

THE FUTURE FIRE

SPECULATIVE CYBERPUNK DARK

Issue 2008.13

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明らかなからの私達の商業社会の不精な予想を混同する衝撃を
与えること、暗闇および推測的な視野への細道。

-- Nairo Hamada

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There has been a lot of talk recently—most notably by Lou Anders (<http://louanders.blogspot.com/2008/08/science-fiction-belongs-to-world.html>) and in an SF Signal Mind-Meld (<http://www.sfsignal.com/archives/007167.html>)—of our ability, or responsibility, or reluctance, to read science-fiction by authors who espouse a political or other viewpoint opposed to your own. Arguments range from the practical ("I don't want to buy [insert asshole of your choice]'s books and put money in his purse"), to the tangential ("Science fiction is all about engaging with the *other*") to the plain disingenuous ("Don't think you can tell what I believe from my writing").

There are two arguments that I don't think have been addressed, so far (although I must confess to skimming some of the discussion, especially comments). On the one hand there is something to be said for Knowing Your Enemy: read what those you disagree with have to say, especially those you disagree with vehemently, because otherwise you don't know fully what it is you have to contend with, to argue against. (I think this argument works a little better with non-fiction than with art, though.) On the other hand we must not forget that reading what you agree with is also important. As Ursula LeGuin pointed out a few years ago, "If you don't preach to the choir the choir won't keep singing" (*GobQ* 3, 2003, p. 25).

A distinctly separate but perhaps analogous issue is something that's been of concern to us at *TFF* lately. We're very interested in speculative fiction that has a social/political agenda or at least allows a social/political reading. One corollary of that is we have had to make decisions about otherwise perfectly good science fiction stories with social, political, religious, or other agendas that we find antithetical to our own beliefs, opinions, or positions. Ultimately we probably won't publish a story whose overt message (not necessarily the beliefs of its author, but the independent implications of the story) we find offensive. Offensive content is fine; that's not the same thing as the thrust or the underlying assumptions behind a story. It's important to point out that (1) this is *nothing* to do with free speech—we're not denying (and in fact would fight to defend) your right to tell such stories—; and (2) it is not that we won't listen to or read such stories. It is just that we are political animals, *TFF* is an ideological organ (as are all publications), and we will not give a platform to a story that seems to imply (whatever the author may believe or intend) that discrimination or violence based on race, sex, sexuality, or belief is *ever* justified; that torture is ever required for the greater good; that a pacifist or a diplomat is a traitor while an élitist, jingoistic military saves us from our own weakness; that eroding civil liberties and privacy is harmless and necessary; that no social experiment can ever improve on our economic models; or that global warming and evolution are merely "articles of faith".

As we say, go ahead and tell that story. We may even read it. But that's not the story we're helping to tell.

Bruce and Djibril, general editors

September 2008

Suburban Alchemist

Rob Sharp

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Wendle sat with his Bloo on a chain, watching the silent seeds cloud the air like upsidedowns snow. Not that the kitling knew what snow was... that was for the bigger people who lived in the mountainous growths.

The Bloo dribbled and chewed at his restraint, hunched over the wicker-boy like a hairy boulder. Great shoulders holding the reeking neck, bottom jaw too full of molars and lavender. He was a good Bloo... most of the times. Normally he pulled up whacking handfuls of grass and stuffed them in his gob, as kitling and Bloo wandered down from the pleasant hills into the rotting town.

Normally.

But just a-Wednesdays the great gawp had a little *chew* at someone. Just a titch...

Bleary-eyed and tailless, Wendle peered

out from under his marmalade hat, keeping one bloodshot peeper on his pet. Meat-man had been sniffing around again, offering real shiny—to butcher and render down the Bloo's carcass. Any more nibbling on peoples and it was the Sunday-pot for the great hairy lummoX, right as Tuesday it was.

Tuesday, if she was honest (which, as a half-witch and a quarter *Fey*, she wasn't), rather fancied a string of Bloo sausages herself, all sizzling on a plate. When her kissy-friend Wendle was sky-larking, she would give the Bloo a little pinch to see how much meat was on his bones.

Cherrymost in her new 2-2, with gossamer wings catching the clouds of cotton-like seeds, she skiddled up to the pair and winked.

"Where's ya goin'?" she floated.

Wendle had his arm half way up his snoot, so it took him a bob to answer the faery-girl. He finally came out with, "No place. Scouting for pennies and bright little things in the dirt... Hope to turn over a buck..."

"Wicker-boy full of it," Tuesday snorted, sneezing thrice. Cotton seeds up her snoot always made her honk like a marsh duck.

Wendle laughed, like a chime of bells. It was a roundy sound. Plumby. He made Tuesday laugh too. Even Bloo tried a whistle, which started the dim pair off again.

Then a tinkling and a wailing drifted out of the fallen streets of the town. The place where the oldsters once shared a kebab. A forgotten song about some reeking sailor and his weird dietary needs drifted out of the silent streets, as the habitats leaned drunk and roofless, with the weeds of Time growing in every crook and granny.

Out of the blighted town came a scratched and dented ice cream van.

On deflating tyres it werbled and sang its merry little tune—a sea-shanty from another time. Faded images of that squinty malformed sailor with his too-skinny girl and a bearded, brutal adversary wrapped themselves around the hallowed automotomobile.

Seated at the wheel, one elbow hanging jauntily out of the windy-down window, sat the master of the kool. The Alchemist. Long of flaxen hair wagging in the breeze, with broken specs balanced on his snoot; bits of black masking tape crossed over the cracked left eye of his oculars.

He looked a shade like an oldster—but that was mouth-wash, as all the oldsters had shuffled off this heating coil when the *Whimper* came out of the sky. The wicker-boy knew him as Orson. Lost and bastard sprog of a distant ocean-god—'cause the Alchemist had told him so. This magical man smelt of the salt of distant seas... and occasionally, once-a-Friday, of the vinegar as well.

Above all things, Orson liked a laugh.

Well, there was one other sport that he hadn't been getting much-a-plenty of now for a good time. So top-of-the-shop came a good, hearty hee-haw.

Seeing the skinny kitling with a hulking

great Bloo in tow, whilst a faery-girl twittered and hovered around them both, Orson slammed on the brakes. Well... kicked the old van into first so that it stalled and swerved to a girly halt.

With a deft flick, he turned on the neon writing around the van that said, rather degenerately, *'Stop me and buy one!'*

"Two 99s!" shrieked Wendle, tongue lolling out.

"You payin'?" Tuesday chirped.

"No, you is. Owes me one from last Monday."

"Bugger if Iz don't!" The floaty girl stuck her cherry snoot in the air and sulked like a good 'un.

Scrambling into the back of the van, Orson had already balanced 2 dollops of white iced love on a matched pair of crispy brown cornets.

"Two chocolate logs, or none?" He conducted the air with his frosted scoop, catching a fat cotton seed as he did so.

"Two..." Wendle sulked now. His turn. Dipping his kipper deep into his pocket, he rescued a dull and copper coloured coin with a bite out of it.

"Wazzis?" Orson squinted at the vandalised monies with his one good eye.

The Kitling nodded sidewhys at the Bloo. "He done it... Chew through the planet if I let him..."

The Alchemist laughed once, like the bark of a dog, and flipped the bent coin into his own trousers' pocket.

With a broken smile, smelling of baccy-leaves and mint tea, the old soap-dodger reached down with the two cornets of love and their crowning chocolate kisses. Kitling and faery-girl gravely took their prizes and caught those first melty bits with furred-up tongues before they ran down the backs of their hands, eyes closed in unadulterated ecstasy.

Hidden beneath the serving counter, squatting on her hunkers, with Orson's double-ended shotgun balanced on her chapped knees, the hijacker was growing twitchy and nervous.

She was bonny for a hijacker. Chemical-

ised hair, the colour of Orson's ice cream, she was only a jot passed Wednesday. Bit older than the faery-girl, but with far more curvy bits. A feast to the eye if truth be told. But that old truth, as aforementioned afore, was a slippery rascal.

Orson wasn't too vexed that she'd nicked his gun and wanted him to drive to the Hurly-Burly. Sat on the floor like that, he'd copped a good eye-full of her busties. Not many creatures of the opposite sex mooching about on the outskirts of the dead town these days. Not as plump and ripe as her.

That first love of his tickled at his hind-brain as he glanced down at the dolly teen... all wide-eyed and legless.

The Alchemist had tried to eek her name out of her. Even sat there and babbled through a list, as she shoved the business end of the shotgun in his hearhole.

"Are you a Nancy, or a Fancy? Molly, Golly, Barbarolly? Pixie, Lixie, Jane or Beau? Rachael, Lizbeth, Missy, May? A little clue would—"

"Shut the flack up..." the hijacker scowled, wiggling her upper-carriage. Orson just smiled. It gave his day some shape and he'd been going to dock off at the HurlyBurly any-whichways, as he happened to live there.

In a great disused factory behind Hurly-Burly market place, where oldsters once made chairs and tables to put in their little square rooms and sit upon, he mixed his vats of sensual ice cream. Had the cows out back where the Park used to be, a-chewin' on grass, from dawn 'til dusk. Milked twice a day... which was more than he'd been for yonks... and there was that first love again.

It was his hijacker's nice busties that was turning his head. He adjusted himself in the driving seat, trying to think pure thoughts as he struggled with the contents of his trousers. Failing miserably.

"Git a move on!" she hissed, as the salty-dog crunched the knackered old gear box back into first and bounced the van away. In one cracked and tweaky mirror, he noticed the two kitlings and that lumpy big Bloo hitching a ride on his tailgate. Orson smiled.

Turned out nice again...

TimberTown loomed up like a good 'un first. Leaning over the once neat gridlocks of red suburbia. Rotting houses full of rotten lives. Never to see a Monday come around again, thanks to the *Whimper*.

"Git rid of the kids!" the hijacker hissed.

The Alchemist blew a raspberry and chewed on a stick of flavourless gum.

"You start blasting off with that gun, my pretty squeaker, and that Bloo galumphing along in our wake will bite your face right off!"

There was a look in the man's one good eye and a smile on his unshaven face that told a truth. But the girlie still hunkered down, looking all the more desperate. She was on the run from summert to somewhere... theyz always were.

"Talkin' to yourself?" the faery-girl trilled as the ice cream van bounced along the crazy-paved asphalt.

"Only person that makes any sense these days..." he called back. The kitlings laughed.

"Give you a jack-off if you keep cavy on me," the hijacker whispered.

"Now you're talkin'. I had a little more of a sexual frenzy in mind, but I'll take what ever's on offer in these hard times, thank you kindly."

TimberTown loomed a bit more.

An adventure playground on steroids, its vast wooden walls, rat-runs, climbing bars and the rusting rising hang-slides, marked the territory where kitlings could be kids. No over fifteens allowed.

The Alchemist squinted down with his good eye at the uninvited guest again, busties wobbling. She was old enough for it. On the run from some gang-crashers? Chased off by some gnarly survivalist holed up in the mountains? There was a tale to be told, that much was certain.

The Bloo bleated as it recognized the Town. Smart-monsters like him were getting rarer... Genetic degradation since the *Whimper*, but the variations of kitlings seemed to be blossoming and still on the up, like the cotton seed clouds whiffing in from the desert plain.

"When we gets to the gate-house, those

homicidal little tykes are goin' to see you down there with you norks showing. They may only have pointy sticks and sling-shots, but a stone'll take your eye out sure as sugar," he wound up his would-be woman.

She was nervy. She was loosing it. "What'll I do?" She licked her lips and looked ready to pee herself.

"Play nice. Pretend its a game. Above all, smile..."

With only a second's hesitation, slotting the gun back in its happy-clips under the counter, the former hijacker leapt to her feet and went, "Boo!"

Wendle and Tuesday fell off the van in surprise, rolling arse over tip. But the Alchemist had slowed the wreck of a van to go up the rise to TimberTown, so they were only grazed and still hooting.

Hijacker-girl pulled at her dress, full of nerves. Smile painted on and eyes full of echoed fear.

