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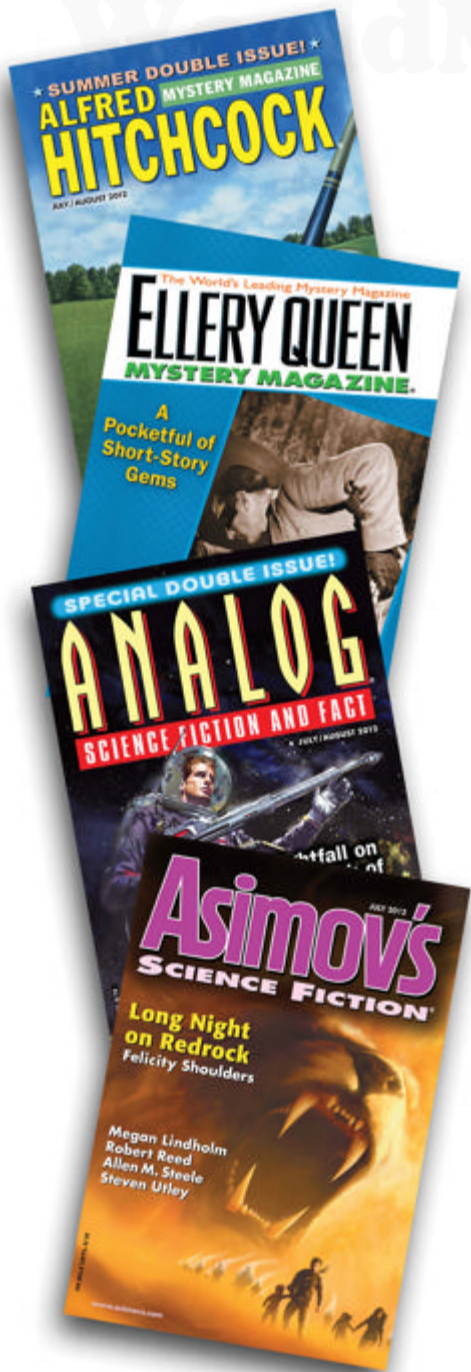
The Discovered Country

Ian R. MacLeod

Leah Cypess
Tom Purdom
James Sallis
Dominica Phetteplace

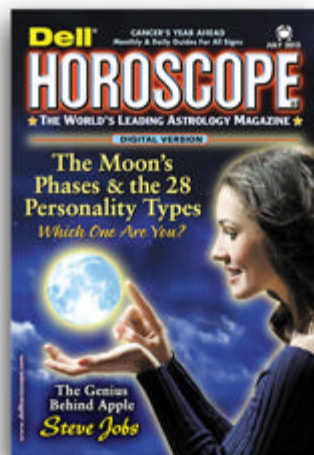
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SCIENCE FICTION

SEPTEMBER 2013

Vol. 37 No. 9 (Whole Number 452)

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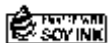
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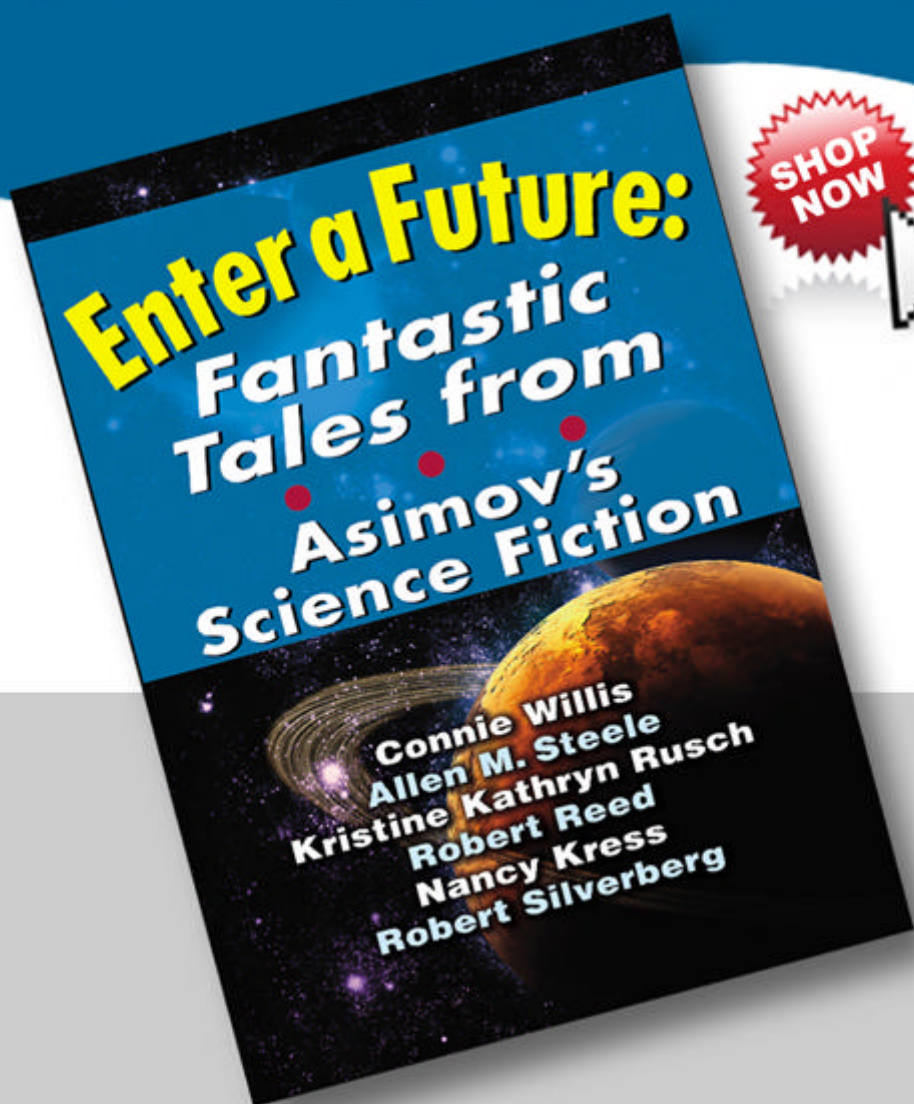
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ON NOT DYING OF THE LIGHT

My father believed that—no matter what the odds—one should always go down metaphorically swinging and never face the end with resignation. Where some living wills indicate “Do Not Resuscitate,” his instructed us to extend his life by “all means possible.” I don’t think every situation lends itself to this philosophy, but I know I’ve been influenced by it. It’s one reason Arthur C. Clarke’s 1972 novel, *Rendezvous with Rama*, so quickly convinced me that humanity could do with an early warning system that would help Earth avoid disastrous collisions with objects from outer space. As Bill Nye the Science Guy says, “We are the first generations of humans who can do something about an asteroid or comet impact. We have learned enough about the cosmos and our place in space that we can understand the danger and make a plan.”

Asteroids and comets as methods of mass destruction have been much on our minds lately. We’ve all seen the videos of the 11,000-ton meteor that blew up over the Chelyabinsk Oblast earlier this year. Although the atmosphere absorbed most of it, the meteor was packing a kinetic energy punch twenty to thirty times greater than the energy released by the bomb that fell on Hiroshima. Almost directly on its heels came the awfully close flyby of Asteroid 2012 DA14. At four times the size of the Cheyabinsk meteor, this asteroid could do significant damage if it impacts the Earth at some point in its future travels. There are good reasons for why asteroids and their comet cousins are the nightmares of science fiction writers, readers, and editors.

But objects like asteroids have dual natures in science and in science fiction. We know one ended the reign of the dinosaur and one could as easily bring about our own demise. Lurking in my submissions system are numerous stories chronicling

the Earth’s fiery destruction, yet for every one of those there’s another tale about the daring deeds of brave asteroid miners or the exploits of dodgy, and sometimes misunderstood, asteroid pirates. These ideas are so common in science fiction that they are often viewed as clichés. Still, they may become reality sometime in the not too distant future. A company called Planetary Resources Inc. hopes to mine near-Earth asteroids for water and platinum. NASA’s proposed budget for 2014 “includes a plan to robotically capture a small near-Earth asteroid and redirect it safely to a stable orbit in the Earth-moon system where astronauts can visit and explore it.” Kim Stanley Robinson’s latest novel, *2312*, imagines us using asteroids as nature preserves and means of transportation.

My earliest encounter with an asteroid story may have been Isaac Asimov’s “Marooned Off Vesta.” I found the story in a collection called *Asimov’s Mysteries* when I was in middle school. In this tale, three plucky characters must use their ingenuity to survive after their spaceship is wrecked by a meteoroid. Last year, Jason Sanford’s “Heaven’s Touch” featured an equally competent character who desperately tries to save the Earth and herself from a close encounter with a comet.

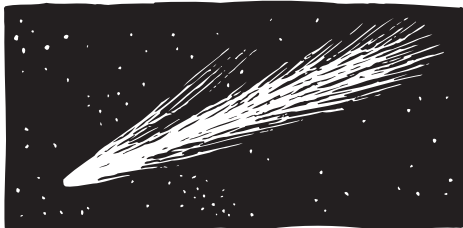
In James Maxey’s 2005, “To the East, a Bright Star,” and Robert Reed’s 2007, “Roxie,” characters await the inevitable end of life on Earth as we know it with varying degrees of acceptance. These stories have their quiet beauty. Although fatalistic, they are powerful. They remind us of what we will lose if we don’t take steps to protect ourselves. I know that just because we have a “can-do” attitude doesn’t mean that we will succeed at everything we set our minds to. But inaction could certainly doom us. I’d rather throw my lot in with those who are trying to ward off these cosmic terrors than

ignore the issue and convince myself that asteroids or comets aren't going to inflict massive destruction on the Earth during my lifetime.

Clarke called his fictional early warning system for detecting hazardous Near Earth Objects "SPACEGUARD." Today, there are numerous national and international associations working on the problem of detecting NEOs and avoiding a major impact event—some of these organizations even take their names from Clarke's novel. NASA lists many of the groups at <http://neo.jpl.nasa.gov/links>. The Planetary Society <<http://www.planetary.org>> is a nonprofit organization that funds "asteroid hunters" through their Shoemaker NEO Grants. One grant partially funded the La Sagra Sky Survey, at the Observatorio Astronómico de La Sagra. Asteroid 2012 DA14 was discovered during the course of this survey.

Although scientists have lots of promising ideas, it doesn't look like humanity is prepared to take on the redirection of a massive object anytime soon. Right now, the best defense seems to be an orderly evacuation of the endangered area. Evacuation won't be the answer if a planet-killer sized asteroid shows up, though. Many hope that the dramatic footage of the Chelyabinsk explosion, and its concurrence with the visit from Asteroid 2012 DA14, will encourage more research into methods for nudging treacherous NEOs out of our path.

I hope it does. I'd prefer that we not face extinction from the skies as helplessly as the dinosaurs did. I want humanity raging effectively at the blinding light of a catastrophic Near Earth Object and finding ways to destroy or deflect the planet killer before it gets us. Neither I nor my children nor my children's children should have to go gently. ○



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TRANSLATIONS

The January 1987 issue of *Asimov's Science Fiction* featured a novella of mine called "The Secret Sharer," the title of which I had borrowed from a story by Joseph Conrad. In an introduction to my "Secret Sharer" written for a collection of my stories soon afterward I said that I had "translated" the famous Conrad story into science fictional terms. In one basic sense that was true: Conrad's story is about a ship captain who quite improperly provides sanctuary in his cabin for a stowaway who has hidden himself aboard his ship, and so is mine. But I was uncomfortable with that word "translated" all the same, for I felt that it was not quite the appropriate term for what I had done. What I believed I had done was to find a purely science fictional *equivalent* of Conrad's basic story situation and produce something that I think represents completely original work, however much it may owe to the structure of a classic earlier story and insofar as completely original ideas in fiction are ever actually possible. (More about that latter point later on!)

The term "translation" in the sense I've used it here first showed up as a derogatory word in the uncompromising

critical vocabulary set forth by Damon Knight and James Blish in the 1950s upon which I based much of my own fiction-writing esthetic. They defined a "translation" as an adaptation of a stock format of mundane fiction into SF by the simple one-for-one substitution of science fiction noises for the artifacts of a mundane story. Blish, in a famous essay eviscerating a story of Robert Sheckley's—and Blish specialized in eviscerations—wrote, in 1955, "As usual, the problem is 'solved' by pulling three rabbits out of the author's hat, though of course he doesn't call them rabbits—they look like rabbits, but if you call them smearps, that makes it science fiction." To this day, "calling a rabbit a smearp" is a phrase used by critics to describe this kind of lazy science fiction.

Blish and Knight weren't the first to denounce the technique. In the fall of 1950 an impressive new science fiction magazine called *Galaxy* commenced publication, and on the back cover of the first issue, under the heading, YOU'LL NEVER SEE IT IN GALAXY, were these two paragraphs printed in parallel format, the work of *Galaxy's* brilliant, tough-minded editor, Horace L. Gold:

Jets blasting, Bat Durston came screeching down through the atmosphere of Bblizznaj, a tiny planet seven billion light years from Sol. He cut out his super-hyper-drive for the landing . . . and at that point, a tall, lean space-man stepped out of the tail assembly, proton gun-blaster in a space-tanned hand.

"Get back from those controls, Durston," the tall stranger lipped thinly. "You don't know it, but this is your last space trip."

Hoofs drumming, Bat Durston came galloping down through the pass at Eagle Gulch, a tiny gold colony 400 miles north of Tombstone. He spurred hard for a low overhang of rim-rock . . . and at that point a tall, lean wrangler stepped out from behind a high boulder, a six-shooter in a sun-tanned hand.

"Rear back and dismount, Bat Durston," the tall stranger lipped thinly. "You don't know it, but this is your last saddle-jaunt through these here parts."

“Sound alike?” Gold asked, below. “They should—one is merely a western transplanted to some alien and impossible planet. If this is your idea of science fiction, you’re welcome to it. YOU’LL NEVER FIND IT IN GALAXY.”

Gold, who had served his literary apprenticeship writing for the pulp magazines of the 1930s, knew all about such stuff. Change “Colt .44” to “laser pistol” and “horse” to “greeznak” and “Comanche” to “Sloogl” and you could easily generate a sort of science fiction out of a standard western story, complete with cattle rustlers, scalplings, and cavalry rescues. But you didn’t get real science fiction; you didn’t get anything new and intellectually stimulating, just a western story that has greeznaks and Sloogls in it. Change “Los Angeles Police Department” to “Drylands Patrol” and “crack dealer” to “canal-dust dealer” and you’ve got a crime story set on Mars, but so what? Change “the canals of Venice” to “the marshy streets of Venusburg” and the sinister agents of S.M.E.R.S.H. to the sinister agents of A.A.A.A.R.G.H. and you’ve got a James Bond story set on the second planet, but it’s still a James Bond story.

I don’t think that that’s what I did in my version of “The Secret Sharer.” The particular way in which my stowaway Vox hides herself aboard the *Sword of Orion* is nothing that Joseph Conrad could have understood, and arises, I think, purely out of the science fictional inventions at the heart of the story. The way she ultimately departs from the ship is very different from anything depicted in Conrad’s maritime fiction. The starwalk scene, in which Vox and the captain take a virtual stroll into interstellar space, provides visionary possibilities quite unlike those afforded by a long stare into the vastness of the trackless Pacific. “Together we walked the stars,” I wrote. “Not only walked but plunged and swooped and soared, traveling among them like gods. Their hot breath singed us. Their throbbing brightness thundered at us. Their serene

movements boomed a mighty music at us. On and on we went, hand in hand, Vox leading, I letting her draw me, deeper and deeper into the shining abyss that was the universe. Until at last we halted, floating in mid-cosmos, the ship nowhere to be seen, only the two of us surrounded by a shield of suns.” And so on. “The Secret Sharer” by Robert Silverberg is, or so I believe, a new and unique science fiction story set, for reasons of the author’s private amusement, within the framework of a well-known century-old masterpiece of the sea by Joseph Conrad.

As for calling rabbits smeerps and horses greeznaks, that is not only lazy conceptualizing but can be irritating and distracting to the reader, and I had my own say on that in the introductory note I wrote for the novel *Nightfall* (1990) on which I collaborated with Isaac Asimov: “Kalgash is an alien world and it is not our intention to have you think that it is identical to Earth, even though we depict its people as speaking a language that you can understand, and using terms that are familiar to you. Those words should be understood as mere equivalents of alien terms. . . . So when the people of Kalgash speak of ‘miles,’ or ‘hands,’ or ‘cars,’ or ‘computers,’ they mean *their own* units of distance, *their own* grasping-organs, *their own* ground-transportation devices, *their own* information-processing machines, etc. . . .

“We could have told you that one of our characters paused to strap on his quonglishes before setting out on a walk of seven vorks along the main gleebish of his native znoob, and everything might have seemed ever so much more thoroughly alien. But it would also have been ever so much more difficult to make sense out of what we were saying, and that did not seem useful. The essence of this story doesn’t lie in the quantity of bizarre terms we might have invented; it lies, rather, in the reaction of a group of people somewhat like ourselves, living on a world that is somewhat like ours in all but one highly sig-

nificant detail, as they react to a challenging situation that is completely different from anything the people of Earth have ever had to deal with. . . .”

Note that phrase, *a world that is somewhat like ours in all but one highly significant detail*. A science fiction story needs to have some underlying speculative concept, or it isn't science fiction no matter how many smeerps and greeznaks it has. And it hardly matters whether the people of the planet Kalgash have streets in their towns or gleebishes in their znoobs, so long as no specifically science fictional situation is presented in the story.

Long ago, Poul Anderson and Gordon R. Dickson dealt with that problem in a classic series of comic masterpieces (eventually collected in 1957 as *Earthman's Burden*, about an Earthlike planet called Toka inhabited by Hokas, intelligent creatures resembling teddy bears, who in the early years of Toka's contact with Earth had seen some old Western movies and had decided to recreate the cultural milieu of those old Westerns on their own world. So they wear red bandannas and ten-gallon hats, and greet some visiting Earthmen with, "Howdy, stranger, howdy. . . . I'm Tex and my pardner here is Monty.")

It's all wildly funny, and the perfect inversion of Horace Gold's "You'll Never See it in GALAXY" back-cover advertisement. Anderson and Dickson did indeed make use of all the clichés of the Western story in the first of the Hoka stories (appropriately called "The Sheriff of Canyon Gulch"), but everything in the story is conceptualized in a legitimately science fictional way, as one would have expected from those two masters of the genre. "If the cowboys are teddy bears," one of the Earthmen asks, "then who—or what—are the Indians?" And they

soon find out: they are reptilian creatures, "big tall beings, bigger than I am, but walking sort of stooped over . . . tails and fangs and green skins, and their talk is full of hissing noises. . . ."

Later Hoka stories played with the Don Juan legend, with Sherlock Holmes, with the pirates of the Caribbean, the romance of the Foreign Legion, and several other familiar standbys of classic mainstream fiction. Should these stories be considered translations of mainstream material into science fiction? Of course. Their very titles signal that. ("The Adventure of the Misplaced Hound." "Yo Ho Hoka!") But they are something more than that, much more, because they depend on an underlying science fictional postulate: *Suppose an alien species decides to imitate Earthly story formulas in real-life existence*. Here's a case where the teddy bears are called Hokas, all right, but that isn't just smeerpism, teddy bears hiding behind a funny name: they are genuine alien beings set in genuine science fiction stories.

Still, they look like teddy bears, and they have redesigned their world to look like this and that bit of what could just as well be movie scenery. Real science fictional thinking went into the Hoka stories, but they are based—deliberately and gloriously so—on Earthly predecessors, just as my "Secret Sharer" novella is a set of science fictional equivalents of Joseph Conrad's story, set aboard a fantastically imagined starship plying the galactic depths instead of a nineteenth-century sailing vessel working the Gulf of Siam. Most science fiction, under close examination, turns out to have some degree of smeerphood about it. Is true conceptual originality possible at all? Let's look at that next issue. ○

THE DISCOVERED COUNTRY

Ian R. MacLeod

Ian R. MacLeod <www.ianrmacleod.com> has been an acclaimed writer of challenging and innovative speculative and fantastic fiction for more than two decades. He grew up in the English West Midlands, studied law, spent some time working and dreaming in the civil service before moving on to teaching and house-husbandry. He now lives with his wife in the riverside town of Bewdley. Ian's most recent novel, *Wake Up and Dream*, won the Sidewise Award for Best Alternate History, while his previous works have won the Arthur C. Clarke, John W. Campbell, and World Fantasy Awards. The author's John Lennon-based story, "Snodgrass," was dramatized this year in the UK as part of the Sky Playhouse series, and it is the title story of his "best of" e-book collection. The idea for the theme and setting of "The Discovered Country" came in part from Keith Roberts' brilliant short story, "Weihnachtsabend," which has long been one of his favorites.

The trees of Farside are incredible. Fireash and oak. Greenbloom and maple. Shot through with every color of autumn as late afternoon sunlight blazes over the Seven Mountains' white peaks. He'd never seen such beauty as this when he was alive.

The virtual Bentley takes the bridge over the next gorge at a tirescream, then speeds on through crimson and gold. Another few miles, and he's following the coastal road beside the Westering Ocean. The sands are burnished, the rocks silver-threaded. Every new vista a fabulous creation. Then ahead, just as purple glower sweeps in from his rear-view over those dragon-haunted mountains, come the silhouette lights of a vast castle, high up on a ridge. It's the only habitation he's seen in hours.

This has to be it.

Northover lets the rise of the hill pull at the Bentley's impetus as its headlights sweep the driveway trees. Another turn, another glimpse of a headland, and there's Elsinore again, rising dark and sheer.

* * *

He tries to refuse the offer to carry his luggage made by the neat little creature that emerges into the lamp lit courtyard to greet him with clipboard, sharp shoes, and lemony smile. He's encountered many chimeras by now. The shop assistants, the street cleaners, the crew on the steamer ferry that brought him here. All substantially humanoid, and invariably polite, although amended as necessary to perform their tasks, and far stranger to his mind than the truly dead.

He follows a stairway up through rough-hewn stone. The thing's name is Kasaya. Ah, now. The east wing. I think you'll find what we have here more than adequate. If not . . . Well, you *must* promise to let me know. And this is called the Willow Room. And *do* enjoy your stay. . . .

Northover wanders. Northover touches. Northover breathes. The interior of this large high-ceilinged suite with its crackling applewood fire and narrow, deep-set windows is done out in an elegantly understated arts-and-craftsy style. Among her many attributes, Thea Lorentz always did have excellent taste.

What's struck him most about Farside since he jerked into new existence on the bed in the cabin of that ship bound for New Erin is how unremittingly *real* everything seems. But the slick feel of this patterned silk bed throw . . . the spiky roughness of the teasels in the flower display . . . he's given up telling himself that everything he's experiencing is just some clever construct. The thing about it, the thing that makes it all so impossibly overwhelming, is that *he's* here as well. Dead, but alive. The evidence of his corpse doubtless already incinerated, but his consciousness—the singularity of his existence, what philosophers once called “the conscious I,” and theologians the soul, along with his memories and personality, the whole sense of self that had once inhabited pale jelly in his skull—transferred.

The bathroom is no surprise to him now. The dead do so many things the living do, so why not piss and shit as well? He strips and stands in the shower's warm blaze. He soaps, rinses. Reminds himself of what he must do, and say. He'd been warned that he'd soon become attracted to the blatant glories of this world, along with the new, young man's body he now inhabits. Better just to accept it rather than fight. All that matters is that he holds to the core of his resolve.

He towels himself dry. He pulls his watch back on—seemingly a Rolex, but a steel model, neatly unostentatious—and winds it carefully. He dresses. Hangs up his clothes in a walnut paneled wardrobe that smells faintly of mothballs, and hears a knock at the doors just as he slides his case beneath the bed.

“Yes? Come in. . . .”

When he turns, he's expecting another chimera servant. But it's Thea Lorentz.

This, too, is something they'd tried to prepare him for. But encountering her after so long is much less of a shock than he's been expecting. Thea's image is as ubiquitous as that of Marilyn Munroe or the Virgin Mary back on Lifeside, and she really hasn't changed. She's dressed in a loose-fitting shirt. Loafers and slacks. Hair tied-back. No obvious evidence of any make-up. But the crisp white shirt with its rolled up cuffs shows her dark brown skin to perfection, and one lose strand of her tied back hair plays teasingly at her sculpted neck. A tangle of silver bracelets slide on her wrist as she steps forward to embrace him. Her breasts are unbound and she still smells warmly of the patchouli she always used to favor. Everything about her feels exactly the same. But why not? After all, she was already perfect when she was alive.

“Well . . . !” That warm blaze is still in her eyes, as well. “It really *is* you.”

“I know I'm springing a huge surprise. Just turning up from out of nowhere like this.”

“I can take these kind of surprises any day! And I hear it's only been—what?—less

than a week since you transferred. Everything must feel so very strange to you still.”

It went without saying that his and Thea’s existences had headed off in different directions back on Lifeside. She, of course, had already been well on her way toward some or other kind of immortality when they’d lost touch. And he . . . well, it was just one of those stupid lucky breaks. A short, ironic keyboard riff he’d written to help promote some old online performance thing—no, no, it was nothing she’d been involved in—had ended up being picked up many years later as the standard message-send fail signal on the global net. Yeah, that was the one. Of course, Thea knew it. Everyone, once they thought about it for a moment, did.

“You know, Jon,” she says, her voice more measured now, “you’re the one person I thought would never choose to make this decision. None of us can pretend that being Farside isn’t a position of immense privilege, when most of the living can’t afford food, shelter, good health. You always were a man of principle, and I sometimes thought you’d just fallen to . . . well, the same place that most performers fall, I suppose, which is no particular place at all. I even considered trying to find you and get in touch, offer . . .” She gestures around her. “Well, this. But you wouldn’t have taken it, would you? Not on those terms.”

He shakes his head. In so many ways she still has him right. He detested—no, he quietly reminds himself—*detests* everything about this vast vampiric sham of a world that sucks life, hope, and power from the living. But she hadn’t come to him, either, had she? Hadn’t offered what she now so casually calls *this*. For all her fame, for all her good works, for all the aid funds she sponsors and the good causes she promotes, Thea Lorentz and the rest of the dead have made no effort to extend their constituency beyond the very rich, and almost certainly never will. After all, why should they? Would the gods invite the merely mortal to join them on Mount Olympus?

She smiles and steps close to him again. Weights both his hands in her own. “Most people I know, Jon—most of those I have to meet and talk to and deal with, and even those I have to call friends—they all think that I’m Thea Lorentz. Both Farside and Lifeside, it’s long been the same. But only you and a few very others really know who I am. You can’t imagine how precious and important it is to have you here. . . .”

He stands gazing at the door after she’s left. Willing everything to dissolve, fade, crash, melt. But nothing changes. He’s still dead. He’s still standing here in this Farside room. Can still even breathe the faint patchouli of Thea’s scent. He finishes dressing—a tie, a jacket, the same supple leather shoes he arrived in—and heads out into the corridor.

Elsinore really is *big*—and resolutely, heavily, emphatically, the ancient building it wishes to be. Cold gusts pass along its corridors. Heavy doors groan and creak. Of course, the delights of Farside are near-infinite. He’s passed through forests of mist and silver. Seen the vast, miles-wide back of some great island of a seabeast drift past when he was still out at sea. The dead can grow wings, sprout gills, spread roots into the soil and raise their arms and become trees. All these things are not only possible, but visibly, virtually, achievably real. But he thinks they still hanker after life, and all the things of life the living, for all their disadvantages, possess.

He passes many fine-looking paintings as he descends the stairs. They have a Pre-Raphaelite feel, and from the little he knows of art, seem finely executed, but he doesn’t recognize any of them. Have these been created by virtual hands, in some virtual workshop, or have they simply sprung into existence? And what would happen if he took that sword that also hangs on display, and slashed it through a canvas? Would it be gone forever? Almost certainly not. One thing he knows for sure about the Farside’s vast database is that it’s endlessly backed up, scattered, diffused and re-collated across many secure and heavily armed vaults back in what’s left of the

world of the living. There are very few guaranteed ways of destroying any of it, least of all by the dead.

Further down, there are holo-images, all done in stylish black and white. Somehow, even in a castle, they don't even look out of place. Thea, as always, looks like she's stepped out of a fashion shoot. The dying jungle suits her. As does this war zone, and this flooded hospital, and this burnt-out shanty town. The kids, and it is mostly kids, who surround her with their pot bellies and missing limbs, somehow manage to absorb a little of her glamour. On these famous trips of hers back to view the suffering living, she makes an incredibly beautiful ghost.

Two big fires burn in Elsinore's great hall, and there's a long table for dinner, and the heads of many real and mythic creatures loom upon the walls. Basilisk, boar, unicorn . . . hardly noticing the chimera servant who rakes his chair out for him, Northover sits down. Thea's space at the top of the table is still empty.

In this Valhalla where the lucky, eternal dead feast forever, what strikes Northover most strongly is the sight of Sam Bartleby sitting beside Thea's vacant chair. Not that he doesn't know that the man has been part of what's termed *Thea Lorentz's inner circle* for more than a decade. But, even when they were all still alive and working together on *Bard on Wheels*, he'd never been able to understand why she put up with the man. Of course, Bartleby made his fortune with those ridiculous action virtuals, but the producers deepened his voice so much, and enhanced his body so ridiculously, that it was a wonder, Northover thought, they bothered to use the actor at all. Now, though, he's chosen to bulk himself out and cut his hair in a Roman fringe. He senses Northover's gaze, and raises his glass, and gives an ironic nod. He still has the self-regarding manner of someone who thinks himself far better looking, not to mention cleverer, than he actually is.

Few of the dead, though, choose to be beautiful. Most elect for the look that expresses themselves at what they thought of as the most fruitful and self-expressive period of their lives. Among people this wealthy, this often equates to late middle age. The fat, the bald, the matronly, and the downright ugly rub shoulders, secure in the knowledge that they can become young and beautiful again whenever they wish.

"So? What are you here for?"

The woman beside him already seems flushed from the wine, and has a homely face and a dimpled smile, although she sports pointed teeth, elfin ears, and her eyes are cattish slots.

"For?"

"Name's Wilhelmina Howard. People just call me Will. . . ." She offers him a claw-nailed hand to shake. "Made my money doing windfarm recycling in the non-federal states. All that lovely superconductor and copper we need right here to keep our power supplies as they should be. Not that we ever had much of a presence in England, which I'm guessing is where you were from . . . ?"

He gives a guarded nod.

"But isn't it just so *great* to be here at Elsinore? *Such* a privilege. Thea's everything people say she is, isn't she, and then a whole lot more as well? *Such* compassion, and all the marvelous things she's done! Still, I know she's invited me here because she wants to get hold of some of my money. Give back a little of what we've taken an' all. Not that I won't give. That's for sure. Those poor souls back on Lifeside. We really have to do something, don't we, all of us . . . ?"

"To be honest, I'm here because I used to work with Thea. Back when we were both alive."

"So, does that make you an *actor*?" Wilhelmina's looking at him more closely now. Her slot pupils have widened. "Should I *recognize* you? Were you in any of the famous—"

“No, no.” As if in defeat, he holds up a hand. Another chance to roll out his story. More a musician, a keyboard player, although there wasn’t much he hadn’t turned his hand to over the years. Master of many trades, and what have you—at least, until that message fail signal came along.

“So, pretty much a lucky break,” murmurs this ex-take-no-shit businesswoman who died and became a fat elf, “rather than any kind of lifetime endeavor . . . ?”

Then Thea enters the hall, and she’s changed into something more purposefully elegant—a light grey dress that shows her fine breasts and shoulders without seeming immodest—and her hair is differently done, and Northover understands all the more why most of the dead make no attempt to be beautiful. After all, how could they, when Thea Lorentz does it so unassailably well? She stands waiting for a moment as if expectant silence hasn’t already fallen, then says a few phrases about how pleased she is to have so many charming and interesting guests. Applause follows. Just as she used to do for many an encore, Thea nods and smiles and looks genuinely touched.

The rest of the evening at Elsinore passes in a blur of amazing food and superb wine, all served with the kind of discreet inevitability that Northover has decided only chimeras are capable of. Just like Wilhelmina, everyone wants to know who he’s with, or for, or from. The story about that jingle works perfectly; many even claim to have heard of him and his success. Their curiosity only increases when he explains his and Thea’s friendship. After all, he could be the route of special access to her famously compassionate ear.

There’re about twenty guests here at Elsinore tonight, all told, if you don’t count the several hundred chimeras, which of course no one does. Most of the dead, if you look at them closely enough, have adorned themselves with small eccentricities; a forked tongue here, an extra finger there, a crimson badger-stripe of hair. Some are new to each other, but the interactions flow on easy rails. Genuine fame itself is rare here—after all, entertainment has long been a cheapened currency—but there’s a relaxed feeling-out between strangers in the knowledge that some shared acquaintance or interest will soon be reached. Wealth always was an exclusive club, and it’s even more exclusive here.

Much of the talk is of new Lifeside investment. Viral re-programming of food crops, all kinds of nano-engineering, weather, flood, and even birth control—although the last strikes Northover as odd considering how rapidly the human population is decreasing—and every other kind of plan imaginable to make the Earth a place worth living in again is discussed. Many of these schemes, he soon realizes, would be mutually incompatible, and potentially incredibly destructive, and all are about making money.

Cigars are lit after the cheeses and sorbets. Rare, exquisite whiskeys are poured. Just like everyone else, he can’t help but keep glancing at Thea. She still has that way of seeming part of the crowd yet somehow apart from—or above—it. She always had been a master of managing social occasions, even those rowdy parties they’d hosted back in the day. A few words, a calming hand and smile, and even the most annoying drunk would agree that it was time they took a taxi. For all her gifts as a performer, her true moments of transcendent success were at the lunches, the less-than-chance-encounters, the launch parties. Even her put-downs or betrayals left you feeling grateful.

Everything Farside is so spectacularly different, yet so little about her has changed. The one thing he does notice, though, is her habit of toying with those silver bangles she’s still wearing on her left wrist. Then, at what feels like precisely the right moment, and thus fractionally before anyone expects, she stands up and taps her wineglass to say a few more words. From anyone else’s lips, they would sound

like vague expressions of pointless hope. But, coming from her, it's hard not to be stirred.

Then, with a bow, a nod, and what Northover was almost sure is a small conspiratorial blink in his direction—which somehow seems to acknowledge the inherent falsity of what she has just done, but also the absolute need for it—she's gone from the hall, and the air suddenly seems stale. He stands up and grabs at the tilt of his chair before a chimera servant can get to it. He feels extraordinarily tired, and more than a little drunk.

In search of some air, he follows a stairway that winds up and up. He steps out high on the battlements. He hears feminine chuckles. Around a corner, shadows tussle. He catches the starlit glimpse of a bared breast, and turns the other way. It's near-freezing up out on these battlements. Clouds cut ragged by a blazing sickle moon. Northover leans over and touches the winding crown of his Rolex watch and studies the distant lace of waves. Then, glancing back, he thinks he sees another figure behind him. Not the lovers, certainly. This shape bulks far larger, and is alone. Yet the dim outlines of the battlement gleam though it. A malfunction? A premonition? A genuine ghost? But then, as Northover moves, the figure moves with him, and he realizes that he's seeing nothing but his own shadow thrown by the moon.

He dreams that night that he's alive again, but no longer the young and hopeful man he once was. He's mad old Northy. Living, if you call it living, so high up in the commune tower that no one else bothers him much, and with nothing but an old piano he's somehow managed to restore for company. Back in his old body, as well, with its old aches, fatigues, and irritations. But for once, it isn't raining, and frail sparks of sunlight cling to shattered glass in the ruined rooms, and the whole flooded, once-great city of London is almost beautiful, far below.

Then, looking back, he sees a figure standing at the far end of the corridor that leads through rubble to the core stairs. They come up sometimes, do the kids. They taunt him and try to steal his last few precious things. Northy swears and lumbers forward, grabbing an old broom. But the kid doesn't curse or throw things. Neither does he turn and run, although it looks as if he's come up here alone.

"You're Northy, aren't you?" the boy called Haru says, his voice an adolescent squawk.

He awakes with a start to new light, good health, comforting warmth. A sense, just as he opens his eyes and knowledge of who and what he is returns, that the door to his room has just clicked shut. He'd closed the curtains here in the Willow Room in Elsinore, as well, and now they're open. And the fire grate has been cleared, the applewood logs restocked. He reaches quickly for his Rolex, and begins to relax as he slips it on. The servants, the chimeras, will have been trained, programmed, to perform their work near-invisibly, and silently.

He showers again. He meets the gaze of his own eyes in the mirror as he shaves. Whatever view there might be from his windows is hidden in a mist so thick that the world beyond could be the blank screen of some old computer from his youth. The route to breakfast is signaled by conversation and a stream of guests. The hall is smaller than the one they were in last night, but still large enough. A big fire crackles in a soot-stained hearth, but steam rises from the food as cold air wafts in through the open doors.

Dogs are barking in the main courtyard. Horses are being led out. Elsinore's battlements and towers hover like ghosts in the blanketing fog. People are milling, many wearing thick gauntlets, leather helmets, and what look like padded vests and kilts. The horses are big, beautifully groomed, but convincingly skittish in the way

that Northover surmises expensively pedigreed beasts are. Or were. Curious, he goes over to one as a chimera stable boy fusses with its saddle and reins.

The very essence of equine haughtiness, the creature tosses its head and does that lip-blubber thing horses do. Everything about this creature is impressive. The flare of its nostrils. The deep, clean, horsey smell. Even, when he looks down and under, the impressive, seemingly part-swollen heft of its horsey cock.

“Pretty spectacular, isn’t he?”

Northover finds that Sam Bartleby is standing beside him. Dressed as if for battle, and holding a silver goblet of something steaming and red. Even his voice is bigger and deeper than it was. The weird thing is, he seems more like Sam Bartleby than the living Sam Bartleby ever did. Even in those stupid action virtuals.

