

# **THE FUTURE FIRE**

**SPECULATIVE CYBERPUNK DARK**

**Issue 2007.10**

**ISSN: 1746-1839**



Cover Art: (c) 2007 Hadrian York Holdings

**Black Swan winner:  
Steven Pirie**

**Plus fiction by:  
RJ Astruc**

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# The Future Fire: Issue 2007.10

The real end of the world is the destruction of the spirit; the other kind depends on the insignificant attempt to see whether after such a destruction the world can go on.

-- Karl Kraus

## **Fiction**

Steven Pirie 'Night Dreaming' ..... (3)

RJ Astruc 'In the Shadow of Kakadu' ..... (6)

**Reviews** ..... (11)

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## **The Future Fire (c) 2007**

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We only have three brief things to say in this introduction to the final *TFF* issue of 2007. The first is a hearty congratulations to Steven Pirie, winner of the Black Swan contest, whose story 'Night Dreaming' you will find below. There was a strong field of entries, and the judges clearly cast their votes widely and variedly, which is an excellent sign.

The second is to wish a happy tenth issue to *TFF*, and may your future hold even more exciting developments and excellent stories than your past. The third is a question: I don't know if anyone else has observed this, but why is chilli not as hot as it used to be?

More news from our expanded editorial team and slightly redesigned site to come soon. See you all in Spring.

Ixthus & Djibril

December 2007

## **BLACK SWAN CONTEST WINNER**

### **‘Night Dreaming’ Steven Pirie**

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Since the surgery, Mary sits in shadow, Night Dreaming. At least, she thinks she no longer feels the sun's awful heat upon her brow, so she must be in shadow. Perhaps she's been too close to the fire in the Day Room and Bob's pushed her away. Assuming Bob's still out there; that there's still a fire, a Day Room, and a sun in a sky to burn her skin.

'Are you a bit warm, Edith?' says Mary.

Mary listens to the sound of her own voice in her head. When she's Night Dreaming, Mary's an island. She gazes seaward from her rocky plinth, and words break like waves at her feet. Not that Edith answers any more. She hears Frank grunt and feels Bob scratching his backside, but Mary hasn't really heard from Edith since the surgery. If an answer comes, Mary's never quite sure if she's talking to herself.

'Not me,' says Edith, or Mary, or someone in Mary's head. 'I'm cool as can be. It must be one of your turns you're having. You'd best call Doctor Stevens, or Bob.'

Mary shivers. 'I'm not calling him.'

There's no room for Bob on Mary's island. She tries to call him but the words bounce around. Bob never comes. And Bob was all for her before the surgery, that's the hurtful thing. Mary was sure Bob, if

anybody, would stick by her. Now, she's not sure about anything.

'I don't think he's coming,' says Edith. 'I'm not surprised.'

Mary recognises the tone. It's that twisted, knowing intonation that Edith's so good at. It's a told you so thing, all smug and self satisfied.

'You'd know all about that,' says Mary. 'You couldn't hold on to your Frank, now, could you? Left you for that floozy from number six, he did. Off like a rat up a pipe, he was.'

Waves roar and sea-eagles wheel. Mary ducks away. It's safer to do so whenever she insults Edith. Old Edith's fine right hook makes Mary's adenoids ache. Mary sighs; she doesn't really want to get on Edith's bad side, but sometimes, when Bob doesn't come and the Night Dreams are so real, it's hard not to. She's an argumentative old bint, Edith. Since the surgery, Mary's happy Edith is an island, too.

It's three-thirty. Bob always visits at three-thirty. Bob's a creature of habit, and not all of them good ones. Edith watches through the washy, soft-focus of her good eye as Bob shuffles in. He looks pale and wishy-washy himself, as if he's not really in the room.

Edith grins; she could tell Mary a tale or two of Bob; of back in the old war days when Bob had hormones and needs. Then, Bob was a military policeman at the American base. Creases like knife edges, he had, as he stood wooing Edith with Nylons and chocolate and an erection that promised such intrigue and excitement. Not that Edith knew about such things; not like Mary who'd pounced on it like it was the last flagpole on VE Day. Always a bit loose, was Mary, always a bit too up-against-the-alley-wall ready.

'Hello Edith, love,' says Bob.

Edith grunts. Bob never brings flowers or grapes or holds her hand. Blast it that Mary has the mouth; damnation that Mary doesn't know what day it is; sad that all Edith can do is work the washy eye and thrash the limbs. Surely there can be no worse Hell than this.

Bob sits on the bed, fumbling with his fingers and staring about the room. Edith squints out at him. Bob looks anywhere but at Edith.

'It rained in the night,' Bob says, slowly. He pauses, as if expecting Edith should reply. 'Mrs Carlisle's cat's gone missing again, randy little bugger; the cat, not Mrs Carlisle. Mr Thompson has to have his leg off; gangrened, it is, all rotten and limp below the knee.'

In bed, Edith thrashes. She cries out to Mary, that together they might coordinate some rational thought and get something done, but her pleas are dulled, reflected back from where synapses lie wafting and severed. Since Mary has lost herself in this... Night Dreaming, she calls it, they'll not talk at all. Edith can see Mary a mere hemisphere apart, but she might as well be on the moon.

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Mary hates it when she flails about the bed. It's as if her body has a mind of its own and refuses to be calm and serene and behaved. She's seen people thrashing like this in a film. Nuts, they were, all electrified and injected, and tied up in jackets with straps.

'Is that you mucking about, Edith?' Mary waits but only waves crash. 'Just stop it before someone gets hurt.'

In the darkness for the briefest of moments Mary thinks she smells Bob. Or is it Frank? It's hard to remember whether she'd loved Frank or Bob, or Larry from the ordinance factory. Had she loved the GI she'd met at the Grafton that balmy night in June, when the war had paused as he'd led her blushing and warm-eared around the back by the bins? Hung like a racehorse, Edith had said later, and keen like a beach donkey at home time; but she was like that, Edith, overly wise in sordid thoughts, not like Mary all innocent and doe-eyed.

Now, Mary isn't sure whether she's Mary or Edith or both. And what's become of the others since the surgeon's knife? Lorraine? Susan? Edward? And...?