"Whado I do now?" she eeked out of the side of her sun-blistered mouth.

"Sit on my lap for starters, an' let's see what pops up!" he suggested in his usual lewd fashion. To the crusty's surprise, she did just that. One arm round his neck and those twin buns of happiness nestling on his bony old thighs.

That old line had never worked before, not in many a leer.

The kitlings from the fort hailed and well-wished them both. Orson occasionally had another odd bod with him, so there was no fear in their mucky little faces. They gathered around the van like mud-puppies, all ages, all mutations, all colours, holding out old money for their daily fix found in the dirt. Dressed in rags and never a wash tween Sunday to Doomsday between them all.

The *Whimper* had seen to that...

Mother mutation was a contrariwise bitch.

There were little pink kitlings with piggy noses and prehensile tails. There were tall hairy kitlings and ones with skin-wings hanging from beneath their arms. Lizard-boys and battery-girls jostled with imps and jinxes, elbowed aside by see-thru and blimp-babies bouncing on strings. Welcome to the butt-end

of the inhuman race.

Yet this was how younguns were meant to be. Play all day, sleep all night, letting the bed bugs bite if they really wanted to. Reaching the age when their hormones turned hormonal and they got that certain urge. Then they were thrown out of TimberTown and joined the battling bands of teens in the hills behind beyond.

Before the Alchemist began to dole out the ice creams and the lollies, he had a quick cuddle with his new nameless dolly. A tweak at her cherry-ripes just to keep him going. She winced, but said nowt. What she was runnin' from was a darn sight worse than a grope from an old gopher like himself.

The sun was angling low as his customer-base subsided.

"HurlyBurly?" the failed hijacker lisped, sliding off the codger's lap, trying to pull her short skirt down over her twin peaks.

"In a mo! Need to sort the merchandise first... check the doses..." the Alchemist crowed.

His dolly teen watched, squeak-eyed, as he rummaged through draws full of poppers still in their silver paper and tubes of orange tablets. Purple powders and crushed kaleidoscopic crystals. Sprinkling a handful of mixed delight into the ice-cream tub, he stirred the drugs in gently.

"Vitamins and anti-viral loads..." he answered her unasked question. "There's just a few of us old enough to remember a time before the *Whimper*. Kitlings are mutating more each year as the human race slides off its face. I try to stabilise the changes at the half dozen TimberTowns I visit on my round."

"Hundreds and thousands..." the girl said dreamily, watching the crumbling multi-coloured tablets being stirred into the dreamy, creamy white stuff.

"You heard of the *Whimper*?" Orson questioned, squinting through the one good glasses lense.

"The world ended; not with a *Bang*, but with a *Whimper*..." she replied, quoting the old religious text.

"Airborne pathogens... aerosol mutagens... We filled the sky so chock full of shit that it

turned us inside out and kilt the lot of us." he smiled sadly at the girl, knowing she wouldn't understand a word. How old was she now? Seventeen? Eighteen?

The average life expectancy of a human being in these dark, decaying days was around twenty eight.

Still... Nice arse...

Sometime later, Wendle licked his grubby fingers as he spotted the old ice cream van still sat in TimberTown square. Usually the son of the sea-god dished out his goodies and was gone. And why was the old machine beginning to shake and bake on its rusty old springs? Backwards and forwards in a silly dance.

The wicker-boy snuck up to the back door and opened it a crack. It was enough to shock any kitling right out of its childhood into next Thursday.

The white haired teeny was bent forward over the ice cream tub, squished on top of the cold container. Trousers around his knees, the old Alchemist was trembling her from behind. Hands gripped on her naked hips, he was making the most funny of sounds.

Wendle didn't know girlies went down after a while—it was awful good of the Alchemist to pump her back up again. But whatever the two were doing, they seemed to be having smiles.

Dolly had her peepers closed. She silently bit her lip, holding tight onto the van's shelving and wished her new saviour would git wherever he was going to. Suddenly sensing they had an audience, the Alchemist fell backwards with a whoop, letting poor blinded, gobsmacked Wendle see much more than was intended.

Eyes like saucers, mind full of moist sights that he should have been too young to cotton on to, the kitling ran as fast as he could before the old codger could brain him. This little pump-up game hanging in his head, until he next saw Tuesday, beat hide-and-squeak hands down anywhichway you looked at it!

"Bugger..." the Alchemist swore, trying to pull his pants up. "Coitus interruptus with a

vengeance..."

"You finished?" dolly sighed, pulling down her skirt and rescuing her underwear from the walnut whip machine handle.

"Well we3 ain't..." came a dreadly little voice from outside the van.

It was nearly dark. Three teenys stood, boys all, with lumps of wood in their hands and nasty pimply faces.

"Chuck her out, grandad! We3 ain't had uz cut o' the cake yet!" called one.

The girl sank to the floor and tried to let the van swallow her up.

"It's them... she gasped. "Them I ran from..."

"Oy, join-the-dots. Bugger oft out of it! This is a TimberTown for tots only. Old enough to shave, one foot in the grave!" growled the Alchemist.

The leader of the three marauders swung himself up on the serving hatch and peered into the van, like a monkey in a jacket. He wasn't going to go quietly into the night.

"Out U come, bitchette. U've got a lot of sweating 2 catch up on!" he crowed, clutching at his crotch, making his statement oh so plain.

The Alchemist sighed. "You hear that?"

"Wot?" snarled the teeny.

"That's the sound of the English language devolving..."

Not one of the three funsters had the wit to comprehend his wry statement. But it had bought the old codger the thyme he so sorely needed.

"Sorry about this, sonny-jim," said the Alchemist. With a twirl of the hand, he unclipped the double-entendred gun from under the counter where the dolly had popped it back. As a look of horror filled the teeny's eyes, the old man thumbled off the safety and blew the lad's brains out through the back of his napper.

He'd clicked the reload again before the other two munchkins realised their day was done. Kicking the first body free, the Alchemist shot the second boy in the belly. Miles of red stuff spewed out behind, as the teeny sank to his knees, too dumb to realise he was already deceased.

The Alchemist struggled to reload.

"You're dead az Fridays!" screeched the third teeny, showing a not-so-clean pair of heels.

"Flacking flacked up gun..." the Alchemist banged it on the side of the blood smeared chiller box.

"Gimme..." the dolly said, stony-faced. Taking the gun from the old man's hands, she cleared the blockage, shouldered the weapon and took aim. Letting go with both barrels, she spun the beast around and clipped it back under the counter out of sight.

The Alchemist looked at the still running figure, all arty in the twilight. Running for two more seconds before the twin cartridges of destruction blew both his arms off with a squeal.

"Nice shootin'," said the old man.

"They liked three at a time... I couldn't take it any more, dickless cherry-wits..."

Justice after the *Whimper* came in swift healthy doses.

Leaving the three corpses for the Meat-man to find and grind into kitling burgers, the Alchemist took the ice cream van on a detour to the coast.

The sea was breathing in and out when they reached the edge of the land. Still smelling sharp, its salty tang making man and girl close their peepers and smile a while.

Old thoughts, *older memories*. Thanks for those...

"I used to sell insurance in another life." Orson breathed in and out with the rhythm of the waves. "Not many folk lived to collect on their policies..." he mused.

"You say the kookiest things," his dolly smiled, hutching up close.

Rolling in by the light of the blue moon, as it had for billennia came that dark sea. Rolling in and drawing back like a fimble sigh. Except, under the lunar light, the pebbles on the endless shore seemed mighty big.

That's cause they were human skulls... washed clean by the rising tides.

All around this septic isle lay the bones of the dead. As the teeny and the old man sat by the sighing sea, arm in arm for a little human

comfort, they saw the silhouettes of people up on the cliff top. Folkz carrying suspicious bundles to the edge and chuckin' them off.

Human-shaped bundles.

Back in the dead-dog day, they'd started creating fun-buddies like the Bloo by splicing human DNA with fantasy lab-samples. Dropping the reject biological soup into the sea. Discharging more laden terror-drugs up into the sky with every passing year. Making pixies for their children to play with. Big cuddly things to keep them snug at night. Real life dolls for the slightly older customer.

Playing God.

In twenty four sad, sad hours, the *Whimper* blew around the world and killed 99.9% of the population. Children survived. Young children. Those still too young to die straight off, but infected with the suicide-breakdown genomes, mobilised the dregs of the armed forces. Constructed TimberTowns as vast shelters outside the infected cities full of the dead.

Then the soldiers corked it.

Old farts—just a few, like the Alchemist, or the Meat-man, or Jolly Roger and the rest had worked out a plan. Bring the kids up in TimberTowns. Feed them drugs and medicines to try and reset the human race's genetic blueprint.

When the children reached puberty, they were driven out into the hills. Some worked in the fields to grow the food which was brought to the TimberTown creches. Most fought teen-wars, raped and pillaged the mountain habitats and brought their surviving babies to the TimberTowns to be looked after.

Then before they were thirty, they all died.

How long the Alchemist had been doing this, he hadn't a cherry. As the rest of the world lived short-time, his existence seemed to have stretched like a piece of hot toffee across the sticky years. Mixing the medicines, popping the pills. Trying to cure this grave new world.

"I'll call you, Marigold, if you don't mind," he said to the teeny as the night drew in and they

headed for HurlyBurly, as promised. The market place for teenys and the nearly-dead, where his laboratories waz.

"Fine by me," she replied, fumblin' inside his pants, trying to get 'Little Alchemist' to pay attention again. It was the only way she knew how to thank him for saving her pretty hide. Still the oldest commodity around as the human race tap-danced towards extinction. "Why Marigold?" she pushed further.

The old man shrugged. "Had a wife once... fought like cat and dog but I liked the name..."

"Wife?" the dolly screwed up her eek.

"I'll draw you a pikture when we gets home..."

"One name's as good as another. So I'll take that as an invite to stay?"

"Oh, yes!" beamed the Alchemist, his one good eye misting over.

He'd had a baker's dozen or so Marigold's down the lonely years. They never lasted. Maybe this one would respond to his ice cream cocktail of kool and live beyond the thirty mark. Keep him company on the cold nights as he drove his ice cream van from here to there—and back again.

They'd sit in front of the open fire and roast Dewberries together. Laugh at his old jokes—well he'd chuckle anyway. Sing songs, swap spit, bump bits and if she sur-

vived...

Shame he always got so fond of them before he had to slide their silent corpses into the relentless sea... loving every single one of his Marigolds.

"And I'll fix these tyres for ya... It's like ridin' on square wheels!" she added, cracking her head on the van's roof for the fourth time.

"Thank you Lord... Sexy and with practical skills!"

She laughed, looking all bubbly, rubbing her goosebumpy arms against the evening's cold. Nipples akimbo. He was alright, this dirty old scrote... Better treat her dandy or the shotgun might have to come out from under the counter again...

The lights of HurlyBurly beckoned and the Suburban Alchemist turned on the one working headlight and his van's tinkly-tinkly tune to cheer up the night. Marigold had slid to sleep, her fluffy head in his lap. Relaxed. Safe.

He got all lumpy in his throat at the soft sight of her—which made a change from where he usually got all lumpy.

Trying to avoid the worst of the potholes, he wondered vacantly if he was the last man in the world who knew the words to, 'Popeye the Sailor Man'.

