Among the Dead

by Edward Bryant

Mummified pine shiver in the wind. Dry branches whir a litany for the dead. The moon, silver skull with a smile, sheds no tears for a wasted earth. Below, the metaphor is bone.

Child's blocks, heavy stone joined by edges, break the mountainscape. Three tourists cling together inside a mausoleum. And around them, hundreds of silent companions wait.

On the bank of the river, beside the road no longer traveled, is a sign. Raised bronze letters: THEY SHALL LIVE AGAIN.

Shall they?

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Foster dreamed:

Spinal fragments of a dead lizard, fire-blackened.

The Autumn Leaf Tour and the train. The tracks lay far down the mountain and were crisscrossed by tumbled cars. Bones inside the charred engine—deadman switch that didn't work—and a graded curve taken too fast. Skeletons everywhere—the trail of bones leading up the mountain. Bones that collapsed and jumbled like pickup sticks and …

Images—how it must have been—the germ aerosols bursting high above Denver, the enormous hiss like a deodorant or insect spray, the vapor white-seeping down and becoming invisible, then killing and killing and nothing but bones—the aspen, white in the daylight, jointed, articulated, dying faster than the leaves—the Autumn Leaf Tour—and the trail up the mountain.

The girl—just as pale, never in the sun, never naked. And now, because he wanted her to, she opened her legs that he might taste, and he tasted tomato paste and liver and scallions … Sampled and ate.

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"This morning we finished the last of Gunderson. Gunderson, Vernon L., according to the records. Age forty-seven, race Caucasian, sex male, death from emphysema May 21, 1972. There was a Gundersen,

Lillian G., but we skipped her; just left her there in the vaults. She was too damned skinny, some sort of wasting cancer. Maybe when the day comes that we polish off the last toe-joint of Zytlinsky, George M., we will be forced by necessity to thaw out dead, emaciated Gundersen, Lillian G.

"Of course by then we'll probably all be dead anyway. Our gums are bleeding and the goddamn diarrhea's getting worse. Mardin says that deficiency diseases will get the three of us long before there's any chance of starvation. But I guess the way things are now is a form of starving to death. Last night Connie dreamed about a Caesar salad, cherry tomatoes, Russian dressing, the whole works. She had to tell me about it today, in detail. I could kill her for that. I'll dream tonight about green vegetables, and I'll agonize."

Foster snapped the journal shut. God, he thought, it would make a tremendous beginning for a horror story.

"Hi," said Connie, from the doorway. "I brought you a tray. Mardin fixed it—it still isn't my turn until tomorrow. I thought maybe you didn't want to eat with Mardin tonight." Her last words almost phrased a question.

"No," said Foster. "I don't want to eat with crazy Mardin, that goddamn ghoul."

Connie's skin was delicately, almost abnormally, pale. Her face quickly betrayed the flush.

"Jesus," said Foster. "Here we are at this place and time and you can still blush at profanity. God, girl, your sensitivities are incredible."

"Sorry," she said. "I'm me." She set the tray on the desk in front of Foster, her silver charm bracelet jingling.

"No kidding." Foster slid the dull metal tray closer. With a tentative gesture he touched the hemisphere covering his supper. "So what is it tonight? Spaghetti and seasoned Italian sauce? Roast capon garnished with parsley? Idaho big-reds *au gratin?* How about one of Mardin's superb soufflés?" He idly traced his initials in the condensed steam that dappled the metal.

"Please," she said. "Don't. Mardin's bad enough." He saw that her hands were curled into tight fists. Foster marveled with mild pleasure that he could almost feel the pain of her nails deeply buried somewhere inside those knotted fingers.

"Sorry." But it was no real apology. Foster lifted the dome from his supper. A thin vapor rose from the platter of meat. "Smells good," Foster said pleasantly. "Pot roast tonight?"

"Rib steak," said Connie in a thin voice. She turned and started for the door.

"Don't go."

