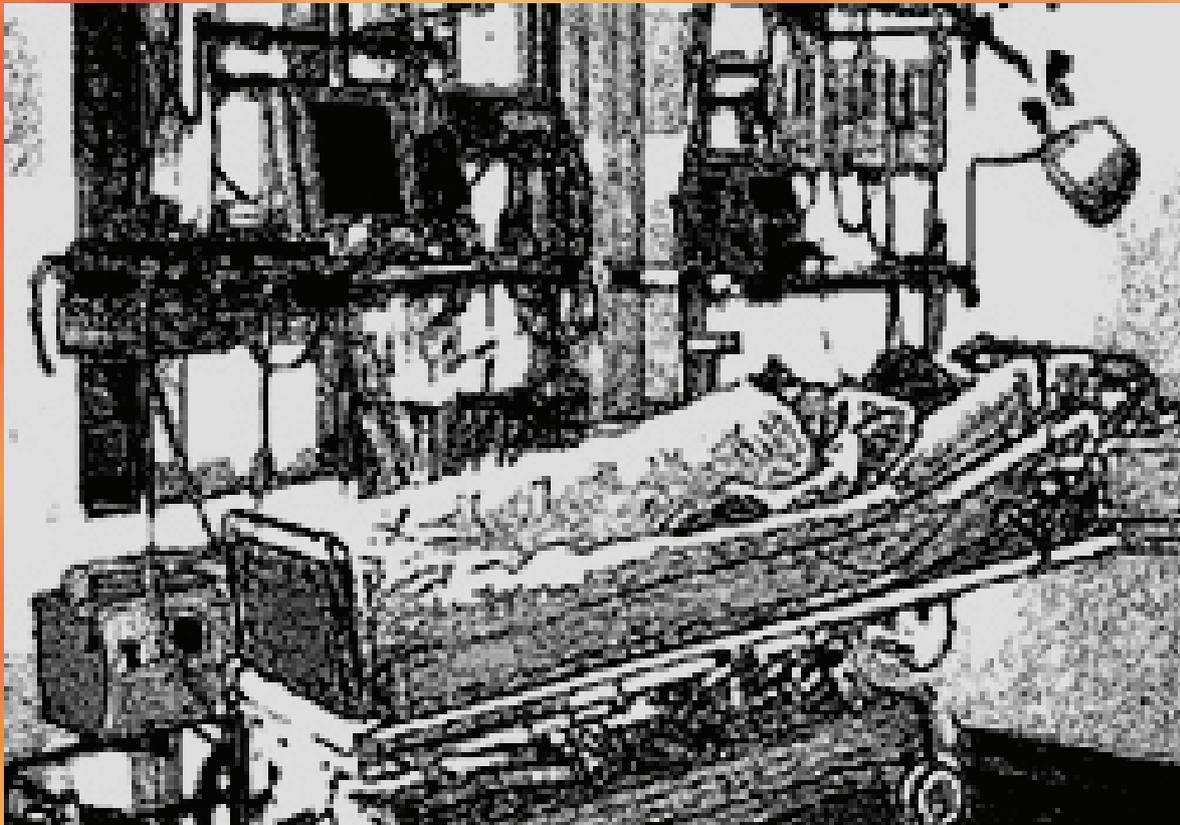


# *The Future Fire*

Speculative Fiction, Cyberpunk, Dark Fantasy

Issue 2005.04

ISSN: 1746-1839



Fiction by:

J.W. Bennett

Terry Grimwood

Flashes of Darkness Winners

plus The Speculative Meme-Pool

Distributed free on the web at <http://futurefire.net>

# The Future Fire: Issue 2005.04

'I'm not a Satanist, I'm a Nietzschean—I hold Satanists in just as much contempt as Christians!'

?Vasily Swedenberg

## Table of Contents:

### Fiction

J.W. Bennett 'Lost Chapters' (3)

Terry Grimwood 'Exaggerated Man' (12)

Allen McGill, 'Once Again' (17)

Brett Alexander Savory, 'Bottom Drawer' (18)

John Young, 'Backward Planning' (18)

The Speculative Meme-Pool (19)

Reviews (20)

Welcome back to the fourth issue of this increasingly dark and decreasingly speculative magazine. (More on this later; we're working on it.) This month we have two very cool stories—one by a writer we've featured before—as well as the three short shorts from the Flashes of Darkness competition. There were some very good entrants that we had to turn away empty-handed, but with any luck we'll be featuring some of these in future issues.

We've been thinking about what to do about the fact that what we originally conceived as a political/societal-cyberpunk magazine with some dark fantasy thrown in for good measure, is overpoweringly turning out horror stories. Not that we want to lose a single one of these excellent stories: but we're just not attracting much Speculative Fiction in the cyber genre. (The competition has pushed us further in this direction, but that was kind of dictated by the nature of our sponsor; at least it made sense to use dark fantasy in an event helping to publicise *Mirrormask*.) It may just be that the online horror-writing community is much greater than the cyberpunk—is there any site as active and successful as [Whispers of Wickedness](#) doing speculative fiction?

In any case, we have two strategies for steering in the future, and we'll just see whether this makes any difference or not: (1) our next competition—for which we still invite a sponsor—will probably be a "Flashes of Chrome" cyberpunk writing event; (2) we have opened and are slowly starting to fill the "Speculative meme-pool" (see below under non-fiction).

Let me only stress again that we still very much welcome dark fantasy as well as all other subgenres of speculative fiction, and that quality writing is totally our first criteria at all times. Feedback, as always, is welcome.

December 2005

**The Future Fire (c) 2005**

ISSN: 1746-1839

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## 'Lost Chapters'

By J.W. Bennett

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This is a true story, even though it never happened.

Abandoned to the cramped confines of the fisherman's cottage, Alison found time for her thoughts to finally breathe. The cottage lay slotted in beside its stone brothers halfway down the cobbled street. From the vantagepoint in the converted attic, Alison's eyes could follow the slope down to the Torquay promenade where the waves crashed endlessly, blue against grey. The spray, framed by the crooked buildings, looked like a miniature storm in a box, and when the dying sunlight caught the spray, it transformed into scattered rubies falling from the sky.

The view hardened Alison's resolve. Damn him, but she'd made the right decision! Foregoing the lure of the city, she'd chosen to continue her work as a full-time dressmaker. And to hell with husbands! To hell with promotions, mobile phones, commuter trains and office lunches!

She'd listened to her heart. If Bruce couldn't hear its honest beat, that was *his* problem. They'd separated, and he returned to the urban sprawl. In truth, Alison suspected the Torquay venture had all been one giant excuse, covering the fact that he didn't want children. The six-month 'country trial' was meant to bring them closer together. Instead, it had ruined them.

The emptiness sleeping beside her in the double bed had almost become a comfort. Ashamed, she didn't even seek an audience for her heartbreak. And so, out of necessity, the story became planted. She wanted to banish the coldness inside her by creating a love story, using the shreds of her broken dream as so much ink.

She'd never written before, but Alison didn't even question her skill or where the desire had come from. Confidence in her fairytale, and the hope its narration would heal her, seemed the only concern.

By the end of that bitter summer, the characters were living in her mind, the plot thickened into a single strand.

Sat at the desk in the loft, overlooking the grey ocean, she took up her pen and began:

'They were happy in the village by the sea, whilst magic remained in the Earth. In the way of these tales, she was the daughter of a blacksmith and he the son of a farmer. At seventeen, Lily took up teaching at the local village school. At twenty, Abe made a moderate living as an artist, selling canvases as far as London. Lily liked to dance and play the flute. Abe liked to shoot, and subsidised the rise and fall of his earnings by hunting pheasant, though his skill at this would never equal his painting.

Life passed merrily enough in the village, a small collection of cottages set amongst the Devonshire hills. Even though the hamlet's population was small, the two young ones never spoke to each other beyond a passing courtesy.

This, in the way of these tales, was set to change... '

Alison paused, regarding the sentences she'd written.

A quick glance at the clock showed only ten minutes had passed. Intoxicated by this new form of tailoring, she bent to the paper again.

'One day, Abe went walking with his gun, looking to worry the birds in the woods surrounding the village.

The sun shone brightly through the branches as he followed the brook. His steps, being the step of a layman hunter, were not quite as soft as the paintbrush upon his easel at home.

Nevertheless, above the rustling of leaves and snapping of twigs, he heard the music.

Somnolent and silvery, the notes snaked through the trees and bewitched him. He followed the sound, and cresting the rise of a dell, he looked down upon the dark-haired girl with the flute.

She sat in her summer dress, her head bobbing in time with her fingers on the instrument. Even from a distance, he could tell she was beautiful.

Abe paced around the edge of the dell in secrecy, fearing a sudden arrival might startle the girl. From behind a tree trunk, he recognised the blacksmith's daughter, Lily, and his heart swelled. He often found peace in the woods, and laughter in his work, but the sight of the girl with the flute came as a new joy. All thoughts of shooting pheasants flew from his mind like clouds before a gale.'

Alison stopped again, envisioning the boy standing in his breeches behind the tree. She felt a little unnerved at the clarity of the image, even though she'd pictured it many times before.

Before she had time to ponder the starkness of her own creation, the hall telephone rang. She made her way downstairs, wondering if it might be Bruce calling her - with another apology, another reproach. She didn't notice how the pages upstairs slid across the wooden desk, as if caught in an errant draught - even though the window had been shut tight and the storm outside was dying down.

Talking with Bruce was, as ever, a rowdy process. By the time she replaced the receiver, she felt thoroughly exhausted. Ditching the thought of any further writing, she retired to bed. In sleep, at least, she found some peace.

Later that night, in the loft above, voices Alison did not hear:

"Where *are* we?"

Silence. Then a reply:

"We are home... at least, I *think*so."

"I feel so... dusty."

"That doesn't make sense."

"Neither does this. Look at my hands!"

He looked, and nodded. He'd always hidden his astonishment so well, she thought.

The next morning, Alison arose feeling a little better.

In the night, the clouds had rolled away, leaving a clear autumn sky in their wake. There was work to be done. Today, Margaret Hanson would be visiting to check on the progress of her granddaughter's wedding dress.

Alison grabbed a quick shower and breakfast, and then her customer arrived. The elderly woman shuffled into the sewing room on the ground floor and began her usual tirade of clucking and sighing over the work-in-progress. The wedding dress enveloped half the room like a melted meringue. Assurances were made,

along with a pot of tea.

"I've not seen Mr.Trewellen around the village much," Mrs. Hanson remarked, her wrinkled eyes picking over the hem of the dress. "Is he away on business?"

"Yes. *Permanently*..." Alison regretted the word as soon as it tumbled from her lips.

The last thing Alison wanted was gossip. From the look of the lines around Mrs. Hanson's mouth, the old woman had done her fair share of talking over fences. But Mrs.Hanson's eyes narrowed and Alison realised the truth of the matter must show on her face. Betrayed by her own tongue, she gazed mournfully at the fabric between her hands.

"Never mind," the old woman twittered. "They're all the same. Not one amongst them worth the worry."

"Excuse me?"

"The men, dear. The men. Ships without anchors eh? Catch a sudden breeze and off they fly, over the horizon. Mind you, I don't suppose the cottage has brought you much luck, what with the -"

The old woman clammed up, and silence descended like a rain cloud.

"I'm sorry," Alison asked, "What did you say about the house?"

"Nothing, dear. Just being silly. *Men!*"

"No, no," Alison insisted, "If there's any history, good or bad, I'd like to hear it."

"Well, you're young enough to ask for bad news," Mrs. Hanson replied, looking uneasy. "But this isn't the time to be rattling on about the desires of ink and paper. Nor the secrets of the hearth. Both need a little longer to gestate..." the old woman trailed off, coughed, and then said; "Don't you listen to a stupid old lady. Our business today is about a wedding. We can leave less *pleasant* rituals for a few more days."

"I really don't know what you mean."

But Margaret Hanson refused to be moved on the subject, and turned her attention back to the dress.

Later that day, still pondering the words of the old woman, Alison set aside her needle and took up her pen. The previous night's row had upset the flow of the story, and as she entered the loft, she realised she'd been more affected by the quarrel than she thought. She was *sure* she'd stacked the pages neatly on the desk, but leaves had fallen to the floor and become scattered. A breeze perhaps, though the window next to the desk looked firmly shut.

Confused, she gathered up the pages and re-ordered them on the desk. She took a few moments to gaze out the window at the slate sea, and then picked up the tale where she'd left off.

It wasn't long, by one sense or another, that Lily knew she wasn't alone in the dell. She lowered the flute and as the music died, she heard him.

Red faced, the sandy-haired youth came from round the tree and stared down at her.

"Forgive me," Abe stuttered. "Drawn by the flute song, I tarried in the light of its player. I meant you no harm."

"And a fine excuse it is," Lily replied sharply. "A farmer's son and a poacher at that, comes a-creeping on a lady unawares. I know the face of you, Abraham Canticle. The sight of your gun does not ease my worry."

Though she said these words, she was not afraid. For despite herself, something thrilled in her heart at the sight of him, and there in the dell they fell in love.

After a shared picnic and a few whispered words, they were sealed on grass and daisy, and Abe claimed Lily for a wife. Over the hills they ran, to announce the news to their parents. In the distance, on the shore of the village, the sea winked brightly. The ships waved their sails, and the sun smiled down on their youthful passion.

Of course, good news travels fast, and their union was met with much joy. Abe and Lily planned to tie the willow-knot at the end of summer, as the first leaves began to fall.

There was one in the village however; who was not so pleased.

At the summer fair, just before the ceremony, the village crone approached the dotting couple and poked a long twig into Lily's belly.

"No good'll come of it," she announced, peering down her hooked nose. "Mark my words! For you have tarried in the Briar Dell and been shooting birds what belong to the Fairy Lord, Grymrtrell. He excuses the lady her visits, for the flute song gladdens his tricky heart - but he won't forgive man-seed spilt on charmy soil, of this I'm sure."

