

Theaker's Quarterly Fiction

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EDITORIAL

New Friends and Old!

Stephen Theaker

This is rather a sad issue for us here at Silver Age Books. For one thing, we'd hoped for many, many years that with issue 32 we would finally catch up with *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* – in terms of issue numbers if nothing else. It was a silly, arbitrary goal, but one that kept us going through the long Sundays of proofreading. But it wasn't to be: we've produced this issue a bit late, and those literary rascals at *McSweeney's* managed to sneak out an issue 33 just as the year turned. We could console ourselves with the thought that Hamish Hamilton have yet to release issue 33 in the UK, but it feels hollow. Blast the erudite, beautiful hide of Dave Eggers and all who work in his dungeons!

The second reason for our sadness affects the reader more directly. In this issue concludes the saga of Newton Braddell, a virtual ever-present in this magazine since his first appearance in issue 8, back in 2005. "The ship drifted like a wind-tossed seed through the long night of space." Thus it began, and Newton never really achieved much more control over his life than was thus established. Yet his endless adventures have endlessly entertained this editor – and sustained the magazine! I have always known that should no other suitable contributions be received, there would always be at the very least a Newton Braddell episode to publish. Herein we have the final four episodes: the magazine will be forever lessened.

But new adventures ever beckon! On one hand, in the style of British comics of old, this issue features on its flipside one of the final issues of *Pantehnicon*, a fellow zine that ran out of steam. Though I am of course always glad to see our rivals tumble to their doom, I was more than happy to help them get their last issues out to the world.

Also, I was recently lucky enough to be appointed the caretaker chair of the British Fantasy Society... It's a huge honour, but it does mean that this year's issues of TQF will probably be a bit shorter than usual, so that I can do my best to stay on top of everything. Our schedule may be a little more erratic than usual. As my favourite typo has it, bare with us!

SCIENCE FICTION

Newton Braddell and His Inconclusive Researches into the Unknown: the Conclusion!

John Greenwood

Miss Lavender Goes It Alone

Only a few weeks after our own exile from the wandering tribe of City Hall, Miss Lavender had absconded in turn, disgusted so she said by the messianic fervour that had gripped her people. According to her account, I had become a hate-figure for the Citihallians, blamed in my absence not only for the continuing shortages of food, but for other thefts and losses too. Broken-down trucks and other technical failures were routinely attributed to sabotage on my part. The demonisation had reached such a pitch that general opinion held I had murdered Yewtree and other absconding Citihallians who had grown tired of the atmosphere of paranoia and religious madness.

Miss Lavender revealed that “wanted” posters had been produced and hung in every communal kitchen and therapy waiting room, depicting me as an immensely fat glutton with a devilish glint in my piggy eyes, my parasitical appendages elaborated with barbed thorns as though they were prehensile limbs ready to lash out at the viewer, and Raffles perched on my shoulder transformed into a rabid fanged predator, rather than the harmless snake-mouse who lived in my pockets and rucksack.

The picture had been so widely distributed that Miss Lavender confessed herself astonished to see me looking so “svelte” (in her words). “Haggard” would have been a more accurate description – both Yewtree and I had lost weight. We were not starving, but not a single morsel of edible matter that crossed our path was passed up.

That I had become the Citihallians’ devil would have been amusing were it not such a tragedy for this once-peerlessly scientific civilisation, and were it not so obviously a source of distress for Miss Lavender and, to a lesser extent, Mr Yewtree. How had Miss Lavender survived alone in the Kadaloorian wilderness? Evidently the preparations she had made for her escape were more considered than our own. Most importantly, she had stolen one of the community’s few hover bikes, nifty little vehicles that, while seating only two, could cope with all but the most unfriendly terrains. In place of a passenger she had been accompanied by, so she explained, a mountain of provisions carefully bound in nets and ropes. Alas, the provisions had long since been exhausted and the precious bike abandoned, broken-down but carefully stowed in a small cave.

“It took all my strength and ingenuity to drag that broken-down, braddellish bike up the hillside to the cave mouth,” she said.

I started at the odd use of my own name. “Braddellish?” I asked. “What is that?”

Miss Lavender blushed deeply and turned her face away from our campfire.

“Oh, Newton forgive me!” she said. “That is one of the words they’ve started using, back in City Hall camp, I mean.”

“But what does it mean?” I enquired with a smile (Miss Lavender’s casual use of my first name, for the first time, had cheered me immensely).

“I suppose it means rotten and dreadful. It just slipped out! Oh, how thoughtless! Do forgive me!”

I assured her with sincerity that I thought no less of her for her slip of the tongue, but I would have had very thick skin indeed, inhumanly so, not to feel this neologism as a slight on my character. Not only was my person depicted in every corner of City Hall camp as a flabby thief, but my very name had become a curse and a by-word for villainy amongst my erstwhile companions.

“So once you had lost the bike, what then?” asked Yewtree, between mouthfuls of supper.

That evening we were dining on the boiled tubers of a certain flowering shrub that Miss Lavender had taught us to recognise. It was one of

several innovations that the ever-resourceful Lavender had introduced to our nomadic lifestyle, including the furs we now sat on, skinned and tanned by her own fair hand. The bright green tubers were rather tasteless, filling, and induced (in me at least) distressing quantities of trapped wind. But it was also plentiful in these parts, and in the absence of readily available game it had become our staple.

"I did not lose the bike," replied Miss Lavender a little haughtily. "I know its exact whereabouts."

"But how did you survive alone, and on foot?"

"Why much the same way that you have, I imagine," was her reply. "A little thrift, a little care, rather more application."

Yewtree interrupted her. "What I don't understand is why you decided to go it alone in the first place. Surely there were others who wanted to get away? Wouldn't you have had less to endure in company?"

"Perhaps," said Miss Lavender, "But there were less malcontents in City Hall than you imagine, and certainly less opportunities to escape. Most of those who had wanted to strike out on their own had already done so, and those who remained were changed."

"Changed? In what way?" I asked.

Miss Lavender frowned. "People began to be afraid to stray very far from the camp, especially alone. A rumour went around that you had gathered together a gang of aliens, Braddellites they were dubbed, who stalked the camp and were ready to hunt down anyone who found themselves out alone after dark."

"Hunt them down?" I laughed. "To what end?"

"To eat them," said Miss Lavender grimly.

There was an unhappy pause in the conversation while we all privately reflected on what we had experienced in that misty forest valley so recently, before Miss Lavender took up the threads of her tale once more.

"Just a few days after your disappearance another group of Citihallians vanished – several households, at least a dozen people in total. Of course they had absconded – their tents and all their equipment had gone with them – but that didn't prevent the authorities from calling it murder. From that point on we were forbidden from leaving the camp in the hours of darkness, and when that did not stop the leak, the prohibition was extended to daylight hours too. So even those who did not succumb to the fear-mongering were cowed by their respect for the communal laws."

"Communal law!" bellowed Yewtree indignantly. "Why, these laws were never the product of any community I was a part of! This is unbri-

dled draconianism! And what authorities have the power to restrict a man's movements if he has done no harm? This is not the City Hall I knew!"

Miss Lavender's eyes seemed for a moment filmed with tears, and she took on a distant look. I wondered whether some untold incident had proved the impetus to her leaving City Hall, something she had chosen not to reveal to us. Though I had privately sworn my undying love for her, I still barely knew the woman. It was as though I had pledged my loyalty to a foreign nation never seen, as Yewtree seemed to have tied his colours to the mast of Romundli, even before we had set eyes on the place.

"Guards were stationed around the camp perimeter," continued Miss Lavender, "and even beyond the camp, armed patrols combed the area for signs of intruders or curfew-breakers. It became close to impossible to conspire with one's fellows. To speak aloud one's wish to leave the camp would have been seen as a sign of insanity or even treachery. There must have been others who wanted to break free, but we had as yet not found one another, nor developed a means of communication. I had to make a decision – either stay with the Citihallians and hope that other dissenters crossed my path, or else strike out alone. For too long I prevaricated, cautiously seeking out like-minded citizens who might join me in an escape attempt."

"What changed your mind?" I asked.

"Something else happened," said Miss Lavender, and we all sat still for a moment while we listened to the mournful barking of some wild animal, miles away in the depths of the night.

"Wolves?" I wondered aloud, and the word brought back disturbing memories of the Bugis.

"Wild dogs," Miss Lavender corrected me. "Not much meat on them, but good thick coats, just like the ones we're sitting on now."

Taken aback I ran my fingers through the coarse fur beneath me, but was aware at the same time that I should not have been surprised. In my mind's eye I pictured Miss Lavender wrestling one of these slavering predators to the ground with her bare hands, then either breaking its neck or putting its eyes out with a sharpened stick. It was not an image that appealed to my romantic inclinations and I decided to probe no further into the means by which these invaluable coats had been parted from their owners. No doubt Miss Lavender, ever resourceful, had devised a hygienic and humane method of trapping the beasts.

Abruptly the barking ceased.

"Sounded like it was in pain," said Yewtree.

"No," said Miss Lavender. "That's their mating call. But it amounts to much the same thing."

"You said that something else had happened to change your mind about City Hall," I said, changing the subject.

She looked directly at me with an inscrutable expression, which sent a shiver down the nape of my neck.

"Do you remember the day we escaped from the volcano?" she asked.

"How could I forget it?" I said, flushing at the thought of the unfinished letter I had discovered among Miss Lavender's effects. It was a subject I had never dared broach with her.

"A child was born that day," continued Miss Lavender, "on the slopes of Mount City Hall."

"Yes, I do remember hearing the news," I said, thinking back to that first night in the emergency shelter.

"No casualties, and one new arrival!" said Yewtree with a smile. "The population of City Hall actually grew that day, despite the Punggol bombs! A good omen for the future, eh?"

"That little boy is crawling now," said Miss Lavender.

"Is he now?" said Yewtree. "How the time rushes by! But what of it?"

"Since you both left, the infant has taken on a larger significance than you could have imagined. Of course, other mothers have given birth since, but he was the first, and the only one born on the volcano itself. They say that a tent was put up on the mountain, and that the doctor and midwives all crowded inside to assist in the delivery while the bombs fell around them. But it was just one of many incredible stories of survival to emerge from that strange day, until very recently. I don't quite know how the rumour started, but the child had been given a sheet of paper to play with, and had got hold of some coloured chalks. When his mother saw the marks he had made she became convinced that he had drawn a map of the new homeland."

