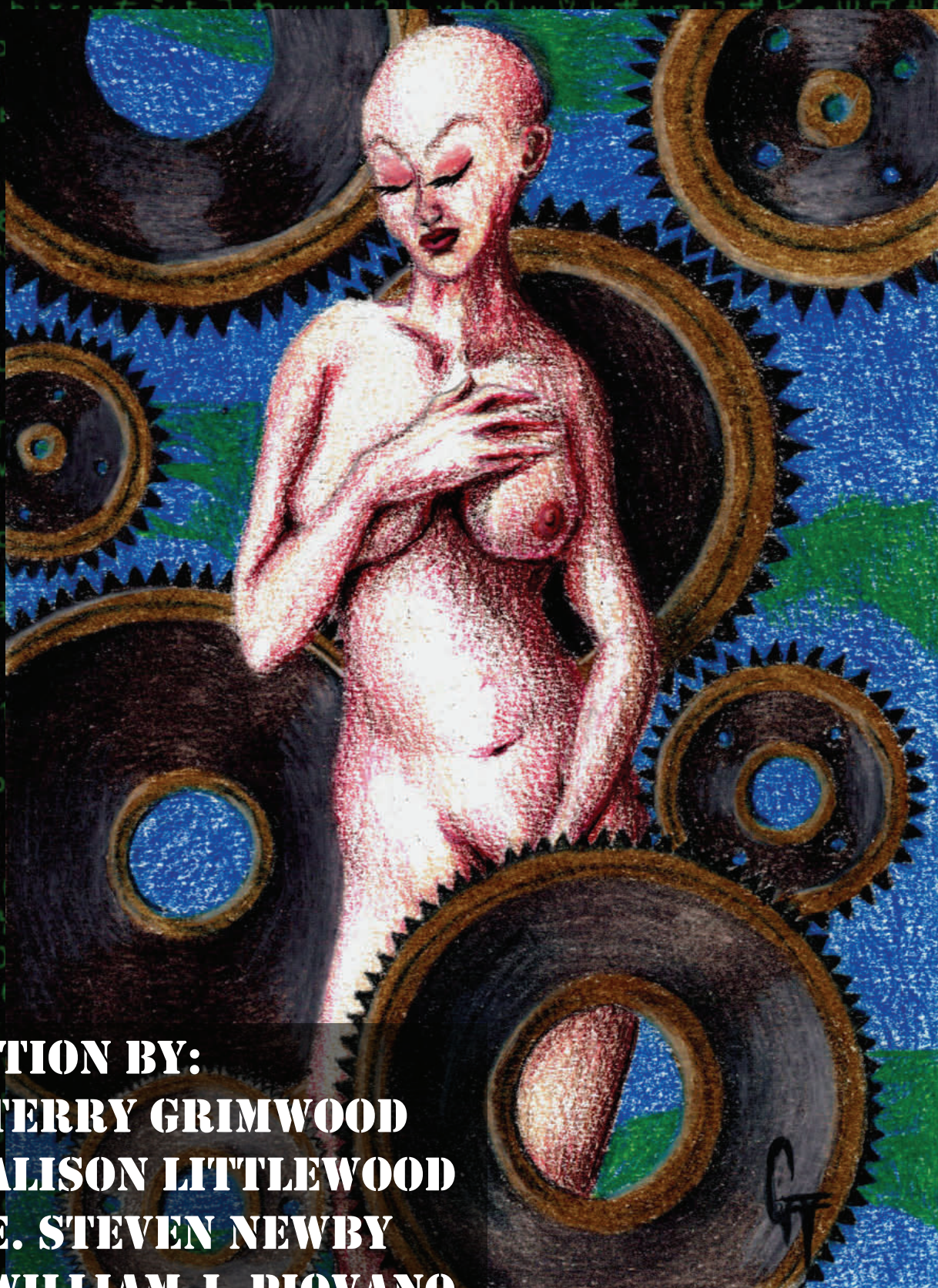


THE FUTURE FIRE

SPECULATIVE CYBERPUNK DARK

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The Future Fire: Issue 2008.12

Freiheit ist immer Freiheit der Andersdenkenden

-- Rosa Luxemburg

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This issue we bring you a lively fiction edition of *TFF*, with four stories, including the second part of William J. Piovano's three-part dystopian parable 'Avatar on the Belts'; part 2 is subtitled 'Eros'. Long-standing *TFF* contributor Terry Grimwood considers love and power—both personal and governmental—in his troubling and unpleasant dialogue, 'Kemistry'. 'The Devil's Tooth' by E. Steven Newby shows a stubborn and superstitious mother's tough love for her wayward, damned son. Finally we round off this issue with the winner of the Nudge Nudge Wink Wink competition that was judged at the TFF Convention in London last month: Alison Littlewood's darkly comic 'Always Look on the Bright Side' puts her Kylie-admiring protagonist through an almost Palahniuk-esque breakdown. Fabulous artwork as always from Arianna Ciula, Carmen, Cécile Matthey, and G. Edwin Taylor.

Is there a romantic theme going on here? It *is* all about love, after all, albeit not as you might know it. Enjoy!

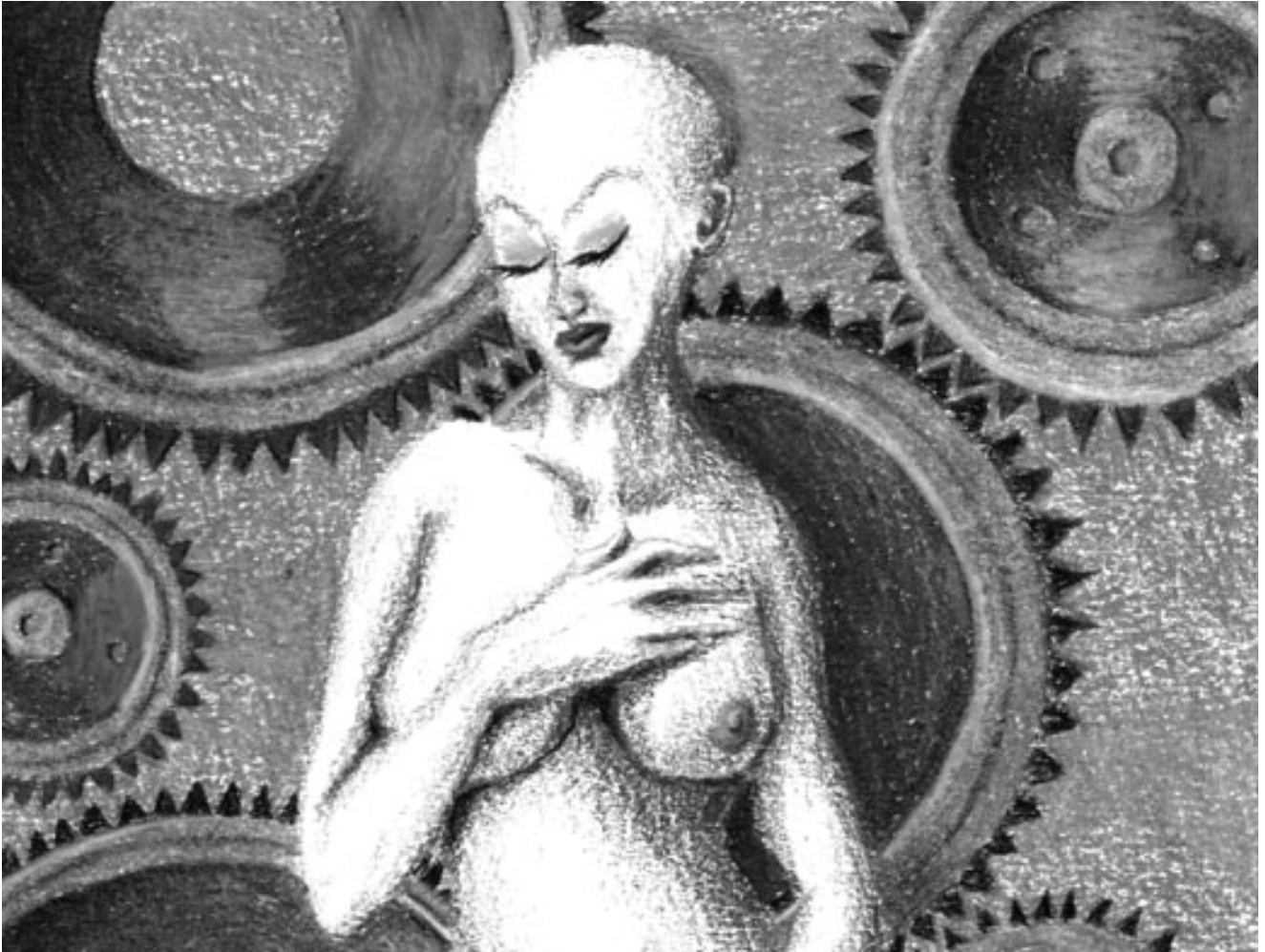
Djibril and Bruce, general editors

July 2008

AVATAR ON THE BELTS 2: EROS

William J. Piovano

Artwork (c) 2008 G. Edwin Taylor



(Continued from *TFF* 2008.11)

Her head was shaved like all the rest, just another bobbing scalp. But the body, and the features—She stood out like a Goddess amongst a worshipping rabble. Indeed, many swarmed around her, bees orbiting the honey pot, and like a true Goddess She gave them the scraps of attention they needed. The moment I saw her, I stopped, and my eyes drank in her figure, that breast swelling and female gentleness which oil and blood had destroyed on the women of the conveyor belts. When she met my gaze, I knew I

was hooked, a helpless fish on the line. The eyes, nothing like the blank whiteness of the anesthetic, gazed back, and I felt lust.

I crouched in the penumbra, the border between the pools of yellow light and the sea of obscurity. I waited there for a long time, watching Her shuffle towards the steaming porridge barrels. Every few steps she would turn and look at me. And then she smiled. A warm knot clenched in my stomach, and somehow my own lips climbed over the cheeks into a smile of my

own. It felt wonderful to smile, and to be smiled at. The light of the bulbs seemed to glow on the skin of her face.