"What say you Madame Ragson?" Lily asked, for long had she heard the rumours of the Fairy Lord, and though dismissing them as tales, her girlish heart responded with fear. "If we have trespassed, then we'll be willing to make amends!"

"*Ha!*" cackled the hag and snapped the twig over her leg; "Amends will make *itself*, foolish maiden-that-was. Grymrtrell will claim the child growing within your belly a year from this day! And if you do not give freely without tears, then neither of you will see another autumn. You'll have each other's blood upon your hands!"

"What can we do to counter such a poisonous spell?" Lily gasped, eyes bright and terrified.

Madame Ragson sighed, leaning in close to whisper:

"The breaking of the spell is a simple thing. You cannot enter wedlock with the farmer's son. The groom must leave the village before nightfall, sat backward on a white horse, naked, with a thistle between his teeth... and he must never return. You must never lay your cornflower peepers upon him again. In this way, the Fairy Lord is foxed."

"Such a costly punishment!" cried the girl in dismay, but Abe, who was not given to old wives tales (especially after so much wine) kicked turf at the old woman.

"*Away, hag!*" he scoffed. "Do not stain the day with such chatter. Your salad years are done, and green-eyed you look upon our grace. Your teats are dry of

milk and the bloom of your rose is done. *Away, I say!*"

And the old woman fled, spitting profanities over her shoulder as she went.

But this, in the way of these tales, was not the end of it.

Alison put down the pen and reread the recently written pages.

A sea wind rose outside the small loft window, and muttered against the pane.

Frowning, she read the story again.

Somehow, it didn't feel right.

This was supposed to be a happy story, and already a shadow wavered across it. With all the torment of her split from Bruce, the last thing she wanted was to write about ill-fated love.

Sighing, she tore up the pages, swept the scraps into the bin. Tomorrow, she'd begin a new story, and this one would be trouble free.

Yawning, she switched off the lamp and went to bed.

But not everyone in the cottage slumbered. In the loft, there were whisperings:

"Did you see what she *did*?" a girl's voice asked the darkness. "That *hurt*."

At first, there came no reply. Then:

"I saw. But this is our chance. It can be fixed."

"You really think so?"

"Why else would we be here?"

"My hands... "

"Oh do shut up about your bloody hands," he said.

A week passed. Alison became too busy with the wedding dress to even think about the story. It hovered in the back of her mind, but never close enough to quite remember it. Autumn moved into the town of Torquay, and the cobbled streets were newly paved with windblown leaves.

She was sweeping them from her doorstep when Mrs. Hanson turned up, enquiring about the progress of her commission. The old woman announced her desire for a cup of tea, and Alison didn't have the heart to disagree.

"It's a poor thing to be lonely," Margaret Hanson said out of nowhere as she sat at the kitchen table, "... it makes you old too quickly."

"Isn't there a Mr. Hanson?" Alison enquired, trying to keep her reluctance for the conversation from her voice.

"I didn't mean *me!*" the old woman laughed. "And no, there *isn't*... thank the gods! Like I said, I'll have no truck with men."

"I'm *not* lonely. There's plenty here to keep me occupied."

"Of course dear," came the reply. "And I suppose you *do* have company now, after all. It's in the *walls*. I suppose they've only been waiting for someone to open the door."

"Come again?"

"Well, it's the *traces*, isn't it? But I don't expect you have time for these kinds of things – the souls of stories and such. You're *far* too modern."

Alison – fearing her most persistent customer was, in

fact, quite mad – actually snapped.

"If there's something you'd like to tell me, Mrs. Hanson, then please do. I haven't been sleeping well lately and I'm rather busy... "

"No need to be brusque dear," the old woman replied. "It's them who gets trapped that need the sympathy. I'm sure you'll be all right... in the long run. Just... keep your eyes open, will you? I expect they'll be relying on you by now."

"Who?"

"The story, my sweet. I expect they've been waiting a rather long time... "

Frustrated, but not willing to show it, Alison just nodded, as one does when confronted with gobbledegook, and sipped her tea.

By evening, after her customer had departed, Alison still felt plagued by Mrs. Hanson's words.

Especially the bit about the story. Did the old woman know something? Did she know she'd been writing up in the loft? No, that couldn't be right... not unless...

Horrified, Alison wondered if the old woman had found her way up there and had a good old root around. She knew how nosy these country types could be, and maybe with the best of intentions she'd...

Without a further thought, Alison ran up the dusty staircase to the loft and opened the door.

The room looked perfectly normal. Nothing seemed out of place.

She'd been about to shut the door, cursing herself for being so stupid, when something on the desk caught her eye. There sat the sheaf of paper with her pen next to it. But even from the doorway she could see something was wrong.

The pages weren't empty.

Crossing to the desk she could see it was true - her own handwriting, looping across the crinkled pages, the story she'd begun writing... then *torn up and thrown away!*

She shuffled through the pages, questioning erratically. The memory of ripping up the sheets seemed so certain, and yet...

Alison realised, with mounting alarm, that there was more story present than there should be. Sinking into her chair with puzzled wonderment, she read:

'Nine months after the wedding of Lily and Abe (which had gone without a hitch, barring the intrusion of Madame Ragson), Lily gave birth to a bouncing baby boy.

They named the boy Dell, after the place of his conception, and everyone in the village remarked that if they'd ever seen a happier couple, they couldn't remember it. But then they always said this at a new mother's bedside.

Of course, there were a few mutterings about the hag's nasty words, but on the whole, the villagers paid it no mind.

Days went by and Dell suckled at his mother's breast. His fireside cradle rocked in the winter breeze under the parlour door as Lily watched him sleep. Abe stood painting a portrait of the child with mother, a

Madonna whose face was aglow with the miracle of parenthood.

There came a rapping at the door, and though the hour waxed late, Abe, farmer's son and layman hunter, crossed the room to open it.

Outside in the snow stood Madame Ragson, her shawl clutched tight against the weather.

Her words came as soon as the door opened.

"*Quick!* There is little time! A prophecy is not a curse, young man, but the undoing of both will only work at the hour of need. Let me by, or your fate is sealed."

But Abe, good, solid Abe (who had no truck with wives tales, especially on cold winter nights) replied with a voice as frozen as the ground.

"Madame, are you drunk? Away with you before I call for the marshal! We have no use for silly fables round here! "

"Foolish man! A story may not be real, but that doesn't mean it isn't true. Don't you see? You cannot laugh in the face of destiny!"

"Who is it?" Lily called from the parlour, but before the crone could make her presence known, Abe slammed the door in Madame Ragson's face and turned to his lady wife.

"Nobody," he declared. "Just the tapping of a wind that whispers ill. Just the moaning of a winter gale. Look again to your dreams and the fire."

Lily, chilled but trusting her husband, did as he instructed, and there came no more disturbances at the door...

At least, not until the stroke of midnight when they were safely in bed in the room upstairs, and the baby Dell lay cooing in the arms of sleep.

Strange lights outside the window, illuminating the room with an eerie green glow, roused Abe from slumber. Rising from the bed, he heard a tapping at the door downstairs, and hurriedly reached for his gun.

He pounded into the parlour and his eyes grew wide as he realised the fire in the grate had been re-lit. The flames flickered with emerald tongues, like wet springtime leaves

Again; there came a soft rapping at the door. Abe cried out for the midnight visitor to identify itself.

A mocking voice, reedy as a willow bank, answered him;

"Nobody," laughed the peculiar voice. "Just the tapping of a wind that whispers ill. Just the moaning of a winter gale. Look again to your dreams and the fire."

"Old harpy Ragson, is that you?" Abe challenged, and yet somehow, knew it was not.

Again came the tapping and the voice.

"It is the knocking of a branch on traitor's wood, the thumping of a Lord on a peasant's dwelling... The calling of one who would claim his prize and return to the dell where a thief first planted it!"

And immediately Abe knew it to be the voice of Grymrtrell and all of Madame Ragson's appalling words had been true.

He levelled his gun and let forth a shot, which clear

split the door in two and allowed the snow outside, lit by the eldritch light, to drift into the small parlour.

Through the hole peered a hairy little face, its hoary eyes bright with malice. Its lips pulled back to reveal a row of tiny teeth, sharp as chestnut needles. The Fairy Lord sniggered.

"Mortal weapons cannot harm the Fay!" Grymrtrell announced, and leapt through the gap in a galloping bound. "A farmer's son should know better than to ignore the warnings of a witch! Give me the child without tears, or neither you or your lady wife will see another autumn, and each other's blood will stain your hands!"

"*Never!*" cried Abe, and reloaded his gun in full sight of the Fairy Lord, who merely stood within the green glow and smiled cunningly, his teeth dripping moss-stained saliva.

Roused by the blast from her husband's gun, Lily rushed to the parlour in her nightgown, clutching tiny Dell to her bosom. At the sight of her, Grymrtrell let out a whoop and danced upon the snowy air, and Lily, upon sight of the fairy, let forth a mighty scream.

Both sounds were eclipsed by the noise of gunshot, but the Fairy Lord skipped across the parlour and snatched the sleeping baby from its mother's arms. As soon as Grymrtrell touched the child, Dell began to wail. But the echo of the gun and the infant's bawling were snuffed out quickly, as the light became extinguished, and child and fairy vanished in a small implosion of foul smelling smoke.

Lily fell to the hearth and wept. Abe stood frozen to the spot, staring intently at the wide hole in the door as if his eyes had betrayed him.

Through the blur of her weeping, Lily looked up and regarded him savagely. He seemed so implacable standing there, as if nothing in the world could shock him, and she wondered how he managed to hide his astonishment so well...'

Alison also froze.

Her mind buzzed with faint amazement as she picked up the reams, her hands shaking. She could not recall writing this part of the story. In fact, she couldn't recall anything to *do* with the damn story from the moment she'd torn it up.

The only explanation could be that somehow she *had* written it. The tale, being so familiar, could only have come from her imagination, onto the pages before her.

Perhaps, left alone in this cottage by the sea, abandoned by her husband, her mind had rebelled. Perhaps, reluctant to face up to the conditions of her desertion, she'd simply lost herself.

Perhaps she was even mad.

The thought spurred tears over her lashes, staining the ink on the pages like an unexpected rainfall, blurring metaphor and dialogue into a blue pool.

Alison let the pages slip to the floor of the loft, and turned to the staircase, knowing in her bedroom she could seek solace in sleep, pulling the cushions close and pretending they were the body of her departed

lover.

But upstairs above her, awake now and urgent, the voices murmured:

"I'm all wet!" one exclaimed, indignant. "She's not getting this at all!"

"What's a little saltwater? We won't be smudged forever," said the other.

"You are always so calm. Don't you see how important this is?"

"Well of *course* I do."

"She's not getting this. Not one bit," the girl's voice insisted.

"But she must," he said. "She *must*."

The next morning, feeling downhearted, Alison sat in the kitchen and tried not to think.

She knew Margaret Hanson would be visiting her again today, as pressing as ever about the wedding dress. But not a bone in her body could move towards the task, and when the old woman arrived, all Alison could do was apologise as she made the customary pot of tea.

"Still not sleeping well?" Mrs. Hanson worried as she swilled her cup in a circular motion, watching the leaves settle; "It's a common malady of those afflicted with a broken heart. Or those with a duty they cannot *see*."

"Who said anything about a broken heart?" Alison replied, a touch more tartly than she'd intended to.

The truth was the old lady remained her only friend... at least, the only one who came to the cottage regularly.

Even this tenuous bond had fast become a comfort, and she didn't wish to sever it by being rude. Not now when she feared for her sanity.

"It's in your face dear. I could see it the minute we met," continued Mrs. Hanson, brazen as ever. "Not everything has to be in *words* in order to be read. You might have guessed that by now, what with the visitors..."

Alison drained her cup and placed it on the table.

"Mrs. Hanson... Maggie... I don't know why, but I really get the feeling you're trying to tell me something. Something I don't understand. What do you mean by..."—she took a deep breath—"visitors?"

"It's all in the story. The one you've been writing..."

There came a shocked silence. Then Alison bristled: "How on *Earth* do you know about that? Have you been prying upstai—"

"Oh, I'm no snoop, young lady... at least, not in the sense you mean," the woman breezed. "I'm just here to see the job gets done, and that's about the whole of it."

"The job... the wedding dress?"

"Among other things... yes. Well, she'll be wanting to play the bride again, I suspect. It isn't nice being stuck between the lines you know. Especially for so many years... I doubt you'd fancy it much either, though heavens know she wasn't alone. Not that *he's* ever been much good, despite how the pen wants to colour him."

This was too much for Alison.

"Mrs. Hanson," she said icily, rising from the table so the chair legs screamed across the tiles like murderous kittens, "I'd like you to leave now please. The dress will be finished, as we agreed... but I'd appreciate it if you didn't come to the cottage anymore. I have your phone number; perhaps we can communicate that way from now on? And... and maybe you ought to talk to someone about these delusions of yours..."

"Don't you worry about me, young missy," Margaret Hanson replied, getting to her feet, her hunched back casting a shadow over the table. "I'm used to 'em not listening. It's all part of the business you understand, part of the story. Problem is, you don't even *see* you're in it, and that's a sorry thing. We'll talk when the time is right. It's not *my* task to be weaving the thread. Oh no, not now, not *never*..."

And with this, and a slight huffing, the old woman shuffled out the front door and up the street and out of sight.

Alison watched her go, fighting the tears biting the back of her eyes.

Suddenly, she felt lonelier than when Bruce had left.

Torquay seemed to be a hostile place; the grey cobblestones cracked as her heart and the pounding sea uncarving an expanse. The romance of staying here now felt more than stubborn – it felt remotely obscene.

Closing the door, Alison thought maybe Bruce had been right after all.

