwittingly ingesting them for a considerable period – long enough for them to wreak any damage to our internal organs they might have been capable of. Neither of us felt any ill-effects – in fact I had never felt in better physical health than during these days of wandering and sleeping under the stars – but my experience with the Rumbia beetle larvae made me naturally suspicious of any potential infection of our water supply.

"Why worry about it?" asked Yewtree. "We've no idea what other organisms are passing through our system. Our stomachs must be like iron now anyway, with some of the things we've eaten."

He was probably right, in his usual blustery way, but it did not prevent the pot shrimps from preying on my mind. Boiling the water seemed to kill them – although the difference between life and death in this species was difficult to spot, so immobile were they in their natural state – and their presence did not noticeably alter the flavour of our meals. On one desperate occasion, running low on provisions and stranded in a barren area, we struck on the idea of pot shrimp stew, which we attempted to make by boiling down litre after litre of rainwater to generate a concentrate of pulped shrimp. After several hours of continuous cooking, and forests of firewood, we had accumulated two paltry bowls of thin, grey shrimp porridge, which tasted of metal.

"Look what we have been reduced to," I tried to joke, as we hunched over our meagre meals under a shelter of branches and bracken as the rain pelted into the mud all around us. Either the joke did not translate well into Citihallian, or Yewtree was not in the mood for frivolity: an empty stomach was one of the few misfortunes guaranteed to depress his spirits.

"What's happened to those biscuits?" said Yewtree. "That amputated rat's had them, I'll be bound!"

Raffles' continued presence on our expedition was still a source of tension between us, but I refrained from comment on this occasion. Having finished my meal, I decided to cleanse my palette with a cup of rainwater, and feeling heartily sick of pot shrimps, I paid very careful

attention to cleaning out my cup. I had only held my cup outside the shelter for a second before Yewtree said, "Hang on, I'll have some of that too."

Before I could take Yewtree's cup from his outstretched hand, I noticed that mine was already spattered with raindrops, and that within each droplet squirmed a single pot shrimp. They were far livelier within their protective raindrops that we had seen them before, but they soon relapsed into their more familiar lassitude.

The only possible explanation was that the creatures spent the larger part of their life cycle amongst the clouds. Were they capable of flight? It was hard to see by what mechanism they might defy gravity – they could barely muster the energy to support themselves in the water. Perhaps their sheer insubstantiality allowed the wind to bear them along? Or were they instead the larvae of some other winged denizen of the upper atmosphere? Were these the failed offspring, the chaff of a greater heavenly spawning? It was an intriguing question, which could not be definitively answered, and while Yewtree and I argued the matter back and forth, within a few weeks the pot shrimps had left us, or we had left their natural habitat behind, and the rain was again, so far as we could tell, pure and lifeless.

Kadaloorian weather had other surprises too. When the rain did not contain translucent crustaceans, it came in short, sharp showers, as brief an experience as passing through a beaded curtain, but finding oneself damp on the other side.

Or else small rain clouds seemed to express a preference for particular wretched areas where no plants grew. From afar we watched the clouds converging on those lonely deserts as though drawn there by an invisible force, and who is to say that they were not? The earth had been washed away to bedrock, which was itself riven with deltas of deep, narrow channels worn by the constantly flowing acid rain. Some of these rocks were very beautiful, and I collected a few specimens of particular interest, hoping to sketch their patterns later, when we had more leisure. My sketchbook had not emerged from my backpack once since we had escaped from the Citihallian camp, and I kept it tightly wrapped in plastic, to protect it not only from the rain but also from Raffles, who had been known to add paper to his diet from time to time.

I witnessed so many phenomena that, without the expertise and time that neither Yewtree nor I could provide, defied explanation. All the Citihallians had been fascinated by the changing weather, and it continued to astonish Yewtree that our immediate environment, whether we were hot or cold, or battered by gusts of cold air and water, was entirely

beyond our control, or indeed anyone's. The architects of City Hall had used the heat from Kadaloor's molten core to maintain an even, comfortable temperature throughout the underground complex. For one born and raised in such a controlled incubator, the weather was a source of amusement, anxiety and, on one occasion during a thunderstorm, stark terror.

"It's the Punggol!" Yewtree had screamed at me in the middle of the night, bursting into my tent without knocking, a discourtesy that had become a rather irritating habit. "They're bombing us. It's you they're after! We're going to die, and it's all your fault!"

Bleary-eyed though I was, I realised at once that this rash accusation was one of those statements that could derail a friendship entirely. And knowing by now how easily rash statements leapt almost unbidden to Yewtree's lips, I pretended I had not heard him.

"What's going on?" I muttered, rubbing my eyes.

A flash of lightning illuminated Yewtree's fearful features.

"It's just a storm," I said, and in between the flashes and rumbles tried to explain what little I understood of their causes. To lighten the mood I told Yewtree some of the legends and myths which primitive people used to explain such dramatic natural phenomena back on earth: the hammer of Thor, the rain-bringing Chinese dragon and the ancient Peruvian people who attributed earthquakes to the struggling of a giant, hog-tied armadillo buried under the ground.

"I have every sympathy with your ancestors," commented Yewtree as he sat huddled in my tent, hugging his knees and startling anew with every thunderclap. "This weather is psychotic! How could any man stay sane without a story to explain it?"

With hindsight it seems clear that this night was a turning point in our friendship. Yewtree was almost as much an alien in the Kadaloorian wilderness as I was. Rather it dawned on me that Yewtree had had his fill of the outdoor life, and of rootless wandering, and had begun to pine for the comfort and security of the crowds he had rubbed along with for almost his entire life. It was never in my friend's character to brood, but relative to his usual sanguinity, Yewtree showed unmistakable signs of withdrawal and pensiveness. We conversed less as we trekked along, and while our silence was still companionable, it was also pregnant with unspoken thoughts. When Yewtree did give voice to his thoughts it was often on the subject of Romundli, how long it would take us to get there, or reminiscences of anecdotes his father had told him about the Old Country. Yewtree had once savoured the countryside, and exercised a lively curiosity about its flora and fauna, but increasingly he saw the landscape merely in terms of the obstacles it put in our way, and of the

distances that Kadaloor had so unjustly stretched between the island of Romundli and us.