Connie hesitated, then continued to walk.

"Please." Foster deliberately inserted a mild note of pleading in his voice. The girl stopped, turned, faced him, and Foster saw she was close to crying.

"All right," she said. "But only because I don't want to be alone, and I can stand you better than Mardin." She sat down on the edge of Foster's bed. Connie was so light she barely made an impression on the bedspread.

"I think you need to eat more," said Foster with calculated malice. He picked up a linen napkin from the

tray and flipped it open. Something white and ragged fluttered out and landed between his feet. Foster picked the object up and examined it—a piece of paper, torn from a sheet in the vault records. "Hamilton, Willis T.," it read. Below the printing was a line in Mardin's nearly illegible script. "With the compliments of the chef."

"Wise-ass," said Foster. He flipped the scrap to Connie, who read it and looked sick.

"Don't puke," said Foster. "Or if you do, go out in the hall."

"I won't be sick. I can't. I'd just have to get another helping of supper."

Foster ate quickly and silently while Connie stared at his face.

"I'm sorry I kept going on about that Caesar salad," she finally said.

The man smiled. "You know, you're a sweet kid."

Connie didn't hear him; her mind had skipped to something else, something more obsessive. "Foster? Someday we'll be rescued, won't we? Won't someone look for us?"

Foster shrugged. "Why should they? Other people must have had natural immunities, others must have survived. But I'm sure they're too busy keeping alive to worry about rescuing us."

"Oh," she said blankly.

All us colorless people at the end of the world, he reflected. What a goddamned anticlimax.

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Sunrise poured over the clouded eastern mountains like a spill of wet concrete. Both Mardin and Foster went up to the observation level to watch the morning, while Connie busied herself in the kitchen, preparing breakfast.

"You know," said Mardin, resting his forearms on the chill metal rail, "I don't think I'll ever get used to the world without green."

Foster was vaguely surprised. Mardin hadn't spoken to him in six days. Sometimes he suspected Mardin didn't exist at all. "Yeah," he said, looking out over the barren Rockies. "It isn't so much the plants I miss. It's the things that move—the birds and animals and things." He considered. "I never figured I'd be lonely for a goddamn robin."

Mardin snickered. "The only reason you want a robin is to roast him on a spit."

"You're a lousy comedian," said Foster.

"No," said Mardin. "No, I'm not. I'm a bald, skinny ex-file clerk who's probably got pellagra and beri-beri and God only knows what else; and I'm standing out here under a starving sky talking about what I miss to a man who isn't my friend while a girl who also isn't my friend is down below in the kitchen frying up a fellow man I never knew, as something I'll try to imagine is Canadian bacon." Mardin's voice stopped like a mechanical toy running down. His lips quivered slightly, and Foster hoped the man wouldn't cry. Mardin had been the most unstable member of the trio from the start. Oddly, it had been he

rather than Connie who had been the last to eat the meals culled from the vaults. Mardin had held back until his ribs etched tight against stretched skin while Foster and eventually the girl assuaged their hunger. Then, after days of self-denial, he had broken and gorged himself on chops and steaks and filets. But the breaking had snapped something besides Mardin's hunger, Foster thought.

Mardin gestured toward the dark river. "What started it?" he said loudly, and his voice echoed toward bare hills where nothing moved except the wind.

"Not 'what,'" said Foster. "Who." He pointed downward. "Them."

Mardin looked at him curiously.

"The dead," said Foster. "The people frozen in the vaults. The ones who didn't plan for the future—the jerks who didn't believe in birth control or who piped their sewers into the oceans. So what else could they expect, letting people breed up toward infinity in a wasted world? The birth rate went sky-high and biological pressure made the death rate compensate drastically."

"Well, we overcompensated," said Mardin.

"You have a gift for understatement." Foster chuckled. "The silent spring, sprung. Hell—once we were worried about H-bombs and nerve gas. Then they let the bio-bombs loose …"

"Okay, breakfast's ready." Connie's voice echoed up the concrete shaft to the observation level.