Sleep came easy for once.

She avoided the upstairs of the weatherworn house for the remainder of the day, telling herself a doze by the open hearth would prove more of a comfort than a feather bed. To this end, she gathered up her nightgown and a blanket, and made for the sanctuary of the living room.

In truth, she didn't want to go near the loft, in case curiosity got the better of her. What on Earth had the old woman been implying when she said Alison was in a story?

Wasn't everyone, if you looked at it a certain way?

What right did the wizened hag have anyway, coming round to the cottage with such teasingly obscure phrases? Couldn't Mrs. Hanson tell she was already confused, already hurting? The last thing she needed was more riddles to add to the stack of those haunting her.

Alison, reassured by these denials, changed into her nightgown, drank a cup of cocoa by the fireside, and fell soundly asleep in the rocking chair by seven o'clock, the blanket over her knees.

But it was not a peaceful sleep.

Despite herself, she dreamt of the characters in the tale upstairs:

*A lady dressed in white, her eyes searching between starlit trees...*

The lady's face, turned to the moon, may once have been beautiful, even through the tear-streaked grime. The lady wailed like a jackal for a child she could never find.

Brambles protruded from the lady's hair, dark against

the pale skin. Mud splattered over her gown, which Alison recognised as a tattered wedding dress. Thorns cut the girl's hands as she stumbled through the briar, blood falling to the shadowed ground, staining darkness upon darkness. Then the woman in the wood became obscured by fog.

*A bearded man, weeping into a tankard of ale as he hunkered over a wooden table.*

His hunting cap sat askew, feathers bent into a comical shape; brim pulled down in a sad droop. In one hand, the tankard, and in the other, a shotgun, the barrels of which had never been empty since one tragic winter's night. No smile would crease this man's face again, so long as his lady wife walked the woods at night, howling to a world forever set aside from his one of drunkenness and sorrow. Tonight, his belly full of ire, and his mind wheeling with drink, he staggered from the tavern and climbed into the woods to find her.

*You'll have each other's blood upon your hands!* The wood moaned through the trees encircling the dell, as the crescent moon grinned down in frozen spite.

A gunshot split the dream and Lily fell, her blood splattering the grass, her bridal dress blossoming around her like a readymade shroud. Abe stood over her, twin barrels smoking, hiding his astonishment, even from himself.

Lily crawled forth on the thorny earth, and grabbed at Abe's boot heels, pulling him down into the boggy mire, until nothing remained but a tatty piece of blood-soaked satin and a hunter's cap, its feather bent out of shape.

Alison rushed down the torrent of her slumber, the pictures melting together in a washed-out mass. She didn't hear the wind pick up, or notice how the flames in the grate became thicker, viscous fingers guttering into the chimney well. The flames bristled scarlet, then paled to a marshy blue, finally merging in a single pillar of spectacular green light.

Outside in the cobbled street, snow began to fall.

Anyone standing out there would have been treated to a strange meteorological phenomenon; the flakes only fell upon the roof of the fisherman's cottage, eddies swirling against the weather-beaten door. A pattern swam within the blizzard, faces maybe, or letters from an unknown alphabet, all picked out in the emerald glow radiating from the fireplace inside.

The tapping finally woke her, an incessant rapping, echoing across the walls of the living room.

Alison's eyes flew open.

For a heartbeat, she thought she must still be asleep, and her dreams had followed her back to the real world. Then reality hit home like a wrecking ball and she sat bolt upright in alarm.

The rocking chair, disturbed by the movement, tipped her onto the tiled floor. She could feel the iciness of the hearth on her face, her features lit up in a spotlight of shock.

"My God!"

She clung to the rocking chair like a drowning

woman. All around the room the rapping continued, assaulting her ears with a fearful urgency.

She half crawled; half ran to the stairs, mind instructing body to get as far away from the vision as possible. She stumbled up the staircase, her way lit by the emerald radiance below her.

*Where was Bruce when she needed him?*

The bedroom door crashed open and she flung herself upon the sheets, pulling the pillows over her head to shut out the noise and the uninvited brightness.

A thin wail slipped between her trembling lips. Above it, and above the wind shaking the cottage, she heard the voices upstairs.

Voices, in *her*house, coming from the loft.

Alison sat up and her eyes turned toward the ceiling.

Yes, there was definitely movement up there; a rustling, like long dead branches against cold glass.

And then the voices again - low but unmistakable.

The loud rapping on the walls made it impossible to determine what those voices said, but even in her dread she could not refute their presence.

Someone was in her house, and something told her the visitors were not just going to go away.

Unsteadily, Alison hauled herself up by the bedpost.

The voices above wavered and the movement (feet on floorboards?) sounded erratic. It sounded like an argument happening through a thunderstorm.

Fear propelled her to the foot of the loft stairs.

Within her, a bravery rose... and a fresh anger. The pain caused by her abandonment hardened into resolve, becoming the engine that carried her to the loft door. She flung it open. The wood crashed heavily against the stone wall behind it.

And within, a *hurricane*:

Sheets of paper swept around the room in a cyclone, scratching the walls in an ever-increasing circle of speed.

As soon as she entered the loft, the tornado pushed her against the stone and pinned her there. Dust and the blur of her own handwriting whisked in front of her startled face. The blizzard buffeted against the small windowpane, illuminating the chamber as it had done in the room downstairs. The wooden desk fell over with a crash, drawers spilling open and sending missiles of pens and pencils into the chaos. They circled the room like darts, splintering on stone and sending tiny daggers into her skin. Sheets of paper slapped her body like wicked hands. Alison struggled against the blasting air, trying to edge back towards the door.

Every time she made the attempt, a force pushed her back again, her arms scraping painfully on the rough walls, the wind cementing her nightie to her limbs.

The roar in her ears became unbearable. She struggled to breathe, her lungs tightening. She wondered if she might drown within the storm, suffocated by flying dust and blinded by plummeting pencils. Panicked thoughts beat inside her skull, and she wrenched herself in one last effort to reach the door.

The whirlpool swept her into its grasp and flung her around the room, her feet barely scraping the floor-

boards and her hair writhing. The scream, once torn from her lips, shot into her face, so quickly she spun. Door, wall and window blurred into a carousel of dazzling green light.

Desperately, Alison reached forwards, grasping nothing, eyes shut tight against the wheeling debris. No sooner had she done so, the vacuum at the centre of the tempest pulled her free.

She was deposited unceremoniously into the heart of the storm, skinning her knees on the floorboards. She glanced up, and saw the orbit of paper dancing round her on all sides, forming the walls of a funnel – a funnel that now ensnared her.

The motion made her giddy.

The pages thrashed the back of her nightgown. She might have been sick, if not for the sudden change in the miraculous cyclone.

The circle started to slow, speed gradually reducing until it flowed languidly before her. Gravity appeared to be glue, holding the pages in place as they circled her. The sheets began to transform, ephemeral in the jade iridescence.

Helplessly following the progress of the wheel, Alison saw the pages take on a transparent quality, her own handwriting hanging ghostly upon the air. Words and sentences flowed snakelike, rivers of letters weaving in and out of each other, serpentine passages mingling into fluid shapes.

Full stops and commas dropped from the floating riddle, meandering in all directions until they pooled like ink on blotting paper. The characters merged in the spinning atmosphere, forming shapes on either side of her.

The twin shapes danced and twisted, embryonic forms wreathed in buoyant words. The sight stole Alison's breath away. From these suspended clouds, recognisable contours made themselves known – a hand, an arm, a foot growing into a leg, which attached itself to a nebulous torso and stretched upwards into a neck, a head... and eventually – a *face*.

With a gasp, Alison confronted the delicate spectres drifting around her.

With a second draw of breath, she identified them as male and female – one sandy-haired, his breeches blurred and the gun over his shoulder little more than a sketch on the air. The female glided past transparently, the tatters of her wedding gown trailing into a loop of muddled language, the dark strands of her hair framing a pallid face.

Before she could put a name to these familiar visitors, the man spoke, his uncertain mouth whispering down to her.

*"Please... we are here... at the doorway..."*

*"The doorway..."* echoed the girl.

*"No time... no time to waste... a Lord will come a-knocking..."*

Alison's mouth felt dry, but she forced a question out despite the pain in her throat.

*"Who are you? What do you want?"*

But she already knew. Their forms slowly became more solid upon the shuffling air, and she identified them as the characters from her story; young Abe and his tragic bride, Lily - and in this moment of certainty, she accepted that her mind had gone.

The girl addressed her.

*"... Lost upon an ill wind tapping at the door... can you free us from the spell... from which our doom takes root? Kind lady of the knowing pen..."*

"I don't understand..." Alison said, lips quivering.

*"In a cage of story, forever more,"* the man in breeches interrupted, his urgency apparent in his hissing voice, *"until the pen of a stranger releases us. We stand half in and half out of the Lord's design, adrift in enchantment and loss..."*

*"With each other's blood..."*

*"Upon our hands..."* the boy finished sadly, this last fact alone the devil of it all.

As they spoke, their revolving shapes took on a clearer dimension, the web of words comprising their bodies steadier in Alison's dazed eyes.

A light rain was falling within the confines of the loft, spattering the floorboards with red spots. From their spectral hands, the liquid fell, though no wound could be distinguished. As they turned, a scarlet circle became painted on the dusty floor, and this sight struck new dismay into Alison's heart.

The figures of Abe and Lily reached out for her, as if the bloody wisps of their hands might stroke her face, seduce her to their need.

*"Come, take up the thread and weave our ending..."*

Abe beseeched her as he sailed within the current of levitating pages, *"Year upon year, a curse finds its fate in the scrawl of your words. Do not be afraid. Release us from this prison, and we will make sure of an exchange..."*

"This isn't real!" Alison screamed.

*"Pick the briar thorns from our hands,"* Lily begged, who wept openly now, her broken face blurring with sorrow. *"We must be free to save the baby, to thwart the will of Grymrtrell..."*

*"Release us..."*

*"Free us..."*

*"Please..."*

Later, Alison could never say what spurred her into action.

Maybe the earnest face of the ruined bride struck a chord of grief within her that was too deep, too fresh, for her to listen to their words.

Maybe it was the bristling impatience behind Abraham's features, threatening anger if his wish went ungranted.

Alison wanted nothing more than to be away from their whispers, their bleeding and their woe.

She wanted to be away from the loft, out of the cottage, somewhere safe and sane where stories couldn't suddenly live and breath and demand freedom from the page.

"No," Alison rose from the floorboards and stood within the green-lit circle.

"No," she said, shaking her head at Lily's wasted face, into Abe's translucent frown.

That frown now crumpled in her hands as she reached into the wall of revolving energy and closed her fingers around his visage. His frame shook as she tore through his substance, nothing more than paper and luminance, coming apart like gossamer in a gale.

Shreds of paper fell through her fingers as she dismantled him, his arms rustling inwards, his torso crinkling as she worked, his face nothing more than a ball of diaphanous pulp in her fist.

Lily shrieked at the slaughter, her own body fraying upon the air. Alison, determined in the task, turned to the ghostly lady and ripped through the filmy material of the tattered gown, finding no flesh, only shadow and air.

A cloud of confetti swirled through the loft as the maelstrom came apart under Alison's hands, scattering like the snow outside the window, melting into nothingness until only darkness remained. The emerald light faded as the funnel evaporated, and a dying sigh shuddered against the brickwork of the loft.

Alison, alone in a circle of shredded paper, leapt towards the open doorway.

Down the stairs she went, breath steaming. Past the bedroom door, and through the living room, where the hearth was simply a pile of greenish ash spilling over the carpet.

*Out, out,* her mind panted, into the street and the vanishing snow.

*Out,* where she could feel the cold cobbles under her bare feet, the certainty of a world she knew again. A world that offered abandonment and pain, but ultimately, *her* world; a place of safety, where dreams could not touch her with spectral fingers.

And where tales couldn't reach out from the pages they'd been written on.

Halfway up the street, Alison looked back.

The cottage stood dark and empty, as if nothing miraculous happened there. As if everything was ordinary, and normal, and sane. Just a cottage. Just a night. Just a hallucination...

She drew a breath, and thought about finding shelter.

No way would she go back to the cottage. No matter if the autumn night was chill and the sea wind dampened her nightgown to her skin.

The hairs on the back of Alison's neck prickled in a frost of nerves, and turning, she regarded the upturned face of Mrs. Hanson, who stood, waiting patiently, a few metres away on the darkened street. The old woman's stooped form, huddled in a woollen overcoat, seemed dwarfed by the surrounding houses.

"We failed them," the old woman said softly. "I warned them not to ignore the demands of ungodly creatures. But they didn't listen then, and *you* didn't listen now. It's all in the way of things, I suppose. All part of the story."

Alison gasped a question in the icy air.

"What the *hell* is going on?"

Mrs.Hanson nodded. She knew the question well.

"Come on dear," she replied gently. "Let's get some hot tea in our bones and a fire to talk around. I've got some explaining to do..."

And Alison, no longer sure what world she belonged to, followed the old woman up the night bound street.

The next day, things in Torquay seemed better.

For the first time since she'd decided to stay here, favouring the wild ocean and the open countryside over a faithless husband, Alison didn't think about Bruce. She had something else to focus on now, something to alleviate the pain of the previous summer.

A duty, some might call it.

Alison returned to the cottage by mid morning, walking down the street in the ill-fitting clothes that the old

woman had kindly lent her. The brisk chill of autumn no longer echoed in her heart. The sun shining on the leaf blown street gave her a feeling approaching happiness.

Once inside the cottage, she didn't fuss over the mess in the living room, nor go into the parlour to work on the wedding dress.

Today she had other business to attend to. *Good* work. *Secret* work.