"What?" cried Yewtree. "Who is this cretinous woman?"

"Her name is Mrs Lakeside. But now she is more frequently known as the Sacred Mother of the Philosopher-in-Chief." Yewtree and I laughed out loud but our mirth was cut short when we saw that Miss Lavender was entirely serious.

"You would not be suffered to laugh at the Philosopher-in-Chief were you still amongst the Citihallians," said Miss Lavender. "Nor would you treat it so facetiously if you saw with your own eyes the reverence in which the child is held by the general population."

"Reverence?" spluttered Mr Yewtree. "Sacred beings? But this is the

language of the brutish mud-dweller, the stone-worshipper, the religion-mired half-reasoning primitive! How could we have sunk so low?"

I did not comment at the time, but in that one outburst Yewtree had laid bare the true depths of his attachment to the culture of his birth despite all his professions to the contrary and assertions of his Romundlian ancestry.

"I can't answer that," said Miss Lavender, "but I can tell you that the situation worsens weekly. As the infant gained greater control of his limbs, his gestures and babblings were judged to have a deeper meaning. When there was uncertainty about the way ahead, the child was brought, with immense pomp, to the head of the caravan, and whichever direction he pointed was interpreted as the shortest route to the homeland.

It was such a decision that led the whole city to the brink of disaster when the child's chubby finger would have sent the advanced scout party over the edge of a precipice. Six did indeed lose their lives, and six more were badly hurt, trying to find a route down the almost sheer cliff, or trying to ford the rapids that rushed by at the base of the cliffs.

"Reason would have insisted they turn back as soon as they came to the precipice!" said Yewtree.

"Reason had already retreated," said Miss Lavender. "They say that one man deliberately gave himself up to the water, rather than fail to carry out the orders of the Philosopher-in-Chief."

"Their first martyr," I commented.

Miss Lavender looked up, "First what?"

The word did not exist in the Citihallian language, at least not yet, and my Dover and Somerset had been unable to translate it.

It was in large part this incident that made up Miss Lavender's mind. If her despair at the accelerating decline of Citihallian ideals was not enough to outweigh the risks attendant on escape, then the threat to her own life tipped the balance.

"I tried to persuade my family to come with me," she said.

I confess that until that moment the notion of Miss Lavender's family had not occurred to me, unlikely as that sounds. Perhaps I had unconsciously assumed that, like Mr Yewtree, an only child whose parents were both dead, all Citihallians were more or less free agents, without family ties, or rather that their family was the larger community of City Hall. Certainly blood ties played a less important role in the life of the Citihallians than it would in that of a citizen of Europe, or any other of the civilised peoples of Earth. Children were, at least until the exodus, raised collectively in large sprawling nurseries staffed by parents and volunteers.

"Your family?" I asked now.

"Yes, you never met them," she replied. "My parents are rather elderly, and despite all the change-acceptance therapy they had undergone, the loss of their home came as a great shock to them. My mother in particular could never really accept that we would never be going back to City Hall. They had lived apart for years – finding that they no longer had much in common, they separated when I was sixteen – but both quickly became zealots for the Philosopher-in-Chief and his Holy Family. I suppose it was an emotional crutch for them in difficult times. And they had always wanted grandchildren, so the infant leader became a kind of grandson by proxy. He is a remarkably attractive child, if nothing else. They couldn't understand why anyone would want to leave – they had total faith in him. I have an elder sister too, and while she never said so explicitly, I suspected she had some sympathy with my little conspiracy. But my parents are frail, and she could not bear to leave them to cope on their own."

"How do you think they would have coped?" I asked.

"No better or worse than anyone else on that mad quest," said Miss Lavender. "But she – my sister – would not alter. She would not – what is that phrase you use Mr Braddell? – she would not *listen to reason*. I never really understood the meaning of it before. We lived in a world of reason, as fish in water. What need was there for us to listen out for it? Now I see how easily the voice of reason can be drowned out."

And so, telling nobody of her plan bar her sister, Miss Lavender loaded her stolen hover bike with as many supplies as she dared, and drove out of camp one morning before dawn.

"No doubt my parents will believe them when they say I was murdered by marauding Braddellites. Perhaps it is better that way. At least they will not think my absence a betrayal."

"Do *you* think it a betrayal?" asked Yewtree, tactlessly I thought.

"I don't yet know," said Miss Lavender seriously. "I'm tired, anyway. We should make an early start in the morning."

"In that case, I'll get some sleep too," said Yewtree. "Can I leave you to stoke the fire, Braddell?"

And with that they both withdrew, leaving me to my firewood and my thoughts. Even the wild dogs had apparently retired for the evening. I looked up at a sky clogged with unfamiliar constellations and wondered, not for the first time, whether my own sun was hiding amongst them. It was a sentimental notion, but I would have felt a fraction less lonely had I been able to tell myself that one particular pinprick of light held the Earth in its orbit and was, however incredibly, home.

A Diabolical Persistence in Error

To my surprise, Miss Lavender fell in with our travel plans, vague as they were, without a murmur of dissent. Perhaps she was so glad to be travelling in company again, that the destination hardly mattered, but if she had really been so unfussy she might have easily stayed with the Citihallians and entrusted navigation to a babe-in-arms, and saved herself the trouble.

I was hardly about to point that out. In one respect, Miss Lavender's sudden reappearance, in such dreadful circumstances as I have previously omitted from my narrative, was no less than a dream realised. Indeed some mornings I awoke unable to believe it, until I poked my head outside and could reassure myself with the sight of a third tent by the fire.

On the other hand this reunion could never have been other than a source of disturbance for us. For one it raised the spectre of hope in me, a ghost I had spent the last few months, if not exorcising, then at least mollifying. The coward in me felt a measure of relief that I had not been bolder in my letter writing. Miss Lavender did thank me for my "kind and thoughtful" letter, but if she read anything of my true intentions beyond the superficial blandishments, she gave no hint of it. And so the revelation that would result in either unbounded joy or shame and despair, the long-anticipated and dreaded crisis in our relationship was again postponed.

Mr Yewtree found my reticence incomprehensible and was almost as frustrated by it as I was myself.

"Just ask her, for goodness sake!" he urged me. "Out with it, man! Such feelings cannot be contained. They will fester and corrode your insides."

"Is that your professional opinion?" I whispered crossly. (The conversation took place early one morning as Yewtree and I were washing up after breakfast in a shallow stream, while just a few feet away Miss Lavender began disassembling her tent in readiness for the day's march.)

"It's merely common sense," said Yewtree. "Just say to her, 'I love you, Miss Lavender.' What is so complicated about that? What is the worst that could happen?"

"Will you please keep your voice down!" I replied, looking round, terrified that the object of our conversation might overhear it.

"You presume to know rather a lot about my feelings," I continued, looking away and scrubbing my pan with renewed vigour, with the aid of a twig.

"Listen, I understand these things better than you imagine," said Yewtree. "You have been offered a second chance at happiness. It would be churlish not to seize it. If you do not take this opportunity now it might be taken from you."

"And what is the meaning of that remark?" I demanded, just as Miss Lavender herself appeared behind me on the riverbank.

"Not finished yet?" she said. "What are you two arguing about?"

Before Yewtree had a chance to open his mouth, I said, "The best technique for washing dishes. Mr Yewtree prefers brushwood as a tool. I myself prefer the simple stick to attack more stubborn dried-on stains."

"It seems a strange subject for such heated debate," she commented. "Why don't you simply use a dishcloth as I do? In any case, you should hurry: bad weather is on its way."

We looked to the brow of the hill behind her, and banks of damp, inky cotton wool, blotting out the sky, confirmed her forecast. Within an hour we were ready to set off, just as the rain began to spatter the tops of our rucksacks. It did not stop raining for the next six weeks.

I do not remember much about the following episode of our journey, and from what little I do recall there was little of interest to the general reader, unless he has a particular interest in sub-tropical climates. The rain: of course I remember that. But it is as if the weather during those miserable weeks has mushed all my memories together. One or two isolated events stand like islands above the flood. I remember that after two weeks of solid downpour, when Mr Yewtree joked, "I think this must be the rainy season," Miss Yewtree was so far from amused that she pushed him down a short slope, at the bottom of which he barked his shin quite badly on a rock. The incident revealed a tempestuous side to Miss Lavender's character, which I had not hitherto suspected.

Mr Yewtree's comment stayed with me, and I distinctly remember the morning when the revelation came to me in a flash: we were travelling south, not north. We were following the wrong stars as blindly as the Citihallians followed the tiny forefinger of their Philosopher-in-Chief. We were heading for the equator, not the poles, moving out of the temperate zone. How else to explain the monsoon?

At first I told myself that the facts were uncertain, and this satisfied me as an adequate reason to put off telling Mr Yewtree and Miss

Lavender of my suspicions. The longer we endured the constant torrents of rain, the further we pushed into the sub-tropical zone, the flimsier this excuse appeared. I was certain in my own mind that we were straying further from our goal with each day's toil. The vegetation and wildlife had, by slow degrees and footsore miles, begun to subtly shift, gradually becoming lusher, denser and more diverse. I had never seen a live monkey back on Earth, but a distant memory of schoolboy natural history lessons told me that the tiny, furred creatures who scampered across our path, who stole the food from our tents and bombarded us with stones and faeces from the branches above, were nothing other than these legendary primates. Lavender and Yewtree were astonished by their human resemblance. It was purely because of their lifelong confinement in the sterile environment of City Hall that neither saw anything suspicious in the gradual shift from a temperate environment in favour of a hotter, wetter one, supporting such species as the aforementioned monkeys, whose staple diet must have consisted mainly of fruits available year-round, along with many thousands of other species. Giant flowering cycads; limbless mammals that resembled my pet snake-mouse Raffles in all particulars, barring their complete lack of fur; several-trunked trees with great, flat buttresses like those of the Peruvian walking fig, but barbed with vicious thorns longer than my thumb; and innumerable, indescribable, tireless insects whom we battled in a perpetual siege of our equipment, clothing, food, hair and bodies. Had we spent much longer than those six weeks fending for ourselves in this tropical wilderness, I have no doubt but that the insects would have eventually claimed their victory. Infestations and the constant slow torture of rain apart, those six weeks took us to the last limit of our food reserves. The deeper we penetrated those jungly valleys, the less confident we felt about our ability to judge the edibility of the local flora. It is by pure, dumb luck that our mistakes in this regard were limited in their consequences to diarrhoea, a constant complaint for all three of us, and a brief but intense period of fever and delirium for Mr Yewtree, which delayed us for four days while Miss Lavender and I nursed him. Thirst was, it hardly needs stating, not an issue. But the task of keeping our dried rations in a state that still warranted the name strained our ingenuity.