He expressed even more impatience to reach this possibly mythical land than I did, I who still hoped to discover there a cure to my brain disease. I had not lost sight of my original purpose, but as I had learned to co-exist with the parasitical trailer rooted in my brain tissue, and with the psychotropic side effects apparently in remission, so I had begun to resign myself to a long a potentially unending quest. There were worse ways to exist: I had work, companionship and hope, and that was enough to keep me buoyant and, relatively speaking, sane.

If I was ever bored by the toil and drudgery of keeping body and soul together in the Kadaloorian wilderness, then the planet always retained its ability to surprise. Whether it was the inexplicably right-angled meanders of a meadow stream, the corkscrew pinecones as long as a man's forearm, which screwed themselves into soft sand-dunes through who knows what ingenious mechanism, or the small brown, otherwise unremarkable birds whom we could not dissuade from heaping hundreds of different-coloured berries under the eaves of our tents. Not knowing whether they were edible, we dared not taste their gifts although at times the temptation was strong. I did not subscribe to Yewtree's theory that the little birds were carnivorous, and working in concert with the aim of poisoning us both to feast on our corpses later. It seemed dangerously close to paranoia and gave the gift-giving birds more credit for intelligence than I think they really warranted. A far more likely explanation was that the birds had mistaken our tents for the nests of potential mates, and the berries were a form of mistaken courtship offering.

I have said before that within days of our leaving the Bugis settlement, my claims to have helped the Bugis a little way along the road towards civilisation were decisively disproved, and the circumstances of this episode were as surprising as any natural phenomena that Kadaloor might have placed in our path. However, I find myself reluctant to tell it. Without question I was humiliated and my judgement called into question on many counts. But quite apart from that there was something so unpleasant, so morally repulsive and dismal, about our next discovery that my memory recoils at the effort of recall, and I have not the heart to bend it to the purpose. Granted this is a journal, and as such I am committed to recalling the details of my inconclusive researches truthfully and unflinchingly, but in this instance I must beg the reader's forgiveness: he will not learn from me what took place in that misty jungle valley, beyond the bare facts that I emerged from it at least physically unscathed, and accompanied by both Mr Yewtree and Miss Lavender.

REVIEWS

The Quarterly Review

BOOKS

Bad Karma

Dave Zeltserman

Five Star, hc, 322pp

Dave Zeltserman describes *Bad Karma* as a solid, steady PI tale, but in doing so he is being self-deprecating rather than modest. There would, indeed, be nothing wrong if it was a straightforward hardboiled detective story: this type of mystery has been entertaining readers since the publication of Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest*, eighty years ago, and will no probably continue to do so well into the future. While *Bad Karma* might lack the flair of Zeltserman's critically-acclaimed *Man Out of Prison* noir trilogy (*Small Crimes*, *Pariah*, and *Killer*, all published by Serpent's Tail), it nonetheless brings a highly original voice to the subgenre.

Bad Karma is set five years after the horrific climax of *Bad Thoughts* (Five Star, 2007) and sees ex-Cambridge cop Bill Shannon living on his disability pension in Boulder, Colorado. He has been happily reunited with his ex-wife, Susan, and – after her – his main interest in life is studying meditation and doing dream work therapy. He is a licensed private investigator, but rarely takes cases, and then only minor ones. From the outset we are told that, as in *Bad Thoughts*, Shannon lives in a universe where out-of-body experiences and astral projection are possible. This not only gives the novel an interesting New Age theme – and sets up Shannon as a counterpart to the traditional occult detective – but is also essential to the solution of the mystery.

A lawyer who is handling a civil claim for compensation hires Shannon to investigate the unsolved murder of two university students. He accepts the case against the advice of Eli, his spiritual mentor, who believes that contact with the criminal soul will regress Shannon's healing process. Shortly after, he compounds the risk by agreeing to assist a woman from out of town find her daughter, who has disappeared after

joining a local cult called True Light. Naturally, there is a connection between the two incidents, although it is only revealed at the end, with a subtle and expert hand.

The novel works on three levels. It's part clever murder mystery and part personal spiritual journey as Shannon tries to heal his psychological scars and achieve inner peace; it's also an informed and impartial commentary on the New Age Movement, presenting both the positive and negative aspects of the subculture. This might be a standard PI tale in structure, but it shares the ingenuity which has brought a distinctive touch to so much of Zeltserman's fiction. A competent and fascinating read.

TQF readers will be pleased to hear that Zeltserman's work-in-progress is an occult detective story – I hope to have more information on it shortly. The author's blog can be read at: www.smallcrimes-novel.blogspot.com. – *Rafe McGregor*

Contagious

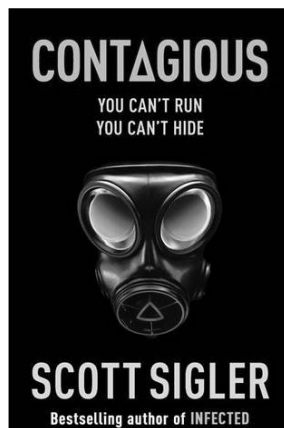
Scott Sigler

Hodder, pb, 640pp

In this sequel to *Infected*, a prologue quickly brings new readers (and a new President) up to speed. The infected develop welts, kill their families, and die once pyramid-shaped aliens hatch from their bodies. The little aliens then start building stargates while the government tries to stop them. Former quarterback "Scary" Perry Dawsey survived the first novel by hacking off his genitals; here he takes the lead. Think *The West Wing* v *Aliens* with Michael Myers as the hero.

One of the shortest six-hundred page books I've ever read, this is split up into dozens of tiny chapters, one for every scene; it's paced like a mini-series (you get to p. 131 before reaching the first line of the back cover's plot summary), but cut like a music video, which gives it a style you might see as sketchy or punchy, depending on your point of view. The little aliens are not very scary, but the book is surprisingly brutal, and runs a nice line in body horror.

It's a big sloppy puppy dog of a novel, daft and eager to please. It doesn't surprise or innovate, but it's perfect for the beach or a long train journey. 6



Different Skins

Gary McMahon

Screaming Dreams, pb, 120pp

Different Skins collects two novellas, "Even the Dead Die" and the shorter "In the Skin", both by Gary McMahon. They share certain themes – death, identity, skin, gender relations – but are otherwise separate. The marvellous cover is by Vincent Chong.