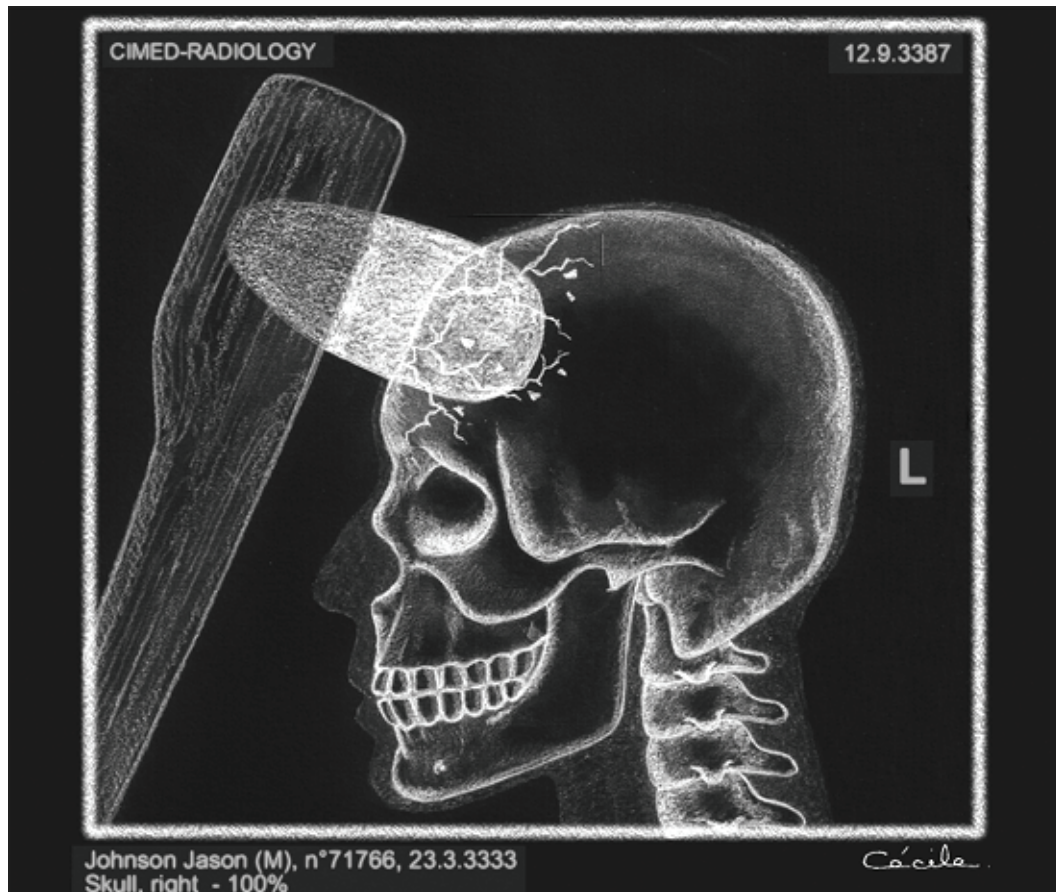
Like it all meant a week full of flyin' flacks any way.



Getting Down and Dirty

Michael Johnson

Artwork (c) 2008 Cécile Matthey



One hundred is a nice round number, isn't it? When you get to be 100 years old it seems significant. You spend some time sitting thinking, and usually you reach some conclusion, not life-shattering exactly, but it translates into a permanent shift of values. Actually the process begins at 98 but you don't notice it.

My old friend Jason invited me round to join him in this practice, although I am older than he is (he would be shocked if he knew by how much). Sometimes you can think better with somebody to talk to.

"You won't remember how I got this scar," he said, pointing to the ones on his forehead.

I thought I did. The long sepia-crimson one was where they'd hit him with a stone axe, fracturing his skull and causing quite a bit of brain damage. The other, which he wore as a magenta-orchid dot with a faint

pink circle around it, had been a bullet hole. He was quite proud of that one because it was perfectly round, so you could see that the bullet had gone right into the brain (and also because they really are not supposed to have guns down there in the wasteland—some of us are still keeping an eye out for that).

"Not the ones you can see," he quickly explained. "This one is inside, in my oft-reconstructed brain, and the self that is always reconstructed along with it. I don't know if this has ever happened to you, or anybody else, but I'll tell you about it now. Maybe it will remind you of something."

A psychological scar? No, you surely don't want to carry any of those into your third set of 7 times 7. The slate has to be wiped clean.

"It was the time we went down in the southern content, somewhere in the middle. I think they burned you alive that time."

"Not me, Jason, but thanks anyway," I was quick to correct. "I'm still not up to that one."

Of course Jason had done this, and had a yellow-orange scar on one foot to prove it, usually visible through a transparent circle in his shoe, or a gold ring on his sandal. No thanks. It's a cute little flame-shaped scar that they leave you with since they have to reconstruct a lot of skin—very nice, but I'm definitely not up to it.

"Maybe it was just Frederick then, but you left it quite late to pass out. I only saw them lighting the fire, and then they bundled me into one of the huts. They kept me alive for days, you know, in a sort of cage that they'd built for animals."

Now I remembered which trip he was talking about. Frederick and Jason were the experienced ones, and they'd chosen this area as being one of the most inhabited parts of wasteland, with a number of tribes fighting for supremacy. Samuel and I were invited along to see what could happen when primitive evolution was at play. They promised us a more sophisticated form of violence than usual, whatever that meant.

The transporter came in silently out of the sky at night and dumped us in a small clearing, leaving us to suffer some mild inconveniences and wait for the dawn. There was always an initial shock to overcome, at the heat or cold, or thirst or dirt, after our regulated and optimized lives in the city. When the sun arose to shine through the trees, we must have looked like European hunters from an ancient time, dressed in cotton shirts and shorts, and wearing ridiculous pith helmets on our heads. I think that was Jason's idea. We had some sort of nets in our hands, which he assured us were used for catching colorful insects, and on our backs we had rifles—simulations of course.

Let me tell you, that feeling of being outside the city, that shock of vulnerability in the first morning light, for me that is a terrific rush of reality in itself. I could be lifted back home after that and it would make my day. Unfortunately the others were looking for more than feelings of reality.

We didn't have to wait long. The clearing

had been chosen carefully, and the warriors had already left their village. They arrived looking remarkably like a team of ball players, but with weapons instead of hurley-sticks. They had the same mixture of skin colors that always looks odd to me at first—each of them being more or less all the same color himself, but different from the others. Of course they had the same fierce expressions on their faces—same as each other and same as a team of ball-players, although in their case it was due more to a lack of imagination than to any cloning process.

Howls of pleasure and derision as they leaped forward to claim some easy prey, but not much change in their expressions—I think that's what took Samuel by surprise. He didn't even turn to run, probably just fascinated by those faces. One of them hit him on the side of the head with a metal axe, and I saw his skull split open. I saw brains and blood in the split-second before the tiny monitoring dots in his body took over and dry-froze every cell. Nothing could harm him now. He toppled over and hit the ground like a statue. They could take his clothes and possessions, but his body would stay like that, intact and invulnerable, until a transporter came during the night to take him back for reconstruction. One blow and the expedition was over for Samuel, but it was a hefty enough blow, and he would remember it.

I was quite cool that time. I took off my toy rifle and pointed it at my own murderers, noting there was no hesitation as they raced towards me. It should have been realistic enough to be recognized, and I think I was holding it properly, but they smacked it aside with no fear. I was ready for the spear that I saw being raised for me.

At that moment, with a smile almost forming on my face as I met once again with that exquisite fear of death mixed with the crazy randomness of violence, a loud roar echoed around the clearing and time seemed to slow down for it. It was the perfect augmentation for my heightened senses. I was reveling in that stretched-out quivering moment. A commander emerged, pushing the others aside in order to walk a straight line through the midst

of them—their commanders always do that for some reason. I had a glimpse of him, big and muscular by their standards, striding towards me babbling orders that presumably resulted in my being knocked unconscious.

"They had some kind of leader," Jason's voice both confirmed and dispelled my memory. "Bigger and tougher than the rest, which is not saying much, but I think he was more intelligent as well."

In fact there was little else for me to remember. I woke up with a terrible headache, inhaling and instantly coughing out the smoke from the fire. The heat was already unbearable. When they noticed that I was conscious they threw me straight on to the fire beside Frederick, who was fairly writhing in agony. I had often wondered why they do that—burning us alive—but seeing Frederick and hearing his screams, along with their attempts to imitate him, I could guess that it just amuses them. He was going to need a lot of reconstruction for this, but he would be greatly admired, especially by me. I couldn't do that. The dots in my blood knew it, and they reacted immediately. I passed out and became a statue myself, which must have been quite a disappointment to the audience.

"For some reason," said Jason, "he singled me out for special treatment, this leader. Do I look different from the rest of you? Why me?"

"You're the obvious leader, Jason," I replied. "Every leader recognizes another one."

"My colors you mean? I don't think they even notice our scar colors. Anyway he started asking me questions, repeating everything about five times, the way they do. With every question I got a smack across the face. Pretty soon I learned to shout the answer as quick as possible, also repeating it the requisite five times."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Do you mean to say you speak their language? When did you learn that?"

"Oh they don't exactly have a language. If you listen to them closely it's our words that they use, but you would hardly recognize them. Still I knew what he was asking—basically who we were and where we came

from."

"That's interesting," I said. "I've never heard of that before, but I suppose they were bound to become curious about us sooner or later. But what could you possibly tell him, that he could understand?"

"I told him the truth—that we came from the sky and were gods who couldn't die. He didn't believe it of course. These people are not all stupid. In their own way they evolve a kind of intelligence, competing for what little food the wasteland might produce, as well as whatever they can take from us. No, he didn't believe it, and so he had to torture me to get the truth."

"You were tortured?"

Once again I had to admit that Jason was way ahead of the rest of us. Being tortured was something we could only dream about or simulate, because the wasteland people had no use for it. Evidently Jason had stumbled into being one of the first victims, and he hadn't even bothered to mention it.

"It was nothing much," he said. "Just more beatings—that's all they were up to I'm afraid. No excruciating pain, no ingenious devices to make something intolerable last forever. They don't have much imagination, and I suppose it was a new thing for them, but they did manage to keep me alive for more beatings."

"Now," he continued, finally getting to the point of the story. "At the end of the day I was lying there with a lot of bruises and a few cracked bones, quite a lot of pain really and almost unconscious, when one of their women came into the hut and gave me a cup of water to drink and a few dried berries to eat. When I saw her face I forgot everything."

I almost had to laugh. If he was going to tell me that he'd had an affair with one of those wretched creatures it would be typical of Jason, but his story suddenly branched off at a tangent.

"Did you see Julie-Francine's exhibition last autumn? Do you remember 'The Fading Pangs of Culmination', the one that they used for the Hodnett campaign?"

Of course I remembered. That expression flashing over a thousand faces on a thousand

displays, until finally you had to buy a Hodnett without knowing why. It was very cleverly done. Somehow it wormed its way past our collective resistance to such campaigns, and I think it deserved to succeed for that reason alone. But how had a Hodnett managed to infiltrate the wasteland? Same way as the guns, I supposed.

"Are you telling me that she used a Hodnett to make your food?" Now I really was laughing, but he was quite serious.

"No no," he said. "That was before the campaign. Back then Julie-Francine was still working on the concept, and she couldn't quite get it right. There was adoration in the eyes, but more—a mystical union that was about to be granted, but not quite yet—just the last moments before realizing it, before giving up the normal human perception. She'd sent me the early proofs and I thought I could see what she was aiming for. The models were quite intrigued, and her customer clique was catching on to it. Nobody could get it exactly, but you could feel quite a buzz building around it."

"The pangs that faded with their own culmination?" I mused, but Jason was returning from his tangent.

"This wasteland woman, you see, had exactly that expression on her face. She did, I swear it."

"Impossible," I said. "That's impossible. You were probably hallucinating in the heat. Their range of emotions is far too limited, and they don't have the cranial muscles for it."

"That's what I thought, but it wasn't my imagination. Probably she was just born with features like that. I don't think there was an emotional configuration behind it, because it never really changed. I drank the water and ate the food—it wasn't much, and my body was crying out for it—and all the time I couldn't take my eyes off her face. When she turned to go out, I remembered where I was and the pains came back"

"Did you see her again?"

"Yes. She came every day after the beatings, and always with that same expression, giving me the same cup of water and the

same food, such as it was. I always meant to say something to her, but I was too weak, and I really needed that drink. Her face was just incredible, and you know the effect of that expression—I don't know what I would have said to her anyway."

He sipped his present-day drink, possibly expecting to quench the remembered thirst with it.

