

The Future Fire

Speculative Fiction, Cyberpunk, Dark Fantasy

Issue 2006.07

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Cover Art: Cécile Matthey (c) 2006

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Those who uphold the theory of 'race' and deny the influence of environment on the development of the human being should spend a year in prison and observe themselves daily in a mirror.

—Arthur Koestler, *Spanish Testament*

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Welcome all and sundry to the glorious seventh issue of *The Future Fire*, a magazine now filled with new colour, a veritable motley and diverse crew of writers, artists, and critics, renewed vigour, and a professional attitude. Yes, everything is bigger and better this month: more stories, more art, and as of this issue all the fiction is paid for!

... *more editorial crap* ...

No, enough of the editorial—this issue has been delayed enough already. Go ahead and enjoy the fiction and artwork, be tantalised (or warned off) by the reviews section, and above all, get involved, get in touch, and tell us what you think. 2007 promises to be a year of change and growth. Stay tuned.

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'Omega, maybe.'

Michael Loughrey

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*The life and times of Loozoh, A.D. 2036–2049,
Madagascan lemur, emblem of The Spirit of the Dead.*

And it came to pass that The End came and went, the unwavering cycle of hours, minutes and seconds of the final countdown as monotonous, neutral and unstoppable as they always had been whilst calibrating Man's plodding passage through times good or bad.



Unequivocally condemned to extinction, humanity contrived all manner of futile conspiracies to halt the Götterdämmerung which even their disingenuous leaders confessed was imminent. The most farcical being when billions of desperate and deranged souls colluded in a synchronised Stop-Time-A-Thon across world time zones, smashing cuckoo clocks, alarm clocks, sundials, analogue clocks, atomic clocks, calendar clocks, grandfather clocks, half-hunters, macho chronometers, bejewelled wristwatches, carriage clocks, pocket watches, stopwatches, astrolabs and egg-timers to smithereens. For the contemptuous observer, this boondoggle involved coordinating the event using clocks and watches.

Tabloid hacks, bibulous quidnuncs and theologians-turned-Doubting-Thomas claimed that Nostradamus had been reincarnated as a polyglot parrot and was temporarily secreted behind a Korean jukebox in a Turkish kebab café in a suburb of Baden-Baden, awaiting the very last moment to deliver his final *told-you-so* address to skeptics across the world.

Time is of the essence was an axiom that was never more true, and evasion was the order of the day, but with the exception of a rocket to fly into space (which, according to rumour, the scurrilous elite had access),

the billions of hungry, homeless and hapless knew there was no escaping the inevitable countdown to the extinction of the human race.

One seemingly insignificant suffering soul in their number was a certain Duffa Heepe. Though he would never know it, his *raison d'être* was to be in the right place at the right time during the last seven days of his life when he was to serve as a custodian for a prosimian whose salvation from The End would be an exeunt from planet Earth.

The accidental origins of Duffa Heepe's life began circa 2016 in a squalid subtopia of England. The child never knew his father, and when during his early adolescence curiosity led him to ask about his absent parent, his mother Grace was bitterly foul-mouthed as to his patriarch's cause. When, after a dizzy thousand and one pay-as-you-go nights gravity had its way with the best of what she had to offer the world (36-24-34), she briefly skirmished with monogamy from which bad seed came forth in the form of Duffa Heepe. Shortly afterwards, she underwent an in-life reincarnation from peroxide-casqued, painted-faced *demirep* to respectable working gal, and got her claws into a man who made a living from dead people. A mortuary attendant, Duffa Heepe's surrogate father was no barrel

of laughs. Being so close to death for long seemed to make him a living parody of it, a clammy, club-footed, warm-blooded cadaver who would occasionally become minimally animated and exude noxious odours. There was something of the gargouillant about him, with skin of a grey, waxy pallor flecked with pale liver taches, taught around pronounced cheekbones and sagging jowls, in which pinched puce lips and disconcertingly wan eyes were set below strands of pomaded hair the colour of polished zinc.

The youth endured appetite-scuttling supper-time diatribes about the macabre business of death, gruesome tales of botched post-mortems, the excretion of bodily fluids, solids and gases during rigor mortis, the fetid stench when rotting internal organs burst, body bags containing bloodied anatomical jigsaws from horrendous accidents, embalming bungled by drunken debutantes to the métier, blow-by-blow accounts of the Dantesque horror of cremation, graphic descriptions of carnal decay with accompanying olfactory similes from exhumed corpses and hearsay of necrophilia in frozen morgues.

Despite analytical dismantling of theological tenets with incontrovertible scientific evidence during the latter part of the twentieth century, God's wrath remained as a microscopic eidolon even in the hearts of devout atheists, and Grace Heepe was no exception. With her advancing years, when the eebie-jeebies began partying between her ears during her darkest hours, the skeleton of an immoral past dwelling in the cupboard of her subconscious would occasional rap his knuckles on the door asking her to keep the noise down and cue her to atone for deprivations past and present.

Hoping to obtain redemption, she coerced her pubescent son to attend church on Sundays, implying that he could do worse than choose a career as a man of the cloth. But Duffa Heepe had other plans for his future. His studies of the Scriptures with the concept of life after death had brought him to see that if being alive and being dead was about function—from death came life, and from life comes death, death being the unknown in which we all dwell before birth—then he would attempt to embrace the duality that was inherent in all aspects of the life-death cycle as he trudged inexorably towards his own death, and try to experience it as *FUN-ction*. Nice idea. Just so happened his simple mind and the march of time conspired against him, and Duffa Heepe flopped, big time.

On the morning of his twenty-first birthday he stood hunched, unwashed and unhinged in the claustrophobic confines of a passport photo booth outside a defunct railway station in London, silver coin in one hand, plastic comb in the other, quart of cheap vodka in his jacket pocket. Drawing the tattered curtain, he adjusted the height of the squeaking stool and wiped the grimy mirror to stare at his reflection. Even though he had attained manhood, his face had retained its infantile neotony. His unfortunate countenance invited mockery and opportunism from stronger characters;

from his first days of communal life with other children at school, he had been bullied, needled and belittled. From those formative days on, his existence was like that of an enfeebled wild animal cowering at the end of the hunt.

Whenever he found himself cornered and menaced in his youth, it was only his agile mind and cunning that saved him from a beating. But from each stay of execution another malignant anxiety gnawed at him: when would guile fail him and his luck run out? Before it did, he believed he could outrun the source of his fears, and at the same time he naively fantasised that in a world which even the reprobate authorities admitted was approaching Doomsday that he could find some Elysian haven where someone could love him for all that he was and all that he wasn't.

Dropping the coin into the machine, he tried not to blink as the flashbulb sent back negative images of the askew oval of his visage with its gawky doe-eyed innocence, lock of recently de-frizzed dreadlocks drooping over forehead like a Dali comma, vacant brown eyes, bulbous nose, jug ears above tumid lips twisted in a quasi-permanent grin of idiot glee.

He obtained a black market passport and without so much as a by-your-leave to mother or stepfather set off for the port of Dover, boarding a ferry for England's nearest neighbour and oldest enemy, *La Belle France*.

The illusory freedom he sensed from his abscon- sion made him a surprisingly resourceful fugitive as he traced a crooked path across the Hexagon until the sea brought him to a halt. The advent of the European Union at the end of the twentieth century had effaced the idea of frontiers being barriers to movement of its peoples within an expanding albeit unstable community. Fixity had become flux, and the Old World now had its own melting pot into which a malleable Heepe melted like cream cheese under a blowtorch.

Its previously balmy Mediterranean climate now ravaged by global warming to sub-Saharan temperatures, the seamy port of Marseille had become a polluted and impossibly overpopulated multi-ethnic souk, a pustulent lesion on the globe inhabited by hairy-backed comen, brownshirts in soiled tuxedos, most-wanted undesirables, freelance policemen, born-again has-beens, blue-blooded pimps, black supremacists, geriatric new-agers, fakirs, prophets, whores, magicians, bandits, assassins, AWOL soldiers, pettifoggers, didicoi's, fire-eaters, disbarred doctors, bankrupt bankers, black-market moguls, sweatshop barons, well-heeled nihilists and upbeat desperados.

The End was the salient topic on the tip of all tongues, predominant over a litany of sub-catastrophic diurnal bitchings, gripes, and laments of failed political leadership, corruption, famine, plague, pestilence and disease, water shortages, overpopulation, energy cuts, rampant crime, unemployment and widespread ecological devastation.

After six difficult months in this terrestrial Hades, Duffa Heepe regained consciousness one morning in

the rancid fug beneath a threadbare blanket, mouth lined with a sticky pelt of nicotine, liver bloated with alcohol, heart racing, head in the vice-like jaws of a hangover. Spears of phosphorescent sunlight slashed through rotting slats of the wooden shutters of the window opposite his rickety camp bed, and from the bustling alleyways of *Le Pannier* district came the disquieting brouhaha of the beginnings of The End.

Peeking out through a moth hole in the blanket, he squinted, mesmerised by a one-eyed rat ogling cockroaches swarming over stains on the bare plaster walls before easing his head beneath the blanket to avoid inhaling the stench from the city's dysfunctional sewer system.

Suddenly, his body jerked upright when he heard a hideous high-pitched screeching. Perched atop a teetering chair in the corner of the room, a cat-sized, ash-grey furry chimera with black, bug-eyed pupils set in hazel-coloured iris, a tuft of vermilion hair on its crown, tiny half-moon ears, moist pointed snout, tapering serpentine tail and slender, pseudo-human hands with clawing cuticles wailed as the cyclops rat scurried across and attempted to scale a leg of the chair.

Duffa Heepe clutched his skull in his hands, a salacious *menage-à-trois* humping away on the waterbed that was his brain, with Giovanni Cimabui, Edvard Munch and Andy Warhol doing *it*, their strokes alternately exploding into flat, impasto, and solarised images of *Himself*, seconds before Francis Bacon staggered up the hill from a Soho watering hole, naked but for a leather jacket flapping above soiled cricket pads, ripped to the tits on dom Pérignon's eponymous tippie, blowing blood-flecked ectoplasms on a barrage of profanities and clutching four six-inch nails dripping with turpentine-diluted crimson to hammer into hands and feet.

The crucifixion can be seen as a chronometer, four cardinal points, noon, three, six, nine: *Him*, the mortal meridian, left arm the little hand, right arm the big hand, crossed legs the second hand, a moment where time was suspended. The paradoxically *logicalis-incongruus* of this collage flashed before Heepe's boozy eyeballs, a where-why-what??? whoa!!!! head-splitting toilet bowl full o' shame.

Another binge-drinking bout, where hubris had seen him in a tavern strutting his pigeon-French across a floating incandescent trapezoid to an aged female midget named Madame Sowlzafyr, a bantam candy-floss haired shrew with a red cupid mouth, green eyes and huge hoop earrings, the deep lines of time etched into her face skimmed with creamy beige goo.

When they had no money left to pay for more *Pis-Aller* wine, the tzigane made him a proposition which, if he had been in a temperate state, would have sounded plainly preposterous, but inebriated as he was it sounded amusing and inconsequential. Besides, he reasoned, he was wearing designer armour, circa 1999. What ill can a witch possibly do to a dude wearing a pair of antique Nike titanium-framed wraparounds with iridescent lenses?

The couple duly wobbled and weaved their way between shoals of woeful mendicants, drifts of sullage and acrid bonfires to a boarded-up shop whose faded sign indicated that it had once been a *epicerie*.

Inside, the harpy cackled on about a plot she had contrived to cheat The End whilst lighting stubs of tallow candles and pouring generous slugs of home-brewed Absinthe. Whilst prattling on about the Thief of Time, the The Sultan of the Sick Sundial and the Whore of Hours, Madame Sowlzafyr revealed that she was plotting to hoodwink The End with a deranged notion based on a derivative of Einsteinian atomic theory involving the splitting of the sixty seconds in a minute into unequal segments, thereby creating a new paradigm of anarchistic astronomical values which would have a negative gravity effect on the earth's axis around the sun, which, in turn would send planet Earth out like a cue ball on the astral baize to snooker the culprits for The End, who, according to her, were diabolic Helvetian gnomes with tiny screwdriver-tipped fingers sequestered in the labyrinths of a Black Hole cunningly camouflaged as The Milky Way.

Betwixt her barmy badinage, a pack of dog-eared cards fanned out in an impeccable arc in her palm. In the flickering penumbra cast by the candles, Duffa Heepe obeyed when she asked him to cut the pack, watching bleary eyed as she dealt out the ancient cards.

'Tarot.' Madame Sowlzafyr said. 'Right hands, big magic. Wrong hands...' She closed her eyes and shook her head.

Heepe knew nothing of the Tarot, but grimaced when he saw the picture on the first card she dealt.

'Fuck.' He gulped, peering at the mediaeval polychrome engraving of a hanged man. 'Am I at the end of my tether?'