I trembled all the way back. As I crawled my fingers shivered, the extremity of my excitement, and I was afraid I might snap the thread which was my only way home. I was blind and my imagination raced. Usually, in the dark, I pictured the world around me; it is a human thing, to fill the void. I knew there was an infinite maze starting inches from my face, and yet I couldn't see my hands. In my mind's eye I would gaze upon the millions of belts crossing each other like metal spiderwebs, never-ending, carrying sagging bodies sprawled like sacks of dead meat in their soiled seats. But not this time. This time I only saw a smile.

The belts hummed above and below, never sleeping. Covered in oil and flakes of forgotten rust, I groped on.

Because of my lingering, I almost missed the beginning of my next shift. I reached my sector, panting, rolling up the last of my thread, just as the groggy workers returned to their posts, snaking through the web of conveyor belts which carried newborns from other active areas. A hundred thousand cubicles, manned by sober male and pregnant woman. One empty. I hurried to fill the gap. Routine and similarity, I remembered, routine and similarity. The copper cones hung still above my head. The Red Men watched from their cages.

I should have stayed in that night, should have rested to avoid exhaustion. My body was tolerating work less, those recent months, but my desire to see her again drove me like no whip ever could. A shadow in darkness, I crept out as the rest collapsed in their bunks. It took me almost an hour, crawling under the myriad crossings of belts, forcing my breath out quietly for fear I might be lying directly under a Red Man's hanging cage.

The area was under shift this time, so I waited until the break. Never had I experienced such impatience, crouched behind a belt, as I did searching for that girl. From behind, it was difficult to tell one from the

other. Scrawny hands bathed globs of squirming flesh into green tanks, and conveyor belts carried them away. When the workers broke for porridge, I spotted her immediately.

My courage had grown out of proportion by then, and I hopped out from behind my cover and mingled with the crowd, taking care to adjust my speed to fall in line with the girl. The first thing I noticed was that many were trying to do the same thing. I began to despair when a human wall formed around her approach, but then She pushed through, *She* did, and came to stand by *me*.

"You're not from here," she said, coming to stand beside me in line. When others pressed close, she glowered at them and they receded like a circle of wolves from brandished flame.

"No," I said, suddenly unable to look at her directly. I was particularly aware of her female form, of her skin's texture, and most of all her smell. Sweat, chemical and pungent, but with a particular twist. It was a maddening twist.

"Why are you here?" she asked.

I shrugged. "I'm looking for someone."

"Who?"

"A one-eyed man."

She frowned at that. How could she not. I thought she would turn and leave, but she remained with me in line. We did not speak until the porridge was served, and in that time I thought about the Gods, and whether she was indeed one of them placed amongst us. A lesser God, but one nevertheless. I couldn't decide, and it bothered me.

It occurred to me then that the girl must be barren. She had no physical imperfections, and all non-protein-positive women without handicaps eventually turned up on the belts to deliver their own offspring. Barren or not, She was enthralling, and I basked in her presence until time demanded my leave.

"I have to go," I said, after watching her finish her porridge. I hadn't touched mine.

"Do you want that?" she asked, pointing at my bowl. I offered it to her, and she devoured it.

"I'll be back," I said. "Tomorrow." The search for my brother had waited fifteen years; it could hold another night.

"I know you will."

"You do?"

She smiled at me, but there was less of it in the eyes than there had been before. "Everyone comes back to me."

I nodded, though I did not understand, and took my leave. Ducking under a belt, I looked back to see her standing amongst a group of men. She took one by the hand and they walked off, climbing together into the same cot.

The following shift in my sector was a true test of nerves. I delivered the babies with lightning speed and precision, as if that would somehow accelerate time. It did poor job of distracting my head. Time never stops, and eventually the break did come. I lost no time, ignoring even the porridge dispensing. The way was now familiar, and it took me less time to wind my way through the obstacles.

As expected, the shift was on. She met me right after, in the usual line.

"I'm back," I said, almost sheepishly.

"I told you." She eyed me askew. "You speak very well, better than others."

I fumbled for an answer. If I didn't satisfy her quickly, she might leave. "I read... to myself, a lot."

"You read? I never read."

"You should try. There's a lot to learn."

"Why don't you stay," She said.

It took me a moment to reply, lost as I was in the eyes. There was something magnetic of Her, which tugged at my muscles.

"I cannot leave my shift," I said, and when disappointment clouded Her, I hated myself.

"I want you to stay."

There was nothing I could say, just like there was nothing I could do, so I remained quiet and sat with her as she ate. Again I gave her my porridge, again she ate it and watched me leave before going to rest with a man—a different one this time—in her cot.

Creep. Crawl. Her face sensual in the darkness. I had stretched my time, lingering

with Her, and had to scramble back, nearly snapping the thread in the process. Taking a deep breath, I forced myself to calm, to hold back aching image of her and her body until I reached safety once again.

When I returned to my stool, exhaustion sagged from my limbs and throbbed in my head. The woman sitting before me blurred. I needed rest, direly, and was faced instead with fourteen hours of work. I thought of Her, and of my one-eyed Brother, until sleep snuck up on me.

My spoon saved me, clattering to the ground before I could. I awoke with a start, reeling off my stool, but straightened immediately. I was far too afraid, after that, to doze off again. Adrenaline had replaced blood in my veins. When the end of the shift did come, however, I carried my porridge to my cot and crumpled into the deepest sleep with food still sloshing in my mouth.

The next day I had residue of tiredness, and fortunately my wisdom still had the better of my lust. I rested in the bed for the first two hours, knowing that She would be working her shift during that time anyway. Excitement prevented full sleep, and so I read. I searched the pages for the Gods, and the Gods for Her. I paused before the painting on the top left corner of a page. A naked woman, with full waterfall of black hair, but in all other ways identical. Aphrodite, Goddess of love.

Aphrodite was sulking upon my return.

"Where were you?" she asked.

"I had to sleep..."

"I want you to stay."

"I can't leave my shift. The Red Men..."

But she meant it, and a Goddess always gets what she wants. "You will work here," she said, and without waiting for an answer she gestured to one of the men. A lanky individual, younger than me and with eyes only for Aphrodite, stepped forward. She placed a hand on his cheek and said, rather sweetly, "Follow this man, when he leaves, and take his place."

"Yes," replied the man, unblinking. I wondered what had taken over him. Soon enough I'd find out.

And as simply as that, it was done.

Aphrodite turned a satisfied look on me, including a smile which swallowed me whole. It evoked in me a novel feeling, what could only be love. She reached out and took my hand, and I felt myself stir.

"Let's go," she said, and took me to her cot.

That day I experienced first hand one of the more popular concepts described in my books: the union of man and woman, in body, mind and soul. The Gods I had read of were fond of procreation, and they sought and practiced it freely. Zeus had a wife Hera, and many mistresses, and his kinsmen too reveled in the conquest of the opposite sex. But I had never quite envisaged the process. Nor had I thought that fornication was the act my Aphrodite had been performing with the men in her cot every day. I was not her first, but that made no difference to me. My heart pounded so hard in my chest when we climbed in, I was afraid she might hear the drum roll.

When she removed her linens and lay before me in her nakedness, I saw something completely different to the millions of females which had rolled on the belts before me all my life. There was no bloated belly, no clammy flesh and ivory stare. Instead there was life, and sweaty heat, and eyes which saw. It was an image from one of my books; Aphrodite, all inviting curves, the intoxicating scent, and skin smooth and so very warm to the touch. I didn't know what to do, but when she pulled me down, I know I did it right.

So did I begin a new life, and though the area of work was exactly the same with its cluster of cots, its webs of belts and the million cubicles before the pregnant women, it was also completely different. Aphrodite came to stand by me in the porridge line, to the envy of many, and ate with me. And when the time came, surrounded by hopeful attendants, she chose me every time, and we would walk away hand in hand to lie together entwined as mortal and Goddess.

For weeks which faded into a blur, I had no need to ask where my cot was. The other

men offered her their porridges, and everything else though they had nothing more. I did not confront them directly, just stood with my stare to my feet, my throat clogged by the fear that I'd look up to see her walking off with someone else. I did not understand my feeling, but it was there. It was the clearest thing I had ever felt.

And like with all coveted possessions, came the fear of losing it.

Aphrodite ate and lounged like a queen, consuming her supplicant's offers while ignoring them coldly. Some of the men began to treat me with a near level of worship, only to get to her. One man even begged me to step down, and when I did not reply, contorted his face and limbs with the deepest bitterness.

"Do you really think you're her chosen?" he said, and the anguish in his voice warped his words like twisted metal. "You're not the first to come here from the dark. People have seen her and she has picked them, but they never last."

Again, I said nothing, and he pounced to his feet, taking me by the linen shirt.

"Soon you'll be one of us, and understand." His breath was so close and hot, smelling of porridge and infection. His scowl flashed a checkered array of teeth. It all reminded me of the wild-eyed man, and his confessed secret—except this was less shocking, and more puzzling. Was I just one of many, I wondered, and doomed to be scrapped meat?

Aphrodite appeared behind me, then, and the man dropped into a pitiful grovel of repentance. Repentance to the Gods, I thought. Almost I pitied him, but she was there, her hand in mine, and my world narrowed to contour her shape, blotting out the rest.

They all wanted Aphrodite, as I did. Who did she want; that was the real question. For now, me. Later? Who knew. She took everything she wanted from her would-be suitors—demanded it if it wasn't already on offer—and then retired to vent her lust—a ragged, angered lust—with mine. I yearned for nothing more.

And again, there was nothing I feared

more to lose.

So one day, holding her naked body sweaty and drowsy in my arms, I conceded to her my thirty-year old secret.

"Have you ever thought of the Outside?" I asked, feeling my voice rumble into the ear which rested gently on my chest.