"On the third day the big guy came in just as she was giving me the water. They were both surprised, shocked in fact. She let out a squeal and dropped the cup, which would have been quite a disappointment to me if I'd had time to think about it, but he drowned her out with a terrible yell of outrage, like it was some kind of blasphemy that she was committing. He looked at me, at the cup, and then he just launched himself across the hut and sent her flying to the floor with one mighty punch in the face."

He shook his head, and I could almost see a wave of deep sadness flash across his eyes. It was very unlike Jason to have an expression like that. He was almost grimacing.

"I won't tell you what he did with her. I had never seen anything like it. I was up on my feet trying to break the bars of the cage, and I did manage to break one of them. All my own injuries were forgotten. Every time he did something to her, he turned and looked into my eyes. Every despicable thing he did, he dragged her around to make sure I got a good look at it. By the time he was finished she was in much the same shape as I was, lying naked and muddy in a corner. No broken bones maybe, but a huge swollen eye, blood coming out of her mouth and elsewhere, a few bites here and there, some hair ripped out, scrapes all over, and she was unconscious. I was shaking the cage, shouting mad myself, and the doorway was jammed full of gawping spectators. Then I collapsed, and the big guy laughed his head off. Then he just yawned and pushed his way out."

"I suppose I had assumed that she'd been sent in by him to keep me alive. It never occurred to me that she was breaking some kind of law to do that. She certainly got no sympathy from the other women. They came in a

few times and poked at her, nothing else—no water for her. At least they threw her clothes on top of her, so she looked like a heap of rags. After a while she woke up and put them on, taking ages, moving very slowly. She didn't look at me until she'd managed to get to her feet, at which point she swiveled her one good eye at me, just for a moment. Then she hobbled outside, to be greeted with jeers and howls of laughter."

"I thought that was the end of it, but no. After a few minutes the big guy came back into the hut, looking like he'd just had a brilliant idea, and he kicked open the cage and dragged me outside. He got them to hold her while he took out a knife, and I could see what his brilliant idea was—he would cut my throat and make her watch. I suppose he'd given up on getting information out of me, too carried away with this burst of mental creativity, and so I was finally going to get something out of the expedition. It was this one here."

He indicated one of the glowing cyan-turquoise lines on his throat. He'd had his throat cut four times altogether.

"But I got something else from her, something that I wasn't expecting at all and it took me completely by surprise. Her face took on another very complex expression, and the swollen eye was part of it. She was screaming too, and that was part of it. Julie-Francine would have given a million for an expression like that, all nostrils and teeth and the one eye rolling upwards and down again as if she was on the edge of consciousness, willing herself back again to recoil helplessly from the unspeakable."

"She was so horrified at seeing you killed? How could you possibly have meant so much to her?"

"I have no idea. I don't understand any of it. The knife cut in, much more slowly than usual so that I had to make gurgling noises, blood spurted out, and then I was out of it. No more pain. I woke up in recon and was released the next day, reminiscing with the rest of you while we waited for Frederick. You had all been wondering what was taking me so long."

"Yes that's right. You seemed a bit distracted on the first day, when Samuel and I were guessing what might have happened to you. You said you were unconscious a long time. But you were fine when Frederick came out, and then we were busy planning the next one. Frederick got all the glory that time."

"It's another world, the wasteland," he said, sounding distracted again. "When we adjust back to our lives here in the city it's gone. We forget the details. We forget until something suddenly reminds us, just a flash of something iconic here in the city and we're back there for a second, wondering how we could ever have forgotten. Then we just fall to pieces. Maybe we're remembering who we really are."

It was a strangely perceptive thing to say, for such a man of action, but when I glanced at his face he was just squinting at his drink, which was now too cool, so he rotated the base slightly with his little finger to warm it up again.

"Something happened to remind you?"

"Yes. The party at Julie-Francine's last night. She was rehearsing her summer exhibition and she showed us a couple of clips that she hadn't quite perfected, and there it was. I swear it. It was that face that she'd given me, one eye closed and swollen, the other one rolling, and the mouth open in a scream that you couldn't hear. It was exactly the same face, and I cracked up. Nobody noticed, but the fact is I burst into tears like a child. Luckily Seb-Sebbo had just made one of his hilarious comments and most of them were cracking up anyway, with tears of laughter. I got away with it."

I thought about this for a while. It was too much of a coincidence, surely too blatant for him to ignore.

"Did you find out who the model was? Or was it Julie-Francine playing some ingenious trick on you?"

"I got away with it," he said. "I'm not going to investigate anything. What am I going to find? Some kind of conspiracy involving Julie-Francine and the wasteland, set up just to make me cry like a baby? I don't think so."

We both sipped our drinks, which were by

now at exactly the right temperature, and we gazed at the lakes and the rivers below, a landscape which had once borne the weight of a sheet of ice two miles thick.

"Am I going mad, Cartin?" he asked simply. "Is this what happens when you get to 100? Am I seeing things that aren't there?"

In my right ear there is a dot cluster which is a dedicated communication channel that I reserve for Joy, and it burst into life at that moment. Joy is her name and her voice lives up to it. The communication works both ways, allowing her to hear what I hear, if she happens to be listening.

"That was me, Cartin! It was me both times!" she shouted with glee, sounding as if she couldn't be happier, but this was her usual way. "I made him cry. What do you think of it?"

Very clever, I thought, but I also thought of the sounds of these two words, in such a way that they were picked up and translated into real sound, which was transmitted to her over this same channel. I could imagine her clapping her hands in two-three rhythm, wherever she was sitting, maybe sipping a drink herself against the stars in a viewport of one of the orbiting platforms, or taking a break from her research work in the bunkers under the wasteland.

I had often commented that she spent too much time passively observing the great domed cities, as if they were insect colonies in glass cases performing for her amusement. At least now she had begun to mingle with the inhabitants, but did she have to start with my friends?

We shouldn't do this again, Joy. This must be a one-off experiment. These people should not be toyed with. They are advanced enough in their own way, and if we can't help them we should leave them alone.

"Yes," she agreed. "They seek their pain and horror deliberately, but they know why—it's like to free themselves from it. They see beyond beauty and begin to turn their facial expressions into an art form, and they know also why they do that—it's like to cultivate a more sophisticated communication protocol.

Don't you think they should move on though? Masochism is so limited in its benefits."

Are you sure about this? Some of them don't seem so self-aware to me, but then again you are the expert, my ubiquitous Joy. So congratulations, you've baffled Jason. He has been tagged. Now it's my turn. Watch this!

In my right eye there is a dot cluster which allows me to see what Joy is seeing, if ever I want to know, and I could see her looking at Jason's profile at that moment. That was luck, or was it a coincidence handed to me by the real gods? She was in a submarine research unit looking at his encephalo-chip with a heightened magnification drill, and I could see, like her, every synapse and axon of his cerebral network, especially the memories of these two incidents of expression recognition. She was very proud of her work, my precious incandescent Joy, admiring it highlighted there in the diagrams, but she was inadvertently giving me the means to undo it.

"I'll tell you what I think, Jason," I said, "but it's just an idea that springs to mind."

[I jump to the side, time-wise. I link to the orthogonal time-line of the cells in my own body, because I need to get down to that level to do this work. My cells welcome me in their little capsules of sideways time. It's great to be micro-programming again. I'm really good at this, but I rarely get the chance these days. Spark-like worker-dots within dots, nano-dots really, and they carry within them the logic to simulate those city-tech dots while we're here, but they also have the power to replicate themselves much faster, and nudge those clumsy city-tech dots out of the way. They can replace them in a matter of seconds. But first they have to be programmed with a very specific task. That's what I'm good at. It's what I do.]

"What if there are civilizations around that are as far ahead of our cities as we are ahead of the wasteland?"

[I take a snapshot from the dot cluster in my

eye, and feed it to a group of worker-dots. I do this with just a sequence of directed thoughts in the spaces between the words that I speak. My speech may have slowed down slightly, but Jason just thinks that I'm speaking deliberately. Joy has already highlighted those two incidents for me. I indicate that these neural configurations should be erased, and only these two.]

"What if they drop in on us occasionally and do something for their own obscure purposes?"

[Those clever little worker-dots are suggesting that I should also erase the reference memories—the times when he thought about this, or spoke about it. What if he remembers remembering? It's unlikely. People don't normally remember the times they were remembering something else. Still, he spoke to me just now. Probably that was the only time he spoke about it to anyone. Interesting. I wonder if he can cope with that? My speech becomes slightly slower, but I need to decide on this quickly, and there may be ethical considerations.]

"How could we possibly make sense of them, their sciences, their art-forms?"

[All right, I'll take a chance on it. It would be too difficult to find those short-term memories. We'll erase just the highlighted ones and forget the references. The worker-dots convert my command to their own specific low-level instructions, and they are ready. They replicate and position themselves as I speak even more slowly and deliberately, sounding quite dramatic, and I hope Jason doesn't think I've gone catatonic. Nobody talks this slowly.]

"What if they do things to us just to measure our reactions?"

[I cough, I sneeze violently. The worker-dots disperse themselves in the air. He thinks I was slowing down to sneeze. Good. Sneezing is not very common in the cities, but our

high-level minds are still programmed to ignore it.]

I coughed again, apologizing, politely turning away from Jason, as the breeze was blowing in his direction (which it had to be for a guaranteed dot transfer—more luck) (or a gift from the real gods?).

"Gods from the sky you mean?" he laughed. "Gods from the sky who cannot die? Do they then have their own gods coming from their own sky? I don't think so Cartin—there is only one sky."

He inhaled after laughing, and I think the timing was perfect. We sat with our drinks for a while, looking at the sun which was not exactly setting but reaching its lowest point as midnight approached. It appeared to be setting behind a magnificently colored cloud, which would probably have been a depressing gray if the sun hadn't been behind it.

"So how was it at Julie-Francine's last night?" I asked.

"Good crack," he said, a slight frown coming to his face. "Seb-Sebbo was in great form—had us in tears at times. But didn't I just say that? Didn't you just ask me that?"

"Um, I don't know Jason—did I?"

"Are we both going mad, Cartin?" he asked, his frown deepening. "Is this what happens when you get to 100? Do you start repeating things and forgetting what you just said?"

"Maybe you do," I said, getting up to stretch my arms. "Maybe you do."

"Ah what the hell," he sighed, his frown disappearing. "I'm still looking forward to the next 100. No more trips to the wasteland though—I think I've done enough of that. There must surely be something better we can do with our time."

I was facing away from him, so he didn't see me smiling and clapping my hands in two-three rhythm.

Did you hear that? You made him cry, but I made him sigh. That was the sound of Jason's slate being wiped clean, and now he's moving on. You see, Joy? A little help from us and they might make it yet.

One Drop

David Dumitru

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It had once been somebody's dream house by the sea. At least that's the way Joan, our exoarcheologist, saw it. Looking back, I suppose that's what made her so good at her job, coaxing narrative from the chaos left behind when things die. It had to have been a dream house in the same way that a crumbling, unadorned vase became a ritual decanter brimming with intent and meaning. She told me once that she heard the songs of the distant dead in a ragged scrap of ancient, faded cloth. It was the way she was and it was why Bellamy fell in love with her. Ultimately, I suppose it's why I'll never leave this place. I wait. And I listen for their song though I know I will never hear it.

Originally, I'd planned the mission as a twofer, just myself and Bellamy, QCore's top cryptobiologist, whose working hypothesis was, unsurprisingly, Life Hides. But when I arrived in Woomera to catch a shuttle to the Farside Computational Facility at Daedalus, there was Joan, waiting with Bellamy on the tarmac, her arms draped oh-so-casually around his neck like some kind of cheap, op-shop ornament. She asked to go along and I couldn't very well have said no. It wouldn't have looked right. And then, as if my day wasn't already spilling over with joy, I spied Robert Utson Jr. the forty-something, egg-shaped son of one of QCore's major shareholders, ahead of us in the boarding queue, having a go at the shuttle pilot because he'd been given a lower berth instead of an upper.

"Do you know who I am?" he bellowed. "I'm the senior planetary systems scientist, and I'm needed at the twinning center at FCF, ASAP!"