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The chill of the vault numbed Foster's fingers as he wrestled the foil-wrapped bundle from its cradle. "Hytrek, Donald M., Jr.," the file read. There was something special about this file, Foster reflected. The file matter-of-factly reported a death on September 3, 1973—an unusual cardiac arrest, but remarkable only because Hytrek had been seven years old. Tough luck, Mr. and Mrs. Hytrek, Foster thought as he carried the shapeless package up the steps of the storage chamber. What pathetic hope drove you to have your dead son quick-frozen after death and placed here in the cryogenic vault? You probably wondered if you would still be alive when the surgical techniques would be developed that could repair Donald Jr.'s damaged heart. Well, you're not. You're dead, your son's dead too, and you'll all stay that way. Sorry. But we'll live a little longer—Connie, Mardin, and me.

Foster reached the welcome warm air at the top of the steps. Clumsily holding his burden in both arms, he kicked the door shut behind him.

"Hello." It was Connie, looking fragile and wanly pretty. She glanced at the oblong parcel in its gleaming foil sheath.

"It's my turn," said Foster.

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"Why are you so cruel to me?" whispered Connie one night in the quiet despair of Foster's bed. The top

of the girl's head was silk against his chin. Foster couldn't see her eyes in the half-light from the lunar skull squinting down the sky-shaft.

"Me, cruel?" Foster ran his fingers sleepily along Connie's flank and up across her stomach. Her ribs were painfully evident under his hand and the skin on her belly was taut, like a stretched, bloated drum-head. "I'm not cruel. I'm just—well, me. Like you said you were you the other night when you brought my supper."

"No," she said. "You're cruel when you bait me about the food. You're brutal about it and you enjoy my pain."

Foster was in an uncharacteristically good mood. "At least I'm faithful," he said. "Sorry, you'll take that as a barb." Foster shifted his body restlessly. "Do you mind? You're putting my arm to sleep."

Connie raised her head, and Foster moved his arm. Her chin tipped back and he saw a shine of tears on her cheek. The girl choked on some word, then pressed her face convulsively against Foster's chest. Foster stroked her hair mechanically, wondering when she'd ever let him sleep.

"Sorry," she finally said, voice muffled. "It's a mood. I suddenly remembered most of the things I promised myself not to think about ever again."

"Nebraska?" Foster said. "The plains and the golden wheat fields under the summer sun? Your family? Mother and father? Old boyfriends long dead now? Trees, lakes, birds, horses, planes, cities, television shows?"

"Damn you, yes!" From the short distance between them she struck out with her fist. The blow glanced lightly off his cheekbone, and Connie again began to cry. Foster continued to stroke her hair.

"I feel miserable," said Connie. "I want to leave."

"And go where?" Foster said placatingly. "Mardin and you and I might be the only people left anywhere. This may be the only shelter, and the vaults probably hold the last edible food in a hundred miles."

Her tears were wet on Foster's chest. "God!" she cried out in frustration and misery. "Why me?"

"Trite question," said Foster. "Maybe God likes you and the rest of us and that's why he picked us out to survive a while. Maybe he just overlooked us when he got the rest of the earth. Or maybe we're to provide the finale for the last great scene at the world's end."

Connie pushed away from Foster's embrace and struggled free of the tangled blankets. She stumbled into a dark corner of the bedroom beside the closet and huddled there, weeping. Foster rolled onto his back and closed his eyes.

In a while the room became colder, and Connie returned to the warmth of Foster's bed.

She curled forlornly against the sleeping man. "Oh baby," she whispered, no one hearing except herself. "What's going to happen to us all?"

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Connie dreamed:

The day Mardin walked past her as she sunned herself by the main entrance to the cryogenic complex. The sack over his shoulder was bulky and stippled with cabbage-lumps.

"Ho ho," he laughed, macabre Saint Nick.