"Outside where?" came the groggy response.

"Outside of this place." I gazed out of the cot's opening to the belts, the grates and cages and the darkness beyond which held only more of the same. The darkness which had once frightened me so much. "You know... where they take the protein-positives. If you take that belt, on and on, past everything and into the tunnel with the light, what would you eventually see?"

"I never thought about it," she said. "They just disappear in there and that's that."

"What if I told you I knew?"

"I wouldn't believe you," she said, snuggling closer.

"Someone did tell me," I said. "There is a great space with no metal, no belts, only light. Think of light like a million lamps and more, and everything as soft as a cot feathers and as sweet as porridge. An infinity of that is what the Outside is."

"What?" Her response was taut with attention.

"A man died in my sector, many years ago, and he claimed to have seen the Outside. Briefly, but enough to describe it to me. A fascinating place, where one can rest his entire life," I ran a hand down her body, "with the person he desires."

For once, she did not respond to my touch. I had aroused something far deeper. I knew it that next moment, by the way she looked up at me, and the wonder in her voice.

"Do you think there is a place like that?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said in all honesty. "That's what he said. Whatever it is, it's right beyond that tunnel, at the end of the belt. No more machines, or oil or blood, only soft rest, in a place where the roof is higher than any thousand levels and made purely of

light."

Her eyes widened.

"A dwelling fit for Gods," I said, more to myself, and thought of Mount Olympus, trying to picture a great mountain in the dark where the sons and daughters of the Proto-geoi first-born dwelled in their immortality.

"Gods?" Aphrodite propped herself up on an elbow. "Why do they not let us go...? Why only let the protein-positives? Are they Gods?" Aphrodite had never understood the concept of mythology. I might have corrected her, taught her the truth of it, but I feared she might lose interest.

"The man said there was this great sickness which spread from other creatures. He said there were things which could float in the air, flap their arms and soar high towards the light. Things with feathers, like these, instead of skin." I plucked a feather from the mattress tear, ran it smooth and weightless down Aphrodite's nose. Those feathered creatures, perhaps, had been Gods. "We men lived alongside them—and fed on them too—until one day a sickness struck them and killed them all. And almost all of us. The man told me that only those with the Protein could resist; all others died." I held the feather above my nose. Dead Gods for dead men, I thought. Seeing Aphrodite's eyes probing mine, I continued, "But this Protein only appears rarely, and so the survivors began to search continually, here in this place, for those few who are born with it and can live in the Outside." I paused for a moment, added, "That's what the man told me, anyway."

She remained silent for a long time, staring off into nothingness. I dared not interrupt her thoughts, and basked instead in the comfort of her presence. After a while she pulled closer to me, nuzzling under my chin.

"Tell me more about the Outside," she said.

The man had told me nothing more. I spoke for hours.

It became a routine. After every shift we would eat, she would take what she wanted from whomever she wanted, then we would retire to our cots, make love, and I would

talk to her of the Outside until her light snoring let me know I was allowed to doze off as well. There was nothing left to recount of the wild-eyed man's tale, of course, but over the years which followed his account, I had often speculated about the nature of the Outside. Aphrodite did not know it was my imagination spinning the great mountains with their green expanses and warm glowing forges. I saw no reason why she should. Speaking of it continually meant I often dreamt of it, too. Normal dreams—my own mind's fabrications, that is—which helped me in crafting greater detail, filling in the picture in Aphrodite's head which kept her eyes wide and her body in my embrace.

But every time I closed my eyes, I could hear the Red Men coming to take me away. For some reason I knew only one person was allowed to know that secret, the truth of the Outside where the Gods still dwelled.

It all continued unchanging until the day I had another dream.

It was one of those dreams. I felt my awareness, my presence within its ethereal walls. But this time it was someone else's awareness. I stared down a cone of vision, and I saw a swaying light above an anesthetized woman, saw my own hands reach down. But there was something wrong with it, something askew. It took me a few moments to realize I watched through a tunnel, a single eye.

My eyes flew open. In front of me, the mattress and its strands. Had that dream been what I thought it was? Rolling off the bed, my back scraped on some sharp edge in the mattress. Absently I reached down to extract the offender from the soft feather collection and saw it was in fact the spoon, stashed deep into the mattress long ago and surfaced only by the continuous friction of lovers' bodies. Having read all too much mythology, I came to regard this as a sign, a reminder of my one-eyed Brother, my kin who waited unknowing somewhere in the belted dark.

I confronted Aphrodite with the news that same day, after the shift. My porridge bowl trembled slightly as I spoke. I feared a rebuke, or worse, an abandonment.

"I have to search for someone," I said.

Her eyes narrowed. "Who?"

"Someone I knew. It doesn't matter. I just wanted to tell you that I won't be here during rest."

"Only today?"

"Every other day," I said, forcing the air from my throat. "Until I find him."

"What? Why? I want you here, with me."

"I want to be here, too," I said. "But I have to find him. I abandoned him, and now I must find him."

"How could you abandon him?" She rolled past the question, "you don't know where he is? At *all*?"

I shook my head, and she surely thought I was crazy.

"How are you supposed to find him?" she asked. "This place is infinite."

"He will be close by," I said. "I know it. He has to be."

"No, you don't know it. And I want you here."

She was right, I didn't know it. I hoped it.

"I've decided already. I'm going, but I'll be here tomorrow..." The urge to take it all back, to run back to the cot with her and have her as mine, almost broke me. I clenched the spoon in my hand.

Her frown caved into a scowl. "Is this about your Gods? Look around, there's nothing of them here." She might have been right.

I did not reply to that, simply stood and said, "I'll see you in a few hours." What my mind was screaming was *don't pick anyone else!* Again I forced emotions back down. It was better that way, a show of strength. Again, I hoped.

Creep. Crawl. Coughs stifled in the dust. Troubled as I was during my return to exploration of the conveyor webs, I garnered a fine collection of bruises. I tripped often, cursing myself for sounds which might alert the Red Men. What truly ached was my heart, with a sickening worry. I pictured Aphrodite walking back to her cot with other men. Why was I splitting nails on metal grates, dragging shaking muscles over a hundred years of slippery grime, when I could

by all rights be lying with Aphrodite? Was I insane to make such a choice? I clutched the wrapped spoon. More than once I turned back, crawled a few feet towards my Goddess, until my grip on the spoon hardened and resolve returned. In those long lonely hours I examined a dozen sectors and found nothing, saw no sign of the one-eyed man. With a little less hope, I crawled back home.

It seemed like a lifetime before I arrived.

I cannot express the relief I felt when I peered into the cot and saw Aphrodite lying alone and asleep. There was little time left, so I squeezed in beside her. She mumbled something but did not return my advances, so I slept with her until the next shift began.

The next day saw me return to my routine, and my lust was famished. After I let it feed to its satisfaction, it was Aphrodite's turn to be hungry—for more knowledge of the Outside, that is. Languid in my release, I let my mind speak of the wonders of Mount Olympus, unaware that Aphrodite's eyes watched my words like twin discuses and assimilated every syllable as divine truth.

For a very long time did I continue my dual existence, wreaking fatigue upon my body. I had found something special; Aphrodite had filled some emptiness within me, but a different hollowness still remained. It belonged to my Brother. I knew I had to find him, and I was determined to continue my search until my last breath wisped through the grate floor. Fortunately it did not come to death in the end.

Or, in a sense, it did.

It was the final proof that the Gods are dead in this place. None of the beings described in my readings would have poisoned my joy with such vile bitterness. If there is a God here, then he is envious (though the reason eludes me) of our existence, and chooses not to grant us more than one blessing at a time.

I was lying under a belt, listening absently to its hum and searching with no great concentration the porridge lines of yet another sector. I remember comparing the porridge dispensers to Gods, more than the Red Men, for the Red Men were only feared, not re-

vered. Such thoughts were obliterated from my mind in an instant, with the glimpse of a Cyclops. Only this one here did not have a single central eye, but one of a pair left open where the other sagged closed beneath a rugged scar. That single eye, that scar, was all the clue I could ever have, and the only one I'd ever need.

The excitement exploded only briefly, culminating in a collected calm, an extremely rational state of mind which guided my actions in slow-motion. The only thing I could relate it to is the day I discovered my first (and last) protein-positive child: incredulity, a truth too unlikely to be true, and yet unmistakably there before your eyes.

Casually I approached the porridge line, lingering in the midst but not joining it, until my Brother got his bowlful and walked off to sit on a belt. Nobody sat with him, talked to him, or even looked at him. He ate with his fingers, head bowed, feet dangling off the edge of the belt. I was suddenly afraid of having crafted, with my hands, a tortured soul.

He noticed me as I approached, and I saw fear and diffidence in his eyes. I raised my hands in gesture of innocuousness, slowed my walk. It was all I could do not to run and embrace him. I knew better.

The first thing that struck me was how young he looked. A young man, beardless, barely past the stage of a boy. It could have been no other way, for he had been born some fifteen to twenty years before, but in the long wait I had grown to picture him almost my same age.

Young or no, he had all the apparent maturity of my age.

"Why have you come to bother me?" he asked, holding his bowl protectively against his chest. "What do you want?" His one eye scanned me, a tunnel vision...

"I'm not here to bother you," I said, looking at the scar. Diagonal, from center forehead to outer cheek, as I remembered slashing. "You don't know me, but I know you."

He brought a hand to the scar, as if protecting that too from my gaze. "You know me?" The suspicion was writ plain upon his

face. This man lacked in peace of mind, that was obvious. "I've never seen you here," he said.

How to explain? 'You're my brother, from a different mother?' 'I put out your eye, so I would have a way to find you?' How absurd, how *cruel*, would that sound? And yet it was nothing but the truth.

"I am from another sector," I said, but I saw the word meant nothing to him. "Another place like this, far out."

He said nothing, turning slightly away. "Leave me be."

I had never imagined it to be so difficult, always seen it as a mutual joy of discovery.