It's lonely in her head since the others have parted. Such a mistake to try and rid herself of them; a grave error to go under the knife. At least when the others were around she had someone to talk to. Then Bob

cared for her and Frank sang love songs while Edith danced all ribbons and swank. Sometimes it doesn't do to fix that which is broken.

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Bob waits outside while Edith is restrained. Doctor Stevens says it's distressing to see a loved one held down and stabbed with a hypodermic. Bob knows the doctor hasn't quite mastered the placement of the paddles for the electro-convulsive therapy, and the smell of singed hair seeps under the ward door. Out in the corridor the light bulbs flicker.

Bob tarrys at the ward door. It's quiet beyond and he knows Edith will sleep the entire night. He wonders does she dream Night Dreams locked away on her island, too? Does she yearn for release, for life or for death? And what of Mary gazing seaward?

Now there's a rickety bridge—it wasn't there before, but Bob's world is like that, full of things that appear and disappear at will. Perhaps his home lies in the bit of the mind where Night Dreams are born, pushed down into the Hippocampus when the surgeon invaded and parted the lobes? The bridge swings over oceans and war zones and the flap of severed synapse. Bob is an angel restrained.

'Hello, Mary,' says Bob.

'Bob? Is that really you? Have you come back for me?'

Bob glances towards Edith's sleeping form; a dark cloud; a threat of thunder on the horizon. It saddens Bob for Mary's sake that when the surgeon's blade cut tissue and separated them all Edith grew dominant in her higher cortex while the others withered supplicant before her. The problem with such oceans and war zones is that they're so hard to cross.

'For the moment, Mary love,' Bob says. 'Until Edith wakes I'm yours.'

'Will you love me, Bob, love me like you used to do?'

Bob grins. 'You know me, Mary, dearest; always.'

---

It's dark when Edith wakes. She senses Bob's been wandering. She smells Bob's aftershave; cheap and stinging, always leaving a rash on her thighs. Nothing moves in the ward. The night nurse snores in her cubicle. None of the patients snore. The sedated do nothing except lie already dead while alive, fed, watered, and evacuated by tubes, living extensions of wheezing ventilator machines at the bedsides.

Edith resists the urge to thrash. This body is a prison, and like all prisons escape is difficult. She forces a thought toward Mary, feeling the gap between their synapses as Bob's wooden bridge. The thought sticks like boots in mud.

'Mary,' she calls, 'Mary.'

A single connection waves and brushes against another, and a spark of neurotransmitter is passed between. Around it, a second synapse flails, and then a third, and then a thousand. Edith sees Mary stir. Edith grunts as she strains to push the thought through.

'Edith, is that you?' says Mary.

'We fought too much, Mary,' says Edith.

'It's always the way. I blame your Frank. He never got on with any of the others.'

'It doesn't matter who's the cause. If we're to live any life in here we need to get over our differences. Together we were some kind of fragmented whole. Together we stumbled along.'

'Bob won't like taking Frank back,' says Mary.

Edith glances at Bob restrained. 'Bob has no choice. When I tell you, I want you to think your way through the tangle to me.'

'But I can't, Edith.'

'Think, Mary, think.'

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Next day, there's a gaggle of white-coated students around Edith's bed. Doctor Stevens shines a light into her good eye. The beam wanders like a search light in her head.

'Remarkable,' says Doctor Stevens. The students each make a note on their pads. 'The brain has an amazing capacity to repair itself, but never have I seen such extensive regeneration.'

'Can I go home?' says Edith. Her mouth's dry, her lips chapped, and she's all but forgotten how to speak. 'Frank will wonder where I am.'

'Oh, Lord, no,' says the doctor. 'We'll need to do tests. We'll need to know you've lost your multiple personalities before then.'

'There's just me,' Edith says. The others shun away from the doctor's probing light. 'Just me and the mice in here.'

---

Mary sits in shadow. At least, she thinks she sits in shadow; Mary's never quite sure what she's up to since

Bob tore her world apart. Mary stares at the garden beyond the French windows. It's dark and stormy and gripped by winter, and Mary thinks perhaps summer will never come again.

Lightning flashes. It jolts Mary into a lucid moment. She wonders, did she really go under the knife? Did she endure the terrors of split-brain surgery? Was it a stroke she'd suffered, or a fall? Edith had often warned her about her ears. A good neighbour Edith: always was popping in for tea and a biscuit.

Or was it the shock of coming home and finding Bob in Edith's arms?

First Frank, and then Bob, it was no way for a good neighbour to behave. Neighbours didn't steal husbands, did they? They didn't nip in when your back was turned to leap between the sheets. And how could Bob inflict such hurt on her after all those years? Perhaps it happens all the time now, but not in Mary's day. It's enough to turn a woman to Night Dreaming.

Mary slips into the safety of her own head, back to her island plinth. It's a barren place, but at least from here all she can see is out. It's best to drag Edith and Bob and Frank inside with her. Inside she can keep them apart, an island apart, keep them from leaping at each other when her back's turned.

Mary feels the nurse lift her head. The pills are sharp against her tongue. She swallows and settles in her chair. She'll sleep soon, but that's not so hard. When she sleeps, they all sleep.

'I'm warning you, Edith,' she says. 'Don't be getting up to anything while I'm nodding off.'

Mary drifts away. She's not sure if she's in shadow. She's not sure she's still alive. Night Dreaming, for all she knows, may well be death's release.



## ‘In the Shadow of Kakadu’ RJ Astruc

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First time I saw the boy he was hanging about with the Americans, a pair of plump, sandy-haired kids from Texas who'd come to Kakadu with their parents. As I passed their tent one of the Americans, Patty, burst into laughter. 'I don't understand you at *all*,' she giggled, squeezing the boy's long, dark hands between hers. 'I don't speak aborigine-language. Can't you say it with gestures?'

The boy smiled or grimaced and then spouted a melodic chain of words, pointing toward the bush. I looked but could see nothing, only eucalypts and ferns and the shimmer of a nearby billabong, a flock of sacred ibis picking their way through the shallows. The sun was sinking, and the great walls of rock behind our campsite glowed red and orange. Patty's brother, Hutch, noticed me watching and called, 'Hey, Miss Guide-lady. D'you know what this kid's saying?'