Behind me in the queue I heard Joan muttering, "Oh, lovely. Buttson's coming along. Idiot." I gave her a jab in the solar plexus with my elbow. Robert—Bob-to-my-friends (as if he had any)—Utson, Jr. (and thus Buttson to Joan), was an idiot, true, but that didn't stop him from being powerful. And in my book, a powerful idiot is the most dangerous variety.

"Okay, okay," Joan relented. But in the end she could not help herself. "I suppose," she deadpanned, "that it *is* critically important to the advancement of the store of human knowledge to find out what happens when one squeezes a giant, semi-sentient hemorrhoid through a massive quantum computer and out the other end in an alien world. There could be a Nobel in it for each of us."

We were in for a ripper little mission. Skittles and beer, I could tell. The telescope crew at the Lagrangian 2 platform had spotted a new planet. They thought they'd picked up a signature for liquid water, maybe an ocean, and they wanted someone to twin out and have a look. It was humorous, in a way. They would blueline us, rendering us dormant in order to get us out of the way—or, in q-comp speak, reduce our potentiality profiles to a statistical nullity—and then send statistical approximations of who we'd been before we went dormant to have a look at a statistical representation of the planet, effectively chucking us into a probability trajectory based on observations taken eons after the information had left the target system.

There was, of course, a catch. The statistical approximation was so complete that it was mathematically indistinct from the, for lack of better term, real thing. And so there was always the question, academic though it may have been, of who wakes up at the end of a mission; you, or your twin, since it's the twin that's made the memory you now have in your head while the other you was lying on a gurney so close to death that, had you been laying about like that on Earth they'd have

harvested your organs and sold 'em to some rich American sesquicentenerian before you could say Hold on, I'm not quite finished with that kidney.

On the day, as usual, I was last into the system and last to download to the planet. The others were only seconds ahead of me but by the time I got my bearings in the planet's muted, dull-orange light, it was apparent that the fun had already begun. Bellamy, gorgeous to a fault in everything else, was prone to losing his balance and I gathered that he'd accidentally stumbled into Utson's personal space. The first thing I heard, then, shattering the perfect silence of this pristine alien world was Utson's nasal sneer.

"Bloody bottie, mind where you tread with those...those things of yours."

Bellamy took a careful step back and fixed his eyes on the ground.

Still a bit fuzzy from the twinning process, I was slow to react and Joan stepped into the leadership vacuum thus created. "Get stuffed, Butson," she barked. "Mind your own great boats."

I remember raising my hand, signaling her to stop and I remember as well Joan ignoring me completely.

"He's no bot," she went on. "He's as human as any of us and more so than some. He's every right to go wherever he's a mind to."

Utson flinched. Joan was small, but she was a force of nature when angered.

Looking to me for some kind of support and seeing that he was looking in the wrong place, Utson yammered on. "He's arto. You know it and I do too." His right hand, pasty and slick with sweat, shot out from his side, a jittering index finger pointing at Bellamy's shoes. "He's not fooling anyone with those bloody things."

Involuntarily, I glanced at Bell's feet. He was wearing runners dyed a lurid sort of violet that glowed iridescent in the planet's semi-daylight. Holos. It was a painfully obvious and ineffective subterfuge, meant to draw attention to them, to trick the subconscious into forgetting about what they might con-

ceal. Inarguably a genius in every other way, Bell's emotional status was that of a very confused, very awkward child.

Utson pointed at Bellamy's head, then. "Let's see the eyes," he jeered. "Drop the sunnies, eh? Let's have a squiz at those peepers of yours."

"Stop!" Joan shouted. She'd had enough, as had I. We both grabbed for Utson's collar but Joan got there first. A head shorter than he but much fitter and utterly without fear, she drew his face down close to hers. "When we get back, Buttson, I'm going to..."

Utson's nostrils twitched and a fleck of spittle was visible the corner of his mouth. He was afraid, but he gathered his wits enough answer with a mocking threat of his own.

"You'll what?" Joan didn't answer. "Let me tell you what *I'll* do, you puny, conceited little pygmy. I'll have the bottie's contract pulled. See how much you fancy him then..."

"Enough!" I heard my own voice before I knew I was speaking. "Back off, M'Goto," I said, using Joan's surname to reinforce my rank and break her focus. I sensed a grin forming on Utson's face, gray and hollow in the languorous light of the planet's star. The grin melted away when I rounded on him next. "You keep your gob buttoned up on this mission," I said. "You're only here because of who your father is."

I should have stopped there but of course I did not. "Joan's twice the man you are and Bell's thrice the human. Any more trouble and I'll crash you."

Every once in a while it was good practice to remind a twinning team that there was one among them and only one—me—who held the crash codes in her mind and could send one or all of them back into their own probability vectors and thus back to their bodies or, depending on the circumstances, off into absolute and absolutely instant oblivion. I could crash a team and never face even the notion of an inquest. This was no democracy. It was business. Officially my authority was absolute and my accountability nil while twinning.

Utson and Joan separated, eyeing each

other for a moment like children being sent to their rooms without supper. Joan then turned her attentions to Bellamy, who was already studying the landscape, pretending rather badly to have missed the entire episode.

The planet, at least the bit where we'd put in, was as flat as one of those old petrochemical music disks my father used to collect. Bell scanned the horizon, squinting through the visor-like mirrored sunglasses he wore almost everywhere except, I knew, to bed.

"I'm not getting much, Bird," he said, using my given name (after an early twentieth century jazz musician on one of those petrochemical disks). He turned slow, awkward circles, cocking his head this way and that, lifting his hands and craning his neck just noticeably, all of his senses straining, gathering, sifting and analyzing. His wetwork—the extra brains, the small one between his shoulders at the base of his skull and the larger one embedded in his abdomen—would have been working full on, processing, postulating, rejecting inconsistencies, forming opinions and arranging the results into potential courses of action. It's amazing what a few billion extra, finely-cultured neurons can do for a person's processing capacity at very little extra cost in terms of energy. Beef up the heart a bit, add a bit of blood, and you've got parallel processing.

"There," he said at last. "The water's this way."

We walked, taking it slowly at first so Bellamy could pace himself. I remember looking back at one point and seeing three sets of footprints like three dotted lines bisecting the surface of the planet. I should have, later on, been a little quicker to connect the dots, so to speak, but then if I had a dollar for everything I should have done in my life I'd be as rich as Buttson's father, Robert Utson Sr.—affectionately known in certain circles as Daddy Butt.

Gradually, the surface beneath our feet changed color and consistency, turning from a thin layer of cinnamon-colored sand to something like slate. Joan stopped and brushed her hand across the ground.

"Look at this," she said, standing now, displaying her hand, palm out to us.

"So?" Utson said. "There's nothing."

"That's sort of the point, I think," I said just as Joan's mouth opened to let fly with another insult. Utson was supposed to be our planetary systems man. Right.

Bellamy, close by, took Joan's hand and studied it and then ran his own hand over the surface. I looked back to where we'd come from, there were no more footprints.

Joan said, "It's as if it's been swept clean. There's no dust. No dirt. No sand..."

"Now she's a bloody walking thesaurus," Utson cut in. "Isn't that the botto's job?"

I felt Bellamy's reaction more than I saw it, even though I was looking directly at him. He bristled under the surface, struggling to keep his hands from balling into fists, biting back words that, once uttered, could not be taken back. Sensing another blue on the boil between Utson and Joan, I stepped in between them while addressing Bellamy. "What do you make of it, Bell?" I said.

He shot me a sad, grateful smile and continued his survey, turning, focusing his senses in that way of his, like a gemstone can focus a beam of innocuous photons into a cutting tool. It was this, his ability to concentrate so completely on one thing at a time, to possess an experience and at once be possessed by it in a way that I never would, that drew me to him. Watching him now, images appeared in my head, of being alone with him and him engaged that way, absorbed in my needs and desires, knowing what I wanted before even I did. After a time he looked at me and I thought for second that he'd read my thoughts. He said, "Huh," and turned back to whatever he'd seen in the distance.

"Huh," he said again. Again there was a smile, but this one different, like a child about to open a present, expecting to be disappointed but hoping against it. "A feature. There. An anomaly."

We started walking again, our pace doubled, each of us now engrossed in our own private game of beating back the fear, propelled forward by the obsessive curiosity that had gotten us here—aside, of course, from

Utson, for whom curiosity was something to be bludgeoned to death in the pursuit of his own personal aggrandizement. We'd been to dozens of planets. So far, we'd found that life, as such, was common in the universe. But then, from what we'd seen so far and working from the Copernican principle that we live in an isotropic, homogenous universe, we'd come to the depressing, and mostly unspoken, conclusion that as far as *intelligent* life goes, we humans may be a bit late to the party. For instance, on a certain planet several months ago Bellamy and I had found four hematite arrowheads, conical in shape and threaded like screws, and a cut diamond the size of my fist. That was all. The planet was otherwise barren, near the end of its life cycle. It did not appear that it had ever been inhabited, at least in the way we humans think of inhabiting a place. Where did these things come from, then? Where did the rest of it go?

After an hour of walking we came to the edge of a body of what appeared to be liquid water, bronze streaked with red, stretching off to the horizon, waveless, glassine, as flat as the land we'd been traversing and as eerily still.

"Why aren't there any waves?" Utson wondered aloud. Joan and I shared a glance. An intellectual dynamo if ever there was one, our Sonny Butt.

"I think it's a very old planet," Bellamy said, half responding to Utson's query and half merely pondering the phenomenon for himself. "There's little or no volcanic activity, no thermal disequilibrium to stir an ocean."

"No wind," I interjected.

"The planet's a slow spinner," Bellamy answered. "There's probably some wind, sometime, but maybe not enough to lift the top thermal layer of water. No upwelling, at least not enough to break the surface tension. Maybe it's a cumulative effect. No stirring..."

"...it settles in layers," Joan finished for him. "Like soil."

"Oil and water," I said.

Utson said, "I could've told you that."

"But you didn't," Joan said.

They were nose-to-nose again. I had to

physically separate them. "Right, you two. Stand down." I reckoned I was in for a top-up on the pay-grade if I was going to have to play nanny as well as everything else.

I'd lost track of Bellamy for an instant and turned to find him wandering off along the barely perceptible shoreline. His gait was uneven, but not as bad as I'd seen it before. I followed, directing the others to do the same, with Joan in front of me and Utson behind to keep them apart. We were close enough now to the anomaly that even my un-enhanced eyes could pick out a shape, a lump like a tortoise shell on the horizon. I don't recall now how long we walked before I heard Bellamy say, "It's a structure." He'd come to a stop and Joan was standing with him.

"Wait here," he said. He started forward and Joan started after him but I reached out and pulled her back.

"That's right," Utson mocked. "That's what he's for. He's expendable. He can't sue us if he gets hurt and there'll never be any wee botties running around to sue us if he carks it."

I'd had enough. It was true that Bell and his kind were, by law and out of hysterical, irrational fear, sterilized at birth. Here we were at the end of the twenty-first century, still defining people's legal status by their ability to reproduce. "If you so much as open your mouth again," I said to Utson, "I'll defrag your packet and rewrite your vector so that no computer will ever be able to unpack it."

I was fairly sure I'd gotten through to him this time. His knees knocked together twice and his hands tugged spastically at the hem of his shirt. It produced the desired effect of shutting him up while we waited for Bell.

I often envied Bellamy his reconnoitering duties: thousands of light years from home, we come across a structure built by alien beings before we Earthies had even crawled up out of the oceans, and he would be the first to see it up close, to examine it, smell it, feel its textures and contours and thus join it to the course of human endeavor in this vast, expanding universe. He approached the structure and climbed up on it. He waved us in

and we went, Joan sprinting ahead.

Forgetting himself, Utson said, "Look at her," meaning Joan. The venom had crept back into his voice. "It's disgusting. Nice little chickadee like that going all gooey over a bloody arto. He doesn't even belong to himself like a real person. He belongs to QCore, well and truly. If I had his contract pulled, he'd as good as starve to death. Nobody's going to hire one of his kind even to sweep their floors. We've real robots for that. Dinkumbots that know their place and don't try runnin' off with our women."