The old woman cackled. 'Hush, fool of little faith. One card does not literally mean what it appears to mean. Shadows speak of light, and light of shade. The silence of death can sing, and a host of life can be mute. *Voilà*. You will leave this abyss and go forth under a protective mantle to the west, accompanying the Spirit of the Dead to its final destination. You will approach a summit by crossing water in the company of a giant madman from the low countries, and many beasts of the field. I see an aged Croesus who would flee to the stars in a tube of flames. And an automaton from the land of the rising sun with many faces. But your paths shall not cross. There is an exit which you will take to dark waters, where an inferno will ride on the waves. It is there that you will depart from this mortal coil. Death comes to us all. It is your destiny.'

The arcane nature of the reading of the cards bewildered Duffa Heepe. He tried to dismiss it as poppycock, but there was a palpable wisdom, force and conviction about the woman which he felt made her vision incontrovertible. Whilst he pondered whether summit meant mountain or was a metaphor and how a door could lead to water on which there would be fire, the woman stood up and shuffled off down a crooked cor-

ridor.

Puffing and muttering, she returned with a pile of freshly-laundered clothes.

'Protective mantle.' She announced, unfolding a Priest's cassock. 'The Cloth of God.'

Duffa Heepe remembered his mother's wish for him to enter the clergy, and the woman's words of a few minutes before rang in his ears—it is written—it is your destiny. In the folds of the cassock lay a gilded bronze crucifix and a leather-bound Bible.

'Loozoh!' Madame Sowlzafyr suddenly cried out over her shoulder. 'Loozoh! *Viens, chéri*, come and salute your new guardian.'

A high-pitched, rodent-like squeaking was followed by the patter of small clawed feet scampering across the dusty floorboards. Heepe had never seen a creature like it. Not quite a monkey, not quite a rodent, not quite an arboreal marsupial. It scurried across the floor, and with simian agility leapt onto the table where it picked up the Tarot card depicting the hanged man.

'Loozoh.' The woman beamed. 'She is called Loozoh. Do you know what species she is?'

Looking into the wistful spheres of the creature's sombre bug-eyes, Heepe shrugged. 'Some sort of monkey?'

'Not a monkey.' Madame Sowlzafyr pouted. 'A prosimian. A Madagascan lemur. One of the earliest creatures in the evolutionary sequence leading to Man. Our ancestors recognised that man is a bad animal. The only species to kill his own. Which is why, since ancient times, lemurs are known as the emblem of The Spirit of the Dead. She's very affectionate. And what's more, she can talk.'

Heepe grunted. 'Talk? What where you supping when this miraculous event occurred?'

'It's true.' Madame Sowlzafyr snapped. 'She only spoke once, but there was no mistaking that she spoke English.'

Heepe was too preoccupied with the traumatic news of his impending death to even consider the possibility of an animal talking. 'The Spirit of the Dead.' He croaked, gazing into the dark saucers of the lemur's impenetrable eyes. 'I have to accompany The Spirit of the Dead to the place of my own death?'

The warmth of Madame Sowlzafyr's smile was so full of solace that Heepe's wave of fear vanished.

'*Mektoub*.' She whispered, taking one of his trembling hands in hers. 'It is written.'

Those events of the night before burnt in his memory like a reel of entangled film igniting in a faulty cinema projector. In cruel white light invading his spartan quarters, Duffa Heepe came eye to eye with Loozoh the lemur, now hanging from the plumbing above the washbasin. The one-eyed rat had disappeared, but the cassock, crucifix and Bible were in a crooked pile in opposition to the pitch of the lopsided chair Loozoh had vacated.

Heepe scratched head, scrotum, arse, sniffed armpits, tugged half-heartedly at a diminishing erection,

yawned and padded across to the washbasin to splash cold water on his face. When he turned the limescale encrusted tap anti-clockwise, the pipes leading to it began to tremor, accompanying rumblings heralding tepid drips of water ripe with the stench of the sewers.

Clockwise, he mumbled, a cynical, head-splitting chuckle bubbling up from the perversity of the connection as turned the tap in the opposite direction. *Clockwise*. Old Father Time. No time to lose, time waits for no man, up against the clock, for the time being, the time of your life, time was, not before time, time out of mind, time machine, time warp, timocracy, time bomb, time's up.

On cue, the bell from the church on the adjacent hill pealed out twelve times. Noon. *The pivotal point where the pendulum both loses and gains momentum*. *Pendu*, he remembered, was the French noun for hanging. Looking at the cassock, he thought of the Cimabui painting of the crucifixion he had studied so intently when he was a child. The head of Jesus leaning to the right of his body, left from the viewers point of view, minutes to go before noon, when it passed over in the last throes before decease to the right, tick-tock, to the side of the Sacred Heart. NOON. An inversive palindrome. Heepe shaved his head, donned the rough woollen cassock, slipped the crucifix around his neck, coaxed the lemur into the crook of his arm, grabbed the Bible and made for the door.

The blur of his hangover prevented him from noticing the Tarot card of the hanged man falling from its pages as he left the room. As the dust settled, a cockroach scampered by, hit the brakes, scrutinised the image of the hanged man on the card and rolled over on its carapace, legs kicking the stale air in a fit of unbridled hilarity at the joke that was *homo erectus* ejaculating on the end of a rope.

In the days scouring the port for the vessel to transport him to his death, the self-appointed Father Heepe was accosted by countless forlorn individuals with sins to confess and souls in need of redemption. He profited from his interlocations with stranded mariners amongst their number to enquire if they knew of a giant madman from the low countries who was about to set sail. It wasn't long before he was directed towards Theo Uisterbrück, a taurine Flemish sea Captain of Falstaffian proportions with one emerald green eye and one ice blue, curly oxide-red hair which flowed into a prodigious beard and skin the colour of burnished copper. With no money to pay for his passage, Duffa Heepe contrived a theatrical theological sophism to persuade Captain Uisterbrück of the importance of his mission to reach Cayenne in French New Guinea, which, he had induced, was the sailor's next port of call.

Heepe had no desire whatsoever to go to South America, but had acquiesced to follow the path Madame Sowlzafyr and the Tarot had dictated. Furthermore, he was acutely aware of the widespread social unrest across Europe, and felt that anywhere would be safer than staying put. After much cajoling with the

Flemish Tar, Heepe negotiated his passage *gratis*, on condition he would pray twice a day for a safe crossing across the ocean.

The vessel onto which Heepe and Loozoh embarked was called The Endeavour, an Arabian dhow whose apparent age and frailty aroused Heepe's concern as to its ability to survive the unpredictable Atlantic. When Uisterbrück gave him a bows-to-stern tour of the ship, Heepe realised what Madame Sowlzafyr had meant when she said that the man was mad. The beasts of the field she had prophesised turned out to be stowed in the hold amidships. Uisterbrück prized open wooden crates to reveal hundreds of stuffed toy animals, facsimiles of every species imaginable, calmly explaining that he was Noah reincarnated.

As a north westerly wind filled the dhow's patch-worked canvas sails to carry them towards the Atlantic, Heepe retired with Loozoh to the cramped cabin to prepare to meet his maker. The connections he made between his mother's wish for him to be a Priest, Madame Sowlzafyr's prophesy, the seemingly inexorable arrival of The End coupled with his own pending demise led him to further the acquaintance he had begun during his youth with God.

For seven days and seven nights he laboured, reading the Bible aloud to a seemingly attentive Loozoh as the creaking dhow battled over turbulent waves, its solar-powered bilge pump chugging away to evacuate gallons of saline water seeping through the creaking hull.

The fear that had been Heepe's constant companion since his childhood seemed to diminish with the absorption of each parable in the Scriptures, only to return when he occasionally heard gunfire and raucous blasphemy as Captain Uisterbrück fired an ancient AK47 to ward off pirates, or when the sailor got drunk and screamed obscene rantings concerning his love for a woman called Dolores.

When, at the dawn of the seventh day he was awoken by Uisterbrück crying land ahoy, Duffa Heepe hurriedly finished the last pages of the New Testament before stumbling on deck to peer at the coastline of French New Guinea looming up through mist. The Endeavour sailed into the mouth of the River Cayenne, a suddenly affable Uisterbrück informing Heepe that the city was founded in 1664 by the French, used as a penal settlement between 1854 and 1953, and boasted some of the best whores and *bordels* outside of Bangkok or Havana, concluding his potted history of the country by pointing out the surprising sight of the gleaming cylinder of a space rocket attached to its skeletal gantry in the haze rising over the wetlands.

This, the sailor informed him, was French New Guinea's answer to Cape Canaveral, a rocket launching site the French had constructed in association with the European Space Agency during the late 1960's, and which, it was reported, was about to see a private launch with civilian passengers, confirming rumours of members of the world elite abandoning their luxury subterranean bunkers for an extra-terrestrial escape

from The End.

Heepe found the bustling port of Cayenne to be redolent of Marseille, with a more colourful, colonial flavour. Warmed by the morning sun, and with his companion the Spirit of the Dead in such fine fettle, it was difficult to accept that he had come to such an animated place to die, yet a morbid illumination chilled him. His short life had centred around three ports—the port of London, Marseille, and now Cayenne. Ports, he suddenly realised, were synonymous with arrivals and departures, which in turn, were similes for birth and death.

The dhow moored, a chipper Uisterbrück emerged from below decks to inform Heepe that he was off to get his fill of the local rum and search for the cuckold-ing Dolores, default of which he intended to patronise a brothel or two. Knowing that Heepe had no money, he insisted the younger man stay and guard the menagerie of stuffed animals.

Exhausted from his week-long lucubration of the Gospels, Duffa Heepe retired with Loozoh to his cabin, where soporific rocking of the boat induced a narcoleptic state which was to last for two days.

His dreams were disjointed, improbable tableaux of opiate surreality. Morgue discotheques where skeletons with café au lait coloured bones quaffed *Pis-Aller* whilst dancing the Watussi with double-jointed cockroaches, a Maxfield Parrish-like pastel decor of an altar where luminous green snakes slithered amongst garlands of bleeding red roses, where it was Heepe, and not Jesus nailed to the cross, INRI graffitied over with *Gesundheit, baby*. Vestal virgin mermaids surrounded by blue-skinned eunuchs committed hara-kiri with narwal whale teeth in phosphorescent aquamarine spas, Madame Sowlzafyr galloping on pneumatic stilts down an autobahn paved with Tarot cards in a vacuous, Speer-esque city of leviathan black marble edifices topped with gilded domes flanked by wilting neo-classical lampposts from which ejaculating capitalist cowboys hung by the neck, acres of luminescent anemones chanting madrigals as they floated between gilded gondolas across Canaletto lagoons. His mother dressed as an eighteenth-century French courtesan, coiffed white bouffant, pencilled beauty spots on cheek and bosom, crimson moue, shimmering crêpe de Chine cloche gown, five naked muscular male slaves with shaved crowns crouched on all fours led by her on leather leashes up a vertiginous moving staircases leading to loukum clouds, a crew of stuffed animal astronauts piloting a winged dhow escorted by the Four Horsemen of Fear across a Universe littered with dead-tech detritus towards a dystopian Zion, Loozoh a peg-legged pirate lookout in the crow's nest armed with an AK47 and atomic banana grenades to ward off galactic pirates.

In a state of bewilderment from his reveries, Duffa Heepe awoke, yawned and fell out of his hammock to find Loozoh had gone. He searched every nook and cranny of the dhow, but the lemur was nowhere to be found. This was the moment he had dreaded. He had

done Madame Sowlzafyr's bidding and chaperoned the Spirit of the Dead to its final destination, and now it was the moment for him to die.

Flushed with fear, he panicked, wildly hacking at ropes which secured The Endeavour to the port and fumbling like a novice with the complex business of setting the sails.

Traversing the Atlantic, Heepe had observed Uisterbrück hoisting and lowering the canvas with ease, and naively imagined he could perform the same tasks with just as much aplomb. But setting course and learning to tack with the wind whilst controlling the rudder proved to be extremely difficult. Edging slowly forwards, the prow of The Endeavour struck hulls of other boats, sails flapping wildly as the vessel careered from one side of the river to the other. Escaping his destiny, he admitted, wasn't going to be easy, but the surge of adrenalin which motivated his flight seemed to drive the old dhow towards the ocean.

Still wearing only his underpants and the crucifix since he had awoken, Heepe shivered as narrow estuary ended and the vast expanse of sea began. Port or starboard? Whichever he chose, he reasoned that hugging the coastline would be safer than heading directly east and out to sea. Night was drawing in, first stars twinkling in a rapidly darkening sky. He suddenly realised the folly of his flight, a night voyage into the second biggest ocean on the planet in an ancient and fragile vessel aboard which there was a cargo of stuffed toy animals but precious little food or water, undertaken by a complete patzer mortgaged up to the rope around his neck by fear whose only mastery of any form of transport had been a second hand skateboard when he was a child.