“His name’s Aleph—means alpha, of course, or the first. You may have heard of him. He won, yes, didn’t you . . . ?” By now, Bartleby’s murmuring into the beast’s neck. “The last ever Grand Steeplechase de Paris.”

Slowly, Northover nods. The process of transfer is incredibly expensive, but there’s no reason in principle why creatures other than humans can’t join Farside’s exclusive club. The dead are bound to want the most prestigious and expensive toys. So, why not the trapped, transferred consciousness of a multi-million dollar racehorse?

“You don’t ride, do you?” Bartleby, still fondling Aleph—who, Northover notices, is now displaying an even more impressive erection—asks.

“It wasn’t something I ever got around to.”

“But you’ve got plenty of time now, and there are few things better than a day out hunting in the forest. I suggest you start with one of the lesser, easier, mounts over there, and work your way up to a real beast like this. Perhaps that pretty roan? Even then, though, you’ll have to put up with a fair few falls. Although, if you really want to cheat and bend the rules, and know the right people, there are shortcuts. . . .”

“As you say, there’s plenty of time.”

“So,” Bartleby slides up into the saddle with what even Northover has to admit is impressive grace. “Why are you here? Oh, I don’t mean getting *here* with that stupid jingle. You always were a lucky sod. I mean, at Elsinore. I suppose you want something from Thea. That’s why most people come. Whether or not they’ve got some kind of past with her.”

“Isn’t friendship enough?”

Bartleby is now looking down at Northover in a manner even more condescending than the horse. “You should know better than most, Jon, that friendship’s just another currency.” He pauses as he’s handed a long spear, its tip a clear, icy substance that could be diamond. “I should warn you that whatever it is you want, you’re unlikely to get it. At least, not in the way you expect. A favor for some cherished project, maybe?” His lips curl. “But that’s not *it* with you, is it? We know each other too well, Jon, and you really haven’t changed. Not one jot. What you really want is Thea, isn’t it? Want her wrapped up and whole, even though we both know that’s impossible. Thea being Thea just as she always was. And, believe me, I’d do anything to defend her. Anything to stop her being hurt. . . .”

With a final derisory snort and a spark of cobbles, Bartley and Aleph clatter off.

The rooms, halls, and corridors of Elsinore are filled with chatter and bustle. Impromptu meetings. Accidental collisions and confusions that have surely been long planned. Kisses and business cards are exchanged. Deals are brokered. Promises offered. The spread of the desert that has now consumed most of north Africa could be turned around by new cloud-seeding technologies, yet untold fortunes have been spent providing virtual coffee, or varieties of herb tea if preferred for Farside instead.

No sign of Thea, though. In a way she’s more obvious Lifeside, where you can buy

as much Thea Lorentz merchandise as even the most fervent fanatic could possibly want. Figurines. Candles. Wallscreens. T-shirts. Some of it, apparently, she even endorses. Although always, of course, in a good cause. Apart from those bothersome kids, it was the main reason Northover spent so much of his last years high up and out of reach of the rest of the commune. He hated being reminded of the way people wasted what little hope and money they had on stupid illusions. Her presence here at Elsinore is palpable, though. Her name is the ghost at the edge of every conversation. Yes, but Thea . . . Thea . . . and Thea . . . Thea . . . Always, always, everything is about Thea Lorentz.

He realizes this place she's elected to call Elsinore isn't any kind of home at all—but he supposes castles have always fulfilled a political function, at least when they weren't under siege. People came from near-impossible distances to plead their cause, and, just as here, probably ended up being fobbed off. Of course, Thea's chimera servants mingle amid the many guests. Northover notices Kasaya many times. A smile here. A mincing gesture there.

He calls after him the next time he sees him bustling down a corridor.

"Yes, Mister Northover . . . ?" Clipboard at the ready, Kasaya spins round on his toes.

"I was just wondering, seeing as you seem to be about so much, if there happen to be more than one of you here at Elsinore?"

"That isn't necessary. It's really just about good organization and hard work."

"So . . ." Was that *really* slight irritation he detected, followed by a small flash of pride? ". . . you can't be in several places at once?"

"That's simply isn't required. Although Elsinore does have many shortcuts."

"You mean, hidden passageways? Like a real castle?"

Kasaya, who clearly has more important things than this to see to, manages a smile. "I think that that would be a good analogy."

"But you just said think. You *do* think?"

"Yes." He's raised his clipboard almost like a shield now. "I believe I do."

"How long have you been here?"

"Oh . . ." He blinks in seeming recollection. "Many years."

"And before that?"

"Before that, I wasn't here." Hugging his clipboard more tightly than ever, Kasaya glances longingly down the corridor. "Perhaps there's something you need? I could summon someone. . . ."

"No, I'm fine. I was just curious about what it must be like to be you, Kasaya. I mean, are you always on duty? Do your kind *sleep*? Do you change out of those clothes and wash your hair and—"

"I'm sorry, sir," the chimera intervenes, now distantly firm. "I really can't discuss these matters when I'm on duty. If I may . . . ?"

Then he's off without a backward glance. Deserts may fail to bloom if the correct kind of finger food isn't served at precisely the right moment. Children blinded by onchocerciasis might not get the implants that will allow them to see grainy shapes for lack of a decent meeting room. And, after all, Kasaya is responding in the way that any servant would—at least, if a guest accosted them and started asking inappropriately personal questions when they were at work. Northover can't help but feel sorry for these creatures, who clearly seem to have at least the illusion of consciousness. To be trapped forever in crowd scenes at the edges of the lives of the truly dead . . .

Northover comes to another door set in a kind of side-turn that he almost walks past. Is this where the chimera servants go? Down this way, Elsinore certainly seems less grand. Bright sea air rattles the arrowslit glass. The walls are raw stone, and

stained with white tidemarks of damp. This, he imagines some virtual guide pronouncing, is by far the oldest part of the castle. It certainly feels that way.

He lifts a hessian curtain and steps into a dark, cool space. A single barred, high skylight fans down on what could almost have been a dungeon. Or a monastic cell. Some warped old bookcases and other odd bits of furniture, all cheaply practical, populate a roughly paved floor. In one corner, some kind of divan or bed. In another, a wicker chair. The change of light is so pronounced that it's a moment before he sees that someone is sitting there. A further beat before he realizes it's Thea Lorentz, and that she's seated before a mirror, and her fingers are turning those bangles on her left wrist. Frail as frost, the silver circles tink and click. Otherwise, she's motionless. She barely seems to breathe.

Not a mirror at all, Northover realizes as he shifts quietly around her, but some kind of tunnel or gateway. Through it, he sees a street. It's raining, the sky is reddish with windblown earth, and the puddles seem bright as blood. Lean-to shacks, their gutters sluicing, line something too irregular to be called a street. A dead power pylon leans in the mid-distance. A woman stumbles into view, drenched and wading up to the knee. She's holding something wrapped in rags with a wary possessiveness that suggests it's either a baby or food. This could be the suburbs of London, New York, or Sydney. That doesn't matter. What does matter is how she falls to her knees at what she sees floating before her in the rain. Thea . . . ! She almost drops whatever she's carrying as her fingers claw upward and her ruined mouth shapes the name. She's weeping, and Thea's weeping as well—two silver trails that follow the perfect contours of her face. Then, the scene fades in another shudder of rain, and Thea Lorentz is looking out at him from the reformed surface of a mirror with the same soft sorrow that poor, ruined woman must have seen in her gaze.

"Jon."

"This, er . . ." he gestures.

She stands up. She's wearing a long tweed skirt, rumbled boots, a loose turtleneck woolen top. "Oh, it's probably everything people say it is. The truth is that, once you're Farside, it's too easy to forget what Lifeside is really like. People make all the right noises—I'm sure you've heard them already. But that isn't the same thing."

"Going there—being seen as some virtual projection in random places like that—aren't you just perpetuating the myth?"

She nods slowly. "But is that really such a terrible thing? And that cat-eyed woman you sat next to yesterday at dinner. What's her name, Wilhelmina? Kasaya's already committed her to invest in new sewerage processing works and food aid, all of which will be targeted on that particular area of Barcelona. I know she's a tedious creature—you only have to look at her to see that—but what's the choice? You can stand back, and do nothing, or step in, and use whatever you have to try to make things slightly better."

"Is that what you really think?"

"Yes. I believe I do. But how about *you*, Jon? What do you think?"

"You know me," he says. "More than capable of thinking several things at once. And believing, or not believing, all of them."

"Doubting Thomas," she says, taking another step forward so he can smell patchouli.

"Or Hamlet."

"Here of all places, why not?"

For a while, they stand there in silence.

"This whole castle is designed to be incredibly protective of me," she says eventually. "It admits very few people this far. Only the best and oldest of friends. And Bartleby insists I wear these as an extra precaution, even though they can some-

times be distracting. . . ." She raises her braceletted wrist. "As you've probably already gathered, he's pretty protective of me, too."

"We've spoken. It wasn't exactly the happiest reunion."

She smiles. "The way you both are, it would have been strange if it was. But look, you've come all this incredible way. Why don't we go out somewhere?"

"You must have work to do. Projects—I don't know—that you need to approve. People to meet."

"The thing about being in Elsinore is that things generally go more smoothly when Thea Lorentz isn't in the way. You saw what it was like last night at dinner. Every time I open my mouth people expect to hear some new universal truth. I ask them practical questions and their mouths drop. Important deals fall apart when people get distracted because Thea's in the room. That's why Kasaya's so useful. He does all that's necessary—joins up the dots and bangs the odd head. And people scarcely even notice him."

"I don't think he likes it much when they do."

"More questions, Jon?" She raises an eyebrow. "But everything here on Farside must still seem so strange to you, when there's so much to explore. . . ."

Down stairways. Along corridors. Through storerooms. Perhaps these are the secret routes Kasaya hinted at, winding through the castle like Escher tunnels in whispers of sea-wet stone. Then they are down in a great, electric-lit cavern of a garage. His Bentley is here, along with lines of other fine and vintage machines long crumbled to rust back on Lifeside. Maseratis. Morgans. Lamborghinis. Other things that look like Dan Dare spaceships or Fabergé submarines. The cold air reeks of new gas, clean oil, polished metal. In a far corner and wildly out of place, squatting above a small black pool, is an old VW Beetle.

"Well," she says. "What do you think?"

He smiles as he walks around it. The dents and scratches are old friends. "It's perfect."

"Well, it was never *that*. But we had some fun with it, didn't we?"

"How does this work? I mean, creating it? Did you have some old pictures of it? Did you manage to access—"

"Jon." She dangles a key from her hand. "Do you want to go out for a drive, or what?"

"The steering even *pulls* the same way. It's amazing. . . ."

Out on roads that climb and camber, giving glimpses through the slowly thinning mist of flanks of forest, deep drops. Headlights on, although it makes little difference and there doesn't seem to be any other traffic. She twiddles the radio. Finds a station that must have stopped transmitting more than fifty years ago. Van Morrison, Springsteen, and Dylan. So very, very out of date—but still good—even back then. And even now, with his brown-eyed girl beside him again. It's the same useless deejay, the same pointless advertisements. As the road climbs higher, the signal fades to a bubbling hiss.

"Take that turn up there. You see, the track right there in the trees. . . .?"

The road now scarcely a road. The Beetle a jumble of metallic jolts and yelps. He has to laugh, and Thea laughs as well, the way they're being bounced around. A tunnel through the trees, and then some kind of clearing, where he stops the engine and squawks the handbrake, and everything falls still.

"Do you remember?"

He climbs out slowly, as if fearing a sudden movement might cause it all to dissolve. "Of course I do. . . ."

Thea, though, strides ahead. Climbs the sagging cabin steps.

"This is. . ."

"I know," she agrees, testing the door. Which—just as it had always been—is unlocked.

This, he thinks as he stumbles forward, is what it really means to be dead. Forget the gills and wings and the fine wines and the spectacular food and the incredible scenery. What this is, what it means . . .

Is *this*.

The same cabin. It could be the same day. Thea, she'd called after him as he walked down the street away from an old actors' pub off what was still called Covent Garden after celebrating—although that wasn't the word—the end of *Bard on Wheels* with a farewell pint and spliff. Farewell and fuck off as far as Northover was concerned, Sam Bartleby and his stupid sword fights especially. Shakespeare and most other kinds of real performance being well and truly dead, and everyone heading for well-deserved obscurity. The sole exception being Thea Lorentz, who could sing and act and do most things better than all the rest of them combined, and had an air of being destined for higher things that didn't seem like arrogant bullshit even if it probably was. Out of his class, really, both professionally and personally. But she'd called to him, and he'd wandered back, for where else was he heading? She'd said she had a kind of proposal, and why didn't they go out for a while out in her old VW? All the bridges over the Thames hadn't yet been down then, and they'd driven past the burnt-out cars and abandoned shops until they came to this stretch of woodland where the trees were still alive, and they'd ended up exactly here. In this clearing, inside this cabin.

There's an old woodburner stove that Northover sets about lighting, and a few tins along the cobwebbed shelves, which he inspects, then settles on a can of soup, which he nearly cuts his thumb struggling to open, and sets to warm on the top of the fire as it begins to send out amber shadows. He goes to the window, clears a space in the dust, pretending to check if he turned the VW's lights off, but in reality trying to grab a little thinking time. He didn't, doesn't, know Thea Lorentz that well at this or any point. But he knows her well enough to understand that her spontaneous suggestions are nothing if not measured.

"Is this how it was, do you think?" she asks, shrugging off her coat and coming to stand behind him. Again, that smell of patchouli. She slides her arms around his waist. Nestles her chin against his shoulder. "I wanted you to be what I called producer and musical director for my Emily Dickinson thing. And you agreed."

"Not before I'd asked if you meant roadie and general dogsbody."

He feels her chuckle. "That as well. . . ."

"What else was I going to do, anyway?" Dimly, in the gaining glow of the fire, he can see her and his face in reflection.

"And how about now?"

"I suppose it's much the same."

He turns. It's he who clasps her face, draws her mouth to his. Another thing about Thea is that, even when you know it's always really her, it somehow seems to be you.

Their teeth clash. It's been a long time. This is the first time ever. She draws back, breathless, pulls off that loose-fitting jumper she's wearing. He helps her with the shift beneath, traces, remembers, discovers or rediscovers, the shape and weight of her breasts. Thumbs her hardening nipples. Then, she pulls away his shirt, undoes his belt buckle. Difficult here to be graceful, even if you're Thea Lorentz, struggle-hopping with zips, shoes, and panties. Even harder for Northover with one sock off and the other caught on something or other, not to mention his young man's erection, as he throws a dusty blanket over the creaky divan. But laughter helps. Laughter always did. That, and Thea's knowing smile as she takes hold of him for a moment in her cool fingers. Then, Christ, she lets go of him again. A final pause, and he almost thinks this isn't going to work, but all she's doing is pulling off those silver bracelets,

and then, before he can realize what else it is she wants, she's snapping off the bangle of his Rolex as well and pulling him down, and now there's nothing else to be done, for they really are naked.

Northover, he's drowning in memory. Greedy at first, hard to hold back, especially with the things she does, but then trying to be slow, trying to be gentle. Or, at least, a gentleman. He remembers, anyway—or is it now happening?—that time she took his head between her hands and raised it to her gaze. *You don't have to be so careful*, she murmurs. Or murmured. *I'm flesh and blood, Jon. Just like you. . . .*

He lies back. Collapsed. Drenched. Exhausted. Sated. He turns from the cobwebbed ceiling and sees that the Rolex lies cast on the gritty floor. Softly ticking. Just within reach. But already, Thea is stirring. She scratches, stretches. Bracelet hoops glitter as they slip back over her knuckles. He stands up. Pads over to a stained sink. There's a trickle of water. What might pass for a towel. Dead or living, it seems, the lineaments of love remain the same.

"You never were much of a one for falling asleep after," Thea comments, straightening her sleeves as she dresses.

"Not much of a man, then."

"Some might say that. . . ." She laughs as she fluffs her hair. "But we had something, didn't we, Jon? We really did. So why not again?"

There it is. Just when he thinks the past's finally over and done with. Not Emily Dickinson this time, or not only that project, but a kind of greatest hits. Stuff they did together with *Bard on Wheels*, although this time it'll be just them, a two-hander, a proper double act, and, yes Jon, absolutely guaranteed no Sam fucking Bartleby. Other things as well. A few songs, sketches. Bits and bobs. Fun, of course. But wasn't the best kind of fun always the stuff you took seriously? And why not start here and see how it goes? Why not tonight, back at Elsinore?

As ever, what can he say but yes?

Thea drives. He supposes she did before, although he can't really remember how they got back to London. The mist has cleared. She, the sea, the mountains, all look magnificent. That Emily Dickinson thing, the one they did before, was a huge commercial and critical success. Even if people did call it a one-woman show, when he'd written half the script and all the music. To have those looks, and yet be able to hold the stage and sing and act so expressively! Not to mention, although the critics generally did, that starlike ability to assume a role, yet still be Thea Lorentz. Audrey Hepburn got a mention. So did Grace Kelly. A fashion icon, too, then. But Thea could carry a tune better than either. Even for the brief time they were actually living together in that flat in Pimlico, Northover sometimes found himself simply looking—staring, really—at Thea. Especially when she was sleeping. She just seemed so angelic. Who are you really, he'd wondered. Where are you from? Why are you here, and with me of all people?

He never did work out the full chain of events that brought her to join *Bard on Wheels*. Of course, she'd popped up in other troupes and performances—the evidence was still to be found on blocky online postings and all those commemorative hagiographies, but remembrances were shaky and it was hard to work out the exact chain of where and when. A free spirit, certainly. A natural talent. Not the sort who'd ever needed instructing. She claimed that she'd lost both her parents to the Hn3i epidemic, and had grown up in one of those giant orphanages they set up at Heathrow. As to where she got that poise, or the studied assurance she always displayed, all the many claims, speculations, myths, and stories that eventually emerged—and which she never made any real attempt to quash—drowned out whatever had been the truth.

They didn't finish the full tour. Already, the offers were pouring in. He followed her

once to pre-earthquake, pre-nuke Los Angeles, but by then people weren't sure what his role exactly was in the growing snowball of Thea Lorentz's fame, and neither was he. Flunky, most likely. Not that she was unfaithful. At least, not to his knowledge. She probably never had the time. Pretty clear to everyone, though, that Thea Lorentz was moving on and up. And that he wasn't. Without her, although he tried getting other people involved, the Emily Dickinson poem arrangements sounded like the journeyman pieces they probably were. Without her, he even began to wonder about the current whereabouts of his other old sparring partners in *Bard on Wheels*.

It was out in old LA, at a meal at the Four Seasons, that he'd met, encountered, experienced—whatever the word for it was—his first dead person. They were still pretty rare back then, and this one had made its arrival on the roof of the hotel by veetol just to show that it could, when it really should have just popped into existence in the newly installed reality fields at their table like Aladdin's genie. The thing had jittered and buzzed, and its voice seemed over-amplified. Of course, it couldn't eat, but it pretended to consume a virtual plate of quail in puff pastry with foie gras in a truffle sauce, which it pretended to enjoy with virtual relish. You couldn't fault the thing's business sense, but Northover took the whole experience as another expression of the world's growing sickness.

Soon, it was the Barbican and the Sydney Opera House for Thea (and how sad it was that so many of these great venues were situated next to the rising shorelines) and odd jobs or no jobs at all for him. The flat in Pimlico went, and so, somewhere, did hope. The world of entertainment was careening, lemming-like, toward the cliffs of pure virtuality, with just a few bright stars such as Thea to give it the illusion of humanity. Crappy fantasy-dramas or rubbish docu-musicals that she could sail through and do her Thea Lorentz thing, giving them an undeserved illusion of class. At least, and unlike that idiot buffoon Bartleby, Northover could see why she was in such demand. When he thought of what Thea Lorentz had become, with her fame and her wealth and her well-publicized visits to disaster areas and her audiences with the Pope and the Dalai Lama, he didn't exactly feel surprised or bitter. After all, she was only doing whatever it was that she'd always done.

Like all truly beautiful women, at least those who take care of themselves, she didn't age in the way that the rest of the world did. If anything, the slight sharpening of those famous cheekbones and the small care lines that drew around her eyes and mouth made her seem even more breath-takingly elegant. Everyone knew that she would mature slowly and gracefully and that she would make—just like the saints with whom she was now most often compared—a beautiful, and probably incorruptible, corpse. So, when news broke that she'd contracted a strain of new-variant septicemic plague when she was on a fact-finding trip in Manhattan, the world fell into mourning as it hadn't done since . . . well, there was no comparison, although JFK and Martin Luther King got a mention, along with Gandhi and Jesus Christ and Joan of Arc and Marilyn Monroe and that lost Mars mission and Kate and Diana.

Transfer—a process of assisted death and personality uploading—was becoming a popular option. At least, amongst the few who could afford it. The idea that the blessed Thea might refuse to do this thing, and deprive a grieving world of the chance to know that somehow, somewhere, she was still there, and on their side, and sorrowing as they sorrowed, was unthinkable. By now well ensconced high up in his commune with his broom and his reputation as an angry hermit, left with nothing but his memories and that wrecked piano he was trying to get into tune, even Northover couldn't help but follow this ongoing spectacle. Still, he felt strangely detached. He'd long fallen out of love with Thea, and now fell out of admiring her as well. All that will-she won't-she crap that she was doubtless engineering even as she lay there on her deathbed! All she was doing was just exactly what she'd always

done, and twisting the whole fucking world around her fucking little finger. But then maybe, just possibly, he was getting the tiniest little bit bitter. . . .

Back at Elsinore, Kasaya has already been at work. Lights, a low stage, decent mikes and P.A. system, along with a spectacular grand piano, have all been installed at the far end of the great hall where they sat for yesterday's dinner. The long tables have been removed, the chairs re-arranged. Or replaced. It really does look like a bijou theatre. The piano's a Steinway. If asked, Northover might have gone for a Bechstein. The action, to his mind, and with the little chance he's even had to ever play such machines, being a tad more responsive. But you can't have everything, he supposes. Not even here.

The space is cool, half-dark. The light from the windows is settling. Bartleby and his troupe of merry men have just returned from their day of tally-ho slaughter with a giant boar hung on ropes. Tonight, by sizzling flamelight out in the yard, the dining will be alfresco. And after that . . . well, word has already got out that Thea and this newly arrived guy at Elsinore are planning some kind of reunion performance. No wonder the air in this empty hall feels expectant.

He sits down. Wondrous and mysterious as Thea Lorentz's smile, the keys—which are surely real ivory—gleam back at him. He plays a soft e-minor chord. The sound shivers out. Beautiful. Although that's mostly the piano. Never a real musician, Northy. Nor much of a real actor, either. Never a real anything. Not that much of a stagehand, even. Just got lucky for a while with a troupe of traveling players. Then, as luck tends to do, it ran out on you. But still. He hasn't sat at one of these things since he died, yet it couldn't feel more natural. As the sound fades, and the gathering night washes in, he can hear the hastening tick of his Rolex.

The door at the far end bangs. He thinks it's most likely Kasaya. But it's Thea. Barefoot now. Her feet slip on the polished floor. Dark slacks, an old, knotted shirt. Hair tied back. She looks the business. She's carrying loose sheaves of stuff—notes, bits of script and sheet music—almost all of which he recognizes as she slings them down across the gleaming lid of the piano.

"Well," she says, "shall we do this thing?"

Back in his room, he stands for a long time in the steam heat of the shower. Finds he's soaping and scrubbing himself until his skin feels raw and his head is dizzy. He'd always wondered about those guys from al-Qaeda and Hezbollah and the Taliban and New Orthodoxy. Why they felt such a need to shave and cleanse the bodies they would soon be destroying. Now, though, he understands perfectly. The world is ruined and time is out of joint, but this isn't just a thing you do out of conviction. The moment has to be right, as well.

Killing the dead isn't easy. In fact, it's near impossible. But not quite. The dead's great strength is the sheer overpowering sense of reality they bring to the sick fantasy they call Farside. Everything must work. Everything has to be what it is, right down to the minutest detail. Everything must be what it seems to be. But this is also their greatest weakness. Of course, they told Northy when they took off his blindfold as he sat chained to a chair that was bolted to the concrete floor in that deserted shopping mall, we can try to destroy them by trying to tear everything in Farside apart. We can fly planes into their reactors, introduce viruses into their processing suites, flood their precious data vaults with seawater. But there's always a backup. There's always another power source. We can never wreck enough of Farside to have even a marginal effect upon the whole. But the dead themselves are different. Break down the singularity of their existence for even an instant, and you destroy it forever. The dead become truly dead.

Seeing as it didn't exist as a real object, they had to show him the Rolex he'd be

wearing through a set of VR gloves and goggles. Heavy-seeming, of course, and ridiculously over-engineered, but then designer watches had been that way for decades. This is what you must put on along with your newly assumed identity when you return to consciousness in a cabin on board a steamer ferry bound for New Erin. It many ways, the watch is what it appears to be. It ticks. It tells the time. You'll even need to remember to wind it up. But carefully. Pull the crown out and turn it backward—no, no, not now, not even here, you mustn't—and it will initiate a massive databurst. The Farside equivalent of an explosion of about half a pound of semtex, atomizing anything within a three-meter radius—yourself, of course, included, which is something we've already discussed—and causing damage, depending on conditions, in a much wider sphere. Basically, though, you need to be within touching distance of Thea Lorentz to be sure, to be certain. But that alone isn't enough. She'll be wearing some kind of protection that will download her to a safe backup even in the instant of time it takes the blast to expand. We don't know what that protection will be, although we believe she changes it regularly. But, whatever it is, it must be removed.

A blare of lights. A quieting of the murmuring audience as Northover steps out. Stands center stage. Reaches in his pocket. Starts tossing a coin. Which, when Thea emerges, he drops. The slight sound, along with her presence, rings out. One thing to rehearse, but this is something else. He'd forgotten, he really had, how Thea raises her game when you're out here with her, and it's up to you to try to keep up.

A clever idea that went back to *Bard on Wheels*, to re-reflect *Hamlet* through some of the scenes of Stoppard's *Rozencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, where two minor characters bicker and debate as the whole famous tragedy grinds on in the background. Northover doubts if this dumb, rich, dead audience get many of the references, but that really doesn't matter when the thing flows as well as it does. Along with the jokes and witty wordplay, all the stuff about death, and life in a box being better than no life at all, gains a new resonance when it's performed here on Farside. The audience are laughing fit to bust by the end of the sequence, but you can tell in the falls of silence that come between that they know something deeper and darker is really going on.

It's the same when he turns to the piano, and Thea sings a few of Shakespeare's jollier songs. For, as she says as she stands there alone in the spotlight and her face glows and those bangles slide upon her arms, "The man that hath no music in himself, the motions of his spirit are dull as night." She even endows his arrangement of "Under the Greenwood Tree," which he always thought too saccharine, with a bittersweet air.

This, Northover thinks, as they move on to the Emily Dickinson section—which, of course, is mostly about death—is why I have to do this thing. Not because Thea's fake or because she doesn't believe in what she's doing. Not because she isn't Thea Lorentz any longer and has been turned inside out by the dead apologists into some parasitic ghost. Not because what she does here at Elsinore is a sham. I must do this because she is, and always was, the treacherous dream of some higher vision of humanity, and people will only ever wake up and begin to shake off their shackles when they realize that living is really about forgetting such illusions, and looking around them, and picking up a fucking broom and clearing up the mess of the world themselves. The dead take our power, certainly—both physically and figuratively. The reactors that drive the Farside engines use resources and technologies the living can barely afford. Their clever systems subvert and subsume our own. They take our money, too. Masses and masses of it. Who'd have thought that an entirely virtual economy could do so much better than one that's supposedly real? But what they really take from us, and the illusion that Thea Lorentz will continue to foster as long as she continues to exist, is hope.

Because I did not stop for death . . . Not knowing when the dawn will come, I open every door. . . . It all rings so true. You could cut the air with a knife. You could pull down the walls of the world. Poor Emily Dickinson, stuck in that homestead with her dying mother and that sparse yet volcanic talent that no one even knew about. Then, and just when the audience are probably expecting something lighter to finish off, it's back to Hamlet, and sad, mad Ophelia's songs—which are scattered about the play just as she is; a wandering, hopeless, hopeful ghost—although Northover has gathered them together as a poignant posy in what he reckons is some of his best work. Thea knows it as well. Her instincts for these things are more honed than his ever were. After all, she's a trouper. A legend. She's Thea Lorentz. She holds and holds the audience as new silence falls. Then, just as she did in rehearsal, she slides the bangles off her arm, and places them atop the piano, where they lie bright as rain circles in a puddle.

"Keep this low and slow and quiet," she murmurs, just loud enough for everyone in the hall to hear as she steps back to the main mike. He lays his hands on the keys. Waits, just as they always did, for the absolute stilling of the last cough, mutter, and shuffle. Plays the chords that rise and mingle with her perfect, perfect voice. The lights shine down on them from out of sheer blackness, and it's goodnight, sweet ladies, and rosemary for remembrance, which bewept along the primrose path to the grave where I did go. . . .

As the last chord dies, the audience erupts. Thea Lorentz nods, bows, smiles as the applause washes over her in great, sonorous, adoring waves. It's just the way it always was. The spotlight loves her, and Northover sits at the piano for what feels like a very long time. Forgotten. Ignored. It would seem churlish for him not to clap as well. So he does. But Thea knows the timing of these things better than anyone, and the crowd loves it all the more when, the bangles looped where she left them on the piano, she beckons him over. He stands up. Crosses the little stage to join her in the spotlight. Her bare left arm slips easily around his waist as he bows. This could be Carnegie Hall. This could be the Bolshoi. The manacled weight of the Rolex drags at his wrist. Thea smells of patchouli and of Thea, and the play's the thing, and there could not, never could be, a better moment. There's even Sam Bartleby, grinning but pissed-off right there on the front row and well within range of the blast.

They bow again, *thankyouthankyouthankyou*, and by now Thea's holding him surprisingly tightly, and it's difficult for him to reach casually around to the Rolex, even though he knows it must be done. Conscience doth make cowards of us all, but the time for doubt is gone, and he's just about to pull and turn the crown of his watch when Thea murmurs something toward his ear which, in all this continuing racket, is surely intended only for him.

"What?" he shouts back.

Her hand cups his ear more closely. Her breath, her entire seemingly living body, leans into him. Surely one of those bon mots that performers share with each other in times of triumph such as this. Just something else that the crowds love to see.

"Why don't you do it now?" Thea Lorentz says to Jon Northover. "What's stopping you . . . ?"

He's standing out on the moonlit battlements. He doesn't know how much time has passed, but his body is coated in sweat and his hands are trembling and his ears still seem to be ringing and his head hurts. Performance come-down to end all performance come-downs, and surely it's only a matter of minutes before Sam Bartleby, or perhaps Kasaya, or whatever kind of amazing Farside device it is that really works the security here at Elsinore, comes to get him. Perhaps not even that. Maybe he'll just vanish. Would that be so terrible? But then, they have cellars here at Elsi-

nore. Dungeons, even. Put to the question. Matters of concern and interest. Things they need to know. He wonders how much full-on pam a young, fit body such as the one he now inhabits is capable of bearing. . . . He fingers the Rolex, and studies the drop, but somehow he can't bring himself to do it.

When someone does come, it's Thea Lorentz. Stepping out from the shadows into the spotlight glare of the moon. He sees that she's still not wearing those bangles, but she keeps further back from him now, and he knows it's already too late.

"What made you realize?"

She shrugs. Shivers. Pulls down her sleeves. "Wasn't it one of the first things I said to you? That you were too principled to ever come here?"

"That was what I used to think as well."

"Then what made you change your mind?"

Her eyes look sadder than ever. More compassionate. He wants to bury his face in her hair. After all, Thea could always get more out of him than anyone. So he tells her about mad old Northy, with that wrecked piano he'd found in what had once been a rooftop bar up in his eyrie above the commune, which he'd spent his time restoring because what else was there to do? Last working piano in London, or England, most likely. Or the whole fucking world come to that. Not that it was ever that much of a great shakes. Nothing like here. Cheaply built in Mexico of all places. But then this kid called Haru comes up, and he says he's curious about music, and he asks Northy to show him his machine for playing it, and Northy trusts the kid, which feels like a huge risk. Even that first time he sits Haru down at it, though, he knows he's something special. He just has that air.

"And you know, Thea . . ." Northover finds he's actually laughing. "You know what the biggest joke is? Haru didn't even *realize*. He could read music quicker than I can read words, and play like Chopin and Chick Corea, and to him it was all just this lark of a thing he sometimes did with this mad old git up on the fortieth floor. . . .

"But he was growing older. Kids still do, you know, back on Lifeside. And one day he's not there, and when he does next turn up, there's this girl downstairs who's apparently the most amazing thing in the history of everything, and I shout at him and tell him just how fucking brilliant he really is. I probably even used the phrase *God-given talent*, whatever the hell that's supposed to mean. But anyway . . ."

"Yes?"

Northover sighs. This is the hard bit, even though he's played it over a million times in his head. "They become a couple, and she soon gets pregnant, and she has a healthy baby, even though they seem ridiculously young. A kind of miracle. They're so proud they even take the kid up to show me, and he plongs his little hands on my piano, and I wonder if he'll come up one day to see old Northy, too. Given a few years, and assuming old Northy's still alive, that is, which is less than likely. But that isn't how it happens. The baby gets sick. It's winter and there's an epidemic of some new variant of the nano flu. Not to say there isn't a cure. But the cure needs money—I mean, you know what these retrovirals cost better than anyone, Thea—which they simply don't have. And this is why I should have kept my big old mouth shut, because Haru must have remembered what I yelled at him about his rare, exceptional musical ability. And he decides his baby's only just starting on his life, and he's had a good innings of eighteen or so years. And if there's something he can do, some sacrifice he can make for his kid . . . So that's what he does. . . ."

"You're saying?"

"Oh, come on, Thea! I know it's not legal, either Lifeside or here. But we both know it goes on. Everything has its price, especially talent. And the dead have more than enough vanity and time, if not the application, to fancy themselves as brilliant musicians, just the same way they might want to ride an expensive thoroughbred, or

fuck like Casanova, or paint like Picasso. So Haru sold himself, or the little bit that someone here wanted, and the baby survived and he didn't. It's not that unusual a story, Thea, in the great scheme of things. But it's different, when it happens to someone you know, and you feel you're to blame."

"I'm sorry," she says.

"Do you think that's enough?"

"Nothing's ever enough. But do you really believe that whatever arm of the resistance you made contact with actually wanted me, Thea Lorentz, fully dead? What about the reprisals? What about the global outpouring of grief? What about all the inevitable, endless let's-do-this-for-Thea bullshit? Don't you think it would suit the interests of Farside itself far better to remove this awkward woman who makes unfashionable causes fashionable and brings attention to unwanted truths? Wouldn't *they* prefer to extinguish Thea Lorentz and turn her into a pure symbol they can manipulate and market however they wish? Wouldn't that make far better sense than whatever it was you thought you were doing?"

The sea heaves. The whole night heaves with it.

"If you want to kill me, Jon, you can do so now. But I don't think you will. You can't, can you? That's where the true weakness of whoever conceived you and this plan lies. You *had* to be what you are, or were, to get this close to me. You had to have free will, or at least the illusion of it. . . ."

"What the hell are you saying?"

"I'm sorry. You might think you're Jon Northover—in fact, I'm sure you do—but you're not. You're not him really."

"That's—"

"No. Hear me out. You and I both know in our hearts that the real Jon Northover wouldn't be here on Farside. He'd have seen through the things I've just explained to you, even if he had ever contemplated actively joining the resistance. But that isn't it, either. Not really. I loved you, Jon Northover. Loved *him*. It's gone, of course, but I've treasured the memories. Turned them and polished them, I suppose. Made them into something realer and clearer than ever existed. This afternoon, for instance. It was all too perfect. You haven't changed, Jon. You haven't changed at all. People, real people, either dead or living, they shift and they alter like ghosts in a reflection, but you haven't. You stepped out of my past, and there you were, and I'm so, so, sorry to have to tell you these things, for I fully believe that you're a conscious entity that feels pain and doubt just like all the rest of us. But the real Jon Northover is most likely long dead. He's probably lying in some mass grave. He's just another lost statistic. He's gone beyond all recovery, Jon, and I mourn for him deeply. All you are is something that's been put together from my stolen memories. You're too, too perfect."

"You're just saying that. You don't know."

"But I do. That's the difference between us. One day, perhaps, chimeras such as you will share the same rights as the dead, not to mention the living. But that's one campaign too far even for Thea Lorentz—at least, while she still has some control over her own consciousness. But I think you know, or at least you *think* you do, how to tune a piano. Do you know what inharmonicity is?"

"Of course I do, Thea. It was me who told you about it. If the tone of a piano's going to sound right, you can't tune all the individual strings to exactly the correct pitch. You have to balance them out slightly to the sharp or the flat. Essentially, you tune a piano ever so marginally out of tune, because of the way the strings vibrate and react. Which is imperfectly . . . Which is . . . I mean . . . which is . . ."

He trails off. A flag flaps. The clouds hang ragged. Cold moonlight pours down like silver sleet. Thea's face, when he brings himself to look at it, seems more beautiful than ever.

The trees of Farside are magnificent. Fireash and oak. Greenbloom and maple. Shot through with every color of autumn as dawn blazes toward the white peaks of the Seven Mountains. He's never seen such beauty as this. The tide's further in today. Its salt smell, as he winds down the window and breathes it in, is somehow incredibly poignant. Then the road sweeps up from the coast. Away from the Westering Ocean. As the virtual Bentley takes a bridge over a gorge at a tirescream, it dissolves in a roaring pulse of flame.