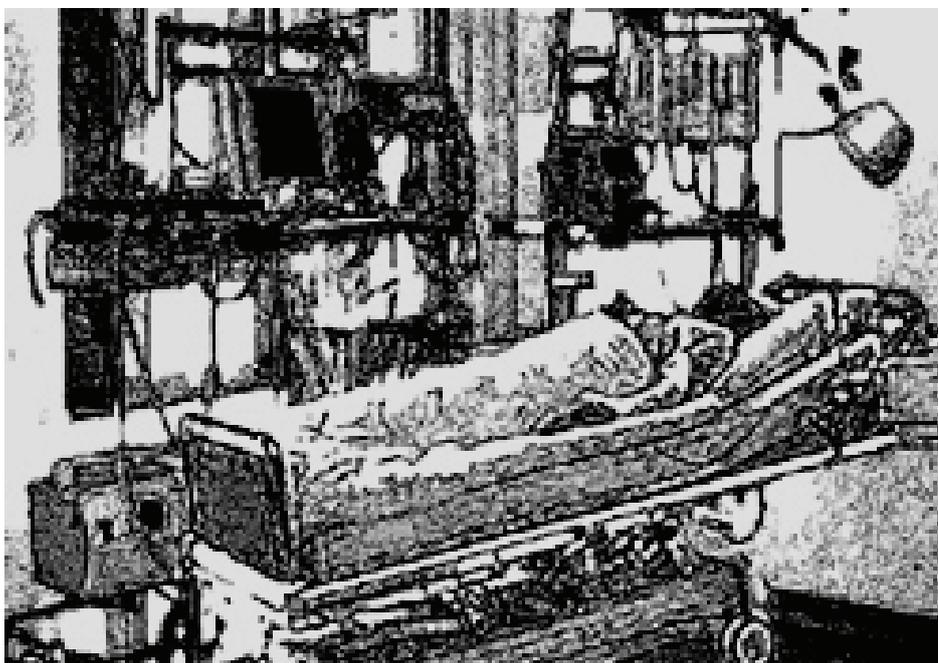
In the way of these tales, she righted the desk in the loft, and sat behind it, regarding the turbulent sea out the window. She looked up at the cloudless sky and took her inspiration from the blue.

Then, haunted by a fairytale, she lifted pen to paper and began.

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'The Exaggerated Man'  
by Terry Grimwood



*Salman Rushdie once wrote that a person becomes exaggerated once they have been in the presence of death.*

1

First he was tired. The tiredness was black and filled with a strident thud-thudding that could only be his heart. He knew all about hearts. Hearts had made him rich. There were other sounds; gurgling, roaring, and, from somewhere distant, a rhythmic, incessant bleep.

He sank. He fell. He couldn't move. He couldn't speak or open his heavy, heavy eyes. He panicked, this was a mistake, he wanted to go back, had to go back...The thudding slowed into irregularity. The roaring faded.

The thudding stopped. The bleep became a flat, unbroken tone.

Descent became ascent.

He opened his eyes and saw...The familiar grid of white fibre tiles that roofed his private consulting rooms. But something was wrong. The ceiling was falling...No, no it was okay, it wasn't the ceiling that was moving.

"Christ Carol. We have to bring him back. Now-"

He rolled over in mid air, the movement calm and easy, and found himself looking down at a hospital trolley surrounded by the paraphernalia of intensive medical care. And at himself, Cardiac Consultant Peter Atwood, gaunt, bearded, face ashen, eyes

closed, lips slightly apart.

Dead.

He supposed he should be shocked, upset, but he wasn't. He was at peace, accepting.

The trolley was attended by a red-haired, middle-aged woman and, an over-tall, over-thin young man; Drs Carol Mellor and Andy MacFarlane, Atwood's Senior Specialist Registrars. Atwood wanted to reassure them, but he knew they wouldn't hear him if he...what? Spoke? He smiled. The smile was a spreading of warmth and peace through whatever constituted Peter Atwood now.

"For God's sake Andy," Carol, firm, as always. "Three minutes, that's all he asked for."

MacFarlane ran a nervous hand through his hair. "Christ, don't you understand? If we fuck this up we've murdered him - "

"Shut up, okay?" Carol sounded shaken by MacFarlane's warning. "Just shut up and calm down."

Three minutes...so little time. Atwood willed himself away from the scene and found that he could float smoothly across the room, over equipment cabinets, their dust-coated tops piled with old journals and books, towards the wall, through the wall and into the private clinic's bright-lit main corridor.

Faster now, beginning to spiral, but not dizzy, just exhilarated by speed, by the madcap abandon of his flight. The corridor stretched on.

Became a tunnel.

Dear God, he was hurtling headfirst into a tunnel, the tunnel, as described in almost every near-death account Atwood had ever read or heard. Its walls dazzled but didn't blind, were smooth but not solid. The light bathed him, was an energy that thrummed through him, gave him strength.

Ahead, he saw a disc of astounding blueness; rushing at him, expanding, filling the universe, becoming everything. Until he -

Stood by a river.

Grass under his feet, the warmth of a sun on his face, a gentle wind tousling his hair...Hair? He glanced down at himself, he had a body, his own, clad in the green hospital gown he had borrowed for the journey. He looked up. The sky was empty. No sun, no clouds, no vapour trails or birds. Only that astounding blue.

The river was about twenty feet wide, the water clear, giving sight of a pebbled bed. The banks were gently sloped and lushly grassed. There were trees, poplars, willows, hissing gently in the wind. He studied the nearest of them and saw that their trunks were slightly translucent, netted with tiny vessels, like veins and arteries.

The trees sighed, the grass whispered. Atwood chuckled. Telling those trees things they shouldn't know? The chuckle died because he sensed that it was exactly what the grass was doing.

He turned his attention to the further riverbank. Its slope was crowned by an ordinary-looking, wooden fence. There was a gate. It was closed.

And there were people.

A man and a woman, watching him from the other side of the fence. Atwood's breath caught in his throat. They were his parents.

He ran into the water, which was warm and shallow. The pebbles were not slippery, but soft under his feet. In less than a minute he was scrambling up the other bank. Halfway to the fence he stumbled to a halt, overwhelmed by the presence of his dead.

"Well, well." His father smiled wryly. "I shouldn't be surprised I suppose. You never could leave a question unanswered."

They both looked...three-dimensional. His father, in a typical dark suit and waistcoat, his mother, in the type of floral summer dress she wore for seaside trips when Atwood was a child. They were just into their middle-age, yet their eyes seemed ancient, windows to immense wisdom and peace.

"I...I had to come," Atwood answered his father, feeling awkward, shy even. Mister Jonathon Atwood, had always commanded respect, both as a father and as a surgeon.

"You shouldn't be here Peter Dear," said his mother. "You really ought to be getting back." Atwood moved closer, and saw tears.

"What's over there? Beyond the fence?" he asked.

"I can't tell you that Peter," said his father. "You'll find out soon enough."

"Is it heaven?"

"Heaven? I don't think so." His father shrugged and was suddenly tamping and lighting his pipe. Blue smoke curled from its bowl, Atwood smelled its familiar, pungent scent. "It's...Well it's what it is."

"It's good," his mother interjected in that "Don't worry, everything will be alright," tone she once used to soothe his child-fears. "Now you really must be getting back, you have work to do."

"Your mother's right," said his father. "It's for the best." God, not one, but two of his most infuriating clichés in one sentence. "And we need to be getting along ourselves. Do the sensible thing eh? Go home." He reached out for his wife's hand, hesitated and looked back. "I am glad you came Peter. You've done well, I'm proud of you son."

Then they were walking away, disappearing over the crest of the hill.

Atwood scrambled for the fence, and felt a tug, a tension, like the stretching of a cord. Ignoring it, he clambered onto the barrier.

Nothing happened, no repulsion, no fork of cosmic lightning, no booming voice, just that warm breeze, the feel of old wood under his hands and bare feet, then the grass of the meadow beyond. He ran, surprised at his energy, calling out to his parents as they crested the hill and disappeared.

Atwood quickened his own pace, ascended the gentle slope in a few long strides. Reached the summit -

And stumbled to a halt, shocked, uncomprehending, weeping and laughing in wonder and fear.

There was...a structure, a building, a machine, a living thing, its geometry incomprehensible. It was vast, its edges fading into infinity, its summit lost in a sky of liquid metal and of iron cloud shot through with writhing snakes of energy.

The structure sighed.

He reached out, the act instinctive. The tug at his back, the compulsion to flee strengthened. He fought it, forcing his arm up, his hand open, grasping at...at something he could not understand yet seemed so utterly familiar.

Wheels rotated, titanic, silent-but-thunderous, mechanisms sang. The sighs grew loud. The tug became an urgent pressure, he resisted, wrenching himself forward.

The cord broke and he lurched into the borders of the structure. Amoeba-like arms moved to embrace him, to engulf and absorb. Something was there, emerging from the insanity of machine and translucent flesh; a figure, a mechanism, a sound, an emotion, vast, and benevolent...oh so benevolent. Atwood, on his knees now, reached out to it. Hands met and there was skin on skin, and peace, and the knowledge that he could stay, that he must stay. Transactions were being made, transformations taking place, linkages formed -

He exploded out of a maelstrom of black and light and blood red, ripped into awareness by a shattering

blast of energy that crashed through his body.

The beeping was back. He saw the ceiling, blurred, faces, indistinct yet sliding into focus. There were voices, muffled gibberish, slowly resolving into a chant, his name. "PeterPeterPeter..."

"Pete?" said Carol Mellor. "Peter, can you hear me?"

He managed an answer, a groan that forced its way up into, and out of, his throat.

"Oh God," Carol muttered, and began to cry.

2

"We've proved nothing," said MacFarlane, who was pacing the room. "Except how stupid we are."

"That's not fair," Carol protested. "It was a risk but -"

"It's okay," Atwood said. He was perched on the edge of the trolley, a blanket round his shoulders, a coffee mug cupped between his hands, and feeling, as far as he could tell, no ill effects either from his journey, or the electric shocks Carol had delivered to his stubbornly unresponsive heart.

"The sense of wellbeing is easy to explain," MacFarlane went on. "Endorphins, released into the brain during times of stress. The floating...okay, you saw a view of the room you've never seen before, but Christ, you know this room like the back of your hand, it wouldn't take much for your sub-conscious to work out what it would look like from up there. Come on Peter, you've steeped yourself in near-death folklore...I'm sorry, you must be tired. We'll talk it through tomorrow."

"No, I want to discuss it now, while it's immediate, while we still feel. You were here, you saw it from this side."

"There are no sides Pete, only life and death, existence and oblivion."

"But I went further than anyone has. I found...the place where the dead exist, where they...they live."

"Go home and look at your bookshelves Pete; Silverberg, Clarke, Tolkien, plenty of raw material for your sub-conscious there, plenty of monoliths and mysterious shining structures and collective intelligences. But yes, you did go too far. Christ, I really thought we'd lost you."

"But supposing it was real," Carol said. Her voice was still tremulous, her face pale. "Was it God Peter? Do you think you saw something Divine?"

"Oh come on," MacFarlane exclaimed. "Peter was dead. His heart, his brain, every vital function in his body had stopped working. Everything. We saw nothing, we felt nothing. We were looking at...at an empty carcase...All that light and wonder was hallucination, a brief flare sent up by the mind to make sense of what was happening. It lasted seconds. For most of those three and a half minutes Peter Atwood simply did not exist." He stood, fists clenched by his sides, shaking his head. "I want it to be true. Believe you me, I want the reassurance, but I can't have it. This is it Peter, there's nothing else."

"It was real." God, so real. And how he wanted it

back. This room, this place, was grubby, confining, a-roar with the thunder of air-conditioning, the white-noise soundtrack of late-night traffic. "I've described it badly. I've used terms that are too mundane. I felt. It was more emotional than sensory." Atwood subsided, stared down at his coffee, trying to recapture, to re-live...He chuckled. How do you re-live death?

MacFarlane put a friendly hand on Atwood's shoulder. "We'll talk in the morning. I'm going home, and I suggest you do the same."

"See you Andy, and thanks. I always knew you'd bring me back."

"Yeah." MacFarlane grinned ruefully. "We all make mistakes."

3

The darkness greyed towards dawn, and still Atwood hadn't slept. Several stories below, a milk float whined and stopped. Someone whistled "Please Release Me". Bottles clinked then the milk float whined on its way. And beside him, in this unfamiliar bed, Carol Mellor murmured, stirred then settled again.

There had been a kiss, back in the consulting room...

The quality of the dark changed again, uncovering the detail of Carol's bedroom; floral wallpaper, delicate, tasteful, the dressing table, the wardrobe, the clothes, strewn over the carpet, his own shirt and trousers stirred carelessly into the mix.

A kiss.

Following a glance, and a sudden, electric realisation. All these years Carol had been working in his team, turning down transfers and promotions because...

A joining of lips, a meeting of tongues.

So many flavours; sweet and erotic, stale and disgusting - he tried to ignore those, tried to once more to feel, not think. He wondered why he hadn't noticed such tastes before in the hot-breathed mouths of the unsuitable women he had bedded since his long-ago divorce.

Every touch was fire, knife-edged between delight and pain. When it was over, there was comfort and Carol's sleep and Atwood's insomnia. He lay, wide-eyed, hating the dark because the dark was too full of sound and smell.

The wardrobe again, somewhere to focus his attention. It was expensive, but...tatty; the doors, slightly out of true, the varnish, brush-marked and uneven, the wood defaced by knots, tortured by minute warps.

He sighed. Did it matter? He had never been a perfectionist, except in his work. That was different, that was life.

And death.

Oh yes, death. How many lives had he saved? A thousand? Ten thousand? But how many had died?

Before?

Afterwards?

During - those were the worst. The ones whose

lives slipped, literally, through his sterile-gloved fingers, whose hearts stumbled to a halt as he worked. The ones who were alive, then, abruptly, gone, everything stuttering to that untidy halt when bleeps became tones, life became... death. A ceasing-to-be so abrupt, so definite, that to cease must be to leave.