'I'm afraid not. I don't speak any of their languages.' I'd heard plenty of aboriginal languages spoken or sung before though—Kunwinjku, Jawoyn, Gun-djeihmi...—but I didn't recognise this one. It bothered me that the kid looked about the same age as the Americans, thirteen, which was way too young to be running about in the bush alone. Whippet-thin with big eyes, he wore nothing but a pair of too-big shorts—likely a gift from his new friends—and a chain of native grass around his neck. 'I'll see if I can contact the outstations in the morning,' I said. 'See where he came from.'

'He can sleep in our tent tonight,' Patty offered

magnanimously. 'Hutch won't mind.'

'Long as you tell your parents,' I warned them, before heading back to the main campsite, where the rest of my tour group were complaining about the lack of electricity and showers. Due to a booking error, the group consisted of twenty people, well over our usual limit, and I didn't relish the idea of picking up a random aboriginal kid to baby-sit too. How had he got here, anyway? The nearest outstation was miles away, and I hadn't heard anything on the radio about a kid going missing.

Behind me Patty was laughing again. 'Lost, huh?' she asked. 'That's cool, we'll hang out until the guide phones your mom. What do you Australians say? No worries, right?'

---

There are only about five hundred aborigines living in Kakadu these days. I spent most of the morning trying to contact the different outstations located around the park, but the reception was bad and got progressively worse as we continued our trek into the bush. While the tour group paused to look at some aboriginal rock art, I climbed up to the highest point I could find, a rock sitting precariously on the edge of a gorge, and phoned my boss. Jack picked it up on the first ring and yawned loudly into the receiver.

'Kakadu Adventure Holid—oh, it's just you, Lucy,' he said. 'Problem with the group?'

'I picked up a kid,' I said. 'Aboriginal kid, thirteen or so, doesn't speak English. Does he belong to any of

the outstations? We found him last night, he's been staying with a couple of American kids. If he's from an outstation in the area we can probably walk him back home.'

'Haven't heard any reports about a missing kid. And trust me, if he disappeared last night, they'd have put out a search by now. Lots of crocs around at the moment, parents get worried quick if their babies don't make it in for dinner. I'll keep you posted if I hear anything, but the best thing to do is to bring him back here. Maybe one of the guys will know him.'

'Right-o,' I said, but I doubted it. I'd stopped at most of the outstations at one point or another, and this kid didn't look familiar.

Back at the rock paintings, Hutch and Patty were showing the boy one of their guidebooks. He was fascinated by the colour pictures and was chatting animatedly in his language, to the Americans' amusement. 'They have photos and cameras at the outstations, don't they?' Hutch whispered to me. 'I mean they'd have seen them before at least, right?'

'Yeah, they would have. So I don't know where he's come from.' For a brief moment I contemplated the possibility that the boy had lived in the bush all his life, without any human contact—I remembered stories about orphaned children being raised by wolves in Europe, or bears in America. But those kids had run on all fours like beasts and had been unable to talk, most barking or growling like the animals that raised them. The aboriginal boy was chatty, social, and seemed far more light on his feet than his chubby American friends.

'Maybe there's some aborigines living here you don't know about?' Patty suggested.

'Doubt it. Aside from all the tours, we have helicopters and the like flying around here all the time, filming for documentaries. I'm sure they'd have spotted any unusual signs of life outside of the outstations.'

We looked over at the boy, who had set aside the guidebook and was drawing in the dirt with a stick. It was a figure of a man, as far as I could tell, with long outstretched arms. A mimi spirit, maybe. I'd seen similar things in the rock paintings. Some of the other tour group members had started to take an interest, so I started in on one of my 'guide' speeches:

'There are many kinds of paintings done by the aborigines—you'd probably have seen some of the dot paintings that are in the foyer of the Kakadu Adventure Holidays office. Usually these paintings are used to tell a story, part of the aborigines' dreamtime heritage. I think he's drawing one of the mimi spirits—they were an ancient race the aborigines believed lived here before they did. They taught the aborigines a lot of things, like how to cook, hunt and paint.'

'Like how aliens taught the Egyptians?' Hutch asked, and was quickly silenced by laughter.

'Can we buy some?' his mother asked. 'For a souvenir.'

'There are a lot of local artists you can buy work from,' I said, sighing on the inside. 'But I'm afraid the

rock paintings here aren't for sale. Some people have tried to steal them, cutting them out of the rocks, but when they'd brought them out of Kakadu to sell, the pictures had vanished from the stone. Well, that's the story anyway,' I added. 'Beyond the shadow of Kakadu these things magically cease to exist.'

'Magic,' said Patty's mother, rolling her eyes. 'Probably rubbed off in their bags.'

'It really *was* aliens,' Hutch told me, as we followed a dirt track along the base of a cliff. 'I read it on the internet. And the Egyptians could do magic too, but it was science-magic, like how the pyramids can turn back time and stuff. I bet these mimi spirits were like that, they did science things and the aborigines didn't understand so they just thought it was magic.'

A kookaburra cackled from somewhere nearby. I looked over my shoulder but couldn't spot it; the bush here was too thick, all white bark and stringy grey-green leaves. Behind us the rest of the group straggled along, panting and sweating. None of them were experienced bushwalkers, so we were taking an easier route—not that it seemed to matter to them. The weather was hot and unusually dry, and they were suffering for it. 'Pretty sure I've read something similar on the internet, kid,' I said, turning back, 'but I'm also pretty sure it's rubbish. Have you ever tried that out? Making a pyramid or something to turn back time?'

Hutch flushed. 'Yeah, for a science project once. It didn't work.'

'I didn't think so.'

We camped by the edge of a gorge that night. I hoped that none of the group was prone to sleep walking. From above the walls of the gorge looked like piled up bricks—a result of over two thousand million years of geological flux. Far below, water trickled between the rocks and tree roots. There hadn't been any rain for a while, and most of the rivers in the area had shrunk, not that this made the view any less spectacular.

What always amazed me about Kakadu, even now, was the sheer *size* of it. It looked like a landscape designed by giants. The aborigines believed there was magic in those rocks, and hell, maybe there really was, something left behind by the mimi spirits. A lot of things happened in Kakadu that were hard to explain: people vanished into thin air, lone bushwalkers saw strange things, and sometimes even the landscape seemed to repeat itself; often I'd *swear* that I'd walked through the same gully twice, or passed the same tree.