My mouth hung open for a moment, and suddenly I knew what I had to say. "I had a dream, of you. I saw through the single vision of a one-eyed man, and I knew we were tied. So I came to find you..." Again, truth, though not nearly all of it.

My Brother (to my amazement) turned back and tilted his head. "A dream? I've had dreams too..."

That was when I knew *those* dreams were truly special. Reassured, I pressed on, "I knew it meant I had to find you, and the clue it gave me was your single eye."

To my amazement, he accepted this with a nod of his head. Just then I learned why.

"I've dreamt through the eyes of another, too," he said. "So it is true, then."

His words took me aback. I had not thought my dream would have made any sense to him—they did little enough to me—and yet here I was faced with another mysterious link. Another sign of fate, I took it.

"So what now?" he asked.

I blinked, frowned. "I don't know." He was right; what now? After more than a dozen years of search and hope... what came at the end, what came with the success?

"I don't know," I said again. What did this all mean, to me, to him? "I have to return to my sector, but I'll return, I can promise you that."

"To what end? What does this mean?"

I could offer only the same answer. I knew why I had marked him, implicitly—to know something unique, diversify to give

meaning, grow to gain an emotional attachment—but then I didn't really know *why*.

My Brother extended a hand and brought an index finger close to the wrappings of the spoon in my hand. "What is that?" he asked, coming close but not touching.

I hesitated. "It's an old tool. Which helped me find you."

Again, he nodded, and so did I, saying, "I'll be back after your next shift, or perhaps the one after."

Thoughts of Aphrodite avalanched back into my head. Anxiety, lust, jealousy; a broth of incompatible ingredients. I had quite a while left before my shift started, but I ached to return to her. I had no reason to stay, now that my search was complete. My mind stretched toward my Brother, my body towards my lover, and my heart lay torn. There would be time, I told myself at length, time to speak to my Brother. For now we both had to digest our meeting.

I gave my farewell again, along with another promise, and began to trek back to my sector.

Creep. Crawl. Bleeding fingers begging to be spared. The desire for my Aphrodite drowned all pain away, however, and in the darkness there was a great light only I could see, calling me back. And, for the first time, there was one behind me too. Never had the darkness, even under the dead belts, seemed so bright.

Alas, what is that renowned saying? The higher you fly, the harder you fall.

The discovery of my one-eyed Brother became that day my curse, sending me back earlier than I anticipated—earlier than Aphrodite had anticipated. I skipped, quite literally, to her cot. I flung myself to the edge, a grin splitting my face wide enough to swallow my ears. Plans and hopes had already formed on my lips; bringing my brother to this sector, so that she could meet him. My Brother and my Goddess, brought together. It would be wonderful.

I found her moaning.

The first thing I saw was a red-streaked back. A pale expanse of foreign skin lashed by nails which for months had raked only

my skin. Four legs, entwined—*four*. Not a scrap of linen between them. The sweaty smell of lust.

In truth I could not have pictured it worse in my head, and the horror of it was like a hammer blow to the head, except instead of knocking me into merciful oblivion it transfixed me to stare at the scene unfolding. Her face swung to the side, eyes closed, lips slightly parted, exhaling with every ragged motion of her pale monstrous parasite. My Aphrodite's face, in bliss, without me.

I cannot say for sure how long I stared at that spectacle. It was a true example of masochism, a self-inflicted torture beyond anything I could ever have conceived for myself. I only remember that at one point, in a suspension of time, Aphrodite's barely parted eyelids fluttered open, hovered in their narrowness, in their disbelief, and then burst open with the hammer's hit.

She cursed, pushing that mass off of herself. She scrambled towards me on her knees. I would have howled and bitten that impostor to death, surely, had anything but my naked Goddess lain beside him. A thick sickness curdled in my stomach, and all things reeled. Suddenly I was aware of the grate floor inches from my face, and a great deal of liquid gushing from gaps in my clenched teeth. Sick porridge. In the distance, barred beyond the confines of my hearing, her voice was a fairy's whisper drowned by raving machinery.

My stomach continued to heave for a long while, choking me, but my legs acquired a singular strength born of more than simple adrenaline. I ran far and fast in no particular direction, until that fairy's voice died. My world shriveled into me, and nothing was left but the beating chorus.

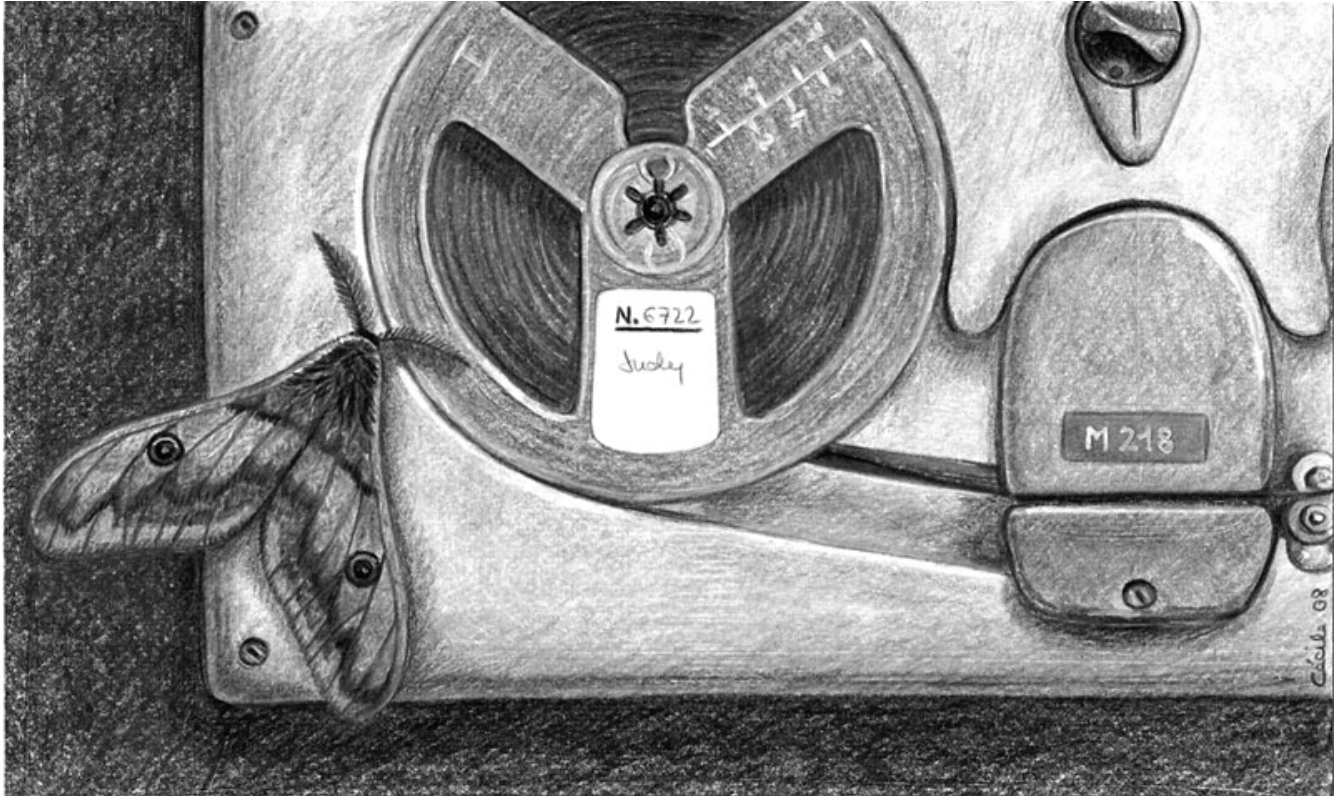
Jealousy, the death of lust.

(Coming in *TFF* 2008.13: 'Avatar on the Belts 3: Aether')

KEMISTRY

by Terry Grimwood

Illustration (c) 2008 Cécile Matthey



"Please, please tell me why I'm here."

"You really don't know?"

"No, I don't. I want my husband."

"He isn't your husband."

"Of course he's my husband. What the hell are you talking about?"

"We don't recognise your so-called marriage to Neil Palmer."

"You don't rec... Look there's a marriage certificate, in our luggage."

"You were already married."

"Divorced. Bloody *divorced*."

"Not in the eyes of the law."

"I want to call my solicitor."

"Why is that, Judy? Do you think you're under arrest?"

"It feels like it. Your colleagues descended on us the moment we landed at Heathrow, we were handcuffed when my husband protested, our children were taken

away... and this looks like a police station interview room—"

"How do you know? Have you been interviewed by the police before?"

"Who are you?"

"How do you know this is a police interview room, Judy?"

"My name is Mrs Palmer."

"Have you been arrested, in the past? Is that how you know?"

"No. I've never been arrested or even been inside a police station."

"Television then, lots of interview rooms on television aren't there: Frost, Lewis, Taggart."

"Who are you? At least I have the right to know your name."

"You haven't actually, but I'll tell you anyway. I'm Dr Anita Rogers. I'm a Police Psychologist. Like Cracker."

"Listen, *Anita*, I am divorced. The decree is in my luggage as well, signed sealed and stamped."

"I suggest you use my correct title, Judy."

"I want my solicitor."

"The law changed after you fled the Country."

"We didn't *flee* the Country, Neil got a job in Albania."

"What's wrong with jobs in England?"

"Does it matter?"

"Everything matters."

"My divorce doesn't seem to."

"Answer my question."

"Albania is a developing country. They're building out there, hotels mostly and apartments. Neil's an architect. It was a career opportunity."

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

"You're lying."

"What other reason would we have for going there? I mean, Albania for God's sake."

"Why did you come back?"

"Neil's contract has finished."

"Why Albania? Why anywhere? Come on, Judy, tell me."

"I had to get out."

"What? Speak up, for the tape recorder."

"I had to get out."

"Why?"

"You know why. You know everything."

"I want you to tell me."

"God. Look, my ex-husband was threatening me."

"Correction. Your *husband*."