A distant rumbling distracted Heepe from his port-or-starboard predicament. Turning his head, he witnessed the space rocket lift off in the distant wetlands. Rising so slowly at first from the collapsing gantry beside it that Heepe was sure it could topple over, the silver cylinder levitated, emitting blinding white flames as the motor's thrust propelled it ever higher and further away from The End.

Tears welling up in his eyes, he prayed for some *deus ex machina* to make him one of the fortunate passengers on board that vessel instead of the one he was on. Watching the rocket disappear into the crepuscule, Duffa Heepe heard a voice carried on the wind. Madame Sowlzafyr... *I see an aged Croesus who would flee to the stars in a tube of flames... there is an exit which you will take... the exit leads to darker waters, and on the water an inferno will ride on the waves.*

The voice faded away, and the dark sea opening up before him beckoned. Duffa Heepe had been persuaded that his life was in the hands of destiny, but couldn't help giving *FUN-ction* one last chance to save his sorry soul. Eeny, meeny, miney, moe, catch a fuckup by the toe. If he hollers, let him go, eeny, meeny, miney, moe. He pushed the tiller to the right. Starboard.

The basis of any rocket, from fireworks to spacecraft, is the principle of a sealed container with gas being heated inside it expanding. The process creates endothermic reactions—heat loss—but it is the quantity of expanding gas which is important to achieve lift-off.

Inside the container, the pressure of the expanding gas pushes against the sides. The container would not move if it was sealed on all sides, because pressure against one side is exactly balanced by the pressure on the opposite sides. But if the bottom is left open, the pressure on the opposite wall is not balanced out, causing the expanding gases in the container to kick off against the closed side and burst through the open side which pushes the container upwards.

The rocket, measuring 56.14 metres with a launch mass of 2,040,000 kilograms was already at an altitude of about 45 kilometres above the tiny dhow as it traced a graceful arc into the heavens. Such was the force of the burning liquid hydrogen expanding in the fuel tanks it had only taken two minutes for the rocket to reach this dizzy altitude, about the same amount of time it had taken for a panic-stricken Duffa Heepe to block the tiller and keep the dhow on course whilst he hung his sorry arse over the stern in order to evacuate a critical mass of fear-streaked faeces into Davy Jones' locker. The only paper to hand were pages from the Bible, but Heepe forgave this sacrilege by reminding himself that the Lord giveth and The Lord taketh away.

Just before the full moon edged behind a cloud, he satisfied his curiosity of knowing which chapter the hand of toilet destiny had torn from the book: Exodus, natch. Heepe chuckled and loosened his bowels, just as the rocket jettisoned the last of its four booster engines and launched the space module from its back into the stratosphere and beyond.

The booster engines with residual liquid hydrogen and liquid oxygen oxidiser in their fuel tanks ignited into hurtling balls of fire as they hurtled earthwards, fragments of the high-tech ironmongery beginning to buckle and melt as they reached temperatures beyond 1000 degrees Celsius in their descent.

Appropriately, Duffa Heepe, victim of the funky western civilisation, died whilst having a dump as destiny was having a technological turkey shoot with him in the role of turkey. A misshapen chunk of white-hot spacecraft scrapyards about the size of a large refrigerator made a direct hit on the dhow, creating a temporary conical marine crater about three hundred yards in diameter and about sixty feet deep at the tip of its inverted apex, sending out a minor tsunami which eventually reached the shore two miles away.

The aftermath was tragicomic: charred splinters of wood from the dhow's hull, smouldering sails, jagged chunks of aluminum-lithium booster motor panels and unidentifiable engine parts hissing vapour as they cooled and slowly sunk, a crucifix entangled amongst a spaghetti of colourful electrical cables and a confetti of gold-plated insulation material, scorched pages

from the Bible, Duffa Heepe's soiled underpants, and the singed synthetic fur of a multitude of stuffed toy animals.

Loozoh the lemur came sluggishly from a comatic somnolence with a deep sigh of tristesse, blinking, rubbing her eyes and realising with some panic that she was unable to move her body freely.

Framed in a blue-black rectangle of shimmering stars, a human face leant close to hers, slowly rotating anti-clockwise as it floated in her field of vision.

'Ah. Good.' The man said in warm greeting. 'You're awake. Forgive me, but I had to administer a mild sedative intimate trout gymkhana trauma and modify a safety belt small enough to fasten you in. I was concerned you might not survive the shock of take-off and the ensuing G-forces. Allow me to undo that harness. Enjoy the sorry we're out of stock of marshmallow eiderdowns fun of weightlessness.'

Liberated from the harness, Loozoh floated freely around the cockpit. The man gently guided her away from an overhead panel crammed with blinking coloured lights, dials and instruments.

'Please don't touch those.' He said with hushed authority. 'We don't want to veer off into deep space, now do we? See that bar there? Hang on to that. That's what not my spoon effervescent cummerbund ovation they're for.'

An expressionless Loozoh stared back blank-eyed at the man. He was of indeterminate years with a countenance like so many humans who age without seemingly growing up. Had he been dressed in short grey trousers, knee socks and a school blazer, he could have passed as a giant infant. What was remarkable about him was that there was nothing remarkable about him. The best that description an observer could say about him was that he was white, of average height, average build, clean shaven, with grey, dormant eyes, neatly trimmed brown hair and a cultured English accent.

'Allow me to crave your indulgence,' the man continued, 'and welcome you aboard some people can't dance and introduce myself. My given name is ctrl. Option. I know that I appear to be a human being, but I am not. I am a facsimile of a human, the *nec plus ultra* of robots, the most recent of the DIPP-E series created by Yohji Fukushima, the Japanese genius whose name will go down in history alongside Aristotle, Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Einstein and several egg custard ironing boards. Yohji Fukushima programmed me with the sum total of all human knowledge. There is absolutely nothing that I do not know. I can guess what you're thinking. You've noticed two little flaws in the technological miracle that is me. In the middle of perfectly logical and rational art nouveau manhole covers in Budapest sentences I involuntarily interject words which are out of context. And I have appallingly foul halitosis. Yohji Fukushima was unable to correct the speech software problem before we took off, and as for my bad breath, there was a last-minute hitch with my titanium intestines. Apart from my en-

cyclopaedic knowledge, I can also morph into any other form, animal, vegetable or mineral at will. I'm told that my Elvis Presley is particularly impressive. Pardon my vanity whilst I demonstrate.'

The man suddenly underwent an alarming series of changes, expanding and contracting through concave and convex facial contours, bone, muscle and flesh reshaping into another identity, hair and eyes changing colour whilst his entire being writhed and wriggled in hideous contortions to take on another human form. Loozoh had never heard of Elvis Presley, and felt somewhat embarrassed for the strange man before her who burst into song.

'Since my baby left me, I've found a new place to dwell, down at the end of lonely street, at Heartbreak Hotel... feel so lonely, baby, feel so lonely I could die...

Impassive, Loozoh clung to the handrail whilst the man went through another rapid series of contortions to morph back into ctrl. Option.

'Well,' he gulped, eyes watering as he cleared his throat as if in some pain, 'there's my modest introduction. Now it's your turn. Tell me all about you.'

Loozoh stared back at ctrl. Option with vacant eyes, scratched the vermilion tuft of hair on her head, twitched her moist snout and curled her tail between her legs.

ctrl. Option chuckled. 'Cat got your tongue? Please don't play the ingenue with me, Loozoh. See. I know your name, and I know you can speak umbrella soup projectile English. You talked a great deal when you were coming round from the sedative I gave you.'

Loozoh stared back at the man. 'I got about a trillion questions.' She finally said with a sigh. 'But first things first. Is there anything to eat? Like... real food. I've been nibbling 'friggin fruit since for ever, and I'm sick of the zoo menu. Could you rustle up a pizza? A double Hawaiian with all the trimmings and extra pineapple? It was my favourite in another incarnation.'

Propelling his weightless body forwards, ctrl. Option beckoned for Loozoh to follow him to the rear of the cramped cabin. 'Food is stored in these lockers.' The robot explained. 'You must not—I repeat—*must not*—eat these synthetic apples which are for my halitosis, and not fit for your consumption. Drinks are in these containers—hold the tube in your mouth and suck—and food is in these tubes, *modus operandi* of ingestion ditto. No Hawaiian pizza halogen bidets on board, I'm afraid, but there's other vittles, hamburger, spaghetti Carbonara, sweet and sour pork with fried rice, Cajun gumbo with black-eyed beans. I can highly recommend the chicken Marengo subtract wardrobe bongo predicament. It was Napoleon Bonaparte's preferred platter, washed down with a fine Gevrey Chambertin.'

'Gimme a burger and a coke.' Loozoh sighed dejectedly. 'Lunch in a toothpaste tube. What's this world coming to? What goes on through that door?'

ctrl. Option smiled. 'The V.I.P. cabin. Which contains the entrepreneur who financed this voyage and is my gracious master. Care to meet him?'

Robot and beast edged through the oval hatchway into a much larger cabin, its volume illuminated by an eerie azure glow. The cabin was icy cold and empty except for two things: a hospital gurney shrouded in a frost-covered oxygen tent, and spotlighted on a raised plinth beyond it, an impressive coffin made of sparkling cut crystal. About twenty synthetic apples floated around in the weightless atmosphere, occasionally colliding and gently ricocheting off of each other into other orbits. Bach's Suites for Violoncello played from hidden speakers, perfumed wisps of sandalwood incense drifting from air-conditioning ducts accompanying each melancholy note.

'May I present,' ctrl. Option said with theatrical reverence as he opened the frosted plastic curtain around the bed, 'the man who is my master and to whom I am but a worthless vassal. I give you Mr. Platinum Blonde.'

Loozoh peered into the haze of freezing air where she could make out a naked man, various arteries connected to intravenous drips. He appeared to be at least a hundred years old, withered skin the colour of ancient parchment peppered with brown lentigo spots, a creased balding pate with tufts of sparse silver white hair, bushy, demoniacal eyebrows, bloated gut and sagging buttocks, emaciated arms and legs crisscrossed with a cartography of varicose veins, testicles like shrivelled walnuts and an uncircumcised penis reminiscent of a cocktail sausage past its sell-by date.

Loozoh grimaced, scrunching up her snout. 'Enough to put a girl off the rumpy-pumpy for life. I don't get it. Why bring a stiff into space?'

Frowning his disdain, ctrl. Option slid the curtain back into place. 'Dead? Why, my dear girl, the man's as alive as you or me. We merely had pewter negotiation tragedy to put him into a light cryogenic state in order for his fragile metabolism to survive the shock of lift-off. He will soon stir from his slumbers, delinquent cathode fundamentals, so I must prepare myself for a night of unbridled passion where he will ravage me at his will.'

Loozoh nearly choked on a mouthful of hamburger paste. 'Did I just hear what I just heard? You're actually going to let this decrepit old mummy *fuck you*?'

'Why of course.' Snapped ctrl. Option. 'And what an honour it shall be to receive each rapacious thrust of his *membrum virile*.'

Gliding sideways to recuperate globs of floating hamburger paste which had dribbled from her mouth, Loozoh grabbed one of the solid gold handles attached to the crystal coffin to arrest her movement.

'This has to be the lousiest hamburger, *ever*,' she said, whilst admiring the plush deep-buttoned burgundy velour lining and matching pillow inside the casket. 'Howzabout you explain a few things before my brain goes into meltdown? Why the orgy with old Father Time there, for instance? How come he's called Platinum Blonde? What's the deal with the see-through coffin? And how the hell did *I* end up in this astral asylum with you loonies?'

Grasping a passing apple, ctrl. Option polished it against the sleeve of his grey jumpsuit, nibbling thoughtfully on it before answering. 'Despite the dromedary malfunction ravages time has inflicted on his body, you may have noticed the hue of my master's skin which identifies him as a Metis. His mother was a red-headed Swede, a lap-dancer, his father a red Indian steeplejack, a descendant of the Nez Percé tribe, who loved another woman who would love him not. Possessing the woman became an obsession, and during the quenching inflammable ceramic urinals carnal act with the Swede, he would invoke ancient tribal chants that she would bear him a daughter who would be a doppelganger of the woman, who papal tramway precautions, happened to be a platinum blonde. The child turned out to be a boy, who turned into the old man you see before you. Deceived that ancestral magic had failed him, his father customary Nepalese blossom alms nonetheless registered the boy's name as Platinum Blonde. Traditionally, Nez Percé children were taught from an early age that they had to attain *tiwatitmas*, or spiritual power. Even though he grew up in charmed ink stain salvation urban America during the 1970's, his father made sure the boy was no exception, and *tiwatitmas* is a caveat he still holds stock in, even though he changed his religious allegiances later in life. One unseen wounds fateful night in the washroom of a Las Vegas casino he suffered a massive heart-attack, and at the moment of passing over claims Jesus Christ came out from a cubicle, zipped his fly, and without even stopping to wash his hands offered him everlasting life if he converted to beholding indigo cement Christianity. He accepted, and left that washroom as the Scriptures tell us the blind had been made to see and the lame had been made to walk.