Dense canopies of foliage shut out most of the sunlight in this region, so that game was harder to spot, let alone trap. It may have been my imagination, but the wildlife seemed jitterier at these latitudes too –was an increase in predatory pressure to blame, or was my hunger projecting itself onto the objects of its desire?

Despite these hardships I breathed not a word of my unhappy revela-

tion to my companions. Beyond a certain point, I reasoned, it was not worth turning back. Of course I was wholly ignorant of the extent of this sub-tropical realm. We might have been merely dallying on the fringes of a rain-forest continent the size of Amazonia, for all I knew. But the thought of having to retrace our steps back through that rainy hell, and then to recross all the territory we had with so much labour already conquered – well, it was unconscionable, and I was not so ignorant of my own store of inner resolve to believe that I would resist despair on such a return journey. With every day and every mile we hacked deeper into the jungle, this reason for my continued silence grew stronger. Why turn back now? My sanity would not have withstood an about-turn, for that is surely what Mr Yewtree would insist upon, should he learn of the mistake we had persisted in for so long. Yewtree had developed a deep longing for the island of his ancestors and, never one to indulge in self-doubt, he was quite certain that Romundli lay somewhere in the north, based on his own hazy recollections of his father's anecdotes. No, he would be adamant that we turned back, once the inevitable apoplexy at our wasted time and effort had subsided.

Miss Lavender's reaction to this dispiriting news was harder to predict. She had no particular vested interest in reaching Romundli beyond the bare hope that here we might find another outpost of humanity and civilisation somehow overlooked by the Punggol armies. Even this prospect evinced no great enthusiasm in my beloved Lavender. Since entering the rains she had begun to withdraw from our company, speaking only when necessary, and then only about practicalities.

I could hazard a guess as to what was the matter: she was overwhelmed with guilt about the manner of her escape from the Citihallians, and the plight of her elderly parents. She may have brushed aside concerns for their welfare in her explanations to Yewtree and me, and she was probably right that her mother and father would fare no worse, materially speaking, with or without their eldest daughter. City Hall operated an enviable state welfare system in which the needs of vulnerable groups were zealously met by both professionals and volunteers who saw the service as an essential part of their own ego-dissolution therapy. But it was not, I concluded, the image of her parents' empty cutlery-wheels that haunted Miss Lavender through her waking nights, but the idea of herself as traitor, deceiver, and what was possibly worse, Braddellite.

"You're lucky," Yewtree said to her one morning with his typical lack of tact. "At least you have some hope of seeing your parents alive again. They can live in hope of your return one day, slim as that hope might be."

But take me – both my parents are dead. The best I can hope for is a glimpse of their old home before I die.”

“I think it would be better if my parents presumed me dead, for all our sakes,” said Miss Lavender.

I could not see her face while she spoke these baleful words – it was almost entirely hidden by the rainhood she wore. But it seemed a terrible thing to say, and if at all indicative of her inner mental state, deeply troubling.

This was the third reason why I kept the secret of our navigational blunder. My concern for Miss Lavender’s mental health was already acute. Perish the thought of any further blow to her already fractured and failing sense of optimism.

It may strike the reader as contradictory that an émigré from such a confessional, psychoanalytical culture should remain such a closed book on the subject of her emotional well being, but such was the case. The oddity of her behaviour did not escape me at the time, I must add.

No odder than my own behaviour, certainly. It remained the case that, tenuous though it might be, the only hope I had of curing my brain disease lay on the island of Romundli. I could not accuse Eunós of having invented the place to further torment me. Its existence had been independently verified by Mr Yewtree, though its direction was still far from certain. Nevertheless it was my only hope of ridding myself of the infestation that had rendered me temporarily insane, and for all I knew might one day kill me. So why, the astute reader will ask, was I content to persist in error, once that error had been revealed? Why did I allow our footsteps to place an ever-greater distance between me and the only possible source of salvation?

Let me attempt an answer, though I have little hope of it proving an adequate one. First of all, I was far from content in our southerly wanderings. My mind was a constant battleground of intentions and counter-intentions, ravaged by apathy and procrastination. One day I would wake in my flooded tent, determined to come clean about the whole sorry business, but by noon, after we had fought through a few meagre miles of sucking swamps and mangroves, my determination had ebbed away, leaving behind only self-recrimination and guilt like so much flotsam and jetsam washed up on the beach of my consciousness. At times this inner struggle was so intense that I suspected a further episode of delirium was upon me. Undoubtedly I suffered from heightened feelings of persecution: were I to reveal my secret to Yewtree and Lavender, what would be their reaction? Why, they would most likely beat me to death

on the spot, or else drown me in the mire that we waded through up to our waists, such would be their rage at my persistent stupidity.

The weather did not assist rational consideration of our situation. Our weatherproof clothes began to dissolve under the strain of billions of droplets of water, beginning with the very tops of our hoods, most exposed to the downpour. Finally one day Yewtree tore away the ragged remnants of his own hood, and flung the useless shield into the mud in disgust, resolving henceforth to brave the elements bareheaded. But within days he was complaining both of headaches and hair loss, attributing both to unspecified acids in the rainwater.

The drastically altered conditions did nothing to slow the growth of my parasitical passenger. The creeping trailer was now several times the length of my own body, although I kept it carefully coiled and hidden away in my turban, the size of which had steadily grown throughout our journey, so that it now assumed comic proportions. I rarely bothered to unwind the turban to wash it anymore. In the jungle all of our standards of personal hygiene suffered a sharp decline; attempting to keep any part of one's body or clothes clean and dry was a futile endeavour. On the rare occasion that I did, I discovered that the turban device had been a serious error. Suckers from the original stem had begun to implant themselves at other points around my skull, and my strategy of winding the plant around my head had apparently facilitated this new development. Some of the new rhizomes could be detached with a sharp, painful tug. Others, nearer to the original fissure, had already begun to worm their way into my skull, precluding any attempt to remove them, although Yewtree saw no harm in trying. His one attempt left me with an intense headache, lights flashing in front of my eyes, and an inability to comprehend the number 17. The symptoms wore off after a few days, although that number has continued to trouble me ever since. This new development in the growth of the parasite leached away any residual hope I had of finding the Redhill Clementi, from which, according to Eunos's analysis, a cure might be extracted. The plant had by now become so tightly bound to my own neural network that it was difficult to imagine how it might be disentangled. The winding stems and dark, velvet-furred leaves were an extension of my body.

As I neglected my own bodily hygiene in the damp, sticky morass of the Kadaloorian tropics, so I abandoned any attempt to disguise my affliction. New shoots and leaves poked out between the strips of my turban, and flourished in the open air, until I resembled, as Yewtree remarked, a pollarded tree. There was a time when such thoughtless comments would have piqued me, but I no longer cared, or had the

strength to get on my high horse about it. In the jungle there was no pride to be injured. We lived like animals, existing from day to day, driven inexorably south as though by some migratory instinct, but one that had been cruelly deceived.

And then one day, the jungle ended. Our only warning was a subtle alteration in the quality of the light streaming between the tree trunks, and I emerged on the banks of a wide, brown river, in torrent and churned up by the pounding rain. Speechless, I stood in the ankle-deep mud, barely thicker than the river water itself, and stared at the spectacle. On the other side of the river, almost directly opposite us, stood a small log cabin, two stories high and topped by an observation tower. I looked around to see Yewtree and Lavender standing beside me, equally dumb-founded. It was only now, in the unimpeded daylight, that I saw truly how ragged and filthy we all were.

"How are we going to get across?" asked Miss Lavender.

As though in answer, a small moving speck on the opposite shore slowly grew, and resolved itself into the shape of a boat.

A Hard Bargain

"It's not free, you know," said the ferryman. He kept his boat a short distance from the shore and eyed us with suspicion. I looked at my own filthy, sodden rags. Yewtree turned to me. "What did he say?"

"He says we have to pay," I explained, then turned up the volume on my Dover and Somerset so that we could all converse. There was a risk of course that the ferryman adhered to the same strange ethos as our erstwhile hosts the Bugis, but the ferryman did not look like one of the Bugis. Most of him was hidden beneath a voluminous black cape and wide-brimmed sowester-style hat of the same material. From under the brim, blue eyes peered out of a grizzled, lined face. A bushy grey moustache was neatly parted, its length hidden by the collar of his raincoat. I found it hard to imagine that any Bugis male would have taken the trouble to brush his moustache.

"We can pay," said Yewtree.

"With what?" I asked. I looked about us. Little of value had survived the monsoon.

"We can discuss terms on the journey across," said Yewtree.

The ferryman shook his head. "Pay first, ferry later."

Miss Lavender said, "Well, how much is it?"

"Depends on where you want to go. Just to the other side – small cost. All the way to the delta – a little bit more."

"The delta?" I asked. "You mean the mouth of the river? The sea?"

The ferryman looked surprised. "Where are you people from?"

Yewtree opened his mouth to speak, but Miss Lavender silenced him. "We've come a long way," she said circumspectly.

"What tribe?" asked the ferryman, narrowing his eyes.

"We're all from different tribes," said Lavender.

Yewtree interrupted. "I'm from the Island of Romundli! Can you take us there?"

The ferryman said, "I can take you as far as Sembawang, but you'll have to find your own passage when you get there."

I could not believe what I was hearing.

"How far is it?" asked Yewtree. "I mean, to Romundli?"

The ferryman shrugged. There's an overnight ferry," he said. "I've got a friend who works at the docks. He may be able to get you a good price."

"Would you talk to him?" said Miss Lavender. "We'd be grateful."

"Of course that's going to push up the price you pay to me. Not much though."

All three of us looked at one another, wondering what we still possessed that might be of value.

"We have these," I said, holding up the tents we had appropriated from the Citihallian camp. Of all our possessions, these alone had proved waterproof, and as our only refuge from the constant downpour, we would probably never have got this far without them.