"Ex, ex, ex, ex fucking *ex husband*."

"The law's been changed. You are *not* divorced from Paul. The marriage stands because it was a chemical marriage."

"A *what* sort of marriage?"

"Chemical."

"I don't understand?"

"Let me put it this way, Judy—"

"Mrs Palmer."

"Judy. How do you feel about Paul?"

"That's none of your business."

"Yes it is, especially when families are involved, that's my department, Family

Maintenance and Reconciliation."

"I've never heard of—"

"It's new."

"New? My God, since when has Family Maintenance and Reconciliation been a police matter?"

"Since the government made it one. Answer my question."

"Okay, okay. I hate him. He's a complete and utter bastard, a *fucking* bastard."

"You use a lot of strong language Judy."

"Because I've got a lot of strong feelings."

"Hate *is* a strong feeling, a passionate feeling."

"No, it's just hate. He hurt me."

"But when you first saw him, what about then?"

"I don't have to answer that."

"Yes you do."

"Christ, this is unbelievable. I fell for him like the sucker I am. Paul was good-looking and tough. He had a six-pack and tattoos and huge biceps and a swagger that turned me on so much it made me wet, okay? Do you want to know more, about the first time we—"

"And what about dating him? Come on, Judy, tell me. How did you feel?"

"Smug. I was Paul's girl, the one he'd chosen me over all the other bimbos who drooled all over him."

"Were *you* a bimbo?"

"No. I was not. I was set to go to university. I wanted to be a doctor."

"Why didn't you become one?"

"Because of Paul. I was so infatuated I eloped with him. I must have been crazy."

"You were. Crazy in love with the man you desired. Nothing wrong with that."

"Nothing wrong? Of course there was something fucking wrong. It was insanity. I gave up everything for him. I was only eighteen!"

"My point exactly. You love him. *That* is chemistry."

"Bruises and humiliation, that's what it is... was. He hit me, with those fucking great fists of his."

"Why didn't you run away?"

"I did."

"No, when it started. Why did you stay

with him?"

"Because I *thought* I loved him and we'd get over the bad times and later because I couldn't seem to break away, because I felt as if I had failed and deserved what I got. That's how it is isn't it, with beaten wives? They stay because they can't leave. You're the psychologist, you should know."

"But what was sexual intercourse like with Paul?"

"Go to hell..."

"Tell me Judy and save yourself a lot of trouble."

"What sort of trouble?"

"Just tell me."

"The sex... the sex was good. Always good. But that doesn't mean..."

"Doesn't it? Isn't that what relationships are really about?"

"No, they're not, not completely... I don't know. No."

"You were attracted to him because of his looks, because of his swagger. And the sex was so good you endured physical violence to get it."

"I had no choice."

"Yes you did, in those days you did. You could've simply walked away. But you didn't."

"I want my children. Where are they? What's happening to them?"

"You could have had children with Paul."

"I love Neil."

"Do you? Really? What sort of love is it?"

"A good love. He cares for me. He's gentle and—"

"Is the sex exciting? Does *his* swagger make you wet? Does he give you the sort of wild ride Paul gave you? Answer me, Judy; make this easier on yourself."

"No... No, it isn't like that..."

"What is it like?"

"Neil is kind, safe."

"Aha, that word; safe, normal, secure. Boring."

"He isn't boring. God, we've just spent two years in Albania."

"Would you leave him? If another Paul came along? Would you, Judy?"

"Of course not. I love him for God's

sake."

"Are you sure? If the chance of another wild ride came? If you met a man who made you wet with his swagger? How safe is your marriage?"

"Very safe."

"I don't believe you. The statistics don't believe you."

"What is going on? I want my husband. I need him. You can't keep me here—"

"Of course we can keep you here. We can keep you here indefinitely. That's how the law works in this country now. There are many threats out there. And what is the worst threat of all? The enemy within, the canker, the cancer, the rot. Family life is breaking down. So many marriages end in divorce. The strongest pillar of our society is crumbling because people leave the ones they are meant to be with, the ones with whom they share that vital chemistry. That's why our enemies despise us. They see us as immoral as dirty, loose, our women flitting from partner to partner, in and out of marriage. They want to destroy us because we are dirty and weak."

"I don't understand..."

"You have to go back to him."

"What... to who? To Neil?"

"To Paul. To your one true love."

"But he hit me. He fucking beat me until I was broken!"

"Because you were hurting *him*."

"How do you know? What do you know about any of it?"

"He told me. He came to us to claim you back under the law."

"What about my children?"

"Illegitimate, born out of wedlock. Social Services will take care of them."

"I want Neil..."

"He has his own responsibilities; a prostitute he used to see. Became quite fond of her, because she turned him on, because she did the things he really needs, because there was chemistry and he loved her."

"No... No, that's not true. He would never—"

"He was a healthy, normal, lonely man before you met him. And rather naive. It's

quite natural, and more common than you think."

"I want to see him."

"I'm sorry. That episode is over."

"God we should never have come home."

"Not my problem, Judy. You have to face your responsibilities and do what is right."

"And if I refuse?"

"Bigamy carries a prison sentence."

"I'm divorced from Paul."

"You're married to Paul."

"You're wrong... this is insane..."

"No, our society *was* insane. No self-control, no grit or sense of responsibility. Tired of this relationship? Okay, I'll try another, and another, give my virtue to any man who comes along. Ignore what my own body is telling me."

"It was telling me Paul was going to kill me."

"It was telling you that you had found what it wanted. We can prove it."

"How? How can you prove something like that?"

"Chemistry. We tested your pheromones, and Paul's—"

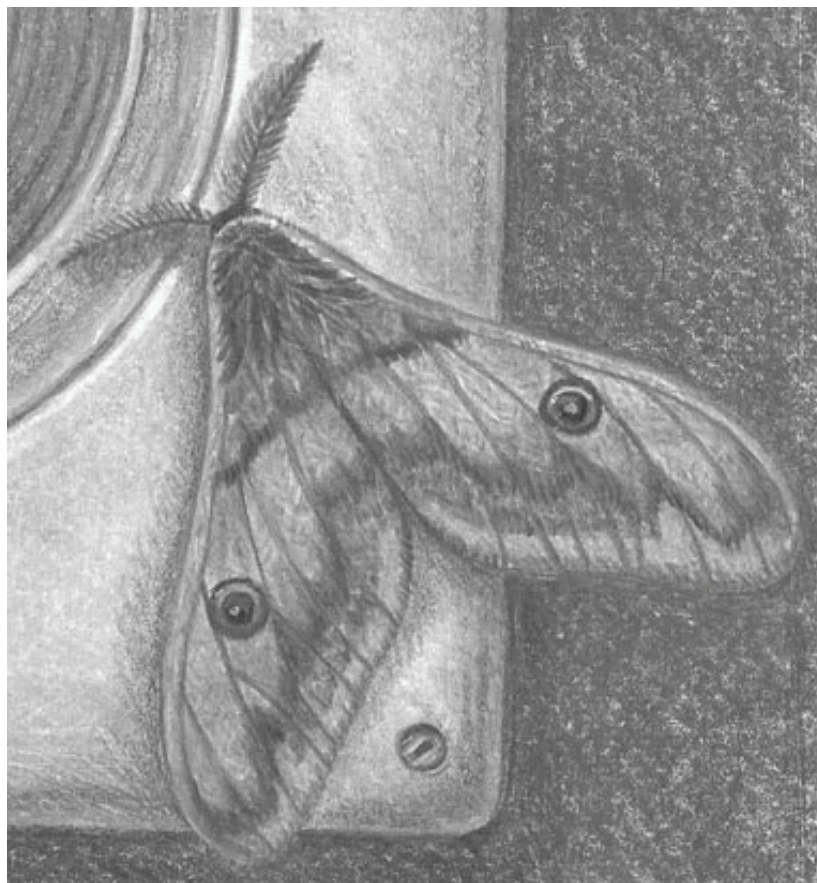
"Tested... what are you talking about? You can't test pheromones—"

"—and he's the one, Judy. He's your life partner and the sooner you accept it and agree to go back to him the better. If not... no jury will have an ounce of sympathy, the judge will want to make an example... We have to protect ourselves, and the only way is to repair the walls. Show *them*, the ones who want to break us, that we are strong and moral and do not deserve their wrath."

"Please..."

"Think about it, Judy. You have time, you're not going anywhere. Think about it, I know you'll do the right, the moral, thing."

"No, listen, you can't go. I can explain, I love Neil. I really love—"



THE DEVIL'S TOOTH

E. Steven Newby

Illustration (c) 2008 Arianna Ciula



"Come to tell me I was wrong? That the depth of my sins was so great they cost my son his life and immortal soul? If you've come to my table to slap down an all-mighty 'told you so', then hold that thought one minute while I fetch the cleaver. But if you can keep that reproachin' tongue still, I'll tell you what really happened; and how, despite what our *infinitely wise* Father Johran says, my boy's alive and well.

"Do we have a deal?

"Then I'll make tea. You get comfortable...

"Sal was born different. Hell, anyone could tell that. Something in the eyes, even when he was a baby... Father Johran said I

should have left Sal upon the cliffs so that God can have him back. Said the Laws of Geninteg demanded it. But Sal's father died in the mines only days before the boy was born—God had already taken too much from me. Besides, Father Johran ain't never had to leave a helpless child all exposed like that. What right's he got askin' a mother to do the same?

"Got a lot of grief, I did, for ignoring divine laws. But I wouldn't have none of it. Every man who tried to put me in my place got threatened with a neuterin' right on the spot. Carried my cleaver with me everywhere I went just to prove I wasn't foolin'. Soon folks got the message. Left us alone.

Since Sal couldn't wrap his head around much schoolin', they put him in the mines at six, runnin' supplies. By eight he was swinin' a pick-ax. Grew up strong, and had a mean left hook for any boy who called him an abomination. God don't make abominations. He has a plan for everything and everyone.