She looked up. "What's that?"

"Heads," he said. "Gonna dump 'em."

Mardin walked away, laughing softly, and behind him remained the stench. Thick sweetness first, then

The smell. Similar, but—

The prairie stretched away to the horizon. The sod houses, board roofs chinked with mud, were dark chocolate against the green waving grass. The people worked at indistinct tasks, their exact actions obscure.

She was inside one of the sod houses and they *were there, all the men and women. She saw her grandfather and father and many more whom she didn't know. They stood around the rough wooden furniture, and their talk buzzed in currents she could not understand.*

The smell. Sweeter, more cloying.

The boy and the girl were twins, perhaps five years old, blue-eyed. Both smiled as the people closed about them and began to tear bits of flesh from their bodies.

Connie ate too, and it was from love, not hunger. She had wanted to have babies, and now she ate them. And then she was younger, as young as the two children, and the people closed in around her.

The smell. She whimpered deep in her throat. The potty-smell …

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One morning Foster and Connie were jarred from uneasy slumber by the clang of alarm gongs and the flash of red warning lights. Foster shook his head drowsily, irritated by the clamor, and flicked the switch of the lamp by the bed. Nothing happened. Only the intermittent crimson glare from the hallway lit the room. The man staggered from the bed and picked up his robe and slippers from a chair.

He found Mardin wild-eyed with agitation, fluttering his hands in front of the access hole to the power room. Above the sealed metal port was an obtrusive sign rapidly blinking "Automatic Systems Malfunction!" A cacophony of bells was ringing. As Foster approached from the hallway, a klaxon horn began to blare and the newly flashing sign—"Danger! Radiation Hazard!"—added to the carnival aspect of the power-room door.

"Hello, Mardin. What's the problem?"

"How the hell do I know?" The ex-file clerk's bony hands sawed the air. "I just got here. Something's wrong with the nuclear plant. We're not getting any electricity."

"No power?" Connie had approached unnoticed. "What are we going to do for lights? How are we going to cook?"

"I saw some candles in a desk," said Foster. "We'll use those at night. As for cooking, it looks like we'll just have to go outside and see if those dead trees'll burn."

A siren wailed in crescendo behind the bells and klaxon. The new sign flashed "CONDITION CRITICAL—PRIORITY REPAIRS AAA-1."

"Is it going to blow up?" asked Connie.

"Beats me," said Foster. "Too bad we're all ignorant tourists instead of technicians. Maybe we ought to go outside in case it blows. Come on, Mardin."

But Mardin stayed, seemingly hypnotized by the random patterns of light and sound, while Connie and Foster retreated along the access corridor and climbed the shaft to the observation level.

After five hours, Mardin climbed from the cryogenic complex into the outer world. Humming a tuneless song, he stumbled through the dust of the leached soil and found Connie and Foster making love in the shadow beneath a stand of dead pine.

"Hey! You can come back now. I don't think anything's going to blow up. The batteries must have run down or something—the alarms stopped. But we still don't have any electricity. Looks like we're going to have to rough it."

"Okay," said Foster, disengaging himself. "You two pick up some limbs—we cook out tonight."

"I haven't cooked over an open fire since I was a little girl," said Connie. "We went camping in Yellowstone Park once." Her voice sounded happy, and Foster smiled. Mardin continued to hum his tuneless song and walk around in abstracted circles.

"Hey!" called Connie, dropping her armload of branches. "Look, Foster!" She pointed toward a streak of white vapor that bisected the dusk. "It's a jet."

Foster squinted into the sunset. "I don't think so," he finally said and felt a twinge of guilt. "We didn't hear any sound of a plane. It's just a weird cloud formation."

But the three of them stared hungrily and hopefully into the west until long after the white streak had vanished.

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"Uh oh," said Foster, holding his candle high.

"Something's strange," said Connie, crowding close behind him.