In "Even the Dead Die" Mike Angelo (his parents must have had a sense of humour) moves through a London that he despises, soon discovering that there's a worse London beneath. It's a story of death, rape, murder, prostitution and sexual slavery. Structurally, there are similarities with things like *Neverwhere* or *The Matrix*, but in tone it's closer to the movies of Clive Barker. I won't say anything more about Mike's discoveries; I don't want to spoil the novella for anyone; but as you might expect they are shocking, horrifying and gruesomely entertaining.

This novella was bit of a tough read, even allowing for the gruelling subject matter, because it was marred by mistakes and patches of clunky, awkward writing. Some sentences looked good on the surface but didn't stand up to scrutiny, while other sentences were overloaded with redundant words. For example see p. 40: "This was becoming repetitive, but despite all the information (he) was imparting, he was going nowhere near the answer to the only question that really mattered." It's not exactly wrong, but it's not exactly elegant either.

Some sentences don't quite slot together. For example, there was "a lengthy silence on the line, which was soon filled by the sound of Aunt Hilda crying" (p. 21) (was the silence lengthy or soon filled?), and "I needed air, even if it was the polluted miasma that hangs above London like a cloud of radioactive leakage" (p. 24) (if it's a cloud above London will he be breathing it?). After a revelatory chat, his "mind was drowning in all this sensory information" (p. 52) – presumably the chat was accompanied by a laser show!

The opening line is already infamous: "London is an open wound ... through which oozes the rancid puss of society." And no, this isn't a story about zombie cats. I'd guess the old lady with the hot body is supposed to be disconcertingly erotic rather than "discerningly erotic" (p. 54), though both could well apply, and when a baddie gets his just desserts I think the process probably involves being pulled apart rather than telling lies ("quickly dissembling him" (p. 67). There's also a pile of smaller

errors and the impression is unfortunately of a story that didn't go through a proper editorial process.

Still, despite its flaws, it has many strong moments, lots of good ideas, and (as Tim Lebbon notes in his introduction) is written with exceptional passion. If the production is poor, the story being told is more than good enough to compensate and make this a very worthwhile and memorable read.

"In the Skin", though, was better in every way. Dan goes on a business trip to New York, leaving behind his wife Adi and young son Max. Upon his return, his wife seems jumpy and his son seems unusually bulky. What has happened to them in his absence? And who's that crawling around in the garden?

As with "Even the Dead Die", the story is powerful and frightening. There is still the occasional mistake (how could he have watched both planes crash live on 9/11, and how does his laptop's operating system run once the entire hard drive has been wiped?) but the language is leaner, direct and much less wordy – and hence more impactful. The writing is just plain better. The author's notes at the back of the book suggest "In the Skin" was written much more recently than the story that shares its covers (circa 2008, compared to 2002 for at least the first two parts of "Even the Dead Die"), so maybe that explains the differences between them.

Either way, this was a very enjoyable book, and if my experience of the same author's *Rain Dogs* is anything to go by, within a month or two I'll have forgotten the mistakes and be rhapsodizing about the bits I loved. 6

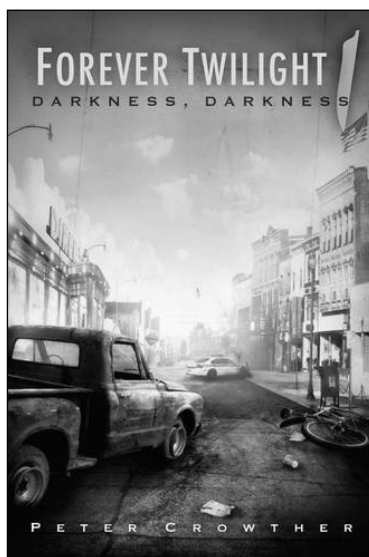
Forever Twilight, Vol. 1: Darkness Darkness

Peter Crowther

PS Publishing/

Drugstore Indian, hb, 127pp

"At a little after 3.15, the whole world had turned white, just for an instant, and then everything had gone back to normal." But of course it didn't. Everyone has gone, zapped out of existence in the middle of the night, and the four people left at KMRT are



all that's left. Till the light flashes again, the next night, and then things get really strange.

A review by me of this book is a bit redundant, given the glittering literary stars lined up on its first few pages to praise it! Ramsey Campbell says it's "as intensely menacing and gruesome as any George Romero film", while Tim Lebbon calls it "a masterpiece of suspense and dread". Michael Marsall Smith, Paul McAuley, Stephen Baxter and Sarah Pinborough are among the others lavishing praise.

For me Ian Watson nails it when he says it "reminds me ... of Stephen King's novella 'The Mist'". This could easily be read as a very well done pastiche of Stephen King. The small group isolated at a radio station is reminiscent of *The Fog*, while the mysterious disappearance of the rest of the world and the tension between safe-in-here and dangerous-out-there reminded me of "The Mist". Add a dash of 1950s sf cinema (think *Invaders from Mars*) and you have a tasty concoction.

At one point I began to wonder whether the book was set in the fifties (the CDs would say not) – a hysterical woman gets slapped across the face, not once but twice, by two different male characters (Johnny on p. 87 and Rick on p. 117). Not something you see in books so often nowadays. And the first occasion comes just after Johnny lets her open the door to danger – just because he doesn't want to worry her.

The plot is the story's main weakness. It relies upon the survivors spending the daytime (very sensibly) turning the station into a secure little fort, and then (unbelievably stupidly) going out for a walk in the pitch black night at 3.11 am, and coming a cropper. Why didn't they wait till morning before investigating? Geoff said, "My view is that two of us walk down into town, while it's dark. That way, maybe we can find out some more." Johnny, "verbalizing everyone's thoughts", asked who should go. You'd have thought at least one person would be thinking, a four mile walk in the middle of the night during a worldwide catastrophe is a stupid, stupid idea!