Perhaps it was those mimi spirits who were to blame, still hanging around after all these years. Now that I thought about it, the descriptions of the mimi spirits did sound a bit like aliens: tall, thin creatures who towered above humans. I decided not to tell Hutch that; I didn't want to encourage him.

While the rest of the group busied themselves making dinner—canned food cooked over the fire—the aboriginal boy did some more drawing. I stood behind him, watching as his simple lines transformed into

people. He was drawing a story, of that I was sure. It began with the mimi spirits and a picture of a circle with light radiating from it in zigzag lines. Then a family with a small boy—was it *the* boy, I wondered—came to talk to the mimi spirits. And then the boy began to look at the circle...

'What is that?' I asked, pointing at the circle. 'Is it the sun? The moon?' I gestured towards the sky.

The boy said something in his language and moved his hands in a wide circle, then mimed moving through it.

'A door? A round door? To what?'

He didn't understand and went back to drawing.

I called Jack again that night. He'd checked with the outstations and there were no kids missing from any of them. 'Kid is a ghost or something,' he said.

'No, just very, very lost. Maybe we should run his picture in the papers when we get back. Can you arrange that?'

I was starting to worry. There'd been kids found before in the bush, but they always belonged to *someone*. I didn't want to think about what would happen to this kid if we didn't find his parents.

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On our last day of the tour, we saw a gang of kangaroos leaping up a mountain side, their red-brown fur almost camouflaged against the rocks. At first I thought that we'd startled them, until I heard snorts and splashes coming from a nearby river and saw the familiar, heavy shapes of bathing water buffalo. Signalling for the others to follow me quietly, I pushed through the ferns to the river banks. Not that it mattered; they didn't seem scared of us in the slightest.

'Water buffalo,' I explained to the group, as the beasts below swaggered about in the muddy water. 'They're quite common in Kakadu. They were introduced in the nineteenth century and have caused a lot of problems with the local ecology, mainly in the wetlands—however, they are also beneficial from an economic standpoint, as many aborigin—'

I was interrupted by a squeak from the boy, who was staring at the buffalo with an expression of amazement on his face.

'Is there something wrong with him?' I asked the Americans.

'He's never seen them before,' said Hutch. He looked smug. 'That's all.'

Patty sighed. 'He's not in the right time,' she said sadly. 'I think that's the problem. I don't understand what he's saying but you can tell by his face that all this makes no sense to him. He thinks my clothes are ridiculous, he's never seen photographs before, he doesn't know how zips work, and he keeps drawing pictures of aliens and boxes.'

'Mimi spirits,' I corrected her.

'They're *aliens*,' Patty insisted, her brother nodding sagely beside her. 'You only have to look at them to tell. He's really lost, Miss Guide-lady.' Her sunburnt face creased—I couldn't tell if she was angry or about to cry. 'You said there was Kakadu magic,' she said.

'That's what you told my mom. With the paintings that disappeared. Maybe he's part of that, that—'

She trailed off, upset and searching for words. Both her brother and the boy gave her a hug, one on each side. When I turned to the rest of the group, they were all staring at me, waiting for an answer. As if, in my job training for Kakadu Adventure Holidays, I'd been taught a little speech to cater to this very situation. I shrugged—I didn't know what else to do. 'I'll call my boss again tonight,' I said. 'I'm sure they'll find his family soon.'

But when I called Jack that evening, he had no good news for me. He put me on hold while he called some of the other tour groups in the area to see if they'd heard anything about a lost aboriginal child. I nested my mobile in the crook of my shoulder and rubbed bitter-smelling mosquito repellent into my arms and legs. The nights were getting colder, the air thinner—it was coming up to the dry season.

Tonight we were camping deep in the bush, in a tiny clearing we could barely squeeze our tents into. Here we could hear all the sounds of the bush: the crackle of leaves underfoot as animals moved through the undergrowth, the growls of koalas and the sharp, angry cries of native birds. Wind hissed through the trees. I thought about Kakadu magic and the stories I'd heard about the aboriginal spirits, the creatures of their Dreamtime. The mimi, the rainbow serpent, cat-men, bunyips and creator-gods.

'Nothing,' said Jack, coming back to the phone. 'He's definitely not from around here. I'm going to call the social welfare office and see what they recommend we do. We might have to bring him to Darwin.'

'Darwin? Why?'

'I knew you wouldn't like that idea. Look, there'd be people there who could help him. Doctors and social workers and counsellors and places like that. And maybe they'd have some record of him there, *something*, a birth certificate, a medical record. Anything. It's not right, that no one here knows who he is.'

'The kids here think he came from another time,' I said. 'Sent here by mimi spirit aliens. It's Kakadu magic.'

'That's as good an explanation as any other I can think up,' said Jack. 'I'll see you tomorrow, Lucy, for the pick-up. Keep the kid safe, okay?'

---

We made it to our pick-up point by mid-morning of the next day, our inscrutable tag-a-long still with us. The Americans were starting to teach him rudimentary English. He'd said, '*Hai*,' when he saw me in the morning, and then, a little confused, '*Gad-ladee*.' It worried me. Earlier I'd heard the Americans' mother say something to her husband about organising an adoption and extending the family. I didn't like the sound of that; I hoped that one of the outstations would take him in.

Jack showed up with a caravan of Kombi vans to take the group back to relative civilisation. We stood amongst the greenery, swatting mosquitos and flies, while the others loaded their backpacks into the vans.



It was a beautiful day: we were by a billabong hemmed in by mangroves, their roots bulging above the water line. Kookaburras chattered close by, probably scared by the sound of the Kombis. Jack offered me a mouthful of coffee from his thermos and we sat on a rock to discuss business.

'That the kid, eh?' he asked, looking at the boy. 'I don't recognise him. Definitely not a Kakadu boy.'

'That's where we found him,' I said. 'I'd been feeling slightly sick all day, and the coffee made my stomach churn. 'You can't argue with that.'

'I talked to the social welfare office. They said we should probably bring him to Darwin. He might actually belong there, you know—you said he doesn't speak any of the local languages. He could have got on the wrong bus or something, ended up here by mistake. Adam's driving up to Darwin today to see his girlfriend, so he said he'll take the kid along.' He paused, frowning. 'You okay with that, Lucy?'