The ferryman eyed the mud-smeared tent rolls sourly.

"No, I've got one of those already," he said. "What's that thing around your neck? A talky box?"

"You mean my Dover and Somerset?" I said, holding the box protectively. "I'm sorry, that's not for sale."

The ferryman said, "It turns your words into my words?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. It's a universal translator. I couldn't possibly consider parting with it."

"That's a shame," replied the ferryman. "It's a clever trick." He began to move towards the back of the boat to retrieve his oars. "Well, good luck getting across. I'd advise you not to try swimming. If the current doesn't get you, the fish will."

"What are you doing?" hissed Yewtree to me. "Give him the box! It's your only hope of a cure!"

I began to explain to him the impossibility of our survival in a foreign

land without even the barest means of communication, but Miss Lavender interrupted me by calling out to the ferryman just as he was about to pull away from the shore.

"Hey wait! You can have the talky box! It's a deal!"

My face must have been thunder, but it softened when she turned to me and said tenderly, "Newton, it's your only hope. Yewtree is right. And I can't allow you to pass up this chance. I know this is going to be difficult for all of us, but it will be worth it if you find what you're looking for."

Could any man refute such arguments, expressed so sweetly by the one person on whom he had pinned all his hopes of future happiness? I had one caveat: I would not give up the Dover and Somerset until we were safely aboard the ferry to Romundli. It was a safeguard against the possibility that the ferryman planned to cheat us, as I explained it to my companions, but in truth I lived in dread of losing the Dover and Somerset. I had already panicked when I had thought the device was malfunctioning. How would I cope without the power of speech? My Citihallian was still rudimentary and the language of these Romundlians was a mystery to us all.

"That's not how it works," said the ferryman. "You pay before you get in the boat."

"Then let us give you a down-payment," I said, rummaging in my backpack. "I have... I have a very unusual creature, a rare specimen of mammal, unknown in these parts, a highly prized curio, a limbless mouse."

"You cut the legs off a mouse?" asked the ferryman.

"No, no!" I said, but my rummaging failed to produce Raffles, who had either concealed himself among my possessions, or had finally deserted me. I could not recall having seen the snake-mouse for several days, but my mind had been on other things. Instead my hand pulled out an intricately carved spherical nut, a souvenir of the time I had spent as a guest of the Bird People.

The ferryman's eyes showed a flicker of interest. "You don't see many of those nowadays," he said.

"No, they're very rare," I agreed. "Made by the Bird People – do you know them? Wonderfully skilled craftsbirds."

"Let me see that," said the ferryman.

I handed over the Bedoki nut, leaning across the riverbank. The ferryman turned it over in his hands.

"It's a child's puzzle," I explained. "Well, not just for children."

“Not a puzzle,” said the ferryman. “It’s an old talisman. To ward off evil.”

“Yes, and a very effective one,” I agreed.

The ferryman laughed. “No need for this sort of thing now. The evil has been banished, many years ago. This is just a relic.”

“You can’t be too careful.”

In the end we reached an agreement. The ferryman took the Bedoki nut as a deposit, and I would hand over the Dover and Somerset device as soon as we disembarked at the port, wherever that was. The ferryman would then arrange our transport to Romundli.

“You going to get your head fixed?” asked the ferryman as I took my place in the little rowing boat and hefted my backpack onto the plank seat beside me.

I looked up at him in blank surprise. “What?”

The ferryman waved vaguely at the tangle of weedy outgrowths that escaped from my headdress.

“Your head,” he said. “That why you want to go to Romundli?”

I nodded eagerly, but before I had the opportunity to ask him a question, he had stalked away to the prow of the boat to see to the oars.

Lavender and Yewtree climbed aboard and the man pushed us off the bank into the swollen current.

“Did you hear that?” I asked Yewtree when he had sat down.

“Hear what?”

“I just... well, I can’t believe we’re actually going to Romundli,” was all I could say at that moment.

“Why ever not?” said my friend. “I never doubted it for a moment. But that’s the difference between us two.”

“What is?”

“You have no faith in yourself,” said Yewtree.

I turned away and stared into the rain-troubled waters as the ferryman’s oars dug into the current. The little boat bucked and lurched in the brown torrent. For a few minutes Yewtree and Lavender talked to one another in low tones but soon fell silent. For the rest of the crossing we all sat with pale knuckles gripping the side of the boat and teeth clenched, as eddies, whirlpools and crosscurrents toyed with the little boat. I was reminded of the *Tanjong Pagar*, the spaceship that had brought me to Kadaloor, spinning helplessly through the void like a seed on the breeze. Of course in contrast to the *Tanjong Pagar*, this vessel was far from rudderless and, unlike my own craft, the captain had not let his hand slip from the tiller through carelessness. Even when it felt as though the little boat was wildly out of control and on the verge of capsizing, the

ferryman merely shifted his grip on the oars and steered another course along invisible pathways through the apparent chaos of forces and counter-forces. It was punishing physical work, and the ferryman grunted and sweated as he leaned and pitched, sometimes with, sometimes against the boat's movement. His face remained impassive until we reached the far bank and he broke into a large grin.

"A good ride, eh? You got your money's worth."

"Wait a moment," said Miss Lavender crossly. "You promised to take us to the ferry port! We had a deal!"

The ferryman leapt into the water, waded to the shore, and began to lash a rope to a gnarled tree stump on the bank.

"Too late to go to the ferry. Go tomorrow instead," he said. "Dark soon."

"Where will we sleep?"

The ferryman looked surprised at the question. "In my home!" he replied.

That night, for the first time in many months, we spent the night under a roof, dry if not exactly warm. The log cabin was also home to the ferryman's wife and an indeterminate number of small children who came at intervals to stare at us or bring us gifts of leaves or decorated river pebbles. The ferryman's wife was as laconic as he, and expressed no surprise at the arrival of guests. She led us to the only available floor space in the building: the observation tower, where we rolled out our bed mats. There was supper: some sort of bitter, mashed root, filling and hot at least, and to our great surprise apparently free, or included in the deal we had struck.

"Where can we wash?" asked Miss Lavender, as the lady of the house came up to our crow's-nest bedroom to retrieve our empty bowls.

"In the river," said the woman. "But not now."

"Why not?"

"At night the big fish come," she said, before climbing back down the ladder that poked up through a trapdoor.

The ferryman's house seemed rickety, but proved surprisingly weatherproof. The rain was channelled directly into the river through a series of long, natural gutters made from hollow plant stems, which began on the roof, itself curled into a pointed shell-like spiral of interwoven branches, then wound down around the observation tower in half pipes of increasing diameter, finally emerging as a gushing spout at ground level. The noise made by such a contraption was considerable, but we were all three so exhausted that Punggol warships would have had difficulty rousing us.

The last thing I recall before my eyes closed was peering out through the vertical slats of the cabin. As darkness fell, dozens of points of light emerged, one by one in quick succession. On our side of the river the forest was dotted with campfires, but when I glanced over at the way we had come, the darkness was complete. Ruminating on this in that strange, meandering state of mind that often precedes sleep I heard, somewhere behind the rain, a great splash, as of some vast object emerging from, and then submerging once more beneath, the surface of the river. My dreams were troubled by the "big fish" alluded to by the ferryman's wife, vast malevolent shadows sunk in the deepest silts of depression.

I woke with a start. "What's that?" I shouted out, confused.

"No rain," replied Yewtree. "It's just the sound of no rain."

Against all probability, the sky was blue. My eyes were drawn up to that blue again and again. When the ferryman's wife appeared in the trap door, carrying bowls of the same bitter orange mash as had formed the basis of yesterday's supper, she said, "The rains stop today."

In appearance she was short, like her husband, but also stooped. Greying, tangled hair scraped back untidily into a bun framed a face that was as lined and careworn as the ferryman's, and her soft, grey eyes were as inscrutable as his. In her general physiognomy she resembled Yewtree and Lavender more than she did Marsiling and Eunos with their almond eyes and sallow complexions.

Yewtree was already up and about, fussing with his pack. Miss Lavender slept; I had spent the last few, brief minutes gazing at her lovely face, the only part of her visible outside the sleeping bag, a rare enough opportunity in itself that was interrupted by the arrival of our hostess.

"Will she wake soon?" asked our hostess.

I shrugged. "She is very tired."

Yewtree nudged my beloved in the ribs with the toe of his hiking boot. "Up you get, you lazy pig," he barked. "Do you want us to miss the ferry?"

Miss Lavender sat up immediately, blinking. "I wasn't asleep," she said. "I was just lying awake, enjoying the sensation of sunlight on my eyelids."

I felt a thrill of mingled joy and fear as I heard those words: had she been aware all along that I was gazing down at her? And if so, why did she not open her eyes before? An idea then leapt into my mind with such suddenness and clarity that I found it irresistible, and formed in that instant a resolution of the most binding and unyielding kind. I *would* find

a cure for my brain disease. Then, and only then, I would ask Miss Lavender to marry me. The sense of a larger purpose to my actions immediately lifted my spirits. It seemed as though, quite unexpectedly, I had risen above the cloud of mental fog, the existence of which I had hitherto barely understood, just as a man who has spent weeks enduring constant rain forgets that he is being rained on, until the skies clear, so too did I now see the depths of depression to which I had sunk. My indecisiveness over the question of our navigational blunder: this was obviously another symptom of the sluggish mindset that had become, until this moment, my *modus operandi*. That we had been travelling south instead of north all this time hardly mattered now: Romundli was almost within our grasp. I vowed that I would break my silence on this subject, at a more convenient time, perhaps once we had actually reached the island.

There was a mood of child-like excitement in the air as we prepared to embark on the next stage of our journey. Some of the older children offered to wash our mud-encrusted clothes. After they had beaten the garments on rocks by the river, and dried them in the branches of trees, they returned them to us threaded with sprays of fragrant tree blossoms. The ferryman spent a long time preparing his boat, loading it with large blocks of the bitter mash we had eaten at every meal, here dried into rough bricks. I guessed he was using the opportunity of a trip into town to do a little trading at market. When he finally returned to the house, I put to him the question that had been troubling me since the previous day.

"Do you really think I'll be able to get my head fixed once we get to Romundli?"

The ferryman, busy at his breakfast, shrugged. "Maybe," he said. "Some do. Some don't."