"It's the refrigeration units," said Mardin from the rear of the small procession. "The electricity to cool the nitrogen—it comes from the power room …"

"*Came* from there," corrected Foster.

The trio descended the concrete steps.

"Listen!" said Foster. He stood motionless. Out of the darkness sounded the *drip-drip-drip* of fluid splashing on cement. "You two light the other candles."

The interior of the cryogenic vault became visible as Foster stepped from the stairwell into the room. The reflected candle flames danced eerily on the crinkled-foil capsules containing the hundreds of guilty dead.

"They're defrosting," said Mardin. "Like a big refrigerator when you pull the cord."

"I wonder how long they'll last," mused Foster, "before they spoil. Several days, maybe?"

"At least," agreed Mardin. "My wife left a roast out once when we took off for the weekend. It was a little moldy, but the dog ate it all right after we got back Sunday night."

Foster inexplicably wanted to giggle. Instead, he said, "What if we haul some of the bodies upstairs and put them outside? It's pretty cold out there."

"The nights are chilly," said Mardin, "but the days won't be. It's late June now—we've got most of the summer ahead."

The little group stood silent, watching the cryogenic capsules flicker with silver fire.

"Well," said Foster finally. "Let's worry about tonight first." He bent over a foil-wrapped bundle and peered at the tag in the glow from his candle. "All right, Mardin. Grab Miss Kelly's feet and let's get her up to the kitchen."

Connie took the candles in her hands as the two men struggled with the rigid package. "Foster," she said in a low voice. "What are we going to do when they—when they all go bad?"

Foster smiled ambiguously. "Perhaps we'll live on love alone."

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Mardin dreamed:

Briefly.

A three-lobed solid with sharp corners and no straight lines. It had been a greenish yellow at the beginning, but the red crept across in bands, like a television screen when the plane flies over. It was somehow important to him, but progressively less so as it reddened. And then finally the crimson was total.

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One particularly lean day, Mardin attacked Connie in the kitchen. Neither Foster nor Connie ever knew Mardin's purpose—whether it was sex, food, both, or neither.

Foster was wandering the halls, leafing idly through an ancient book of Gahan Wilson cartoons he had found in the visitor's lounge. Then he heard the commotion in the kitchen. He investigated and found Connie, clothes shredded, sprawled on her back on the breakfast table while Mardin weakly battered her head against the formica surface. Foster watched for a moment, then picked up the useless electric carving knife from the counter. He slammed the heavy handle against the back of Mardin's head, stunning the ex-file clerk. Quickly, Foster wound the long vinyl electric cord around Mardin's neck and garroted him—then unwound some slack and drew the serrated blade across Mardin's jugular.

Connie moved weakly on top of the table. She gasped for air and moaned.

Foster slowly stood and put the electric carving knife in the dirty sink. He stepped to the table and looked down at the girl. Connie opened her eyes and looked back at him.

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The final day came when the two survivors stood apart from each other. They watched without saying, almost as a tableau. Connie was at the top of the staircase to the observation level. Behind her was the pearl gray of early morning. The light from the open door made the girl's pale skin translucent; the outline of her form glowed—the rest of her body was in shadow. But she was smiling—Foster could see that; her teeth showed white. Her hands were together in front of her, and something gleamed there—a blade perhaps; or maybe a silver bracelet.

Foster settled back in his chair, hardly breathing, and looked up the steps at Connie. On the floor beside him was the electric carving knife, within grasp-if he wanted to reach it.

"Baby, where now?" The voice whispered from above him, soft. Connie started down the stairs and the perhaps-a-knife in her hands glittered again.

"Wait," said Foster. "Listen."

The girl stopped.

"I hear something," said Foster. "Something distant and coming closer. A buzzing like maybe a rescue helicopter."

"It's a hallucination," said Connie, again starting her descent.

"Perhaps."

"Or one of your rotten jokes."

Outside the building, blackened trunks of pine shivered in the dry wind.

The End