My eyes were fixed on the other side of the clearing, where Patty and Hutch were saying goodbye to the boy. Patty in particular was having a hard time of it, sobbing, her arms wrapped around the boy's neck as if she didn't want to let him go. Hutch looked paler than usual; I could tell he was being strong for his sister. Adam, yellow-haired and tanned, stood by the open door of his Kombi, checking his watch.

'I don't know what else to do,' I said. My hands were shaking and sticky-palmed; I hid them between my thighs. 'I guess that's the only way.'

'You did good, Lucy,' said Jack. He squeezed my shoulder, the way he did with the men on the team, and for a second I felt proud. 'Must've been a stressful group to work with, even without our little runaway. Come out to the pub with us tonight, hey? Have a drink on me.'

The Americans were led away by their mother, and the boy climbed into the back of the Kombi. Adam had to help him fix his seat belt. I waved; he waved back. At the back of my mind I felt a twinge of worry. 'Sure,' I told Jack, getting to my feet. 'That sounds great.'

For a second I thought the ground moved beneath me, a rumbling discontent deep beneath the soil, and the trees around me seemed to shuffle in and out of focus. I'd been in the sun too long, it was getting to me. I was about to head to the refreshments station the other guides had set up, when the Kombi carrying the boy took off. Darwin-bound.

I turned to look. The kid must have wriggled out of his seat-belt the moment he felt the engine purring under him, because he appeared suddenly at the window, his hands splayed across the glass, his mouth open, his eyes wide and white. I couldn't tell if he was afraid or excited. The reflection of Kakadu's red rocks and greenery flashed across his features, shadow and light, and then the Kombi turned a corner and was gone.

A strange silence followed—the bush itself seemed to go quiet in the Kombi's wake. Then Patty screamed,

a horrible shrill sound like a wounded bird. She made a run for the road but Hutch held her back. 'No,' he said. 'It's too late. They won't listen anyway.' It was meant to be a consolation but Patty screamed again. Her startled American parents, clutching glasses of flat soda, did nothing.

'You can't take him,' she hollered, and her eyes were on me now. 'You can't let him go to Darwin. You said it only works in the shadow of Kakadu.'

The sun was in my eyes and in my face and all I could think of were the red rocks and the tall, thin mimi spirits dancing across the cave walls. Patty shrieked, clawing at her brother's arms.

'Give me your keys, Jack,' I said, turning around. My head felt high and light.

'Lucy, don't be silly.'

'Give them to me, or I swear to god I'll quit on you today.'

He gave me the keys. I stumbled across to the main Kombi and got in. Patty was sobbing on her knees. I didn't know what I was doing. I started the engine. Hutch yelled something at me I couldn't hear. I turned the van around and headed after Adam.

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I caught up with him ten minutes later. He pulled over when I held down the horn, the blast enough to raise a flock of rosellas from the nearby trees. He got out of the van and I rolled down the window.

'Open the back.'

'Lucy? What the hell are you doing?'

'Open the back.'

I climbed jelly-legged from the Kombi and staggered across a road that tilted and buckled like a eucalypt in a storm. I was beside Adam when he unlocked the side door and slid it back.

Adam said: 'I don't understand it. I checked him in the mirror before we left. I heard him rattling around in there for a while, talking in whatever weird language he spoke. I told him to sit down, it wasn't safe. He chattered on a while longer, then there was nothing. I thought he'd just lain down on the seat and gone quiet.'

He climbed into the back and started looking under the seats, as if the boy could have vanished into some dark corner in there, like a stray coin or a missing thermos. Leaning against the Kombi for support, I looked back at red rocks in the distance. The sun was high; the shadow Kakadu cast was small. My heart was racing. Echoes of Patty's screams funnelled along the bush highway and the earth moved again, perceptibly. Thin things moved between the eucalypts, their pale bodies camouflaged amongst the bone-white branches.

'Jesus,' said Adam, from the van, 'I don't know where he's gone. He couldn't have climbed out, not when we were driving. I'd have heard the door. I don't understand.'

'Adam,' I said. 'Adam.'

He was angry now, kicking and punching the walls. 'What, Lucy? What the hell do you want?'

'Help me.'

He got to me before I fainted; I fell into his arms.

I left Kakadu a month later. It wasn't about the boy, as Jack claimed, not exactly. I'd known they wouldn't find him, that no search party on earth could have brought him back. I could deal with that. What sent me back to Sydney was Kakadu itself. I saw bunyips lurking in the billabongs with great frog-like heads and teeth like snakes; I saw a coloured serpent as big as a motorway weaving through an estuary; and everywhere there were the spirits, stalking through the shadows, their skin as white as paperbark. Kakadu and its magics made me run, shoving my scant belongings

into a backpack and catching the bus to the nice, normal chaos of Sydney, where boys didn't vanish into thin air.

But I think of the place often, and sometimes even fondly, when I see pictures of it on television, that great wide stretch of brown, green and red seen from above. And there are days too that it seems to reach for me in return. Now and then, when standing at a bus stop, or sitting in my office, or drinking coffee at a street café, I catch a glimpse of something tall and white skulking on the very edge of my vision.

I freeze, breathless, as the mimi pass by, long-limbed and sketchy beyond the shadow of Kakadu.

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## Reviews

**Michael Boatman, *God Laughs When You Die*. Dybbuk Press, 2007. Pp. 148. ISBN 9780976654629. £7.99.** **Pete Butler (ed.), *Triangulation: End of time*. Parsec Ink, 2007. Pp. 155. ISBN 9780615152806. \$12.00**

Reviewed by Karina Kantas

A collection of nine short stories in the not-so-subtle genre of Horror.

Although he is a professional actor and author of the forthcoming comedy novel *The Revenant Road* (Drollerie Press, 2008), *God Laughs When You Die* is Michael Boatman's first literary collection.

This collection consists of stories that are comic, disturbing, absurd, grotesque and utterly bizarre. A few of the stories such as 'Folds', 'Katchina' and 'Dormant' are understandable horrors. But then there are more bizarre tales, such as 'The Long Lost Life of Rufus Bleak', which will take a couple of reads before you find your way through the fog of confusion. 'The Last American President' is an absurd little tale whose non-existent plot is too complicated to explain. Here's the first line, so you get the idea: "Today in the Oval Office, the Secretary of Defense tried to swallow his own intestines." See what I mean?