"Now, my boy has an eye for patterns. Sees 'em in tree branches and leaves. The sound of rain fallin' on the metal roof. Even the way people talked, he said. Used to love to watch me dance. Yeah, I see that look in your face. Can't imagine these chubby thighs kickin' to a rhythm, right? Can you imagine these thighs kickin' your ass out that door? That's right. Drink your tea.

"As I was sayin', Sal used to love watchin' me dance. He'd clap his hands in time while I sang or hummed along. We'd have a high old time of it, sometimes he'd jump up n' dance too... Sometimes, when he was right happy, he'd look up from his pallet and say,

" 'Dance for me, Ma.'

"Good, good times. But it was that love for patterns that'd get him.

"Aldex done came and told me Sal was pokin' round that obelisk in the center of town. Cursed fang of black rock. We all know them stories about that jut of stone: plucked from Satan's jaw at the start of time, the Teeth were scattered across the land as a reminder to man of the mark of sin he was born with. Every town has one in its center, though I never could figure why everybody'd want to build their lives around such unholy remains...

"Don't know what drew Sal to it to begin with. Perhaps the designs carved into its black faces. Not a pattern there I'd recognize, but then like most people I try not to notice the Devil's Tooth. Try not to think about it. Maybe it was a one time thing. Sal'd lose interest. A mother can always hope. So I laid low, said nothin'.

"Soon folks started whisperin' that my sin of lettin' him live all them years ago drew the poor soul to the Devil's Tooth. Started carryin' my cleaver with me again. Few were keen to share their opinion with a fat woman wieldin' a big knife. Was at market when

someone warned me that there was gonna be a secret meetin' that I wasn't supposed to know about. Never you mind who spilled the beans. But that night when Sal came home from the mines, I let him have it. I says to him, I says,

" 'Devil's Tooth is evil! Claimed the soul of a man from this town when my paw paw was a boy. Now don't go playin' near it again.'

" 'But the patterns, Ma,' he says, 'I see light between the lines.'

"Can't say I knew what that meant, but it scared me real bad. Just started tremblin' all over, as if the fire in that hearth over there'd gone out all of a sudden.

" 'Father Johran's got folks mighty scared of you messin' with that rock. Scared people are apt to do somethin' stupid. And your father used to have a sayin': stupid things get people killed.'

"We went round an' round. I sent him to bed without supper, just so he'd know I was serious as a winter's storm. Sal promised to stay away from it, and I thought—maybe I hoped more than anythin'—that the matter was done.

"Now you all townsfolk worked yourselves tighter than Mrs. Accountint's butt crack. Don't look at me like you don't know what I'm talkin' about. I had to go to Father Johran an' tell him that I done talked to the boy and that no lynchin' was in order. 'Course he denied that any such thing was in the works, but after that people seemed to lighten up. Pulled the corks out, if you know what I mean.

"All was well and good for a year. He'd work his shift at the mines and come right home afterwards, never goin' near the Tooth. By now they was havin' him haul the carts out to the Collectors. Those shiny chariots'd come down from Heaven to gather up the metals those hard workin' men had dug up. Sal would come home and tell me that the way the Collectors move, it was like people, he'd say. Not Angels. I'd tell him never you mind, Angels move as Angels please, and God ain't about to change that.

"Told him that patterns wasn't divine, that

God didn't work in ways that man could understand. Just 'cause Sal could see it didn't mean that it was real. Faith is more important than the illusions around us. 'These patterns,' I said, 'mark of the Devil. Test of faith.' I made him swear never to tell another soul about the way Collectors move.

"Then of an early spring day, for the same reason the chigger's got to bite in that *one* spot, he starts dinkerin' with that Tooth again. Morogan spotted him this time. Sal says the light between the lines shows him glimpses of another world. Devil's promises, that's what it was. Can't trust that Toothless Bastard. Again Sal promised he'd stay away, but any woman with half a brain ain't fooled twice by the same con.

"Kept a watch on him, I did. Morogan was an easy eye, what with his shop near the Square. Aldex, though not so near, was always a good source of 'telligence, if you know what I mean. Graham, the Barker Boys: had them all workin' for me too. If m'boy so much as farted in the direction of that black fang, I'd know.

"But it wasn't my spies that caught him. It was me. See, Sal'd grown cautious. Trait I'd never seen in him before. Became aware that folks'd been watchin' him. It was in early May when the fire's don't always need another log in the wee hours of morning, but sometimes they do, yeah. Well, I was fixin' to plunk another down when I noticed his pallet was empty.

"Bein' different, Sal was always shy on friends. Lacked the honeys for a midnight romp. Didn't take a mother much imagination to guess where he'd gone. I wrapped a layer or two over myself, and made my way to the Square. I was just steppin' round that damned mule cart Grevis always leaves parked in the middle of the street, when I saw him. Sal was standin' before the Devil's Tooth.

"To the horror of my soul, I could see the light between the lines! They was shinin' as if cracks had formed all over the Tooth, and at any moment it might explode, loosin' its unimaginable evil into our world once more. Sal made awkward movements, and spoke in

strange, repetitious ways. Sometimes they wasn't words coming out of his mouth, just sounds like I never heard a human make. I was sure the Devil had driven him to madness. On and on he spoke, on and on he moved. The lights of the stone changed from white to green, red and purple. Any time that light changed color, he changed the way he spoke, moved. As if he understood the stone, and it done understood him.

"I meant to step forward, to reprimand him for such blasphemous foolery. But somethin' stayed my bones. I was sure the power of the Devil himself kept me from leapin' up and savin' my boy from absolute damnation. Thought to myself, They was right. This boy's gonna pay for my sins...

"Don't think it can get any worse? Maybe you should leave now then, 'cause what comes next'll make those last dregs of tea more bitter'n Copler's home brew. Sure you want to hear this? All right then, don't say I didn't warn you.

"The lights from that obelisk was shinin' all the colors of an evil rainbow when all of a sudden the whole stone took to glowin'. Set the Square alight as if it was mid-day. Couldn't look right at it, so bright it was. Then out of it all stepped one of them fallen Angels!

"It looked like a man with short gray hair and wrapped in a strange white suit. He looked human, he did, like one of us. But the Devil's Hand didn't trick me. Though I was scared to the bone and weepin', I prayed to God to save us from this monstrosity. But the All Mighty did nothin' to intercept, and that cursed bein' commenced to speakin'. Sal fell to one knee before this creature.

" 'Well met, young one,' says the Dark Angel. 'Long has it been since any from this region has cracked the primer.'

"Now I can't say I know what a 'primer' is, but Sal seemed to. He goes on without so much as a blink: 'I saw the patterns,' says Sal. 'The patterns spoke to me. Said I needed to be careful, that others might be watchin'. They might hurt me, it says, 'cause they don't understand.'

" 'It is not their function to understand,'

says the bein'. Then he says some many things I can't quite remember. Stuff about it bein' a puzzle how Sal had come to talk with the Tooth and all. Then the Hand of the Dark One called the jut of sin by a weird name, a title that meant nothin' to me. He called it a 'Mon'trin Stashun.' Said it was meant to keep an eye on this region, though why the Devil'd wanna do that's beyond me. The Fallen Angel then said somethin' that really boiled my noodle. He says, 'You will be re-cassied—no, that ain't the word he said. Reclassified, that's it. Reclassified to a level function—whatever that is—that was more fittin' to Sal's abilities than 'minin' raw materials.'

" 'It said I was going to leave soon,' says Sal, still on one knee. 'Are you going to take me away?'

"That unholy beast nodded. 'The Mon'trin Stashun was not meant to be sessed from this side.' He then jabbered on about how it would affect the integrity—that's the world he used—of the syssem. I don't know what a syssem is, but Sal seemed to understand.

" 'Can I say bye to my Ma?'

"The fallen Angel shook his head. 'She would not understand, and it'd pose too great an security risk.'

"After a moment, Sal stood tall, starin' the Dark Angel in the eye. I tried to jump forward, to warn him of the danger he was placing upon his immortal soul, but I could not move. Some spell of the Devil, some magic in the air, prevented me from so much as a twitch. Still as stone I watched as the Dark Angel reached forward. And Sal took his hand, sealin' the deal. Instantly the bright light of the Tooth went out. It looked just as dark and forebodin' as it always does. But Sal and the Dark Angel was gone.'

"I just stood there, leanin' against Grevis' cart, more mortified than any woman who's ever lost a child. At the funeral, she can always be right appeased in the knowin' that the young soul will find its place in Heaven, baskin' in the eternal love of God. But I didn't have no body for a funeral, and no comfort could be had in knowin' where my boy's soul was condemned to.

"Eventually I made it back home, though I swear I don't remember steppin' away from that cart. Honestly can't tell you if I'd've kept my mouth shut or run to Father Johran the next mornin', but the choice wasn't mine to make. Seems Morogan watched the unholy spectacle from his upstairs window.

"So that's what happened. That's how I lost my boy. But you know somethin'? I don't know how he managed, but Sal got himself away from that Devil. More than this, I know he's still alive. Think I've cracked, yeah? Well, you've heard me this far, a mite more'n most folks'd done, so I won't make no more threats on the matter. I'll just say what I know, and you can decide for yourself.

"A few weeks later, I was out buyin' some produce. Had to pass through the Square. Saw a flash of light comin' from the Devil's Tooth. Tried to ignore it, refused to look at it I did. Wasn't goin' to let it take me, too. But then I heard Sal's voice, plain as if he was standin' right next to me. He says,

" 'Don't you worry about me, Ma. I like my new life. I get to play in the patterns.'

"I wouldn't answer. No Devil's gonna use my boy against me. No Devil's gonna torment me like that. Started whisperin' to God, please *please* help me. Ain't a woman suffered enough?

"Then I hear Sal's voice again: 'Things are different here,' he says. 'There are tools that do more'n plowin' fields and chippin' rock. There are tools that think.'

"Well I started bawlin' right there like a mad woman. Didn't care who saw me or what they thought. I whispered back, 'You're dead, an' its all my fault!'