But if the plot is flawed, the ideas, atmosphere and action are terrific. And it is as scary as the luminaries above say; it gave me nightmares for two consecutive nights. The sequence with the telephone is the most frightening thing I've read since the railway scenes in *The Witnesses Are Gone*, from the same publisher. The desperate struggle to survive at the end was thrilling, and left me eager to read the sequels from Subterranean Press.

I reviewed this from a pdf ARC, so I wouldn't normally point out mistakes; there was one that could be confusing to readers if it makes it through to the final version, though. In one key passage I think the wrong

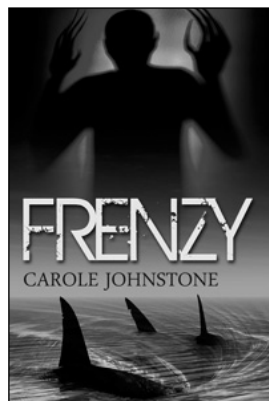
brother's name is given (p. 75, fourth para, Geoff for Rick), which had me puzzling for ages about what was going on. 6

Frenzy

Carole Johnstone

Eternal Press, ebook, 80pp

Eight men find themselves in a life raft with no memory (or so they say) of how they got there. It's an odd kind of raft – basically a hoop from which each of them dangles in a claustrophobic little pocket, like an inverted toolbelt. No land is visible. The water beneath them is very deep, and it's full of sharks – though they have as much to fear from each other.



I do enjoy a good shark story every so often (*Meg* was great fun, for example), so that brought this novella by Carole Johnstone straight to the top of my reading pile. However, it was disappointingly light on shark action. The sharks are there just to give the men something extra to worry about, to set them against each other. In fact, the men are almost in too much danger – from the sun, from each other, from drowning, thirst, hunger and madness – for the sharks to be a big problem.

This is really a psychological horror story, exploring Pete's nightmares, his feelings about his brother, his relationships with the other men. This is done extremely well, but for me it lessened the drama of the situation. Anyone would be upset at what had happened to his brother, but would it be uppermost in your mind with sharks nipping at your toes?

As the days go by, and people bleed into the ocean from various wounds, the threat of a frenzied shark attack seems ever more distant. It's sidelined so much that it stops being frightening. The sharks feel like an afterthought, added at an editor's suggestion to make the book more commercial. The novella would have worked just as well without them – and shark fans wouldn't have felt cheated.

In fact, no part of the story really blows up in the way you might have hoped: the sharks don't seem hungry, the male rivalries are trumped up, the mystery of how they got onto the life raft summarily dismissed. At one point I thought the story might take a truly horrifying turn – why didn't any women make it to the raft? – but even if I wish the story had focused elsewhere and taken different turns, it's well written and never less than gripping. Just don't expect *Jaws*. 6

Gilbert and Edgar on Mars

Eric Brown

PS Publishing, hb, 90pp

This very enjoyable little book sees G.K. Chesterton, having been mistaken for H.G. Wells, abducted by Martians. An energetic and rather unpleasant Edgar Rice Burroughs rescues him and the two head off into the Martian wilderness to find Edgar's good friend, John Carter, dodging dinosaur attacks and battling alternative realities along the way...

This makes a nice companion piece to the same publisher's *Planet of Mystery* by Terry Bisson, in which astronauts found themselves on a hallucinatory Burroughsian Venus, but where that could have been drawn from the pages of *New Worlds*, this is much more traditional, and slightly old-fashioned. That makes it no less enjoyable, though.

After all, this is a book which sees John Carter pointing a ray-rifle at Professor Challenger – what's not to love? Burroughs fans may be disappointed by his unflattering characterisation, but it serves the story well. It's perhaps a shame the Jabbak Kathro didn't get a chance to rummage through Chesterton's brain, but that's what sequels are for... **8**

The Magicians

Lev Grossman

William Heinemann, pb, 400pp

Quentin Coldwater is a rather sour over-achiever from New York, whose favourite books are the Fillory and Further series, which bear an uncanny resemblance to the Narnia books of our world. Before you know it, it's teenage wish fulfilment time – he's whisked off to magic school. But he finds that having your teenage wishes fulfilled isn't all it's cracked up to be.

Essentially, this is half-Potter, half-Narnia with a sprinkle of Miracleman, and at times the book feels as cynically commercial as that sounds, but it's still fairly enjoyable. Grossman writes very well, the characterisation of his thoroughly unlikeable characters is excellent, and the storyline wraps up nicely in a single volume, which on its own is enough to set it apart from a lot of commercial fantasy novels.

What didn't I like? The sarky snipes at Potter in the text seemed rather ungentlemanly, given how closely it followed the Potter template. As for the animal sex bits – if a woman's ability to say no is taken away, because she's been turned into an animal, and then you have sex with

her, isn't that effectively rape? I didn't see much difference between that scene and the teacher putting Rohypnol in the school dinners... But then, reading further into the book, perhaps I wasn't supposed to and should actually give myself a pat on the back for taking issue with it!

I think I'd have enjoyed it more if it had been an actual Narnia sequel. Alan Moore's *Miracleman* drew a lot of strength from building on the original Marvelman comics, and it was easy to imagine how much more powerful this novel would have been if it had featured Aslan and the Pevensies instead of Ember and the Chatwins. But it was a fast-moving, well-plotted novel about a group of very realistic teenagers (even if they are the kind of teenagers that adults will find intensely annoying). I wouldn't describe it as Harry Potter for adults, but older teenagers may well adore it. 7

Mister Gum

Rhys Hughes

Dog Horn Publishing, pb, 108pp

Mister Gum is a creative writing tutor who illustrates the rules of good writing – beginning of course with “Show, don't tell” – with a series of extended anecdotes that may or may not be from his own life. Eventually he loses his position, but his adventures in sex and language continue, including a spell working at the inflatable headquarters of Scrofula Yard with Detective Ynch Short.

This is a book drenched in gentlemanly emissions from start to finish, and if it isn't the filthiest thing I've ever read (that would have to be *Les onze mille verges* by Apollinaire, which I expect to be arrested for reading any day now) it's in the top ten, somewhere near Miller's *Under the Roofs of Paris*. But for all the semen being flung around in these pages, it's really very genteel and polite. This isn't Rhys Hughes does porn, or Rhys Hughes sets out to shock; it's the same Rhys Hughes, just with oceans of semen, talking hymens and characters like Fellatio Nelson, a pirate with a prehensile penis, and, erm, Lynne Truss, punctuation fanatic.