A few machine parts twist jaggedly upward, but they settle as the wind bears away the sound and the smoke. Soon, there's only the sigh of the trees, and the hiss of a nearby waterfall. Then there's nothing at all. ○

WHAT WE OURSELVES ARE NOT

Leah Cypess

Leah Cypess <www.leahcypess.com> is the author of two young adult fantasy novels, *Mistwood* and *Nightspell*, and numerous short stories. She lives near Boston with her family, and is at work on a new fantasy novel that will be published in early 2014. One of Leah's most recent short stories for us, "Nanny's Day," (March 2012) is currently a finalist for the Nebula Award. The tale below owes its inspiration to Michael A. Burstein's, "Kaddish for the Last Survivor," and its title to Vaclav Havel's, "The Need for Transcendence in the Postmodern World."

The second Zach's mother walked into his room, he knew it was time for the Talk. She was biting the side of her lip, the way she did when she was really nervous, and she gave his picture of Amy an extra long look before she sat down on his bed.

Not that he was surprised. It was his seventeenth birthday, and the copy of *Dealing with the Teen Years* she kept on her nightstand recommended seventeen as the ideal age for chip implantation. Which made sense: it only became legal at sixteen, and was usually impossible by the age of twenty, due to decreased brain plasticity.

Secretly reading that book had been one of the best moves he'd ever made. Now he always knew what to expect when his mother got nervous.

"Zach," his mother said. Despite all the signs of nervousness, her voice was casual and even. *Dealing with the Teen Years* also recommended "practicing important conversations" and "preparing responses for expected arguments." Though Zach was pretty sure his mother had no response prepared for what he was going to say.

Since she had done all that preparation, though, it seemed polite to at least let her get through her speech. He minimized his v-screen and said, "Hey."

"So." His mother smoothed the blanket over his mattress. "I know a couple of your friends have chips now, and I was wondering if you were thinking about it."

Zach grunted. Suddenly, despite the fact that he had prepared for this, he wanted to put off the inevitable.

"I also know that some of your friends have opted not to be chipped, and your father and I will respect your decision if that's what you want. But we really think getting a chip will be the best thing for you."

Amy's parents had thought the same thing. They had even paid big bucks for the custom add-ons she had asked for.

His mother's brow furrowed, and Zach realized that she was waiting for a response. He tried to think of one. "Uh—why?"

"Because it can be difficult, in today's world, to hold on to who you are and what makes you unique." She launched into the speech with evident relief. "It's so easy to be swallowed up by the majority, and that might even seem like an attractive option to you. But a world without diversity is a poorer world . . ."

He tuned her out while pasting an attentive look on his face. The school had been organizing discussion groups about chips for months now; he knew all the arguments and all the counterarguments. They merged in his head into one vast swirl of confusion. It didn't matter. He had made his decision, so he didn't have to think about it anymore.

His mother drew in her breath, and he blinked at her. She was looking at him with concern; maybe his attentive look had slipped. She winced, then said, "If you . . . want . . . we can get the version without the Holocaust."

Wow. They really wanted him to get the chip.

But the wince helped. It seemed to stake out some part of the decision as his own instead of his parents'. There was something about his mother's pride in his accomplishments that could bring out the worst in Zach—as if her happiness wrapped itself around him and stifled him, leaving him no space to breathe. It was easier to be rational around her when she wasn't completely thrilled with him.

"All right," he said with a shrug. "I'll check out both versions and decide which one I want."

His mother peered at him. This was not the response she had been prepared for. "You're sure? You mean . . . you've already . . . you're going to get a chip?"

"I am," Zach said. And then, since she seemed to have nothing to say, he pulled up his v-screen again. Hopefully, that would signify that the conversation was over.

The v-screen's audio pickup was obviously working well, since the first thing that popped up was an article called, "Are Chips Making Society More Fragmented?" The answer seemed obvious, so Zach ignored the article and switched back over to the game he had been playing.

But his mother wasn't done. "Zach. I'm very happy to hear that, but I want you to be sure."

"I am," he said. And then, for no reason, "Amy already got one."

"Oh." He could see her struggling with herself. She took a deep breath. "This should be your own decision, Zach. Not something you're doing to be more like your girlfriend."

A harsh laugh slipped out of him. "More *like* her? Not really."

"Zach. I know how you feel about Amy, but the two of you are still in high school. I know it's hard to see now, but someday . . ."

"Stop it," Zach said, already regretting the slip. There was a reason he usually kept his love life off limits in conversations with his parents. "Not someday. Today."

"What?"

"Amy and I broke up."

"Oh." She shot another startled glance at the picture on his desk. "I'm sorry."

"No, you're not."

"Zach—"

"It's fine." He restarted the game and scowled with concentration at the new challenge he had just opened. "I just don't want to talk about it. It has nothing to do with the chip."

Which was a lie. But his mother didn't question it, since it was what she wanted to hear.

He saw Amy in school the next day, and for the first time in a week he didn't turn and head the other way. He didn't head toward her, either, though that had been his

plan. He just stood and looked at her, standing like an idiot in the middle of the hall, feeling as if his heart had frozen and was blocking his ability to breathe.

He had never believed she would break up with him. Even after she got her chip, even after the school's discussion group on how chips could change relationships, even after days of subtle but definite distance between them. He hadn't believed it until she had told him, and then . . .

Well, then he hadn't handled it very well.

"I don't want to hurt you," she had said, after about ten minutes of him making a fool of himself. "And I'm sorry, Zach, I'm so, so, sorry. It's just that I'm part of something, something that is big and important and that shouldn't disappear from the world. I don't want to be a part of making it disappear. I have an identity and a purpose, and I want my children to have that, too."

"We can make our own identity." Even as he'd said it, he had been grateful none of his friends were around to hear him begging. "We don't have to be tied down to the past. Cultures change all the time."

"Changing isn't the same as disappearing."

"You were Korean before! Do you think Koreans who haven't been chipped aren't real Koreans?"

She had flinched at that, making him shamefully glad. "No. But it's . . . it's more of me, now. It's the base of what I am, not just a part of who I am. I can't imagine who I would be if I wasn't Korean."

"I can."

She had stepped back then, giving him a look that made it clear that not only was he not getting it, he had just said exactly the wrong thing. He had seen her drawing away and known there was no way to stop her.

"It doesn't have to be like this!" He couldn't help sounding desperate. "Don't blame it on the chip. You and I, we were talking about *forever*." He had almost been crying. Okay, not *almost*. "I love you, Amy. We were planning to go to the same college. We were happy. How can something be good if it ruins that? What's more important than people being happy?"

"I know you don't understand." If only she had been crying too. But her face, though pale, had been calm. "I don't expect you to, Zach."

He hadn't expected to either.

But today, he was full of hope for the first time in days. He took a deep breath, then another, then another, until it was almost easy. And then he walked right up to her, as if he had a right to, and said, "Hey."

Her friends exchanged looks, then scattered. They didn't even bother making excuses.

"Hey," Amy said warily. Her dark eyes were red-rimmed, but Zach knew better than to assume she had been crying over their breakup. The first couple of weeks after implantation were said to be tough.

"I'm getting my chip this afternoon," he said. "My parents talked me into it."

Amy peered at him from under her red-streaked bangs. She knew him better than anyone. She knew his parents hadn't talked him into it.

"Good," she said finally. "I think you should get a chip."

"I'm aware of that."

"I think everyone should know where they come from."

"Spare me the pep talk."

She narrowed her eyes. "I also think you should be doing it for the right reasons."

Zach swallowed hard, suddenly very aware of the overlap between grand romantic gestures and pathetically desperate wussiness. "I'm doing it for you."

"Oh, Zach."

"Once I have a chip too, I'll understand you again, and we'll—"

She shook her head so sharply that the ends of her black hair whipped into his face. He hadn't realized he was standing so close to her. But she didn't step back, so neither did he.

"Don't you want that?" He had definitely crossed over the *wussiness* border now, but he couldn't make himself stop. "You said I couldn't understand you anymore . . ."

"You won't be getting the same chip as me, Zach!"

Zach tried to imagine telling his parents that instead of the Jewish chip, he wanted the Korean one. Even in his mind, he couldn't pull it off. "I read this article last week. It said the gap between the chipped and the non-chipped is far greater than the gap between those whose chips are from different cultural backgrounds."

"That makes sense." Amy stepped back, squashing Zach's impulse to lean in and kiss her. Which was probably a good thing. "Now that I have the chip, I feel a connection to everyone who's proud of their differences, even if they're not different in the same way I am."

"So once I have a chip—"

"Zach." She bit her upper lip, a habit she had developed back when she was trying to cure her overbite. He had always found that habit oddly sexy, but now all he felt was a roil of misery and confusion. "Don't. Even if you get a chip, we're not getting back together."

This time, he was the one who stepped back. "Fabulous idea, then, isn't it? After all this time we've spent learning to respect our common humanity, to know that we're all the same deep down, let's divide people up into distinct little groups again. Like we don't have enough ways of making people more distant from each other."

"Zach." She stepped forward, and he held up both hands as if to ward her off. "You already are distant from almost everyone who exists. The chips make you closer to the people you *can* be closer to." She bit her upper lip again. "But that's not the point. If that's how you feel, you shouldn't get a chip."

She was so calm, so reasonable. He couldn't even make her mad anymore. It was like they had broken up a year ago instead of last week.

She hadn't cried at all. Not over him. He had; he had sobbed in his room the night they broke up, with his music cranked up loud so no one could hear. But he was sure she had not cried over him, not one single tear. And he knew it was horrible, but he wished that she would.

The silence stretched between them. She kept her beautiful dark eyes on him, careful and considering. It wasn't just that they were red and puffy. They were . . . old. Older than seventeen. Burdened with knowledge and experience.

I don't want eyes like that, Zach thought suddenly. He drew in a ragged breath, and heard himself say, "I hate you for this."

Amy blinked. Then she reached out and touched his cheek. "No, Zach. You don't."

He'd had a response all ready, but her touch froze him. "How can you—"

She smiled, a smile as old as her eyes. "Because I know what it's like to really be hated." And soon, he guessed, so would he.

He didn't cancel the implantation. He didn't have the energy to face that fight, not after how excited his parents had been all day. At least someone was happy.

"So," his father said, in the gray-walled waiting room. "About the Holocaust . . ."

The woman in the seat next to them, a black woman with a bored-looking teenage boy, glanced at them and then looked away. Zach wished his father would lower his voice.

"You know," his father said, not lowering his voice, "the whole reason the original chips were developed was because of the Holocaust. Because the last survivors were dying, and people were saying it never happened. They wanted to make sure the next generation would never forget."

Zach knew the history. But his father always took a long time to get to a point, so he just nodded. He hadn't thought he was opposed to getting the Holocaust memories, until his father started going on about them. Now he was starting to wonder what he was even doing here.

If that's how you feel, you shouldn't get a chip. But he didn't know how he felt. He wished he *did* know, the way Amy did.

On the end table next to their faded brown chairs was a pamphlet with red block letters across the front: *Will your culture still exist a century from now?*

He couldn't possibly tell his parents he was rethinking the whole chip idea, so he stuck to the subject he was allowed to argue about. "It's not like I plan on trying to forget about the Holocaust," he said. "But I'm not sure I want it hardwired into me. Shouldn't I have a choice?"

"A choice about what?" his mother said. "About whether these things happened? About whether they happened to people related to you? About whether you choose to forget everything they did and suffered and lived for and died for?"

His father took a deep breath. But before he could start circling around the point again, the receptionist sang out, in a bored voice, "Levinsons, please make your way to Room 173."

They had to wait for the tech, so his father got to review the history all over again, reading most of it straight from one of the glossy brochures, while his mother sat watching them anxiously.

There were three Jewish chips. The first—"more for historical interest, really"—was Holocaust-only; the impending deaths of the last Holocaust survivors twenty years ago had been the impetus for the first chip.

The second was the broader cultural chip, a collection of memories put together by a coalition of Jewish organizations: Holocaust survivors, soldiers in Israel's War of Independence, American Jews rallying for Soviet Jews, an Egyptian Jew being forced to sign the Pledge to Never Return, an Ethiopian Jew stepping off a plane onto Israeli soil. His father didn't mention the fact that there was still daily squabbling in the Jewish papers about why one person's memories had been chosen over another's. Not that Zach read the Jewish papers, but he'd had to do a term paper about it last year. Every ethnic group had the same kinds of arguments about their chips. Some had refused to try to put together a chip at all, finding the whole idea impossible or even offensive. One of Zach's bandmates was Han Chinese, and wanted a chip but couldn't get one; his parents didn't have the multi-millions necessary to create a personalized chip from scratch.

Along with the history, there were the non-specific memories: complete knowledge of Hebrew, Ladino, and Yiddish (either the full language, or just the jokes and curses), a repertoire of ethnic recipes, a song repository, and the basic traditions of all the Jewish holidays.

And then, of course, there was the third choice. All the knowledge and all the memories—except the Holocaust. His father was just getting started on that when the tech entered the room. She was a short, older woman—young enough to be hot, though—with light brown skin and severely cut hair. Zach watched her hands as they moved, describing the chips in a detached tone.

"None of the memories will make you feel like you're reliving them," she said. She had a pleasant, reassuring voice. Zach wondered if her voice was the reason she had been hired to do this. "They'll feel like exactly that, memories. Some you might never even 'remember' unless a circumstance calls them up. If you choose to add personal memories from your own parents and grandparents, those are usually more vivid . . ."

She lifted an eyebrow, and smiled faintly when Zach's parents shook their heads. "I

didn't think so. Some ethnicities tend to be more interested in the family memory option than others."

Amy's family add-ons had cost almost as much as her original chip. Zach's parents had never even mentioned them.

"However, there are those who feel that the Holocaust memories are so traumatic as to be debilitating. You probably know that in San Francisco, implanting chips containing Holocaust memories is illegal without a prior psychiatric evaluation."

"What is your opinion?" Zach's father said.

The tech half-smiled, half-grimaced. "Even though the input is the same, everyone filters it through their own personalities and experiences, so outputs vary widely—for all aspects of the cultural memories, but especially for the Holocaust. Most of my patients who take the full implant adjust quite well. There are those who have a lot of difficulty, especially those who didn't understand the full extent of the Holocaust before they got their chip. The more you've read up on it in advance, the easier the transition will be. I see you go to Hebrew school once a week. That will help a lot." She rubbed her forehead. "You do have to understand that the chips can't be un-implanted. The procedure is not reversible."

"Do you have a chip?" Zach asked.

"Zach!" his mother said.

The tech chuckled. "That's all right. A lot of people ask. The answer, Zach, is that I don't. I'm half Hispanic, one quarter Native American, and one quarter Irish. I wouldn't even know where to begin."

"Then how can you participate in this?" He didn't have to turn around to know that both his parents were glaring at him. "Your parents and . . . and ancestors . . . if they hadn't bridged the differences between them, you wouldn't even exist. Do you think differences between people are a *good* thing?"

She tilted her head to the side. "Say there were no differences between people. Who should we all be like?"

"Like—like people who can choose their own way. Who don't want to be trapped by history. Who care about everyone equally. Who are *free*. People like . . ." His voice died before he could finish. *Like me*.

She smiled. "Everyone does choose their own way, Zach. And for some people, the way is a chip. This might surprise you, but after everything I've seen working here, seeing how much meaning people can find in their culture and history, I'm considering getting a chip myself. Probably the Irish one, because it's my Irish grandmother who . . ." She stopped and gave a little laugh. "We don't need to get into that."

"Aren't you too old?"

"Zach!" His father this time. His parents tended to take turns like that.

The tech just shrugged. "There are new chips being developed that will work even on people whose brain growth is minimal. Twenty isn't the limit anymore."

Zach's father blinked, then leaned forward eagerly. "I hadn't heard about those."

"They're not publicly available yet."

"When will they be?"

The tech hesitated. Zach wondered if she wasn't supposed to tell people about this. "There will be a limited run in December. If you want to sign up as a possible participant—"

"I do," Zach's father said instantly.

His mother sat silent.

Zach turned and stared at her. She was biting the side of her lip. "Mom?"

She looked away from him.

Zach stood up. "Are you kidding me? *You* don't want a chip?"

"I'm not eligible for one."

"I'll give you a moment," the tech said hastily, all but scrambling to her feet.

"That won't be necessary," Zach's mother said. "This isn't a secret. It just . . . never came up."

"*What* never came up?" Zach asked.

His mother took a deep breath. "That I'm not Jewish."

Necessary or not, the tech seemed pretty eager to leave once the yelling reached a certain level. The door swung shut behind her.

"We weren't hiding it from you," Zach's mother said, for the dozenth time. "And I did convert, though not, technically, in a way we could prove."

"We agreed to raise you Jewish," his father said, "so we thought—"

"*Why?*" Zach kept his focus on his mother. "*Why* would you agree to raise me Jewish? With all this talk about the past defining me and not forgetting who I am. What about who *you* were? Why was it okay for that to get lost?"

"I had nothing to *lose*." His mother lifted her head. The more Zach shouted, the calmer and more in control she became. "My parents lost it for me. I had no idea who I was, where I came from, and they thought it didn't matter. They thought there should be no differences between people. That I should be exactly the same as every other person in the world, no matter where they came from, no matter what their history or culture."

"Sounds good to me," Zach said bitterly.

"It wasn't coincidence that I married your father. We met at a class about Judaism. You can't imagine how much it appealed to me, the idea of being part of a people who had endured through centuries against unimaginable odds, who never let go of who they were. I wanted to be part of that and I wanted my children to be part of it. And I understood that you couldn't have it both ways. If you want to be part of something bigger than yourself, Zach, then there are choices that have to be made. It's what I tried to explain to you about Amy—"

"I'm seventeen, Mom! I wasn't going to marry Amy!"

"But whoever you marry. If she's not someone who shares your culture, then you have to make a choice, when it comes to your children."

"What if we don't? What if we're not so damn dramatic about it, and just wait to see what happens, instead of deciding that one culture has to lose?"

"Then the minority culture loses," his mother snapped, her control finally breaking. "Then after all those generations of holding fast, you let go of your identity just because you couldn't be bothered to care."

"I don't see why I *should* care about a bunch of people who lived and died before I was ever born, just because I happen to share their DNA." His mother flinched, and his anger broke, a bit. He didn't mean that, not really. Or at least, he wasn't sure he did. "Besides, it's not quite as simple as that. In case you haven't noticed, neither Amy nor I are exactly part of the majority culture."

"Don't be ridiculous," his mother said. "You both were."

Were. Until last week, when Amy got her chip.

Someone rapped on the door, and the tech peeked her head through. "I'm sorry to interrupt. But we don't have much time, if you're planning to go ahead with the procedure."

The silence was absolute.

"Also, Ms. Levinson? I want to point out that there are no eligibility requirements for any of the chips. You don't have to prove anything. If, er, if that's what you want."

"Thank you," Zach's mother said, her eyes on Zach. "That's what I want."

Zach looked back at her, then at his father, who was watching his mother. Then he looked at the tech.

"I'm ready," he said. "I know what I want, too."

Amy came over to him once he was back in school. Her eyes were clear again, though still oddly old, and she was wearing the short pleated skirt she had worn on their first date. Zach met her eyes, then turned and walked down the hall and out the front doors of the school.

He wasn't sure she would follow him. But she did, all the way down the block and around the corner, into a small deserted park they used to sneak out to whenever they got a chance. Just being there with her made his blood heat up.

But other memories overlaid that now. That first sight of Amy had been a shock, calling up a memory of a girl who looked a lot like her, singing and laughing in Pagoda Park, her face full of hope, a line of Japanese policemen advancing slowly behind her.

When Zach turned to face her, that faded. It was just Amy, beautiful and brilliant and brave, who, despite what he'd told his parents, he had fully believed he would marry someday. He couldn't imagine ever meeting anyone better, or loving anyone more.

"How are you adjusting to the chip?" Amy twirled a slack strand of hair tightly around her finger, a habit she had been trying to break for a year. She had asked Zach to mention it when he saw her doing it, but this didn't seem like the time.

"They're okay," he said. "It takes some getting used to. I have nightmares."

Her finger stopped in mid-twirl. "They?"

"Especially about the 6.25 War," Zach said. "The one where I'm watching my village burn to the ground. I can't shake that one."

She dropped her hand. Her hair sprang free.

He laughed at the expression on her face. "I got both. Jewish and Korean."

She stood there, frozen, staring at him. The silence stretched so long that he heard himself saying, awkwardly, "I can give making kimchi a shot now—I've got a bunch of different recipes in my head, and a lot of good memories associated with the taste. Though I still can't promise I'll like your mother's soup."

Amy drew in a sharp breath. "They let you do that?"

"Not just let me. Once I explained my idea, they were all excited about it—they even paid for it, when my parents wouldn't. There's going to be an article about me and everything." He couldn't stop smiling, even though she wasn't smiling back. "I was thinking that once I adjust to these, I can get all the chips. Understand everyone's culture. And once people know it can be done, maybe I won't be the only one who makes that choice."

"God, Zach." She was staring at him, but not in the wonder he had anticipated. There was horror written across her face. "You had no right!"

"The tech said it was an amazing idea. Said it could change the world. Can you imagine—" He stopped. He was babbling, which was *his* nervous habit. "But I didn't do it for the world. You know why I did it."

She turned abruptly, leaving him staring at her hair and her back and her trembling hands. "I did it for you. Because now we can go back to being what we were."

"I didn't want to be what we were!"

That hurt, more than anything else she had said or done to him. It was a moment before he could speak. "That's not what you said. Not at the dance, or that time on the bridge. Remember?" He stepped forward and raised his hand, but let it drop before it touched her hair. "You said we were different. And we *were*. We are. We have a future together, Amy."

"I know!" She whirled back, and he saw that her eyes were bright with unshed tears. "I know we did, Zach. Don't you see? That's why I did this. Because of you."

"Because of—"

"I *do* love you! The chip doesn't change that."

Do. Not did. His heart suddenly felt lighter than it had in weeks. "Then what does it change?"

"It changes what I want my life to be. Or how badly I want it. Being Korean is important to me as a way of life, and I want to pass it along to my children *as a way of life*. Not as a colorful addition to being just like everyone else."

"But being just like everyone else could be a *good* thing. Especially if the reporter is right, if what I did catches on." He lifted a hand toward her face, and she didn't turn away. His fingers touched her cheek. "Don't you see? It's not about erasing differences. It's about erasing divisions. I identify with everyone, now."

"No." She slapped his hand away. Her eyes were bright, dark and shining. "You skipped the part where you learn how to do that. How can you identify with everyone when you can't even identify with your own people?"

His hand was shaking as he lowered it to his side. This wasn't how this was supposed to go. "That's exactly the sort of narrow-minded thinking I don't want to be forced into. Do you *want* to divide people from each other? To divide me from you? What if it doesn't have to be this way? You said I could never understand, but I do now. I *do*."

"You don't! I'm trying to make you understand, and you won't. No matter how much I love you, Zach, I can't have the life I want if I'm with you."

"But I—"

"Grafted it on like it was an interesting extra-curricular? My culture, along with *everyone's* culture? No, Zach. That just proves how little you understand." She began to cry then—finally, after all this time—and it didn't make him feel better at all. He felt cold and empty. Tears dripped off her chin as she spoke. "You've done exactly what the chips were created to prevent. You want to erase all our differences. You want to make us all the same."

He wanted to brush away her tears. He wanted to hold her close. Instead, he held himself very still. "Yes. Because it will be a better world that way. I did this because *every* culture is important to me."

"No." She stuttered, but kept going. "What you're setting out to do is destroy my culture. Mine, and yours—"

"Don't pretend you care about mine!"

"I *do* care! I care about everyone's. I'm not afraid to be different, so I'm not afraid of other people being different. But you are."

"Maybe you should be," Zach said. "Differences between people aren't so simple. They can be dangerous. Read some history."

"Read some *more* history. People will find things to fight about no matter what. And fighting is better than persecution, Zach, which is what you get when you try to force everyone to be the same."

"I'm not trying to force anyone to do anything! That's what you and your precious chips are about. I'm just trying to help people move past worrying about persecution, past being stuck in history, past being obsessed with their own narrow ways of life—"

"So we should all be the same? Is that really what you want?"

"I want—" He stopped. He took a deep breath. "You know what, Amy? Yesterday, all I wanted was to understand *you*. But today I want more than that." He forced himself to look straight at her. "Now I'm part of something more important. Something bigger than I would have been a part of if I'd only implanted one chip."

"I don't think so," she said.

He managed a trembling smile. "I know."

She brushed away her own tears, and they stood in silence, facing each other.

He was the first to step back. They stood looking at each other for a few moments more, and then they turned and went back to school, walking side by side but with a significant distance between them. ○

Ponies and rocketships are the blackest of magic because they exist in your mind beyond sin and debt, a heroic nirvana of open ranges and deep space.

Because as little girls and little boys we believed we could have them and we ran around the house with our fingers like ray guns and our pink cowboy hats long before we understood the complex historical and social ramifications that made our dreams impossible.

PONIES AND ROCKETSHIPS

Also that they shoot mustangs now because they trample vegetables, and light speed travel hasn't even been invented yet. They probably believed in ponies and rocketships once too.

Ponies and rocketships are horrible things because we have always watched movies that tell us heroes ride ponies and rocketships into suns, and we fell for it every time and still hope we too will ride into suns and sunsets.

And one day you realize it's impossible, and also you will not be president.

My mother wished for them for every Christmas and ran out in the snow in her bare feet while her mother called her an idiot from the kitchen window in her bare feet.

And she threw open the garage door and found only her parents' VW van and the little puddle of oil—the old rusted tools that she would leave for years after her father died. She never found a pony or a rocketship and neither will you.

What will actually happen is something like this: you will get into the college of your choice, that you can't afford, and the poet goddess of your department will call you practical as if it's a contagious disease, and you will feel like you have become a minor character.

You will find an uncomfortable peace in this and you will get very drunk very often. You will wake up next to people. You will walk down dark alleys and get in at least one fist fight. You will smash your head against the ground and feel very strange for a day, but refuse to go to a hospital. You'll be fine.





You will work much longer than you are being paid for.
You will be praised for your determination or not.
And you will play by the rules and still
not find a job to pay the money you owe and you will
wonder why you ever wanted to go to space
or chase outlaws in the first place.

You will wonder
what kind of debt that would have gotten you.
And then you might meet someone
and lie on the floor eating popcorn
because you can't afford a couch yet
and talk about a time when you will afford
so many couches.

You crush out the tiny fleas
and talk of a time when you won't
wage a tiny war across your carpet.

Yes, ponies and rocketships are the darkest of magic, because
the fantasy will creep back into your life
no matter how practical you are
or how little wine you drink
or how few times in your life
you allow yourself to use the word yeehaw.

You will start thinking
of fighting space aliens again, maybe
only driving home from work, at stop lights,
or pouring eggs into a saucepan, but you will
think of them again.

You will plan what you would do
if someone galloped into your living room,
stuck out their hand and said,

There's no time!
If you are lucky—if you have lived your life well—
you will think of the movies and the daydreams,
the hopes and disappointments with a surprised affection—
a nostalgia like that for your first shitty car
or ratty apartment—

as if you were the hero,
as if these were your war stories.

—Leslie Anderson

THE UNPARALLELED DEATH-DEFYING FEATS OF ASTOUNDIO, ESCAPE ARTIST EXTRAORDINAIRE

Ian Creasey

The author says, “I got the idea for this story after watching a TV documentary about famous escapologists. I found myself wondering what kind of escapology stunts would exist in the future, and this was the result.” Ian’s most recent appearances include stories in *Daily Science Fiction* and *Orson Scott Card’s InterGalactic Medicine Show*.

Escaping from a black hole is one of the most challenging stunts an escapologist can attempt. Firstly, there are many difficulties of presentation: it’s not an exploit that can be performed onstage in an ordinary theatre. Secondly, the audience needs to be educated to appreciate the feat, as half of them won’t even know what a black hole is, let alone that escaping it was once proverbially impossible. Thirdly, and most importantly, the show has to *mean* something: it must create an emotional impact. That’s the hardest part to achieve, when nowadays we’re all so sated with sensation.

I solved the first two problems by putting the audience on a spaceship and playing them an in-flight movie. By the time they arrived at the auditorium orbiting the black hole, they understood what they saw: a cascade of stellar debris plunging to an inexorable doom. The hole’s accretion disc glowed in purple tints that matched my costume and the auditorium’s décor. Half of showmanship is attention to detail.

“Welcome!” I said, standing center-stage with the viewscreen behind me. “Thank

you all for coming. Let me begin by asking a question: is there anyone here who doesn't want to die?"

A nervous titter went round the room. Everyone in Cockaigne is immortal—it wouldn't be utopia if you weren't immortal. But the flipside of immortality is a fascination with death.

In the front row, Veronica smiled in the manner of someone accepting a dare. A pulse of excitement raced through me. No matter how long we'd been together, I still loved to see her smile. And it boded well for today's real performance: the more difficult escape I would attempt after the black hole.

"That's not a rhetorical question," I continued. "Everyone can watch the show from here, but I'm also offering you the chance to accompany me into the black hole. The only problem is that you won't come out." I paused for emphasis. "I'll come back, but that's because I'm an escapologist—it's my job. The rest of you will all die." I said this with cheery relish.

"Here's how it works: you'll each create a temporary disposable copy, which will transmit full-sense signals back to your original self. The copy will enter the black hole, and the original will stay behind. Or vice versa! Either way, you'll simultaneously watch yourselves die, while also experiencing your own deaths.

"But only if you want to. If you'd rather not—if you think that death is perhaps a little too extreme for an evening's entertainment—then you're perfectly at liberty to opt out, and refrain from joining our descent." I smiled. "I promise not to think any less of you, as you sit safely here and watch the rest of us plummet to obliteration."

A buzz of excitement arose. I let it build for a few moments, then went on, "There are a limited number of seats available on the shuttle. First come, first served. If you want to come, please make your way to the copying booths."

I walked to Veronica's seat. "Would you like to be first, lovely lady in the audience?"

I shepherded Veronica through the booth, with contradictory emotions: anguish at creating an incarnation of her who'd live so briefly, and relief that she'd agreed to it. I'd created this entire performance to test Veronica's attitude to copying.

The audience's new copies followed signs to the waiting shuttle. "Move along, please," I called out. "We don't want to keep Death waiting."

As the originals returned to their seats, I addressed the auditorium for the final time. "I'm afraid I won't be staying with you, because I never create copies of myself. After all, my escapes wouldn't be very impressive if I used backup copies. I'm the one and only version of me: if I fail to escape from the black hole, then I die forever. Wish me luck!"

In the front row, the original Veronica blew me a kiss.

"I'll be back—I hope—but in the meantime I'll leave you in the capable hands of my compère. Enjoy the rest of the show."

I followed all the copies into the shuttle, and guided them to their seats. "Last chance to change your mind," I said teasingly, as I closed the hatch behind me. Then I pulled the release lever. The ship juddered as it undocked from the auditorium and started falling.

This shuttle was much smaller than the luxurious spaceship in which the audience had arrived. The cabin contained seventy seats, all crammed together. Force-fields throbbed in thick metal walls. There was only a short one-way journey ahead, and I wanted to create a sense of cramped discomfort. It's not enough to simply escape: it must also feel like a struggle. Half of showmanship is crafting the right ambience.

The shuttle's nose-cone was transparent, showing us the inferno ahead. The accretion disc flared brighter with every nugget it swallowed. I had sculpted the in-

falling debris into shapes resembling my rivals and their signature props. Here fell an asteroid looking like old Perplexo with his billowing cape; there fell the twin castles of Flabber and Gast; and between them plummeted Miraclissimo, holding a strangely phallic wand. All these enormous caricatures were distorted in blatant mockery, and all fell to their doom—the doom from which only I would escape.

I'd enjoyed crafting these absurd effigies. Rivalry gave spice to our performances, as we strove to outdo each other. My fellow escapologists would be watching their effigies fall and burn up. Some of them would already be preparing their revenges. . . .

The prospect of sabotage intoxicated me. I knew what to expect from the black hole, but I had no inkling how my rivals might interfere. I would have to rely on my wits, and my large stock of weaponry. The danger made me feel acutely alive.

I reveled in the sensation. This was my life: the thrill of competition, making each new stunt harder than the last. And the joy of living in Cockaigne was that it enabled such escalation, with no limit upon performances other than your own imagination. Want a black hole? Here's one! It wouldn't be utopia if you couldn't have any props you wanted.

The external barrage of X-rays and gamma rays manifested as a cacophonous hiss blaring from speakers all around the cabin. It was the music of annihilation. I'd crafted the noise with a teeth-grating whine to put everyone on edge. I wanted the passengers to become unsettled and nervous. They were all going to die, but emotionally they didn't yet grasp that. I had to make them feel it, and bring them to the pitch of terror and delight.

"If you have any last regrets, start contemplating them now," I said. "It will take us seven minutes to reach the accretion disc. That's the purple glow you can see. We're falling faster all the while, pulled by the hole's unstoppable gravity. Once we plunge into the halo, it will only take another three minutes to reach the event horizon—the point of no return."

The com channel showed heavy traffic, as my passengers transmitted sense-data to their originals in the auditorium. Some of them had augmented their sensoriums to directly apprehend the storm of neutrinos, X-rays, and the rest of the blue-shifted torrent of electromagnetic radiation.

My rival escapologists were not among the passengers, since the performers' code prevented them from creating disposable duplicates. Some might be watching from a distance. Others were, I knew, much closer. They waited nearby, lurking behind the curtain. . . .

The ship fell onward, accelerating to its demise. After passing through the purple fire of the accretion disc, we saw the distorted relativistic field of the black hole itself. A dark void lay before us—no light could escape the hole. But a bright ring encircled the nothingness, as gravitational lensing focused the glow from the accretion disc on the far side.

"The event horizon approaches!" I declaimed. "Once we pass beyond, no signal can escape. Your originals back in the auditorium will feel the connection attenuate as we slide down. . . . Ten, nine, eight, seven . . . I shall return, but you shall not . . . Four, three, two, one . . ."

I let the silence ring out for long moments. I held my breath, and unconsciously the audience all mirrored me. They were under my spell. Nothing stirred as we slid through the invisible border of the event horizon. The ship's gravity compensators would hold for a little while longer.

Finally, I drew breath, and the audience also drew in a collective shuddering gasp, as though astonished to find themselves still alive.

I glanced at the com channel. Everyone was still transmitting, but now that we'd entered the black hole, the information could not escape.

"We have crossed the border into the undiscovered country, ladies and gentlemen. We're utterly disconnected from the outside universe. Your originals back home are no longer receiving the transmissions you send. Their experience of being cut off, as we disappeared into the black hole, has felt like the end of existence, like the truncation of life itself. I've given them the taste of Death that they crave."

Actually, this was only the first taste—I had more planned, which I didn't mention. Half of showmanship lies in holding something back.

I turned to Veronica, intending to ask how she felt. Before we could speak, something clattered into the ship with a jolt that almost shook me off my feet. The increasing concentration of debris within the black hole created its own perils. Yet I suspected that my rivals had set additional traps.

The elite escapologists had a tradition of spicing up each other's stunts by adding a few extra hazards. It made our exploits more challenging. The danger escalated with every show, and the performers accrued ever more prestige from their death-defying feats.

This was our private rivalry. We refrained from spoiling the show that the public saw. And so we confined our interference to the realm behind the curtain. Any escape act always contains a veiled moment, when the performer works his magic in secret. The audience never sees exactly how he does it. The stunt concludes when the curtain is opened and the illusionist reveals himself, demonstrating the success of his escape.

The black hole's event horizon was the curtain that shielded me from the public's gaze. It also demarcated the territory in which my rivals could attack. Only when I emerged from the black hole, completing the performance, would I finally be safe.

Another impact rocked the ship. The explosions weren't strong enough to jeopardize the hull's integrity. Not yet, anyway. Perhaps we'd merely been lucky so far.

What lay out there? How far would my rivals go?

I didn't bother peering at the sensors. Ever since we'd crossed the horizon, they'd showed nothing in front of the ship—they couldn't possibly show anything, because the gravity gradient was too steep for light to climb.

We flew blindly on.

However, I could take a few precautions. The shuttle had a full complement of weaponry: I fired several blasts with the pulse-gun, hoping to clear our route ahead and vaporize anything coming behind us.

Soon I'd need to make my escape. But not yet. I expected my rivals to aim most of their fusillade at the outer regions of the hole. Deeper inside, I would paradoxically be safer—assuming the hole itself didn't kill me. I had time to talk to Veronica.

"You linger, Sir Astoundio," said Veronica.

"It is for the pleasure of your company, my Queen," I replied in the approved courtly fashion.

This was our latest ritual: a little old-fashioned romance, as if I were a knight courting her favor. We'd been lovers a long time, but we always sought new ways to affirm it.

"The pleasure is all mine," Veronica said.

She clasped the sleeve of my black-and-purple tailcoat. Veronica wore a white dress with accents of pink, its style subtly mirroring my own costume. In her hair she wore the silver circlet that had once been the crown of Elfland, in a former frolic that still held fond memories. Her skin was impossibly youthful, inhumanly perfect, save for one area on the left of her neck where three warts lurked. The fad of grotesquerie remains popular because its blemishes can symbolically represent any vices. We often joked about which vices Veronica exhibited.

I have my own blemish, of course. Veronica's fads were mine too. My personal

grotesquerie consists of an extravagant scar upon my left hand. I sustained it during a skirmish with the Blight, in the days when Veronica and I helped defend the borders of Cockaigne. I kept the scar for showmanship: it suggests the danger of my trade, implying a narrow brush with death.

“Any regrets?” I asked. “Since you’re going to die anyway, you can be honest.”

“How long have I got to list them? Should I stick to the top hundred?” Veronica smiled and shook her head. “No, I don’t believe in regrets.”

“That’s not the same as saying you don’t have any.”

“I know. But why don’t you narrow it down? Tell me what you’re really asking.”

“I’m just wondering if you’re still happy with me, that’s all,” I said.

Veronica raised her eyebrows a mere fraction, like a queen whose tiniest gesture moves worlds. “If I weren’t, I wouldn’t wait for imminent death to tell you. You’d have heard about it before now. Quite loudly!”