But where the hell had they gone?

Some came back, lost for a few seconds, minutes perhaps, returning to share tantalising glimpses...

Atwood had whittled his list of close friends and most trusted colleagues down to two. He cooked them a meal, he poured wine. He made his proposal.

"Oh my God," said Carol Mellor.

"You're fucking crazy," said Andy MacFarlane.

Atwood rolled over and kissed Carol's shoulder. It tasted sweat-salty, chemically soured by soap, perfume, skin cream. Another murmur, another stir, but she didn't wake. Just as well. Last night's post-mortem activities had been strenuous to say the least. He chuckled, and grinned at the ceiling. There was life in the old dog yet.

Life...

The grin faded.

The ceiling oppressed him. It was artex-coated and inscribed with a series of allegedly regular half circles. He tore his eyes away, disturbed by the brutal mess masquerading as order.

He slid out of the bed and quietly disentangled his clothes. As he dressed, he glimpsed himself, insomnia-haggard, in the dressing table mirror. The surface of the glass was finger-smearred and breath-muddied. Was everything in the world this dirty? He scribbled a note. "Gone for a walk, back soon, Pete". Should that be "Love Pete", should the note be prefixed by "Darling"? He didn't know, friendship had turned to desire with an abruptness that was far more shocking than even his trip to the other side had been.

Outside there was grey-sky and raw, damp cold. Atwood zipped up his Barbour, shoved his hands in his pockets and set off down the street. It was still only seven am and few people were about. The grey deepened, the breeze stiffened. There was rain in the air.

He could see it.

Astonished, he stumbled to a halt. He could see the moisture in the atmosphere; bright, sharp splinters of it, mingled with the dust that scraped and hissed all around him, abrading his skin, scratching his throat.

He turned up his collar, shoved his hands more deeply into his pockets and put his head down, like a man stumbling into a blizzard. His downcast eyes picked out the cracks, flaws and misalignments of the paving at his feet. A car rushed past, loud with the rhythmic pattering of its pistons.

There was a newsagent at the end of the street, a monstrosity of glass and green-painted-wood that offered some form of sanctuary. Atwood hurried the last few yards and pulled open the filth-encrusted, out-of-true, door. An electronic bell squawked a harsh two-tone blast.

Inside was a cramped confusion of filth and sound.

The fluorescent lights hummed and crackled loudly. The breathing of the assistant, a teenage girl wearing a blinding green tabard over her roll neck jumper was laboured and chesty. She smoked and there was already damage, he could hear it in the working of her lungs. He could smell it too, even from here by the door, the stale ashtray scent of the nicotine addict, melded with the other odours of print, paper, glue, dust, sweat, menstrual bleeding...his stomach recoiled.

He couldn't go in there.

He had to go in there.

Into the shop, fixing his attention on the newspapers. Dirty they were, grubby with print, finger marks, and fibres from packaging. He snatched up an "Independent". The paper was greasy to the touch, coarse beneath an illusion of smoothness. The print was blotchy, irregular and difficult to read. He took it to the counter, the girl glared at him through her mask of makeup.

As he fumbled coin from his wallet, his ears were pounded by the rattle of her lungs, the relentless thundering of her heart. He gagged at the stench of the place. He felt dizzy, faint, couldn't find the right money, couldn't think. Hands slippery, fingers stiff, he dumped a handful of coins onto the counter and fled.

Into a sensory tornado; sound, smell, dazzling glare, a jagged, desolate wilderness of uneven ground, out of square buildings, of filth and stain and countless living things, in the air, on every surface. Squirring, writhing things, spreading, birthing, dying, lashing against his face, into his eyes, into his nostrils as he shambled back towards Carol's flat

Careful to breathe through his nose, the taste of the air making him nauseous, Atwood rang Carol's doorbell, then waited on the landing, leaning on the wall, arms locked, palms splayed against the painted brick, trying to calm himself, to understand what was happening to him. It was as if he was seeing the world for what it was. It was as if he didn't belong here anymore.

The door opened. He looked up to see Carol, still in her dressing gown, and not much else by the look of it. She smiled, made to hug him. Atwood stumbled back, an involuntary movement, his cry was instinctive too.

She was...dirty. Scraps of make-up clung to her face, her pores leaked fluids, her flesh was ingrained with muck of all kinds. She stank of sweat, semen, of other juices and excretions. When she spoke, her voice was a grating rasp. "What's wrong?"

"Something's happening to me...Call Andy..."

She led him into the squalor of her home, sloshing through the dank mud of bacteria that seethed in the pile of the hall carpet, then helped him onto the bed. She made to pull off his shoes, but he yelped in pain as his socks scraped at his skin.

"Leave me, please, please leave me alone. Just call Andy."

He lay on top of the duvet, a titanic Gulliver in a sea of Lilliputian micro-life that swirled towards him, hungry for his flesh, his blood, seeking the warm ori-

fices that gave entrance to his body. They dropped from the ceiling, swarmed the walls. He could feel them, taste them, hear them.

Carol moved into view, showering Atwood with a steady fall of skin flakes. Things crawled in her hair, bubbled from her nostrils and between her lips.

"It's okay, it's alright," she murmured in her rasping, whining voice. She stroked his forehead, her sandpaper palm tearing across his skin. He gasped in pain. She flinched back. "Peter, what's happening to you?"

"Some sort of effect," he managed. The vibration of speech sawed at his throat. "Delayed shock...Don't know. Everything hurts."

He lay back. He closed his eyes. In the pain-filled dark, sounds drove in at him, blood-roar, the working of his lungs, the thundering of his heart, the rage of traffic, the scuttle and rustle of living things.

Open again. Carol was returning, from somewhere, the phone probably. Carol...A bulbous, sac of life fluid and organs, a tent of flesh and muscle propped up by a creaking skeleton of mouldering bone, diseased, dripping and exhaling excretion, engulfed in a cloud of swirling bacteria.

Atwood covered back as the Carol-thing lurched across to the bed. She was issuing choking gagging sounds, speech. She reached out for him with an ichor-dripping claw. He wrenched himself away, rolling in an agony of scraping and sliding, slamming into the floor. Something blundered round the bed towards him, a mound of living filth, a shambling monstrosity of blood and decaying flesh. It bore down on him, its gagging and choking desperate now. It fell on him, attempted to smother him, its touch was pain. Atwood scabbled at the bedside cabinet, his fist closed about something heavy, a lamp. He swept it down onto – into – the thing's head. It fell. No, melted, dissolved to the floor at his feet. Merging with the writhing roiling masses filling the carpet. It moved feebly. It mewled. He hit it again. bone cracked, fluids splashed.

Carol...God no...Carol!

He hauled himself to his feet. A furnace of sunlight burned his eyes as he fumbled at the window catch...

4

There was grass under his feet, a river rolling by, warmth on his face. A gentle wind tousled his hair...Hair? He glanced down at

himself, he had a body, his own, clad in the shirt jeans and Barbour he had been wearing when he had...He looked up. The sky was empty. No sun, no clouds, no vapour trails or birds. Only that astounding blue.

The trees sighed, the grass whispered. Peter Atwood chuckled. Still telling those trees things they shouldn't know? He turned his attention to the further riverbank.

Someone was there...A woman with long, lush red-gold hair, wearing a dressing gown and little else. Carol...

He took a step towards the water, and saw that she was crying. "You can't," she said. "Pete, you can't cross. You don't belong here. You don't belong anywhere." She turned away, covering a sob with her right hand. "You stayed too long, crossed the line... We... We shouldn't have brought you back... Too many things were broken."

"Of course I belong here. I'm dead for Christ's sake," he shouted. "I belong here with you, Carol! With my mother and father, with everybody I've ever lost."

She shook her head, unable to speak, crying freely now, shoulders hunched, hands limp by her sides.

Atwood stumbled towards the river, ran –

The water cried with a voice that was a thousand voices and reared out of the pebbled bed and shimmered before him, a vast, translucent wall, veined, pulsing. Screaming Atwood drove himself into the barrier, penetrating for a moment, engulfed in a womb of damp, thrumming warmth. Then he was hurled backwards –

Into pain.

A white, blazing hell of agony shot through with the flash of blue light and radio crackle. The tarmac was hard under his shattered skeleton, his strewn vitals, faces peered down at him, vile, filth-ridden masks of skin on bone. Something, uniformed, jumped back; "Jesus Christ," it rasped. "The poor bastard's alive! He's bloody well alive!"



**'Once Again', Allen McGill**  
(Winner, Flashes of Darkness Competition, 2005)

Brendan's chest muscles hurt from tightening them against the cold. His face was pained. Blinking back tears forced from beneath his eyelids, he trudged his way through slush and snow, as wind and sleet plummeted from a black sky.

Two more blocks to go. Jesus, he thought, I hate working nights at this time of year. New York winters are bad enough during the day, but nights are worse when you can't see where you're going.

He pulled the stocking cap farther down over his ears, grasping its sides with his knitted gloves. Christ, it's bitter! he thought, and grasped the lapels of his overcoat even tighter.

The coffee shop was on the right, so he shuffled toward it with a slight swagger, intended to counteract the wind's force. He usually stopped for coffee on his way to his job at Madison Square Garden, where he worked as a janitor. He could get it free there, but so many freeloaders milled about that it took too long. He didn't like being that close to people anyway. Didn't trust them.

"Big night, tonight, huh?" the counterman called, drawing coffee from the spigot. "All the political honchos in town." He nodded toward the tv.

Brendan looked. He never watched tv, except for nature shows. Didn't like watching people. The screen was a live broadcast from the Garden, a political rally in the main auditorium. He was about to look away when the announcer introduced the "Speaker of the Evening."

Brendan didn't hear who it was—his hearing died the moment he saw the Speaker approach the podium. He gaped at the screen, eyes and mouth wide. Him! No! Couldn't be!

He stared at the man's eyes, remembering when he'd first seen them, many years ago. Brendan had heard sounds from his sister's room and went to investigate. The man was on top of her, attacking her, mauling her naked body. Grunts and groans filled the bedroom.

The blood rushed to Brendan's face, heat supplanting the cold he'd brought in with him. Hot furious tears flowed, frenzied thoughts scrambling his mind.

This couldn't be the same guy—but it was! That other guy was dead. Brendan had killed him in a blind rage, stabbed him over and over with his sister's scissors while she shrieked and cried and begged him to stop.

Yeah, he'd killed him, all right, tore out his eyes and slashed at his face until he no longer looked human. Brendan had been covered with blood.

They'd sent Brendan away for what he'd done, for years and years. This couldn't be the same guy. It wasn't possible—but there he was, smiling, waving, making a show of himself. And not a scar to be seen.

The tumultuous thoughts and emotions began to

sort themselves out. No scars. Well, I'll have to do something about that, won't I? Back home, us good old boys know how to handle fuckers who lay hands on our sisters.

He paid for the coffee and made his way around back to the Garden's employee entrance. His mind was awl with memories, thoughts, confusion, unmindful of the weather that beat at him with every step.

He waved his ID at the guard at the door, underwent a cursory frisking and headed through the maze of passageways and down the stairwells to the caretakers' locker room. It was empty. He sat to think, wondered about his sister again. He'd never seen her since that night, had been told she was afraid of him. But, why? He'd protected her. He wouldn't hurt his big sister. She was his angel. His parents were never the same toward him either. Hardly ever visited. Moved before he got released. He'd been on his own for years now, never staying in one place very long.

And it was all HIS fault! Son-of-a-bitch had ruined Brendan's life. How often he'd gone over that night, time and again, year after year. The stabbing, the gouging, the... He felt himself getting hard again. No. Not now. Plans. Must make plans.

Some of the early shift came into the room, changing into street clothes without a word, knowing he wouldn't answer them anyway.

"I'll take the rear section," he announced, as the late shift guys showed up. They showed surprise. Brendan rarely spoke and never had a preference as to where he wanted to work. They just nodded, or shrugged.

Brendan listened carefully to the intercom that fed all sound from upstairs. He'd been exposed to this type of brouhaha before and knew just about when to expect the meeting would normally break.

When the locker room was empty, Brendan checked the wall clock. Should be just about time. He went down the hall to the pay phone and dialed 911. A moment later, he hung up brusquely and returned to the locker room. As he dug into his toolbox, the sound from the auditorium erupted into what a volcanic eruption must sound like. "Stay calm," being yelled repeatedly over all the commotion.

Quite calmly, Brendan climbed a back stairway to a rear passage off the main floor, near the emergency exit. He entered a utility room, closing the door behind him, leaving it cracked so he could see along the corridor. *This time*, he thought, determined.

The Speaker's eyes showed terror as Brendan rushed him from the door, but just for a moment. They rolled back into his head as the screwdriver was jammed under his chin and up through his skull into his brain.

"Stay dead!" Brendan shouted, as he was dragged to the floor. "I've killed you six times now. Stay dead!"

**'Bottom Drawer', Brett Alexander Savory**  
(Prizewinner, Mirrormask/Flashes of Darkness Competition, 2005)

In my office is a desk.

My desk contains three drawers, each slightly bigger than the one above it. The top drawer is where I keep my stationery; the middle drawer contains mainly instruction manuals for my computer, a scientific calculator, and other devices; and the bottom drawer is where I hide things.

Four years ago, when job stress got to be too much, I hid a bottle of whiskey in this bottom drawer. Hid it, but never touched it. It's still there, unopened, pushed to the back. After that, I hid a handgun. It's loaded, sitting next to the whiskey, unused now for three years.

This worked for a little while, made things easier, knowing that when depression hit, I had some whiskey and a gun. I could take action.

If I wanted to.

But for the past year, it hasn't been enough, and I've realized that this stress has little to do with my job. I feel ashamed when I think of the whiskey bottle and the gun, because I know I'd never use them.