" 'Don't cry. Don't.' Then, for half a heart beat, it felt as if my boy was standin' right in front of me. I could almost see his smile. 'Dance for me, Ma,' he says. No unholy torment could squeeze such a pure sentiment of bliss from a captured soul. It don't work like that. Sal was tellin' me the truth.

" 'Dance for me, Ma.'

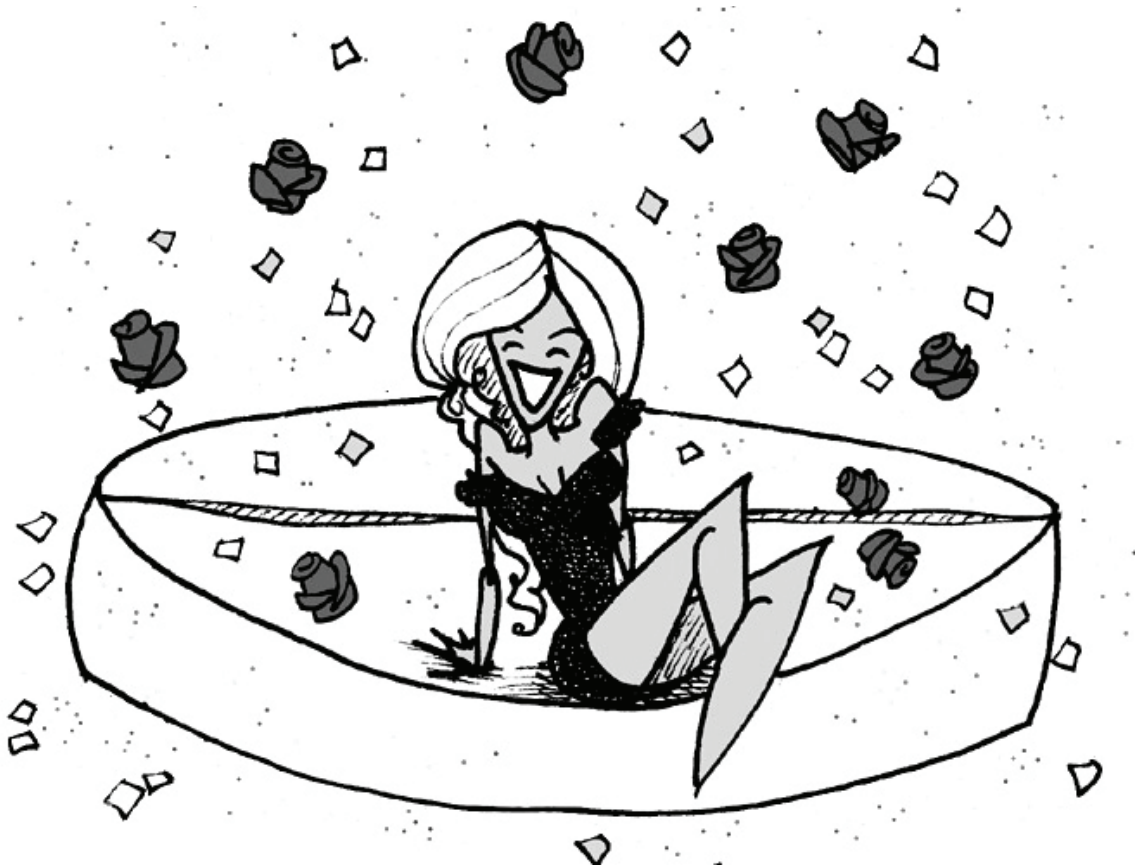
"Now what's a mother to do?

"I danced."

Always Look on the Bright Side

Alison Littlewood

Illustration (c) 2008 Carmen



Bugger it. I wonder what Daniel Craig would have done. Probably waggled his little finger and they'd have all been swooning, falling at his feet or something. Wish I could do that. Transform into a sex god. Be every guy's envy. Happiness is not hard to obtain when you're six foot tall and built like the brick proverbial. Wonder if he was ever sick on someone's shoes. Nope: didn't think so.

It was all down to my mate Zach. He gave me this pep talk. "It's not what you say, Kevin, it's how you say it. In life, you have to think big. Being small is a crime, in business as in love. Never agree to be a loser. Think loud, think proud, think the world is your oyster. Imagine you live at the Savoy, drive a Zonda, have Kylie begging for it, like she loves you more each day. You know she would, if she could. Grab life by the balls,

Kev."

He calls me Kev, I think he thinks it's jaunty. I call him a tosser, but not to his face. Still, you can't be choosy when you have no money, no woman and no friends. Everyone else I knew had gone to uni. Zach just never seemed to want to leave, and I'd failed to get in.

"Get a life," said Zach, as though they had them on shelves at the supermarket. "Get out there. Get a proper job. Get a girl. Get up and get going. Get something, for God's sake. Get huge, get large, get our pills."

"What?" I said.

"Well, maybe not pills," he said. "I'm not sure you're quite ready for that stage in your development. They're for the bold, you know. For the brave. Although it worked for me." He tapped a finger against his nose, as

though he knew something I didn't. "Free starter pack changes my life. That's what they all say. Guaranteed."

"What sort of pills?"

"Oh, you know. Few 'erbs. Spices. Spice up your life." He pulled a little package out of his pocket. They didn't have a label. He put them into my hands and leaned in, confidentially. "Hit your home run today," he said.

I took one just before work. My first day it was, on the shop floor, and a big grin spread across my face soon as I walked in. I whistled this tune under my breath, 'Always look on the bright side of life', and I did. For me, the sun was shining, everything was beautiful, and I could dance like Fred Astaire. So I did, right down the electrical aisle, and into the arms of my new boss. I grabbed her by the waist, spun her round, and told her it was good to be alive.

"Are you quite all right, Kevin?" she asked. "Only you're supposed to be sweeping the floor down in canned goods. There's a baby been sick in aisle three."

"I," I said, quite slowly, "am not a floor sweeper of life. Am not a floor sweeper of anything, in fact. Born to better things.

And you, may I say, are too. You're looking quite gorgeous. Sexier than Kylie Minogue's arse." I fell to one knee, grabbed something off the shelf and held it out to her. In my head, it was a red, red rose. In fact, it was the new Nokia 4630i, 30% off.

She stared at it. "You're fired," she said, precisely seven minutes after I'd walked in.

That was when I was sick on her shoes.

"Get a life," Zach had said. "Get a job. Get a girl." Yeah, right. Bollocks. Get fired, get humiliated, get sick. Get gone. Monstrous results today.

Then I looked at my boss' lips, all pursed up like a cat's behind, and the trainees, their mouths hanging open, and wondered.

Free starter pack changes my life? Well, I suppose it did. Can't complain. Never agree to be a loser, that's what he said.

Transform into a sex god. Be every guy's envy. Happiness is not hard to obtain. And I started to whistle...

This story was selected by the audience of the TFF Convention held in London in June 2008 to win the Nudge Nudge Wink Wink writing competition.

Book Reviews

DJ Burnham, *Test Drive: Volume 1 of the collected stories*. The Inky Well, 2007. Pp. 319. ISBN 9781847536419. £7.99.

Reviewed by Karina Kantas

Test Drive is a collection of seventeen short stories in the genre of Science Fiction. You don't need to be an N.A.S.A scientist to understand and enjoy these stories, but knowledge and the love for science fiction is a must. In this collection, you'll find tales of romance, religion, war, and horror, all in the genre of sci-fi.

The first story is called 'Test Drive' and is a tale about a young inventor who goes on a car journey across Mars and comes across a hitchhiker, or is it merely space dementia that's causing the ghostly apparition? The plot for 'Travel Agency' made me smile. Imagine aliens taking over the world for the *good* of humanity. 'Meltdown' is a curious little tale about being able to live an eternity without actually living. 'The Spoils of War' is a chillingly realistic tale. With the conflict in Iraq, this will hit home to many people. 'Dinner Guest' is an enjoyable story about an alien chef; top chef of the universe who has a taste for human flesh. In the end, humanity gets its revenge.

The only tale that failed to impress this reader was 'One True Path'. As the title suggested this is religious orientated and a little too thick in parts; resulting in it not being as entertaining as the other stories.

Test drive isn't the kind of book you could read in one sitting, in fact, readers may find some of the stories hard to digest as Burnham gives complex descriptions and scientific details. However, the stories are entertaining enough to want to pick the book up again. *Test Drive* is a feast for lovers of sci-fi, and his originality and detail could certainly put him with the best science fiction writers around.

To add an incentive to potential readers; the author requests all profits from the book will be donated to the World Wide Fund for Nature.

Andrew Humphrey, *Other Voices*. Elastic Press, 2008. Pp. iii+221. ISBN 9780955318146. £5.99.

Reviewed by Terry Grimwood

This is a double for what we Suffolk folk talk of as That Other Place, a collection by Norfolk-based writer Andrew Humphrey published by the Norfolk-based Elastic Press - award-winning purveyors of quality, innovative fiction.

Other Voices is Andrew Humphrey's second Elastic Press collection, the first being the critically-acclaimed *Open the Box*. Andrew Humphrey is a versatile author who produces an eclectic mix of crime, science fiction, slipstream and mainstream, often mixing and matching elements of some or all of these genres. His writing is economical, immensely readable but always accessible, even when telling his most opaque tales.

So, to the anthology itself. Another double here, my feelings about the book. There is no doubt that the stories here are original, crisp and, in many cases, quite profound. The characterisation is vivid and the plots both credible and solid. However, collected together like this there is a sameness which becomes a little wearing by the time the final story is reached. There is a theme, nothing wrong with that, whether intentional or not. It's there in virtually every tale, a male protagonist who is chauvinistic, embittered and wrestling, ineffectually, with a doomed relationship. I found myself wanting to shout, to shake them and tell them to grow up and pull themselves together, which is probably the point. Not that the book's womenfolk are blameless, long-suffering in many cases, hard

and cold in others, but for the most part, hollowed-out by their downbeat partners.