I exhaled a breath that I hadn’t realized I was holding. “All right, I take your point. Still . . . generalities, trivialities—speak now or forever rest in peace. Anything you’d like to say?”

She shrugged. “We’re only in this position because you’re performing yet another escape. You’ve been an escapologist as long as I’ve known you. It gets old, sometimes. I wonder why you don’t . . .” She paused, in case I wanted to jump in, but I waited for her to finish. “Well, why don’t you find another hobby?”

Veronica had plenty of interests, and she kept them on heavy rotation. There was nothing unusual in that: most of her friends did the same. Every few months, she would download some expertise from the Facilitator and dive into an unexplored realm of art or mathematics or gardening or history. Whenever any new fad came along—speaking in iambic pentameter, installing a household spirit, gambling for social forfeits—she would embrace it with good cheer, then abandon it until its ironic revival.

I was the exception. Although I absorbed some of Veronica’s enthusiasms, I was an escapologist first and always. “I want to be the best,” I said. “It takes time to achieve that.”

“I respect your dedication, I really do. And you’ve achieved a lot.” Veronica waved her arm, gesturing to the ship, the black hole, and by implication my audience in the auditorium and beyond. “Isn’t this enough? How can you do any better than this?”

“You’ll find out,” I said. My hand flew to my mouth as I realized I needed to rephrase that. “Your original self will, anyway. The next escape I perform will be my best ever: the ultimate stunt. And you’ll be part of it—if you want to be.”

“Oh, you always say that. Every performance better than the last. . . .” Her voice took on a singsong tone as she mimicked my patter: “An amazing new feat in the annals of illusion! Audiences will be astounded, rivals will be dismayed!”

She didn’t understand that I really meant it: my next exploit would put me at the peak of my profession, but it would change our lives forever. There was no time to explain. The ship fell onward, into the darkness. My feet vibrated with the trembling of the deck-plates, as the gravity compensators battled against the unimaginably fierce conditions around us. On the control panel, readings crept ever closer to the red line indicating catastrophic collapse.

Death approached.

“One last kiss?” I asked, with a knowing smile. We always strove to keep our love fresh, and this brush with mortality would certainly give it a frisson.

Veronica’s cheeks were flushed; her eyes blazed as though a lifetime’s passion had been compressed into the tiny few minutes she had left. She threw her arms around me, and kissed me with wild abandon. The moment stretched . . . and broke, interrupted by a commotion in the cabin.

"I've changed my mind—I don't want to die!" someone shouted. A passenger stood up and walked toward me, staggering as the shuttle shook from external impacts.

"Sorry, no refunds," I said. I hardened my voice and injected a whiplash note of command. "Sit down, please."

He stepped back, impelled by my tone of authority. But someone else called out, "I want to go home!"

"Me too!"

"Yeah!"

Half of showmanship lies in projecting an aura of complete control. The audience mustn't become unruly.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I said, "there is no going back. We're inside the black hole, from which nothing can emerge—not even light itself. Nothing! Or almost nothing. Because there is just one thing that can escape a black hole: something even more immaterial than light . . ." I paused, then dropped my voice to a whisper. "Prayers!"

In the sudden hush, I continued, "Yes, my friends—you're all going to die, so I suggest you spend your final moments in quiet prayer. Thank you for taking part in my show."

I knew this wouldn't hold them for long. I turned to Veronica and took her flawless hand in my scarred one. "Farewell, Queen of my heart," I said. She bowed her head.

Swiftly, I stepped through a discreet hatchway and closed it behind me. I squeezed into the escape pod and pulled the release lever. The pod shot out of the ship's stern, into the crushing embrace of the black hole.

And now we come to the question of technique.

I must warn you that what follows may feel disappointingly prosaic. There are good reasons why every escape happens behind a curtain: it maintains an aura of mystery, a hint of magic. It allows the audience to imagine the performer struggling with esoteric forces, exploiting secrets that mankind was never meant to know.

Spectators don't want to see the escapologist using a mere contrivance to unravel handcuffs, a straitjacket, a black hole. They may *think* they want to see it. But mystery is a property of questions, not answers. The method is fascinating only while it remains obscure, the subject of speculation, invested with the dark glamour of trickery and illusion. As soon as it's revealed in its dull mundanity, the technique becomes uninteresting and almost contemptible. A lock-pick, a dislocation of the shoulder, a hidden gizmo. Yes, of course—what else would it be?

My escape pod looked like a coffin. (Half of showmanship is the careful design of props.) I lay inside, feeling secure rather than claustrophobic. The control panel under the lid showed that I was, naturally, falling toward the center of the black hole. I reached for the red button that would trigger my escape—

A massive *thump* jolted the pod, as something fell onto the roof just above me.

—and punched the button so hard that my wrist throbbed with pain. A wobbling, shimmering sensation passed through me, as though I'd been turned inside-out.

I'd hopped to a parallel universe, one that didn't have a huge black hole in the vicinity. Here I could use my thrusters to move without the hindrance of the hole's pull. Soon I would return to the original universe, arriving just outside the event horizon. Then I'd emerge from the accretion disc, and receive the audience's applause as they cheered my death-defying stunt.

Remember, I did say that you might be disappointed. Parallel universe, of course—what else would it be?

I felt lighter. I knew that wasn't true, because the pod maintained a constant local gravity. But having escaped the crushing gravitation of the black hole, I almost felt as if I were floating.

I checked the external camera to verify my escape. I expected to see stars. Instead, the outside view was totally dark.

Apprehension surged through me. Had the hopper failed? Was I still inside the black hole?

Another *thump* resounded through the pod. The camera showed a dark figure raising an implement of some kind, then lowering it for another shattering blow. As the figure shifted position, I saw stars around its silhouette. I couldn't tell whether it was a robot, or someone in a spacesuit. I only knew that my rivals' sabotage attempts were becoming rather over zealous.

When I'd hopped across universes, my attacker had been carried along with me. Now I activated the pod's thrusters at maximum force, hoping that the sudden acceleration might shake my assailant loose. But the figure still clung on.

Because I'd fallen a long way into the black hole, it would take time to emerge. I couldn't re-enter the old universe until I passed the event horizon. Then my rival would be forced to disappear, because interference was strictly confined to the zone behind the curtain, away from the audience's gaze.

I opened a com channel and said, "You have knocked. So I ask, 'Who's there?'"

The shadowy figure leaned toward my camera, giving me a better view of its head—its skull. With smashed cheeks and missing teeth, the ash-grey skull was a visage of hideous decay. The figure's torso wasn't a skeleton, but a blankness even more terrifying than bones might have been. The amorphous body carried a scythe, its edge gleaming in the starlight.

"You know who I am," the figure said, in a deep voice that echoed within the tiny pod. The reply didn't arrive through the com; the voice simply surrounded me. "You have fled me for years, while I followed patiently and implacably. I am Death."

Pangs of panic swept through my brain. I suppressed them. As a showman, I recognized a fellow showman's tricks. The voice had been treated with reverb and a bass boost, to create the echoing effect of doom. The com channel was unnecessary, when simple conduction could transmit sound through the pod's shell. The skull and the scythe gleamed more brightly than the faint starlight should have permitted: they shone with a subtle glow that created a phantomlike aura.

Reluctantly, I admired the workmanship behind the effects; it approached my own level of perfectionism. Yet this only made the panic swell. Someone had gone to a lot of effort to follow me this far in the persona of Death. I didn't know what he had in mind, but I suspected that it didn't involve tea and cakes.

"I see you're still using the tired old imagery of skulls and scythes and whatnot," I said, trying to make my voice sound bored and unconcerned. "Have you considered getting a makeover?"

If I could draw my adversary into conversation, I might distract him from whatever plan he had in mind. The longer he delayed, the further my thrusters carried me toward safety.

"Oh, my costume and accessories are as flexible as I need." The deathly figure wagged his scythe, which transformed into something smaller and more cylindrical.

My antagonist lowered the new weapon to the pod's surface. A harsh metallic whine assaulted my ears. I felt the vibration of the pod's casing, just a few inches above my body. The scythe had transmuted into a drill. If it pierced through the shell, the pod would depressurize, and I would suffocate.

The noise and vibration were terrifying. But half of showmanship is staying calm in all circumstances. I forced myself to concentrate on my options.

I had a pulse-gun, but the muzzle projected from the end of the pod; it couldn't target an enemy that had already latched onto the pod itself. There hadn't been room to include weapons for every contingency.

My thrusters were already firing at maximum capacity, since I needed to escape as quickly as possible, before my audience grew restless. I couldn't speed up and reach safety any sooner.

And so I turned to the escape hatch that I'd already used once. I selected a random long-range destination, and pressed the red button to take us to another universe. If I hadn't been watching for it, I might not have noticed the slight shift in the patterns of the constellations.

The drill continued its deadly descent. The high-pitched whine had deepened into a baritone warble, as the drill-bit penetrated further into the casing.

I pressed the button again. And again. In each new universe, the stars changed.

"What are you trying to do, make me dizzy?" sneered my assailant. "I'm not going to fall off!"

I knew that he could feel the transitions as we hopped across universes. I didn't know whether he'd spotted the change in the stars, or whether he guessed what I was trying to do.

"You can't escape Death so easily," the figure said. It emitted a ghastly cackle. The phantom laughter chilled my spine, until I forced myself to consider how much rehearsal and sound-effects trickery it must have taken for someone to perfect the hollow chuckling.

"But you're not Death," I said. "You're just some guy dressing up. Who are you really?"

As I spoke, I realized the unconscious assumption I'd made in saying "guy," and I wondered whether my antagonist could be a woman . . . perhaps even Veronica.

In the old days as Queen of Elfland, she used to enjoy sending knights on dangerous quests. But she also envied the adventures we had, battling strange perils and exotic temptations. And so she would—we suspected—don armor and join us in the guise of a knight newly arrived from some faraway realm.

I'd told Veronica about the escapologists' games of sabotage. I could imagine her deciding to join in, on a whim. But I couldn't imagine her being so vicious as to dress up as Death and actively try to murder me.

Well, perhaps I could. To prevent our relationship growing stale, we often spiced it up with various antics, enjoying the shared thrill of reaching for novelty, for mystery, for danger. This attack was extreme, but that gave it the benefit of surprise. Among immortals, surprise is rare and highly valued.

"Veronica, my darling . . ." I said, expecting that once I guessed her identity, she would drop her disguise. Then she might flounce away, to tantalize me. Or she might crawl inside the pod with me, and we would make jaded love under the distant stars.

Again came the ghastly cackle of jeering contempt. "You think I'm Veronica? Your judgment is rather poor. Or perhaps I should say . . . *our* judgment?"

The bodiless skull vanished, replaced by a commonplace spacesuit. Its transparent head-bubble framed an ordinary face—a very ordinary face. My own.

Suddenly, bright sunshine illuminated us. I'd continued hopping through random universes, and we'd just entered one with a nearby star. My doppelgänger blinked reflexively. His suit's bubble darkened to protect him from radiation, but I still saw every detail of his visage: the severely cropped hair, the clean-shaven chin, the old-fashioned waxed moustache that I'd adopted five years ago, then abandoned when rival performers began sporting ever more elaborate moustaches in subtle mockery.

"Your impression is out of date," I said, striving to sound dismissive. Yet a horrible sense of anticipation squirmed inside me, as I guessed what the figure was about to say.

The sunshine faded to half strength after I flipped us to another universe. But I was no longer hopping completely at random; I'd narrowed the parameters so that

we stayed in the vicinity of this star, which in different universes had formed in different places according to local fluctuations in the primordial gas clouds.

"I've kept my original appearance," said my doppelgänger, "rather than copying all your superficial makeovers. But when I replace you, I'll match your current look before I emerge from behind the curtain. Then the audience won't ever know—"

"You won't replace me," I said firmly, as we hopped across yet more universes. When the star grew brighter than its first appearance, I narrowed the parameters again.

"Oh, but I will. That's what I was designed to do. I am your backup, after all."

"I don't have a backup!"

"You mean you don't have any memory of creating a backup," my doppelgänger said. "Some things are far too incriminating to remember. We always claim we work without a net, don't we? But a few years ago, we concocted a spectacular stunt: surfing a supernova. You remember that, I'm sure. It was appallingly risky. We were worried it might not work, so we created a secret backup copy to step forward in case we got burnt up. We rolled dice to see who'd be the performer, and who'd be the backup. You won. And as soon as I'd disappeared to my hiding place, you purged your memory of my existence, so that you could perform without being distracted by a guilty conscience."

"If that happened after we parted, you couldn't know about it," I retorted. "You wouldn't know whether I'd wiped my memory—"

"I knew, because we'd planned it that way. I'd have done the same if I'd won the dice-roll. And besides, after the stunt succeeded, you never contacted me. I credited you with wiping your memory, because the alternative was that you knew I existed, and yet you still didn't bother to find me."

It sounded horribly plausible, and it rocked me to the core. Was my whole career based on a lie? My hands shook; I took them off the hopper controls, suddenly paralyzed with self-doubt.

Then I realized that this uncertainty was precisely what my antagonist hoped to achieve. He was trying to disconcert me.

"If you are my secret backup, then prove it," I challenged him. "Tell me something that only we would know. Dredge up something from our oldest memories."

"I don't need to prove myself to *you*," he sneered. "You'll soon be dead. I only need to prove myself to Veronica, when I replace you."

My doppelgänger looked grim and determined. The pod still vibrated with the drill's persistent whine. I couldn't tell how far it had penetrated through the case. At any moment, I might hear the hiss of escaping air. . . .

But his refusal to prove himself gave me the confidence to shake off self-doubt, and proceed with my plan. I returned to the hopper controls. My assailant flinched in the appalling glare as we entered yet another universe, this one far closer to the star. The blue-white incandescence filled half the sky, bathing us in lethal radiation. My escape pod could protect me for a while; my enemy's spacesuit looked flimsy in comparison.

Swiftly, frantically, he said, "It doesn't have to end in a death struggle. We can both walk away from this. Haven't you grown tired of it all lately—the whole grind of performing, the endless search for yet another stunt to top the last? When you've escaped a black hole, what can you possibly do next? Let me replace you, and it'll become my problem, not yours. We won't fight—we'll make a gentlemen's agreement. I'll take on your identity, and you can walk away into the sunset. It'll be your ultimate coup: the escape from escapology itself!"

As soon as he said this, I knew that the pseudo-doppelgänger definitely wasn't a copy of me. He didn't know the reason I'd originally come to Cockaigne: to attempt a

stunt far more difficult than escaping from a black hole. I'd been postponing it for years, but now it loomed before me. As soon as I completed this exploit, my next and far more difficult feat would be to walk away . . . if only I could persuade Veronica to come with me.

The impersonator must be one of my rivals, or perhaps one of their secret backups. I could imagine some of my less scrupulous rivals—Perplexo, or Baron Bonne-Bouche—creating a duplicate who grew weary of his secret existence, impatient to return to public life. Rather than deposing his progenitor, he might prefer to replace a rival performer.

I shivered. No wonder life had become so dangerous behind the curtain, with so much escalating sabotage!

I didn't bother to refuse the offer. I simply pressed the red button. The star grew closer still, filling my camera's field of vision, and turning my adversary into a mere shadow outlined against the brightness.

He yelled with rage, and withdrew the drill. A rush of pure relief made me giddy, as I assumed that he was giving up and retreating.

The respite lasted only for one and a half seconds, the time it took for the drill to transform into a pulse-gun. He fired at the pod, targeting the weak point where the drill had pierced through most of the casing. The pod shuddered under the impact. I knew that a few more blasts would shatter my protective shell.

Frenziedly, I hopped across universes. The immensity of space had never been more vivid to me. If you hop at random, your chance of materializing inside a star is infinitesimal. Even when you find a star nearby, homing in on it still requires a converging series of hops—

The pulse-gun blazed again, and this time the smell of melting plastic filled the pod.

Then the blue-white star swallowed us.

Within my pod, an alarm alerted me that external conditions surpassed the design specs. The interior of a star is a harsher environment than a quiescent black hole. The brightness was overwhelming, saturating my camera's external view into a featureless blur. The infernal heat registered only as a number on the control panel; the pod maintained its temperature by dissipating heat into other universes, but I nevertheless sweated with fear.

If I hadn't been strapped down, I would have been smashed to pieces as the pod was thrown in all directions by the writhing, roiling plasma inside the star. It was the ultimate bumpy ride. Yet despite everything—despite the danger of the star and the threat from my antagonist—a fierce exhilaration rose within me. This was escapology at its purest: an elemental struggle. To be the best, I must master every test.

The pod could barely withstand such a furnace. The thick, rugged exterior was boiling away, second by second. Yet surely my assailant was worse afflicted. Even the magical technology of utopia couldn't manufacture a spacesuit that would last long here.

My coffin shuddered under another jolt from the pulse-gun, but the shot only glanced off the bottom corner. An immensely strong gust from the stellar wind tumbled the pod end over end. The external camera still showed nothing, whited out in the glare of the star. I had no way of knowing whether my enemy still clung on.

The star's plasma was threatening to burst through the drill-hole, the weak point in the pod's shell. Desperate for a respite, I punched the red button. The pod materialized in the empty vastness of another universe.

My passenger had gone. He'd either retreated, or been vanquished: borne away on the stellar gales, if not atomized by the intense heat. The euphoria of survival—of triumph—filled me.

I wondered who my enemy had been, but I didn't want to find out. We escapologists have our own curtain, veiling the heart of the performance, creating an aura of

mystery. We'd collectively created the figure of Death as our antagonist, to spice up our shows and bolster our egos as death-defying performers. But Death must always remain a sinister shadow, never quite defined, a protean peril ever lurking in the wings. . . .

My adversary might have been one of my rivals, or one of their illicit backups. Maybe he was a creature of the Blight, trying to slink into utopia. He could have been a carefully crafted simulacrum, programmed with a plausible spiel—perhaps I'd secretly constructed him specifically to become my dark side, sabotaging stunts rather than performing them.

To complete this particular stunt, I needed to collect one last item. The shuttle in which I'd entered the black hole had, throughout its journey, been transmitting the passengers' sense-feeds to their originals in the auditorium. Although the direct link had ended when we crossed the event horizon, the shuttle also routed the signals into an alternate universe. I hopped into that universe and sent a code to the receiving station. The beacon squirted back to me all the transmissions it had received from the shuttle—right until the ship stopped broadcasting, having met its doom at the heart of the black hole.

Finally, I sent a message to my compère, telling him to begin the build-up to the stunt's conclusion. While I'd been battling behind the curtain, the audience had been watching some pre-recorded material. Now it was time to give them their true desire.

I hopped back to the universe I'd started from, arriving within the black hole's accretion disc. A nudge from my thrusters propelled me out of the purple halo, into the clear space beyond.

Over the com channel, I heard gasps and applause from inside the auditorium. I knew how it must look. My escape pod's exterior was blistered and melted. The drill-hole and the pulse-gun scars might not be apparent at first glance, but if the compère had any skill—and I'd hired him for his skill—he would zoom in for a close-up, to show exactly how close to death I'd come.

Although I could have returned to the auditorium using the pod's thrusters, I wished to seem helpless and spent after my ordeal. Half of showmanship is making it look like hard work. A standby spaceship therefore scooped me up. The compère delivered some blurb about a supposed lack of signal from the pod, the com antenna having been burnt off, and so forth. He gave his spiel an ominous, ambiguous note, maintaining tension as to whether I'd survived.

My transport ship docked with a deliberate jolt, creating a deep *clang* that reverberated in the auditorium like a death knell. Mechanical conveyors carried my pod onstage. Now the audience could see its battered surface, and smell the charred casing. It gave them a more visceral sense of the ordeal I'd endured.

A murmur of whispered comments and nervous laughter rippled around the auditorium. I waited for silence. Then I activated the pod's exit mechanism. A side panel exploded outward, crashing onto the floor of the stage.

Sometimes we performers deal in primitive effects: darkness, a sudden loud noise. We manipulate elemental fears—and death is the most primitive fear of all.

I stepped out. After so long strapped into the pod, I was unsteady on my feet, but I let myself stagger forward. It contributed to the impression of adversity, by hinting that I'd gone through unimaginable trauma.

In a quiet, conversational tone, I said, "I have looked into the eyes of Death. I have faced his gaze, fought with him, fended off his scythe."

The audience thought I spoke metaphorically, of course. But I remembered battling my *doppelgänger*, and the emotion of that encounter fueled my voice, infusing my words with absolute conviction. My audience sensed the core of truth.

"He is not easily withstood," I continued. "Although I rebuffed him, I still bear the

taint of his touch. I bring it with me. I have returned here, laden with the blight of mortality.

"It is my gift to you." I raised my arms and raised my voice. "Behold—your own Death!"

And I transmitted the signals I'd retrieved, via the beacon, from the shuttle falling into the heart of the black hole. I sent the final segment, the last minutes before the ship and its passengers were utterly destroyed.

Earlier, the audience had experienced the cut-off as their disposable duplicates fell beyond the event horizon. Now they received far more: the visitation of true death, with all its confusion and terror, as the ship succumbed to the atom-crushing forces deep within the black hole.

I extinguished the spotlights, smothering the auditorium in darkness. I was no longer the center of the performance. For a timeless moment, the audience absorbed the final signals transmitted by their copies as they plunged to their doom.

Screams rang out, echoing across the blackness.

Then silence.

I brought up the house lights, allowing me to see the audience. Some of them had collapsed in their seats, flopping awkwardly at odd angles; one person had died in sympathetic shock, and would need restoring from backup. Others stared at me, looking aghast—or strangely sated. Veronica's eyes were open, but she didn't see me. She had a distant, yearning expression, as though she gazed inwardly at some phantom allurements.

When most of the audience showed signs of recovery, I began my closing patter. "I trust you've all been invigorated by your encounters with Death. It's electrifying, isn't it? It certainly gives us a renewed appreciation of our everyday pleasures, our comfortable lives. But I hope it'll be a long time before you think about returning for another dance with the Jolly Reaper. Leave that to the professionals! We're on intimate terms with Death, and we dance with him so that you don't need to. So, until my next performance . . . goodnight!"

That was as much of a lecture as a live audience could stand at the end of a show. I wanted to say more about the unconscious death wish that leads immortals to live in volcano craters and earthquake zones, and by which utopia tolerates the Blight, but I'd have a better chance to say it later. When this performance was edited into a video for release to the wider public, I would add some commentary about the sociological context.

The audience applauded; I delivered a final bow. Then I re-entered the pod. The pod disappeared offstage as the curtain fell.

There was an after-show party, of course. You can't bring people to a black hole, give them a taste of Death, and then just send them home. No, they expect a decent buffet and a wide selection of drinks. It's all part of the experience. The brush with extinction sharpens the palate, making the food and wine all the more piquant.

I never attend the parties. An illusionist must maintain a certain distance; his absence creates a space for the audience to discuss the show, and for the show to grow larger in their minds. If the performer attends, he is suddenly a diminished figure, vulnerable to having his costume stained with stray canapés. He risks being button-holed by audience members who demand to know how the trick was accomplished, or who complain about their agonizing deaths.

In any case, I was in no mood to appear in public. I felt tired and deflated. The escape had been an ordeal, particularly the encounter with my false doppelgänger. He could have killed me: our sabotage pranks had gotten way out of hand. If I wanted to be the best, I needed to move on from such petty rivalries. I needed to complete the exploit I'd planned for so long.

I took a nap and a shower. By the time I emerged, the audience had dispersed. Only Veronica remained.

She looked at me and smiled. "Most impressive," she said. "Most . . . stimulating."

I wanted to bask in my triumph. I wanted to take Veronica in my arms, and enjoy my moment of glory. We would talk and laugh and look back upon the day, and look forward to the next. Then tomorrow it would be her turn to shine, and she would show me all manner of wonders. And then the next day, we'd attend some friend's concert or exhibition, and find ourselves pleasantly diverted. And so the time would pass: each day a shimmering jewel, unique as snowflakes . . . yet somehow all the same.

For too long I'd succumbed to that temptation: just one more day, week, month, year. Just another day to enjoy another dose of happiness, and prove yet again that Cockaigne really was utopia.

If I was ever going to complete my plan, it had to be now. I had to stop postponing the conclusion of my grand scheme.

"Would you like to be part of my next trick?" I asked.

"Of course," Veronica replied, laughing. "What, right now?"

"Yes, right now." I walked through the backstage corridors, Veronica trailing behind me. We entered the auditorium's main chamber: the seats empty, the spotlights off, the curtain still draped across the stage. I immediately felt a vast nostalgia for everything I was about to leave behind. Here in Cockaigne, I could build an auditorium orbiting a black hole, and use it for a single performance. Life was not so straightforward elsewhere.

"The audience have all gone home," Veronica said. "Is this a private show, just for me?"

She thought it would only be a little joke: just another of the surprises that we sometimes sprang upon each other to keep our love fresh, to keep the days sparkling diamond bright.

"Let's sit down," I said, and we sat in the front row.

"We've known each other a long time," I began. In truth, it was longer than I wanted to think about. "You know I wasn't born in Cockaigne. I came here from outside."

Lots of people arrive in Cockaigne every year. It wouldn't be utopia if you couldn't get in.

"I was already an escapologist. When I arrived, I took the opportunity to expand my repertoire, and perform grander exploits. But technology is a two-edged sword. It lets you perform all kinds of stunts, yet it makes them too easy. If we want genuine danger, we have to add it ourselves: sabotage behind the curtain, and whatnot. That's just a way of performing more difficult feats. Escapology is about the challenge—we have to find that challenge somewhere.

"There's a lot of rivalry among escapologists," I went on, "but we're also colleagues and friends. We talk about what kinds of shows are the best, the ones that put you at the top of your profession. Is it those that most impress the audience? Or is it about the technicalities of the feat itself: the pure escape? What's the hardest possible escape that anyone can perform?"

I looked at Veronica to see if she could guess the answer. She frowned. "I suppose it would be coming back from the dead."

"But that isn't very hard at all," I said, "not with modern technology. You died inside the black hole, and yet here you are. Anyone can be restored from backup. Everyone in Cockaigne is immortal!"

"So it's not death?"

"There are many forms of death, including stasis," I replied. "But a long time ago, when we were drinking one night, we talked about the hardest possible escape. And we came to the conclusion that it was the escape from utopia."

We'd congregated at an awards banquet: a gathering of peers, a noisy conversation full of ribaldry and rivalry. Implicit in the discussion of the hardest escape was that anyone performing it would become the supreme escapologist, at the pinnacle of our profession. And like any ambitious performer, I wanted to be the best.

Veronica laughed. "Escape from utopia? It's not exactly like escaping from an iron cage or a black hole, is it?"

"Isn't it? There are only two things that define escapology: the feat must be possible, but it must be difficult. And utopia fulfils those criteria exactly." I raised my hand and checked them off on my fingers. "It isn't utopia if you *can't* leave. So it's possible to escape. But it isn't utopia if you *want* to leave. That makes it difficult."

I remembered how I'd searched for utopia. I knew it must exist: among infinite parallel universes, everything exists somewhere. The hard part had been verifying Cockaigne among the multitude of candidates. Yet I'd always been meticulous: as an escapologist, my life depended on it. Half of showmanship is the careful selection of props.

Veronica looked astounded. "So that's why you came to Cockaigne—to perform a *trick*?"

"Yes, exactly," I replied.

"But what about me?" she cried. "What does that make me?"

"Well, it wouldn't be utopia without romance," I said. "When I met you, I fell in love. And so I stayed a lot longer than I'd planned."

I'd justified that to myself in various ways. It was an adventure. It was a rigorous demonstration of Cockaigne as utopia. It was a chance to break new ground by staging shows on a vast scale. But mostly, it was love.

Love is just one of the ways that utopia sucks you in.

"And now you're leaving?" said Veronica, her voice suddenly cold. "To finish your *trick*?"

"That's the plan," I admitted. "But I still love you. And so I'm asking you to come with me."

I knew it didn't sound like much of an offer, so I tried to put the best possible spin on it. "Think of it as a challenge! You'd be stepping outside the safe, comfortable world of Cockaigne, where everything you want is there for the taking. You'd be entering a harsher world where accomplishments are hard-earned, and more meaningful. . . ."

My voice trailed off, partly because Veronica didn't look remotely persuaded, and partly because I didn't really believe my spiel anyway. It wouldn't be utopia if you could convincingly denigrate it.

"You don't know how old I am," she said sadly. "If I left Cockaigne, my body wouldn't last for very long."

I'd suspected this. Trying to take Veronica out of Cockaigne would be like trying to take fairy gold out of Elfland. All too soon, there'd only be a few withered scraps, fading on the breeze.

That was why I'd concocted the black hole stunt, with the audience making duplicates of themselves. Now I pointed to the copying booth that Veronica had previously used.

"I'm not asking you to send your original body. You can stay here. Just make a copy of yourself, to accompany me." I grasped her hands, and adopted my courtly mode. "I beg of you, my Queen. Your love is the greatest treasure in all the land of Cockaigne. Without it, I'm bereft. Come with me!"

Since Veronica had already sent a copy of herself to certain death inside a black hole, I figured that she could hardly refuse to send a copy to accompany me outside Cockaigne.

Veronica pursed her lips. "It doesn't seem fair. If you take a copy of me with you, then you'll have my company—but my original self will be left here all alone. Why don't you leave a copy of yours here with me? Then it's symmetrical."

I shook my head. "Unfortunately, I can't do that. If I leave a copy of myself here in Cockaigne, then I haven't really escaped."

Veronica shot me a disgusted look. "So it's the escape that matters, rather than being with me."

"I want you with me!" I protested. "That's why I'm asking you to come."

"But if you're so keen on the purity of your escape, then it won't look good if you bring a copy of me back with you. Everyone outside will think I'm just some kind of sex doll that you're addicted to and can't let go of. They'll say you haven't fully escaped, because you're still chained to your fantasy lover."

This hit me like a punch in the stomach. Veronica was right. How could I say that I'd escaped from utopia, if I insisted on bringing a piece of it back with me?

My love for Veronica had blinded me. I'd schemed to find some way of taking her with me, because living without her was unthinkable.

Yet this was meant to be the hardest possible escapology feat. No clever gimmick could finesse it. If I wanted to complete the stunt I'd plotted for so many years, and reach the pinnacle of my profession, then I had to renounce every single aspect of utopia—including Veronica.

I faced an unavoidable choice: either abandon my cherished ambition, or leave Veronica forever.

Maybe my relationship with Veronica was just a delusion. Was she merely a sex doll, a fantasy crafted to populate my personal utopia?

I didn't want to believe that. I didn't want to be the kind of sophisticated cynic who believed that nothing so wonderful could possibly be real.

And yet . . . wasn't Cockaigne's perfection in itself rather cloying? Hadn't I had enough, like a child who's eaten too many sweets? Could I stand any more of the endless days?

Veronica knew me well: she could see my doubts. And she didn't want to lose me. "There are always new quests needing a brave knight, even here in Cockaigne."

"Yeah, I know," I said, thinking of the social whirl, the infinite number of hobbies and sports and arts and games—all the myriad ways to compete and collaborate and interfere and interact. But I'd already tasted that life, and drunk deep from its well.

"There's much more than you realize," Veronica said. "In those memories from my copy who died, I saw something inside the black hole—something ahead of us."

"It shouldn't have been possible to see anything ahead."

"Yet we did. We saw the singularity, where the laws of physics transcend themselves. It was like the light of heaven! And it was welcoming us, a shining beacon. . . . People are living there already. If we'd had a stronger ship, we could have reached them." Eagerness shone in Veronica's face. "There's no need to be restricted by our human bodies and minds, the limitations of physical laws in a normal environment. There's no need to become tired or jaded."

The curtain rose. Behind it, the huge viewscreen showed the black hole, still remorselessly swallowing everything that approached. Veronica pointed to the darkness at its core. "There are whole new universes in there! Come and explore them with me."

It wouldn't be utopia without an infinite range of possibilities. Yet I shuddered. "That's a bit . . . irrevocable, isn't it?"

She turned and smiled, her arm still extended. "It doesn't have to be irrevocable." Now she pointed at one of the copying booths.

Indeed, we could copy ourselves. We could simultaneously enter the black hole to

join the singularity, and also continue our lives in Cockaigne, pursuing merely ordinary perfection in the dull suburbs of the universe.

Escapologists don't copy themselves. But if I stayed with Veronica, that meant abandoning my dream of accomplishing the ultimate escape. I'd already performed enough routine exploits; there'd be no point in continuing as an escapologist.

Should I abandon my dream? What would make me happier: attaining my ambition, or staying with Veronica?

Achieving my ambition would be a lonely, temporary triumph. Yes, I'd be acknowledged as the top escapologist—for a while, until something else became the ultimate feat to aspire to. I liked my colleagues, but I didn't love them. And after all, they had tried to kill me.

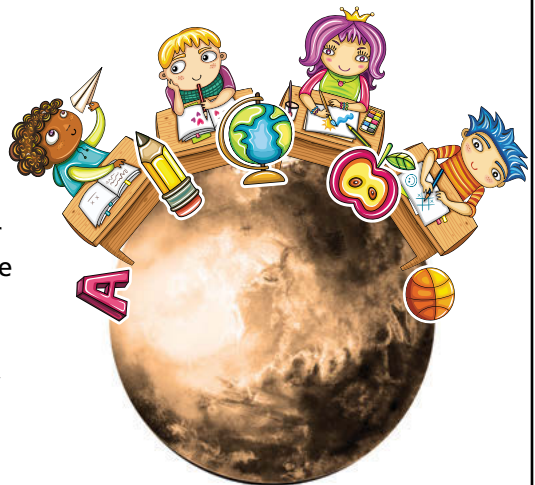
I reached for Veronica and kissed her. Then, arm in arm, we walked toward the copying booth, leaving the empty stage behind.

Half of showmanship is knowing when to stop. ○

Mothers fasten extra air packs to their children's bags, secure breathing tubes and dust masks. They affix stickers, bright pink and blue nylon tags to identify, at a distance, who is walking steady, who is in danger of straying off course. In August, the dust storms are always terrible, red tumults that smear pressure suits. During recess, the youngest draw their initials on each other's arms, laughing. The older ones play ball. I watch them wind across the covered court, short Earth children under a tall Martian sky; they throw the balls and catch them, yowling, jostle each other to the ground. After arithmetic, human biology, compare and contrast writing, they help each other into gear, trudge home. I watch from the door screen as their bright, hard frames disappear, occluded by red gales. Every day, my final duty: count my classes home.

—Alicia Cole

TEACHING ON MARS



After a twenty-eight year absence, we are delighted to welcome Jim Sallis back to our pages. Jim's fifteenth novel, *Others of My Kind*, is just about to come out from Walker/Bloomsbury, and earlier this year his latest collection of poetry, *Rain's Eagerness*, was released by Aldrich Press. Jim received a lifetime achievement award for mystery fiction from Bouchercon in 2007 and he won the Hammett Award for literary excellence in crime fiction in 2012. His novel *Drive* was the source of Nic Refn's film. Jim's band, Three-Legged Dog, plays regularly at music festivals. The author's new story for us is . . .

AS YET UNTITLED

James Sallis

I am to be, they tell me, in a new Western series, so I've tried on a shirt with snaps for buttons and a hat the size of a chamberpot and stood for hours before the mirror practicing the three S's: slouch, sidle, and squint. It's been a good life these past years inhabiting the science fiction novels of Iain Shore, but science fiction sales are falling, they tell me, plummeting in fact, so they've decided to get ahead of the curve and move me along. Back to mysteries? I ask, with fond memories of fedoras, smoke-filled rooms, the bite of cheap whiskey. Sales there are even worse, they tell me, and hand across my new clothes. Howdy, my new editor says.

Next day I meet my author, who definitely ain't no Iain Shore. (At least I'm getting the lingo down.) Evidently, from the look of his unwashed hair, what's left of it, he doesn't believe in tampering with what nature's given him. His lips hang half off his face like huge water blisters there below rheumy red eyes. He's wearing a sport coat that puts me in mind of shrinkwrapping, trousers that look like the gray work-pants sold at Sears, and a purplish T-shirt doing valiant duty against his pudge.

By way of acknowledgment, he pushes his glasses up his nose. They're back down before his hand is.

"Woodrow," he says. My name, evidently.

His is Evan, which he pronounces (my editor tells me) *Even*.

"I've the bulk of the thing worked out," Evan says. "All but the end, I should say. And the title—I don't have my title yet. First title, I mean. Not to worry."

I allow as how all that sounds good.

"Here's the thing," he says. "You get the girl."

"Beg pardon?"

"The schoolmarm. You get her. Playing a fresh twist off the classic trope, you see."

I make a spittin' motion toward the wastebasket. Kinda thinking things over. Never could abide authors that said things like trope.

So, three shakes of a calf's tail and I'm riding into a half-assed frontier town in (as Evan told me the first day) "Arizona, Montana, some such godforsaken place," dragging a personal history that a hundred or so pages farther along will explain (1) what I'm doing here, (2) why I'm so slow to anger, (3) why I never carry a gun, (4) why I'm partial to sheep, (5) what led to my leaving Abilene, El Paso, Fort Worth or St. Louis, (6) and so on.

Glancing back, I see what looks suspiciously like a guitar wrapped in a flour sack slung across my horse's rump. The horse's name is Challenger, but I vow right then and there that, however long this thing lasts, he'll be George to me. And, yep, we hit a rut in the road and the sack bounces up and comes down with a hollow, thrumming sound. It's a guitar all right.

This could be bad.

Eyes watch from windows as I pass. An old man sitting out front of the general store lifts his hat momentarily to look, then lets it fall back over his face. Someone shoulders a heavy sack into a wagon, sending up dense plumes of white dust. Two kids with whittled wood guns chase each other up and down the street. I can see the knife marks from here. One of the kids has a limp, so he'll be the schoolmarm's, naturally.

Think about it. I've got a guitar on the back of this horse and I'm heading for . . . pulling up in front of . . . yeah, it's the saloon all right.

At least I'm not the sidekick again.