I bit my lip. I counted ten but got only to two. I said, "You'd just as soon see him in a collar with a tag around his neck like a dog. Your kind never learns, do you?"

"My kind? The law's on my side and you know it. One protein. One splice. That's all it takes for Eeyore," he taunted, referring to the EOR, the Enhanced Organism Registry. Anyone with even a single non-standard enhancement was supposed to be registered and chipped for tracking, ostensibly purely for research purposes. In reality it was a legal and social marker, identifying its wearer as somehow less than human so that people like Utson could have someone to feel superior to. "One drop of artie blood makes him a bloody artie," he went on. "You're just envious. The thought of M'Goto and him doing the doona dance, it's got your knickers all in a twist."

My temples pounded. I heard my knuckles popping as I flexed my hands. He was right. And I suppose that it was that, the fact that I'd been so transparent, that got to me. In any case, he should have kept it to himself. I closed my eyes. Q-code poured across my inner field of vision, some of which I'd loaded before we twinned and some of it coming from a place inside of me I'd not known was there. When I opened my eyes again, Utson was still there, but not all of him. The right half of him was missing and the rest was vanishing a little at a time in slices, something like a ham being sliced at a deli. He appeared to be conscious of what was happening to him as well, his left eye as big as a platter and the left side of his mouth pinned open in a silent scream. I could see

right into his viscera and though I knew I ought to have been repulsed I found it all quite intriguing in an odd sort of way. And satisfying, too, especially when I noticed the second brain tucked just under his beating heart.

"Why Butto," I said, "You sly dog, you. You're one of them." I looked at his one remaining foot. It seemed fairly normal. "And such a little cheat as well."

He of course was a trifle too occupied with whatever his right eye was seeing—or not—in whatever alternative universe it was materializing in—or not—to answer.

"Just goes to show, does it not," I added, shaking a finger at him for good measure, "that it's not so much the brains as what you do with them."

I blinked and he was gone.

Up ahead, it appeared that Bellamy and Joan hadn't noticed anything amiss. When I caught them up, they were surveying the structure, walking around the on-shore half and peering around gently curved corners at the other half, which sat directly on the waterline.

"Mind the water," Bell was saying.

"It was somebody's dream house by the sea, I think" Joan was saying in her singsong African lilt. When she talked like that even I was inclined to sweep her off her feet and into bed. A dream house by the sea. Only Joan. Romance writ large, alive in her soul right along with the science and neither ever skipping a beat because of it.

I stood a ways off at first. They didn't seem to notice Utson's absence and I wasn't about to point it out. We'd have to cross that bridge sooner or later and later was looking pretty good. Joan climbed down into the interior of the ruin and peered back out at me from a narrow aperture in the wall.

"Window?" she called to me.

"Gun port?" I answered.

"Looked out on a garden, perhaps," she said. "I see little alien children playing in the sand. Making little alien sand castles."

"What sand?" I answered. She shrugged. I said, "I see little alien enemies swarming in from three sides. Little alien teeth clattering

for a bit of fresh alien kiddie-meat."

"You're such a spoilsport, Bird," she said.

"That's my job." I was surprised and, strangely, not a little proud to find myself engaging in light conversation so quickly after having dispatched a member of my own team to an uncertain fate.

"Just think," Joan gushed through the portal. "This was here, maybe bustling with life, quite possibly before our sun had even collected enough mass to ignite itself."

"Yes," I said, but I was thinking about Utson again, how easy it'd been. How easy it might be to do again, to someone else.

I shook my head to shake the thought away. Apparently, I didn't shake hard enough. Pictures of Joan and Bell sharing a newlywed suite on a cruise liner bound for Mars passed through my mind. I knew what he saw in her, of course, but I wasn't exactly the dog's breakfast as far as looks went, either. And the data showed that he and I were perfectly matched. When it came to physical profiles, sexual needs, emotional tolerances, my IQ and his processing capacity, it was as if we'd spent our lives on a collision course with each other; something like fate only with test tubes and q-chips. All twinnings were registered for the program before we were even conceived. Every instant of every moment of every hour of our existences had been recorded and filed away, from zygote to blastocyst to fetus to birth to here; every firing of every neuron, every beat of our hearts, every bubble and gurgle and infantile bellow and fart. It was how the computers reconstructed us and our probability trajectories. Many were registered but few actually remained in the pool after birth. Fewer still at adulthood. If it weren't for Miss Dream-House-By-The-Sea M'Goto no one could doubt that it would be me at the top of Bellamy's to-do list, as it were. All that remained was for him to realize his mistake and set it right. How he could have fallen for this effervescent, perky-breasted exoarcheologist made no sense whatsoever.

"Joan! Bird! Take a look at this." It was Bellamy. I remember noting the fact that he'd called for her before me. It stung, and it took

a moment to locate him around the side of the ruin. He was standing about three meters out in the water. Only he wasn't in with water as much as over it, sort of hovering, floating there, just a centimeter or two above the languid surface, walking—literally—on the water.

Joan and I spoke at the same time. I said, "Bellamy, be careful. Don't move." And she said, "What is it, Bell? Is it alive?"

It took my eyes a second to adjust, to see the *it* Joan was on about, a kind of transparent pillow of the planet's buttery light had congealed into a viscous, flowing mass, undulating beneath his feet. It raised him up a few centimeters higher and let him down again. Deliberately, he lifted one foot to inspect the bottom of his shoe. Running his hand along the sole, he looked back at us with his eyebrows cocked and a silly, pleasantly puzzled frown on his face. He bent low, fingers cupped as if to try and scoop up some of the light.

"No," I said. "Don't touch it."

He straightened and looked back at us. He smiled one of his little smiles and said, "It's quite beautiful, isn't it? The way it catches the light. I think it stores it, like in a jar."

"A jar of honey," Joan said.

Jar of honey? Luckily, we void our gastrointestinal tracts before we twin out. If I'd had anything in my stomach right then I might just have blown chunks all over the surface of this placid, pristine world.

"Out, or off, or whatever," I ordered him. "Now."

He came towards us high-stepping awkwardly, as if trying to navigate his way across the back of some huge, beached jellyfish. When he finally stepped onto the shore at the side of the structure I realized that I'd been holding my breath.

He looked around, eyes narrowed, and asked, "Where's Butt...Mr. Utson?" As if nothing had happened.

"Round the side there, draining the dragon," I said, pointing vaguely over my shoulder with my thumb. "Never mind him. What was that all about? What were you thinking?"

He shrugged. "I don't know."

Joan ran to his side. Instinctively, I took his arm and pulled him a few steps further ashore.

"It doesn't appear to be menacing us," he said.

"But where did it come from? How did it creep up on us like that?"

"It didn't," he said. "It was here. I just didn't see it. It's hard enough to see even if you're looking for it."

"Camouflage?" I asked.

"Could be, but that raises the question of what it's hiding from." Sometimes a man knows just what to say to a lady. Sometimes not.

"Maybe it's hiding from us," I offered a little too hopefully.

Behind us, near the waterline, Joan sat on the ground with her knees drawn to her chin, not an arm's length from the pulsating cloud of light. She was humming something, a childhood ditty that I recognized after a second as being the theme song from the old Bananas in Pajamas program. Funny. I'd pictured her as more as a kind of post-Wiggalian cyber-tramp than a connoisseur of fine children's entertainment.

Off on a tangent already, Bell appeared not to have heard me. "It's attached to the structure somehow, I think. This could be just a bit of it. The rest could be..." he broke off and spread his hands, indicating the rest of the planet, "anywhere. Or everywhere."

"Could it be a force field?"

"Maybe, but I think it's alive. There are non-random fluctuations. Pulses. But they're an-algorithmic. It's not code. Not Mechanical. It's something else."

He cocked his head back, listening. At first I thought he was listening for whatever it was that our jarless honey jar might be hiding from. I noticed then that the humming had stopped. No more Bananas. Bell and I both swung around to look back at the shoreline and I could feel the tension that had so suddenly taken him dissipate as he caught sight of Joan, sitting where we'd left her, gazing dreamily into the slowly churning light. And then she looked at us, her lips down-turned

and her eyes as sad and faraway as any eyes I'd ever seen.

"I'm sorry," she said. Her voice was small and timid, very un-Joan-like. "I couldn't help it. It's so beautiful."

Bell closed the distance in three steps and dropped to her side. He reached for her but she warned him off, pushing at the air with her right hand, pushing him away. "Don't."

I went closer, and as I neared I saw that her left hand was immersed in the light. She'd touched it and it wasn't letting her go. Where her hand should have been visible because the thing itself was so translucent, there was just the outline of a hand, as if someone had traced her hand with invisible ink underwater. She closed her fingers and opened them again and the outline did the same, like a hand made of pure, liquid glass.

Bellamy knelt beside her, his eyes darting back and forth between her and the light. It was apparent that it was consuming her, creeping up her arm, swallowing her a little at a time. I reached out on an impulse as Bellamy had done, to pull her clear, but Bell grabbed my wrist. He said, "Look," lifting his head a little, glancing up and down Joan's body. She began to shimmer, glistening from head to toe as the cloud drank her in.

I stepped back and ordered Bellamy to stand clear. Joan's crash code raced through my mind and I tagged it and executed it. It should have vaporized her from our point of reference and sent her back.

Nothing. I ran the code again. Again, nothing.

She sat, her knees tucked up to her chin. The light had climbed all the way up her arm and across her chest now, turning her body a little at a time into a tumbling, limpid silhouette of itself.

"You know better than to...," I started, but the look Bellamy gave me caused the rest to wither in my mouth.

"It doesn't hurt," Joan said. "It's actually sort of pleasant." And then it took her completely.

I watched Bellamy for his reaction, wanting to comfort him but wanting him to turn to me, to ask for it. Instead, he just stood there,

looking out to over the water, his back to me, whispering her name.

"It wasn't your fault," I said, but he wasn't listening.

"Joan," he said. And then louder. "Joan?" And again, louder still.

"Bell, listen to me..."

"Shut up," he said. "Look." He pointed.

I followed his gaze. A form, her form, had risen up out of the light like the idea, just the essence, of a dragonfly caught in liquid amber, alive and unaware of its predicament, the resin amenable to changing shape and nuance. She started dancing then, whirling around and around. Her arms flew out to her sides as she spun, her fingers curved upwards and slightly apart, her lips parted in a private, inward smile.

Stunned, I could not speak at first. I went to Bellamy's side. Expecting outrage I saw serenity in his expression. Expecting anguish I saw connection. I saw rapture. He reached out, slowly, tentatively, to touch it too, to offer himself, to follow.

"No!" I shouted. "You can't."

"I'm going with her," he said. "I have to go."

"I'll crash you, Bell. Don't you move."

He fell back on the shore, sitting with his legs crossed, his hands tugging crazily at his feet. He looked up at me and shook his head. He said, "You've no right, Bird. You're better than this."

"I'm not," I answered. "She's done this to herself. I can't lose you, too. If I let you go like this, I'll never get another team."

"You mean if you lose a valuable piece of equipment like me."

"No."

"Yes."

He was right, of course, and I knew it.

"I can't believe you're doing this, Bird. I'm no slave."

"No, you're not, Bell. Not legally. But just the same, your time belongs to QCore. You have to come back with me. Maybe one day you'll earn enough to buy off your contract, but until that day..." Nothing I could have said could have been calculated to hurt him more.

I hated myself and still I stood my ground. "Even that, that thing," I pointed to the light, where what was left of Joan was spinning around and around like a child in the park on a summer's day, "doesn't want you. You were standing right on top of it and it didn't take you."

He looked up at me. I saw that he was laughing. Noiselessly, almost gently, but laughing nonetheless. How could he be laughing? He took his sunglasses off. His eyes, bio-marked at birth with the crimson retinal tattoo of a multicephaloid, brimmed with pity. One at a time he kicked off his shoes, the holo-runners Utson had ridiculed earlier. Revealed now, as I knew they'd be, were his feet, genetically hobbled from before the day he was born; three large toes curled down under the foot. Without the special shoes he wouldn't be able to walk a kilometer before collapsing. It was another way we kept them *them* and not us. It was why, even with the shoes, he had such trouble walking from time to time.