Boatman's writing is raw and in some tales hard-edged. He has no fear when it comes to expressing himself with words. It's his grotesque details that make the stories entertaining.

My favorite of the collection is 'Dormant', a science fiction-flash, about a man who's been told he is terminally ill with EBM; extraterrestrial, bipedatropic, microcarnivore. A very short tale that is so well told, you can feel the EBM squirming inside you as you read.

One tale that has stayed with me (I doubt it will ever leave) is 'Folds'. It's the first in the collection and rightly so. Chun king is a five year-old *big* boy. Big in the sense he weighs 120 pounds. Chun King is no ordinary child and his weight gain is no ordinary obesity. This creepy, disturbing tale will give you the chills and would not look out of place on an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. (No surprise then that Boatman's horror-comedy film, *Evil Woman*, is scheduled for production by Guardian Entertainment.)

There are also illustrations throughout the book by Amanda Reagen, John Perry and Vanesa L. Wojtanowicz, which just add to the macabre tone of this collection.

*God Laughs When You Die* is not a book for readers that want a scare, but if you have a warped sense of humor and can work out puzzles of bizarreness, then you'll enjoy this collection.

Reviewed by Lillith

*Triangulation: End of Time* is a thought-provoking, exhilarating collection of stories hypothesizing how the end of days will come or what it will be like for those left after whatever catastrophe takes place. All of the stories are masterfully written, so much so that I found it difficult to put the book down after ending each selection—even at the end, I wanted more. Editor Pete Butler picked the cream of the crop in these up-and-coming authors!

This collection covers the gambit of time-travel, zombies, gods on the brink of extinction, humans on the brink of extinction, natural and not-so-natural disasters—in other words, there is something for everyone here whatever one's preferred genre. Yet I urge all to read the whole book front to back as the composition is a treat for the cerebrum no matter what your taste.

Of the twenty offerings in this little collection, there are four that stand out the most:

'America Is Coming' by Dario Ciriello is a charming eco-disaster tale that has an interesting, albeit unexpected, conclusion. The relationships between the characters in the story are such that one wonders if such a disaster just might be what is needed to achieve peace and understanding between cultures.

Michael Stone's 'The Bridge' by is one I was disappointed in— not for lack of talent from the author, mind you—but because it was too short! I wanted to know more about the character and their story—just more story period!

'That Ain't A Mosey' by Jeff Parrish is a classic zombie tale set in my home state of Texas—specifically my choice of current residence, Fort Worth. Mr Parrish did an excellent job researching the history of what is now known as Cowtown and the characters flowed well within the plot. Surprising ending kinda makes one wonder about the place now...

Finally, 'The Shopping Cart People' by Terry Hayman is a disturbing, yet at the same time heartwarming example of the adage that acts of random kindness do indeed bring great rewards. Just take note: next time you are disrespectful to others based on their class and station in life, it might mean your doom.

I'm not reviewing all stories individually as I think it's better for the reader to be as pleasantly surprised as I was by each one. All of the authors are superbly adept at their craft of painting the world as they see it at the end of time—some heart-wrenching, some funny, some downright scary—but all do it in such a way that one ends up either having hope or nightmares depending on the selection read (and sometimes we need our nightmares, don't you think?).

*Triangulation* is a recommended read for anyone wanting a fresh insight into our future, even if it at times is a bleak one.

**Yasuyuki Kasai, *Dragon of the Mangroves: Inspired by True Events of World War II.* iUniverse, 2006. Pp. 152. ISBN 9780595390267. \$12.95.**

Reviewed by Elliott Hall

*Dragon of the Mangroves* is a self-published horror novel set in the Second World War. The English version is an unaccredited literal translation from Kasai's Japanese. It is available from iUniverse.com and Amazon.

*Dragon of the Mangroves* centres on the fate of an Imperial Japanese garrison stationed in Ramree Island, just off the coast of Burma in the Bay of Bengal. It is 1945, and the war has already long gone against the Japanese. The garrison is facing an overwhelming counter-attack by British-Indian forces. The narrative jumps between two major characters: Superior Private Minoru Kasuga, a machine-gunner with the Ramree garrison, and Second Lieutenant Yoshihisa Sumi. Sumi has been dispatched by his superiors in a desperate, improvised attempt to rescue some of the garrison trapped on Ramree Island.

The Burma campaign is often referred to as 'the forgotten war.' In a culture drowning in books set in the European theatre during the war, it is a refreshing change. *Dragon of the Mangroves* is doubly unusual in being told from the Japanese perspective. It is the details of an Imperial soldiers' existence, martial and mundane, that often prove the most fascinating aspects of the book. During an air raid, Kasuga puts his hands over his eyes to prevent negative pressure from the explosions blowing them out of their sockets. When one of their comrades is killed, he and his commanding officer both take fragments of his bone so that one can deliver it to his comrades' family for a proper Buddhist ceremony. As an example of how badly the material condition of the army has deteriorated by that time the novel is set, Sumi's party is given a Sten gun stolen from the British as one of the best weapons the army has available.

In addition to deprivation there is a casual cruelty to Imperial army life. Kasuga's platoon leader is a cowardly blowhard named Jinno. His troops give him the nickname 'Binchoku,' a contraction of two disciplinary techniques in the Imperial army that Jinno uses on the slightest pretext: the 'binta,' or hard slap, and reciting 'Gunjin-Chokuyu,' a sort of oath that all soldiers and sailors must memorize. The fact that the binta is a formal term, and referred to in several different contexts in the book, gives an idea of how often commanding officers employed it.

The record of the Imperial Army in the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere – Japan's name for whatever parts of Asia they'd conquered at the moment – can best be described as horrific. While Kasai does not shy away from this fact in the book, he deals with it in a strange and unsatisfying way. The leaders are called fascists, and a direct mention of the Rape of Nanking is made. However, this historical openness isn't carried over in his descriptions of the Imperial

Army's interactions with the native Burmese.