Inside, a piano player and a banjo man are grinding out something that could be "Arkansas Traveler" or "Turkey in the Straw" but probably isn't intended to be either. Seeing my guitar, the banjo man narrows his eyes. He also misses the beat, and his pick skitters out onto the floor, glistening, dark and hard, like a roach.

"Name it," the barkeep says, and for a moment I think this is some kind of self-referential game old Evan's playing, but then I realize the barkeep's just asking what I want. What I want is a nice café au lait, but I settle for

"Whiskey"

which tastes of equal parts wasp venom and pump-handle drippings. Not to mention that you could safely watch eclipses through the glass it was served in.

The town doc's in there, naturally. He comes up, trying hard to focus, so that his head bobs up and down and side to side like a bird's, to ask if I've brought his medical supplies. Have to wonder what he was expecting. Out here, a knife or two, some alcohol, and a saw's about all you need.

The banjo man is still eyeing me as one of the girls, who doesn't smell any better than the doc, pushes into me to say she hasn't seen me around before. A moment later, the musicians take a break, and I swear I can hear Evan clearing his throat, pushing back his chair. Then his footsteps heading off to the kitchen.

So at least I ain't gonna have to play this damn guitar for a while.

We hang out waiting for him to come back, smiling at each other and fidgeting. After a while we hear his footsteps again. (Bastard's got café au lait, wouldn't you know? I can smell it.) Just as those stop, an Indian steps up to the bar. He's wearing an Eastern-cut suit and two gleaming Colts.

"Whiskey," he says, throwing down a gold piece that rings as it spins and spins and finally settles.

"Yes, sir."

Nodding to the barkeep, he holds up his glass, dips it in a toast, and throws it back. I notice he's got hisself a *clean* glass. That's when his eyes slide over to me.

"Took you long enough getting here," he says.

Damn.

I'm the sidekick again after all. ○

A STRANGER FROM A FOREIGN SHIP

Tom Purdom

Tom Purdom tells us he “continues to cope with the travails of old age: concerts, plays, video games, and Friday evenings at America’s oldest journalism club, Philadelphia’s Pen and Pencil Club, hobnobbing with literary lights like Michael Swanwick and Gardner Dozois.” We are pleased that he manages to interrupt these enthralling pursuits to pen exciting stories for us. Of his newest tale he says, “I don’t normally write paranormal stories, but I got the idea for this one while I was coping with chemotherapy and it looked like it might be worth a try.”

The people in this city had developed a taste for formality in their after-hours garb. Most of the men were wearing black coats. The women had opted for more color but black coats had won the vote in their bloc, too. The women added the color with accents like scarves and hatbands. Nobody gave Gerdon a second glance as he slipped through the crowds hurrying between dinner and curtain time. He didn’t try to keep up with fashion in the places he visited. He had learned he could fade into the crowd if he merely looked like what he was—a stranger from a foreign ship.

The target was a slender young woman, six feet in low heels, brisk walk, light coat, long face that matched her build. Gerdon picked her up, as planned, a block and a half from the concert hall, twenty minutes before show time. She lived in an apartment building five blocks from the pickup point. She subscribed to a six-concert Thursday night series. This was one of her Thursdays.

The client had given him some very precise details. He had wondered, in fact, why the client had needed him.

He had only been hanging around the corner for three or four minutes when he saw her crossing the street with the other people who had been waiting for the light. He was standing near the bus stop, looking down the street as if he was watching for the bus. He fell in behind her, a middle-aged couple between them, and rested his shoulder against a patch of wall just before he made the swap.

The disorientation always hit him harder when the target was a woman. The body felt off balance. Strange hormones played with your emotions.

He couldn’t have taken this job when he first started. They wanted her bank account and credit card numbers. Most people didn’t memorize information like that.

He had to search for visualizations—for the last time she had looked at a card or a statement and her brain had laid down a memory.

It took him longer than he liked. Behind him, through her ears, he could hear people stirring. The man leaning against the wall was attracting attention. The woman locked inside the man's head was reacting to the jolt of the shift—to the shock of suddenly finding herself riding in another body, staring out of someone else's eyes.

Most of them never understood what had happened. How could they? You were walking down the street or sitting in a theater and *blam, flick*, you found yourself connected to strange muscles and strange glands, inches taller or shorter, looking at the world from a different place. You might even glimpse your own body, seen from the outside.

He had never been a target himself, but he could remember all the times it had happened spontaneously when he had been young, before he had learned to control it. Most of his targets probably assumed it was an odd glitch in their brains—a hallucination created by a deficit in blood sugar or understandable fatigue from all those extra hours they were virtuously logging at work.

You couldn't search through a brain the way you searched a computer, with key words and logical connections. The links were foggier and less rational. Odors. Emotions. Childhood associations. Arline Morse had an exceptionally well organized brain, but the images he needed forked from a trail that started with the label on the wallet tucked in the suit she was wearing under her coat.

He severed contact and discovered his body had started sliding down the wall while she had been inside it. He waved off the people around him and straightened up. He ran his hand over his face. He threw out reassuring gestures.

Arly Morse's body had slipped to her knees while he was playing with her brain. Two men were offering her their hands. He turned around, eyes fixed on the sidewalk, and drove toward the corner while she was still reorienting.

She liked to be called Arly. The name permeated most of her memories. He had knocked a few seconds off the search when he had realized her account numbers would be linked to memories associated with Arline.

He stopped in front of a store window, half a block from the corner, and jotted the account numbers in a notebook, along with the appropriate passwords. The passwords had been easy in her case. She was the kind of person who committed them to memory. They looked random at first glance. Then he realized they were Jane Austen titles, with two-digit numbers inserted in the middle. Publication dates?

He turned another corner and slipped into one of the small streets that broke up the downtown area. He wandered past closed stores and maneuvered around sidewalk tables as he looked for a good place to stop and phone in the numbers. He disliked people who weaved through busy streets with their minds focused on their phones and pads.

Most of the people sitting at the tables outside the restaurants wouldn't have linked him with a ship. The city was an inland port, connected to the ocean by a river, and they didn't see most of the traffic it attracted. The ship that had brought him here was moored twenty miles down the river, waiting for its turn beside one of the high cranes that transferred containers to trucks and freight trains.

He had covered another two blocks before he realized he was putting off the call.

He wasn't a mind reader. He couldn't stand outside another person and pick up their thoughts and feelings, as if he had set up a wifi connection. He took complete control—just as they would have taken control of his brain if they hadn't been thrown into confusion. But he could still pick things up. Bits of emotion could trickle into the alien consciousness that had imposed its grip on their brains and bodies.

She had been afraid. Her biological fear responses had been so strong they created a current that persisted through most of the time he had been riffling through her brain.

He had settled into one of the faded, lower priced hotels in the city, as he usually did. The bar had a corner booth where he could stare at a drink.

It wasn't the first time he had felt that steady glimmer of fear. The last time the numbers on his search list had included an address. The time before that the client had asked for an alias.

Both targets had been carrying information about someone else. The implications had been obvious. The second target had even looked like a mobster—a big brute with a rocky face, cased in a suit that would have cost more than most people's vacations. He shouldn't have been afraid of anything. But he was. And he had been carrying the alias his brother was using.

They hadn't told Gerdon why they wanted Arly Morse's numbers. He never asked. He let people know he could dig up private information and they let him know what they wanted. He didn't know who they were and he moved on as soon as he picked up the first signs they were wondering who he was. And how he did it.

For all he knew, they could be federal agents looking for a shortcut in a tax case. Or local cops running a corruption probe.

He plodded up to his room after he finished his drink. A basketball game lulled him into sleep in the third quarter. He still hadn't phoned in the numbers when he hurried out of the hotel the next morning.

Arly lived in an office building that had been converted to apartments, on a main street where he could blend into the pedestrian traffic that streamed past the door.

She came through the door earlier than he'd expected—just fifteen minutes after he slipped into a surveillance pattern. He dropped behind a bulky luggage puller and stayed with her while she walked toward the corner. It was a good day for a tail—a gray day in November that surrounded him with people wearing coats, jackets, and headgear.

He had never had any formal training as an investigator but he had picked up tricks. She popped into a coffee shop two blocks from her building and he selected a position on the other side of the street, out of the line of sight from the coffee shop windows. He modified his appearance by pushing his hat back on his head—like a reporter in an old black and white movie—and unbuttoning his coat. He had grabbed a sausage and egg sandwich from a street cart but he'd skipped coffee.

She worked three blocks from the coffee shop, in an old six-story building that had received a full rehab, complete with sandblasting and white paint on the window frames. The plaque next to the shiny glass door said it was the Dr. J.J. Shen Medical Building.

She was still standing in front of the elevators when he hurried through the door with his head lowered and his phone pressed against his ear. He swept his eyes over the directory and noted that every floor housed a different specialty. She pressed the button for three—oncology. He picked five, Radiology Associates, and hit Lobby when everybody else got off.

She could be a patient, of course. That would account for the fear. But she had looked to him like she was on her way to work.

She left the building just after twelve thirty. She stopped at an ATM. She loitered in front of a window devoted to handbags and gloves. She went inside a woody salad-and-soup place and he verified she was standing in the order line when he walked past the window.

He was hungry. He was bored. He knew what he needed and she hadn't given him any indication he was going to get it. She would go back to her office. She would march straight from her job to her apartment. There wouldn't be one moment between now and the end of the day when he could spend three minutes in her head without raising a commotion that would surround both of them with an instant flash mob.

He would have spotted the two men if he had been a real streetwise investigator. He had seen both of them while he had been watching Dr. Shen's real estate venture.

They sandwiched him between them while Arly was still consuming her soup and salad. The one on his left was obviously the muscle. A little short for the job, but solid. The one on his right was taller and wore glasses.

"We'd like to talk to you," the muscle said.

It wasn't the first time Gerdon had faced the threat of violence, but that didn't make it any easier. He had learned everything he needed to know about violence the first time he had been kicked in the kidneys while he had been doubled up on the ground.

The tall one had a square, Anglo-Saxon face that might have looked annoyingly upper class if he hadn't been wearing glasses. They were both dressed like financial types but he looked like one.

"You've been watching Ms. Morse," the tall one said. "All morning."

The muscle frowned. "We're getting a taxi," the tall one said. "Keep quiet."

Hands gripped his arms. He glanced down the street and saw a pair of taxis waiting for the next light.

He let himself sag at the knees as he made the swap. He looked out of the muscle's eyes and saw his own body drooping. He had a clear shot at the Anglo-Saxon's face and he took it.

The muscle would have put more power into it if he had been controlling his own body but Gerdon had the element of surprise in his favor. The muscle's right fist connected with a target that was totally unprepared.

He jumped back to his own body and found himself kneeling on the curb with his head slumped. Above him, he could hear both of them grunting and swearing. He backed up in a crouch and hurried toward the corner. He had made a dangerous miscalculation. The muscle was not stupid. He had only been inside his head for a moment but it had been obvious the muscle was the leader. He couldn't assume he could creep out of sight while they wasted time trying to figure out what had happened.

So why were they watching her? Why were they combining physical surveillance with a probe of her bank accounts?

Why did they even need him? They knew where she lived. They knew where she worked. They had an organization that could keep two hooligans busy just watching her. Couldn't they break into her apartment and look through her files?

The whole incident looked weird. They had come up to him on a busy street, without knowing who he was, and tried to force him into a taxi. What kind of an organization did stuff like that?

He could always just *ask* them why they'd hired him, of course. Leave a message on the phone drop. *Listen, I've got those numbers you wanted. But I'd like to know what you're up to before I give them to you. Just in case it might be something—*

Something what? Something that might harm a nice looking woman with a stylish walk and a taste for Jane Austen novels?

He couldn't even claim he liked Jane Austen. He had read *Pride and Prejudice* twice. It was funny. It passed the time. But he had never been able to read any of the others. He had to work just to get through the first two chapters.

He shouldn't have panicked. He had let them see something odd was happening. The Jane Austen movies had been good. He'd liked all the film versions.

He bought a black coat in a department store and switched coats in his hotel room. The price tag had made him pause, but who knew? He liked this city. He had been thinking about staying for a while when he got off the ship.

He timed it so he would be approaching Dr. Shen's building just before five. He could have timed it more precisely if he had waited until morning. He knew what time she arrived. But he didn't want to wait. His new finery would help him evade the watchers if they were still around.

As it was, she stepped onto the sidewalk just a minute after he paused at a spot half a block from her door, on the other side of the street. He took two steps, as he had planned, and settled into a chair outside a pizza place.

And found himself staring at her back, through the eyes of some hapless passerby, probably male.

He jumped back to his own body and stood up. The passerby was standing in the middle of the sidewalk, irritating the people maneuvering around him.

He had known he was taking a chance trying to make a swap at that distance. Normally he stayed within a few steps of the target, with a firm line of sight.

He closed in on her while she waited for the light at a corner near her apartment. There was a restaurant with sidewalk tables and tall outdoor heaters near the end of the next block. He hurried around her and grabbed a vacant chair two steps before she passed.

This time he kept her body under control. He recovered from a stumble and steered her toward a store window.

Stand still. Stare at the window. Focus on the fear. What is the fear linked to?

He had never done anything like this. He was riffling through her memories with all the frenzy of a burglar who knew the night watchman was coming down the hall. Facts raced at him like a cloud of buzzing insects. Associations that looked relevant led him into amorphous bogs.

He was still sitting in the chair when he reestablished contact with his body. His head had turned to the left. He was staring at Arly Morse's back.

Arly was still facing the store window. Exactly where he had left her. Left hand in coat pocket. Back straight. He hadn't noticed the hand in the pocket when he'd been inside her. Some part of him must have been looking after her body.

She turned around. Her free hand jumped to her mouth.

He stared at her. Should he hop up and get away from her? Had she really figured it out that fast? And adjusted emotionally?

How long had they been swapped?

A hand settled on his shoulder. The muscle stepped past him and hurried toward Arly.

"It's a nice evening, isn't it?" the man behind him said.

They had brought a friend this time—a plump cheeryface who had decked out the standard uniform with an orange bow tie. He stepped in front of Gerdon's chair, close enough to force a pin, and Gerdon looked back and verified the hand on his shoulder belonged to the tall guy who'd taken the punch the last time they'd met.

The tall guy was bawling their location into a phone. The muscle had started maneuvering Arly toward the table, one hand gripping her wrist, his other arm wrapped around her shoulder in a friendly looking embrace. People glanced at them as they went by but nobody stopped. It was hurry-home time. Let somebody else worry about it.

* * *

The car met them at the corner, a few steps from the restaurant. It was an SUV, with seats for six, and that created an awkwardness. Muscle finally decided Arly should sit in front, next to the driver, and Gerdon should sit behind her, with the muscle beside him and the other two watching his back.

Arly had stared at him the whole time she was being pushed toward the table. She had told them she was willing to see "Freddy" anytime he wanted to talk to her, but that had been the only thing she had said so far.

"We're just looking for some information," the tall guy said when they had all been properly packed into the car. "We're just trying to find out what this guy is up to."

The muscle rolled his eyes. Gerdon had caught glimpses of him when he had been darting through Arly's memories. Arly had realized he was the smart one, too.

He studied the controls of the car as they drove through the city. He didn't drive much, given his predilection for cities, and they kept adding new things between his stints behind the wheel. Could he swap with the driver and open all the doors as he pulled the car to a violent stop? And hop back to his own body and jump out while they were all reacting to total chaos?

It was a nice fantasy. But what would Arly do?

They were obviously going to see "Freddy." Why not wait and see what Freddy wanted?

Freddy lived in a two-story stone house on a block where all his neighbors lived in two-story stone houses. It didn't look that impressive to Gerdon, but the tall guy had muttered something about "welcome to the rich people's world" when they entered the neighborhood.

They unpacked themselves according to the muscle's step-by-step instructions. They trudged down the driveway in a tight little formation and the muscle pressed his palm against a plate next to a side door.

Freddy was sitting in an oversized padded desk chair, in a second floor room furnished with waiting-room armchairs and a desk dominated by an oversized computer monitor. His T-shirt stretched over muscles that indicated his mansion housed an exercise room. He gestured at them with his drink, but he didn't bother to stand up.

"You've been watching Arly," Freddy said. "She's a friend of ours—a very good friend—and we don't know anything about you."

Gerdon had known he could be in serious trouble when they started up the stairs that led to the second floor. He had let himself drift into a situation in which his little trick couldn't protect him. There were too many of them and he only had one line of retreat. He couldn't create a diversion that would keep all of them busy and leap for the first gap that opened up.

He had let that happen when he had first gone to sea. There were always places on ships where three or four hooligans could crowd a skin-and-bones kid into a corner. There had been nothing he could do about it when they started punching and kicking.

He had been burning with outrage the first time he had guided a wine-soaked oaf over a rail. He had been savagely aware he didn't know what would happen. Could he swap back to his own body before his target slammed into the deck machinery thirty meters below the rail? Would he die if his target's body died while he was inside it? He didn't care.

He still didn't know what would happen if somebody died while he was swapped. Would the other person live out their life in his body? He had always made sure he had time to escape when he killed somebody. Drowning was the safest. Walk them

off a bridge into deep water a long way from shore. Zap back to your own body while they were still thrashing around. Go on your way.

He had never thought of himself as brave. Courage, in his opinion, was an over-rated virtue. Hoodlums liked to strut and act nervy but they always had size and numbers on their side. They had left him alone when they noticed bad things happened to people who attacked him.

"I'm the person you hired. To get some information you wanted."

Freddy scowled. The muscle turned his head and studied Gerdon as if he was looking at an object that had suddenly acquired a new level of interest.

Freddy gestured at Arly. "I think you and Dan should have a drink in the rec room, Arly."

Arly straightened up. "Can't you tell me what this is all about? You could have just told me you wanted to see me."

It was the first time she had said anything since they had arranged themselves in the car. Gerdon had spent most of the ride staring at the back of her neck, as she slumped inside her shoulder belt.

"I need to talk to this guy," Freddy said.

The muscle gripped Arly's arm and led her toward a side door. She looked back at Gerdon and he turned away from her before she met his eyes.

He had put her through two swaps. She had looked out of his eyes twice. She had to know something funny had happened.

"That's how you do it?" Freddy said. "You follow people around?"

"I ran into some problems."

"You were going to beat it out of her?"

He couldn't even tell himself she was some poor little innocent. He hadn't pinned down all the details when he had rummaged through her head in front of the restaurant, but he understood the general drift. They were working a scheme involving chemotherapy drugs. Arly manipulated the records and delivered the goods to Freddy's customers. She was supposed to get a percentage of the take on each delivery, but she had been lying about the size of the sales. She was carrying all that fear around because Freddy had warned her he wouldn't tolerate that kind of behavior.

She wasn't even very smart. She'd let Freddy pile the whole thing on her. Freddy set her up with a customer and sat on the sidelines collecting 80 percent of the take. Gerdon had picked up flashes of her after-work life and it looked like she had spent most of her share wandering through stores buying clothes and trinkets like expensive handbags. Freddy had given her a chance to do some extra shopping and she'd lunged at it.

It was a small time operation. Run by small time people. Milking small time gullibles.

"It's her," the tall guy said. "I saw the way he looked at her."

Freddy raised his eyebrows. "Is that it? You like skinny women?"

"I needed more information."

"And you thought you could get it following her around? We hired you because your contact told us you could get the information we needed faster and cheaper than anybody else. With no fuss. You were supposed to phone it in almost twenty-four hours ago."

"It's her," the tall guy said. "He's some kind of geek. He likes female geeks."

"We have a business relationship with Arly," Freddy said. "We think she may be falsifying the amounts she's supposed to pay us. We thought we'd run a little audit on her accounts and make sure we've been getting the right figures. We have a business relationship with you, too. We gave you half in advance. Up front. On your contact's recommendation. Give us the information we paid for, you get your other half, we're done."

"What happens to her?"

The tall guy laughed.

"We aren't going to kill her, if that's what you're worried about. We'll just make sure she understands she has to stick to our arrangement. I haven't thought that through yet, but it probably won't take much."

Gerdon nodded. They wouldn't need to raise a bruise, given the fear he had detected. They could show her the evidence, have a little fun with her, and send her back to her job knowing she had placed herself in a permanent trap.

You could even say Freddy was being kind. He was looking for evidence before he locked her in her cage.

Freddy lowered his head and thought for a moment. "I hired you—whoever you are—so we could get the account numbers without bothering her. Painlessly."

"If we can't do it that way. . . ." the tall guy said.

"They're in my inside pocket. In my notebook."

Freddy held out his hand. Gerdon ripped the page out of the notebook and Freddy waved at the cheeryface with the bow tie.

The cheeryface stepped around the desk and bent over the computer. Freddy pushed his chair back and watched Gerdon while he followed the action on the screen.

"We owe you some money," Freddy said.

"You got her?" the tall guy said.

"I presume you'll accept dollars. I can throw in a few euros."

Gerdon was sitting behind the desk, looking at the startled expression on his own face staring at him across the desktop. He jerked open the drawer on the right side of the desk and saw the gun sitting there, just as he'd expected.

It was a nine millimeter self-loading pistol—the commonest private firearm in the world. He worked the slide as he pulled it out of the drawer and fired two shots upward, as fast as the gun would operate, at a point on the tall guy's coat just below his right collarbone.

He had never been the kind of person who enjoyed shooting. The kick and noise of a gun had felt hard and brutal the first time he pulled a trigger and his feelings hadn't changed.

The computer whiz had jerked erect. Gerdon twisted in his chair and fired into a well padded thigh. He was thinking coolly and rapidly, as he always did when these things happened, bolstered by the knowledge he was one step ahead of surprised, confused adversaries who didn't know what he was doing. He wasn't trying to kill either of them. He just wanted to put them out of action. There were people who could absorb everything he had done and rip your throat out before they let it stop them. He had watched them ravage his birthland. This crew didn't look like bonafide human wolves.

He turned back to the shocked version of himself on the other side of the desk. He placed the gun on the desktop. He pushed against the floor with his legs and rolled backward.

Then he was inside his own body again. He stumbled as he stepped forward but the confusion only lasted a second. He picked up the gun and aimed it at the man rolling away from him.

Freddy had good reflexes. He had been through a complete round trip, *zip, zap*, and he was already twisting like he was getting ready to throw himself to one side.

This time Gerdon went for the kill. He lined up the sights, elbows locked, and pressed the trigger four times, firing each shot at the standard aiming point in the center of the upper body. One of the bullets went wide but he could see the strikes of the others.

The computer whiz was staring at the blood on his leg. The tall guy was bending over the desk with his weight resting on his good hand, wheezing with pain.

The side door swung open. Gerdon turned and saw Dan the Muscle crouching on

one knee in the doorway, gun in firing position. The gun swung toward him and he put Freddy's gun on the desk and lifted his hands.

Dan stood up. He checked out the three casualties and stared at Gerdon with the kind of intense, screwed-up concentration Gerdon had seen on the faces of ship handlers who were steering mammoth vessels through narrow passages with volatile currents.

"You took that gun from somebody. You didn't have it when you came here."

The computer whiz was sitting on the floor. The tall guy had given up fighting the pain and let himself slump to his knees, with his head resting against the desk. Gerdon wondered if either of them even carried a gun. The only person in this group who looked truly dangerous was pointing a gun at him.

The computer whiz grunted. "Freddy. Freddy shot us."

"Freddy shot himself?"

"He shot Freddy."

Gerdon knew he had to move as soon as he saw Dan's gun waver. Dan had looked out of his eyes. Dan had punched his partner in the same way Freddy had shot the two men bleeding in front of him.

He was staring at another jump into unknown territory. Usually he did one swap—two at the most—and stayed locked inside his own head until he got another job weeks later. Now he had done three in the last few hours. One in the last two minutes. Did he know what he was doing? Did he have any idea where this would take him?

The world trembled. Thunder cracked somewhere—in his mind, or some place in the real world, whatever the real world was. He stared across Dan's gun at the body the universe had given him—or loaned him, if you wanted to be more accurate.

Dan was just as fast as Freddy. He started diving behind the desk seconds after Gerdon recovered from his own confusion. Gerdon dropped to his hands and knees and sent the gun sliding across the floor.

Could he get back to his own body again so fast? Yes, he could. And there was the gun, just two steps to his left. With Dan on his hands and knees staring at the floor. He picked up the gun. "Where's Arly? Stay where you are."

"What are you?" Dan said.

"Where's Arly?"

"Watching TV. In the living room."

"Can she hear you if you call her? Tell her to come here."

The two men he had shot were looking sicker by the second. He didn't look at Freddy.

"What the hell are you?" Dan said.

"Please call Arly."

Dan raised his voice. He couldn't produce a proper shout from his all-fours position, but Arly wasn't as engrossed in TV as he had indicated. She stepped into the doorway seconds after he called her and responded with an appropriately nineteenth century display of horror. She even covered her mouth with her hand.

"You'd better come with me," Gerdon said. "You can't stay here."

Arly stared at Freddy's body. He could try another swap and walk her across the room, to the door that opened on the stairs, if the swap worked. But that would mean she would be inside his body while he moved. Holding the gun. Buffeted by an emotional storm that would have floored an astronaut.

"What are you?" Arly said.

"You can't stay here with them, Arly. They know what you've been doing."

"Is that what you're trying to do?" Dan said. "You're trying to protect her?"

Arly's hand had jumped back to her mouth. She let out a little choked sob and Gerdon decided he had penetrated the storm and triggered the fear that had made him change course and veer into a minefield.

Arly turned around. She stumbled down the hall on the other side of the door and Gerdon watched her turn into a door. He heard Dan shift his weight and he automatically locked his elbows and pointed the gun directly at Dan's upturned face.

"It's all right," Dan said. "I'm not stupid. I don't know exactly what it is you're doing but I am not going to do anything stupid."

Arly came down the hall dressed in the coat she had been wearing when they picked her up. She maneuvered around Dan with her head lowered and walked toward the back door as if she was a demure example of eyes-lowered female modesty, instead of a modern shopping-obsessed woman who apparently couldn't leave an expensive coat behind if her life depended on it.

Freddy's gun was still lying on the desk. Gerdon shoved it into his coat pocket and started backing toward the door. The two pound weight in his pocket felt heavy and awkward but he wasn't going to leave a gun where somebody like Dan could pick it up.

The car was still sitting in the driveway. The dark figure behind the wheel was still jittering in time to the earphones he had settled on his head when they got out. He abandoned his post without any fuss when Gerdon showed him the gun.

He hadn't thought it through. He had just acted. He had stuck Freddy's gun in his pocket because it looked like the right thing to do. But was it? They could have told the police Freddy had shot them and shot himself. Gone berserk for no reason. How could they do that without a gun?

You couldn't take gunshot wounds to a hospital without saying something. Unless you had connections. Did they have medical arrangements? Were they too small time to have a doctor on their payroll?

"Do you have any idea what you're doing?" Arly said.

"They knew what you've been doing. You were in very serious trouble."

"You think they would have killed me? You think a bunch of small timers like that would give up the money I'm funneling them?"

"They didn't have to kill you. They would have . . . taught you a lesson. And sent you back to work. On their terms."

He turned onto a street cluttered with stores and eating places. This neighborhood changed fast. You drove down a "rich people's" block with trees and big front yards and twenty seconds later you were surrounded by rundown houses and stores that looked like they sold the kind of stuff the people in the rundown houses bought.

"You're the one that told them what I was doing," Arly said.

"I gave them some information. I didn't know what you were up to. I got your account numbers. They hired me to do it. The computer geek took the numbers and verified you were cheating them."

"You're a paranormal."

Gerdon glanced down a side street and saw a cluster of overhead lights two blocks away. Cars and trucks sped along a street that looked like a big boulevard—a road out of this part of the city.

"That's it, right? You get into people's minds? You did something funny and got inside my mind."

Gerdon had worked his way through a shelf of paranormal romance novels during a month when he had holed up in a room in Liverpool—back in the days when he had still thought he could learn something about himself from books. He had mostly learned that women were attracted to daydreams that were just as absurd as the fantasies that hypnotized men.

Did women who read Jane Austen novels read that kind of thing, too?

He had never understood how his thing worked or why he could do it. Or why he

seemed to be the only person who could do it. There had been a time when he had thought quantum mechanics might explain it but he had given that up when he had decided all the writers who philosophized about uncertainty and entanglement didn't know what they were talking about. The people who really understood the subject communicated with mathematics he would never master.

The Universe was clearly a mysterious place, with wonders his fellow humans had barely noticed. Someday, someone might understand his peculiar aberration. When they did, the explanation would probably be just as incomprehensible as a quantum textbook.

"That's what you do?" Arly said. "You've got those kind of powers?"

"I have a trick I can do. It's very limited. I'm not looking into your head now, if that's what you're thinking."

"You did it to me twice."

"I did it the second time because I didn't know what they wanted—what would happen to you. I had your numbers. But I didn't know why they wanted them."

He had turned on to the boulevard. He didn't know how it fit into the street layout but he knew they were heading south, toward the downtown area.

"You did all this for me? You killed Freddy for me?"

"They would have sent you back on their terms. They would have kept you there until you got caught. You'd go to jail. And it wouldn't cost them anything."

"Are you in love with me? Is that it? You did all this because you're in love with me?"

"I didn't want you to get hurt."

"I'll have to watch for them every time I go out the door."

"We don't know what they'll do. Freddy's dead. They don't know what happened. And they don't have Freddy telling them what to do."

"You're in love with me. You're one of those men with a hard shell who doesn't want to admit he's in love. And now you're a murderer. You let yourself fall in love with me. You killed Freddy just for me."

"I'm taking you home. You'll be all right. They won't bother you after this."

"You should have killed Dan. He's the one that's dangerous."

Gerdon focused his attention on the road directly in front of the hood. He had felt her fear. She had seen the carnage in Freddy's office. Could she really recover this fast?

Maybe he should be asking her what *she* was.

"You don't have to worry about Dan. He's the smart one. He's not going to do anything that could invite more trouble."

"You could take over that whole operation. Freddy was just a midget under all that attitude. You could turn it into something big."

"You can't keep up what you're doing, Arly. You were just a temporary source to them. They use people like you until you get caught. You go to prison and they find somebody else."

"I could keep it up forever if I had you watching out for me. We could be living on top of the tallest building in the city."

"You're safe. You should be safe. They got a real shock."

"We could have everything we wanted. We could fill the biggest closets anybody could build for us."

He had placed the bag on a patch of broken concrete, in an area that picked up some of the light from the rumbling expressway over his head. He was standing in the darkness next to a pillar, out of effective pistol range, unless Dan was more of a marksman than most petty criminals.

It was two-fifteen in the morning. He had told Dan he should arrive on foot, at two A.M., but he wasn't surprised when a car cruised down the street that ran beside the underpass and turned under the expressway, fifteen minutes late. He had assumed a smart person would create some confusion.

Litter crunched under the car's tires. Dan threw open the door and waddled toward the bag in an exaggerated combat-manual crouch, swerving his gun from side to side.

The crouch had put Dan's body in an awkward position. It fell backward before Gerdon could get control and he found himself sitting on the ground.

He had stepped out of the dark as he made the swap. He had a clear view of his own body. The man looking out of his eyes could see everything he did.

He sat up straight. He placed the gun next to his cheek and held it there—where the bullet would smash through his face and jaw, disfiguring and crippling without killing. Then he raised it and held it against the side of his nose.

He finished by holding it against his kneecaps. First the left. Then the right. Then he tossed the gun under the car.

He had thought about a little speech. *I can disfigure you. I can maim you. It will hurt me for a few seconds. You'll live with it the rest of your life.* But it wasn't necessary. Dan would understand.

He backed into the dark as soon as he had his own body under control. Dan grabbed the money and scrambled into the car with satisfactory haste. The gun was still lying on the ground when the car veered out of the underpass.

Gerdon wandered through the darkened neighborhood that abutted the underpass, looking for a main street that might attract a taxi. He had done his best. Arly might have to move to a cheaper apartment. She would definitely have to reduce her clothing budget. But she could go to work in the morning and read her romance novels in the evening without wondering if someone was going to attack her on the street or break down her door. He had returned every dollar he owed them. The brain in their newly remodeled organization knew what would happen if they violated their side of the bargain.

The neighborhood looked pleasant. The houses all looked neat and well maintained. It was a nice city. Could he stay awhile? He did have to make a living. ○

We sent the nanobots out
To explore the galaxy,
New jump tech sent them hopping,
Faster than old sub-light probes,
Self-repairing and—replicating,
Using what they needed to
Keep up the search,
They could go where we
Had not the funds to follow.

Back they trickled, flowed,
Then torrented,
Bringing back fantastic shots:
Worlds, stars, & nebulae
Imploding, bursting, shrinking.

Then, one by one,
The nearer stars winked out.

—David C. Kopaska-Merkel

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THAT UNIVERSE WE BOTH DREAMED OF

Jay O'Connell

Jay O'Connell grew up in suburban central New York, but now lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with his wife, kids, and cats. Although this is his first appearance in *Asimov's*, his fiction was published in a half dozen professional and semiprofessional genre magazines of the nineties, including *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, *Absolute Magnitude*, and *Pirate Writings*. Jay's stories emerge from life-long dialogs with people far smarter and more interesting than he is; polymath geniuses, visionary tricksters, activists, scientists, artists, cranks, writers, work-shoppers, and family members, most of whom Jay is pretty sure aren't aliens. But he wouldn't bet on it. You can find out more about the author's imaginary friends at www.jayoconnell.com.

My supervisor messaged me Thursday night that a visitation request had been made in my name, and so I had Friday off. Chances were I'd be back to work on Monday. Nine hundred and ninety times out of a thousand that's what happened. That one in a thousand? Officially, the aliens weren't responsible. Some people took advantage of the visitation to take off. Just hit the road, abandon job, wife, family.

That made sense to me.

So Friday morning I logged into work, rescheduled my appointments and started a load of laundry; socks and underwear. For a while after Amy left, I'd just kept buying more. I had bushels of dirty underwear. Maybe I could convince my alien to stay in and I could get some house cleaning done too. The place was a mess. No way I could invite anyone back here. If I ever, you know, met anyone.

A conference window pinged. It was Gharlane. I didn't answer.

"Joel, want to do something after the visitation?"

He'd forced the voice message through with the emergency access code I'd given him. Every communication from Gharlane was an emergency.

I sighed, gesturing the conference window to center screen. I was looking at a dark-haired, middle-aged man with round, wire-rimmed glasses not making eye contact with the camera. But then, Gharlane was never big on eye contact. He was maybe my oldest friend, certainly my oddest. Decidedly non-neurotypical. He subsisted on the WPA Creative Stipend, wrote absurdist fiction, and created mildly popular video-montages.

"Maybe," I said. "Look, I'm getting ready over here." I hesitated. "What was your interview like?" I dimly recalled he'd been visited but was blanking on the details.

He looked me in the eye.

"It's bullshit. Like jury duty. But less interesting. There aren't any aliens, you know, it's a plot by the Feds—"

It came back to me. I interrupted the conspiracy theory, that the withered Federal government was behind Disclosure, and said I'd talk to him later. Like so many, Gharlane despised the Feds. He hadn't spoken to me for two weeks after I'd brought up the fact that half his stipend came from them. We'd stopped talking politics after that.

Were the aliens real? I was agnostic on the subject. They certainly could be, but then, who knew. Who killed Kennedy? Some things are hard to know for sure, even when extensively documented.

Of course the joke was that by the time Disclosure occurred more than half the planet already believed in aliens. It was the educated elites who had the most trouble absorbing the news.

It had been five years, maybe thirty million interviews, and nothing much seemed to have changed. Disclosure had occurred two days after the discovery of the vent worms under the ice of Europa, which was three days after my Hyperacusis diagnosis. Somehow they were all mixed up for me.

I was too busy mourning my diagnosis, the end of my musical life, to care. I'd been a fan of space as a kid, caught up in the resurgence of interest following the discovery of the Martian microbes, but music had been my life's focus. After that, after the diagnosis, well. I'd had to grow up.

The door chimed softly.

I opened it, blinking at the moist blast of mid-summer, head-advisory air. My alien was an oddly cute youngish Caucasian woman, slender and blonde, with a pixie haircut. Aliens all looked perfectly human, of course. Hence the conspiracy theories.

She wore a clean white tank-top, faded jeans, and those barefoot shoe things with the individual toes, which I hadn't seen in a decade.

"Hi," she said. Her eyes were a friendly shade of blue. "Can I come in?"

I stood aside, still in my pajamas. My underwear was in the dryer, and I hadn't wanted to go commando with the alien. It was summer, and I had a tendency to chafe. My heart was beating too fast. I took a deep breath.

"What do I call you?" My voice sounded wavery and weird. I cleared my throat.

"What do you want to call me?" The alien-girl-person-thing asked.

I sighed. It was going to be a long day.

I decided to call her Zena, which had a nice alien ring to it. She asked me questions while I folded laundry. It started out almost like a census, dull stuff, demographics. Then we talked about my childhood, my failed marriage, my subsequent love life, or lack thereof. I answered honestly. I'm not sure why.

It was a weird conversation, like talking to a therapist. Questions like, "What do you want to do with your life?"

How the hell do you answer that one?

"I want to be a pop star," I said. Joking. Not.

"Are you in a band?" Zena asked.

"Not for a few years." I saw no reason to bring up the hyperacusis, the excruciating pain that certain sounds, including my music, now caused me. My band, Tikkun Olam, was on hiatus, probably dead, barring a miracle cure. I didn't talk about that stuff with anyone.

Zena nodded, her expression neutral.

"My job takes a lot out of me," I said. "I work for LiveWork, a big NGO, a non-prof-

it. We feed people. Well, we teach people to feed themselves. Fund community gardens and self-sufficiency projects. Subsidize and police barter networks, work exchanges. We're trying to do what the Feds used to do, with corporate sponsorships and social media donations. The private private partnership, I call it, when nobody is listening. Which is most of the time."

"Do you enjoy your work?" Zena asked.

"Not for years." My own answer startled me. But it was true.

Zena nodded.

"It's important work, though."

Zena nodded again. "People won't feed themselves?"