"So other people – people like me, I mean – go there for a cure?"

The ferryman nodded, chewing the mashed root with inexplicable relish.

"People from around here?"

"Yes," he replied. "And other places too. Some near, some far."

"Are there many people who live in this area?" I asked.

The ferryman chewed thoughtfully for a few moments.

"Not many, but some," he said decisively.

"We saw fires, last night, in the forest."

The ferryman looked up from his bowl, his expression a mixture of surprise and annoyance as though he were not used to conversations of such extravagant length.

"Cooking fires," he said. "People make them."

"Yes, I understand. But they were only on this side of the river. Nothing on the other bank. Does nobody live on the other side?"

"Apart from you three? No, not many."

"Why ever not?"

"Too lonely," was his explanation.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Who would want to go and live over there? Nobody to talk to."

Naturally we had been conversing through the Dover and Somerset, and our host now pointed to the device still slung around my neck, and said, "You got spare batteries for my talky-box?"

"Actually it's called a Dover and Somerset Predictive Conversation Simulator. And no, it doesn't need batteries – it's solar powered."

His eyebrows rose. "The sun is the battery. Should last a long time."

"It was made on my home planet of Earth," I could not help saying with some pride.

The ferryman chuckled. "You really need to get your head fixed, don't you?"

"Once we get to Romundli, where can I... I mean, how should I go about..."

"They'll come and get you as soon as you step off the boat."

"Get me? Who will come to get me?"

"The nurserymen."

That seemed to be the end of the conversation as far as our host was concerned, for he pushed his bowl away, rose, and strode out onto the little jetty that abutted the log cabin.

He beckoned us. "Come on, it's time to go."

There were no farewells to his wife or children. As we floated away we saw the lady of the house grimly chopping wood. We waved, but she did not even look up.

Sembawang

This leg of our journey lasted all day. While the rain had stopped and showed no sign of returning, the river was still in spate and in mischievous mood. Several times it tried to steer us into rocks or becalmed pools, but the ferryman sternly plied his oars and avoided disaster. At regular intervals we passed clusters of huts, and at some of these the ferryman instructed us to toss out bricks of the dried mash onto the bank.

This was an unasked-for and nerve-wracking task: the ferryman was visibly enraged when my first throw ended in the water and floated away, though he said nothing. In return small children ran out and threw a variety of barter items into the boat. Their range and accuracy was remarkable, and soon the floor of the boat was littered with mysterious sealed clay bottles, bundles of leaves and even small joints of meat. The trades were made without negotiation or even any exchange of pleasantries. Any conversation at such a distance would have been difficult, but I got the impression that these were people of few words.

The river broadened and slowed until both banks were little more than a hazy line of trees in the distance. There was traffic here: fishing steamers, water taxis, rafts and barges glided silently by. We spotted a pretty stone bridge of three arches spanning a tributary.

“Civilisation!” was the only word I could find. After the months of wilderness inhabited only by the pitiful Bugis, the sights that were now passing us by had the quality of a dream. How had these towns and villages escaped the notice of the Punggol warships? These folk inhabited no subterranean labyrinths like the Citihallians. This string of compact, neat houses of dressed dove-grey stone on the shoreline had an air of age, almost of antiquity. Humans had evidently been taming this land for many centuries. I saw no evidence of bomb damage, no shell-craters blasted out by Punggol raids. It was as if that malevolent purple race had never existed.

Slowly the port hove into view, curling round the arms of a small horseshoe bay. The little blocky houses were stacked in tiers up the steep hillside behind like the steps of a shattered amphitheatre. From this distance the appearance was picturesque, but the closer our ferryman rowed, the more lived-in and grimy the town appeared. The docks swarmed with figures hauling barrels and crates on and off barges, and what looked like wooden horse-drawn carts, although no beasts of burden were in evidence. After a brief altercation with the pilot of a water taxi, we docked and clambered out onto a narrow wooden jetty.

Yewtree, Lavender and I stood there, clutching our backpacks, in a chaos of activity. Dockers and boatmen were yelling at us or at one another, hauling crates onto wagons, pushing past us with trolleys laden with sacks, teetering piles of vegetables and nose-assaulting spices, red powders, black seeds, a cornucopia of alien produce that baffled eye and ear. For many weeks all three of us had become accustomed to the subtle sounds of the forest, its muted light, and to each other's sullen presence. Even before that, Yewtree and Lavender had been used to an orderly, uniform existence in the underground cocoon of City Hall. The

perfectly ordinary scenes unfolding before us on these glittering granite docks, under a cloudless sky, were overwhelming.

The ferryman hustled us out of the main thoroughfare and led us down alleyways between fish-stinking warehouses, impatiently beckoning us every few yards, as though anxious to be rid of us. We stood in a silent huddle in the corner of a bar while he held a whispered conversation with a bearded old soak smoking a double-headed pipe. Apparently on this drunkard's advice we were led through another labyrinth of alleyways littered with the detritus of what must have been a seafood market, now closed, until we crossed a bridge over a deserted wharf and found ourselves at the door of a ramshackle hut. The interior was equipped with the trappings of a makeshift office, along with filing cabinets, what appeared to be sea charts on the walls, and a balding man in a pleated gown of drab, writing in an enormous ledger with pen nibs that fitted over the ends of his fingers like prosthetic fingernails. Another whispered conversation took place between the ferryman and this bureaucrat. I saw no payment change hands, but after we had waited dumbly for the negotiations to conclude, the ferryman beckoned us forward one at a time. In the outstretched hand of the officer was a wafer-thin tablet of white clay, inscribed with a series of undulating lines. My ticket to Romundli: I reached out to take it, but the officer held onto his half and between us we snapped the tablet into two irregular halves. The officer put his half into a lockable cabinet, along with the other ticket stubs from Lavender and Yewtree.

"When do we leave?" asked Yewtree.

"Tonight, on the overnight ferry," replied the ferryman.

It was already late afternoon by the time we reached the dock. The ferry was waiting for us at the dockside. It appeared to be an odd sort of paddle steamer with six paddle wheels on either side of its twin hulls, and several angular awnings stretched above the deck, creating an interior space for the passengers. The latter sat in small huddled groups on the dockside, eating and chatting. I spotted a few isolated figures amongst them, sat apart and obscured from head to toe in windowless grey shrouds. Nobody seemed to pay them any mind, so I tried to concentrate on the task of teaching the ferryman how to operate my Dover and Somerset. It was an arduous task, not primarily because of the complexity of the subject matter, or the stupidity of my student, although both were considerable, but because of a fundamental unwillingness on my part. I was only too aware of how helpless I would find myself as soon as I gave up that invaluable little box. Miss Lavender and Mr Yewtree could converse together in Citihallian, a language still very new

to me. I was about to be marooned on a linguistic desert island. It was quite certain that no one else in the whole of Kadaloor spoke English.

Finally the ferryman said, "Yes, yes, I understand all that! Lesson is over! Give me the talky box. I have to go now. I have an appointment to buy manure. Very high quality manure."

The ferryman scuttled away into the crowd, the Dover and Somerset wrapped in his cloak. Were those to be the last words I ever heard in my native tongue? I banished this melancholy thought as Miss Lavender nudged me and pointed to the ferry, where a jostling crowd was beginning to gather on the jetty.

She spoke, and I caught the words, "boat", "come" and a compound verb that I half-guessed meant "gather up in a bundle". My earlier optimism rather dented and scuffed but undefeated, I hoisted my backpack and the three of us joined the throng of people on the dock, all trying to push towards the gangplank and waving their clay tablet ticket stubs in the air to prove they were legitimate passengers.

Boarding the overnight ferry to Romundli was a bureaucratic and boisterous business. Each ticket stub had to be matched to its other half, and an official wearing similar garb as the man who had provided our passage blocked the top of the gangplank with a large, ceramic board on wheels, designed to hold all the available tickets for this crossing. Each ticket had to be matched, and its authenticity verified by a subordinate officer. Forgery was apparently rife, as several men and women, and sometimes whole families, were refused entry or bundled into the custody of two large, unsmiling men whose uniform and demeanour marked them out as members of the security forces, whether employed by the shipping company or by the city authorities I did not learn.

Such scenes made me nervous about our own tickets. If they were fakes, I hoped they were well made. But I need not have worried: we were waved aboard, albeit last, with little fuss. However, once on deck, another uniformed man approached as we stood at the railings, waiting for the boat to pull away. He grabbed my arm and spoke impatiently, pointing to my tangled, matted turban, leaves poking out at mad angles. This is what I had feared since we arrived at the dock – that I would be prevented from sailing. The ferryman had assured me that others in my condition regularly travelled to Romundli, and yet I had not spotted anyone similarly encumbered with unwanted foliage. Perhaps we were banned from public transport for fear of contamination.

I tried to smile as the ferry official continued to berate me in Romundlian and our one-sided conversation ended with him leading me by the arm through a doorway into the interior of the boat, along a pan-

elled corridor, down a roped stairway into the airless bowels of the ship, and finally into some sort of store cupboard dimly lit by glowing shells pressed into the ceiling and walls. All the time the man continued talking to me, though I had not opened my mouth nor shown any sign that I understood him. Still talking, he rifled through shelves and drawers until he found what he was looking for. He handed it to me with a smile. It was a large, drab sheet of some sackcloth-like material, not too clean and smelling distinctly of mould. I tried to look my thanks and, bemused, turned to the door to leave, but the man grabbed my arm again, spun me around, and deftly draped the sacking blanket over my head. In that fetid darkness I was enlightened: the people I had spotted on the dock in such garb, were my fellow sufferers. Some cultural taboo of the Romundlians forbade us from displaying our mutations in public, and this was the solution. I thanked him again, in English, and this time sincerely. The man slapped me on the back in what I assumed was a good-natured way and pointed me the right way back to my friends. I guessed that he was well used to dealing with feckless foreigners seeking their salvation on Romundli. This was another cause for hope, I told myself.

My makeshift burqa was of a loose enough weave to allow me to see, although dimly, where I was going, and short enough that it did not reach the ground to trip me up as I walked. On my way back I passed several other passengers in the corridor, none of whom paid more than the slightest attention to my disguise. Clearly this was how all victims of the brain parasite had to travel. I was a little apprehensive however, at the prospect of having to hide my affliction under sackcloth for an extended period, once we had reached Romundli itself.