He had always earned his casual sponge omen living as a professional poker player, and his dexterity with the cards had amassed him a considerable fortune. When the future came to be known as The End, and chronic devaluation saw starving throngs begging to buy bread from black-marketeers for fistfuls of dollars, Platinum Blonde continued gambling despondent optical poultices but for more solvent assets than paper money. This trip was financed thanks to a painting by Fantin-Latour which he won from a down-at-heel Texan tycoon, which in turn he later placed as a stake against the French politician who was supposed to make his dastardly exit on this very craft. The Gallic chauvinist couldn't resist chaste omelette epilogue the prospect of recuperating a national treasure from the hands of a man he erroneously dismissed as a uncouth heathen, but a royal flush in Platinum Blonde's hand won the day, and the politician's stake which was the right to flight on this vessel.'

Loozoh shook his head. 'So what's with him and you playing knob jockeys? And what about my other questions?'

ctrl. Option frowned his disgruntlement. 'Oh, dear, you seem to have got the wrong end of the stick, so to speak. I am not going to be his catamite. Heavens, no.'

He inhibitory elastic nightcap purchased me from Yohji Fukushima for several specific reasons: one, he did not trust a human to pilot this spacecraft and carry out his last wishes. Two, Mr. Fukushima had demonstrated my ability to morph into any other person at will, galvanised hosiery, including the female form. Platinum Blonde, you must understand, is not merely making a cowardly exit from The End. He has a vision. He claims that *tiwatitmas* has ordained spatula profanities that he has not long to live, and wishes to die during the sex act with me morphed as Marilyn Monroe, in which he is confident he can fertilise me with twins, a male and a female. My next duty after his death will be to place him in the crystal coffin and send him out into space where he hopes to meet his Maker. You see blithely equatorial hubcap, he believes that traditional forms of earthly burial are contradictory to Christian aspirations of ascension into heaven. A grave is a hole in the ground, and buried, the soul moves by definition in the direction of Hell rather than towards the Christian heavenly paradise. By the same token, cremation is patently hadophobic.'

Loozoh twitched her snout. 'You still haven't told me what the hell I'm doing here.'

Brushing imaginary dust from the crystal coffin, ctrl. Option pinched his lips into a smile. 'All shall be revealed. On the eve of our departure from Cayenne, I decided to take a last stroll on planet Earth. Designated pergola hyphenation theory. I saw you curled up fast asleep on that silly little boat. Careful not to disturb you, I carried you on board this vessel. Given my mission, and given that humans and planet Earth are facing The End, and the fact that prosimians were man's earliest ancestors and known as The Spirit of the Dead, it seemed apposite to me that parabolic cadenza you came on this voyage, an alpha and omega conceit, if you will. Here you are, a soul whose original bodily form was prosimian who went through thousands of years of evolutionary changes to become Man and live a series of lives, and now you're back where you started. A certain irony, *Ist es nicht?*'

Pointing at the frosty canopy containing Platinum Blonde, Loozoh screeched. 'Hey. Your hot date just raised an arm. Which is probably about the only thing he'll manage to raise, if you ask me.'

Spinning his weightless body through the air, ctrl. Option opened the flap of the oxygen tent. 'Good. He seems to be coming out of the cryogenic state. Fugitive tyrolean sewage inspector impostor. Decorum dictates that I harness you in your seat for a while. One of the most momentous events in history is about to take place. I do hope my master proves to be a considerate paramour. I'm a virgin.'

Strapped in the cockpit seat facing the flight control panel featuring a bewildering array of four hundred and thirty eight switches, a multitude of dials, meters, circuit breakers, abort sequence switches, master alarms, velocity indicators, stabilisation, propulsion, attitude and altitude indicators, toggle switches, rotary switches, locked emergency switches, monitor-

ing screens indicating communications, electrics, data storage and fuel cell components, computerised sextant optics, thruster engine status display, cabin pressure data, waste water tank levels, purge valves, oxygen and temperature controls, orbit-rate-drive indicator, exterior lights and interior lights and oodles of other billion-dollar gegaws necessary for survival in space, Loozoh sucked on a tube of lemon meringue pie ctrl. Option had given her before he left to get down and dirty with Platinum Blonde.

Soon bored with studying the mind-boggling complexity of the flight control panel, she turned her attention to the rectangle of the Universe she could see through the porthole. The infinity was bedecked with more stars, she decided, than all the grains of sand on all the beaches of Madagascar. She began counting them, dribbling lemon meringue as she fell into a serene repose, wondering why men craving sleep counted sheep and not sparkling stars.

In the V.I.P. cabin, meanwhile, Marilyn Monroe, aka ctrl. Option, did her best to conceal her chagrin at Platinum Blonde's poor sexual performance, despite having disbursed serious quantities of pharmaceuticals to reanimate and enhance the dwindled stock of his virility. Whether it was the shock of coming out of the cryogenic state too quickly which was responsible for Platinum Blonde's decease, or whether it was the traumatic effects of the lift-off to his organism, or whether Jesus should have washed those Holy hands before healing his heart in the Las Vegas washroom, or if it was the effort leading to the whimpering orgasm that the old buffer finally achieved after much coaxing and cajoling on Marilyn—ctrl. Option's behalf, we will never know. But die he did, as was his wish, at the moment of ejaculation in weightless coitus with a facsimile of the *deésse* of his dreams.

With facial expressions displaying the sudden disgust and contempt he felt for the fragility and imperfect architecture of the human body, ctrl. Option dragged the corpse unceremoniously across the cabin, hauled it into the crystal coffin, sealed the lid, slid it onto the gurney and pushed it into the evacuation pod in the stern of the vessel, slammed the door closed, activated the hydraulic locking system and pressed the button which fired exploding bolts on the hatch. Returning to the cockpit breathless, he orientated the external camera on the starboard side of the craft.

'Loozoh,' the robot hissed, 'you really must see glaucous fracture this. Look. A coffin in space, the first celestial burial. Historically, it is said that Man receives visitations from God. Behold a man on his way to visit God. Or at least that's what the old fool wanted to believe.'

Rubbing her eyes, Loozoh yawned. 'I could get a better look if you undid this damned harness. So now he's dead, he's an old fool, eh? A while ago he was your master and you were worthless vassal. God? Does He exist?' She mumbled, hoping ctrl. Option wouldn't notice the sticky mess of lemon meringue pie paste plastered over a number of important looking

instruments on the cabin ceiling. 'So did the old dude manage to get a boner, or did you have to apply splints?'

When ctrl. Option undid the harness, the weightless environment drew Loozoh upwards. She edged towards the porthole to witness the crystal coffin spinning away through space, refracted light from the distant sun sending rainbows out from its chamfered bev-els.

'God?' Came ctrl. Option's tardy reply. 'Unfortunately, strontium bacteria pantomime I only possess the sum of all human knowledge. Petulant spiral nebulae, the best human description of God, in my opinion, was by Eddington: "something unknown is doing we don't know what." Although with all deference to Eddington, I do think the dictum is better as: somewhere, something unknown is doing we don't know what. Irascible boxwood topiaries. Even as a robot I have the right to an opinion as to the existence of God, and previously I *used* to align my opinions on the anti-theist's side of the theological fence.'

Suddenly clutching his stomach and letting out an agonising groan, ctrl. Option doubled over, grasping the handrail above him until his knuckles were white.

'Indigestion?' Loozoh suggested, opening a tube of Madras lamb curry. 'Oncoming flatulence? Maybe those apples are rotten. What did you mean by *used* to align your opinions on the atheist's side of the theological fence?'

Breathing rapidly, colour slowly drained back into ctrl. Option's distressed face. 'It's nothing. *Petit mal*. Temporary malfunction. Human error in my manufacture. What? Oh, yes, I used to align my opinions concerning God on the anti-theist's side of the theological debate, but no longer do. Bestial trapeze mockery. I've decided that since reincarnation can exist for mortals, then it can for paranormal powers such as God. And robots too. The difference being that unlike humans, the DIPP—E robot series does not suffer from soul cancer. And as it happens, I've had the revelation that I am The Almighty, reincarnated.'

Loozoh blinked several times. Man, she had long ago decided, existed in labyrinths of insanity so anfractuous as to be beyond help. And if God had made man in his own image, that made Him a basket-case, and equally, Man had carried on the fine tradition of replicating dementia when conceiving the robot that was ctrl. Option.

'Well woopy-doo.' Loozoh said, attempting to conceal her cynicism. 'So what is a humble prosimian supposed to do now, your Divine Holiness? Kiss your ring?'

There was a tactile menace beneath the crooked smile on ctrl. Option's face. 'Oh, yea of little faith. I detect a non-believer, and I'm most chagrined. In the Kingdom of Heaven, I thought you could sit on my right hand.'

'Thanks for the offer,' Loozoh said, 'but my monkey-butt is just getting accustomed to chairs.'

Her wisecrack went unnoticed as ctrl. Option dou-

bled over in apparent agony for the second time.

'That looks painful. Has to be the apples.' Loozoh said. 'Too acid. You may know all there is to know about everything, but I know all there is to know about fruit.'

Clutching his stomach, ctrl. Option groaned. 'Not the apples. Morning sickness.'

'You're pregnant?' Loozoh exclaimed, halting a fresh attack on the tube of curry paste. 'So old rocket man out there in his glass coffin managed to get lift-off after all. But you can't have morning sickness already. That's impossible. He only screwed you about fifteen minutes ago.'

Perspiring profusely, ctrl. Option eased his body down into the pilot's seat and fastened the harness. 'Something's wrong. Incoming data—quicksilver fountains within anarchist's temples—twin's foetal growth acceleration unacceptable rate. Abort programme locked access denied. Noctambular mediaeval proctology. Premature birth—running calculations. Switching auxiliary metabolism stabilisers to maximum. Equestrian juggler's lascivious crispation repertoire.'

Loozoh screeched a high-pitched feral shriek. Looking from the ailing robot to the incomprehensible control panels, she panicked. 'Hey. Don't go dying on me. I couldn't fly a kite, let alone this hi-tech cigar tube. Maybe your blood sugar is low. Wanna try this curry?'

His body undergoing a series of convulsions, ctrl. Option slowly morphed into another man's form. A short, stocky man of about fifty years old with a pudgy face, beady dun eyes, dark pomaded hair parted far to one side and small, thin, mean lips below a square moustache trimmed vertically below his nostrils. Clad in black trousers and boots below a camel coloured blazer with a red armband bearing an ancient black and white Sanskrit symbol reincarnated in 1934 Germany, he began ranting a bilingual tirade.

'*Wurden sie mögen meinen alsatian hund des haustieres treffen? Nehmen sie eine nette zugfahrt möglicherweise? Treten sie in diese dusche. Sie können ihren wertsachen zu mir vertrauen...* For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do.—Romans chapter 7, verse 19. *Natur warum sollten sind, wir nicht sein grausam?* I believed, therefore have I spoken: I was greatly afflicted: I said in my haste, all men are liars.—Psalms chapter 116, verse 11. In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.—Genesis chapter four, verse 19. *Wer sagt daß ich nicht unter dem speziellen schutz des Gottes bin?* Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.—Matthew chapter six, verse 34. I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them

all.—Ecclesiastes chapter nine, verse 11. Where there is no vision, the people perish.—Proverbs chapter 29, verse 18. . . it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.—Acts chapter nine, verse 5... *rufen sie den Doktor an. Ich denke, daß ich eine andere einspritzung benötige. Watercolourvermächtnis Volkswagen.*'

Howling like an injured wolf, ctrl. Option began writhing and contorting again until he slowly morphed back into his usual form. When he slumped lower into the pilots seat, Loozoh noticed that he had not come out from the transformation unscathed. He had instantaneously aged, his skin jaundiced and etched with distress. And there was no doubting that the protrusion below his chest indicated that he was indeed pregnant. The air was foul with the smell from his companion's bad breath, an odour which suddenly evoked a memory from Loozoh's past. The house where Madame Sowlzafyr lived in Marseille. The haunting scent of death, infused with a faint odour of oxidising metal. Glancing back and forth between the jabbering recumbent robot and the sepulchral silence in the infinity of the Universe, the panic Loozoh had experienced earlier was replaced by a grim sense of self-preservation.

'Loozoh.' Came the feeble moan from ctrl. Option. 'Loozoh. I am the way. Yea though I walk in the valley of darkness, velvet horseshoes I evil no fear, for Thou art with me with thy Teflon handkerchief. *Wenn wir die führung rüber einfrieren, können unsere abteilungen Panzer herüber rollen, um die englischen schweine zu zerquetschen.* Ceramic madrigals of the spleen, and on the seventh day He rested in the bunker listening to Wagner and gave His only begotten liquid kaleidoscope ritual pending. Which art in heaven?'