A few months ago, I started hiding receipts for mundane things, like movie tickets, wiper blades, bags of chips, DVDs, everything.

Until last week, when I decided to use my bottom drawer to hide more important things, things that *deserved* to be next to the whiskey bottle and the gun.

In a tiny envelope, beside the bottle, I carefully

placed my dream that I'd find someone to share my life with. In another envelope, I breathed my sexual secrets, licked the glue along the envelope's flap, tucked it snugly under the gun.

I filled the middle of the drawer with pages of conversations written in longhand—discussions, as well as I can remember them, with people no longer in my life. I stapled these together, grouped by association.

Friend, parent, lover, child.

I wrapped my love for my children in elastic bands, left it near the front of the drawer, so I could find it easily. So that on very bad days, my hand would touch this knotted bundle before finding the items at the back.

At night, when people drifted lazily out the doors to their successful lives, I locked my top two drawers, but always left the bottom drawer unlocked—and slightly open, maybe a quarter of an inch.

I wanted someone to open it. A nosy cleaning lady. A curious co-worker. Maybe they'd be inspired to add things of their own, wrap little pieces of their lives in stationery, nestle them next to my secrets. Hiding who they really were, who they really wanted to be, just to make life easier.

But every morning, I'd come into the office, and no one had opened it; no one had touched a thing.

Last night, after work, I opened my bottom drawer, leaned over and pushed down with both hands, shoved it all as far back as possible.

Let them try now. Let them work for it. Let them sweat. Courage takes work.

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**'Backward Planning', John Young**  
(Prizewinner, Mirrormask/Flashes of Darkness Competition, 2005)

Someone handed me a rope and stepladder and pointed at an oak tree.

But before that, someone handed me a match. I don't remember who. I struck it on my tooth, spat out the residue, and dropped the flame in a stream of gasoline. Substances mingled and the fire darted toward my lawn. Neighbors had gathered to watch, but I was as lonely as winter.

Everything important was on the lawn: books, photographs, marriage certificates, divorce papers, pink slip to the car, degrees, title to my house. All gone. Just like that.

I was told I would feel liberated—that I would experience revelation once freed from the material world. But, I think they missed something. Me, my material.

Before that, someone handed me a brochure. A colorful thing, really. It spoke of friends, communities, people like me who had it with this life and were ready for something better, something real. It had directions. Call this number, or visit this web site. I did both. They were right back to me. I listened to a woman on the phone and her words sang; her silences inspired; her reassurance of discounted toll charges comforted me.

Then there were visits to the colony, and then the levitating, and then the moment was right.

Still, before that, things really fell apart. Cindy left me. But before that, Cathy left me when she learned about Cindy. Before that is fuzzy.

Kind of like the stuff growing on the side of this oak tree. Fuzzy, green and spongy.

Then there was a pat on the back, a kick of the stepladder, and then nothing after that.

## The Speculative Meme-Pool

So here's the idea, friends: in the absence of a proper non-fiction item this issue, we're setting up a new feature, which we hope to come back to if there's any interest. The "Speculative Meme-Pool" is a primordial soup of ideas into which you may drop any thoughts you have had, and from which you may draw if any of the ideas therein inspire you. (It would be nice if you would credit the Meme-Pool and the original contributor if your work is ever published, but we can't insist on that as you can't copyright an idea...)

This is all sort of in the spirit of Jorge Luis Borges, who used sometimes to come up with ideas that were too long for him to be bothered to write out completely—or even that sounded good as an idea, but wasn't the sort of thing he was ever going to write. So an idea for a novel, for example, would appear only as a book review (giving the impression that the non-existent book had already been written, perhaps), or as a précis of the novel, with character sketches and plot summary only, as in 'Theme of the Traitor and the Hero' (1944).

Please send your ideas, therefore, to [nonfiction@futurefire.net](mailto:nonfiction@futurefire.net)—but only if you are sure you don't mind someone else stealing it. We have posted a few ideas of our own below, as a starting-point:

### Peter Saracen

(Danny Hydrus)

I just read an encyclopedia entry about a little known twelfth-century knight apparently named "Peter Saracen", who was based in Rome and was on the payroll of two successive kings of England. His name even found its way into an English medieval church prayerbook, probably while he was visiting the country on some business. Presumably this good Christian, crusading knight was not actually a Saracen—so where, I ask myself, does his name come from? No etymology is offered, leaving it to our (unscholarly) imagination.

Was he perhaps so formidable and ferocious a warrior that he became known as "Peter Saracen-slayer" for his feats in battle? This name perhaps shortened to the less bloodthirsty version for use in church... Or was he perhaps a diplomat, given this name as a badge of honour by some Saracen king, and continued to use it later in life? Or a childish nickname given because of his dusky, mediterranean complexion? Or were there perhaps Arab Christians in Rome at this time? The possibilities are near endless...

I'd love to see a story (maybe in the vein of *Baudolino*, but needn't be as absurdist or postmodern) in which Peter Saracen appears as a character, and his actions and adventures reflect this ambiguity of his name, allowing for several or all of these possibilities. What a great character he'd be.

### The Viral Meme AI

(Johann Carlisle)

My idea is based on the now-commonplace notion that within the multiple, near-neural networks of the Internet a virus could evolve, unseen and unnoticed, but of such complexity that it would effectively be alive, an artificial intelligence that could even take over entire nodes of the network and force humanity to interact with it. Fred Pohl used this basic idea in *Man Plus* as far back as 1976, and I'm sure it's even older than that. (I remember an article by Richard Dawkins making the same point, probably in the late 1980s.) This idea is then kind of combined with the idea of a virus in the human mind (e.g.—but not only—Neal Stephenson's 1992 novel *Snow Crash*) to form a new premise: if it is possible to conceive of an artificial intelligence that is pure information, and parasitic on the information-bearing mechanism that carries it, namely the Internet, then could not such an intelligence also adapt itself (or copies of itself) to exist on other information-platforms, such as the human brain, or more to the point, the network of brains that is the human meme-pool?

The story might go something like this: intelligence starts communicating with humans, or becomes noticed in some other way, by its activities. At first we think it's an alien, but then we realise it's a terrestrial viral AI. So we think, "Shit, how we gonna clean this thing out of the networks? We can't reboot and uninstall the whole internet..." Plans are devised—with great difficulty since any computer is potentially, and probably, infected, including communication and other technological devices—but even this proves pointless in the end as the lifeform is not just in the wires, as it were, but wired into our heads, and we don't yet know how to write anti-virus software for the meme-pool.

But at this point I realise that this isn't the kind of story I'm going to write, so I leave it at the idea stage, and maybe someone else will like it...

### Bird flu...

(anonymous)

The concept is that an invading alien species has engineered a version of themselves into the DNA code of a virus inflecting the apparently dominant, free, and most mobile species visible on the planet: winged migrating birds. This virus is genetically engineered to evolve and subtly to modify the species in question over time, until the aliens have effectively taken control. But soon they realise their mistake, that the species they have infected are not in fact the planet rulers, and that taking control of ducks and geese won't win them much command of the Earth. So they start to subtly modify their own virulence in the hope of crossing the species barrier and infecting humans...

### **Alien ring colony**

(Westley Nan)

The story begins with a community of colonists on an alien planet, making their new homes on thick vegetation growing on the dark, inner surface of a Halo-like hub world. At first these colonists could be human, as we hear of their travails on this new, inhospitable, dangerous, methane-based world and their relationships with one another. But it soon transpires that they are totally alien, an almost unrecognisable species neither carbon-based nor from our galaxy, although the location of their new world is unclear.

These aliens have something like a hive mind, although this doesn't stop their society from being hierarchical and riven with conflict, as we learn by example in very scathing and satirical terms. Eventually, we learn (no more than 3/4 of the way through the story, as it would be a duff punchline) that the new homes they are inhabiting are actually the hairs growing around the rim of a human arsehole. The final portion of the story piles on the farce as the hostile environment is described in more detail.

As you can appreciate, I'm not putting my name to this story.

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## **Reviews**

**Andrew Hook, *Beyond Each Blue Horizon*. 2005. King's Lynn: Crowswing Books. Pp. 211. ISBN 1905100043. £20.00.**

Reviewed by Djibril

Having read a few stories by Hook before, which I found to be refreshingly original, uncompromisingly provocative, and daringly intelligent, I was looking forward to reviewing this collection. If I may have found myself at times slightly disappointed—or, perhaps, rather disenchanting—with the reading experience, I can certainly nevertheless say that none of the twenty-one pieces in this volume gave me any cause to change that original assessment of this successful small-press author. Nearly half of the stories in this book are previously unpublished or rewritten, a commendably high proportion for collections of this kind. As is to be expected, some of the new stories are of more variable quality than the published ones, but this is by no means the rule.

So, for example, one unpublished piece, 'Kiosk B', feels a little rough at the edges, containing more typos and grammatical infelicities than usual (and the occasional such error creeps into most stories). The story follows what seems to be a half-dreamt "prototype detective", who is hired for the apparently impossible mission of tracking down a lost little girl and a hooker in a (?sentient) city that is hiding them. As happened more than once, the character's confusion spilled over into the reader perhaps more than it should have, and one wonders if this story might not have benefitted from the leave-it-for-six-months-and-then-rewrite treatment.

On the other hand another previously unpublished story, 'Honey Ward', is one of the better pieces in the volume. This tale tells of a bent cop (a character type that recurs in Hook's oeuvre) blackmailed by a prosperous crimelord into investigating the violation of his harem. Far from the roughness of the previous title, this story is very slick, superbly paced and slyly characterised—if somewhat heavy-handedly clichéd—and increasingly creepy and surreal as it progresses.

Another very strong story that has not appeared before (although it is accepted in an anthology, so I suppose not strictly speaking unedited) is 'Fen Shui', which, despite the unpromising cheap pun of the title, is both inventive, vivid, and convincing. A time-travel story, which side-steps but does not ignore the paradox that is the dull staple of clichéd speculative fiction, in which the complementary principles of *feng shui* and *hado* are applied to repair damage caused by a nuclear explosion in the Norfolk fens of the eighteenth century. Although less fully fleshed out than elsewhere, the characters in this story are among the most sensitive and compassionate that Hook has created.

I have reviewed the story 'Alsiso' as part of the collection in which it appears in an earlier issue of this magazine, so will say little about it here, except to note that this excellent story of a sado-masochistic, crooked cop does not stand out as quite so unusual in this collection as it did in the anthology.

While several of the stories in this volume are impersonal in their observation of the quirkiness of modern life, and therefore feel cold and amoral, 'Only the Lonely' immerses us in a man's miserable existence without sacrificing empathy. The middle-aged, unemployed protagonist, who is trapped in a loveless (but, somewhat repulsively, not sexless) marriage, begins to witness the ghostly re-enactment of girls' suicides in the area surrounding his home. Loneliness, desperation, and day-to-day, unglamorous sensuality are sketched with breathtaking efficiency of style and simple sensitivity.

'One Day all this will be Fields' is another powerful story, a dystopian nightmare that begins, without introduction, with a man and a child scavenging in the landscape of a ravaged city. In a post-liberal world populated by gangs obsessed with racial purity, where most countries (including the UK, where the action is set) practice merciless ethnic cleansing and forced repatriation, the protagonist is trying to protect his mixed-race son, while living in a refugee/internment camp. As matters become worse and worse, our hero starts to question whether it is in fact the children who

most need protecting...

Perhaps the most effective piece here, 'Pregnant Sky' is the story of a reporter staying in a city in which the entire population has been sterilised in atonement (or retribution?) for some unstated atrocity. This mass sterilisation is seen as a form of slow suicide, since the population will die in a generations time: already there are no children below the age of fifteen or so. As a result the people have no future, no hope, no love; their only pleasure in the instant gratification of desire. Pornography and promiscuity are rife, but largely joyless, and moral outrage seems entirely absent. The protagonist seduces a young bereaved girl he meets at her fiancé's funeral, and tries to convince her that her townspeople's elective infertility is immoral. I am not convinced by the morality of the tale, but the observation of human character is unflinching and beautiful.

The title story, which comes last in the collection, 'Beyond Each Blue Horizon', follows a house of students on the run-up to election day in a stereotypically un-free country (which may be yours). As quiet but sinister repression of rights of assembly, speech and opinion intensify, people start to disappear. The result is that Ludo, a foreign student who does not vote anyway, finds himself more and more alone. With a glorious, typically surreal ending to this almost Marquezian tale, the book ends on as high a note as it conceivably could.

I have commented here on some of the most important pieces in this collection, but it should by no means be assumed that the others are all inferior or less worthy of attention. Hook almost unflinchingly brings his keen eye for detail to play on scenarios in which quite ordinary, fallible but sympathetic people are put in only slightly unusual situations which

quickly spiral out in unexpected, not to say surreal, directions. There are several themes that recur in these stories: on the most superficial level is the theme of sexuality—all but one or two stories in this collection contain some explicit, often transgressive although never pornographic, sexual activity in fairly prominent place. Loneliness or disaffection from normal society also occur often enough to draw attention: characters may be loners, or criminals, or victims; paranoid crooked cops, or quirky private detectives; invalids, students, fugitives, or perverts; everyone has something to set them apart. (But then, doesn't everyone?) And as often as not it is the removal of normal societal controls that makes these people different, not any flaw in their own characters. This is the fiction of the weird, speculative in the purest sense; most of it is not "sci-fi".

In fact this eccentricity and taste for the bizarre, which is the strength behind Hook's powerful writing, may be the very element that led to my early concern that this book was not appealing to me as much as his individual stories do. Hook's stories are best read alone, in a magazine or anthology full of more staid stories by other speculative authors, where they will glitter and stand out as refreshing, challenging, prodigious. In a collection like this they are too bright, it is impossible to read several stories at a single sitting and still appreciate each for the ground-breaking reality-bend that it should be. If you buy this book—and I strongly recommend that you do—then the best way to read it is to treat yourself to at most one story a day, with other reading in between to resensitise your imagination for the broiling Hook is going to give you afresh each time.