Sumi's local guide is called Pondgi. He's a member of the Burmese National Army, a force created by the Japanese. Often compared to the Buddha, Pondgi has an unnatural serenity that stops any character development. His unquestioning acceptance of everyone regardless of nationality gives us no clue as to how the Imperial Army dealt with the Burmese. Sumi wonders why he's still helping the Imperial forces, but that's as far as the relationship is explored. All of the Burmese in *Dragon of the Mangroves* are either friendly to the Japanese or silent wallpaper.

In writing about the soldiers' own view of their role, Kasai makes different set of mistakes. Sumi is portrayed as a reluctant hero; a man who used his natural intelligence to become an officer and avoid the toil and cruelty of an enlisted man. Sumi's sole ambition in the war is to survive and return to his sweetheart Yukiko. Through most of the novel Sumi is afraid, indecisive and barely in control of the situation. It humanizes Sumi and makes his journey into the war zone of Ramree Island more believable and affecting. However, his past with Yukiko is never fully developed and his reminiscences feel tacked on.

Kasuga is a more straightforward personality. He wants to make his family and village proud of him, and is willing to sacrifice his life for the Emperor in order to do it. However, by the end of the book even Kasuga begins to doubt the veracity of the Imperial Army's project of liberating Asia from Western colonial rule. It is a chance to discuss the irony of freeing Burma from Western rule so it can be dominated by Japanese puppets, but the opportunity is missed. The fact that all the Burmese in the book call the Japanese 'master' should have given Kasuga a clue.

The real stars of *Dragon of the Mangroves* should be the huge man-eating crocodiles from which the book gets its title. They are mentioned every once in a while: a few disappeared soldiers, a horrible rotting stench a Burmese elder identifies as the legacy of a man-eater, and a bizarre impromptu lecture given at the edge of water that may be infested with them. Kasai tries to work them in metaphorically as well, through the recurring nightmares of Kasuga about a dragon-headed fountain in his home village. The problem is that these various mentions of the crocodiles never coalesce, so they are often pushed to the margins of the narrative by the desperate fight for Ramree Island. When the climactic attempt to swim across Myinkhon Creek to Burma comes, the Dragons' big scene feels rushed, not the culmination of a building sense of dread.

Ultimately, the problem may be that Kasai does not have enough material for a novel. The conditions of the Japanese in Burma, with an attempt to untangle the various stories of crocodile attacks that Kasai mentions in his preface, would be a great angle for an interesting article. Stretched to the length of a novel, it is thin-skinned.

**Rae Lindley, *Cimmerian City*. Lavender Isis Publishing, 2007. Pp. 161.**

Reviewed by Susan Mattinson

This novel follows a young college student, Raven Blackheart, as her life is changed by the murder of her boyfriend and a glimpse into a darker world. When she awakes from this dreadful night, ten years have passed and the glimpse she experienced has become a stark reality. Dracins, vampire-like creatures who are the result of pharmaceutical experiments, have grown into a thriving race. The Tech Corporation, supposedly working to unify the human and Dracin races, employs Raven to work for their cause. Raven soon realizes that Tech president Tyler Deamond cannot be trusted. With the help of ex-Tech employee Russell Li and the knowledgeable outsider Enos, Raven learns the full truth: that the off-world mission, meant to transport people from the decaying Earth to a new planet of residence, is being manipulated to carry only humans. Filled with action, corporate manipulation, and the challenge of overcoming the pain of the past, *Cimmerian City* is a briskly moving story that keeps the attention of the reader.

One of the biggest issues I found with this novel is the way Raven is portrayed. She overcomes all obstacles with an ease that suggests either unrealistic reflexes, instances of sheer luck, or situations of conflict that are too simply written. For example: in a club scene while holding a Dracin crime boss hostage, Raven “could sense a red target hovering around the back of her head” (Lindley, 66). She manages to move away just in time for the crime boss to be shot instead.

All the other characters in this novel are very realistic and well-developed; it only seems to be Raven that possesses these un-realistic skills.

There were also some contradictions and technical problems with the story. In some scenes, Raven is participating in training by sparring in darkness where she cannot see her attacker. However, in other scenes she has natural infrared vision capabilities and can see in the dark with great detail. Some technologies are unrealistic, such as a shower that cleans by using sound-waves alone. Near the end of the book, Raven receives from Enos three pure gold swords that she carries all at one time (two in her jacket and one in her boot). Gold is very heavy, and is also a soft metal. These oversights and others detract from the enjoyment and believability of the story.

I was, however, very impressed with the dialogue. Lindley is able to retain the edgy comments and dialogue found in action movies without making it lame or over-done on paper. While discussions about what the Tech Corporation actually does can be a little vague, carefully calculated pieces of dialogue give the reader insight into the situations and personalities of the characters. The reader speculates as Raven does, and solves puzzles as clues are revealed by the characters.

With a novel that possesses so much potential in its larger concepts, it is disappointing to stumble across quite a few under-developed and badly-portrayed details. When the reader over-looks these technical problems, they will find the story interesting, a quick read, and well-paced.

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***Gamebox 1.0* (2004), Dir. David Hillenbrand.**

Hill & Brand Entertainment. Starring: Nate Richert, Danielle Fishel, Patrick Kilpatrick

Reviewed by Simon Mahony

Winner of the 'Best Visual Effects Award' and 'Best Screenplay Award'—it says on the box: *Internacional de Cine Fantastico y de Terror de Estepona*. Well, being a regular visitor to Estepona (one of my favourite Andalusian haunts) for the last ten years or so, I never knew they had a film festival so maybe this film will tell me something of the festival's status rather than the other way round. Eighty three minutes and I would find out.

Charlie, the geeky and socially withdrawn video game tester haunted by his lost love gets a surprise delivery by an anonymous unmanned and unmarked delivery van: a new immersive game for beta testing. "If you wish to play, put on the headset" says the accompanying note. Well there's a challenge. Re-named "Chuck" and looking considerably less geeky, Charlie finds himself in the macho world of *Crime Spree* where anything goes. Taking orders from the mob boss and stealing cars and motorcycles, Charlie tries to fulfil his mission and coming across a cyber representation of his dead girl friend things look good until **\*bang!\***—he gets shot and the pain is real. How can this be happening and how can he survive in the game you cannot quit?