Individually, however, each story is a highly-polished gem. Concise, often satisfyingly ambiguous (not such a contradiction as it sounds), and compelling. Once started on a story, I wanted to finish it, no matter how late for work or for sleep it made me. Most are set in and around Norwich which adds to the book's thematic feel and also grounds the fiction solidly to this earth, vital when expecting suspension of disbelief for a journey into the dark.

Let's take a look. The opener, for example, 'Grief Inc' is one of those mixes Humphrey does so well. This is a fine story set in a near-future Britain torn by civil war featuring a protagonist who absorbs other people's grief. 'Dogfight' is a surreal mix of father-son relationship-healing mingled with what appears to be a ghost story in which a Battle of Britain dogfight is re-enacted in 21st century skies. 'Last Kiss' reeks with a never-realised menace when a typical Humphrey loser persuades a would-be suicide to change his mind, with Dirty Harry subtlety, then finds himself threatened by the very man he has saved, or is he being threatened? The ending is stark and uncertain and very unsettling.

Sometimes an adulterous protagonist gets his come-uppance, as in 'Butter Wouldn't Melt' for instance. Other times there are terrible secrets to be told, such as the one best left on 'Strawberry Hill', although the actual dark truth is as shocking as it is unexpected. 'Three Days' shows us the effect a missing child can have on an already dysfunctional relationship, 'Think of a Number' gives us a quick blast from the muzzle of a trainee hit man's gun. 'Holding Pattern', one of my favourites, is an unnerving account of a man whose life is literally falling apart as reality unwinds, but which reality is it, his own, or the fabric of the universe itself?

So, a collection of masterly stories, *Other Voices* is a book of supremely good writing, but take my advice, dip, don't trek. Open it up, select a story, savour it then close the book and come back another time for the next course. Reading it in one go would be a mistake, would take away the enjoyment and appreciation of what it contains, because the sum of its parts is definitely greater than the whole. Once again, all power to Elastic for bringing out a bold, imaginative and unsafe piece of work written by one of our best.

Daniel Marcus, *Binding Energy*. Elastic Press, 2008. Pp. 216. ISBN 9780955318160. £5.99 / \$12.99.

Reviewed by Sarah Ann Watts

The first story in this collection has the title 'These are pearls that were his eyes' and there is indeed 'something rich and strange' in this collection of beautifully crafted stories.

There is a subtle transformation of the familiar into the unknown and many of the worlds Marcus' characters inhabit just around the corner of our present reality—they lurk just out of the range of normal vision. The stories show us faces of the future and the past.

In the first story, 'Those are pearls that were his eyes', Suki mourns her dead lover Tam, killed in an accident. He still wants to continue with their relationship and will not let her go. He leaves her messages—'sometimes it feels like no one remembers me.' This is a world where Suki remembers a crèche trip to the moon. Then she meets Roan, a void dancer with 'fine radial scars around his eyes' whose job is to map the universe. In some ways life in this future world is not so different—Suki curls up with a costume drama—but 'the induction bead wrapped around her optic nerve like an invisible, coiled worm.'

Here the technology is only just out of reach—and in later stories we meet characters who inhabit the virtual world. For some it is therapy, for others an escape from reality and a drug they cannot live without.

There is 'Love in the time of connectivity'—an online romance with elements of Alice in Wonderland—the heroine seeks refuge in a white rabbit costume and is rescued by

the hero with whom she falls in love. She then demands they take their blossoming relationship to the extreme—F2F contact.

In 'Chimera Obscura' Spike is looking for a new flatmate and accepts Sarah—who is escaping from a violent relationship. Spike is shocked by the immediacy of her experience because most of his relationships have been online. Spike takes Sarah out to a cafe to explore the local area but as Sarah remarks—'This place isn't a gathering spot. It's a point of departure. Look at these people. Nobody's here.' The clientele are all 'mediated'. The extreme example is Bardo who 'doesn't participate much in the house—uh—culture'

This is because he has become so attached to his computer that he no longer has any form of existence beyond it and the only interaction he has with his flatmates is when they monitor his stats on the game he can't stop playing. Bardo has a trust fund and an addiction with no cure, but for Keith, a bereaved father in 'Conversations with Michael' his online existence has become an escape from reality and he has reverted to babyhood. This abdication of responsibility has left his grieving wife struggling to find a way forward following the death of their young son. The boy has died following a radiation accident—another Chernobyl. Stacey is tormented by guilt and is only too aware of the price the planet has paid for 'dishwashers and computers and microwave sat-links'. This is a future where off-world travel is possible but the cure for leukaemia is still ten years away.

In the second story, 'Random acts of kindness' Blair, the main character looks up at the sky—'I saw a dim light make a slow, steady crawl across the sky. Probably Space Station Kyoto. I didn't think there was anyone up there any more but I wasn't sure. I felt a sharp sadness at the thought.' I feel this could almost be a grace note for the collection. This is a post-apocalyptic world that retains its humanity. People are much the same, they live, love and hope, they find friendship and consolation. Life goes on.

In 'Blue Period' we encounter a young arrogant Picasso confronting a war of the worlds scenario and turning it into art that will shake the world and in 'Ex Vitro' a young ambitious couple, Maddy and Jax, research scientists working on Titan who have to decide whether to go home when the world they left behind is destroyed by corporate wars—these are companies not countries and again with the globalisation of certain brands who can doubt that Marcus' vision is less than a heartbeat away? Or—an ironic reference in another tale—are we really progressing towards 'hundreds of McRagnaroks stacked a microsecond apart'?

The scale remains human—here are the problems and joys and confusions we encounter in our daily lives writ large on a cinema screen that still brings us close to reality. There is a bitter-sweet elegiac tone to many of these stories and yet to focus on that would be to ignore the warmth and humour they contain. There is a quiet beauty that catches at the heart.

Marcus gives us aliens and dinosaurs and a voyage into space with a computer that begins to dream. There is a sense of evolution that affects all species—a sense of aspiration that can go either way as in the case of the neighbours in 'Those are pearls that were his eyes' who sing at night and the dog like couple in Echo Beach—'it's difficult to say if they are accelerated canines or regressed humans'.

My favourite story in the collection has to be 'Echo Beach'. This is a fabulous story set in a bar at the end of the world, though as the Proust-reading bartender remarks—'it's hardly the end of Time. Just another planet recycling its heavy elements back into the corpus of the mother star'. Rick in Casablanca comes to mind, but this is a story that has everything including a chess playing Martian.

These nineteen stories can be read and read again to unravel different layers of meaning. They are both rich and strange—and provide no easy answers or solutions to a complex future—but there is always that glimmer of hope.

Conrad Williams, *The Unblemished*. Virgin Books. 2008. Pp. 347. ISBN 9780753513514. £7.99 / \$12.95.

Reviewed by Terry Grimwood

Maybe I'm getting soft in my old age but I was badly discomforted by this book. The plot, fantastic; characterisation, vivid; it was the graphic, dare I say gratuitous, violence that did it.

Okay, this is a horror novel so the reader has to expect horror, but something in the pages of this novel disturbed me in a way that novels such as *Pet Sematary* and *Desperation* did in the past. Perhaps it was the graphic and violent murder of children and what happened to them after death, perhaps it was the sheer torrent of dead, dying and eviscerated flesh. Perhaps, as I said, it was my age.

Having said that, however, the story itself is a scorcher, with a set of finely-drawn characters thrown together in the face of a seemingly unstoppable invasion. The monsters are original, flesh eaters, as near human as creatures who live on fresh and rotting meat can be, but with some very nasty physiological differences (not zombies, thank goodness, I am so sick of zombies). In fact, the detailed description of those differences is another positive aspect of this novel, attention to detail. Whether the subtle and not-so-subtle anatomical characteristics of an ancient flesh eater, or the streets and back alleys of London, the story is rooted firmly in the real earth, it does that thing all good writing should do: cast a shadow on the ground. It is that shadow which provides the illusion of reality so necessary for believable fantasy.

The characters are, as I mentioned before, finely drawn, by turns brave and cowardly, selfless and selfish, in fact behaving the way most humans do when faced with danger and despair. Bo, one of the main protagonists is, I have to say, that typical independent press "hero/anti-hero" (this isn't, in fact a small press release, but Conrad Williams cut his teeth there). Bo is a loner, not good at relationships with the other sex, essentially self-serving and, in many ways, an outcast. He has a girlfriend but commitment is an uncrossable barrier. Recognise him? However, like all good small press leading men, he has a streak of likeability about him and in the end you root for him and admire him for his grit and determination.

Female lead? Woman-on-the-run, fleeing from a very nasty villain indeed: a sadistic, cold-hearted streak of viciousness, relentless in his pursuit of her and the sating of his vile appetites. An added twist and extremely effective emotional hook is the runaway's relationship to her daughter, a young woman carrying a horrible infection that cannot be allowed to run its course...

London is the main setting and its highways, by-ways and dark corners of its history provide a suitably desperate and dark canvas for the horrors Williams has created. One of my old stamping grounds, Southwold, also features, I used to date a girl from there and I can vouch for Williams' depiction of the place.

The Unblemished is relentless; it is soaked in blood and breathless with desperation and dissolution. It leaves the reader exhausted and strained. It is vivid, powerful and very, very dark.

It is just so graphic. Yes, back to this again. There is nothing wrong with graphic. Horror is horror, yes, but sometimes the glimpsed, the half-seen, the implied is as effective—and sometimes more effective—than having your nose rubbed in streaming heaps of vitals and stinking, too-old meat. I'm not suggesting that horror should be watered down or made as tediously respectable as rock musicians performing in the gardens of Buckingham Palace, God forbid, but for me there is a subtle, hard to define line which Conrad Williams has most definitely crossed.

So, recommended? Yes, if you can take the raw horror, because once you wipe the blood off the page, this is a terrific, powerful, wildly imaginative and immensely skilful piece of writing.



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