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**Charles Stross. *Accelerando*. USA: Ace: New York, 2005. Pp. 400. ISBN 0441012841. \$24.95 / UK: Orbit: London. Pp. 448. ISBN 1841493902. £16.99.**

Reviewed by Djibril

This novel is a strange combination of apocalyptic cyberpunk future-shock, and a classic multi-generational epic across time and space. The generations, of course, criss-cross and turn back on themselves as eigen-parents and alternative selves meet in simulations within informational worlds; and the future is less de Garis-style apocalyptic than no-less-shocking speculative revelation. By the last third of this nine-chapter work (which appeared in as many instalments in *Asimov's SF Magazine* between 2001 and 2004), the reader should be prepared for more dizzying twists and vertiginous scene changes, but this reviewer was disoriented every time. In some cases it took longer to learn to empathise with a new generation, than it took to move on to yet another again, which made some chapters less successful than they might have been.

The dynasty begins (and, inevitably, but in a most

peculiar way, ends) with Manfred Macx, an early twenty-first century visionary thinker who registers half a dozen patents before breakfast (most of them signed over to the Free Infrastructure Foundation) and whose business is inventing technologies and business models that make other people rich. Although he has almost no money or property to his name, Macx lives on the combination of his clients' gratitude and his reputation and Credibility Rating. This last is much to the distress of his fiancée and dominatrix Pamela, who works for the IRS and believes that he is cheating the government in millions of tax dollars by refusing to make money himself. While Manfred extends his consciousness through a metacortex of software agents, most of which are outside of his body, Pamela is a hyperconservative, family values, religious, meatbody human. This is to be a marriage made in hell, and Pamela is probably the most perfect villain ever devised in literature, especially terrifying because the hero finds her so irresistible. But it is not Manfred but their daughter Amber (cryogenically frozen shortly after fertilisation and born years later) who is to suffer

the most from Pamela's obsessions and abusive need for absolute control.

This is not the first book Stross has written about the concept of a rapidly approaching singularity, in this case the point in time when the critical mass of available processing power overtakes the combined human brain and changes the world forever from a human-controlled to a digitally inhabited one. There are several such singularities in this novel, points of no return, encounters with both human-created and alien intelligences and economies that immeasurably surpass ourselves. Possibly the most ambitious book I have read, when it occasionally does fall short of excellence, it fails magnificently.

*Accelerando*, like other novels we have reviewed

recently, is simultaneously published in print by a major publisher, and released online under a Creative Commons license (by-nc-nd 2.5). Stross is well-versed in emergent technologies and the Open Source movement, and the developments in this novel are true "Hard SF", the computing and physics alike starting with scientific principles that are only a historic instant away from being achievable, and extending them in plausible, well-thought out, but wildly speculative directions.

Whatever its flaws and however esoteric the references and jokes might become, this is a book that should be read by anybody who thinks they know what the future will be like. It may just make you think again.

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***Trunk Stories* #3 November 2005. Hang Fire Publications. Pp. 44. \$4.00.**

Reviewed by Djibril

This small format, independently produced, small press magazine is well put together, original and daring, and very good value for money. We have not seen the first two issues (although issue #2 apparently comes in a "pop-up special edition"! ). All of the stories and non-fiction are very short, with the single exception of the opening piece, which runs to sixteen pages including the effective, childlike illustrations. Some, although by no means all, of the shorter pieces seem a trifle incomplete, as though hurriedly put together or lacking much by way of direction, but they are none of them a complete waste of space, and the collection clearly represents the eclectic editorial tastes, which it would be unfair to expect this reviewer to share completely.

Carole Lanham's 'The Good Part', the longest story, is part vampire tale and part the story of kids growing up isolated in the hicks, their dreams, fears, loves, hates, and fantasy fulfilments being closer to reality than in most people's lives. This is a convincing story, well told and deeply unsettling, the youth of the protagonists lending both an unreal quality and notes of tragedy. Not an easy read, at the end of the day, but a worthwhile one.

Other stories are much shorter: Nate Southard's 'Silent Corners'—about a music engineering student whose hunt for the silent spot in his room becomes dangerously obsessive—and Michael Northrop's 'Unvincible'—are both complete stories with plot, tension, and resolution achieved in two or three pages. Neil Ayres' 'The Tamer', on the other hand, is a two page story about a girl feeding mince to a meat-rook; the main character is nicely sketched and the writing is fine, although I was slightly bothered by the omniscient narrator intrusively becoming a character half-way through. William's Wilde's 'Manfleas' is likewise short, although it paints a far more surreal picture of anthropomorphic fleas being hunted down in fields. Both of these stories feel incomplete to this reader, as if they

started out with gratideas but didn't know where to take them. They are really vignettes rather than stories—but as vignettes they do work very well.

Brett Alexander Savory's 'Subliminal Verses' is perhaps the most subtle-surreal piece in this issue, leaving you with plenty to think about. It is fair to say that this piece—along with the two poems by Christoph Meyer and Kristine Ong Muslim—defies description and is best left for the reader to discover at first hand.

The two pieces of non-fiction in this issue are quirky and entertaining—no review articles or debates on the nature of weird literature here. 'Baby Secret', by Margaret Crocker is, creepily, a more-or-less verbatim transcription of the random whispers of a 1960s talking doll. This toy must have been pretty weird in any case, but taken out of context in this publication, it is pretty damn freaky! The second article, Veronica Schanoes' 'Why I hate Penn Station', is a discourse on the beauty of New York, on the history and culture of the railway, and a rant on the ugliness and inconvenience of the Pennsylvania Station itself. Now while it's true that Penn is a pretty shitty station, I can't imagine getting this emotional about it...

In summary, this is an enjoyable, quirky little publication. Maybe light-hearted, and on the short side at 44 pages, but good at the price. Reading it was certainly not a waste of time: there's a shortage of genuinely eccentric creativity out there, and *Trunk Stories* goes some way to redressing that.

***Whispers of Wickedness* 11. Winter 2005. D-Press. Pp. 60. £3.00 (£10.00 4-issue subscription)**

Reviewed by Djibril

The independent horror magazine *Whispers of Wickedness* has been published on paper for a few years now, in parallel with a thriving website (<http://www.ookami.co.uk/>) featuring short fiction and art, and one of the most lively literary bulletin boards I have seen. For the first ten issues of the paper magazine, *WoW* was distributed without charge, even the postage making the editor a loss (although D-Press chapbooks—three of which I reviewed in an earlier issue of this magazine—are charged a nominal price, and circulated through various international online distributors). It is fair to say that with issue 11, the first to charge a fair price on the cover, *Whispers of Wickedness* has come of age. At nearly twice the length of previous issues, with excellent production standards and a glossy cover, perfect bound; fiction, poetry, and other writing, as well as professional artwork, all of the standard we have come to expect, or even higher, this magazine is excellent value for money.

The opening story, 'Atoner' by Terry Gates-Grimwood (of whose work, it will be no surprise to learn, we are already fans here), is a dark, futuristic tale of social injustice, terrible vengeance, and horrifying, arachnid aliens. Beautifully constructed plot, with rising tension and the protagonist's genuine, tangible fear—both of the sadistic capital punishment he is avoiding, and of the voracious aliens he is sent to deal with by the sinister space-magnate—combine to make you both care, and genuinely worry about, the outcome of the tale. Although the aliens are justly slightly unconvincing in being almost identical to Terrestrial spiders, the story largely avoids cliché both in the delivery and the dénouement.

The second story is a perversely festive offering from small-press legend Peter Tennant. 'A Mother's Pride' shows us the poisonous small-mindedness of a petty bourgeois mother whose only son is about to marry—against her advice—an older woman with children by a previous union. Meeting the wickedly described "Anti-Claus" in a both sensuous and creepy dream, the depths of her superficiality are stripped bare for all to see. A typically irreverent and playful story, giving fresh life to several of the genres best clichés; very nicely done.

'Dead Animals' by Leo Siren is a moving story of a loyal but apathetic son, a mentally ill but harmless mother, and their lives that are turned upside down by the return to the fold of the troublesome older brother. Simple enough in concept, economical and colloquial in execution, the story builds to a believable climax and holds it, leads to a rounded conclusion rather than

treating it as a punchline like so many stories do.

Alison J. Littlewood offers us 'Pretend That We're Dead', a first person narrative by a person obsessed with the idea of playing corpses on television, who progresses to playing dead in public in a uncanny combination of practical joke and performance art. The obsession with death—research for the role—borders sometimes on worrying psychosis, but on the whole we are left with the impression of a harmless, if pretty weird, hobby.

'The Reality Mechanic' by Sarah Dobbs is the story of a tractor mechanic in a small town, whose head is full of numbers, but is stricken dumb by grief and shame. Spending his life with only a lame, stray dog, and the ghost of a comatose girl for company, he is barely tolerated by the townsfolk for the same reason that he hides from himself. A story full of both pathos and hope, that promises and satisfies both in generous measure.

Traditionally this reviewer has been a staunch opponent of absurdist writing, of satire that descends into farce: I disliked both Wilde's *Portrait of Dorian Gray* and Susskind's *Perfume* for their lack of grace and subtlety. Upon first reading the work of Rhys Hughes, I thought it was going to be more of the same, but my open-mindedness in persisting was (unusually) rewarded by a much more subtle and clever class of absurdism than I had before encountered. 'The Candid Slyness of Scurrility Forepaws', while no less farcical, in places, is an even more delightful story, worthy of Umberto Eco at his best. I shall refrain from spoiling the reader's pleasure by saying anything more about this story—the title is all the clue you're getting from me—except to enjoin you, even if you read nothing else, to buy the magazine for this piece alone.

This issue also contains non-fiction by Aliya Whitely and Neil Ayres, poetry by Liam Davis, Alexis Child, and Florence Stanton, all of which are in the best *WoW* tradition: atmospheric, dark, unexpected, inventive, surreal, and/or readable. This is truly a magazine to compete on the small press stage, and I only hope it does nearly as well as it deserves.

**Jon Courtenay Grimwood, *9Tail Fox*. 2005. Gollancz. Pp. 336. ISBN 0575076151. £12.99**

Reviewed by Jehoshaphat

Grimwood's early work was hardcore cyberpunk, typified by the novels in the trilogy started by *neoAddix* (1997) and ending with *reMix* (1999—note the taste for camelCase); he was catapulted to fame by the excellent "alternative future" *Arabesk* series (2001-3). After the arguably less enthusiastic response to the complex and arty *Stamping Butterflies* (2004), *9tail Fox* is a return to high-octane form for this softly spoken but punk loving writer.

Detective Bobby Zha is called to interview an eleven year old girl after a burglar is shot whilst trespassing in her home. The other resident, her blind grandfather, is apparently the only person who could have physically shot the man, which Zha dismisses as extremely unlikely... The case is closed for 'political' reasons, but Zha, the dogged investigator full of stubbornness and resolve, continues to investigate the case. In the course of a different investigation, he is shot, and wakes up in the body of a wealthy young man who has been comatose for several years, since boyhood. Zha slowly comes to terms with what has happened, and eventually uses his cunning and the apparently limitless resources of his assumed identity to mix back into his life to answer the now many questions. We are treated to a tale of investigation, murder, intrigue and a very dark rendering of San Francisco. Throw in the shadow of reincarnation and you have the latest in Grimwood's repertoire in a nutshell.

This story takes unoriginal, stock sub plots (dogged investigator who can't let a case go, mired by a dysfunctional marital and personal life), and mingles unoriginal, stock science fiction / fantasy (dogged investigator wakes up from coma in another body and a new life) to create a story that is lush with originality, slick in both narrative and character development, and so well tailored that I found it a sublime pleasure to

read. The stylistic quirks may grate for some, but I found them refreshing. Throughout the book, there is a very subtly conveyed sense of uncertainty, both as the reader gets to know the character of the protagonist, and as Zha himself explores the facets of his persona that never really impressed upon him the hardly disputable fact that he is "a shit". You cannot help but sympathise with Zha, and forgive him for his faults: but he has many serious faults (adultery, selfishness and a scheming nature among them).

Zha is not a character that should be classed in quite the same league as Sergeant Bruce Robertson of Irvine Welsh's *Filth*, but the natures of the two men bear comparison in the area of self-loathing and unhappiness (mainly derived from the mess their personal lives are in). There is a detachment in the way that Zha is described and developed, and this detachment persists throughout the development of all the characters. Their nuances and depth leave you with a powerful sense of familiarity and make you utterly convinced of their reality, though they feel like shadows of people: not shallow or hollow, but in an eerie, almost ethereal fashion because they are perceived primarily through the eyes of a seemingly reincarnated man in a new body. Eerie and unsettling, the allusions to folklore as Zha continues along his journey unsurprisingly add to the other-worldliness of the story, but are surprisingly powerful mainly because they are not overdone.

I was very impressed with the portrayal of San Francisco. Although Grimwood spent time there for research, he makes it clear in his disclaimer that he has provided a fictitious representation of San Francisco and Chinatown. I—admittedly unfamiliar with either location—found the atmosphere of both places nonetheless overwhelmingly real. This sort of thing is what Grimwood does best, and *9tail Fox* brings us a veritable treat, worthy both of general attention and a critical eye.

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***The Call of Cthulhu*, Dir. Andrew Leman**

HP Lovecraft Historical Society / HPLHS Motion Pictures

Starring: Matt Foyer, David Mersault, Noah Wagner, Chad Fifer.