With a Philip Marlow movie voice-over and cheesy action movie soundtrack Charlie is confronted with

scenes that allude to reality but hold the constant threat of death. Die and you lose a (real) life. Trying to escape to the real world he finds that he is dragged back to the game and his mission as it invades his real life. But what is his mission and how can he win?

The result is surprisingly entertaining in a non-challenging way – simple pulp. The fantasy world looks like a fantasy-game world and we (unlike the hero) have no difficulty telling which one we are in. Particularly interesting is the fact that the geeky-looking hero looks and turns out to be kind of cool in the fantasy of the game. It leaves you wondering how the *real* Charlie ever got such a cute girl, although in the fantasy world we can see that it works. Love prevails; the hero gets the girl and revenge on the bad guy. An additional bonus is the geek gets rehabilitated and ends up being cool (in real life); it's surprising the difference combing your hair and losing your glasses makes, as Clark Kent knows too well. The screenplay is simple and effective and the visual effects are good for the time it was made (2004). In the fantasy sequences (which is most of the film), the action looks like video game-play with all its failings, and so achieves its apparent aim. Whether it's award-winning, well, that depends on the competition. The DVD also has many additional features: Making of *Gamebox 1.0*, Bloopers/Gag Reel, Commentary, Deleted/Extended scenes (with Optional Commentary)... but eighty three minutes was enough.

***Sein und Werden*, vol 2, no. 1, "Rejectamenta", ISMs Press, 2007. Pp. 56. £3.00.**

Reviewed by Sarah Ann Watts

This print edition welcomes you with the statement, 'this is the flea-bitten rag with your name stitched on'. 'Come closer to see the offal, the slivers of rotting meat, the hooves and eyeballs, the decaying flowers and cracked skulls, the broken dolls and festering wounds.' At this stage the haloed part of me is trying to recall a pressing engagement elsewhere—while her sister with horns is wondering how the freak show is going to live up to the billing.

So does this collection of the 'best of the worst' deliver?

What strikes a new reader is the variety and richness on offer. There are 20 writers, artists and poets featured, short stories, poems, novel excerpts and artwork all brought together in a dynamic collection. It is the raw energy, variety and intensity in the writing that kept me turning the pages.

In 'Urban Planning: Case Study Number Two', Tim Horvath takes us on a strange journey through 'deserts lush with indifference' to Delagotha, City of Senses. In Excerpts from the novel, 'Infirmative Actions' by Fabian Delecto you can't tell where one excerpt ends and the others begin—the writer is drunk on words, multiple layers of meaning that shimmer to reveal the depths beneath,

'She reeled herself in like a line she was saving for later on the off-chance she would have to go fish. "Well, well, she said. Aren't you an open book?"'

Other highlights included Michael Loughrey's story 'Bedrock', a surreal fable featuring la Sirene, the Fish Wrestler, Sartre, the Cirque des Sybarites and a bizarre last supper. This tale repays more than one reading.

Among the poems, 'Things I have put in my mouth' by Corinne Holmburg, tells a series of tales through sensation, the minutiae of life with a sad and chilling conclusion.

'Window' by Mark Howard Jones begins, 'There he is again, the twin I'm not one half of. It is a mirror tale when we are left uncertain as to who is on the outside looking in or on the inside looking out—a separation between lovers or a separation of self?

There is also the disturbing 'Dog Days' by Robert Levin and another disquieting tale, 'Minna Had Red Hair' by Jodie Daber, that gets under the skin and leaves an uncertain taste in the mouth.

The *Rejectamenta* issue of *Sein und Werden* regales the curious reader with the 'rich and strange' There are many other works worthy of mention – such as the 'Cakeways' poems by Juliet Cook and titles that sink hooks into imagination like the poem, 'Lipstick Automatic' by Matina L Stamatakis and the story, 'Snowglobe Detritus' by Bendi Barrett.

It promises a challenging and stimulating read beyond the comfort zone. There are elements that baffle and bemuse, others that act like an itch you can't scratch. I will certainly be looking out for future issues.

**Purchase or subscribe to *Sein und Werden* from <http://www.kisstthewitch.co.uk/seinundwerden/print.html>**

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**David Longhorn, ed., *Supernatural Tales* #12, Autumn 2007.**

Reviewed by Mario Guslandi

Once again a quarterly journal instead of an annual anthology, *Supernatural Tales* continues to delight the lovers of dark fiction, either endowed with an actual supernatural touch or not. Editor David Longhorn is a learned man with a knack for selecting stories of good quality apt to disquiet and entertain at the same time. Issue #12 won't disappoint the faithful readers of this excellent magazine.

The opening story, 'You are here' by Simon Strantzis is a rather unintelligible piece featuring a homeless man exploring the secrets of the Underground passages. MP Lynch provides "Lies we tell the Trojans", an atypical but cute ghost story in the background of a love affair sprouting from the ashes of a broken marriage.

Gary McMahan's 'The wrong town' is a brief unsettling tale conveying a deep sense of loss and displacement by portraying a man trying to trace the sites of his past life.

John L Probert (definitely a new writer to watch) contributes 'Guided tour', plainly allegorical but

as frightening as a real spook, where a disenchanted young man manages to carry on with his life after a love disillusionment.

'Figure of fun' is a fine example of how Gary Fry is capable of coating a simple plot ( a team of workers faces the mysteries of an old house under restoration) with a thick veneer of psychological horror. Which constitutes both the strength and the weakness of a story dragging on for too long.

Some stories are downright disappointing, such as 'Everything' by John Travis, a depressing tale depicting a sad case of paranoia, and 'Final warning' by William II Read, a Jamesian pastiche too overtly told in a tongue-in-cheek fashion to be taken seriously.

By contrast the comparatively unknown Duncan Barford offers the excellent 'The sofa', a very dark, effective sample of "quiet horror", in which dirty secrets are linked to an ugly sofa sitting in an old apartment haunted by the presence of a little girl.

Finally 'As angles unaware' by the talented Michael Chislett is a delicate but vibrant piece of religious horror taking place in a huge gothic cathedral. I understand that a special issue of *Supernatural Tales* dedicated to Chislett's work is now available. I think everybody (including me) should secure a copy at any cost before it goes out of print.

**Purchase or subscribe to *Supernatural Tales* from <http://www.britishfantasysociety.org/store/supernatural.html>**

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