"They can't, really," I said, irritated. "You know. Tech Shock. Half the population has nothing to do. Not that anyone wants to pay them for."

"If you don't do your job, it won't get done?"

I snorted. "Plenty of people want work. They could replace me in a heartbeat, with a kid they'd pay half my salary."

"I see," said Zena.

She blinked at me. Silence fell. I felt the beginning of a headache throbbing in my temples.

"I don't think you do," I said. I sat heavily next to the stacks of underwear and socks on the sofa. My face was hot. I was angry. Something about the questions, and my answers, had made me feel terrible. She implied things.

"People can't just do any damn thing they feel like. Grown-ups, I mean. People with kids, families . . ."

"Do you have children?" Zena asked. "Family? Pets? Anyone?"

"NO!" I shouted.

I put my face in my hands, ran them through my thinning hair, and thought about that one in a thousand that disappeared after visitation. How many were suicides? What an indirect way of killing people!

"Let's change the subject," Zena said. "I've upset you."

"Good," I said. "Something easy, please."

"Okay," Zena said. "Let's talk about God."

So we talked about God. I'm an agnostic, or an atheist, when I'm talking with a religious person I don't like, which would be most of them. With Zena, for some reason, I didn't want to poke fun at believers. Religion was important to a lot of people, and I'm people. I felt defensive about my species.

Finally, exhausted, I said we lived on a tiny dust speck on the edge of eternity, and if there was a god, some kind of universal intelligence, that we couldn't be a huge priority for him.

For *it*, I corrected, because God probably didn't have a long white beard. Or a penis.

"The penis seems unlikely," Zena said. I didn't notice that she'd almost offered an opinion, at first. Then I did, and stopped talking.

Zena smiled silently at me. Her eyes were kind without being patronizing.

I couldn't stand it anymore.

"You made us? Seeded the planet?" This was a pretty common assumption now. Life on Earth, Mars, and Europa, all based on DNA.

Zena raised her eyebrows. She turned to look at my wallscreen and cocked her head a fraction of a degree. Task windows, camera feeds, my friend profiles, started blanking out, filled with buffering icons. A big "Network Outage" clock appeared center screen.

There were no recorded visitations; no audio; no video. The only thing we knew was what the visited had to tell us, and the visited never said anything important.

Except for the cultists. Every cult's story was different. Well, they generally involved credit card payments.

"That's an interesting idea, isn't it? Directed panspermia."

"You're not going to answer, are you?" I said.

"Not yet."

My heart skipped a beat. Yet? "Is this . . . a test?"

Zena nodded. "Test isn't a bad word for it."

"Has anyone else passed?"

"I can't talk about anyone else."

"How much longer is the test?"

"I won't know until it's over," she said.

"Do you leave when I fail?"

Zena smiled. "Yes."

I blinked. I grabbed her by the shoulders, the first time I'd laid hands on her. Her shoulders felt normal. Nice even.

"Yes? Just yes? Not, 'what do I think will happen'?"

"Yes, and yes. Just yes."

I wanted to kiss her. I was worried if I did I'd fail, though, so I just stood there grinning like a fool.

"I'm hungry," she said, disentangling herself gently. "Let's get something to eat."

I picked an outfit up off the couch, and got dressed in my bedroom with the door half open. I'd left Zena downstairs, flipping through a public photo album of mine on the wall (a local cache, the network outage persisted).

"What kind of music do you play," she called up. "In your band."

"It's hard to describe," I said. What had I called it in the end? Klesmer Folk Fusion? I didn't want to talk about it. I grabbed my ear protectors, bulky plastic earmuffs, the kind you use at shooting ranges, and met her at the door. She took in the ear protectors without comment.

"You eat falafel?" I asked.

"I'm omnivorous," she said. "Well. This body is."

"Very good falafel, up the street, in the Square, about a half mile."

She nodded. So we walked. I wore my ear protectors past the construction site a block from the condominium. An old, static, office building was being pulled down, to be replaced with something smarter. I waved to a neighbor tending his roof garden. He'd have strawberries to trade for my tomatoes in a week or so.

Zena said something I couldn't quite hear. Walking in the city without the protectors was always a crapshoot. A cop car might turn on its siren without warning and I'd have a headache for two days. Still, I was chatting with an alien. I pulled off the protectors and hoped for the best.

"Lunch is my treat," Zena repeated.

She paid for our sandwiches with her phone. There was no place to sit, the falafel joint was tiny, a converted White Castle hamburger place that had been made a landmark around the turn of the century. So we found a bench under a tree in the park across the street.

We sat across from a large fenced-in play area teeming with kids of a dozen skin shades and national origins. My fair city, the Hub, was home to tens of thousands of skilled temporary workers, in biotech, nanotech, and infotech, as well as the usual nannies and home health aides happy to live in the beltway dormitories.

"What would you say to getting off-planet?" Zena asked.

"Is it something you're likely to ask, do you think?"

"Seriously," Zena said. "I'm saying it. You. Off the planet. In a colony."

I stared at my falafel.

As a kid, I'd grown up playing video games, watching movies, TV shows, filled with space travel. The discovery of extraterrestrial life by unmanned probes, even though it was just bacterial mats and worms, had made space travel relevant, less of a kitchy, retro, twentieth century nostalgia thing. The super rich now routinely orbited the moon for fun. Zuckerberg's generation ship was being constructed at L5.

"I don't have the skills, or the profile, for Zuckerberg's Ark. I'm turning thirty. We wouldn't reach a habitable exoplanet in my lifetime anyway, even if I made the cut. Assuming they ever finish the thing. Assuming it doesn't blow up.

"I'm not talking about a ship."

"No ship?"

"We don't use them," she said.

"What about all the sightings," I said. "The saucers and spheres and cigars—"

"Surface craft. We don't use them any more, anyway. They upset you. We use doors."

"Doors? Teleportation? Wormholes?"

"Kind of."

I took a bite. The hummus definitely improved the sandwich, and was worth the extra buck.

Zena took a bite. "This is excellent. Best I've had, outside New Jerusalem."

I thought about it while we ate.

"Why would you help us colonize other planets?" I asked.

"That's a good question," she said around a mouthful of sandwich. A bit of tahini dressing had dribbled from the corner of her mouth. I brushed the same place on my chin. "You got a—"

"Oh!" she laughed. She wiped it off with a napkin. "Thanks."

"You gonna answer?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No. Well. If you guess, I might nod."

I considered that. "Is that part of the test?"

"Yeah," she said. "You could say that."

We finished our sandwiches, and walked to where a scaffold had been erected against one wall of the basketball court. A group of kids were working on a mural mosaic, embedding fragments of colorful recycled material in some quick-setting adhesive. A WPA artist with a large data pad was directing the project. A stylized globe was taking form, recognizably the earth.

My planet. Which Zena was telling me I might leave behind.

"Fermi's Paradox," I said. "Given the age of the universe, our own rate of development, the Drake equation, what we know . . . where is everybody?"

Zena nodded. "Your light cone should be packed with the evidence of intelligent species disassembling stars into Dyson spheres. Ringworlds. Immortal technological civilizations, self-replicating robot factories in the asteroid belts. Solar sails, ion drives, every habitable zone planet a radio star."

"Yeah," I said. "But we don't. There's nothing."

"I could ask, how do you know what you see and hear is real?"

My stomach lurched. "It's *fake*?" An old woman watching a pair of kids on a teeter-totter gave shot me a dirty look. I'd shouted. I waved back at her, regaining my composure. "Our light cone is *fake*?"

Zena laughed. "Sorry. We don't do that. There's nothing much to see, is all."

"So there's no quarantine," I said. "No prime directive. There isn't a big sprawling galactic empire out there, waiting to embrace us, the new guys?"

"No."

"Too bad," I said.

"Yeah. That's the Universe we dreamed of, too. When we were your age."

We sat comfortably for a while, saying nothing.

"Want another hint?" Zena asked.

"Do I fail if you give me a hint?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"Then yes."

"Intelligence evolves frequently. It isn't rare. But it's fragile and self-destructive."

The self-destructive part needed no explanation. But fragile?

She continued as if reading my mind. "Cultural vitality, viability, is fragile, self-esteem, purpose, meaning, the big questions. The why of things. You don't know it, because nothing has come in from the outside, to prick the bubble."

We were walking in front of a storefront Buddhist center. Through the soundproof glass, you could see a class in progress, a grid of fifteen or so people seated in lotus posture on woven mats.

Zena smiled at the statue of the Buddha, a faux bronze thing seated blissfully by the Zen center's door.

"Was he one of you?" I asked.

She shook her head. "We don't mess with religion. Anymore." She made a bad smell face as she caressed the Buddha's bald head. "Not with your species."

"You're Watchers?"

She paused. If she was a person, I might think she'd subvocalized a search on Watcher, and was reading an online answer spat out by a search engine as a data overlay in a contact lens. Maybe that was what she was doing. I was avoiding wearable computing as long as possible, personally. But I had friends who had joined the Borg.

"The bald guys who introduced the Silver Surfer comics?"

"Yeah."

"Would watchers disclose their presence?"

"No."

"We're not watchers," Zena said. "We're doers. But we're careful."

"The Watchers made terrible mistakes. Their gifts were turned into weapons. Species, whole planets were destroyed."

Zena nodded. "That would be terrible, wouldn't it? To know you were responsible for such things. That your people were."

My great-great-grandfather on my father's side had been in the Luftwaffe. "You would get over it, I guess."

"Probably," Zena agreed.

"But afterward . . ."

"Careful," she whispered, looking down at the statue, her finger tracing the Buddha's smile. "Very, very careful."

"So, if life is plentiful, but intelligence is self-destructive and fragile. Panspermia . . . empty real estate? And you said you wanted company. That big Universe full of friends. You asked me if I wanted off the planet . . ."

We'd stopped at the entrance to a community garden by the river. A half dozen people were working in their plots, weeding, or putting in seedlings. Mostly vegetables, tomatoes, small high-yield GMO melons and breadfruit, fresh herbs, but there were flowers too; sunflowers and roses.

"You're gardeners," I said.

She nodded. Once.

I thought about the silence, the great silence, of the Universe. Of the Martian bacterial mats, and the European vent worms.

“But it’s going slowly.”

She sighed. “Even for us. So slowly.”

“Do I pass?” I said.

“You passed two hours ago, when you said God didn’t have a penis. I was enjoying myself, though. I like your city.” She stopped, and looked me in the eye. “I like you, too.”

I laughed. “Why?”

She shrugged. “No idea. Isn’t it like that with people, too?”

I thought about Amy.

“Yeah, it is, sometimes.”

We stopped at another park, and watched the kids playing in the sprinklers, some made up kid game that involved lots of running, and screaming, and laughing, and filling up plastic buckets and throwing the water on kids who didn’t yet know they were playing. Off to one side, a little red-haired girl who hadn’t wanted to get wet was sobbing inconsolably. A lanky boy with dreadlocks a head taller than her stood sheepishly beside her, eyes downcast, as he was upbraided by a woman too young to be his mother. Probably a nanny.

“How many people pass?” I asked, thinking of that one in a thousand.

“About a third of you are fit to leave the planet. A third of you are deeply confused about your place in the Universe. And there’s a third that shouldn’t be allowed to use sharp objects.”

This jibed with my own observations, over the years.

“The problem is, if we leave you alone, most of the time, the crazy third convinces the confused third to do stupid things and you die out. Sometimes you take the whole biosphere with you.”

I thought of the massive public/private investment in sustainable energy and carbon sequestration that had come on the heels of Disclosure. The polar solar arrays that had begun to put a stop to the runaway greenhouse effect.

I didn’t need to ask Zena if they’d had a hand in that.

“Which third am I in, again?”

“You barely pass,” she said. “I’m kinda bending the rules, to be honest.”

This made sense to me, too.

“I’m not a pioneer. I don’t enjoy camping. My practical skills are in middle management. I enjoy gardening, but if I had to do it all the time, I’d hate it.” I was thinking out loud, about Zena’s offer.

“We haven’t relocated anyone yet,” Zena said.

I figured as much. There had been maybe twenty million visitations, according to the Terran authority website. So there were millions of candidates, by Zena’s rule of thirds. You can’t hush up that many disappearances.

“The colonization, using the doors, when we start, we become real; really real . . . we’re only mostly real now. It might kill your culture. Most of the models say it will. Of course the models are wrong sometimes. That’s what makes them models.”

“Kill the culture?”

She blinked at me. “You know about the cargo cults?”

I nodded. During World War II, the Pacific islanders believed that the airplanes and radios and technology of the Americans were gifts from Cargo Gods. They didn’t think human beings could have made such perfect magical things. The belief was persistent. You could take a cargo cultist to a factory where cars were assembled, and the cultist believed the parts had been delivered as cargo.

The cargo cultists built mock runways, to lure the gods to bring them the gifts the Americans pretended they made themselves.

"We're that fragile?"

She shrugged. "We only intervene with a species on the eve of its suicide. We do the best we can, which, as it turns out, isn't all that good. We've tried to desensitize cultures through a series of manifestations, but that may not be working. Some models suggest it's part of the problem."

She took my hand and squeezed it. "I'm sorry, I'm speaking in the wrong timescale. You'll be fine, personally; your city, your commonwealth, your generation. Longer term, we're hopeful some of the cuttings will survive."

"The gardening metaphor," I said. "Ah."

"You'll be spread over a hundred worlds," she said. "Cultures are sensitive to initial conditions. You won't necessarily repeat yourselves, historically. At least we hope you won't . . ."

She trailed off, her expression sad. "You're not going."

"This is my planet." What was I *saying*? I closed my eyes. I couldn't look at her and say what I had to say. "These are my people. I can't." I felt a shiver ride up my spine. As if a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. A weight I'd never known I carried. The madhouse door had swung open. But I wasn't leaving the asylum.

"I figured you'd say no."

"Then why ask?"

"I'm wrong a lot. And I like you."

"Then stick around and help us rebuild the culture. After you wreck it."

"That's not my job," she said.

"Your job won't get done, if you don't do it?"

She laughed. "No, they'd find someone else. But let's talk about you. What are you going to do for the rest of your life? Play your music?"

A half block away, a car alarm went off and the sound cut through my head like a heated wire through styrofoam. I fumbled for my ear protectors, as the throbbing headache struck. Waves of nausea, the taste of bile. I closed my eyes, and focused on my breathing, letting the moment pass.

"Oh," she said.

We walked home slowly. I was thinking about an experimental surgery for hyperacusis, one with a thirty percent success rate. A third of the time, the operation did nothing, and a third of the time, it made the condition worse. Suicide rates in the final third were high. Still, I could sign up to be a test subject, hope I made it into the trial.

"You know, there's no proof," I said. "Until the colonists leave. I have no way of knowing if anything you told me is true."

"Funny how that works, huh?" she said.

"I can't even be sure you're an alien."

"I could peel my skin off, if you want," Zena said. "Eat a gerbil?"

"Salt water!" I said. "Salt water will melt you!"

We both laughed about that. Salt water.

"You want a miracle?" She asked quietly.

I thought about it. One thing that seemed certain was that we, humans, had developed the ability to implant memories sometime over the last decade or so. The drug treatments developed for PTSD had had many unexpected applications. Computer graphics could create any kind of imagery imaginable. These images could be converted into memories with a combination of drugs and hypnosis. Even if she gave me a miracle now, tomorrow morning, I'd have no way of knowing if it was real, or a movie I'd watched.

"I still wouldn't know for sure."

She nodded. "It's hard to know the important things for sure."

I thought about Amy.

"We aren't allowed to do miracles anyway."

"Of course not."

"Last chance on the colonization thing."

"No, thank you. But, I'm glad you're doing it, transplanting us. Thank you. We deserve another chance."

We looked into each other's eyes.

"Okay, maybe not really, but I mean, if there's room, why not?"

"That's how we think about it."

She reached out and touched the side of my face, her fingertips cool, my skin tingling at the point of contact. I wanted to kiss her, and I knew she didn't want to. Yet. So I didn't.

"So, does a saucer pick you up?" I asked. "Do you teleport away?"

"I'm going to walk back to the subway," she said.

"That works too. Look, Zena, could I see you again, sometime?" My mouth was dry, and the words came out oddly. The first girl I'd asked out in a year was an alien. Probably. You have to start somewhere. "I enjoyed this visitation thing. Even though, you know, there was no probing."

Zena made the bad smell face. An awkward silence descended.

"Hah, hah," I added.

"Mail the Terran Embassy," she said. "Use the name Zena, next time your band plays out. I want to hear that music of yours that's so hard to describe."

Ouch.

I felt like I'd been punched in the stomach. I opened my mouth to explain, and then thought, no, it didn't matter. I closed my mouth. She was an alien. I'd thought she understood about the hyperacusis. How I couldn't do the thing I most wanted to do anymore.

But I didn't want to talk about it.

We said goodbye. I closed the door on her feeling suddenly spent. I didn't feel like doing laundry, so I stacked it up and got it out of the way. I wandered around the apartment, looking at stuff. I'd purged the photos, the mementos, all the Amy stuff, but for the first time, somehow, she felt gone. That part of my life was over. Really over.

Instead I picked up my guitar. With the protectors, I could usually manage a song, or most of a song, before the hyperacusis got too bad to play. Tuning the guitar was also an unpleasant experience, but strangely, I'd done that yesterday, taking breaks between each string. It had taken hours. I found the guitar pick, a chip of plastic clipped from a recycled credit card, on the mantelpiece.

On impulse, I plugged into my Marshall, an ancient thing, with 3D-printed vacuum tubes. I turned a dusty knob up to a setting I hadn't used in a decade. My amp goes to eleven. I removed the ear protectors from around my neck, and threw them on the couch. I had a half bottle of oxy from a broken elbow I could use to glue my head back together before work tomorrow. You only live once.

I struck a chord, and the sound exploded from the amp, flooding the room, filling the spaces, my ears, my brain, with sweet fizzing electrical joy. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. I shivered.

There was no pain.

I laughed so hard I cried. I lay on the carpet, with the guitar on my stomach, staring at the ceiling.

Maybe I had a shot at Zena.

Maybe we all had a shot. ○

THE NEW LITERARY CANON

It took half a century, but even Yale got on board:
a threehundredlevel elective in Martian literatures
for those with junior standing or the instructor's approval.

The little man who taught it—balding,
thickly-accented, a bit green behind the tweed—
liked a pinch of rust in his cappuccino. Not an easy A,
not with that thirty-page research paper
in the Martian critical approach of your choice
(or as near as a carbon-based life form
with neuron-based mental functions
could approximate) but it broadened
intellectual horizons, deepened understandings—

And that wasn't really a metaphor. Example:

I met this girl in a bar in New Haven.

A real show-off, she threw out a few lines
in the endangered local dialect of the Cydonia region
between Long Island iced teas. I wasn't too impressed
until the glassware started tinkling, the rum bottle
burst out its cap like a gunshot ...

The Connecticut Sea is nice this time of year.

Quiet. They say that on a still night
you can hear the lecturing ghost of Harold Bloom
underwater, burbling with resentment.

—Megan Arkenberg



WHAT CHANGES YOU, WHAT TAKES YOU AWAY

Dominica Phetteplace

The author tells us, “I want to dedicate this story to my grandfather George Phetteplace (1939-2012). He worked as a copy-editor and typesetter. He loved music, typography, basketball, and history. He was a Buddhist who believed he would be reincarnated. He was my first reader and biggest fan. This piece, my first since he passed, is meant to reflect my hope that there is a life beyond this one, a higher consciousness or another world, perhaps.”

One side effect of the pills is that they make me dream. I dream about mice and secret societies.

I didn't used to, but now my brain is like everybody else's and I dream and talk in complete sentences and use big words. I write notes to my friends. Some of my friends write back.

I don't remember how I was before, just that I was something different. I don't remember how I used to act, but I do remember the things I used to love. My best human friend is Mikey and Shepherd is my German Shepherd and best dog friend. There is my teacher Miss Mary and my Momma who is now an angel because she died. I still love those things.

Dr. Steven says it is like I am being born. I would have picked a different time. The planet is sick with drought. Hot, sick, and dry. And there are other things, too. There are things in the sky that cast big shadows and even Mike notices but he doesn't know how to say it right.

Ooh eff oh, he goes.

But I know what they are really called because I have all my words now. Unidentified Flying Object. I say it because it is fun to say. It is funner to say than to look at. They are boring in the sky, so many of them casting round shadows on the sidewalk. They are silver and pill shaped and huge and they never move, just sit there. That doesn't stop people from staring. Some people will stare all day.

I see these people when I take Shepherd out for walks. He used to be my service animal but now he is my pet. The strangers I pass are always looking up. And I try

to be helpful when I say, "There's nothing to see up there," but people either ignore me or nod politely, which is another way of ignoring me.

People think there are aliens inside. I don't care until I meet one. He is in the park wearing sunglasses. He says, "Hey little girl, come here," except he says it all telepathic from across the lawn. So I walk across the lawn to tell him I'm not a little girl; I am fifteen years old.

When I get up close, I see that he looks like me.

"Hey, do you have Down syndrome?" I ask.

"Why yes I do," he says. But again, he says it without saying it, which is how I know that he comes from the sky. A mouse skitters past my feet and into the bushes. I think she is trying to eavesdrop.

The alien hands me a seed packet. "Grow some flowers." I examine the bag. The seeds are star shaped.

And we just stand there because I can't think of what to say. I am not good at talking to strangers. So I leave.

I will think of what to say and I will say it next time. And I know I will see him again, because I have seen him before, now that I think about it. Now that I am on pills, my memory keeps getting better and better, which is how I know I have seen him before.

When Dr. Steven asks me how my day was I leave out the part about the alien. I say my day went great and then I do his puzzles. I want the trial to be over so Mikey can have my medicine, too.

Alzheimer's. That is one of my new words. Dr. Steven's mice used to have it and then they didn't. Alzheimer's is what Mikey will get unless he gets my medicine. And I would have gotten it too. Everybody with Down's gets it if they live long enough. I have seen it happen to people who live at my house. Time goes out of order and your friends begin to swap bodies.

But my doctor says the pills are not ready for other people. They are for me only until the trial is over. He wants to be sure I am safe. Not like his mice.

Dr. Steven thinks I don't know about his mice. But I do know. He had a bunch of mice and they all had Down syndrome like me. He made his mice do puzzles, just like me. He gave them pills, same as mine. And then one morning, he came to work and all his mice were dead, and he still hasn't figured out what killed them. He doesn't know I know this. I have his passwords, I read his reports. He writes in his journal that it is okay to experiment on animals. I bet he hopes the aliens don't feel the same way about us.

I am smarter than my doctor, but I do not let on. When he gives me a puzzle, I take my time. When he asks me to write something, I misspell words on purpose.

After my meeting with Dr. Steven, I go to my room. There is a note under my bed. I get at least one note a day from my friends. I am never lonely.

PLANT THOSE SEEDS IN THE GARDEN, it says in messy bird scratchings. My friends have bad handwriting and good ideas.

Each of us at St. Anthony's Residential Community has a plot in the garden even though not each of us likes to garden. For instance, my plot is dirt and weeds. Mikey's plot is pretty with daisies and caterpillars. I dig a hole in my plot and pour all of my seeds in there. I empty out the whole watering can of water on top of my seeds. We are rich; we can waste water if we want to.

Then I go inside to watch the TV. I used to watch cartoons. Now only the news is on.

Drought. Aliens. Drought. Aliens.

I wish the Olympics were on.

Drought. Aliens. And some people say these are related phenomena. But not the scientists.

I leave the TV room and head to the library. Every day I read one short story or one kids' book. It depends on my mood.

In the evening, after dinner, I walk out to the garden to see if flowers have grown yet. And yes, but there is only one. It is four feet tall with purple-blue petals. And now it is trying to talk to me. It wants to know about Rin Carnation. I am going to have to look it up.

I write a note, WHO IS RIN CARNATION? And leave it under my bed. The note I get back says I probably want to know about *reincarnation* and there is a diagram attached with lots of circles. Also, a Wikipedia printout. Of course I could have just gone to Wikipedia myself. I am allowed to use the internet without supervision now, but it is funner to ask my friends, and anyway my friends know more than the internet.

The next day, when I see the alien in the park, I tell him that he either needs to fix the drought or leave.

He says: "We would like to take you with us when we go."

I say: "Can you try to move your mouth when you talk like a normal person?"

"I will try." His jaw moves up and down out of rhythm with his words. I do not like this so I leave.

I decide that it is mean to ignore my flower like I have been, so I spend some time with her when I get home. It turns out her name is Flora and she is not lonely because she has the other plants in the garden to talk to. She teaches me how to say "hi" to the other plants.

And then the other plants all shout "hi" at me.

Hi. Hi. Hi. Hi.

And now that we have said "hi" we can understand each other. So we chatter all at once.

"One at a time," I finally say.

But instead of going one at a time they all go in unison. They say they have solved the riddle of reincarnation.

I tell them that I have reincarnated. I know what the word means now. I say I used to have a swollen brain full of proteins that made me dumb and now my brain is clean. I say I am ashamed of who I used to be, when I look at my dumb drawings and the dumb things I used to write when I couldn't even hardly spell my own name. And now I am cured and I can spell all the words. But I am still dumb because there are still so many things I just don't understand.

"Hush," say the flowers. They are hugging me and wiping away my tears.

"You were never dumb," they say. And that's how I know they are my friends.

But even though my friends are nice I am still mad.

I am mad that I was born the way I was and mad that I was changed and nobody asked me if I wanted to change they just gave me a pill.

And I don't go to the park the next day. I am not going to go back to the park until I have an answer for the alien or at least a good comeback.

I think about the problems of the world. There are so many and not just the drought. I print out a list of endangered species, plants and animals, and then I bring it to him when I am ready.

"First of all, I need you to save all of these things. Then I need you to get rid of Alzheimer's completely." I cross my arms and glare at him. All of these things could have been done weeks ago, when they first came. This is how I know the aliens don't really care about us.

"And you will come with us, if we do these things?" asks Mr. Stranger, jaw still moving like a puppet.

"You should just do them. Just because. But yes, if you do a good job, I will come."

He stares up into the sky for a minute. "I have asked my comrades and they have

said no deal." He transmitted a concept to me, one that doesn't translate into words, telepathic or otherwise. They are here to observe, not to change. This is like a museum to them. You don't walk into a museum fixing all the mistakes you see. They have a word for it. It sounds something like nonterferobvys.

They are looking for a souvenir. Not like a souvenir. They have a word for it that's less mean. Friyowa, like a friend you watch. They wanted to take the most special thing on this planet to be their friyowa. They decided on me, but now that I won't come they are going to ask their second choice, the albino cheetah, and he will probably say yes since he is the reincarnation of Mozart. Cheetah has no special requests, he just wants to leave this hot and lousy planet.

"A tip for you," says the alien, "you should stop taking the pills. The mice have already died."

Dr. Steven's Down syndrome mice. After the pills they were able to do the mazes as well as the other mice. And then they were able to do the mazes better. And then they were able to fake their own death so they could escape and then form their own society. The alien and Dr. Steven are not as smart as they think they are. They think this is *Flowers for Algernon* when it's really *The Rats of NIMH*.

I know because these mice have been in contact with me, sending me notes. They say not to stop taking the pills. They say they are making more, for Mikey and for all my friends. They say we will form a new society. They say they will save the endangered species, even the cats, even the cheetahs. They say they will cool the earth and end the drought. They promise to make it rain. Not now, they are not smart enough yet. It will take a few more years of good medicine.

The people on earth can't help but look up at the sky. They think change is going to come from above. They don't want to be experimented on, they don't want to be cured. They want to stay the same. They want to go on and on.

So they look up and up, when they should be looking around. I am always looking down. I want to catch a glimpse of white fur or a pink nose. I want to see those little round ears that hear everything or those dirty little claws used for scratching out messages.

I like my friends. They know how hard it is to have a new brain and an old body. One day they will ask me to join them, and I will say yes, no conditions attached. ○

**In empty houses, faces
reflect in absent windows.**

**In downtown jungles, parrots repeat
conversations of the extinct.**

**In the valley of iron frames,
last-minute poems, handprints of rust
left by the children of industry.**

**Along highways of escape,
brute mothers lie
bashed and abandoned.**

After We're Gone

**While in the ruined café
radios find songs of nothing
dissolved on their trip between stars.**

—Steve Rasnic Tem

A HOLE IN THE ETHER

Benjamin Crowell

This story is dedicated to Ray Bradbury.

I.

On Friday Bill got a promotion in acknowledgement of his development and marketing plan for *On the Road*, which was a twentieth-century novel by Jack Kerouac that was totally unreadable in its original text-only form. That night he celebrated by trading in his crawlle for the new Honda 37m, and early Saturday morning he took the new machine for a shakedown cruise in the San Gabriel Mountains.

A low-speed run took him silently up the narrow trail in the dawn light, diverting once along the hillside above to avoid a jogger and her German shepherd, neither of whom seemed to notice Bill and his silent exoskeleton. He slithered like a snake over the chaparral, the ultralight suit's 16 legs placing themselves so precisely that they never so much as broke a stem of the rusty buckwheat.

Leaving the trail again, he crossed Little Santa Anita Canyon above the reservoir, frightening one chipmunk, and then pointed himself up the steep shoulder of the ridge, switched to semiautomatic, and squeezed hard on the throttle between his knees. With a heart-pounding burst of gee-forces, his new ride launched him up toward the top of the ridge. His helmet's view showed a red icon for a lone deer, and he steered wide before the safeties could force him to decelerate for it.

It was as he was arrowing through a grove of scrub oak that the message came in. Annoyed, he cut throttle and came to a stop next to the barbed-wire fence surrounding the radio tower at the crest of the ridge. He imagined himself as the Lone Ranger galloping up to the top of a mesa and posing for the camera in silhouette against the sky. (This kind of classical allusion came naturally to him, since his college major had been media studies.) Absently he noticed that he had cut his knee, maybe on a yucca.

"Yes?" This had better be important, he thought, before remembering sheepishly that he himself had set the filtering criteria for what was important enough to interrupt a weekend ride.

Bill's great-grandfather Yuen, from the Guerrero side of the family, had died. All marbles intact, and, if Bill was reading accurately between the lines of Aunt Bonita's text message, the old man had made sure it happened at a place and in a way of his own choosing.

Bill had paid at least twenty or thirty times to watch the scene from *Star Wars* (Episode IV, the only good one) in which Obi Wan Kenobi explained to Luke about The Force. But any more formal religion had been extinct from his family for several generations, so he merely planted himself Indian-style on the crawlle's rack of stilts, faced the smoggy sunrise, and reviewed what few memories he had of Gramp

Yuen. There'd been a practical hunting slingshot (of which Bill's mother strongly disapproved) given for his ninth birthday. Appearances at Bill's high school graduation and wedding.

That had been about it, so it was a surprise when he learned that he and his cousin Shona were to split the estate fifty-fifty. Bill had no idea whether it amounted to much, or why Yuen had picked him and Shona above all other descendants. Bill, unlike Shona, had always been conscientious, so he figured on being the one to go through the drudgery of sorting through Yuen's possessions and packing them up. He and his wife, Fari, dropped a text on Shona's social and by lunchtime were at the old man's cabin in the Colorado Rockies.

"Son of a bitch, look at this." He offered the yellowing little paper notebook across the coffee table to Fari, holding it open to the page he'd just been reading. The cover was marked East Africa Trip—2022.

"I don't know whose mommy is a bitch, but I'll tell you who's a bitch in heat right now." She stepped over the table and landed in her husband's lap.

"Seriously, baby, I need you to put on your lawyer hat. Stop drooling on my ear and read."

"Tease."

"Vixen. Read."

She sighed, and accepted the bound stack of wood-pulp pages, holding it gingerly with the thumb and forefinger of each hand, as if it were a scroll freshly excavated from the tomb of a pharaoh. She touched the ink with a fingertip and checked that it didn't come off with handling.

Moshi, Tanzania, June 16, 2022. Finally found a café that serves real coffee instead of Nescafé—you'd never know they grew the stuff here. Phone stolen. When? Crowd in front of mosque? Good thing they didn't get credit card.

June 17. Bought new phone from street vendor for Tsh 120,000. Loaded with someone else's tunes, plus what looks like tons of porn and books.

"I don't think piracy was such a serious crime back then," she said.

"He was young. Younger than we are now. People make mistakes."

"I hear a young man sometimes knows how to please a woman."

"I'll take care of you later, woman. But he doesn't say how much it is. If it's bulk . . ."

"He could get the death penalty?"

"Very funny. What do you think a phone did back then?"

"Sounds like it let you read books, listen to music, and look at porn." She slid off his lap and her face got serious again. "You think he still had the files when he died?"

"He wouldn't still have the original phone."

"I know, but the files."

Yuen's little bachelor cabin was well heated, but Bill's skin turned clammy. "It wouldn't let him, would it? He upgrades to a new phone, tries to copy over the files, but he doesn't have a license for any of them. They're licensed to someone in Tanzania."

"Did it work that way then?" She stood up and paced. "I'm not sure the software and hardware were locked down. This was back when people rode around in cars that were dumber than toasters. Steering wheels. My grandma's sister got killed by a car because the driver turned the wrong way."

"Wow. Was she okay?"

"No, permanently dead."

Bill started a search for the files while Fari talked the stone-age kitchen into making potato salad. They couldn't really get prison or a cogmod for inheriting pirated property, could they?

The front door creaked open and a voice came from the mud room—

“Billy?” The door slammed shut, and his cousin Shona walked into the living room with a flying harness slung over her shoulder.

“Hey, Shona.” They hugged, a little tentatively on Bill’s side, and he noticed that her jet was already cold. “Didn’t hear you land.” And she hadn’t warned the house that she was coming, though of course she had as much right to be there as he did.

“Denver traffic control had exaggerated ideas of their own authority, so I came through the trees and then hiked up the creek bed.”

“Fari, this is Shona.”

“I know Shona, sweetie. We met before the wedding. Nice rig,” she commented as Shona hung up her gear.

“Rich boyfriend. Won’t last, though. They get bored when the thrill of the chase is over.”

“Tell me about it. I got so desperate this morning I thought about raping Bill, but he’s as big and hairy as a small mastodon, and he bites and scratches.”

Shona tsked. “I remember when we were little. I showed him my skinny little scabby-kneed self, and then he chickened out and didn’t want to drop his own pants and give me a peek.”

“Timid,” Fari said.

“Congenital.”

Bill remembered the incident differently, but kept his mouth shut.

“But there is some hope for him,” Fari said. “He’s got a dangerous new hobby.”

“The crawlies?”

“No, crime.”

“Really?”

“Felony piracy.”

“There’s hope for you yet, Billy.” She patted him on the butt. “Is that coffee I smell?”

Fari had used her jokes at Bill’s expense to cover up her unease about Yuen’s long-ago casual piracy. Her childhood hadn’t been secure and orderly like her husband’s, and she lacked the faith that an innocent legal misunderstanding could be cleared up. Her mother had always had the kind of boyfriends who had plenty of money, but not from sources they would talk about. Maybe that was why Fari got along so well with Shona—they shared an intuitive certainty that the universe played by its own dirty rules. Bill was naïve. He’d confessed to Fari that in second grade he’d fallen in love with his teacher, and had been crushed when she told him to stop being a tattletale about things that happened on the playground.

While the two cousins physically sorted china puppies and wool socks into boxes, she idly winked up her interface and studied the virtual yellow rectangles that popped up above the objects. What she found disturbed her, and she started walking around the house and investigating more systematically.

“Hey, let me show you guys something.”

“You found my lost manhood? Now you guys have to find something else to taunt me about.”

“House?” Fari said.

“Yes?”

“Find my toothbrush for me.”

“It’s in the silverware drawer.”

They went in the kitchen, and Fari pulled it out of the drawer. “I palmed it and put it there as a test. It was tagged as mine when I bought it, and the house located it correctly. House, find the painting of the bighorn sheep.” This was an acrylic on wood signed by Shona, done with energetic strokes with a broad brush.

"There is no such painting tagged."

"I wouldn't have bothered when I gave it to him," Shona said. "It's not the kind of commercial crap I do when I need to make a buck, no market value."

"I like it," Bill volunteered.

"Congratulations," Shona said, "you have your own opinions, unlike any person who actually spends money on art."

"And here it is," Fari said, lifting it out from behind a pile of boxes. "House, where is Yuen's bottle of cheap bourbon?"

"On the floor of his bedroom closet, to the left of his box of fishing tackle."

They went into the bedroom. Next to the blue tackle box was an old but fine looking pair of Chinese slippers embroidered with chrysanthemums. She stepped into the dead man's slippers and led the cousins back into the living room.

"House, where's the bottle now?"

"On or near your right foot."

"Can't it see through an eye that that's not what's there?" Bill asked.

"It's old and not real smart," Fari said.

"Maybe we should engage it in Socratic dialogue," Shona suggested. "Okay, so there's stuff that's intentionally mistagged?"

"Yep, lots of stuff."

"Why would he do that?" Bill asked.

Chaos and misdirection. Fari remembered cops at the door, shoving questions at her mother. *Where's your boyfriend? How long since he's been here?*

"Maybe a strange sense of humor," Shona said.

You know we can get a warrant right now on the phone if we have to.

Fari said, "There's some stuff like the painting that was never tagged in the first place, but there's also a bunch that would've been tagged to him when he bought it at the store. It just isn't tagged now. He'd have had to dig the tags out with a knife or tweezers."

"But why go to all that trouble to make it hard to prove something is yours?" Bill asked.

Lady, why not make it easy on yourself and the kid?

"To make it hard to prove it's yours," Fari said. "Not hard for you to prove, hard for anyone else."

Fari found the phone in the toolshed out back, under a carefully folded beach towel. It was obviously old, the plastic cracked and faded. Not as old as 2022, but Yuen wasn't a packrat, and it was definitely too old to have been kept around for any ordinary, practical purpose. There was an old-style battery compartment, empty, which she obviously wouldn't be able to fill with batteries. As a lawyer, she knew she should hand it over to the cousins, but that obviously wasn't the thing to do. Bill was big and strong and brave and sexy—and when you came right down to it, he was a child. Shona wasn't naive like that, but she had a reputation for leaping out of frying pans and into fires. The drug-addled episode with the payboys at the bachelorette party hadn't exactly demonstrated good impulse control.