No show of nonchalance on my part could abate the astonishment of Lavender and Yewtree on my return. To my great frustration, I could not even adequately explain to them why I had donned the grubby blanket, but I think they guessed the reason quickly enough. Another phantom had appeared at the railings of the ferry, a lone sufferer who gazed mutely across the harbour. The sense of our shared suffering made me long to reach out to this fellow victim, man or woman. But it would have been a futile gesture: I could do no more than smile and point and nod, and the person beneath the blanket would likely find my attentions more wearisome than comforting.

As I gazed down the sheer drop of the ferry's hull to the oil-streaked channel of seawater below, my mind drifted across the ocean to Romundli, and to speculations of what I might find there. That the island offered the promise of a cure I no longer doubted, but what form would that take?

Apparently my friends were both consumed by similar musings on their respective futures. Miss Lavender, her eyes focused on some distant point, made a remark, the meaning of which seemed to involve the idea of “coming together” or “settling back to a standstill”. Vague as that translation was, as a man still profoundly besotted, I clutched onto her words as reasons for unparalleled hopes. I would cure myself of my parasitic growth, I would learn Citihallian and Romundlian fluently, and then I would ask Miss Lavender to marry me. We would come together and settle back to a standstill. But for now, forward motion was unavoidable. There was a grinding and crashing of gears, the railings began to judder beneath my palms and slowly the channel of seawater between the hull and the jetty widened until it became the ocean.

END OF VOLUME ONE

REVIEWS

The Quarterly Review

AUDIO

Doctor Who 124: Patient Zero

Nicholas Briggs

Big Finish, 2xCD

The greatest strength of this adventure is Nicholas Briggs, providing both the Dalek voices and some terrific dialogue for them, though Michael Maloney runs him close as Fratalin and his 799 familiars. Fratalin is a Jagrafin, who can separate out pieces of himself to act as independent agents, and then conjoin with them once the work is done. It's "one of the remotest periods of space-time the old girl's ever travelled in", as the Doctor notes, and Amethyst Station is being prepared for the arrival of the mysterious Viyrons.

For once the Doctor's not just walking into trouble, he's also bringing it with him. Charley, originally an Eighth Doctor companion, is "fading in and out of existence", and the Doctor doesn't seem to know about her past (his future). After a little while chilling in the Zero Room, Charley rows with Mila, who claims to have been hiding invisibly in the Tardis since the very early days (cue blushes on the part of Jamie and Victoria). When things go sour the Doctor's not there to help: he's already being escorted to the Amethyst's nearest airlock.

This isn't a perfect story. The Sixth Doctor seems to have lost the light touch of some earlier audio adventures, and is back to the blustering and bellowing of his television run. The set-up feels much like the Doctor wandering into the first moments of the BSG mini-series; the Viyrans look very much like Cylons. At the conclusion the Doctor weirdly decides to pop back out of the Tardis for an extra chat with the Daleks. And his characterisation is a bit off: he spends an entire episode yelling at Fratalin to lower his force fields and surrender to the Daleks.

But Briggs continues the process in which he has played such a big part: returning the Daleks to the height of their sixties cool. This story features the Dalek Time Squad, and their leader the Dalek Time

Controller, a slightly less insane version of Dalek Caan. Briggs makes them dangerous adversaries (both physically and intellectually), and delivers their dialogue with the same talent and relish he brings to the TV show. If I didn't enjoy the bits with Charley quite as much, perhaps their pay-off will come in future adventures. **6**

Doctor Who 125: Paper Cuts

Marc Platt

Big Finish, 2xCD

Starring Colin Baker as the Sixth Doctor and India Fisher as Charley, Paper Cuts follows straight on from Patient Zero's cliffhanger. Like the TV story Timelash, this sees the Sixth Doctor returning to the scene of a Third Doctor adventure. With fortuitous timing it's Frontier in Space (recently out on DVD), so we meet once again the reptilian Draconians, Jon Pertwee's favourite aliens.

Fifty or sixty years ago, in the 68th year of the Serpent, the Red Emperor of Draconia isolated the planet to keep out a plague, ending a thousand-year empire. Now, in the 80th year of the Blood, four men, "the highest, the lowest, the bravest and the wisest", are summoned to serve as vigilants in his tomb: a prince, a fisher-catcher, the disgraced captain of the Imperial Guard and the Doctor. One will become the new Emperor, but what terrible secret awaits him?

The script is by Marc Platt, writer of Ghost Light, the last story of the original series to be produced, and it shares with that story a most welcome ambition in its writing, with lines like: "There's something out there... Can you feel it? Filling in the dead spaces, gnawing at the ropes of time." It's full of interesting ideas like origami warriors with paper swords, young Draconians wearing necklaces of their own eggshells, and the extent to which time travellers can get away with letting their email build up. As the Doctor says, "Lateness, like all time, is relative."

Though setting a second story in a row in an isolated location makes for a little repetition, the "cold empty rooms with paper thin walls" make for a novel setting, and paper is a material that lends itself very well to audio drama. Overall, an exciting and entertaining adventure. **7**

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Quasi-Rabid Movies

In these, the “zombies” don’t even die; they go berserk after being infected by something that is often compared to rabies. The first of these was Romero’s *The Crazies*, although arguably Cronenberg’s *Shivers* did more to popularise the genre. *The Crazies* is mired in early 1970s politics, while Cronenberg’s “infected” also desire a lot of sex, which gives the movie more staying power. As it did with his aptly titled *Rabid*.

British “Zombie” Movies

Surprisingly given its low movie output, Britain has managed to make all of these types, though in small numbers. *Plague* of the *Zombies* was a true zombie movie, *Shaun of the Dead* was a parody movie, *28 Days Later* a mind-blowing *Psychomania* is a jumble movie, but a very British one, in which a gang of Hell’s Angels with Eton accents kill themselves in order to come back as rebels who can never die. Kids, eh?



True Zombie Movies

True zombie movies are those in which a sorcerer re-animates a dead corpse in order to make the corpse work for him. Absolutely true zombie movies would be set in Haiti, or based on Haitian magic, since this is where the word comes from. Examples include *I Walked with a Zombie*, *White Zombie*, and even *Plague of the Zombies* (in spite of its Cornish location). Close enough are films like *Revolt of the Zombies*, where the sorcery is Cambodian, and *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, in which a modern theory about how zombies are created (the person never really dies but is poisoned, paralysed and brain damaged) is used. Also close enough to be included is the entire tradition of Chinese “hopping ghost” movies, which are often called vampire movies. The “corpse herders” use magic to re-animate the dead to work in fields, just as the Haitians do. They are also controlled by a piece of paper, like the Golem – an interesting example of parallel folklore evolution. The first such movie was made in 1917 according to one website, predating the American zombie movie by fifteen years.

Jumbie Movies

A jumbie is a zombie who goes berserk after their master loses control over them, usually after they have been given salt. The same thing happens if the Taoist text is taken from the “hopping ghost” in the Chinese equivalent. This often happens at the end of zombie movies rather than being the focus of a movie in its entirety. Nevertheless, there have been a few movies where the dead come back to life when someone reads a magic text. Thus *The Evil Dead* (and a thousand imitators) could be said to be a jumbie movie, or close enough, though there is no control over the corpses in the first place.

Para-Jumbie Movies

In these movies there is no sorcery involved at all. For some reason the dead come back to life, they are never controlled, and they usually eat brains. This is the tradition that George Romero started. As noted above, the word “zombie” isn’t used in the original *Night of the Living Dead*. It was fans and/or critics who misapplied the term. Of course, what appears to be science (a space probe returning from Venus) is really magic in disguise; the cause of the para-jumbie plague is never really explained. So, Romero had invented a genre of his own and, not content with that, he then started another one: the quasi-rabid movie.

FEATURE

That Was No Zombie, That Was My Wife!

Steve Wilson

People often think that George Romero invented zombie movies. This suggests that he makes true zombie movies. The trouble is that he doesn't. Let's be clear on this, "zombie" is not a term that belongs to Hollywood or movie fans. A zombie is a very specific type of being that is part of the folklore of Haiti, the first Caribbean state to achieve independence from a European power. Zombies represent, according to some psychologists, a slave's vision of hell – to be brought back to life from the peace of the grave only to continue working in the fields. This is achieved by a Houngan – a Voodoo priest of the Petro tradition. His dark magic re-animates the corpse and the zombie is forced to do his bidding.

The USA only really became aware of the zombie – which is part of Haitian Voodoo tradition but not part of Louisiana Voodoo – through the 1929 book *The Magic Island* by American adventurer, author and occultist William Seabrook. One year later, Universal began its string of horror films, and the zombie was drafted in by them, along with the vampire, werewolf, mummy and Frankenstein's monster. In 1932 Bela Lugosi duly appeared in *White Zombie*. However, due to the popularity of Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* – a movie that never actually used "the z word" – it is necessary to classify the varied films that have been wrongly bunched together. I do so as follows:



- The chance to bring new audiences to both types of event, maximising income and helping positive word of mouth to spread.
- The potential to work closely with the accompanying possibilities of increased funding, increased staff pool, and increased access to resources.

When I set up Alt.Fiction, what I was trying to do was produce something in between a convention and a literature event. The aim was to have the focus on the quality of the genre, to gather a wide range of people involved in the industry, to programme on multiple streams and capture the friendly atmosphere that is a feature of the best conventions. I was also looking to incorporate some of the best features of a literature event as well – to run in a venue familiar to local readers and arts-goers, to focus exclusively on writing issues, to market to my regular local audiences as well as the genre press and community. What that resulted in was a mixed audience, some of whom had an interest in the genre and many who didn't, but who were interested in literature and were willing to try this new flavour. Only time will tell whether or not that was a success, and whether it will continue to be a success in the future, but the feedback was positive and I feel optimistic that it will continue successfully.

I think there's a bad habit among both genre event organisers and general literature event organisers to be very introspective and think "I don't need them". Maybe there's even an extent to which they don't – after all, conventions and literature festivals have both been running for many years, often very successfully. However, times are tough. When I look at the scene in my local area, in 2009 both NewCon and Alt.Fiction were missing due to circumstances beyond their control. Both will be back, I don't doubt it. Then if we look at literature festivals in the area – the three cities of Leicester, Derby and Nottingham have all dispensed with theirs, leaving us a smattering of literature festivals going on in the largely rural areas of Louth, Lowdham and a handful of others. Pretty much the only city literature festival left in this part of the UK is in Lincoln. The difficulty in getting money to run arts events preceded the credit crunch by some time, but the credit crunch has brought the issue to the fore even more. It's harder to get events up and running, and it's harder to draw a crowd because people are spending less.