He stood up, shaking his head like there was something I wasn't getting. And there was, of course. The bloody shoes. Holograms. Three pairs of footprints back at the landing zone instead of four. The field they generated must have masked his presence. When he'd been standing on the light before, it simply hadn't recognized him as a life form. He waded again into the strange, luminous cloud. It pooled around his ankles and then crept silently up his legs until he began to go transparent. In moments, he was consumed.

Devastated, I collapsed in a quivering heap on the shore. I sat there for hours, watching, maybe crying, recriminations thrashing about in my head. If I could get back to Daedalus, I could reset the programs, I thought. I could replay the mission, maybe. But I knew that even that would deliver me nothing more substantial than a silly kind of revolving game, changing with each iteration only so much as the initial parameters allowed. With the memories having been downloaded and the processors having sifted the data, those parameters would be limited.

All substantial uncertainty, to the extent that it ever existed at all, would have been washed out of the events themselves by the unyielding onward rush of time's arrow. We can twin a team of eccentric scientists halfway round the universe to squabble and argue and fall oblivious into alien honey-traps, but we cannot yet send a single organic molecule back a millisecond in time. If I'd done something differently, would it have mattered? I had to wonder if, apart from crashing Utson—which I will go to my death someday wishing I had the opportunity to do again, and again and again, damn the consequences—I would indeed have changed any one thing that I did. I'm a leader. I lead. I make decisions and I have to live with them. It's my job. And then, too, was the question of if I *could* have done anything differently that would have mattered. At what point in the intersections of time and space did the probabilities that governed each of us then converge into a common fate from which we were incapable of extracting ourselves?

And, even if I had the opportunity, would I have the right to do anything differently? Not the legal right—which up until then had been the source of my authority, even my ability to act—but the moral right. After all, regardless of my somewhat selfish motives, I acted to protect Bellamy and, yes, even Joan. Protect them from themselves, perhaps, but still...We humans do not, it seems, leave our peculiar, agonizing moral quandaries at the door when we so blithely slip the proverbial bonds, do we?

I slept. The alien sun hovered low on the horizon, sometimes over the sea, sometimes over the land, marking days and nights in which the light did not vary much. I recall waking up and deciding, of a sudden, that it was time to go home, to get back to my body and to set up a protocol for taking care of the bodies of the others. I closed my eyes and ran my retrieval code. When I opened them again, nothing had changed. I was still on the planet.

And then came the visual static, like white noise only in q-code. Nonsense numbers and

fragments of q-spin indicators.

Then, letters. A C D N A T R S.

I uploaded my retrieval sequence once more. I appeared to be getting through, but something was happening at the other end, which caused me a little concern because, as one might imagine, nothing was supposed to *be* happening at the other end. The computer was supposed to be blind as far as the mission was concerned as long as there was a twin in the field. Otherwise there was the danger of collapsing the probability wave the twin was riding and aborting the mission, possibly losing the twin.

In response to my input, more letters, this time streaming across the surface of the silent sea before me: A C S S D N D A U H U R S. It hit me then like a load of wet bricks.

ACCESS DENIED AUTHORIZATION
UTSON ROBERT SR.

Apparently, my having facilitated Baby-Butt's rather messy exit from the universe had registered with the programmers at the computational facility and DaddyButt was having a bit of revenge. I realized at that moment that there would be no going back, and likely no *me* to go back to even if going back had been an option. And, oddly enough, I'm not sure I felt all that badly about it. A little sad, a little angry, yes, but not otherwise able to muster much of a cry about it.

Time passes slowly here if indeed it passes at all. Joan and Bellamy dance, a pair of translucent figurines in perpetual motion, pirouetting in the light of a never-ending sunset, Bellamy as graceful on his hooves as any full-human ever was on feet. They disappear now and again. I don't know where they go. I am alone in those moments, but how much more so, I wonder, than when they're here? Nonetheless, it is a comfort when they return. I make up stories about where they've been and what they've seen. I've tried to go with them, wading into the water, into the midst of the light, reaching out and attempting to embrace it. Once I even tried drinking the water, to no effect. Whatever it is, or whatever they are now, Bell and Joan, they will not have me. There is no indication that they or it even know I'm here, although I suspect at times they do, if even just vaguely. At least I hope they do—need them to. Otherwise, what am I in this silent, unchanging world but a pair of eyes attached to a brain with too little to do?

I see Joan's head tip back and her lips part as if in anticipation of a kiss but I know that it is something else. She is singing. The song of the distant dead. But for me, there is only silence.



AVATAR ON THE BELTS 3: AITHER

William J. Piovano

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Someone once wrote that dying creatures find their way to secluded corners where they will have peace in their passing. I already spoke of how I did die, in a way, but like the souls swarming the banks of the river Lethe, I was drawn back by the perverse desire for earthly existence.

It is also said there is a dark place between that earthly existence and the shores of the afterlife, and that's where I was in the limbo of my indecision. The books never described that limbo, but I knew it all too well. It was like the swamps of Lerna, only instead of still waters there was darkness, and the few dry islets were the sectors with their cots and the washed out cones of yellow light. And belts. Endless criss-crossing webs of conveyor belts humming in the darkness. Those were all around me as I cowered and wept, but I could not see them. There is no light in this place, only the droning of the wheels, the thick slipperiness of engine oil on stainless steel, and the smell of rust. Rust which smelled so much like blood. I crept, I crawled, under the belts and away from my Aphrodite who had betrayed me. Had the Red Men come to drag me away, it might have been a mercy. Where was Aphrodite? With that man, surely.

An indefinite time later, the blanket of darkness slowly parted to reveal the bustle of my Brother's sector. In my confused mind, a rational cog still worked, and I had devised a plan, a solution which was the only possible one. Standing, I made my way to my Brother's cot. People turned to watch me, murmuring to each other; I was not aware of my state, of the vomit which caked my linen shirt, and my swollen eye, smashed into some steel edge before reason had returned to me. My Brother's shocked expression gave me a clue.

"Where have you been?" he asked, sliding out of his cot. "You're ragged."

"I need you to do something for me," I said, every letter burning my cracked lip. "Right now."

"What do you need?"

"You have to take my place," I said. "Take my place in my sector, so I can take

yours."

Confusion deepened on my Brother's face. "But we can't do that. It's not allowed."

"I have done it already. I know others who have."

"Did you dream of this?"

"No." I realized the dream had the power to manipulate my Brother better than anything else, but I didn't take my words back. I did not want to manipulate anyone, not me. "I just need you to do it."

"If they see us... isn't there a safer way—"

"If you don't do it, I'll just run to the belts and die." A threat. It should not have come to that.

My Brother raised his hands, mouth open, obviously unwilling to be responsible for my death. "No need to do that!" He sighed. "You leave me no choice. Ah, I suppose it's all the same."

"For you, yes. Not for me." I felt some guilt, treating the one person left loyal to me with such harshness. More softly, I said, "I thought you told me you hated everyone here."

He shrugged. "I don't hate them. If anything, they hate me. I'm alone—I was until now, at least. Do I not have a right to resent them?"

"You have a right to forget them," I said, "and go to a place where you can start again. As for me, being alone is all I need right now."

"You won't be alone like me. You don't have this." An index finger ran its tip across the lacerated skin, the eye which would never open. Strangely, I did not feel guilt.

"Be proud of it," I said, and I meant it. "You have something nobody else has, and that makes you one of a kind."

He nodded, and said, "Very well. I shall trust you, as you are the only one who has ever made an attempt to garner my trust. Lead the way." He gestured forward. I led the way.

A most peculiar mix of emotions boiled within me on that journey, both ways. The ever-present sickness, the inevitable visions haunting my open eyes (all the more stark in the darkness) of a tangle of sweated bodies

devoid of any linen. But at the same time there was relief, like a gentle current under stormy seas. My Brother's near presence did something of anesthesia to my soul, and at least I did not retch.

Creep. Crawl. Torment like lapping waves. Progress was slow with my inexperienced Brother lagging behind me, but we did eventually reach our destination. Some remained in their cots, I saw, and others sat on belts or read the occasional book, or licked their bowls clean of porridge. We were still in time.

"That's my cot," I said, pointing. I spied Aphrodite's cot—I had to, for an instant—saw nothing. She was nowhere in sight, and I preferred not to speculate further on her whereabouts. My heart raced just at the knowledge of her vicinity.

"Why are you doing this?"

"A woman." I saw no reason to lie, not to him.

"An actual woman, not on the belts?" It was a foolish question, but understandable.

"Yes. You'll see soon enough."

"And she took herself away from you?"

"She shared herself," I spat.

My Brother raised an apprehensive eyebrow at my sourness. "Be careful in judging things too quickly. Sometimes—"

"There's nothing to judge. It just is. Believe it."

He nodded. "As you say. I'll take you to your word."

I sighed. "Thank you. I really need your faith right now." He nodded, and I clapped him on the shoulder. "Thank you for doing this."

"You took me away from a place where I knew only hate. I should be thanking you."

"I'll be back as often as I can, I promise you."

"All I've ever done is wait." He grinned. "I've become quite good at it." Clasp my own shoulder, he stepped out into the light.

Alone, once again, I turned away and crawled back.

Little was left of the rest period when I finally returned. I dropped my aching body into my Brother's cot, and waited for an eter-

nity. The cot smelled strange (a welcome distraction, for a few moments) and it seemed even more scowls came in my direction than when I had entered Aphrodite's sector. To be fair, I did not care one bit. I would have been loath to defend myself had they come at me with sharpened spoons, charged with intents of murder, let alone return their stares. All I cared about was the fact that for the first time in... well, a long time, I was sleeping in a cot alone.

At some later point in time, I found myself lying in a different cot, with far more light and bustle. When I tried to move and was unable to, I knew I was in one of those dreams. Two eyes gazed down at a slim female body, barely clad in linens. My heart drummed a more frenetic beat, recognizing that figure, but I felt none of the lust, not here. Nostalgia, rather, sinking jagged into my bones.

It took only four days for her to find me.

She did not come herself, of course; she did not know the way. My Brother did. In those three days I had stolen him from his sector, brought him back so that I might teach him the way to mine. In the end I decided to leave my thread, like a map, between our two sectors. It proved to be an important decision.

I could not handle seeing Aphrodite, not yet. The thought of glimpsing her with anyone else, unburdened by my absence, brought bile to my mouth. I would never even have returned to her sector, those few times, lurking from a distance, if not for my Brother. My Brother gave me strength.

But on the fourth day it was he who came to me. I saw what he must have seen when I first came, a stranger appearing out of nowhere, only this time it was a one-eyed man and already acquainted. I embraced him, pleasantly surprised by his visit, until his tidings stole the smile from my face.

"Aphrodite sent me," he said. My bleak mood rotted a little more.

I had told him her name, revealed it to him when I hadn't even revealed it to her. Somehow I had had to explain the circum-

stance, the reason behind the tumult. It comforted me that we shared a secret, something small that Aphrodite did not have.

"She did?" Was that hope in my voice? Or surprise? I think it was fear.

"She wants you back."

I forced a scowl on my face, forced it with all my strength, for nothing but a great joy welled inside me when my Brother's words registered. I fought that joy for pure dignity—summoned my pride. "Do you take her orders, now?" I asked mildly.

"No," he said, "though she did try. I think she's scared of me, like everyone else." My Brother seemed amused, this time, rather than offended. "She looked rather desperate—desperate enough to try and order me around. I told her we were linked, you and I, and that she meant nothing to me. So she tried other methods."

I closed my eyes. "Did she...?"

I braced myself for a knowledge I knew I would not be able to endure.

"She offered me food, yes. And when I refused, she begged, and begged." My eyes opened. "I can see why you so covet this female. There is something different of her, very different. I knew better than to touch her; she is yours, like your porridge. Everyone else tries to steal it, however."

"They already have," I said, and my voice cracked.