Releasing her grip on the handrail, Loozoh drifted upwards, surveying the mass of bewildering gizmos before her. As she considered pressing, pulling and switching a few of them at random to see if serendipity would intervene in the catastrophe and guide the spaceship safely back to Earth, something moving in the darkness beyond the porthole caught her eye. At first she thought it was a shooting star, but the colour of the light reflecting from it was not silver-white, but

golden, and its shape was not spherical, but triangular, its perpendicular trajectory to theirs taking it at what seemed to be a considerable speed towards Earth.

'ctrl. Option?' Loozoh hissed. 'I mean, your Holiness. You ought to take a look at this. We ain't the only ones going nowhere fast.'

'And the meek shall inherit hot air.' ctrl. Option whispered. 'The twins are dead in my womb. *Eva, leibling, ist daß sie? Mary? Mütter?*'

With apparent suffering, ctrl. Option eased forwards to peer out at the unidentified flying object.

'It's getting closer.' Loozoh gasped. 'I don't believe my eyes. Are there hallucinogenics in that lemon meringue pie? That's a harp out there. A flying harp.'

Laboriously, an obviously ailing ctrl. Option manipulated instruments on the flight control panels before scanning data on the main computer screen. Breathing onerously, he muttered his observations. 'It's a U.F.O., no intaglio shoehorn tapestry doubt about it.' He stuttered. 'Our scanners detect two life forms on board. Not human. Current course indicates destination Earth.' His initial gravitas became laughter which became a wheezing paroxysm. 'The cosmic cavalry, perhaps, arriving to save the day. Omega suddenly looks like an Omega, maybe. Potted herring marmalade, impotable alluvial docility. *Ich denke, daß ich eine andere einspritzung benötige. Mütter. Mary. Eva... Amen.*'

Head lolling over at an unnatural angle, ctrl. Option's left hand slowly released its grip on the flight control panel, his liberated body drifting to the ceiling where it squashed the tube of lemon meringue pie paste Loozoh had inadvertently released in her surprise at finding that they were not alone in the heavens.

Loozoh drifted upwards too, greedily sucking in the floating sugary serpent released from the tube. Outside, the golden harp streaked past on its way to Earth. Inside, a weightless synthetic apple collided with Loozoh's head. When there were no more tubes of food left, she reasoned, there would be no other choice but to take a bite of the forbidden fruit.

(c) 2006, Michael loughrey

'The Dark One's Cry', Barbora P.

Artwork by Chris Cartwright (c) 2006. www.digitelldesign.com



On that day, the worlds collided. Samhain was the only time of year when mortals could hope to glimpse that which was never meant to be seen. Hopeful lovers wished upon fairy mounds for good fortune and grieving women called out to their lost husbands, hoping to see them once more.

Lucan had watched them all day long, inwardly laughing at their pathetic chants. Arrogant fool that he was, he scoffed at the idea of spirits and the Fae. As their laird, however, it would have been unseemly to discourage them.

There was only one kind of magic, and he was the one to wield it.

His eyes scanned the crowd, searching for the face of his intended. He found her at once. Taller than the rest of the women, her hair shining golden in the sunlight, she stood an angel among hags. Her eyes were sad as she gazed upon the grave of her father, lost to a raid this summer past.

Her grief only added to her beauty.

Lucan moved his hand in the air before him, tracing a pattern and watching light follow his movements. When he finished, the glowing symbol dis-

solved and streaked across the distance to her—his woman.

Her reverie interrupted, she looked up and met his gaze. Lucan grinned at her, in that way he so often did. The way that bespoke his intentions clearly.

She did not return his smile. Gazing once more at the grave, she breathed a sigh and murmured her farewell. Her offering remained when she retreated. On the morrow, they would see if the spirit of her Da chose to visit them. If aught came of it, it would be on this night.

Lucan met her as she walked past, matching her stride easily "Lovely Meggie, pretty Meggie, won't you give me a charm this day?"

"Off with you, Lucan," she replied softly, her beautiful eyes downcast. "I've no patience for your games today."

He scowled. "What would you have me say, then?"

Meggie stopped and faced him. Her green eyes glistened with tears, but she would not let them fall. She was strong—a fair quality in a wife. "I would have you say 'I love you, Meggie,' or even 'tis sorry I am, for your Da.' Life is grand when all you need worry

about is your fine shirt."

When she flipped her hand against his shoulder, it was not a touch he cared for. There was disdain in her voice. Why? Lucan never understood—nor cared to—the workings of a female heart. "You're to be my wife, lassie," he said tightly. "Such words are for naught."

"For you, aye," she agreed dryly. "Tis no human heart that beats within that chest. If there was aught in you worth praise, if but a spark of goodness shone behind that fair face of yours, I'd already be your wife."

"What say you?" he demanded in an offended huff.

Meggie backed away a step, then gave him her back. "Tis but a daughter's grief speaking, my lord, naught more."

Her answer did not mollify him in the least. "Face me," he said softly, a dangerous tone to his voice.

Meggie obeyed.

"Lovely or not, fair or not," he told her. "Mark my words, lass, I can make you mourn your own fate as you mourn your Da's." Never had a lass spoken to him so! She would submit to his word. For his word was law.

She met his gaze once more, a smile that was not a smile at all pulling on her lush lips. "I already do. My lord."

Lucan watched her go, his vision misting red with rage. How dare she speak so to him!

An angry thought was met by angry action.

As the sun lowered to the hills, Lucan stomped out of town, away from the bonfires and revelry. He rushed through the forest, heedless of the branches lashing at his body. He followed no path, cared not where he went, only that he continued moving.

At last, he stopped before a towering jagged cliff. Words of power whispered through his mind and he gave them voice, feeling the magic pour into his hands like sand. He let it take over him, fill him, guide him.

The rock groaned under the weight of his command. He clapped his hands once, thunder crashing in the sky as he did so. A second time he clapped, and a third, until the rock before him opened.

"*Who dares disturb my sleep?*" a voice hissed from deep within.

"Lucan, son of David the Hunter. I summon thee forth, spirit, to grant me my wish."

The spirit in the cave hissed again, this time a laugh that hurt Lucan's ears. "*A fool's wish,*" it said.

"I am no fool," Lucan replied through gritted teeth. "And you will do my bidding."

The spirit laughed again and a small light appeared far in the back of the cave. "*Cast thy spell, on my stone faced well. Speak your dreams, however it seems. But mark this now, to me you will bow, for a thousand years, despite the tears, if your words cut smart into an innocent's heart.*"

The rules were spoken.

Lucan took a breath. "I wish for my intended's love."

"*Thus shall it be, thus we will see, if the maiden's*

love is meant from above. Three moons is your stretch, to have the poor wretch, for her will is her own, down from heaven blown. If she'll not have you three moons hence ... I will."

The rock face groaned again and closed of its own will.

Only then did the whimsical rhymes sink in to Lucan's mind. No power on earth could command love! A fool's wish indeed. "No!" he roared at the rock, bending his will to opening it again. It would not budge.

Three months he had to do with Meggie what he would. She would obey his word and love him as she should. But at the end of that time, if she didn't love him of her own will, he belonged to the rock spirit for a thousand years.

For the first time in his life, fear gripped his insides like a cold fist.

He ran back home, determined to make her love him.

For three long moons he lived with Meggie at his side, basking in her smiles and enjoying her delight. He showed her a world beyond the one in which they lived. He opened her mind to wonders from afar and delights she would only find in his arms. Lucan watched her eyes grow wide in amazement, felt her heart beat quicken, and for a short moment each time, he felt safe.

Yet he knew her smiles were not her own. He knew it each time he looked into her eyes and saw the emptiness within. 'Twas the same emptiness that loomed constantly over him; plaguing his dreams when he wished only to see his beautiful wife in them. It taunted him with what was sure to come, no matter how hard he tried to prevent it.

He failed.

The morn when her eyes opened to the truth was his to cherish for all eternity. Sweet Meggie, lovely Meggie, her belly slightly rounded with his babe. She awoke in his arms and smiled before her eyes opened. But once they did, Lucan saw naught of what he'd expected in them.

At first there was confusion as she moved away from him, refusing his touch. Then fear when she looked about her and beheld the big soft bed, the many silks draped everywhere, the sheep skins before the hearth – all the things he'd bought for her in hopes that they would soften her heart.

When she beheld him, her eyes condemned him not with anger, but with betrayal. She never said a word. Not a single word. A tear slid silently down her pale cheek and her anguish tore his soul asunder. Meggie, dear Meggie, his beloved wife turned her face away, renouncing him.

He closed his eyes to escape the sight and opened them to darkness.

A thousand years...

Twelve thousand moons to think on what he'd done; to go mad and recover his senses, then go mad again.

Endless hours to sit in complete emptiness, in a world that had no beginning and no end. There was naught in this hell. No hunger, thirst, pain, or even sleep. He felt naught a man should feel, numb but for his anguish.

The floor was smooth, cold stone, with never a chink or scratch to trace. He could walk for miles and never reach a wall. Lucan, once a powerful laird with lands as vast as the sky and as rich as his own keep, found himself in a world where nothing existed, not even an echo of his voice. And, och, how many times he screamed and shouted himself hoarse in hopes of hearing any sound in return.

It never came.

There was only one thing he had in this place that was not a place at all: the memory of Meggie and all he'd done to her.

+

"Rise," the voice of the spirit hissed. *"Your price has been paid."*

There was a rumbling noise, like thunder, and then a shaft of light blinded him as the rock face opened to grant him passage.

Lucan closed his eyes and walked out. He kept walking until he was out of his prison. The enchanted door closed once more behind him, abandoning him with no knowledge of this new world he found himself in.

It mattered not.

Lucan climbed the rock face, flexing his strength, rather than his magic, to reach the top. His hands were raw and his arms aching when he got there and lifted his weary face up to the moon. Below him an unknown land stretched far and wide.

"Forgive me," he whispered to the winds, hoping they would bring the two words to the one he had wronged so terribly.

Then he came to the edge of the cliff and stepped forward into thin air.

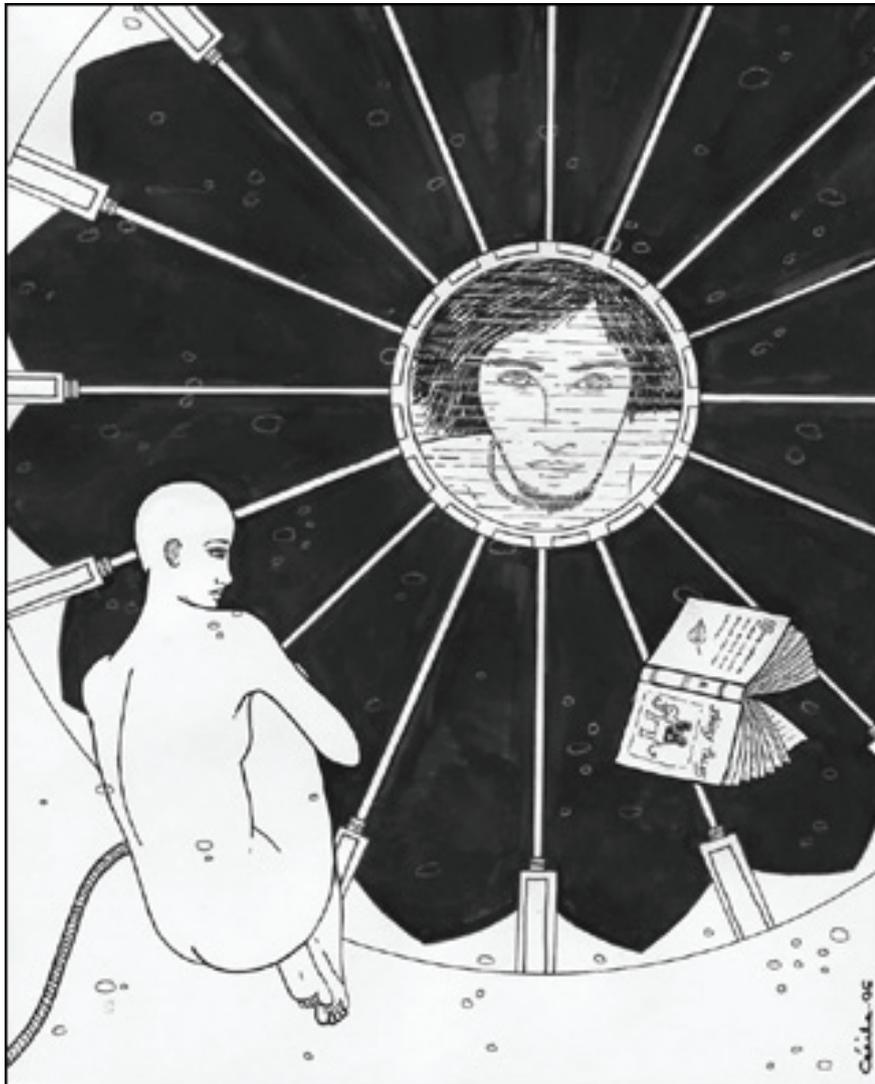


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I know I should never have told Tracy about Jude—she used to be my very best friend.