The bottom line is that it's not a great time to be running these events, genre or not. But that does make it the perfect time to pull together and try to safeguard the present and the future for SFFH events for everyone.

event easily, most likely you wouldn't pay anything more than a five pound and you'd get to see or take part in something you were truly interested in as well.

I mean no disrespect to festival organisers – it's a huge undertaking, and you are consigning yourself to two weeks or more of 14-hour days. But I think that the biggest gap, and the one that leads to the scarcity of genre events, is one of knowledge. Organisers can't be expected to know everything about every genre, of course, but I sometimes found that the knowledge gap was most notable in SFFH. I'd often be asked about how to put on a genre event, how to contact authors, marketing ideas, and so on. I was always happy to help because that was the first step in somebody gaining the required knowledge. But the very fact that this was happening led me to believe that there was a knowledge gap in terms of organising such events. The event has to be marketed entirely differently too. You can't pitch it to people who have been to see Bernard Cornwell or Sophie Kinsella because it is an event with a niche audience rather than the broader appeal of some genres. Add to that an unfamiliarity with the subject matter, and it can cause serious problems.

However, there's a lot to be gained from organising an event in SFFH. In my previous job, I organised Alt.Fiction in the UK for three years. When I first went to pitch the idea of the event to my line manager, I was concerned I was going to get laughed out of the room. But he could see the value it could add to the literature programme, and over three years we were able to build a solid following as well as a surprising amount of kudos from both the Arts Council and the local council for attracting new audiences and bringing a national audience to the city in a way literature had never done before. There are plenty of safe bets you could back in putting together a literature programme, but nothing ever gets remembered for being safe.

In this article, I've been looking at literature festivals and conventions in very distinct and different terms. But what I would love to see is more communication, more cross-working and perhaps even more cross-organising going on between the two types of events. There's a lot to be gained for both parties in some cross-working, for example:

- The chance to cross-promote in an area where the opportunity may not normally arise including leafleting, brochure inclusion, mailings and e-mail distribution lists.
- The chance to share contacts, both mainstream and genre, in terms of writers, publishers and press.
- The chance to share skills and knowledge.

What surprises me the most about literature festivals is their stoic refusal to cover genre writing. During my previous role at my local council, I was always keen to try and include something relating to SFFH not only because of my own interest, but because of the popularity of the genre. Equally I ran events covering crime, romance, poetry and a good few other areas. Unfortunately a lot of other literature festivals are less than keen to follow the example, increasingly focusing on the mainstream “literary” authors, and moving more and more into non-fiction or “celebrity” fiction where name recognition, and therefore potential for audience, is much higher. It was always a bugbear of mine to see a celebrity who had just had a book ghostwritten for them and who was now looking to plug it in a big arena. It must prove very frustrating for people who have spent their whole life dedicated to their art.

The statistics on the matter speak for themselves. Just look at some of the UK’s biggest book festivals. The Hay-on-Wye Festival in 2009 comprised a whopping 264 events featuring Jasper Fforde as the only genre author taking part. The previous year’s Cheltenham Festival included a fantastic 194 events featuring only a Doctor Who event and children’s genre author Eoin Colfer. Those are pretty staggering statistics bearing in mind just how well many SFFH titles sell in bookshops. Looking at this, it’s no surprise that conventions have taken off in such a big way and have such a big following. If you want to see knowledgeable people talking about the genre – authors, agents, editors and other industry professionals – a convention is about the only place you can do it. If you want to see the genre’s big names, it’s also about the only place you can do it. If you want to attend a workshop looking at genre writing... well, you see where I’m going. The fact that these huge-scale SFFH events can be run without any official funding or support is incredible, and a testament to all involved.

However, although the price of a convention generally represents very good value, it is an expensive event for someone to attend. You could spend several hundreds of pounds with ease attending a UK event, and probably thousands if you were on your way to the US. I’d love to go to many more than I do, but financial necessity demands that I stick to one or two. But that doesn’t mean I’m any less interested in the genre, or seeing the writers, artists and other industry professionals taking part. Personally, I would love to see more opportunities to go to smaller-scale events which take place all year round. A convention necessitates time off work, saving up, booking a hotel and generally a fair degree of travel. Wouldn’t it be great if there were more readings and workshops as part of literature festivals and seasons? You could get to and from an

tience it does often leave you working in fields that you have little or no knowledge of. It also gives festivals a very unfocused feel, and each event therefore has to be marketed not only as part of the whole but also in its own right. A children's writer, an African poet and a romance writer will have wildly different audiences, and you have to find a way to reach all of them. The difference there is niche versus general. A more niche event may have a smaller audience, but a higher percentage of those people are likely to come. A general event will have a larger potential audience, but a far smaller proportion of them will attend.

With that in mind, marketing is one of the interesting differences as well. Most conventions have managed to build up an established audience who probably need no more than a nudge – an email update, a message on a social networking site, or something like that. There's also a great opportunity for cross-marketing with other conventions to prompt regular attendees. Many regulars are far more active than that and fully aware of the convention schedule themselves. Literature festivals have to re-invent an audience each time and, as such, months of sending out flyers, e-mailing, doing radio interviews, writing group visits and so on are needed to try and draw a crowd (and trust me, it doesn't always work). This is all too often within extremely limited budgets and as such it's not unusual to revert to things like photocopied flyers and personal visits to writing groups to spread the word. It's exhausting work, and produces wildly mixed results across the events that you can't always put down to marketing effort.

But what particularly struck me was the difference in how these types of event are organised – or should I say, who they are organised by. On a panel at NewCon last year someone used the terms "top-down" and "bottom-up" to refer to that difference. Imagine a triangle with the few events organisers at the top and the many fans at the bottom of the triangle. The terms "top" and "bottom" are not used disrespectfully here – just to represent the numbers of people in each group. Clearly, the fans and audience are the bases for any successful event. Literature festivals tend to be funded and are organised top-down, that is the organisers are delivering the events to the fans. Conventions are all but unique in that they are organised bottom-up – a group of keen fans, writers or independent organisers within the genre decide to pool their collective skills and energies to put on a convention. It's something I could never see happening outside of the genre. I often think conventions are there to plug the genre-shaped hole that literature festivals all too often leave open. I've also never come across a writing community that has been as active and enthusiastic as the SFFH one.

that I was organising something in a similar vein. It was then that I first went to EasterCon and FantasyCon, where I've since become a regular visitor. If finance was no object I'd probably go to many more, including the number of big conventions outside the UK that go on each year, but that's life.

I spent four years working in literature development, both as a freelancer and in a more formal capacity for my local council, and there were a lot of things I learnt during that time. I worked on three Alt.Fiction events as well as two far more general literature festivals, a poetry festival and a host of smaller events. And what struck me was the difference not only in putting together genre events and other events, but also the very notable differences between literature festivals and conventions.

Ignoring the obvious (literature festivals have a broader remit, conventions tend to take place in hotels, etc) one of the big differences is the type of audience that you get. Convention-goers tend to be hardened fans with a strong love for the genre, and a familiarity with many, if not all, of the authors participating. That may be a familiarity with their material or a personal familiarity. Festival-goers are less likely to be such avid fans, and many might just be there because they thought it sounded interesting or that the author was in their kind of genre, or just that the event was in their local area. Often these events can gain the author new fans, whereas a smaller convention may be about cementing those fans. It's a regular user/casual user dynamic that makes the difference.

Literature festivals, which tend to be annual or biennial, don't have that same following as a convention. Conventions may well have a number of people who visit each year, whereas a literature festival can't guarantee the same thing. There may be some who come in each instance, but it largely depends on what's on. Some people may come to all the poetry, or all the crime, or all the romance. Conventions gather, and often retain, a fairly regular crowd of fans, aficionados, authors and people involved in the industry. Again, the difference is very much regular user compared to casual user.

Conventions obviously have a strong focus on one, or a few, types of writing. Generally it is something in the fields of horror, science-fiction and fantasy but there are other fields such as crime and romance which are covered. Literature festivals often have the fairly difficult remit of trying to cover everything and trying to please everyone. Often this is set within the parameters of local council objectives. This requires events for young people, events for multicultural audiences, events with an exclusively educational focus, events in different areas of the city and so on. Obviously for a council this is only right, but I'll testify from experience

Recently released is the Lewis-directed film *The Uh-oh Show* a.k.a. *Grim Fairy Tale*, a horror gore comedy. Featured amongst the cast is Lloyd Kaufman, the brains behind Troma Studios. This certainly sounds like one not to be missed!

FEATURE

An Unconventional Truth

Alex Davis

Ever since I attended my first literature festival, I'd always fancied having a go at organising one myself. There was something about the atmosphere – being out there, taking writing and reading to the people. I took on all manner of volunteering just to be involved, anything from picking confetti off the floor to playing in an impromptu samba band.

That was probably a slightly naive attitude in retrospect, but I was fresh out of university and filled with dreams of using my Creative Writing degree on something other than working in retail (it's one of those subjects that employers look at and think "hmm, how does that apply to us?"). I was eventually given that opportunity having built up some experience, and set about my task with gusto. My first act was to set up *Alt.Fiction*, a one-day UK festival in the fields of science-fiction, fantasy and horror. Perhaps I was far too idealistic. Why shouldn't I do something like that after only five months in post?

Naivety aside, what I was trying to address was what I had seen at the time as a lack of events in the UK focusing on my preferred form of literature, and a form of literature which has a very strong following. Events in most other genres were plentiful – you could tick off crime, poetry, and literary events with the greatest of ease. It was very rare in my area to see an appearance by a SFFH writer, and I felt sure that I couldn't be alone in my disappointment at that.

It was only in putting together *Alt.Fiction* that I became aware of the convention scene and the very concept of a convention, despite the fact

Though his partnership with Friedman would dissolve on good terms, Lewis still pursued gore films.