This is the third book by Rhys Hughes I've read in as many months, following *The Smell of Telescopes* (Eibonvale) and *The Postmodern Mariner* (Screaming Dreams). *Mister Gum* comes to us from Raw Dog Press, publishers of *Polluto* magazine. This multiplicity of publishers suggests that Hughes is something of a wanderer (either that or no single publisher can cope with his prodigious output). And so it goes with his

stories (after three books I'm now an expert!), many of which feature journeys of one kind or another. His stories are like extended "a man walks into the bar" jokes; their conclusions share the unforeseeable inevitability of a punchline.

What I like so much about Hughes' work is (egocentrically enough) exactly what I like in the novels I've written myself. It's the freedom he gives himself, to follow his nose, to be deliberately silly, to extend jokes as far as he fancies. The difference of course is that mine are rubbish, lazily written nonsense, whereas his stories are carefully-constructed, detailed nonsense! He's sometimes accused of being self-indulgent, but there are more than enough books out there that indulge their readers. How great to have a writer working for himself, to create more of the kind of art that he appreciates.

And anyway, as Frank Black sang about the Three Stooges, "Some nonsense, it is so serious." Here, in a very, very silly book, I think Hughes is making very serious points about the near-total irrelevance of externally-imposed rules when it comes to creating art; they're useful when it comes to selling it; and working within self-imposed rules can create interesting results (*viz.* the Oulipo work he admires); but if you want to write a story that is all tell and no show then don't let a silly rule stop you.

I can't imagine trying to edit or translate his work. Translating it, how to adapt the puns to another language, how to even spot them all? Editing it, how to know what's a mistake, when almost any apparent mistake could be another joke? (Well, you would just ask on the proofs, but I'm coming over all rhetorical.) Reviewers face similar difficulties. For example, my pre-release version contains several mentions of prostrate glands. Should those be prostate glands, or is it another joke? Maybe they are prostrate, as a result of all their hard work! If it was a mistake, I hereby claim my no-prize! But if it was a joke, I've shown myself to be a complete dullard!

Anyway, to sum up: fantastically filthy, fantastically entertaining! But I think Lynne Truss will be on the phone to her lawyers... 8

The Nyctalope on Mars

Jean de La Hire, tr. Brian M. Stableford

Black Coat Press, pb, 312pp

Saint-Clair, the Nyctalope, is a twentieth-century Riddick, able to see perfectly in the dark. It's not much of a superpower, but it's enough to

put him one up on Flash Gordon! After twelve girls are abducted to become the wives of the Twelve – a criminal organisation which has established a base on Mars, in order to conquer the Martians from The War of the Worlds, before returning to conquer Earth – the Nyctalope heads to Mars to rescue them.

This is an old French pulp novel given the Penguin Classics treatment by Brian Stableford and Black Coat Press. As well as translating, Stableford provides much useful apparatus. A highly informative introduction puts the novel in context, draws out its themes, and provides biographical information. An afterword deals with the problem of the story's uneven chronology, caused in part by its episodic construction, and partly by de la Hire's decision to introduce contemporary figures. Thirty-six footnotes alert the reader to de la Hire's many mistakes, scientific and literary. Reproductions of several covers round out a generous package. Numerous typos spoil the effect a bit, but I imagine Jean de la Hire would have been delighted to see his novel receiving such loving attention after all these years.

Perhaps I should say careful attention, rather than loving: I probably enjoyed this book much more than Brian Stableford, who calls it a "thoroughly badly-written book". The novel is certainly flawed, but enjoyable nevertheless. I don't need all books to be good; it's okay for some to be silly and entertaining. This book delivers entertainment in abundance, even if it's not always deliberate.

There's an Austin Powers feel to the novel at times. For example, one of my favourite lines recognises that Saint-Clair must already know everything he is being told: "'I know all that,' said Saint-Clair, 'but every time you repeat it, it seems new, and I admire you...'" (p. 63). I've heard of hanging a lantern on awkward exposition, but that's more like hanging a lighthouse on it! In another scene (p. 114), two villains stare at a dial in total silence for an entire hour to see if the power levels fluctuate. There's lots of pipe and cigar-smoking. Characters monologue at ludicrous length, and nobody in the book seems able to think without speaking out loud. Even when hiding from hordes of enemies they still murmur long speeches to themselves (p. 280, for example). The book is full of that kind of endearing daftness. At one point the Nyctalope seems to propose putting someone to death for (among other things) "an extreme irreverence for science" (p. 86).

The book plays interestingly with other texts, for example establishing early on that Wells was a historian rather than a novelist (though why France was apparently unaffected by the Martian invasion is left unclear), foreshadowing similar experiments by Philip Jose Farmer, Alan

Moore, and so on. Similarly the Nyctalope himself anticipates the pulp heroes that would follow: Doc Savage, Flash Gordon, and so on, all the way through to Tom Strong.

But for me this wasn't just of historical interest. It was exciting, amusing, eccentric and quite unique, and I'd recommend it highly to anyone who prizes those qualities. **7**

Queen Victoria: Demon Hunter

A.E. Moorat

Hodder, pb, 376pp

King William IV is dead, and Princess Victoria takes the throne aged eighteen. England and its monarch are threatened by the forces of darkness (among them the King of Belgium); luckily the new queen has supernaturally quick reflexes and is handy with bladed weapons... Essentially this is Queen Victoria as Buffy the Vampire Slayer, dealing with monsters, boys, evil plots and a hard-ass mentor.

The cover of this book is fantastic, and its tag line is magnificent: "She loved her country. She hated zombies." Maybe, but it's p.136 before she meets one, and she only spends about seven pages fighting them in total, being mostly occupied by werewolves. Clearly the zombie angle has been (smartly) played up for commercial reasons.