Reviewed by Djibril

This is a silent, black and white movie presented in the manner of a 1920s motion picture, with everything from the overuse of eye-shadow to the shaky sets and stop motion animation (via the use of brief intertitles for dialogue) adding to the authenticity of this illusion. At forty-seven minutes, *The Call of Cthulhu* is also shorter than a modern Hollywood movie, and fact that is belied by its epic scope. The action, as anyone who has read Lovecraft's story knows, moves from Boston, to Greenland, to New Orleans, to New Zealand and Australia, to Norway, and back to the USA. Scenes are set in hospitals and manor houses, in a frightful

swamp, on storm-tossed ships, and on a mysterious sunken island in the South Pacific. Given the limited budget and largely amateur cast of this production, it is a testament to their devotion and ingenuity that this range of settings were able to be presented without embarrassing weakness, even given the use of the Mythoscope® technique (which involves a combination of primitive shooting techniques with green-screen, digital layering and compositing, and re-mastering to create a 1920s motion picture feel).

By cinematic standards this is a simple enough story: the hero (Foyer)—who narrates the events, mostly at second hand, to his psychiatrist—has inherited from his great-uncle an investigation into mysterious events surrounding the cult of Cthulhu. An artist's fevered dreams of old gods, a police investigation into a murderous cult in a Louisiana bayou, and a report of a raving, shiprecked sailor combine to reveal the un-

speaking truth about the Great Old One who lies sleeping in his undersea home of R'lyeh. As usual in Lovecraftian tales, the discovery of this reality is enough to make the investigator lose his sanity, and the moral seems to be that we should be better off if we did not try to learn the truth about the enormity and inhumanity of the universe.

It has been said that Lovecraft stories are very hard to film in the Hollywood style, and poor efforts such as *Re-Animator* (1985), *From Beyond* (1986), and *Dagon* (2001) seem to support the argument. This film, however, made and supported by fans rather than Californian moneymen, proves that it can be done, and with almost no budget, but a large helping of dedication and a degree of faithfulness to the text that Hollywood will never achieve. *The Call of Cthulhu* is also a very funny production, without descending into campiness or farce like the musical productions the HPLHS team have created in the past.

At no point in this film were the special effects distracting from the entertainment or the suspension of

disbelief. Even the dream sequences and the crazy geometry of the island of R'lyeh, which were visibly made of shaky cardboard were, in the context of the grainy black and white pictures, acceptable. The stop-motion Cthulhu was the only moment when less might have been more, as the writhing face-tentacles and groping claws were really not very scary (but the deaths of the gibbering, fleeing sailors more than compensated for this). Even the acting, which in a low-budget, non-professional film is often the single most damaging weakness, was glossed over by the 1920s effects—the make-up, the absence of voices, and the exaggerated expressions were all true to the genre.

If you have ever been a fan of Lovecraftian literature or the Cthulhu mythos—or for that matter of the silent horror movie—go and buy this film. You'll love it. Even if you are not such a fan, go to the HPLHS website and buy it anyway. It's not expensive, and the hilarious "making of" featurette alone is worth the cover price.

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***Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence*, Dir. Mamoru Oshii**  
Studio Ghibli / Buena Vista

Starring: Akio Otsuka, Atsuko Tanaka, Koichi Yamadera

Reviewed by Ixthus

Like its predecessor, *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* is a feast for the senses, perhaps to the point of gluttony. Mixing traditional hand-drawn animation with three dimensional CGI and two- and three-dimensional compositing and post-processing, *Innocence* is technologically very similar to Oshii's prior film. The mixture is skilfully woven together so that not even the overly specular reflections from some of the 3D rendered objects clash with the sparse cel-shaded visuals of the classic Anime style. Mapping hand-drawn scenery onto three-dimensional scenes allows the camera to move fluidly through a shot without appearing to contrast too heavily with the action in the foreground. A technique often referred to as "Bloom" (added as part of the post-processing) pushes the over-bright segments of each frame into its surroundings, blending away much of the obvious friction between the old techniques and the new. Bloom is used to wonderful effect. Cityscapes bathed in sunlight exude rich, warm colours. Dim and dingy alleyways are countered by research labs where sterile, overly-lit environments bring the cold, clinical aspects of research into cybernetics and genetics into view. The contrast is in the material, not in the techniques or the medium.

There is a sense that the bias has switched somewhat towards the use of 3D rendered CGI, and there are a few places where the low frame rate hand-drawn animation does become noticeable against the high frame rate overly-precise computer-generated media. In the 1995 film more emphasis was placed on compo-

siting two-dimensional media into wonderfully-paced collages. Anyone who has seen the stunning "Wandering The City" sequence in the middle of *Ghost in the Shell* will know exactly what I mean. In *Innocence* there is more emphasis on three-dimensional CGI, and not just in those segments designed to alert us to the impending information blizzard we are bringing on ourselves.

'Innocence' is a blur of visual, aural, and storyline elements. Just like so much in modern life it rarely gives you a moment to reflect, offering sights that you just wish you could just go back and take a closer look at. But by doing this you would be distracted from the current wonderment. There is a diverse soundtrack, and a frenetic story. When it does give you a quiet moment away from the action it starts injecting more of the philosophical questions.

In *Innocence*, the cyborg detective Batou, having been separated from his former partner Major Kusanagi—hero of the preceding movie—is teamed up with a younger cop. They are told to investigate a number of grisly deaths at the hands of a new series of robo-hooker.

The film primarily approaches the subject of what it means to be human. Are humans machines? Can a machine be human? By attempting to blur the boundaries of human and machine, it aims to break down any preconceptions the viewer may have and then hints at some of the questions we should be asking ourselves.

With aspects of the works of William Gibson, Neal Stephenson, Philip K Dick, among many others, the film is gruesome, disturbing, dark, sinister, and horrific. It is occasionally surprising, when the action and sensory overload lets up enough for you to do anything other than just observe open-mouthed. A few wonderful pieces of misdirection add a playful ele-

ment to the story, but it is the touching, human moments which really bring this creation to life.

Just like *Ghost In the Shell*, this film tolerates and rewards repeated viewings, giving access to added levels of meaning and subtlety each time. It doesn't try

to push any boundaries already extended in the first film, but rather to make sure that the viewer hasn't relaxed them, and it provides a cornucopia of story, visual, and auditory treats along the way.

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***Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*, Dir. Garth Jennings**

Touchstone Pictures

Starring: Martin Freeman, Mos Def, Zoëy Deschanel, Stephen Fry

Reviewed by Ixthus

This film was a long time coming. Ever since I first heard about the project—even though Douglas Adams was behind it—I had a sinking feeling. But what can you expect from someone who is irredeemably fused (for want of a better word) to the original two radio series. 'The Primary Phase' and 'Secondary Phase' are special directly because of the way that they came into being. They are funny and perverse and actually pretty dark at times, particularly the Secondary Phase. The fact that 'Fit The Twelfth' was raced across London to get to Broadcasting House a few minutes before it was to be transmitted feels very relevant here. Anything that came after the radio plays feels like it was allowed too much room. Like it was too intricately thought out.

1. The album is a pale imitation on the radio plays. Why it was recorded almost entirely from scratch is beyond me. If a new release was deemed absolutely necessary, it should at most have been edited to cut out some of the material in order to fit the double-album format.

2. The material was quite clearly not suited for books, and I am left with the sense that they were too well thought out. *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency* is an example of a story that is meticulously worked out and works fantastically in its medium exactly because of that. But it is not based on prior work. I think this is what Adams' was aiming for in putting *Hitchhikers* into novel form, but it just didn't work. It's the wrong material.

3. The TV series was okay. But again, it's the wrong medium. The main thing that was right about the TV series was The Book graphics. Probably due, again, to the amount of effort put in, and probably put in right down to the last possible minute. Each frame is intricately created by hand.

4. The new radio series? I love them for the homage they paid to Douglas Adams. I love them for the fact that they reunited a whole bunch of people who were involved in the various versions and a whole bunch of people who should have been involved. I love them because they must have been so much fun for all of these people to make. But they are just not quite the same. They come from the books, and I think Douglas was allowed too many cups of tea and too many baths when writing them.

5. What hope for a film, then?

The story is completely changed. There is precedent for this. In every incarnation something has been changed, from mere tinkering to replacement of whole sections. Perhaps not to this level, though. Intricately worked together, but completely different.

The acting, for the most part, made me cringe, and so many of the scenes feel like they are first masters of something that had not been rehearsed. It feels like the shooting was rushed through in about two days. Which is a shame, because I think Freeman, Nighy, and Rickman could do real justice to their parts, *if* they had just been given the time. As it turns out, Freeman's Arthur doesn't really have that mixture of "incensed Englishman" and complete disinterest that Simon Jones did so well in the radio show and the TV series. The casting of the American actors was poor, except possibly for the interesting choice of Mos Def for the part of Ford Prefect. The other roles fall equally flat.

The comic timing is totally off. Further than that, though, too often you feel you are about to see a new rendition of one of the classic gags from the radio or the TV versions, only to find that they are cut short. Like uttering the first line of a joke and just ignoring the second or the punchline. Even when you do get the full thing, it too often falls flat and the action continues almost as an embarrassed cover-up.

Stephen Fry does do an excellent job voicing The Book, and while The Book graphics are not a patch on the job that was done for the TV series, they retain the quirky, inventive feel, and are occasionally genuinely funny. The Vogons, however, which should be the ultimate in terminal frustration and ghastly poetry, just seem a little damp.

There are a number of little things that I did like. When the Heart of Gold escapes from the Vagon fleet, a subordinate is asked "Did they have proper hyper-space authorisation?" to which he replies with a gasp, "No, commander." When the Heart of Gold comes out of Infinite Improbability, there are a couple of very inventive quirks. The Point of View gun is interesting too, and particularly well mixed with another element of *Hitchhikers*, but I won't give that away. The Vogsphere section is original, imaginative, and I feel one of the best parts of the film. It is also really nice to see the original Marvin costume from the TV series popping up in a couple of the shots from this segment.

But instead of taking the best bits from the previous versions, some of the material that could so easily have been incorporated to keep the audience amused is sadly missing. When Deep Thought is discussing the time required to find the ultimate answer, a missed

opportunity from the TV series: "Seven and a half..." "What, not till next week?" "...Million...years." Which leaves that scene, like so many others, looking like it's an afterthought to explain the story rather than a one that is amusing in its own right. Another example is the Nutrimat: "almost, but not quite entirely, unlike tea" from the radio series is MIA, even though the opening for it is there. There are many other omissions like this. But this is only the tip of the iceberg. The Book is key, and is the transport for much of the humour, but this film makes it a second class citizen to the story and the action.

Overall? Take a decent idea, think about it too

much, add a few interesting points and some casting quirks, spend too little time on the shooting, spend the time you "saved" on adding flash special effects, and blend it into a farcical love story. Hey presto. There is, perhaps surprisingly, the occasional laugh-out-loud moment, and there are a number of things which I find I genuinely admire the film for. For Douglas Adams fans, there is enough to make you feel that it is at least a genuine attempt at a tribute to an intellect sadly taken from us. For people new to *Hitchhikers*, I would hope that it would be an inspiration to listen to the original radio series.

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***Suspect Zero*, Dir. E. Elias Merhige**

Intermedia Film / Lakeshore Entertainment

Starring: Ben Kingsley, Aaron Eckhart, Carrie-Anne Moss

Reviewed by North

Despite an extremely respectable cast—Kingsley in particular has been on very fine form in the last few years—a high body count and a passably intelligent script, this film does not seem to have been a big hit in theatres, and this reviewer first came across the DVD in the 'sale' section of Blockbusters. It is true that *Suspect Zero* is probably neither original enough for the high-brow market (with shades of *Seven*, *Minority Report*, and *The Pledge*), nor straightforward enough to be a great commercial success, but it nevertheless deserves better than relegation to the bargain bins.

Eckhart is FBI agent Tom Mackelway, assigned to a new post after a six month suspension for illegally abducting a serial killer/rapist who was on the verge of escaping justice. Barely has he had time to claim his new desk—with a migraine already starting—when he starts to receive anonymous faxes containing references to a "Suspect Zero", and missing person reports from someone who seems to know more about these apparently unrelated killings—thousands of miles apart with no apparent patterns—than anybody should. His former partner, Agent Fran Kulok (Moss, in moody, unapproachable mode) is called in to double up on the case, but her hostility and lack of faith in Mackelway's instincts echo those of his director, and he is constantly warned to play by the rules and stick to the evidence.

All the clues point toward Ben O'Ryan (Kingsley), a former student of criminal psychology who has now lost all but the barest grasp on his sanity, and whose theory is behind the concept of "Suspect Zero": the criminal who breaks all of the FBI's profiling rules, who has no motives, whose crimes show no patterns, whose *modus operandi* is so perfect that his very exist-

tence escapes attention as no connection can be drawn between the different killings. We have seen O'Ryan track his victims with almost psychic accuracy, but what is the connection between the two apparently innocent travelling businessmen whose bodies he leaves for the FBI's attention, and the serial killer/rapist Mackelway was previously unable to nail? And the countless missing persons he seems to be claiming responsibility for? And what is Project Icarus, the existence of which everyone in the FBI claims ignorance of?

Eckhart plays the tortured Mackelway well; confused, unable to trust anyone, beset by headaches and nightmares, single-minded, and uncommunicative. But he perhaps plays the role too well, and it is not much fun watching someone beat themselves up without ever explaining why. Kingsley steals the show with a performance that is by turns manic and tragic, all rolling eyes and scalp glistening with sweat, his soul as dark and mysterious as the charcoal sketches he leaves everywhere.

Confusion and darkness sum this film up; they are both its strength and its weakness. By not compromising on the effect of the drama on its participants, *Suspect Zero* goes further than such films usually dare, and feels more satisfying when we reach a (partial at least) resolution. But by spending more time on the internal agony of the protagonists and the dark imagery of the crime foretold but not prevented, than on police procedure or the explanation of what is actually going on, it is a much harder movie to watch.



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