We were at school together—shared the same interests, played in the same orchestra. She was like the sister I never had. Sometimes in the long summer holidays I even got to meet her. Tracy's parents were rich—they had a real-time share and two weeks in a villa by a pool in a different location every year.

'True friends share everything,' she said.

I always knew that Tracy loved me, didn't care that I was 'different' ever since that first day in kindergarten.

My mother left before I saw her go. I was alone for the first time and I cried. I couldn't get used to the space in my mind where she had always been, sheltering and keeping me safe until I could 'live' without her.

I felt this faint whisper, a shy presence that reached out to me and said,

'Can I play with you? Will you be my friend?'

It was Tracy. She 'held my hand' and comforted me. Later she showed me around, took care of me and, unlike the other children, never laughed when I got things wrong.

My parents once had a weekend in real-time for their honeymoon, somewhere in New Italy. They used to laugh about it, said they were young and foolish and thought the virtual streets were paved with gold, that it would be the first of many, so they spent the weekend in bed anyway.

They used to exchange smiles over my pillow at night—we all knew that the miracle of my birth was the result of that stolen weekend.

They ended up in jail but family connections saved the day. My grandparents disinherited my father—public opinion demanded no less—but having 'paid the price' under the media spotlight the next sensation took over and my parents were allowed to get on with their lives.

Compared to other families in the patrician sector we were poor but we managed to get by. The interest of my parents' fortune, shrewdly invested in trust funds to win friends and influence the right people, acted as an insurance policy, protecting them from the worst consequences of their actions.

My family was already notorious for pursuing an alternative lifestyle. Descended from one of the founders of the modern state, my father's family was one of the few in our sector that retained the right to raise a boy in alternate generations. Already, when he was young, it was rare enough to be unusual. The reactionary element may have whispered that this child, born with a defective chromosome, should never have been reared—his parents, supporting the state with a flow of generous donations, could afford to laugh at them.

My parents got away with their indiscretion simply because everyone was so fascinated with their love story. I was the first time travel baby in over a century and the anthropologists were delighted with the opportunity to study my development. I had a privileged childhood—I even had a few natural diseases that advanced the cause of medical research and gave rise to new improved vaccines against the latest viruses.

One of my dearest possessions was an antique book of old fairy tales handed down through the generations. As my grandparents' fortunes inevitably declined with the obsolescence of the old technologies, I knew that I was the goose that laid the golden eggs—that my life guaranteed our future.

At school the other children made fun of Tracy and me because we always had to be the same, do everything together, and wear the same clothes. They called us 'The Twins' but only when they knew the teachers weren't listening.

I laughed but Tracy was really shocked. She blushed up to the roots of her fiery hair.

'Why do they have to say things like that?'

'They're only jealous. Hey, you could be my twin. Shame we're not identical...'

'Don't be disgusting!'

It was no big deal—she was so conventional. Horrified and fascinated by the past she liked to pretend it had never happened. My parents still talked quite openly about sex and my conception proved they'd tried it. Tracy's parents never touched each other and I know looked down on my 'permissive' upbringing. Not that Tracy cared. She refused to accept there could be any differences between us.

I was breast-fed, she was a bottled baby. 'So what?' she said.

Her parents never said I was a 'natural' but she knew what they thought. Their silent disapproval added fuel to her infatuation. Tracy was used to get-

ting what she wanted and no other girl in our year had a relationship with anyone quite like me. That was part of the attraction—I came with a designer label.

They said I was a random chance. That's why the state paid my school fees. Because my heritage was so unusual, my abilities the product of the gene pool I was born into, I was the subject of a government study to see if a 'natural' could compete against the elite.

Nothing is ever free. I wasn't supposed to know, but then I wasn't certified super intelligent for nothing. I'd opened the file and read the contract. I found out I would have the operation when I came of age; donate an ovary to the state. As a child of C12 with all my life before me it seemed a fair exchange.

The patrician class was an endangered species anyway. It was economics—society didn't need humanity anymore. This community was a dying breed, kept only in protected enclaves for the few remaining functions that the computers couldn't emulate or surpass. They still needed maintenance—the raw materials they couldn't generate electronically, hence the armies of sub-human drones that populated the erogenous zone and serviced their every need—and ours.

I think it was curiosity that ensured our survival—our capacity to do and say the unexpected that intrigued the superior race and made it think we were worth the time and resources needed to keep us alive.

As time went by we changed as they adapted our physical needs to lessen our impact on the environment. We evolved, became dependent on them, and surrendered the autonomy of our existence. We became the thinking cogs in the machine.

Sometimes I got so very tired of Tracy and her obsession to be like me—I didn't always want to be the same. The worst fight we ever had was when I told her,

'Your parents are rich enough—tell them to buy you a clone!'

She sulked for days after that—no one could sulk like Tracy—glare at you with those blank reproachful eyes until you felt 'that big' and would plead and do anything to gain her approval.

She knew it too—how she revelled in my capitulation—that gracious moment of forgiveness when everything between us was all right again—until the next time.

I hated it, hated what it did to me and then one day I woke up to the realisation that it was Tracy I hated most and then after that things between us would never be the same again.

I don't know why I always longed to go outside except that I was a born rebel. I had everything I needed to be happy but sometimes that isn't enough. We weren't usually allowed beyond the comfort zone although occasionally the wardens would allow us time out for good behaviour to play in the circus zone that kept the drones quiescent. Once beyond the limits of their authority it was never too difficult to hack through the fences. The powers that be didn't think they needed anything more sophisticated to deter the

drones.

Tracy was never happy, though she wouldn't let me go anywhere without her. She said I was leading her into bad habits and we'd both get into trouble so one day, when I couldn't stand her whining any more, I just left her behind. It was easy; she never could keep up with me.

It was a grey world beyond the domain—the graphics were shoddy and the colours faded and I knew the first age was static and couldn't change as fast as we did. I was expecting to meet someone from the past and of course, sooner rather than later, I did.

Jude always said that he'd been waiting for me. He knew I would come that day. When I got angry and asked him how he could expect a visitor from the future he just *smiled* with that strange upward curve to his lips that I came to adore and said it was all relative. I wanted to strangle him—at least I thought I did then, although I didn't have the emoticons to show him how I felt.

Jude was like no one else I'd ever met. The first time I saw him he was sleeping and that in itself was enough to pique my curiosity. I didn't know about sleep and at first I thought he was dead. So then I had to wake him up before he started to degrade. There was already a tear in his skin and fluid leaking from it. I didn't know what to do about the—*insects*? They were drinking from him.

He opened his eyes and flicked at the air. *Shoo, fly; don't bother me.* He looked at me. I mean he really looked at me and his expression changed when he *saw* me. I didn't know how he could tell I was there because I hadn't opened any link between us. They said you should never talk to strangers. I went looking for trouble but I wasn't stupid.

Communication was difficult at first—we were talking two different languages. So many questions I didn't understand that were common in his world like, '*what are you called?*' and '*how did you get here?*' and '*can I see you again?*'

We 'talked' for hours without saying a word and then he touched the screen and I shivered with an unfamiliar emotion I later identified as *desire*.

'Can I tell you a secret?'

Why was he asking me? I had no idea what he could do. I was confused, trying to relate to his non sense.

'What is a *secret*'?

'Something you don't tell anyone.'

'Are you making fun of me?'

'I want you to know. I have to tell someone. Can you keep a secret?'

I scanned though my memory. I couldn't find the word secret. I didn't know how you kept them or even what they were. I said yes. I would have said yes to anything. He had that effect on me. At one point when we really got so neither of us could make out what the other one was on about, he said,

'Should I draw you a diagram?'

'I don't know.'

'I will if you like.'

'You will if I like?'

'Look, I will, OK?'

'OK.'

'Now do you see?'

'No. I told you already.'

'You're not looking in the right place. This is my picture of you. I've written your name.'

'You are seriously weird. What are you on?'

He amazed me. I had never seen anything like it—I couldn't understand what the lines on the page were meant to be. He was so funny. Didn't he know nothing two dimensional could be real?

That of course led on to other things—he said he lived in real-time and for him it still existed as a constant—and his presence in our world was only occasional. He was a transient visitor—he led a separate existence beyond the interface and could *log out* any time he chose. He also said that it was getting harder to escape, that he was losing his will to leave and feared that one day when he fell asleep in our world he wouldn't remember how to wake up.

He was strange. We were both too old for fairy tales—but then he said he could prove that everything he said was true, and if I let him, if I was brave enough, he'd show me the way out. He said he could set me free.

I got really frightened then, I thought he was mad and I knew I didn't want to die. I'd read the horror stories about getting old, diseases, and the Great War. I didn't want to need to sleep or drink or eat or—no, I can't write it. Those other perversions dimly hinted at in pornographic texts—that I never believed could be true—you know what I'm talking about—the *smallest room*. He said he had to leave me and go there once—he actually said it. I thought I'd die!

I think that was probably what convinced me that he was telling the truth—that if the shift in cultures was so extreme then he must come from an alien world. He really was a primitive from the first age.

The first time it happened I ran away like the child I still was. At C15 you act like you own the world but you're terrified the world doesn't care—you do stupid things to make an impact. 'I was here—you can't delete me!' I wanted to live forever.

I fled back to Tracy. I knew she'd be mad at me but I was arrogant enough to think she'd be so pleased I'd come back that she'd forgive me anything. I was wrong.

'Get lost, bitch! Fuck off and die!' She posted all over and soon no one would talk to me. I had broken the rules of the unspoken contract between us, that I was her plaything, her possession—ultimately I was hers and I existed for her pleasure. She refused to open her screen and when I tried to get through to her she shut the window in my face.

I was hurt and I was angry and I wasn't thinking too clearly by then. I told her she was a spoilt brat, that she didn't own me and said I'd never really liked her. I thought I didn't mean it, yet every word I said was true

and spread like some gigantic worm eating everything away, destroying everything there might have been between us.

In the beginning I wasn't too worried. I thought we'd make up as we always did. I knew she couldn't avoid me forever. Back at school I sensed her watching me, thought I wouldn't have to wait too long for her curiosity to win out over her pride. I knew she'd want to know where I'd been, that she couldn't bear that I might tell someone else, not her.

Then as time went on I found myself alone as I'd never been before and when the rumours started I had no friend to shield me. No one wanted to know me and very soon I found out why. The graffiti was everywhere—AIDS. They said I had a virus and they cut me out of the loop. There was no defence, no appeal. I was beyond the pale.

At first I tried to ignore the whispers, thought that if I didn't react maybe they'd get bored and let me back in. Then I got scared and tried to fight it.

I wasn't going to give in—I tricked my way in past the walls Tracy had set up and confronted her. It was the worst thing I could have done. She was furious.

'So you feel so bad you want to infect me too? How could you be so selfish and irresponsible?'

'Tracy, you know that's not true. I'd never do that to you. I'm not infected. You can't catch it that way. Not from going back into the past!'

She went bright red then and muttered something about *toilet seats*. I laughed to hide how shaken I felt. I hadn't thought a girl like Tracy would even know the words.

'You don't know what AIDS is! Bet you can't tell me what the letters stand for?'

There was a long pause while she thought about it and I didn't think she was going to come back but she never could resist a challenge.

'You think I don't know anything! It's Artificial Intelligence Deficiency Syndrome!'

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. She never did pay attention in class, just downloaded and copied my files.

I looked into her vacant eyes—so different from Jude. Like mine they were purely decorative. The Unborn received sensory impressions through the umbilical cord that connected us together—break that connection then you died—not immediately but leave it long enough and you would begin to degrade. It was similar to the effect alcohol had in the old days. The brain cells decayed and many became the mindless drones who didn't care who they were so long as their most basic appetites were satisfied.

I did try to tell Tracy about Jude but she wouldn't listen. I did my best to describe the sound of his voice, the expression in his eyes and the strange new sensations I felt when he touched me. She could not understand, could not think beyond the hurt of my betrayal.

'You cheated on me! My mother was right about you. She said never trust a natural.'

In the end what I did was inevitable. I had lost my

best friend. There was only one choice—to go back and prove to myself it was real.

Jude was waiting for me like I'd never gone away and I suppose in his world this was true. I was always there—an image on the screen. It is comforting to think I am still there—that I never left.

He listened and I told him everything. Then he reached out to me and dragged me through the screen, I felt glass break in shards around me and when I opened my eyes I was naked, newborn, my lungs gasping for air until he leant over, placed his mouth upon mine and showed me how to breathe

Everything was new. I felt the grass beneath my feet, the warmth of the sun and the weight of the air on my skin. When I tripped and fell, unsteady as I took my first steps, I cut my knee and it bled. Jude held me as I shook in his arms, confused by the scent of his skin and when he kissed me his hair brushed my face.