On a trip to town for supplies, Fari went to a public net booth, looked up an electrical adapter for antique electronics, and got one fabbed on a printer at the kind of pawn shop she'd visited so many times as a child. For an extra half-K the man working the counter ran the job under someone else's name. He wanted to charge her five times that, but she bargained him down on the theory that the adapter was legal—he didn't ask why she didn't want it tied to her name.

On the way back she pulled the rented two-seater over to the snow-dusted side of the road and plugged the phone into the adapter and the adapter into the car's dash-

board. The phone came on, complaining that it couldn't connect to the net, presumably because it hadn't had a paid-up account since decades ago, and was designed for the old open internet.

She winked to shut off her interface, but the implant was still in driving-safety mode, so it objected to the indignity, and she had to tell it again with a voice command, adding a couple of choice words that had no effect on the software but let off steam. Asleep now, it wouldn't pattern-match anything pirated that it saw through her eyes, causing it to squawk over the net to the cops.

The phone was loaded with pornography (exclusively hetero and with dialogue in incomprehensible English), pop music (*GENRE: Swahili guitar rumba*), and a very, very large collection of old text-only books in English. In the home folder was a text file named Bill.

BILL—REMEMBER HOW MAD TINA WAS ABOUT THE SLINGSHOT? GLAD SHE NEVER MANAGED TO CRUSH YOUR SPIRIT. HERE'S ANOTHER "SLINGSHOT," IN CASE YOU NEED ONE. YOU PROBABLY DON'T, IN WHICH CASE PLEASE FORGIVE THE IMPERTINENCE. WHEN YOU'RE MY AGE, GROWN MEN SEEM LIKE BOYS. THIS IS THE ONLY COPY, SO IF YOU DECIDE IT'S TOO HOT, JUST DELETE AND FORGET. —YUEN

That was the one thing she'd needed to know: that there wasn't another copy of the illegal library on some other gadget wedged in a crack at the cabin, tagged as a cotton T-shirt. She would erase the books, run over the phone with the car, and then erase the car's memory so that it wouldn't have incriminating video left from its interior safety cameras. Erasing the memory on your own house or car could be considered incriminating (Voorhis versus Todd, 2086), but it was a perfectly natural thing to do when you didn't want the clerk at the rental agency to ogle your cleavage after you returned the car.

Was the phone tagged? She popped up an interface, and a yellow rectangle appeared, hovering in the air above the old phone: SLINGSHOT.

Hell.

Fari hated the image of herself as Bill's mother, Tina, taking away his dangerous toy. The old battle-ax. If Lancelot had had a mother like her, he would have ended up as a nearsighted clerk.

Bill and Shona were surprised when Fari suggested a jaunt to Tanzania.

"Why?" Bill asked.

"It sounds interesting from Yuen's travel journal," Fari said. "We could see how it's changed since then."

"I've only been to Africa once," Bill said, "for that company picnic."

"Sure, why not?" Shona said. "We could be back in time to see the sun rise again here."

Before they left, Fari put the phone in her duffel bag.

The sign said Kilimanjaro Backpackers' Hotel. Bill and Shona looked dubious, but Fari insisted on going in and asking the price of a room. In the dimly lit little lobby, she put her bag down by the door next to a ratty sansevieria and stood in line at the counter, where the clerk was helping a couple of Japanese kids who looked like they needed a bath and were having the time of their lives. She winked up an interface and subvocalized to it to locate her bag.

THIS AREA DOES NOT HAVE A TAG NETWORK.

LOCATE VISUALLY.

NO EYE AVAILABLE IN THIS AREA.

Bingo, a completely dumb building.

* * *

After an hour in the transatlantic tube and another thirty minutes from Dakar to Mombasa, Shona felt like a sardine with a hangover. A gimlet in a plastic martini glass on the final leg to Moshi got her just a little pickled again, and she decided that the pickle jar was a much more comfy place than the sardine can. But by the time they were walking down the main drag, with Billy pointing out Kilimanjaro through the clouds, she felt as though she were pregnant with triplet baby pickles, who were doing jumping jacks on top of her bladder. The hotel Fari found was dirty and not air-conditioned, but Shona gave the thumbs up and rushed upstairs to her own room. The toilet seemed dumb as a brick, which was actually a bonus since she didn't know whether the xylecisan she'd popped the night before was illegal here.

Shortly, someone knocked. "Come in."

Billy entered with Fari in tow. Fari closed the door behind them, looking furtive. Furtive, that was promising. Billy usually had a tendency to be a boring boy scout.

"We've got something here you should see," Billy said, holding out a palm-sized plastic box.

Shona took it and looked it over. "What is it?"

"An old phone."

"Yuen's?" She tried to pop up her tag interface. NETWORK NOT FOUND. The building must be dumb. "It's got the files on it?"

"Yep. Eleven million books." Billy showed her how to work the old-fashioned touch interface, and she flipped randomly through some titles.

FRANCE TO SCANDINAVIA, FRANK G. CARPENTER, 1923

THE DRUNK IN THE FURNACE, W.S. MERWIN, 1958

"Nothing from later than about 1960," she observed.

"Yeah," Fari said, "we think it's every book published in English before 1962."

"Oh." Shona was relieved. "So the copyrights have all expired, right?"

"Nope, that's common misconception. Copyright Extension Act of 2187. Books as far back as *Huck Finn* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are in copyright again."

Fari talked like everyone had been to college and knew what *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was. But anyway Shona knew what book she wanted to find. She ran a search, and there it was:

HALF MAGIC, EDWARD EAGER, 1954

She showed Billy.

"Oh, no."

"C'mon, you enjoyed it."

"She made me play pretend with her girlfriends every summer."

"We needed a boy to be Mark."

"Every summer for five years."

"You must have enjoyed the attention from all those girls," Fari said.

"Maybe at the end."

"When Binti started getting boobs," Shona said.

"When I started caring about girls. You know, I tried to get you a view of *Half Magic* for your birthday."

"Really? That was sweet of you, but it's been forever since you could get it."

"I know. I thought maybe I could use my connections. Dreamworks-HarperCollins bought it because they thought they had a good treatment, but when they started roughing out the marketing, it didn't work. Not enough international appeal, and it's hard to sell a story that's fantasy and set in the twentieth century. There's contemporary fantasy and medieval, but this one didn't categorize well."

"Why didn't they just put out the original book?"

"Well, if you do that, it messes things up if you want to do other media later. You want one big splash. They wouldn't make enough on text-only to pay for my boss to

take the principals to lunch at Urusawa and order the omakase menu. Text-only is never a big revenue stream, because it takes hours and hours to read, so people almost never pay for a second view. And realistically, you couldn't just release the original version."

He was descending. Shona felt her temper rising. "Why not?"

"Like, remember how there was that thing in the book about roller skates, and we had to look up what they were? And even then we got it wrong. We thought they were motorized. Stuff like that has to be modernized."

"That's ridiculous!" She was shouting now. "You pay money to snap up the copyright, and then you just sit on it forever and don't use it at all, so nobody benefits."

"It's not me personally. I told you, this was Dreamworks-HC. Look, it's just economics. There's an opportunity cost, and limited eyeballs per year that you can market to, and then—"

"Fuck you."

"What?" He seemed genuinely surprised.

"Just tell me what you want." She felt like she was going to cry. Fari put her hand on Shona's shoulder, but she shrugged it off. "What do you want?" she repeated.

"I'm sorry," Fari said. "The phone is part of the inheritance, but it's illegal as hell. We wanted to discuss it with you."

"So? Obviously you know what you want to do."

"We want to erase it and not tell anybody," Billy said.

Eleven million books. If they were paper, how much of a bonfire would that be?

"All right, but first I want to read *Half Magic* one more time."

They acted relieved, but of course she wasn't going to let them erase the whole library. That would have been a crime—a real crime, not a law-book crime. While Billy and Fari spent the day watching elephants and water buffalo, Shona got a stage-prop replica of the phone printed. Holding one in the palm of each hand, the only way she could tell the inert copy from the original was that the plastic was still warm from the printer. To make sure she wouldn't mix them up, she used a fingernail to nick the dummy on the back while it was still curing.

When Bill and Fari got back that evening, she made a show out of stomping the copy under her heel and dropping it in a public cycler.

She didn't get a chance to read *Half Magic* again until she got back to Bridgeport. After she was done, she sat and stared at the book for several minutes, marveling at how it stayed there instead of going away. She flipped back and read the first page again, and it never asked her for more money for another view. The criminality of it was deliciously satisfying. It was like the joke about the Irishman and the bottle of whiskey that would refill itself as soon as it was empty.

Shona's angry reaction in the cheap hotel room in Moshi took Bill by surprise. He'd only been trying to demonstrate to her the ins and outs of one corner of the world, a little corner that he happened to know about. She acted as if it was his responsibility. He tried to put it out of his mind—his cousin was, after all, a crazy artist with a sodden cerebrum—but the episode kept nagging at him.

At work, he tried to make a case for releasing the original, unreadable version of the Kerouac book ("raw and uncut!") alongside of the vid and sense versions, but his boss ruled against him. She said it would dilute the brand.

They'd erased the note Yuen left on the phone, but the words kept going through his head. *Here's another "slingshot," in case you need one. You probably don't, in which case please forgive the impertinence.* Obviously his great-grandfather had had Bill's job in mind, and disapproval was implied. But why? He felt like the reporter in *Citizen Kane* trying to figure out what "rosebud" meant.

* * *

One morning two years later, Shona's socialnet woke her. She felt like last night must have ended with her being run over by a team of Clydesdales.

"Hello," an artificial intelligence said when she answered the call. It had painted itself on the screen as a sexless mannequin's head. "I'm a representative of New England Regional Public Peace," the golem chirped soullessly. "I *do* hope I'm not calling too early in the morning."

Shona had had these faux-cordial conversations with the police before, but in the past the object carefully hidden outside the social wall's field of view had been a pill bottle of xylecisans, or a ziplock baggie full of Virginia tobacco. The unspoken question had been, *Who ratted me out? My dealer? That guy who bought a painting and smoked a cig with me afterward?* But that was local-police stuff. If NERPP was calling, it wasn't because she'd passed out microscopic party hats to her neurons. This time, the carefully hidden object was the phone. The question this time around: *Who ratted me out? Was it Binti, because I let her have a copy of Half Magic to read to her son?*

Bill was washing his crawlie when Fari opened the door to the garage and stood on the steps.

"Honey," his wife asked, "did you hear that Shona got cogmodded?"

"Cogmodded?" Wow, she'd been in trouble before, but nothing that serious. "Says who?"

"Andy, her dealer."

"Dealer . . ."

"Art dealer."

"Oh." He wrung the washcloth out into the bucket and stood up. "I thought she was doing so well. She had that exhibition. Did she start doing . . ." *xylies again?*

He didn't complete the sentence because of the look on Fari's face. She was leaning against the frame of the door next to where the house's eye was mounted, with her own eyes rotated to the extremes of their orbits in a comically exaggerated attempt to draw his attention to the camera.

"Want to take a walk?" she asked.

"Uh, sure."

Fari slipped on a pair of flip-flops and led Bill out into the November evening. When they passed a public peace waldo, Bill nodded and said hello, as he always did—after all, whoever was operating the big bipedal form by telepresence was a human being, and not getting paid much—but he felt now as though the pleasantries had turned into a subterfuge. They came to the little public park near their house that had barely enough space for a swing set and a climbing wall.

"All right," Fari said without lowering her voice, "here we are in the park, where we have an expectation of privacy."

They were alone in the park, but—"Honey, there's a safety eye right there by the climbing wall."

Fari sat down on the park's only bench and patted it for Bill to join her. "Yes, but that's not what matters according to the law. It's the expectation that matters. The AI monitoring that eye can't be subpoenaed easily."

"But . . . that doesn't make sense." He sat down, but still spoke in a low voice. "Why didn't we just stay at home? We had more of an expectation of privacy there than in a public park."

"First thing you learn in law school is that the law doesn't have to make sense. At home, the eyes are our property, so it was our choice to leave them on. The cops can pull down the house's memory pretty easily, because that's a record that we made voluntarily. Shimizu versus Missouri."

"So why not just turn them off, or erase the house's memory?"

"Because when's the last time we did that?"

"I wouldn't even know how. I'd have to access the help system."

"Exactly, which if we do it now implies something to hide, and that makes it easy to get a search warrant. Voorhis versus Todd. Not that we're totally safe here, but it's better. Plus we're domestic partners and can't be forced to testify against each other. So here's the deal, sweetie. It's not drugs. They got Shona on criminal copyvio."

"The phone. She said she was reading *Half Magic* one last time while we were out looking at animals. She must've wanted to show it to someone, same as when we were eight years old and she used to bend everyone's ear about how great it was."

"You don't get a cogmod for one book. I think she copied the whole library before she erased it from the phone."

"Oh, hell."

"We should be okay, though. Remember, we erased the memory of Yuen's house before we sold it. That means there's no record that we were involved, and it's not a Voorhis situation because it was a natural thing to do before selling."

He tried to make sense of it. "How could she copy the library? The gadget she was copying onto wouldn't let her."

"I don't know. I talked to her lawyer. Remember Elaine Kim, we were roommates in law school? I recommended her to Shona a long time ago. Elaine and I had martinis at Sancho's, and she told me all about it. Can't fault her for how she handled the case. The DA overcharged, but that kind of crap has a way of sticking. They plea-bargained to a cogmod and probation. Shona was pregnant, so they—"

"What?"

"Yeah, so they let her delay the mod until after she gave birth. The kid's in diapers now. A boy, calls him R.J. If she hadn't copped to the plea they'd have taken him away for sure. So everything's not so bad—"

"But a cogmod!"

"Could be worse."

"She probably didn't even read any of the other books. I mean, how many of those *could* one person read?"

"But here's the kicker. Shona's got to keep clean now as a condition of probation, but she called Elaine yesterday in tears, says she messed up. Hard stuff, I forget—tobacco maybe."

A young boy walked into the park and started trying handholds on the climbing wall. Fari broke off her story, went over to him, and whispered something in his ear. The kid got a wide-eyed look on his face and ran off.

"So this is the part where we get our story straight," Fari said, coming back to the bench as if nothing had happened. "We saw Yuen's paper travel journal. We were shocked, but he was dead, and that was a long time ago. We never heard about the phone in the shed, never saw it. Nice and simple, nothing complicated to remember. The phone was never tagged with the right tag, so they can't trace it to us. If Shona had told them we knew about the phone, they'd have charged us along with her."

Bill felt dizzy. The last blue was going out of the sky, as deep and sad as anything. Venus was shining above the swing set. You could always tell Venus from the stars because it was brighter, and it didn't twinkle.

"No," Bill said. After he'd said it he felt out of breath for some reason.

"What do you mean, no? No to what?"

He was still looking at the sky instead of at Fari or at the world. He tried and failed to put his thoughts together to make words.

"No to what?" she repeated. "Look, sweetie, criminal law isn't what I do, but I know the basics. This isn't *To Kill a Mockingbird*. No more than one criminal case out of a

hundred goes to trial, been that way since before 9/11 and Mexico. If we let attention fall on us—”

“I mean no to everything. The whole thing. It’s all messed up.”

“What whole thing?”

“The whole thing of . . . I’m done with screwing around and not thinking. I haven’t been thinking about anything. Not really. Okay, so they’ll put Shona in prison, right?”

“As soon as she pees in her own toilet, they’ll detect it. Or if she keeps not peeing at home for weeks, that’s a common pattern and they detect it. Her probation officer gets a ping from a network daemon that she had to accept as a condition of probation.”

“And the kid, R.J., they’ll, what, put him up for adoption, give him to the biofather?”

“The Y chromosome was off the rack.”

Off the rack? No way. Shona was against taking genetic material from a stranger, claimed to vote 100 percent antigene, although Bill doubted that she was even registered. A few years back she’d asked him for permission to use his Y, “just in case.” He’d thought nothing of it at the time, but it was a shock now that it was a reality. Sure, it was just a Y—the boy wouldn’t look like him or anything—but why hadn’t she told him?

Fari was saying something about subpoenas and warrants.

“So hang on, the kid winds up with adopted parents, grows up thinking his mother’s—it’s like they just zero her out of the spreadsheet. No. No way, we’re not throwing them under a bus.”

“If she’s under a bus it’s because she put herself there.”

“Have you talked to her?”

“No. That wouldn’t be a good idea.”

“I’m calling her now.” Bill popped up an interface and called Shona, who picked up immediately. They greeted each other uncomfortably, and after a few seconds Fari joined the call, her face looking worried and disgruntled on the split screen that hovered above the playground’s grass.

“Shona, I was thinking,” Bill said. “Remember what a good time we had on that day trip to Africa? Why don’t we do it again, take R.J. along? I still haven’t met my nephew.”

Shona looked confused. Obviously nobody remembered it as a good time after the argument at the end. “That’s really nice of you to invite me, Billy, but I can’t afford the transatlantic. I’m kind of broke right now.” She smiled, but there was something flat about her, something off.

“Don’t worry,” Fari said, as if it had been her idea in the first place. “It’ll be our treat.”

Fari wanted to kick Bill in the shins, but there was no use trying to deflect him when he’d already gone into Dudley Do-Right mode. If she’d had to marry a man whose moral sense was stuck in the twentieth century, why couldn’t the model have been one of those Bogart or Brando characters?

They checked into the same hotel, and had just finished installing Shona and R.J. in a room with a dumb toilet when Bill said, “I’ve got a call from New England Regional Public Peace.”

Fari’s stomach clenched. “Don’t take it.”

She went out into the hall and knocked on Shona’s door. “Shona? It’s Fari.”

“Come in.” Shona was crammed into a corner of the tiny room, breast-feeding R.J. on a rickety rattan stool.

“New England Regional Public Peace is trying to call Bill.” A look of fear came over Shona’s face. “Your parole order says it’s okay for you to travel to East Africa, right?”

“Anywhere in the E.A.F., we checked that, remember? Just no off-planet travel.” Shona’s mouth started to quiver. “Oh, god, I’m sorry if I got you in trouble. It’s all my fault.” She started to sob.

Fari went in the bathroom and got Shona a wad of toilet paper to wipe her face with. “It’s all right, just stay calm.” This blubbering woman was nothing like the nervy Shona she’d known before the cogmod. The sons of bitches. There was something *dirty* about messing with a person’s mind like that. She vowed to herself that she would never let them do that to her. She’d do whatever it took to stop them. Go to prison. Kill or be killed.

The horror of it gripped her. She squirmed in the hotel bed that night while Bill snored and a mosquito buzzed around the bed netting. Finally she dozed off and had a dream about seeing her own brain, pink and bloody, behind the glass at a butcher shop.

“Bill!” A bass drum was pounding in her chest. “Bill!”

“Huh?” She made him hold her. “What’s the matter?”

“Baby, I want you to promise me something. Don’t ever let them mess with me the way they did with Shona. Never!”

“Okay, honey, don’t worry.”

As he comforted her, her brain unclouded, and she started to feel ashamed of her weakness. She could take care of herself, always had. She recalled her earlier vow to herself and repeated it in a whisper to Bill. “I won’t let them. I’ll go to prison first.” *Kill or be killed.* That didn’t sound like something she wanted to say out loud to him. He was soft. And even in a dumb building, it wasn’t smart to say something that could be interpreted as premeditating a felony. “I’d die first,” she said instead.

From then on, Shona began to wish that Billy and Fari had left well enough alone and let her go to prison. They had a wing at Chowchilla where mothers could have a cell with their babies. Elaine said it would have probably been one year, maybe two max. R.J. wouldn’t have even known what was going on.

Being on the outside was like walking across the Grand Canyon on a tightrope, when you didn’t know how the fuck to walk on a tightrope and had never tried it before. Of course you were going to fall off. You took three steps and fell off, and then some asshole put you back on and told you to walk the rest of the way. She wanted to explain all this to Billy and Fari, but the explanation called for words like “fuck” and “asshole,” and whenever she tried to say those words, a C-clamp started squeezing her head, and the only way to make it stop was to keep mentally reciting the Lord’s prayer or the pledge of allegiance.

She was miserable, but misery had company. She was a bird in a tree, and the other two birds looked down along with her at the cat dancing around below. The detective AI never got bored or frustrated, never ran out of hours in the day to pursue a case in which there was seemingly no progress. “Cold case” was not in its vocabulary. It was always polite and forthright. All the cards were on the table. It *did* hope that it hadn’t called during dinner. It was *so* sorry to have had to call Billy’s boss—should it send her a follow-up message explaining that Billy had certainly *not* been named as a person of interest in any criminal IP violation? It was *so* sorry if Fari had gotten the impression that it might have raised any issues with the state bar.

Shona could work in Moshi just as well as in Bridgeport—just as well or just as badly, because now she hated everything she did. Oil paints and linen canvas were commoditized. She made a piece-of-. . . piece-of-garbage painting, fed it into the recycler, and extruded fresh materials from the printer without paying any royalty to whoever had invented Prussian blue. Whenever she needed money, she held back a randomly chosen canvas instead of ‘cycling it, showed it to Andy, and he sold it.

What made her teeth grind was that after the cogmod she could somehow no longer consciously split her output between her two old styles, the commercial one that she was cynical about and the noncommercial one she believed in. The distinction had required an attitude of larceny, which was something that her head disapproved of these days. She painted a rock hyrax that Billy had run over in his crawlie, and Andy sold it for an embarrassing sum. She painted R.J.'s throw-up rag, and Andy showed it to a Saudi prince. The prince called Andy five times in two days. Shona felt remorseful. She wrote the prince a text message explaining the origin of the piece. The prince responded with an earnest letter—She must have many potential buyers, but if she sold it to him he promised not to stick it in some gray vault in the Geneva Ports Francs. He would display it in the lobby of his brother-in-law's suite on the hundredth floor of the Burj Khalifa, where the public could appreciate it. She sold it to him for enough E.A.F. shillings that she was able to stop renting her apartment and buy it.

Her probation officer turned out to have been an art history major in college. He made a speech to the New Haven Rotary Club comparing her to Gauguin in Tahiti.

Andy got her a one-woman show at A/Z-Space in Chelsea. She begged off attending without giving a specific reason—it was really because of a combination of sleep deprivation, breast feeding, and the feeling that she'd chosen a clumsy and inappropriate mode of selling out—but a story started circulating on the net that she was some kind of mashup of Sylvia Plath and Emma Goldman, cogmodded and exiled to the “jungles” of Tanzania. Once the story got around, the show was mobbed, and they held it over for two more weeks.

She tracked down one of the people who had spread the rumor, a critic in Hong Kong named Hua Jane, and had a talk with her to try to set her straight.

“People are really misunderstanding what a cogmod is.”

“I know darling, is not imagine for us. They have your mind chain. Barbarian.”

“No, that's not it at all. It's like, how many middle-aged men do you know who stand on a street corner with a gun looking for someone from a different gang to kill? None, right? It's not like they can't, but they don't have so much testosterone raging anymore, and they just don't. There's no little fairy inside my head controlling me like a puppet. It's more crude than that. It's just a predisposition, an inclination. It's random stuff like, if I try to spit on the sidewalk, I get a feeling inside that I'm a bad person.”

“Yes, crude, barbarian! Your *Throw-Up Rag 1* show it. Despairing. Anguishing.”

She later found out that Hua Jane had grown up in the San Fernando Valley, and the fractured English was a cultivated part of her online persona. Just as carefully cultivated was her dramatic rendering of Shona as a victim of mind-rape, the Tortured Artist. Hua Jane needed that tired cliché as an eyeball-grabber for her net feed. But even with people who didn't have a financial stake in not understanding, explaining the cogmod was like trying to explain an orgasm to someone who'd never had one. The one example that probably would have made them understand was the one she didn't dare use.

I got caught loaning a book to my friend Binti. It was part of a big library of books that my great-grandpa had on an old phone. When the cops started drawing the noose tight, I gave the phone to my art dealer to hang on to. When I copped a plea to copying all those books, I said that I'd thrown the phone off the Staten Island Ferry. After that, they cogmodded me. If I'd tried to tell the lie after the cogmod, I'd have probably vomited a little and had to swallow it back down—some little physical telltale that they'd have picked up on. But afterward, the cogmod just made it easier for me to hide the phone's existence. The mod made it so that it hurt my head to think about the phone, so I avoided thinking about it. The easiest secret to keep is one that you don't even think about yourself. Then, later, when I got the phone back from him, I just had him

put it in a sock so I wouldn't have to look at it. I still had to go in his bathroom and cry, but I could handle it. Having the sock around it was like picking up your dog's poop in the park with a plastic bag. It took the edge off my disgust.

Bill and Fari didn't work in fields where notoriety meant a career boost. While they were still in Africa, they were laid off and blacklisted, their bank accounts frozen for "suspicious activity patterns." By the time the dust had settled, they realized that going home and paying the cost of living in L.A. Republic would just accelerate the drain on their almost nonexistent resources. They decided to stay in Moshi until they could "straighten things out," a phrase that Bill started to feel more and more unsure he could define.

It was the second day since he'd eaten, and he loitered on a sidewalk by an outdoor coffee shop. On the other side of a low hedge, two tourists, a middle-aged French couple, hand-manipulated their interfaces between sips of espresso and nibbles of *mandazi*. Every so often they took a bite and licked their fingers before using them again to gesture in the air above the table, as if not wanting to soil cyberspace with grease and sugar. The couple paid and left, and before the busboy could come to clear their table, Bill nonchalantly stepped over the hedge, scooped the remaining bite-sized pastries into his pockets, and walked inside the cafe as if he were going to use the bathroom.

Emerging into the tube plaza, he wolfed down half the pastries and saved the other half for Fari. Karume and Terence were working the ring-toss game on their blue tarp spread with beer bottles. Bill's stomach didn't seem to know what to do with the food, and for a moment he was afraid he was going to be sick. He doubled over, and someone walked into his head.

"Uh"— "Oh, are you all right?"

It was a woman whose skin tone, shoes, and accent instantly marked her as an American.

"Sorry," he managed to say.

"No, no, don't worry. I totally understand. I ate some food from a street vendor in Arusha last week. Oh. My. God. I was *so* sick."

She was from Huntington Beach, was looking for a wildlife safari, and had been hounded by touts from the instant she came up the lift from the platform. Bill walked her to the booking office of the service he and Shona had used five weeks ago. The woman bought a tour on the spot, and the agent at the desk double-charged her for the national park fee, shorting her by eighty thousand E.A.F. shillings. She left looking happy, and the agent winked and slipped Bill a 50K card. Bill went out onto the street to give it to the woman, but she was already gone. The chip would pay for dinner in a fancy restaurant for him and Fari, but it felt dirty in his hands. He handed it to a legless beggar.

But even if it wasn't food for his belly, it was food for thought. The touts swarmed like flies around anyone who looked like a tourist. The foreigners rapidly learned to ignore any overly friendly young male with dark skin, but Bill didn't fall in that category.

He had no work permit, but he had enough knowledge of mountaineering to give the impression that that was why he was in East Africa. By the end of the day he had an illegal and tax-free job bringing in tourists to a guide service.

II.

As soon as R.J. knew how to read, his mother made sure that he knew about great-great-grandpa's old phone. He grew up knowing both that she didn't want to

talk about it and that she was desperately anxious for him to use it. It wasn't hard to convince him, since he didn't have an interface implant for entertainment. "Honey," she would say when she pulled the phone out of its hiding place, "remember this is something we don't talk to other people about, okay?"

For a long time, his favorite books were the Tarzan series, because there were lots of them and they were easy to understand. It wasn't that she wanted to make him into a bookworm, and he wasn't, really, but she obviously didn't understand how she'd limited his choices. His only options besides the old phone were to play by himself or to play with some of the kids from the orphans' school who also didn't have interfaces. She always told him to go out and play what the American expats still called "soccer," but there were never enough uninterfaced boys for a regulation game, and it was a completely different sport as played by kids with interfaces. If an uninterfaced kid tried to play in one of those games, there'd be blood or broken bones before the first half was over. It wasn't that they wanted to hurt you—the hurt kid was as likely to be someone interfaced as the one playing blind—but the players moved as a unit like schools of fish, and if you zigged when they zagged, there was sure to be a smashup.

The first time the phone broke was when he was still little and didn't know how to fix it. He was scared to ask his mother, because it might be his fault for not taking good care of it, and even if it wasn't, it was one of the things that, if he talked to her about it, might make her cry for a long time. Finally he risked showing Eliphas, who was at the orphans' school because his mother had died of Hep G and his grandparents were afraid they'd catch it from him, even though you couldn't catch it because of the blue pills that El took before dinner. El banged the phone on the sidewalk a couple of times, so hard that R.J. was afraid it would crack the case, and it started working again. "Loose connection," he said knowledgeably. R.J. was going to make him promise not to tell anyone, but El didn't seem to realize that the phone was anything special.

R.J. was ten years old when it broke for the second time, and this time nothing he tried would fix it. Uncle Bill noticed him moping around and took him to Mount Kenya. They went top-roping on Point Lenana above the glacier, and Uncle Bill let him rappel by himself without a backup rope. When they got back to where the crawlies was parked next to Simba Tarn, they ate PB&J sandwiches and ugali and spicy Korean crisps. They drank cold water straight from the tarn.

"Has something been bugging you, R.J.?"

R.J. stalled by pretending not to know what "bugging" meant. (It was another of those American words.) Uncle Bill instantly backed off and started trying to show how he was willing to tell R.J. all about his own life, man to man. He talked about how his new job running his mountain guide service was way more fun than his old office job in America, and about his relationships with his employees.

"When we first came here, we didn't have money to eat."

"It's a real Horatio Alger story," R.J. said, with some bitterness. He was going to be stuck in Moshi for the rest of his life, without an interface to give him even a virtual window into the rest of the world.

"Horatio who?"

"Or Tarzan. Dumped in Africa, becomes lord of the jungle."

"Well, things were looser here than in America. It's a better place for a young guy, or it was then, maybe not now. The E.A.F.'s getting as tight as L.A. these days. If I was your age, I'd be thinking about the L5 colony. Up there—"

The heart-to-heart was embarrassing. It sounded like any minute Bill was about to start talking about his sex life.

"What's bugging me is about this old phone that Mom has, with a bunch of books on it."

Uncle Bill got a look on his face like he was dangling from an overhang and had just noticed a squirrel chewing through his rope. He opened his mouth and closed it, then went through the cycle again.

For the first time, R.J. learned how the phone had shaped his life since before he was born. He found out about his mother's cogmod, which explained why it made her so upset to talk about the illegal phone. He surmised the true reason that he didn't have an interface when his mother could so easily afford the surgery: if he didn't remember to turn it off when he read, it would see the things that he saw, which would cause its copy-protection alarms to go off when he read a book.

Bill didn't know whether Shona had hidden the phone from him and Fari because she didn't trust them, because she was trying to protect them, or simply because her cogmod made her not want to think or talk about it. They'd known for a long time that the library likely still existed in some form, somewhere, maybe in multiple copies; the severity of her punishment meant that she must have given or sold a copy to someone. The only surprise was that she still had a copy herself, and that it was living on the same ancient piece of hardware that she'd made them think was destroyed.

The question was whether this was the only copy in the world, and whether it was recoverable. With a decade's perspective on his old job, he could see now what that would mean. They might be the custodians of the modern equivalent of the Library of Alexandria. To salvage it, he'd need to find someone with the kind of illegal technical skills that had made it possible for Shona to copy it ten years before. A friend knew a history professor with radical politics at the university in Dar es Salaam. Bill made an appointment to visit him.

He prepared a cover story involving snorkeling on Zanzibar, and told it to Fari in view of a camera so that she could claim she wasn't involved. She didn't pay much attention—everyone was too busy talking about the war in California. Cameras were getting to be as common in the E.A.F. as in America, but eventually he maneuvered her into walking through the run-down old park on the way home from getting some new shoes printed.

"I don't think it was such a great idea to take this shortcut," she said. "It's getting dark."

A skinny old man with missing teeth was sitting next to a pile of plastic that he'd scavenged out of an open pit full of garbage. The man put out a palm with a green *mpesa* card in it, and Bill stopped to swipe a few thousand shillings onto it.

"*Asante, kaka.*"—"Karibu, mzee."

"Really, sweetie, let's keep moving," she said.

Bill had been opening his mouth to spit out his illegal plan, but he looked at her impatient face and shut up. They walked on. Fari had always teased him about being a boy scout, but he was a different man now, the kind who worked out cover stories for the cops. Subconsciously he'd been imagining that when he told her about his mission, she'd approve. But the incident with the old man had erased that picture in his mind and clicked a new one into place. Fari's anarchism was devoted to self-preservation. She would have as little interest in the Library of Alexandria as in the old man. Bill decided that he would try to copy the library without telling his wife—the second time that its preservation had been hidden from her—and by doing so, he would put her in the same category as the Public Peace AI. Not a fellow merry trickster, as he'd hoped, but another hunting dog that had tracked the library like a rabbit from one side of the world to the other.

Professor Singh took Bill to a guy with a messy electronics shop who seemed like an amoral but competent criminal.

"Okay, easy solution," the copycat said, pulling a khat leaf through his teeth and tossing the stem into a pile on his workbench. "The guts inside are fine. The screen was the part that died. That's museum stuff, you know, LCD."

"It's amazing you can work with it," the professor said, stroking the hardware hacker's ego. "You're an artist." The professor was built like an aging wrestler, a big bull of a man with an incongruously squeaky voice.

The 'cat flashed a smile full of brown-stained teeth. "You got something you want me to put a copy on?"

"Two copies, please," the professor said, and produced two flat black-and-white handheld interfaces like the ones used at the orphans' school in Moshi.

The 'cat pulled on a pair of latex gloves before he accepted them. "Yeah, these handies are good. Built for kids to pound on, real bomber, should last a long time for you. Safer than an implant, 'cause you can dump it if you're gonna get busted, but remember about these finger interfaces, you leave prints all over it."

He put one under a magnifying screen and used a microwaldo to run a bead of liquid around the seam of the case. Its glued seal having been dissolved, the handy split open, exposing its carbon-nano board. He used a cable to connect the old phone to the handy, chewed some more khat, and then removed the cable and closed his patient back up.

"Now here's the important thing you watch out for. You do it slow and careful every single time, or *haraka haraka, haina baraka*, you got a police knocking. If I turn this fella on right now, he looks at those files I give him and sees if they're cryptographic sign you license them. He sees they're not sign by any publisher public key. So then he looks at the text you're making him show on the screen. It says whatever, *Mary had a little lamb*, so he does a net search. If he googs it and comes up someone owns it and you have no license, he screams for police. So here I got my Faraday cage." He indicated a cardboard box covered with aluminum foil. "This is our hole in the ether, shields out the net. I stick the handy inside and close the flap almost closed. You see how that light turns from green to red?" He made them both peer through the crack into the dark interior of the box where the little light shone. It reminded Bill of Venus. "That says no net connection. Now I turn it on, no problem. Whenever you want to use it, you got to be in a Faraday cage. You can put foil on the walls of a closet."

When the next call came from the cops, Fari was too preoccupied at first to pay attention. The fighting had spilled over from California into Brazil, apparently because of a soccer match, and she and Isaac, one of Bill's guides, were in the office watching a live feed of two mobs going at it on a boulevard in Manaus. At first the groups moved through each other in precise ranks and files, interpenetrating at an angle like dancers in a ballet, but then, at an invisible signal broadcast over the net, the scene broke down into a chaos of kicking and wrestling. Without the friend-foe tags that the fighters were seeing through their interfaces, it was impossible to tell which side was the home team and which was from L.A. Republic. It was like watching a battle between two armies of ants that knew their comrades only by the smell of the home nest. A man crawled across the asphalt, trying to shake off a skinny teenage girl on his back who had her thumbs dug into his bleeding eyes. A text banner scrolled across the bottom of the screen saying that Brazil had cut off tube travel, and both governments were calling for the fighting to stop.

Call from New England Regional Public Peace.

It went through its usual enraging pleasantries, and then: "Ms. Miraghaie, are you aware that your husband has been interacting with two individuals in Dar es Salaam who have criminal ties, a Sandeep Singh and a Bonaventure Lyimo?"

* * *

"How could you not have told me this?" Fari growled at Billy.

The three of them were all sitting around the same campfire, and Fari's growl had been a pretty loud one as growls go, but Shona made herself perceive it as if it were far away. Her art was bringing in a lot of money, her money could pay for the best therapist (or at least one of the most expensive) in East Africa, and her therapist (who wanted Shona to call him Coach) had trained her up to an Olympic level of meditation, self-awareness, and biofeedback. Plus she was backing up the training with a significant but not disabling quantity of Tennessee whiskey.

"I didn't want to get you involved in anything illegal," Billy said, poking at the fire.

The word "illegal" was what Coach referred to as a trigger. Far away, where the word had come out of Billy's lips, it set off a tsunami of self-loathing. Shona examined the tsunami carefully, and before it could reach her she saw that it was actually only a tiny yellow ripple on the surface of her firelit whiskey. She took a tiny sip from the bottle and the feeling was gone. She offered the bottle to Fari.

"No, thanks. Oh, hell, sure, I'll have some." She took a big swig and passed the bottle on to Billy, who passed it back to Shona without drinking. "We have to destroy the handies. Both of them."

"We don't even own both of them," Shona said. "One of them is Singh's."

"He's got it in a tin-roof shack somewhere near Dar," Billy said. "His grad students have a coffee pot and mattresses on the floor. He doesn't go there himself, and he doesn't even know where it is."

"Come on, Bill, didn't you even think about this before you did it? A place like that could get robbed any day of the week, or the cops could track the grad students to the shack. I don't understand why you did this. There's no upside to this. It can only hurt us."

"It's not just about us," Shona said. "These two copies of the library could be the only ones in the world."