"Not that I've seen. She was alone the whole time, weeping, and even made me promise I would tell you so. In the end I caved. She is relentless, that one. She says she wants you and your stories." He paused, quirked an eyebrow. "I hope you don't mind my coming here."

Relentless, that sounded just like her. It took me a moment to answer, filled as I was with a greater swelling of... something. The opposite of that sickness which had emptied me for the past few days. But at the other end, I knew I'd never have what I wanted.

"No, of course not," I said, and added more firmly, "You're always welcome."

Me and my stories. Perhaps it was time to resume the storytelling. Could I truly ask for more, when I already had a thousand times

what anyone else in this place would ever have in a lifetime? If everything always worked as I wanted, I would have been a God, sitting on the top of Mount Olympus in the Outside. Aphrodite was a Goddess, and that's why she always got what she wanted.

She did this time, too.

Creep. Crawl. The beaten dog came back for more. I lingered for a long time at the sector's edge, half-way between the yellow light and the belted darkness. I lingered because I saw her, lying in her cot, and the presence of her was a blazing beacon and a humbling blessing. She was staring out towards the ever-moving files of narcotized women. The hens. Aphrodite was not a hen, but she was not one of us either. She was a Goddess. I could not let a Goddess wait.

Her eyes and mouth were the first to react as I crossed her gaze. They dilated unanimously, but she did not move. I stood there as well, silent. This moment had played in my head a thousand times over, and in none of them had I kept mute. Until at last she shifted, reaching out under her for something, and when she drew her hand back I saw it was my spoon, or rather the wrapping of linen with the steel at its heart. She held it out.

I took it, willing my hand not to tremble. I might as well have asked myself to dance. Squeezing the spoon, I glanced back to see my Brother sitting on the grate floor, sipping his porridge, picking at it with his fingers. Nobody has a spoon, I thought, nobody; I'm one of a kind.

"I want you to come back."

Her voice. Even had it been muffled by an infinity of feathers and garbled by shattered teeth and the withering of age, I would have recognized it instantly. My Aphrodite... I turned back. She begged me with her eyes, moist-rimmed.

I climbed into the cot.

Sometimes it's good to be weak. Pride can serve its purpose, but I believe that more often than not it's better to swallow the stone and take what you really want. I did so, that day, and in some ways it felt just like it had that first time. I rediscovered her completely,

worshipped her every curve. The latent sadness receded, kindly shrouded by Eros with his last gift. Indeed, I do believe the true Gods visit us here, once in a while. They give us a glimpse of themselves, that we might not forget. I knew I never would.

But Aphrodite and I both knew the truth. She had not acknowledged it, consciously, but I needed only her whispered request, the longing which had by then far surpassed the lust, to be reminded that this was not meant to be.

"Tell me of the Outside," she said, finding that niche in my shoulder.

I did. I spun the most fantastic tale ever told, worthy of the annals of Mount Olympus. She listened, rapt, until I finished, and we lay as we always had, breathing into each other.

There did she break it.

She said it firmly, so firmly I was worried I might believe it: "I want you to come with me to the Outside."

It didn't even surprise me. I was past surprise. Instead I sighed and brushed aside her hair.

"I can't," I said simply. Not because of the certainty of death, of the absurdity of that hope, or the fact that the Outside might be, for all they knew, a darker place than this; no, it was that one-eyed man sitting quietly on the grate floor who kept me there. Kinship, something only we had, unique.

She, of course, could not understand. Her customary scowl came on. "I want you to come with me."

"You can't have everything, every time, Aphrodite." I struggled to avoid eye contact.

"Aphrodite?"

I tensed, realizing my mistake. "It's... ah... nothing."

"Nobody ever gave me a name before. What is it?" Her voice had softened.

"Nothing..." Her name almost slipped from my lips again.

"If you won't come with me, at least tell me who I am."

I hesitated, then said, "The Goddess of love," and was surprised at the twinge of bitterness.

"Love." She tasted the word, then took me by the chin and forced me to look down. "Love? By what I've read in these books of yours and all that you've told me, I'd say it is just what I feel for you."

I might have laughed, I might have cried. Some mongrel cross came out of it, a sobbed chuckle. How I wished it were all true. I wanted nothing more than to believe her, for her to feel that way, to really feel that way. But the truth of the matter was in all ways more painful.

"No, Aphrodite. You love the Outside."

And I loved her. She wasn't only Aphrodite, she was *my* Aphrodite, no matter how many men had possessed her.

I waited for an answer, but got none. Perhaps it was better that way. She didn't even seem troubled; more like... enlightened. For my part, happiness was in my hands, then and there, and I was burning it with words and blowing away the ashes.

The Gods have it easy. Mortal lives are so much more complex in their ephemerality.

We said nothing more that day. Farewell and affection was expressed through our fingertips, our lips and our eyelashes. We made love, and it was to be the last time.

I took comfort in that night by knowing that although she loved the Outside—the dream I had helped create—she did love me more than any of the others. We had shared, given each other something special.

Only in our world is a final kiss worth the same as a dented spoon.

Despite my knowledge of the inevitable, I was not fully prepared for what happened later that day. I was working on my stool when I heard the running, feet rapping on the conveyor belt. I knew which belt it was before I turned and saw that pale frame skipping away. My heart-rate tripled in an instant. Slender legs, so familiar, carried my Aphrodite towards the tunnel, towards the light. Inside his barred cage I saw a Red Man turn, and I yelled.

Fortunately or not, the loud bang which echoed in the caverns of steel suffocated my cry. She never heard, just crumpled under the sound, one hand extended towards her

dream.

In all directions, I heard gasps. Shock at the Red Man's lethal weapon, but mostly desperation at the definitive loss of the only special thing this sector had ever known. I wanted to stand and scream at them all, wail into their faces that what they felt was nothing close to my grief. But that one rational cog in my mind reminded me 'routine and similarity', and for the sake of my Brother, if not for myself, I remained quiet. My stool squeaked, absurdly rusty amongst all the engine oil, as I swiveled slowly round to face another woman. A million had gone, prone and ripe, another million would come, but none would compare. Aphrodite had been a Goddess, one of a kind.

* * *

The baby is still crying in my calloused hands, flailing against thin air. I lower it into the pool, reach under my tunic, and pull out the spoon. The linen wrapping has clotted and hardened, decades of use hardened it nearly to plaster. Reluctantly it yields under my nails. Four full loops unwind, the brown-spotted length falls soundless to the floor, and in my hand is the naked metal, glinting in the filament illumination. Identical, it seems, to its counterpart in memory.

I never told my Brother about the Outside. After what happened to Aphrodite, I never could. We have each other, and in this place, it is more than enough. But can I deny my Sister such knowledge? I don't think so.

The Gods don't dwell here; they come occasionally, to remind us of themselves. This, in my hands, is a Goddess. I can feel it, and as such she doesn't belong here. I place the spoon in her grasp, and she needs nothing more than the metal's cold contact to take hold. "No markings for you," I say. "The Gods don't need marks."

I lower the green water tank onto the belt. That belt. So strange, to use that one. I did so

once in my life, and at the time I had been ecstatic, proud and nerve-wracked. It could not begin to compare to what I feel now.

"Let us know what it's like, on Mount Olympus."

Belts don't wait, they roll. The tank glides away from me, and I smile. So many others, seemingly identical, sliding in every direction. But my Sister is alone in her journey, heading for the light.

Now she's there, just where Aphrodite fell so many years ago. I like to think they never moved my Goddess of love, that the belt carried her slender body on to its destination.

None of the Red Men move. The green water tank moves on. There are no loud bangs. I sigh in relief and, blinking my Sister goodbye, return to my duty.

Old, so old, I limp back to my cot. My one-eyed Brother helps me, hoisting me with an arm. He's all grown and strong now, thick black hair where mine has gone white and sparse. Others nod in his direction as he passes; they've learned to respect him, as they do me.

"I think I'll lie in your cot, so I can see the light," I say, clapping him weakly on the shoulder. He grins, my faithful kinsman.

"If only there were more," he says, and sits on the grate floor beside me. Divine words.

A man once said that death is a debt which all of us must pay. But in this limbo, floating between life and death, we may just be shadows, taking darkness for light and death for life. We forget we are shadows, but sometimes a flicker of memory makes us look beyond the fields of belts, to a dawn, a different landscape, a kingdom of life where light has made darkness unknown and love never dies.

Sliding into the cot, I close my eyes. They may not open again but it's okay, for when the dream comes it is one of those dreams. I know, for my mind could never fathom such a chorus of light.

Book reviews

Jeani Rector, *Open Grave*. Publish America, 2008. Pp. 273. ISBN 978-1604417128. \$21.95 / £13.95.

Reviewed by Mario Guslandi

After her first short story collection named *After Dark*, Jeani Rector continues her literary journey into horror with this volume assembling nine short stories and a novella.

Ever faithful to traditional horror themes, Rector produces most of her tales by smartly reshaping standard subjects as in 'A Case of Lycanthropy' a tongue-in-cheek analysis of the predicament of being a werewolf; 'Ghoul', an effective, excellent voodoo story featuring a naive psychiatrist, an ambiguous patient and a mischievous secretary; and 'Crystal Ball', a tense, intriguing narrative exploring the world of fortune-tellers and showing how deceptive some prophecies can be. The only notable exception to this adherence to the tropes of the genre is 'Ebola', a short, chilling piece where horror spurts from the disquieting reality of a lethal african virus.

Compared with her early stories, which this reviewer felt displayed a certain lack of originality, Rector's work is getting much better and consequently more ambitious. Thus, here we find a longer piece, the title novella 'Open Grave', in which she tries her hand at creating more developed characters and a more complex plot. Does she succeed? Yes and no.

On one hand the story of Rick—a university student who, bewitched by a strange dark lady, neglects his girlfriend, his studies and his work to get involved in the unholy practice of necromancy—suffers from a slow, boring start where the reader has to bear pages of pretentious talking about spiritualism and ghosts. Moreover Rector's narrative style and wording are not always pristine and some portions of the novella are rather repetitive. In other words, Rector is a fine writer who badly needs an editor to review the occasional lapses in her phrasing and to trim and abridge the overabundances in the text.

On the other hand I must admit that, in spite of its faults, the novella is compelling, hard to put down, and once the story gains momentum it becomes irresistibly engrossing. Furthermore, the final twist in the plot does come unexpectedly (even though weighed down by a too long explanation) and brings into question the meaning of the events that the reader has been witnessing.

In short, this collection is defective in some ways, but worth reading nevertheless.

Robert Nielson, *That's Entertainment*. Elastic Press, 2007. Pp. 198. ISBN 9780955318122. £5.99.

Reviewed by Karina Kantas

This volume contains fourteen short stories in various genres, collected under the loose theme of the entertainment industries. The one thing these stories have in common is that they *are* entertaining.

'The Pope, Sonny Liston and Me' is a hilarious tale about a gambling pope who discovers time travel and kidnaps a famous boxer from the past, in the hope of winning back the fortune he borrowed from church funds. 'Trouble Ahead' is told in the style of pages from a diary belonging to a struggling writer. The tale is very weird, but addictive reading and ends with a laughable twist. 'The Great Eddie Clarke Farewell Tour' is Neilson's thoughts on what heaven is like for a famous singer, and a thought-provoking tale. 'Love Song' is a touching story involving magic, traditions, and the most powerful emotion of them all, love.

Neilson must be a fan of Elvis as many of his stories refer to the King. What if Elvis never really died and the body that was had been found was only a replica. What would his life be like now? Would he still be singing the classics? Can a leopard change its spots? Read 'Alias Morton Pickney' to find out.

My favourite story in the collection is called 'The Big Fellow'. BBC television is doing documentaries on historical figures, the catch being that these historic giants are alive, living in their natural environment, and re-enacting the past of history that made them famous. Only disaster strikes when the historical character in question learns of his fate. This is a clever, imaginative piece of storytelling, which will keep the reader glued to the pages.

Neilson writes in a relaxed enjoyable style. Fourteen readable stories containing emotion, grit, and thought-provoking aftereffects. Priced at £5.99 (or €8.99), *That's Entertainment* is worth every penny.



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