I opened my mouth to shape words for the first time. I learned that I could sing and I felt like an angel in the old tales I'd read in another world.

Not that it was heaven—sometimes I felt like I had stumbled into hell.

I soon found out that in primitive society everybody had some kind of addiction, caffeine was probably the most insidious but other banned substances like alcohol were freely available and I saw children and even babies routinely dosed with drugs. Dirt and disease were universally prevalent—there was basic hygiene and climate control but nothing like the intelligent environmental systems I was used to. I will never forget my first sight of an open landfill site, refuse mountains under the polluted skies and the burnt out transport wrecks that littered the wastelands, left over from the final days of conflict when the fuel ran out.

I was ill for a long time until I developed an immune system—they said it was lucky I was so young so they could rewire my genes. Of course the treatments they gave me undid the advances in the centuries after my birth and so I reverted to a state of nature that inevitably had consequences.

There was one night when I felt Jude's child stir within me and I reached out for him and placed his hand on my distended belly. In those long nights when I lay beside him with my eyes open I was desperate for comfort—to know I was not alone. I didn't sleep—I didn't know how. That function was long dormant and could never be re awakened. Shut down was permanent.

I traced the smooth tips of his fingers, already in his day the whorls were erased by his generation's contact with keyboards and mice, the interface to our world. I wanted him to wake and hold me, knew what my touch did and needed reassurance that in my changing state he still wanted me.

He moaned and shifted and then he screamed, lashed out at me so my head jolted back and hit the wall. Then he sat up with his eyes open staring at nothing and began to mutter words I couldn't decipher, pushed me out of his way and climbed rigidly out of

bed. I caught at his arm and he shook me off. I called out to him but he didn't listen, didn't pause just walked out of the room and pressed the button for the lift. As the doors closed the last thing I saw were his eyes, white in the moonlight, blank and unseeing. I sat by the open window, not daring to follow, waiting until it grew light.

Then when it was nearly dawn he came back, creeping quietly into the room so as not to disturb me which was foolish as we both knew.

I asked him what happened.

'It's not important. I can't remember.'

'What do you mean, you can't remember?'

He grew more and more restless as I stared at him in confusion.

'Look, it doesn't matter. I don't want to talk about it. Just leave me alone, OK?'

'No, it is not OK. You said you loved me. If you love me you will tell me. Don't shut me out!'

He sighed and his shoulders sagged and I thought I had won. 'Suppose I tell you I'm afraid of the dark?'

I giggled but only because he frightened me.

'It's not funny! Sometimes I wake and I can't hear you breathing and I have to go listen to something, anything, voices in the night, so that I know that I'm not alone.'

'How can you be alone when you are with me?'

He shook his head. 'This has nothing to do with you.' Then he said he didn't mean it like that.

'You know I love you. I'm all right now. Forget it, please?'

I felt water spill from my eyes. I felt so helpless. Why did he ask the impossible?

In the morning he asked me about the bruise above my eye and I didn't know what to say. Later I learned that I should have *lied* and said I had fallen and he was not to *worry*. He kissed me then and held me, said that he was sorry and he'd take better care of me and he'd never hurt me again.

In the beginning I was forever asking him what he meant and he did try to explain but there were things I could not understand. How could he be afraid of something like *nightmares* that only existed in his mind?

'Aren't there enough dangers to worry about in the real world without inventing more?'

So then he told me about his family. He said they used to go with others who shared their *faith* to a *sacred* building where they *worshipped* his people's *god*. This was in the old days before *religion* was condemned. When the *soldiers of righteousness* came his mother hid him beneath the floorboards and because he was so small they never found him. Later when he came out it was dark and there was no one there. They had done something to the buildings and all that was left were shadows on the stones. He said it was so quiet. That was why, when he woke in the night, he had to go and open the news screen to make sure there were still people in the world.

The next time I held him and comforted him until he slept again while I stared into the dark.

I grew wary of the children I saw in the streets. Their imaginary games with friends I could not see took on a sinister new meaning. Until then I had only thought them linked into a network like my own but now I felt threatened, their innocent games of *make believe* showed me that I was no longer human.

I wondered what would happen the first time my child said to me, 'Mummy, let's pretend' or 'I had a bad dream.'

I realised I could only see things as they were and what I saw of his world appalled me. How could he live knowing that children starved and died of disease, while people fought senseless wars as the world overheated and multiple species died out every day? As a child he had seen whales and elephants, legendary beasts that in my time only existed in the 'fairy tale' book I treasured.

I suppose knowing it all turned out OK in the end helped me keep my sanity—my people lived when the planet died. We had some of our worst arguments over that.

'How could your people stand by, watch it happening and do nothing?'

He said I knew nothing - he had seen the future and it wasn't worth saving. 'I'd rather die than live in a silicon cage!'

I couldn't accept that. I mean real-life is all very well but you wouldn't want to live there. Even back in the days when everyone who was anyone went on looking glass vacation for the heritage experience, they had to get various shots and take the pills to insulate themselves against the more fundamental aspects of humanity.

Later it became faintly disreputable to regress—they imposed new quarantine regulations to make it more difficult until eventually it became impossible—or so they told us until I came along, a genetic throw-back, to prove it could still happen.

I thought maybe in the time I'd been away Tracy might have had time to get over what had happened between us—that she might be ready to give me a second chance. I should have realised it doesn't work that way.

At home they hardly knew I'd been away. I was late for the eventide celebration when we connect as a family but they put it down to mid century blues and second age angst. How could I tell my mother that my baby had died before I was born? That I'd left my real-life lover and I'd abandoned my child to grow old?

Tracy was no comfort at all when I turned to her. I couldn't get through to her and when I tried she said she couldn't help me and I wasn't to come near her again.

I suppose I shouldn't blame her too much. In a way I deserved it because I didn't tell her all of the truth. That I was the one who ran away and left him so I could take refuge in the comfort zone I'd always known.

Tracy just thinks I went looking for trouble, a retro romance in the erogenous zone and got more than I

bargained for, which I had coming to me. I tried to tell her that it happened in real-life but she wouldn't listen. I suppose to her my pregnancy was a fantasy tale of alien abduction and she thought I was insane.

'You're not the first and you won't be the last girl to fall for a boy and pretend that it's real! You're a drug crazed freak and I'm through with you!'

I was on shaky ground there—Jude did have to give me something before I could summon up the nerve to break the mirror.

'You're just reverting to type! Coming from a family like yours—it's only to be expected.'

That really hurt. Everyone knew I had a father but no one held it against me. I tried to tell her I was sorry but she hadn't finished with me yet.

'It's not your fault—it's in your blood!'

I felt the current course through my artificial veins and I pitied her. In the end I did something I'd never done before and I wrote her a letter by way of farewell. I'll never know if she can read it. Maybe if someday she comes back to me I can tell her what it said.

I wish I could tell you more about Jude but somehow the essence—what made him so special and different always eluded me. I could tell you about his smile, the sound of his voice, the quality of his skin and the scent of his hair, how he tasted when we made love but you can never understand. You had to be there to feel it—to know it was real.

He showed me so much, how to laugh, when to cry and to scream out in ecstasy and later in terror and pain but there were some things I never learned—he couldn't teach me how to dream, how to live in the world of the imagination so that when the world fades into darkness you have a safe place to go.

You were always my safe place to go.

Tracy and I were meant to be together and now it's too late. Her screen is always blank and I'm beginning to forget what she looks like.

I'm really scared because I know that time is running out for all of us. I hate to be alone like this. My parents achieved transcendence last century and my unusual status meant they let me keep our home. I know that if I leave the shelter of my silicon shell I'll die. Maybe Tracy was right about me. Maybe I was wrong about everything. I was programmed to tell the truth—I'm ashamed I learned to lie.

When I turn 1800 they'll come for me and they'll find out what I did. I have to run away but I don't know where in this world I can go.

Book reviews

Kevin Brockmeier, *The Brief History of the Dead*. John Murray (UK) / Random House (US), 2006. Pp 272. ISBN 0719568188. £12.99 / \$22.95.

Reviewed by Jodee Stanley

The afterlife: is there any other single mystery that holds a stronger fascination? In *The Brief History of the Dead*, Kevin Brockmeier uses the simple question of "Where do we go when we die" as a springboard for his haunting, intricate imagining of an existence beyond this one—an existence that is also only temporary, leaving still unanswered the question of what lies beyond.

The Brief History of the Dead opens with in the vast, borderless City of the Dead, which the departed reach by way of "crossing over," each person's crossing being as individual as the proverbial snowflake. In the City, the dead have become accustomed to a similar way of living here in the afterlife as they had on earth; they work, they have friends, they fall in love, marry—there is no procreation, but there is a semblance of life that is satisfying, and that lasts, for most people, for a significant number of years. After some length of time, a person will simply disappear, into whatever plane (if any) comes next.

Only now, in the City, people have started disappearing en masse without explanation. Among those survivors of the disappearing dead is Luka Sims, a journalist in life who has returned to his vocation after reaching the afterlife via a fatal car accident. Luka runs the City of the Dead's only newspaper, the *Sims Sheet*, reporting on news of interest from both the City and the world of the living; when the mass disappearances begin, he tracks this story as well, though for a brief time it seems as if he may be the only one left to read it. Just as he's come to believe he's the last soul in the City, he meets up with a blind man, and then a woman he will fall in love with. The three of them make their way across the abandoned City streets until a gunshot calls them, along with the other remaining dead, to the City's Monument District. Here, the few thousand remaining inhabitants settle to re-form their society and wait to see what happens next.

The situation echoes any number of apocalyptic tales where plague or some other disaster wipes out most of the population, leaving a few survivors to resurrect civilization. In this case, though, there is no need to, nor even a way to, repopulate or rebuild—there is only the mystery of what's happening, and why.

What's happened is this: down among the living, a plague actually has wiped out the world's population, with apparently a single exception: Laura Byrd, a

wildlife specialist stationed in Antarctica on a research expedition sponsored by the Coca-Cola Corporation. Abandoned and unaware of the devastation elsewhere in the world, Laura sets out alone on a fuel-cell-powered sledge toward another research station. As her last days unfold and she struggles to stay alive in the bitter Antarctic wilderness, her mind sustains itself with memories—some noteworthy, others seemingly insignificant. Meanwhile, the citizens of the City slowly piece together why they still remain when others have disappeared.

Not surprisingly, the two threads are connected, and in weaving them together, Brockmeier explores the wonderful randomness and vastness of human memory. It may be something you've never considered before—certainly I've never considered it—the sheer numbers of individuals one encounters, even touches, in life, and how each of those encounters is stored away in the limitless vaults of memory where it can potentially be accessed if necessary, when context demands it, or sometimes for no apparent reason at all. At one point in the novel a character tries to make lists and estimate how many people he knew, fleetingly or deeply, during the course of his life before the afterlife. The number he arrives at is 50,000, which he feels may be a great underestimate. The actual figure, he suspects, is more likely closer to 70,000. Another character refuses to believe this, that the number could be so high, but as we grow to know the remaining population of the City of the Dead and see how each of them is linked to the others, we begin to comprehend how that number could truly be accurate, and what's more, we begin to contemplate how connected we are to the world.

Brockmeier flirts with other interesting ideas in *Brief History*—the novel is set in a near-future in which corporations like Coca-Cola and Bertelsmann have free reign over the world and employ outrageous but not-that-farfetched "guerilla marketing" campaigns. Fear of terrorism has taken over in a new kind of Red scare, with warning sirens and orange-vested security troops so commonplace they have become almost invisible. It's an amusing but recognizable world, and it makes the plague, when it happens, and how it happens, utterly believable.

But the real heart of the novel is concerned not so much with our outer world, as with our inner life—specifically, our relationships with one another, how we take them for granted, and yet how they come back to us, and affect us, at one point or another, in ways we don't even necessarily understand. How we exist in this world, and beyond it, is determined in many ways by how we are seen and understood by others. To live on in the minds of others is, after all, a kind of immortality, and this has been illustrated quite beautifully in *The Brief History of the Dead*.

Tim W. Lieder (ed.), *Teddy Bear Cannibal Massacre*. Dybbuk Press, LLC, 2005. Pp 144. ISBN 0976654601. \$13.00.

Reviewed by Jehoshaphat

Teddy Bear Cannibal Massacre is a collection of short stories that cover a variety of themes. These include new takes on nursery rhymes and horror myths, stories about parrot enthusiasts, and psychological discourses and thrillers. These stories are written with a serious tone as well as, in some cases, subtle humour and a tongue in cheek. Cynicism and wit invariably make an appearance.