"You don't know that."

"Well, that's a good question," Billy said. "You're a lawyer. Can't we find that out? Shona and I both copied the library, and one of us got caught." Shona felt a wave of nausea. She visualized happy bunnies and took a mouthful of whiskey. "That's 50 percent. If a hundred people do the same crime this year, and fifty of them get caught, wouldn't that be a matter of public record? And wouldn't it also be news that you could find on the net? I mean, this is a pretty major crime, right, eleven million books? Isn't that news that would get reported?"

More triggers, strong ones. The happy bunnies weren't working. Shona got up and walked away from the campfire, her slightly wobbly footsteps narrowly avoiding a water buffalo poop. The night was cold. She imagined that the dirt at her feet was a sidewalk, and she spit on it. A terrible feeling washed over her. She was the kind of bad person who spit on sidewalks. She examined the feeling carefully, and she saw that it was very small. The exercise worked. She observed herself breathing in and out.

"You promised me you'd protect me," she heard Fari say from over by the fire. "I should have known I was the only one who could protect myself." Then, in a voice that Shona was probably not meant to hear: "I won't let them scramble my brains like they did to hers. I told you before, I'd rather—"

Bill interrupted in a lower voice, so Shona never got to hear what was on Fari's list of things she'd be willing to do to avoid a cogmod.

It was all Bill's fault for not being honest with Fari. The day the divorce was final he let Isaac and Shona get him thoroughly drunk. That was a good way to start letting go, but what helped him more was that R.J. got him to read one of the illegal books, called *A House for Mr. Biswas*, saying that it was about someone just like Bill

were taught about in school. Mann isn't just talking about the Incas, Aztecs, and Mayans, whose monuments are probably the most impressive physical artifacts of the pre-Columbian New World. Certainly those cultures get their due from the author, with more information on their history than most of us are likely to have encountered. But Mann especially shines in his treatment of lesser-known indigenous cultures. The tribes of the Amazon region had created a rich culture based on the native plants of the area. Rather than primitive hunter-gatherers, they were sophisticated agriculturists who used the resources of their habitat to the maximum.

In addition to the proposal that the population of the Americas was much larger, a central point of the book is that the continents were much more thickly settled than was long believed. The point is crucial; the Indians (the word Mann uses except when referring to a specific culture) were not savages living a bare-subsistence life. They were a group of thriving societies, in some cases as advanced as most of the European societies that were about to invade them.

Equally importantly, the Europeans' advantage over the Indians came not so much from a superior technology—though gunpowder and steel certainly had their impact—as from something neither side really understood: the introduction of new diseases against which the Indians had no defenses. The conquistadors and the other Europeans who followed in their wake were fighting badly weakened opponents. The spread of smallpox, measles, flu, and other imported diseases after the arrival of the Spanish was rapid and thorough enough to ease the way to the conquest of both the American continents. By as early as the 1550s, the native populations had already been exposed to—and ravaged by—an enemy against which there was no defense in the world they had been born into.

In 1493, Mann follows the thread farther. The arrival of the Europeans was

the first step in bringing the entire world into a coherent whole—the real beginning of globalization, in fact. Columbus had come here looking for a way to China, and his successors didn't give up on that goal. In fact, they were soon using their American bases as a stepping-stone to the Asian trade they had been seeking. Peruvian silver quickly found its way to China, as did tobacco, and corn and sweet potatoes—both now staples of Chinese cookery. In turn, Asian trade goods came through America on their way back to Spain and its trade partners. And so did Asian immigrants—within a few decades of the Spanish conquest of Peru in 1532, many of the workers in that country's silver mines were Chinese, and there was a thriving Chinatown in Mexico City by the 1600s.

Africans were brought to the Western Hemisphere, as well. A major reason was the impact of a group of Old World diseases neither the Indians nor the Europeans had immunity to: malaria and yellow fever. Native Africans had acquired some resistance to both; in fact, most had suffered mild bouts of yellow fever in childhood, when it was far less deadly than in an unexposed adult population—such as the Indians and Europeans. And many Africans had the sickle-cell mutation that afforded some immunity to malaria. Perhaps inevitably, once the mosquitoes carrying those diseases had gotten to the New World, the immunity of Africans made them a desirable addition to the labor force needed to farm the tropical areas. Slavery already existed in the African societies they came from, and that gave Europeans all the excuse they needed to bring them here as forced labor.

The mixture of populations from five continents (Europe, Africa, Asia, and the two Americas) created a previously unimaginable smorgasbord of racial blends. Faced with an unprecedented diversity, the ruling Europeans developed a complex vocabulary (mestizo, Creole, octoroon, Cambuja, and others less fa-

who had made himself miserable by getting married. Bill hated the book. It was long and boring, the funny stuff wasn't very funny, and Mr. Biswas's life seemed not at all similar to his except in the one superficial way that R.J. had pointed out. But the ten-year-old would always ask him questions, and Bill didn't want to let him down. "Did you get to the storm scene yet? Wasn't that great?" "The part about the doll house was really sad, wasn't it?" "You see how he's an exile, just like you?" They argued and disputed, and Bill was embarrassed to find that at least in the parts that a child could be expected to understand, R.J. often "got it" much better than he did. After a while he realized that even though he still hated the book, he was looking forward eagerly to their debates. Why hadn't they done anything like this in college? Bill had been a good student, assiduously watching *The Honeymooners* and *Friends* and writing down plot synopses while the other majors were out partying. He studied hard and remembered all the right answers on the tests. But it was completely different to think about a story and have to defend his opinions without knowing whether they were the answers the professor wanted.

Three weeks later, Bill took stock of himself before going to bed, and he decided that his life was good. He wasn't in prison, he had a job he loved, and if he got run over by a truck tomorrow, he'd have done at least one worthwhile thing in his life by preserving the library.

The next morning, his interface told him that eastern Brazil had been sterilized by a gamma-ray burst from a satellite controlled by L.A. Republic. He hadn't even been following the news recently, thinking that things were calming down. L.A. was mad because Brazil had kept its citizens from going home after the flashmob fights in Manaus. L.A. called them hostages, Brazil prisoners of war.

He took stock again, and then applied to emigrate to the space colony at L5. They made him write an essay, just like applying to college.

To be honest, I think I'll miss mountains and sky and snow. However, I think I'm well prepared for living in an artificial life-support environment, because I'm used to having my life depend on ropes and anchors, and used to not having a second chance if I mess them up. My job requires not just keeping myself safe, but other people, too.

L5 accepted him, and when he told R.J. what he was doing, the boy instantly said that he wanted to go too. They put it to Shona. Whenever she cursed these days, she got an intense look of concentration on her face. She said, "God, they'd never take me—I'm a . . . fuck- . . . -ing . . . criminal." But they had a special category for creative artists, and evidently her plea bargain on IP charges in Connecticut didn't look like a big crime from half a million kilometers away. She and R.J. were also accepted.

Fari would always remember Bill, Shona, and R.J.'s launch date, because it was the same day they gamma-bursted New York. Everyone had felt safe after the skirmishes in low-earth orbit ended with the destruction of the space-based bursters. The attack from the Brazilian sub caught them by surprise. That same evening there was a call from New England Public Regional Peace.

"I *do* hope I'm not calling at a bad time."

"Don't you have anything better to do? Like burying the whole goddamn population of western Connecticut?"

There was a slight pause, but Fari had no way of knowing whether it was because she'd scored a minor psychological victory or because it had been programmed to pause as a simulation of human behavior.

"I'm currently running on hardware in Johannesburg. I understand that you've been accepted by the E.A.F. bar. Congratulations."

The thing's pleasantries had always been bland and preprogrammed, not anything like this that could even potentially be interpreted as sincere or individualized. It

was clearly a veiled threat. *We ruined your career in L.A. Republic, and we can do the same thing again.*

“What do you want?”

“Yes, you see, I’ve been cooperating with the authorities in Dar es Salaam, and we detected an anomalous pattern in the datastream from a location in an extralegal housing settlement in the suburbs. It had to do with certain individuals, graduate students in the history department at Professor Singh’s university. Geolocation data showed that they were entering a house and going into a specific, small area, about the size of a closet, where their net connections were cut off.”

Fari decided to gamble by trying to draw the AI out. “It’s not illegal to have spotty reception.”

“No, but people usually make sure to fix such a problem if it occurs in a closet. It’s inconvenient not to be able to locate a pair of shoes or a can of pineapple.”

“You’re talking about a shantytown here.”

“Yes, you’re doing a very competent job of making the same points the judge made when the local police asked for a warrant. But the pattern of the data was quite unusual. The students were taking turns going into the unconnected volume. As soon as one left, another would go in, and it was at specific times, as if there was a set schedule. We formed a strong suspicion that they were hiding something. This kind of thing is fairly common among criminals. It’s known as a hole in the ether, or a Faraday cage.”

“Why are you telling me this, and what do you want?”

“The police carried out a raid, in which I participated through a waldo. We found two of the students asleep and one in a closet with a claw hammer, a smashed handy, and some very incriminating notes written on wood-pulp pages with a pen. The closet’s floor, walls, and ceiling were covered with aluminum foil. The reason I’m telling you this is that William Guerrero has been showing a similar pattern of behavior.”

“We’re not married anymore, and you should be talking to him about this, not me.”

“In fact we did attempt to talk to him—that is, the police in Moshi did, but I’m afraid they did a sloppy job. Probably someone tipped someone off. Mr. Guerrero is presently unaccounted for, as is whatever device he was using in his Faraday cage, which was in an apartment owned by his cousin, Shona Reisner. Ms. Reisner and her son are currently at Nairobi Spaceport.”

“Which is an extraterritorial concession where you and the E.A.F. don’t have jurisdiction.”

“Yes, and as a consequence, you are the only member of the conspiracy to whom we have access.”

“I’d be a fool to continue this conversation without a good criminal defense lawyer.”

“Yes, and your counsel would without a doubt tell you to stop communicating with me. But time is limited. Mr. Guerrero has a berth on a launch less than twenty-four hours from now, and if we can’t detain him before that, you will be the only conspirator subject to prosecution. I *do* hope you understand that I’m a cop, not a prosecutor, but in my opinion you would be in a poor position at that point. The E.A.F. statute provides for both a cogmod and a prison term of three to five years. But if you agree to cooperate fully right now, the Kilimanjaro D.P.P. has a strong incentive to make a deal.”

A cogmod. Her vow. At first she didn’t realize that she’d spoken the words out loud: “I’ll do anything.”

Bill didn’t know which part of his plan had sparked the other in his brain: his idea for safeguarding the library, or his wish to make one last visit to his favorite place on a dying planet.

All the tourists wanted to climb Kilimanjaro, but Mount Kenya was the real climber's mountain. It was the rainy season, and he seemed to have the south side to himself, as he'd hoped. He guided the crawlie up the Nithi Valley, invisible from the trail that ran above. He would have liked to scale the falls unaided, placing his nuts and cams by hand the old-fashioned way for one last time, but he decided regretfully that that would take too long. He sent the crawlie up and had it top-rope him.

It was now three in the afternoon, and, like clockwork, he heard thunder from the daily storm blowing in out of the west. He strapped himself back into the machine and sent it bounding over a col into the next valley, then up the scree toward the Austrian Hut below Point Lenana, where he and R.J. had gone climbing together half a year ago. The crawlie's safeties protested a few times, and he had to override. The rain reached them and began to wet the rocks. They slipped and tumbled a few times, but he was unhurt; each time he felt nervously to make sure that the handy was still zipped safely inside the front pocket of his pants. When they gained the crest of the ridge, he pulled it out and checked, and the green light was on, showing that it was turned off but getting a network signal.

Here was the hut, and nearby its solar collectors and the fancy new outhouse that made the old main building look shabby by comparison. The sky was nearly as dark as if the sun had already set, but as he'd expected there were no electric lights showing from inside the hut. It was almost always deserted at this time of year. The rain had turned to hail, and it would have been good to go inside and sleep on the soft mattresses that had supposedly been brought up by human porters in the twentieth century. Even better to cook a big pot of tea in the frigid hallway and talk shop all evening with another guide. But his purpose was secret, and that was why he hadn't come in along the trail and why he wouldn't unlatch the door or turn on a light. If he did, old David, the caretaker down at Mackinder's Camp to the west, would hear an electronic beep, and would walk up with his umbrella, even this late and in what was now becoming a nasty storm. He couldn't let good old David know he was here tonight. The only people who knew were Shona, Fari, and Isaac.

He lowered himself out of the guts of the crawlie and walked cautiously northward down across the jumble of ankle-breaking rocks sticking out of the snow, terrain on which his crampons and ice ax would be useless. At the lip of the precipitous slope he looked down at the vast glacier in the valley far below, cast in deep shadow by the ridge to the west. A hundred years ago, they'd said that the glaciers on Mount Kenya and Kili would be gone soon because of climate change, but the restoration project had been a success, and now the snow fields were as deep and wide as ever in human memory. In eight hours when the moon had risen high enough, Lewis Glacier would gleam white with fresh powder covering whatever dirt and dust had blown down on the older snow. He would rappel down, turn the handy on, bury it under a few inches of snow, and, if his luck held, ride the crawlie all the way to Nairobi Spaceport without getting stopped by the police.

The handy was too hot to handle right now, but in a year or two, when things had calmed down, Isaac would recover it using its tag signal, which he would be able to detect once he was down in the glacier's valley. He would get it to a bitter political opponent of Prof Singh's who was not under police suspicion and happened to share Prof's ideas about preserving historical texts. Bill checked the handy, and as he'd expected, its red light was on, showing no reception. At the crest of the ridge, where the hut was, there was line of sight to Meru and Nairobi, but down here, he was in the same radio shadow that covered the whole glacier below.

It was going to be a long night. He sat down under the crawlie's chassis in hopes of keeping some of the snow off. With his insulating jacket and pants puffed up he

would be warm enough for safety, if not for sleep. He spent some time being worried and afraid, and the last glow of sunset disappeared. It was too cloudy to let him occupy his mind with looking at the stars. And then it occurred to him to pull out the handy. Its light glowed red. He turned it on and brought up another book that R.J. had said was good.

Once upon a time when the world was young there was a Martian named Smith.

He dug into it and rapidly decided that he hated it, almost as much as he'd hated *Mr. Biswas*. He hated it while the lightning hit Nelion and then, deafeningly, nearby Point Lenana. While the snow turned to hail and then back to snow he rehearsed his explanation for R.J. of why the book was so lousy. The lightning stopped, but then the wind picked up and made his eyes tear up, and as the tears froze and he wiped the ice away from the corners of his eyes with his gloved fingers, he muttered indignantly to himself "cardboard characters" and "naked hippie commune." He could have made himself more comfortable by putting on his goggles, but even with minimum polarization they'd cut out too much light to let him read, and he wanted to find out what happened next.

The crunching sound of footsteps came from uphill in the direction of the hut. Bill switched off the handy, stashed it back in his pocket, and zipped the zipper. The sky had cleared, but the starlight was too dim to let him see anything. There were more footsteps, and then the creak of the hut's door opening. Somebody fumbled around, and the lights of the hut came on, blindingly bright even from twenty meters away. He caught a glimpse of the big, bipedal shape of a public peace waldo and averted his eyes a little to let them adjust to the light. He heard the waldo step inside onto the creaky, hundred-year-old floorboards and unlatch the door to one of the bunkrooms.

How had the cops found out he was here?

Quickly he strapped himself into the crawlie and brought it out of sleep mode. It was obvious what he had to do. Here low down on the edge of the ridge, he was in a radio shadow. The waldo was being operated by telepresence from somewhere else. If it tried to come down and get him, its radio contact would be broken, and it would freeze up.

Through the whistling wind, he listened to the machine systematically search through one bunkroom after another. There were eight mattresses, and he heard one after another woomphf back down after being lifted upward. To his surprise, he felt angry. Did the operator think he was cowering like a squirrel under a fucking mattress? Seven, eight . . . He primed himself, and then the damn thing went and opened the door to the fancy outhouse. Unbelievable. They thought their only opposition was from the kind of person who would hide in an outhouse. He suppressed an urge to charge and rip the monster to shreds. He could do no such thing. He had to stay calm. His crawlie was a heavy-duty climbing model, built to withstand falls and abuse, but it couldn't win a straight fight with a police waldo. Stick with the plan, the plan was good. Let it come down to him and then freeze up.

The waldo emerged from the outhouse, switched on a headlight, and turned to sweep three hundred and sixty degrees. The light passed him and came back. *Come and get it, you son of a bitch!* It walked toward him with maddening slowness. Step. Step. *Come on, here I am!* The slope was getting steeper. It slipped on an icy rock and had to catch itself with a humanlike hand.

It got to within five meters and stopped moving. Bingo! Bill charged forward, losing an agonizing second as the crawlie's feet lost traction on the icy rocks and then set themselves in a new position and got going again. Just as he was about to reach the waldo, he saw it move. It must still be outside the radio shadow, hadn't yet lost contact with its operator. The person had just stopped moving it for a second. He used a mandible to knock it off its feet and downslope. His enemy tumbled downhill

and then got back up. Bill charged down at it, hoping to use his momentum to knock it farther down, to where either it would fall into the radio shadow or the slope would become too steep, and the scree too unstable, for anything with two legs to walk on.

He was sailing through space. He had a moment to realize that the waldo had used one of its hands to grab his crawlie, pulling him down after itself.

They rolled, flew, and bounced down the near-vertical slope for what seemed like a very long time, and hit the glacier in a cloud and confusion of snow. For a while Bill was stunned. Eventually he became aware of a sheet of blood coursing down over his face, and something terribly wrong with his right arm. He tried to think of what to do. The crawlie's right mandible was slaved to his right arm, so he couldn't use it. He gave the voice command to switch on the headlight, and it came on, but he was blinded by his own blood and couldn't see anything but a pink haze. Clumsily, he swept the left mandible around to try to find whether the waldo was still holding onto the crawlie, but he couldn't tell what the mandible was running into—maybe just the snow they seemed to be sunk into. He stopped moving and listened. There didn't seem to be any wind down here, and it was very quiet. He didn't hear any noise from his opponent. It must be out of net contact and helpless. He'd won.

First aid? He couldn't bandage his own head in the dark with one hand, but what about his right arm? He unslaved the mandible from his left arm and used his own left hand's fingers gingerly to make a survey. The arm was bent at an unnatural angle, and he felt a dagger of bone sticking out through the skin. He slaved the waldo back to his left arm and used the pincers to squeeze just below his right shoulder, tightened until it hurt worse than the injury itself, and then backed off on the pressure a little, hoping it would make a decent tourniquet.

Now what? It took his muddled mind a while to remember that this was a standard avalanche-rescue or crevasse drill. He asked the crawlie which way was up, and it told him he was on his side. He told it to dig its way to the surface. The motion set off a starburst of pain.

He must have blacked out for a while from the pain. There was still no sound of wind, and he knew now that this meant he was still buried. The crawlie had failed to dig itself out. He had it pull his ditty bag out of the top of his pack, managed by feel to extract an emergency-strength pain patch from the first-aid kit, used fingers and teeth to peel off the packaging, and stuck the patch on the skin of his cheek. It would take ten or fifteen minutes to work, and then he could try again to dig out.

His chances were looking bad. It would be good if Shona and R.J. could make it to L5. But—how had the cops known he was here? Only Shona, Fari, and Isaac were supposed to know. Most likely they'd arrested Shona on her way to Nairobi. With her cogmod, she was fragile. A skilled interrogator would be able to pull all the right levers and make her into emotional jelly. It wasn't her fault. She wasn't strong like Fari. He remembered Fari's vow to fight the cops to the end: *I'd die first*. He realized that he still loved her. He always would. If he could get the handy to turn on, maybe he could leave a message on it saying so.

William Guerrero's crawlie was damaged, and its impact on the glacier had buried it below four meters of soft snow. When Isaac Mwinyi didn't hear from him the next morning, he went to the glacier, found the body, and recovered the handy. He arrived at Nairobi Spaceport in time to give it to Shona Reisner, telling her that due to the worsening global situation, he had decided that it was safer to get it to L5 rather than leaving it on Earth as originally planned. Mwinyi's fate is not recorded, but he is presumed to have been killed the following year along with the rest of the Earth's population. Guerrero-Mwinyi Library on L5 is named for the two mountaineers. ○

NEXT ISSUE

OCTOBER/ NOVEMBER ISSUE

It's time for our slightly spooky October/November 2013 double issue and that means it's time for a little bit of terror and ghosts, a sprinkling of the occult and the outré, along with the usual forays into physics, biological regeneration, and travels through time and space. **Kristine Kathryn Rusch** will whisk you off to a scary "Encounter on Starbase Kappa." **Charlie Jane Anders** will bring you back home to an endearing group of misfits who unravel a number of secrets at "The Time Travel Club."

ALSO IN OCTOBER/ NOVEMBER ISSUE

The one eerie person you definitely don't want at your door gives **Sheila Finch** "A Very Small Dispensation"; though the same can't be said of the soul sucker who assures **Gregory Frost** that "No Others Are Genuine"; **Ian Creasey** shows us that even science fictional ghosts can't rest "Within These Well Scrubbed Walls"; **Jack Dann** reveals the horror that looms for those who are "Waiting for Medusa"; **Meg Pontecorvo** gives us an unlucky teenager who discovers what it really means to be "Grounded"; **Joel Richards** does some "Deep Diving" into deep space to resolve a murder mystery; in **Neal Asher's** far future, it's hard to trust those "Memories of Earth"; **Igor Teper** lyrically composes an ode to "Quantum Orpheus, at the Light Cone's Apex"; **Alan DeNiro** develops an innovative, and dangerous art form, in "The Wildfires of Antarctica"; human biology takes off in an equally wild direction for **Ian McHugh** "When the Rain Comin"; and **Paul Di Filippo** conveys what a fool believes in "Adventures in Homogamy: A Love Story."

OUR EXCITING FEATURES

"Translations II," **Robert Silverberg's** Reflections column, looks at SF writers inspired by real-life events; **Ed Finn's** Thought Experiment introduces us to the people responsible for "Dreaming Up a Center for Science and the Imagination"; **Norman Spinrad's** On Books reviews the suspect logic that attempts to market to stable demographics by dividing books into "Genre Versus Literature"; **James Patrick Kelly's** On the Net interviews and reminisces about editor-authors who work "Both Sides of the Desk"; plus we'll have an array of poetry and other features you're sure to enjoy. Look for our October/November issue on sale at newsstands on August 27, 2013. Or subscribe to *Asimov's*—in paper format or in downloadable varieties—by visiting us online at www.asimovs.com. We're also available individually or by subscription on *Amazon.com's* Kindle and Kindle Fire, *BarnesandNoble.com's* Nook, *ebookstore.sony.com's* eReader, *Zinio.com*, and from magzter.com/magazines/

OTHER SEASONS:**The Best of Neal Barrett, Jr.****By Neal Barrett, Jr.****Subterranean Press, \$40.00 (hc)****ISBN: 978-1-59606-406-5**

Barrett, whose work has appeared frequently in *Asimov's*, is one of those authors who transcends category. He has published notable works of SF, crime fiction, historical fiction, YA fiction, comics, and a fair number of titles that defy easy pigeonholing. He also has the respect of his fellow pros, as evidenced by his choice as Author Emeritus by SFWA in 2010. This deluxe “best of” collection would be a fine introduction to his work for anyone who hasn't yet caught up with it.

Included here is “Ginny Sweetlips’ Flying Circus,” nominated for the Hugo and Nebula awards in 1988. The setup is a post-apocalyptic world with the protagonist traveling from one settlement to the next in an armored van, from which she and her crew dispense “Sex*Tacos* Dangerous Drugs,” according to the sign on display—though none is quite what the sign promises. It also includes talking dogs and a man-sized possum—all heavily armed. The overall effect might best be described as “gonzo”—a word that could have been invented with Barrett in mind. Oh yeah, it’s laugh-out-loud funny, too.

But that’s only one side of Barrett’s artistry. “Stairs,” a Sturgeon Award winner in 1989, is a starker vision—a world confined to what looks like a sort of apartment building, with the stairs of the title bustling with the residents. The story focuses on Mary Louise, who lives alone in one of the apartments, fearful of the world outside. What we see of the world beyond her apartment is fragmentary, enigmatic—and piques one’s curios-

ity over what brought such a world into being.

“The Stentorii Luggage” is a story that could have appeared in the heyday of *Galaxy* magazine during the fifties. The protagonist is the manager of a hotel catering to alien races, a smart-mouthed, savvy character faced with a dilemma involving carnivorous shapeshifters brought in as pets by some of his guests—and let loose by a dim-witted bellhop. Barrett plays the situation for laughs, but the suspense is real, the pacing is right on the money, and the solution is suitably ingenious.

Or take “Perpetuity Blues,” the story of Maggie McKenna of Marble Creek, Texas. The story has undeniable SF elements—including a character who purports to be a time-traveling alien—but much of the fun of the story is the sheer weirdness of the Texan characters, who often remind this reader both of the “Tuna, Texas” plays and Mary Cooper, Sheldon’s mother in “The Big Bang Theory.” The dialogue is delicious, showing off Barrett’s fine ear for the nuances of regional speech patterns—not just in Texas, but in New York, where Maggie eventually ends up, seeking a career as a writer. Barrett throws in enough bizarre plot twists to keep the reader off balance, but the ending flows logically from what’s preceded it.

Several of the stories (including “Stairs”) show Barrett experimenting with language, somewhere between the mode of “A Clockwork Orange” and that of Walt Kelly’s “Pogo,” depending on the mood of the story. “Slidin,” one of the newer pieces in the collection, is close to the latter mode as it begins, with an underpinning of Texas dialect, deftly twisted into near-relatives of the original words: “skyscrappers,” or “pre-hysteri-

cal”—actually, that last one *is* out of Pogo. Laureen, the protagonist, is “kinda whole” in a world where everyone else is drastically mutated—one of her brothers “doesn’t breathe air,” for example, and her Grandpa Foot can send “nasty” dreams to anyone who annoys him—frequently to her. The family group is going to view the remains of the world that was before—whatever happened, 283 years before. And then the story takes a frightening turn, rushing to its stark conclusion. It’s a tour de force of post-apocalyptic SF.

Those are just a few of the highlights of the five-hundred-plus-page collection, in stories that call up echoes of sfnal voices from Robert Sheckley to James Tiptree Jr., but in the end are unmistakably Barrett’s. At the same time, his style always carries the flavor of the different eras he has written in. “Stentorii Luggage” is quintessential late fifties, while “Ginny Sweethips” will carry readers back to the new wave/hippie atmosphere of the sixties and seventies. The more recent stories also have the feel of their eras.

Whatever the style, high among his gifts is a rare command of prose rhythm, a fine-tuned sense of when to spin out a phrase and when to clip one short. He also has a good sense of pace, whether in the fast-moving early pulpish stories or the more sinister post-apocalyptic pieces.

With 28 stories, spanning more than five decades, from the sixties to the current century, this volume is an overdue testimony to the accomplishment of one of our best authors.

**CYBERPUNK:
Stories of Hardware,
Software, Wetware,
Revolution and Evolution
Edited by Victoria Blake
Underland Press, \$15.95
ISBN: 978-1-937-6308-2**

Hard as it may be to believe, the cyberpunk revolution is three decades old. That means there are hot young authors—and whole battalions of readers—who weren’t yet born when William

Gibson, Bruce Sterling, Lewis Shiner, and their cohorts were tearing down the walls of SF-dom and doing their bad-boy act on myriad convention panels. If that doesn’t make you feel old, it ought to—unless you’re one of those twenty-something readers, in which case you probably ought to read this book to see where a lot of the commonplaces of your worldview actually come from.

Editor Blake, who is also the founder of Underland Press, has brought together an excellent cross-section of the cyberpunk era, fleshed out with more recent pieces that carry on the spirit of the original movement. For anyone who was around during the eighties, the phrase “cyberpunk anthology” almost immediately conjures up *Mirrorshades*, the definitive document of the movement, edited by Sterling. Interestingly, that collection and this have only one story in common—the seminal “Mozart in Mirrorshades,” by Sterling and Shiner. On the other hand, most of the authors represented in the earlier collection are in this one—in several cases, with more interesting or representative stories. In addition to those already mentioned, we have work by Rudy Rucker, John Shirley, Greg Bear, Paul DiFillipo, and Pat Cadigan, all *Mirrorshades* authors.

To begin with, Gibson’s contribution here is “Johnny Mnemonic,” practically the ur-text of cyberpunk. Published in 1981, it looks at the idea of implanting a cybernetic database in the human body—a more or less logical extension of ideas that people like Arthur C. Clarke had been hinting at for some time. But SF is made as much of words as of ideas, and that’s where Gibson marked out fresh territory. From the first line—“I put the shotgun in an Adidas bag and padded it out with four pairs of tennis socks . . .” the reader has been pulled into a world that has much more to do with noir thrillers than with the SF styles of the preceding era. It was that tough, no-frills attitude as much as a blasé attitude about manipulating body parts according to the dictates of fashion—a

theme the author could have picked up from Samuel R. Delany, among others—that set the tone for the new era. Gibson parlayed those traits into a string of acclaimed short stories, then took it to novel length and at that point there was no stopping the punk SF revolution.

Despite the label they shared, the *Mirrorshades* group was a diverse bunch. Greg Bear was his own man from the start, trying on new styles and genres as the mood took him. His entry here, “Fall of the House of Escher,” is a pastiche of the Poe tale alluded to in the title. The narrator, as in Poe’s tale, finds himself in a grotesque house controlled by an intense, possibly mad host. But as the plot unfolds, an underpinning of advanced tech reveals itself behind the apparently fantastic elements—building at last to a climax Poe would have found congenial.

A fair number of the stories fit comfortably into the expected cyberpunk tropes, with advanced computer science integrated into the characters’ lives. There are a couple of variants on the idea of telling a story through email memos or blog posts, Sterling’s “User-Centric” and Paul Tremblay’s “The Blog at the End of the World.” Others, like Jonathan Lethem’s “Interview with the Crab,” take the notion of augmented intelligence in lower animals to satiric extremes. And Kelly’s “Mr. Boy”—one of his strongest stories, and one of the best in the collection—takes body modification as its theme, then weaves an entire social structure around the idea.

But the stories cover a somewhat wider range than the original output of the cyberpunk group, and not only because of the inclusion of younger writers like Lethem and Cory Doctorow. While well-written and compelling, Kim Stanley Robinson’s contribution, “Down and Out in the Year 2000,” is a post-collapse story with no obvious cyberpunk elements I could detect. It could have been written almost any time after about 1965—which makes me wonder what criteria the editor used to define the anthology’s scope.

And, in fact, the review copy of the anthology did not include the editor’s preface, which can be one of the most interesting bits of this kind of book, putting the stories in perspective and often raising interesting issues in its own right. I’ll look forward to seeing what Blake has to say about this intriguing collection. In the mean time, I have no difficulty recommending the book to readers of this magazine.

1491: New Revelations of the World Before Columbus

By Charles C. Mann

Vintage, \$16.95 (tp)

ISBN: 978-1-4000-3205-1

1493: Uncovering the New World Columbus Created

By Charles C. Mann

Vintage, \$16.95 (tp)

ISBN: 978-0-307-27824-1

These two titles constitute one of the most intriguing accounts of the early history of the Americas I have ever read—and should be required reading for anyone who wants to understand that quintessential SF theme, first contact. They also have loads of material for SF worldbuilding—and of course, they’re a provocative read even for those not in the market for fictional materials and techniques.

As the two books’ titles indicate, Mann offers a survey of the ecology and sociology of the Americas just before the arrival of Europeans, and the results of the meeting of the Old and New Worlds. Note the plural of “Americas”—Mann looks at North, Central, and South America. For many readers, the books may provide their first broad survey of the history of the Western Hemisphere outside the U.S.

1491 builds on the proposition—put forward by any number of anthropologists and archaeologists over the last few decades—that the population of the Americas was considerably larger, and had attained a much more advanced level of social organization, than most of us

miliar) in an attempt to impose some kind of order on it—an order that was of course bound to fall apart as the different groups continued to mix.

Best of all, Mann weaves in bits of history that most of us never learned—or only learned part of. For example, I never knew that Squanto, the New England Indian who greeted the Massachusetts Pilgrims upon their arrival, knew English because he had previously been captured and taken to Europe, ending up in England before returning to his native home—only to find it devastated by the plagues that came up from the south.

There's plenty more here—the two books are full of revelations, large and small, about the consequences of the arrival of Europeans in the Americas. Mann makes no claim to having done great original research—but he has synthesized the results of many other investigators into a stunning whole. I can't recommend these two books highly enough. The discovery of the Americas may be the best real-world example we have of "first contact"—one of the primal SF themes—and Mann makes an irresistible story of it. Highly recommended. ○

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

I'll be resting up for, then recovering from, the San Antonio WorldCon this summer. But for other Asimovians who might not be able to make it there, consider going to ArmadilloCon, CopperCon or BuboniCon. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con five months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. —Erwin S. Strauss

JULY 2013

25-28—Cascade Writers Workshop. For info, write: c/o Junker, 3626 144th Pl. NE, #M-7, Bellevue WA 98007. Or phone: (973) 242-5999 (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). (Web) www.cascadewriters.com. (E-mail) info@cascadewriters.com. Con will be held in: Portland OR (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Air port Holiday Inn. Guests will include: Claire Eddy, Cameron McClure, many authors.

25-28—PulpFest. www.pulpfest.com. Hyatt, Columbus OH. Celebrating Doc Savage, pulp heroes of 1933, 80th anniversary of Fu Manchu.

26-28—ArmadilloCon. 512343-2626. www.armadillocon.org. Renaissance, Austin TX. A. Bishop, C. Neill, Liz Gorinsky, J. Dillon.

26-28—Anime Iowa. www.animeiowa.com. info@animeiowa.com. Marriott, Coralville IA. R. Axelrod, G. Ayres, T. Meuller, M. Riby, Y. Wang.

26-28—TFCon. www.tfcon.ca. Delta Meadowvale Hotel, Mississauga ON. For fans of the Transformers toys and movies.

AUGUST 2013

2-4—DiversiCon. www.diversicon.org. Best Western Bandana Square, St. Paul MN. Jack McDevitt. Multicultural, multimedia spec fiction.

2-4—Shore Leave. www.shore-leave.com. Hunt Valley Inn, Hunt Valley MD. Shatner, A. Tapping, J. C. Brown, Weber. Trek & media SF.

2-4—MuseCon. www.musecon.org. Westin Chicago NW, Chicago IL. Seanan McGuire. Celebrating creativity in all forms.

2-4—Harbour ConFusion. www.harbourconfusion.com. Saint John NB. SF, fantasy, horror, steampunk, anime.

2-4—Fandemonium. www.fandemonium.org. Shilo Inn, Nampa ID. SF, fantasy, horror, comics, gaming, cosplay.

2-4—Flashback Weekend. (847) 478-0119. www.flashbackweekend.com. Rosemont (Chicago) IL. Horror.

2-4—Deadly Ink. www.deadlyink.com. Hyatt, New Brunswick NJ. Hank Phillippi Ryan, Rosemary Harris. For fans of mystery fiction.

8-11—CopperCon, Box 62613, Phoenix AZ 85082. www.coppercon.org. Phoenix AZ.

9-11—When Words Collide, 3314 38th SW, Calgary AB T3E 3G5. www.whenwordscollide.org. Calgary AB. Genres: SF, mysteries, etc.

9-11—Otakon, Box 27291, Columbus OH 43227. (484) 223-6086. www.otakon.com. Convention Center, Baltimore MD. Big anime con.

15-18—GenCon, 120 Lakeside Ave. #100, Seattle WA 98122. (206) 957-3976, x3806. www.gencon.com. Indianapolis IN. Big gaming con.

16-18—SanJapan. www.san-japan.org. Convention Center & Hyatt, San Antonio TX. Arin Hanson, Martin Bilany, Richie Branson. Anime.

23-25—BuboniCon, Box 37257, Albuquerque NM 87116. (505) 459-8734. www.bubonicon.com. T. Powers, B. Weeks, D. Rowland, A. Beck.

23-25—NecronomiCon. www.necronomicon-providence.com. Biltmore, Providence RI. S. T. Joshi and others. Celebrating H. P. Lovecraft.

29-Sep. 2—Lone Star Con 3, Box 27277, Austin TX 78755. www.lonestarcon3.org. San Antonio TX. The World SF Convention. \$200+.

30-Sep. 2—DragonCon, Box 16459, Atlanta GA 30321. (770) 909-0115. www.dragoncon.org. Many downtown hotels, Atlanta GA. Huge

SEPTEMBER 2013

7—TitanCon. www.titancon.com. Wellington Park Hotel, Belfast, Northern Ireland. Science fiction and fantasy.

11-15—IlluXCon. www.illuxcon.com. Allentown PA. Note new city. For fans and practitioners of the art of illustration, in all its forms.

13-15—SF: the Interdisciplinary Genre. McMaster Univ., Hamilton ON. Robert J. Sawyer, whose papers he's donating. Academic.

13-15—NautiCon. www.nauticons.com. Provincetown Inn, Provincetown MA. Age 21 & up only. Members only on hotel premises.

14-15—FantaCon. www.fantacon.com. www.albany.org. Marriott, Albany NY. No more information on this one at press.

19-22—BoucherCon. www.bcon2013.com. Albany NY. Guests TBA. The world convention for fans of mystery fiction.

20-22—Roc-Con. www.roccon.net. Main Street Armory, Rochester NY. SF, comics, anime, horror, gaming.

27-29—ConText, Box 163391, Columbus OH 43216. www.contextsf.org. Doubletree, Worthington OH. SF & related games, comics & films.

OCTOBER 2013

2-4—FenCon, Box 701448, Dallas TX 75370. www.fencon.org. Addison (Dallas) TX.

AUGUST 2014

14-18—LonCon 3, 379 Myrtle Rd., Sheffield S2 3HQ, UK. www.loncon3.org. Docklands, London UK. The WorldCon. £105/A,C,US\$175.

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