This is lightly plotted Kim-Newman-esque fun. Little is resolved by the end, and there's sometimes a sense of characters being moved around like pieces on a board, but those characters, especially Lord Quimby and his dead manservant Perkins, are good ones. Though you don't have to read this book to get its best joke, there are others, e.g. monster hunters named Hicks, Vasquez and Hudson. Don't be too disappointed if this turns up in your Christmas stocking. **6**

Starfall

Stephen Baxter

PS Publishing, hb, 90pp

I've got about a dozen Baxter bricks on my shelves, all of them sadly unread. I really appreciated the chance to read something of his without having to dedicate an entire month to it. I thought this was fantastic, a magnificent, epic story in a mere ninety pages. I really need to make time for his other books! **8**



Ultrameta: a Fractal Novel

Douglas Thompson

Eibonvale Press, hb, 304pp

Alexander Stark is a university professor who goes missing; this book contains accounts of his life – or rather lives – from that point on. His – and sometimes her – stories take us all over the world and into the past, to ancient Greece and medieval Italy. Those he left behind try to piece things together from a trail of corpses. Where is he going? What is his purpose? Is he a serial killer or a serial suicide?

I should say up front that four of these stories were published in magazines I edited (two here in TQF, and two in *Dark Horizons*), so some bias in my review should be expected. But of course there was a reason I selected those stories for publication: I thought they were fantastic. So for whichever reason you choose, it's no surprise that I loved the book too.

Let's get my reservations out of the way first, since that leads directly to one of them: it's perhaps because I read many of the stories in isolation that I saw the book's overall linking structure as something of a flaw. In some places the linking material gives away too much about the stories which follow, but also the stories stood so well on their own that threading them along the skein of one man's life lessened them slightly for me, losing a little of what made them unique by stressing their similarities. Production-wise, the book is afflicted by Eibonvale's usual love of blank pages (fifty-four of them!) and enormous indents. There's also an odd bit of spacing between each paragraph. Discreet is muddled with discrete throughout, punctuation is occasionally erratic and typos become slightly more frequent as the book goes on. On the other hand, each chapter announces itself with a bold, atmospheric illustration by publisher David Rix, and there are useful essays by Allen Ashley and Joy Hendry.

To new readers the book's tiny flaws will be imperceptible, hidden by the glare of the originality and imagination on show here. Looking back at my email accepting "Telemura" for publication (in which spiders rearrange Margaret's house while she sleeps), I said that it reminded me of Borges, or maybe a more dispassionate Lovecraft – if I'd read enough Ballard to be confident of my ground I'd probably have mentioned him too. Now I've read the rest of the book, it only reminds me of Douglas Thompson. It seems to me he's a writer who doesn't sit down to write a story unless he's got an idea to justify it. As an example, consider

“Anatomicasa”, in which a man slowly takes his house to pieces and rebuilds it in the strangest possible way, revealing its structure, becoming both its coroner and plastic surgeon. These stories are original in theme, in execution and in subject matter. Over the last few years I’ve read hundreds of short stories, and these have been among the very best and the most distinctive. The remarkable thing about this book is that despite the experimentation, the eccentricity, and the frequent changes in point of view, tense, location and time, it’s exceptionally readable, each carefully crafted sentence going down like hot chocolate laced with brandy.

In that sense *Ultrameta* reminded me of Moorcock’s *A Cure for Cancer*, another book I very much enjoyed without ever really understanding. But like the ten-year-old in “Butterflies”, “I enjoy reading books that I do not understand, and revelling in that mystery, that blissful confusion” (p. 273). That sums up my feelings so exactly that I wondered at first if I was being quoted! Not knowing can be frightening (being lost in a strange city), but it can also be wonderful (being whirled in the air by a parent). With *Ultrameta* there’s a bit of each: it’s both frightening and exhilarating. By turns cynical and idealistic, liberating and claustrophobic, this book is entirely entertaining and highly recommended. 8

COMICS

The Girly Comic Book 1

Selina Lock

Factor Fiction, hb, 278pp

This collects issues one to nine of *The Girly Comic*, an indie anthology title of strips with female protagonists. Part of the appeal here is the wide range of styles included, from Flaming Carrot-esque superhero adventure to autobiography.

There are so many stories that I can’t go through all of them, but Lee Kennedy’s (apparently) autobiographical strips are a particular highlight. It’s strange and admirable that stories of abusive parents and wicked nuns can feel so positive. Caroline Parkinson’s “Do Not Feed the Bear” was another favourite, an eight-page story of a little girl’s encounter with a bear outside the city walls. I also enjoyed “Star-Crossed Bother”, in which Horsewoman (bitten by a radioactive horse, with the chomp-mark

in her shoulder to prove it) teams up with Puma and Glamowoman to battle the villains of the Zodiac.

On the rare occasions something doesn't click (I'm having trouble thinking of an example), there's always something new around the corner. The quality level is very high, and despite being produced on a shoestring the book as a whole bears comparison with other excellent anthologies of comics such as *Poggun* and *McSweeney's* 13. **8**

MOVIES

The Machine Girl

Noboru Iguchi (dir.)

Japan, 96 mins.

Minase Yashiro plays Ami, a quiet schoolgirl. Her brother and his best friend are killed by a school bully, the son of a Yakuza boss. Going after them for revenge she comes a cropper, requiring the physical amendments the film's title suggests. This is a movie that feels very much like it's been made to cater for a Western audience – schoolgirls, lesbian crushes, Yakuza, etc. It's very much in the shadow of *Kill Bill*, rather silly and cartoonish, full of comedy gore and ultraviolence. It'll probably impress anyone who's seeing this kind of thing for the first time, and at least entertain everyone else. It's fun without being particularly good.

As Ami, Yashiro is terribly flat (it's her first film role), though it's admittedly hard to judge performances in a foreign-language film. On the other hand Asami Sugiura as Miki, the mechanic who fixes Ami up, is superb, delivering the cartoonish, hyper-real performance the film needed, as do most of the cast on the Yakuza side. I knew going in that one of the lead actresses had made her name in pornography, and assumed it was the *Machine Girl* herself since she was so poor in the role: I assumed she'd been cast for publicity (not to mention experience with schoolgirl costumes and anguished squealing). But no, Sugiura is the porn star: on this performance she's a vivid, sparky talent that has been going to waste.