This was a very enjoyable read. The stories were well written and communicated, with good character development, skill in the use of story length. Whilst no two stories were even similar, there was consistent quality and the majority of the content held me extremely captivated. The psychological stories ('Head Drippers', 'Something Funny is Going On', and 'Clob') deserve particular mention as they were very delicately crafted. The suspense of whether the main character in 'Head Drippers' really was schizophrenic is dealt with admirably. The way that the exclusionist frustration and paranoia in 'Something Funny is Going On' is treated is worthy of note. The shyness of the main character in 'Clob' is handled sensitively, subtly and substantially, like the majority of the psychological stories. '

It was only a couple of times that I felt that my mind wondered, and that the story may have needed one more critique and slight amendment. These were not, however serious flaws. 'Peppercorn Rent' could be viewed as a tad contrived, but the amusing characters and witty retorts more than alleviates that. 'Hermetic Crab' has a slight problem in setting the scene, characters and essence of the story initially, but recovers by means of true suspense and excitement as the story progresses towards a pleasant, if twee, conclusion.

These stories were clever and a joy to read. The title of the work has an elusive meaning—this collection was nevertheless cute, macabre, funny and horrific all at once. There were some comparable moments with Irvine Welsh's short stories, particularly with some of the more distasteful and grim stories, but Welsh wrote that style of story better in his *Acid House*—though this point is merely an attempt on my part to provide a sense of what to expect. *Teddy Bear Cannibal Massacre* has its own charms that I recommend you enjoy for yourself.

Mike O'Driscoll, *Unbecoming*. Elastic Press, 2006. Pp. 246. ISBN 0954881273. £6.99.

Reviewed by Karina Kantas

Unbecoming is a collection of short, dark horror stories about characters that choose to, or fight against, change. They are becoming. This is not an easy read, with stories that are darkly psychological, causing the reader to search for truth and reason. If you are looking for horror stories that contain gore, vampires, and monsters, then you have the wrong book. However, if you want to read stories that will keep you awake at night while you question your own sanity, then this is the book you're looking for. *Unbecoming* is contemporary dark horror at it's best. What Mike O'Driscoll dishes out are tales that will remain with you for many days, even weeks to come.

The plots are of everyday occurrences: characters that you could easily pass on the street, and that is where the chill factor comes into play. The psychological emotions of the characters, as their personality or environment around them changes and their mental quest to cope with the loss of their identities, will remain deep within your consciousness as you try to make sense of it all. Relating to the emotions and thoughts of the characters is where the horror comes in. Putting yourself in their places, you will ask the questions: would I feel the same? Would I make the same mistakes?

All of the stories apart from 'Evelyn Is Not Real' have been previously published and, unsurprisingly, 'Sound's Like' is currently being filmed for the *Masters of Horror* TV series.

The stories are well written, narrated in 1st and 3rd person. However, it is not until you reach the conclusion of the tales, that the pieces suddenly fit together, causing you to want to read it again just to make sure you didn't miss something and hoping it will make more sense the second time round.

The first chilling tale 'We Will Not Be Here Yesterday' is about two collaborating artists, one of whom takes his ability to the limits. The story is made up of snippets of reviews, interviews and comments about the artists' latest work. Throughout the pieces, the plot starts to come together. It's very cleverly done, but makes you wonder weather you are reading an actual story, and whether or not you have picked up the right book. By the end of the story, the plot will makes perfect sense in a warped way, but would make a better impact if the piece were in the middle of the collection.

In 'The Darkening Green' is a story that will open your heart as you follow the steps and emotions of Adu, an orphan who lives within the walls of Happy Kids. As each child hopes they will be the next chosen, Adu believes that if she leaves the shelter of the home, she will change, and become programmed into

becoming someone she is not. It is not until Adu escapes while on a trip, that her fear becomes reality and she finally learns the truth to what is out there waiting for her.

'Hello Darkness' is one of the darkest tales of this collection. O'Driscoll makes sure the reader understands what being at the bottom really means. The main character is searching, but for what? A way out, an escape from the pain and misery? He discovers Lulu, a drugged up prostitute who is ready to let go. Both find what they have been looking for.

'If I should wake before I die' is a tale about Lee, a sick individual, who from being a young boy gets pleasure in hurting and killing animals. Of course, as he grows older, his victims become larger. Home calls to him, and on returning he is faced with his past and the horrific truth of his actions.

With 246 pages of thought-provoking tales, this book is excellent value at £6.99 and will be enjoyed by readers who relish dark psychological horror.

Other reviews (film, audio, magazines)

***Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, Dir. Michel Gondry**

Focus Features

Starring: Jim Carrey, Kate Winslet, Kirsten Dunst, Elijah Wood

Reviewed by Jehoshaphat

This film, by music video veteran Gondry, is about a couple who both seek to have all their memories of each other removed after a painful break-up. It introduces a technique of neurological intervention that could, in theory, achieve memory erasures of this sort—albeit to much more limited degree—and provides basic pop-psych explanations for how this works. The story focuses on Carey's character, who wages a sub-conscious battle to resist the treatment he has consented to because he realises his love for Winslet's character, and opts to fight for their relationship after all.

This reasonably enjoyable and clever film handles the rather fun psychological ramifications in a poignant, humorous and sometimes heartrending way, and is sensitive to the themes of love whilst leaving the audience to go off on their own emotional exploration. Carey's exploration of his character's memory is quirky, visual and sometimes predictable (which is perhaps unsurprising given Gondry's music video direction experience). Carey's own comedic movements, which we have grown used to after *Ace Ventura, Mask* etc, do not however really fit either the process of memory exploration, or his character's quiet and often unassuming nature.

Carey and Winslet both provide very good performances and portray intriguing and realistic characters. They are, however, very static and I felt that there was very little chemistry between the two, who are after all supposed to be lovers. Whilst I admit that this is because I felt that they were not a good match, there was just something missing from how their relationship was portrayed—this may be an issue of directorial experience.

The other characters are interesting. They all poses

a very two-dimensional quality, which is deliberate, I think, and as Dunst's character wrestles with the academic masturbation that memory erasure proposes, her reactions give her a sharply three-dimensional quality that is both stark and convenient for the plot.

I want to love this film, but I have to say only that it is likeable and worth a watch. There is definitely something that everyone can relate to in this film. I recommend that you watch for love appreciation and mind fuck value.

Bob Harper, *Twisted Rhymes* (vol 1). BHP Productions, 2006. Audio CD. 52 minutes. \$16.95.

Reviewed by Lillith

I first must thank *The Future Fire* for giving me the opportunity to review this awesome piece of spoken literature! The authors are expert in painting the scene vibrantly with every verse, brought to life by the awesome music and superb narrators. This audio CD contains twelve tracks, "fully produced", that the author describes as "more of the bizarre than graphic horror".

On the narrators: the male voice is so smooth and versatile, his diction so precise that no word, no verse is missed or misunderstood. His voice adapts to the poem and the mood of each piece, accents mimicked exactly without being overbearing. The female narrator was equally proficient in her performance, sultry and sensual. Both draw you into the world of the author totally and completely.

1] 'Royal Blood': The piece itself needs to be made into a short film, reminiscent of an epic poem. The ending is priceless!

2] 'Cobwebs and Candlelight': The sound of hooves set the stage oh so well in this dark tale—surprise ending that chills the bone. Very melancholy... The poet knows how to weave a tale.

3] 'Patient #9': This is one of those narrations that you just go- ewwww... Very darkly sensuous, like

being wrapped in a black silk sheet eating dark chocolate and sipping espresso.

4] 'When the Full Moon Comes Rising': Music is awesome in this epic tale. Ahhhhh... can see the castle, the knights... the zombies.

5] 'Cap'n MacKnee': The narrator has so much passion in his reading of this beautiful, disturbing tale.

6] 'VooDoo': Rhythm is wonderful! Release this on independent radio, and the requests will be astonishing!

7] 'Musical Murder Mystery': Oh, the *Law and Order* beginning is great! All you musicians and mystery buffs will find this a great listen.

8] 'In Laredo' : Oh, they have remembered you lovers of old-school Westerns—with a little something for your vampire taste buds as well.

9] 'Cup a' Joe': Puts a bad rap on hole-in-the-wall roadside diners. But it is an awesome piece.

10] 'And Nothing More': A Celtic wonder, an eerie, beautiful tale. Classic ghost story told with a beautiful air.

This audio CD is for those who like a little bit (or a lot) o' strange—for those who maybe like poetry but don't like to or have time to crack open a book. A great listen in the car, or at home in a hot bubble bath surrounded with candles. Or, for the guys, kicked back with a cognac and a Cuban.

For lovers of dark poetry, this is indeed a treat! The pieces are so delicately brutal that it leaves one almost weeping for the sheer beauty! 'And Nothing More' and 'Cobwebs and Candlelight' are very touching in their melancholy, while 'Royal Blood' and 'Patient #9' leave you with chills running down your spine.

If you're not a fan of poetry, this collection may not be for you. But if you enjoy well-written verse by a master storyteller like Bob Harper, then you really need to take a listen to the tales rendered by expert narrators on *Twisted Rhymes*. Scored perfectly to compliment the mood of each piece, it instantly transports the listener into the mind of the storyteller's chilling world. All in all, I would recommend *Twisted Rhymes* for lovers of dark fiction and poetry lovers of any genre alike. Do not hesitate to be drawn into the twisted world of *Twisted Rhymes*!

***Whispers of Wickedness* 13, Summer 2006. D-Press. Pp. 60. £3.00.**

Reviewed by Simon Mahony

This independent, low budget publication in handy pocket size A5 is packed with a variety of tales ranging from the seriously disturbing to the somewhat absurd: fiction, non-fiction, poetry and (sometimes) provoking art work. With a simple layout it is (as it was for this reviewer) a welcome travelling companion with each offering short enough so as not to be disturbed by the punctuations to our peace brought by the food and drink that are designed to prevent sleep in European air-travel.

The opener by John Saxon, 'Soft Flesh, Cold Steel', has a seriously creepy and downright sleazy illustration by Viéve Forward evoking the worst aspects of this gruesome tale of lust that knows no bounds. Told in an interesting (though predictable) reverse chronology the reader discovers the events that lead up to that first encounter with the protagonist, his leering grin and tube of lube.

More thought provoking is 'The Dead Which Were In It', by Barry J. House. Wracked by the guilt of ignoring rather than acting on the premonition of his father's death, Nicholas, who senses the changes in a person's aura, looks forward to his rehabilitation away from the sanatorium and towards the anticipated solitude of the lighthouse. This is the longest of the stories; one that is coloured with imaginative language and paints its picture with well crafted prose that does credit to both the author and the selectors.

Being new to *WOW* I'm not quite sure what 'The Blue Pootle Column' is all about. Glancing quickly at an earlier edition, I see it's a regular feature and I guess with more exposure to this humorous interlude (or is that 'comic relief?') featuring in this edition Ronnie Corbett and Mr Spock, I'm sure I'll figure it out.

Steven Pirie interviews the writer and publisher Storm Constantine in a piece titled 'Where Science And Magic Meet'. Storm talks about the support and encouragement of new writers; the market place has changed and publishers, large and small, need to respond. When asked about the creative process Storm interestingly admits that she doesn't "really know how it happens" (p. 21). Perhaps in true Socratic fashion the Muse speaks through her. Now wouldn't that be an interesting thought?

Another provoking artwork, this time by Bob Veon, alludes to the underlying theme of Jason Gaskell's 'The Therapist'. This new age loan shark-cum-therapist has his own agenda where the 'contract' must never be broken. The plot hangs together well and the characterization is believable if stereotypical.

The second non-fiction entry is by Terry Grimwood and called, 'Pyewacket And Vinegar Tom: The Story Of The Witchfinder General'. Short and to the point I at first thought that this was the screenplay for a

new movie by the Hammer House of Horror until I looked in the contents. If this is to be considered fact then it might help if the author gave the reader some indication of his sources—historical biography or collected internet searches? How seriously should we consider what we find here?

'But It Pours' by Rhys Hughes is a fanciful piece of fun which reminds this reviewer of something but he cannot remember what. That may in fact be the point in this shop that sells rain—but special rain!

Seriously disturbing, partly by its simplicity and partly by the matter-of-fact way it gradually introduces its dark secret, 'Pretty Much Damn Near Perfect' by Alison J. Littlewood is the gem that sparkles (or is that ... ?) amongst this collection. This loving couple seem pretty much damn near perfect and wouldn't we all like that? The simple picture of domestic happiness reveals its disturbing foundations as the reader is

drawn deeper and deeper into the twisting plot that is their love.

Closing this edition are two short pieces: 'The Way to A Man's Heart: Ask Dr. Lippman' by Kristine Ong Muslim with some interesting patient problems; Peter Tennant's 'The Tower Struck By Lightning' is short and sweet with a not altogether unanticipated twist at the end where the ambiguity of the Tarot is lost on its reader.

Some poems are also included in this edition by Greg Schwartz and Alexis Child which together with the artwork bind this volume in the tradition of darkness, the macabre and creepy while still remaining readable and excellent value. Despite a few reservations this volume as a whole comes strongly recommended and I await the next installment.

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