In the end, I enjoyed it, but felt pandered to and patronised by the cynical panty flashes and torn blouses; spoon-fed sexy Japanese schoolgirl violence, like an American being sold Merchant Ivory England. But despite those qualms, I can't help looking forward to the director's fol-

low-up: Robogeisha! I hate myself for being the predictable sleaze they think I am... 6

Paranormal Activity

Oren Peli (dir.)

United States

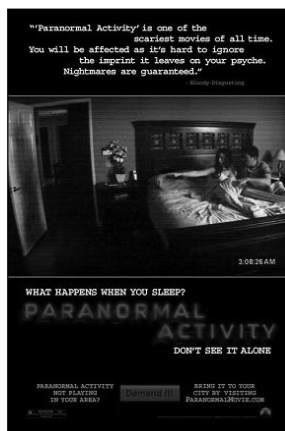
Since 1999, The Blair Witch Project has had a monopoly on low-budget horror films using the homemade video technique. Not any longer. Despite its \$15,000 budget, Paranormal Activity made over \$62 million at the US box office. There is a reason.

Katie thinks something is happening in her and Micah's new home. A doubtful Micah wants to capture whatever it is on his bulky camcorder, through which the entire film is shown. The film unfolds like a song that returns to an ever-intensifying chorus in the young couple's bedroom. Here, a variety of techniques, including some innovative methods with the passage of time, crank up the creepy factor.

The Israeli-born director maximises his shoestring budget by confining the setting to a modest home. The actors, two novices from California, do an exceptional job portraying the slow breakdown of an ordinary couple due to the terror they encounter. Paranormal Activity is a much-needed reprieve from the large-eyed child ghosts and Olympian mutilation festivals that dominate the horror genre.

One of the major challenges the director faced is motivation. Is the combination of Micah's curiosity and Katie's history sufficient motivation for them staying at the house? It may be. Is the antagonist's motivation enough to create believability? Perhaps. Or maybe this bad guy doesn't need a motive. The film does resort to several clichés. Is it possible to create a horror film in which someone does not do monster research either online or in a book (inevitably filled with drawings)?

Despite its flaws – hey, it's the director's debut – the film joins The Blair Witch Project and The Ring to complete the triumvirate of the best mainstream American horror films in the last decade. The typical high-earning film pummels the viewer with gunshots, explosions, colours, superstars, and soundtracks. Paranormal Activity, in its best scenes, shows two unknowns sleeping. There are no colours. There is no music. There is very little movement. And it is so much more captivating than those blockbusters. **8** – *Douglas Ogurek*



Zombie Virus on Mulberry Street

Jim Mickle (dir.)

US, 84 mins

With the tenants of a run-down tenement building facing what seems to be a zombie attack, this seems at first like an unofficial remake of [o]Rec, but when you realise it's a fairly old film only now getting a UK release the influence of *28 Days Later* becomes much more obvious: in the moody shots, the excellent use of music (The Walkmen's *The Rat* is used superbly to set off one of the bloodiest scenes), the use of colour filters, and the fact that the attackers aren't actually zombies, though they have a taste for human flesh.

No, *Mulberry Street* has caught itself a rat virus. The infected get twitchy, grow whiskers, and eventually scurry around on all fours looking for food, in one of my favourite uses of abnormal physical movement to cause fear since Stuart Gordon asked dancers to play the half-human villagers in *Dagon*. In the same way that Gary McMahon's *Rain Dogs* chimed with anyone who had suffered a leaky roof or dripping tap – the bloody implacability of water! – *Mulberry Street* will elicit nods of appreciation if you've ever had a rodent in the house. Scenes where the ratties move behind walls and between floorboards are imaginative, frightening, and clearly created by people who have heard the pitter-patter of too-tiny feet themselves.

Another of the movie's strengths is its interesting set of characters, the leads being an aging ex-boxer and a Polish barmaid. Their tentative romance is very sweet, and could have made for a decent film in itself – though it wouldn't take Freud to find the relationship's outcome rather icky, given how quickly it follows a reunion with his daughter. Nick Damici makes a very unusual and engaging lead. When he straps his hands and starts punching out ratties, you may well wonder what he could do in a Rodriguez or Tarantino film.

What's more, Damici co-wrote the script, and it's a good one. You'd expect an actor to write himself some good long speeches, but no – there's not a word of unnecessary dialogue, and what there is is often very funny (“he's turned into a big f**king rat!”). Damici has previously appeared in *Law & Order*, and that show's New York naturalism is here in both script and performances, even though (or perhaps because?) many of the cast are apparently non-actors.

Any criticisms? Well, the actual plague rats (as opposed to the infected humans) are a bit silly, but in a charming sort of way. The inclusion of

“Zombie Virus on” in the title is an innovation of the UK distributor (so don’t blame the film-makers for the film’s lack of zombies!) and the UK DVD cover features people who aren’t in the movie, but if a snazzy cover will get more people to pick this very entertaining film up in Blockbuster, what’s the harm? 7

RADIO

ElvenQuest

Series one, 6x30mins

BBC Radio 4

An example of the law of unintended consequences: as a result of buying a Sony Reader I now listen to a lot more radio. Turns out it’s perfect for listening to radio recorded on the PS3, and that’s how I came to listen to this highly enjoyable programme.

After doing a Q&A at a bookshop fantasy novelist Samuel Porter is approached by three figures in strange costumes: Lord Vidar the elf, Penthiselea the warrior woman and Dean, a dwarf. They need the Chosen One to save their world from Lord Darkness. But Samuel isn’t the Chosen One: it’s his dog. Amis bounds straight into the quest for the Sword of Aznagar, turning into a human upon arrival in Lower Earth, while Samuel is only convinced to join by the pointed arguments offered by Penthiselea’s proud bosom.

ElvenQuest starts ominously: there’s a joke about fantasy fans not having girlfriends in the first minute, quickly followed by “you people take all this stuff too seriously”. I was all set to strap on my +3 sword of



indignation, but thankfully it quickly left that stuff behind to race through six very funny, imaginative episodes that showed real affection for the material being spoofed.

Given the proximity of their broadcast dates, you can't help wondering if Kröd Mandoon and ElvenQuest sprang from the same round of pitches – if so, Hat Trick backed the wrong horse, because this was substantially funnier than Kröd. For example, one episode begins with a solemn recital of all the tasks facing the heroes, ending with “for as it is written in the Great Elven Book of Knowing, isn't life just one bloody thing after another”.

The cast is excellent, far outshining that of Kröd: Stephen Mangan, Darren Boyd, Sophie Winkleman, Kevin Eldon and Alistair McGowan, sounding exactly like Rowan Atkinson as Lord Darkness. I expect it's easier to get actors to London for a few days than Hungary for a few months! And unlike its television rival, ElvenQuest's satirical net covers more than a single movie. Lord of the Rings is obviously a big target (if target is the right word for such affectionate ribbing), but there's also a lot of Thomas Covenant in here.

Lord Darkness is consistently funny, not least when he has to check in to a retox centre to top up his evil. Readers of Groo #77 will feel the warm glow of recognition upon hearing many of the jokes about Amis, but they are just as funny the second time around. Some of the jokes are real groaners, but delivered with panache: the studio audience is having such a great time that it's hard not to be caught up in the fun.

The ending sets up a second series, and I certainly hope one will be forthcoming. In the meantime, do listen out for repeats on BBC7. 7

TELEVISION

Kröd Mandoon and the Flaming Sword of Fire

Series one, 6x30mins

BBC2/Comedy Central

Kröd Mandoon (Sean Maguire of Meet the Spartans) becomes a leader of the resistance, and with his merry band of outlaws searches for a way to strike at local overlord Dungalore (Matt Lucas). Sean Maguire – always decent in his US sitcom appearances – and the rest of the cast do a fair job, but Matt Lucas rules the roost from start to finish, shining in his first real acting role and making the very best out of every line. He's

clearly enjoying himself. It's no surprise that his character gets the last scene of the last episode rather than the titular hero.

Lots of other familiar British faces are involved, both behind the scenes (Jimmy Mulville produces) and on screen, including James Murray from *Primeval* as Ralph Longshaft, the man who's everything Kröd wants to be, Alex MacQueen from *The Thick of It* as Barnabas, Dungalore's long-suffering vizier, and Tony Bignell as Homunculo. You probably won't recognise that last one, but he was also in BBC3's *Coming of Age*, putting the poor guy in two of the most critically-derided comedies of the year.

But I'm not sure Kröd quite deserved the kicking it got from the critics. The humour is fairly run-of-the-mill stuff (Dungalore talks of his Uncle Zanus, which gives you an idea of what to expect), but it has its moments. There's some quite funny anachronistic chat about casual Fridays and so on. It's no worse than say *The Quest of Dick & Dom*, though obviously expectations are higher for a grown-up programme. It's much, much less funny than Radio 4's *ElvenQuest*. Funnily enough, Kröd features an inversion of its rival's dog-into-human joke, but puts it to predictably cruder purpose.

Like *Robin Hood*, it's filmed around Budapest, and you do expect Kröd and his men to run into Robin's band of outlaws during one of their many rambles through the forest. The fantasy element is fairly perfunctory, the best story being about a biclops – a cyclops who swings both ways. What Kröd reminded me of most of all was the diabolically bad *Dungeons & Dragons* film, right down to the Wayans-esque sidekick, but played for intentional laughs this time. You could quite easily believe the *D&D* movie (and perhaps *Krull*) to be the only fantasy of which these writers are aware. Shame, though, that it misses that movie's best (unintentional) joke: the dwarf who was one of the tallest members of the party!

All I ask of a comedy is that it makes me laugh – whether it is good or bad doesn't really matter (hence my appreciation of the work of Rob Schneider). Kröd manages that, though not quite as often as it could, especially when Lucas is off-screen. It was made for Comedy Central by our own Hat Trick productions, and I can't help thinking Hat Trick would have more joy with an American HIGNFY than another series of this. But there isn't all that much fantasy comedy to choose from – I watched every episode of *Red Dwarf* without ever really thinking it was any good – so if they make another series of this I'll watch it, slightly begrudging the times it hits me with a cheap laugh, but laughing nevertheless. 5

Warehouse 13

NBC Universal

US, 90 mins (pilot)

Warehouse 13 is reminiscent of the much-lamented *Middleman*, in that it's about two beautiful people who work for a secret organisation that stops the world's weirdness from getting out of control – but it's as if some maniac wondered what *The Middleman* would be like without wit, sass, excitement, plot or sexy uniforms. And now the experiment is complete – but did they have to make the results public? Some very dull people go to work in a big boring warehouse. They have to find troublesome magical artefacts and put them in a pressure cooker full of goo to neutralise them. Then they file them away. In short, they take the unexplained and put it on a shelf.

I would love to watch someone like Russell Davies or Charlie Brooker sit through this painfully slow, leaden pilot: imagine their expressions of astonished disbelief as the guided tour of the warehouse drags into its millionth deadly minute! I've stepped on pacier slugs (inadvertently, of course)! It even seems to know how dull it is: the score, for example, noodles away apologetically in the background, careful not to draw attention to itself, unable to hit any peaks because there's nothing exciting happening on screen. "I have to be here," it says with a nervous smile, embarrassed to be seen at such a lame party.

The none-more-generic lead characters are Pete Latimer (Eddie McClintock – the guy who wanted *Bones* to sail away with him), who gets "a vibe" about things – wooh! – and Myka Bering (Joanne Kelly), a standard-issue FBI agent in a tight blouse. McClintock's tone is all wrong – he smirks through the whole thing and looks thoroughly bored. The best I can find to say about Kelly is that she's probably playing the role as written. The support is better: C.C.H. Pounder must feel she's on holiday after those gruelling final seasons of *The Shield*, while Saul Rubinek, who I've often thought would be perfect as Ben Bova's Sam Gunn, plays Artie, the guy who looks after the warehouse.

The screener only included the pilot (thank goodness – I couldn't have taken any more!) – but who knows, maybe with better scripts and direction it could become watchable. Programmes often get retooled between pilot and series. Brief nods at *Monk*-ish cosy crime showed potential. But after a pilot so drab it made *K9 & Co* look like *Band of Brothers*, the best reason for giving this a second chance is that there's little else on telly in the summer months. **4**

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