Aside from nude cuties and gore films, Lewis has children's films as part of his filmography as well. One such film was Jimmy the Boy Wonder. One may wonder why the diverse catalogue? "Early on, I concluded that any category had (and has) a finite shelf-life. So it seemed sensible and logical to explore avenues other than the one I might be treading at the moment."

Despite retiring in the 1970s, he returned to directing in 2002. His influence on film and general pop culture is still being felt. The band 10,000 Maniacs based their name on Lewis's 2,000 Maniacs. His fan-base includes John Waters, Troma Studios, and Juno screenwriter Diablo Cody. When asked about having such influence, Lewis replied, "It makes my whole career worthwhile ... and proves that if an outsider is dogged enough and lives long enough, he or she becomes legitimate."

In recent years, Lewis has returned to directing films. He directed the 2002 sequel, *Blood Feast 2: All U Can Eat*. Lewis commented on his involvement with the *Blood Feast* remake/sequel: "Blood Feast 2 wasn't my film. Jacky Morgan put that together and hired me to direct. I'll tell you absolutely: whenever a producer wants me to direct a film, I'll be there!" Furthermore, films based on his previous works have been released. There was 2,001 *Maniacs* with Robert "Freddy Krueger" Englund and a remake of *The Wizard of Gore* with Crispin "George McFly" Glover.

While noted as a gore director, he was a jack-of-all-trades on his film productions. He acted, was a cinematographer, created gore effects, and composed music for his films. It added to the fun of the films, as well as the toll it had on him to make them.

"I wrote the music for *Blood Feast* because paying a composer/arranger was well beyond my budget. I wrote the theme for 2,000 *Maniacs* because I knew exactly what I wanted. After that, music became a generic part of the production. Once we were able to move beyond department store mannequins, delving into new gore-depths was just plain fun." The music for his films *Blood Feast* and 2,000 *Maniacs* can be found on the CD, *The Eye-Popping Sounds of Herschell Gordon Lewis*.

With the recent success of *The Evil Dead* musical and also *The Night of the Musical Dead*, inspired by the films of George A Romero, one can't help but ask about the possibility of a musical for 2,000 *Maniacs*. His response? "I'm certainly willing. Find me an adventurous producer and we'll be off to the big stage."

of Herschell Gordon Lewis, the American "Godfather of Gore". Lewis explains: "I was the television director of an advertising agency. I bought a half-interest in a small film studio in Chicago. The studio had only 16mm equipment. To compete with the West Coast studios, we bought 35mm equipment." The Pennsylvania-born film-maker served as a producer during his first film undertaking, a film called *Prime Time*. This would be the only time his role was solely as a producer. From then on, he took over directorial duties. Shortly thereafter, he began his partnership with exploitation producer David F. Friedman. The first films the duo produced were "nude cuties", which were in high demand during the early 1960s. "A distributor wanted this product. The origin was simply to satisfy a demand for which a distributor would guarantee payment." These revealing screwball comedies included such titles as *B-O-I-N-G!*, *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre*, and the nudist musical *Goldilocks and the Three Bares*. At the time, these films were in competition with the likes of Russ Meyer's nudie features.

Lewis recalls the circumstances in which he entered into the realm of gore films. "My partner, David Friedman, and I were in Miami, shooting a film on contract. It was cold in Chicago, and the decision to make a film of our own was based on two factors: 1) The 'cutie' field was becoming crowded; 2) we needed a subject the major film companies wouldn't touch." With that mindset, the duo would go on to make *Blood Feast* in 1963.

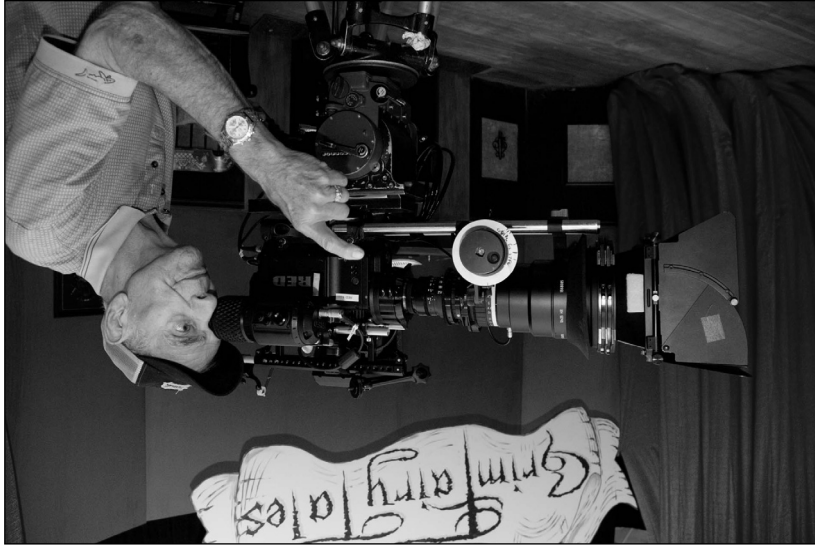
Blood Feast concerns an Egyptian caterer who kills women and takes a body part for the meals he serves. Such body parts included a tongue, an arm, and a leg. It became a hit on the US drive-in circuit and would be the oldest film on the banned list of films in the UK during the "video nasties" controversy. Given the humorous undertones of the film, Lewis stated, "I never took these films seriously, and that attitude had to leak through to audiences. Over the years since *Blood Feast* blasted open the gates, some evolution has taken place." That evolution may very well be the creation of the grindhouse cinemas that featured films with content that studios would not take to, whether it was sex, violence, drugs, or depictions of the counterculture.

A noted element of *Blood Feast*, in addition to his other films, was the use of marketing campaigns. The outlandish artwork of the lobby posters, and the disclaimers featuring Lewis regular William Kervin, recall the sensationalist methods of director/producer William Castle. "William Castle was my kind of producer. He ignored the prevailing rules and attitudes and went his own way." *Blood Feast* would be the first in a trilogy that continued with *2,000 Maniacs* and *Color Me Blood Red*.

INTERVIEW

The American Godfather of Gore in the 21st Century: an Interview with Herschell Gordon Lewis

Mackenzie Lambert



Before Herschell Gordon Lewis's brand of pre-grindhouse filmmaking, audiences were seldom exposed to visceral gore and bloodshed. Only two previous occasions come to mind. One is the infamous eye-slicing scene in the Buñuel/Dali Dadaist film, *Un Chien Andalou*. The other occurrence was the neck bite in *The Brain That Wouldn't Die*. Yet, it's not as if audiences were completely unprepared. There were already the infamous EC horror comics that provided shock violence and tongue-in-cheek humour. Both characteristics would contribute to the horror works

pressed her face into his lapel and held it there. He headed for the basement stairs, feeling for all the world that he had just become an actor on the cosmic stage. He imagined something terribly focused on him and felt the hairs standing to attention all over his body.

Finally he lumbered down the stairs, settling into the nest of pillows and blankets Min had made. He unfolded a vast foil canopy and spread it over them.

What goddam time was it? After four? Certainly he wouldn't have been the only one to make such a mistake in a world of six billion people, but he thought, *What if? Just what if?*

It was him. The chuffing sneeze in the dark. Zwyc, the Drooping Boy.

He peeled back the foil blanket enough to see the small high window across the basement. Still dark. Time passed, and he checked again. Dark, though mute shadows sometimes made the moonlight flicker. Hour after hour passed, and the window remained black with night. He decided they had probably come downstairs sometime before midnight.

A scrap of sorbet sunrise finally glowered in the window. Instead of making Perry feel better, he imagined the sun a lidless, flaming eye sweeping the country. The soundless day went by with agonizing slowness, and finally night returned. It took him hours to fall asleep, and once he had...

He snapped to suddenly in the pitch darkness. His eyes shot wide at the memory of a dream. It followed him into wakefulness, and he could not believe, could not possibly tolerate the horror, of what was happening at that very moment. He'd dreamed the truth.

Right now, *right now* They were watching.

Far out upon the impossible reaches he had learned about in his freshman astronomy class, in wildly distant space he could not understand, an intelligence followed its restless schedule, scanning certain parts of the Milky Way galaxy before moving on.

Another intelligence had sent warning, and even that warning had stunk of fear.

All that could be done was to make the cities and the houses dark and cold and hope Their gaze passed by, hope They did not chance to look into that one lit window.

down the street suddenly went silent. Perry listened. There were crickets and nothing else. He took his phone out of his pocket and opened it. No signal.

Good.

Smelling Minnet's hair, he fell asleep and dreamed of great belts of black unmanned drones casting liquid shadows in the moonlight, whispering by with their payloads, lowering, lowering a few hundred feet a day, waiting for revolution.

When he woke, it was because he heard crying. The sobs came out low and grinding, anguished and alone. A window was open. The crickets were loud and Perry felt cold.

The crying chilled him, and for a moment Perry did not move, hoping the surrealism of it meant the moment was really a nightmare, nothing more.

Yet it droned on and on in his utterly exhausted mind, until he woke completely.

He was in his living room. Min was sitting on his lap, crying in the back of her throat. It wasn't a dream. He'd nearly passed out and Dick had put him on the shuttle, and it had been Darkout Day.

He could see very little in the scant moonlight coming through the windows. Min felt stiff as a corpse on his lap, and his embrace did nothing to soothe her.

He wondered why, and it hit him: *Oh, my God in heaven. What time is it?*

Perry's eyes shot to the Graves clock on the mantle. He'd taken out the batteries a month ago. He'd left his watch at the office.

What time? What time?

He sat perfectly still and thought nothing. A blind fear began clutching him up, the paralyzing certainty of the bogeyman peeking out from the crack in a closet door. Perry took shallow, measured breaths. He clamped his hand over Min's mouth.

It had been dark out when he dropped off, and it was dark now. No change that he could see. It could be as far gone as five in the morning or as early as 11.00 pm.

Perry hadn't just fallen asleep, he'd been knocked out of the park. Min must have fallen asleep with him. He sat there, mute and still.

It was the grownup bogeyman they were dealing with now. He saw their heat perhaps, or the tiny amounts of other radiation they gave off. He saw their beating hearts.

Perry stood slowly, transferring Min to the cradle of one arm. He

"It is?"

She nodded gravely. "In the basement."

Tears began relentlessly coursing down his face. *Stop it! Stop it! You're scaring her!*

"Chef Boyardee," she said, "And fruit, and water. There's three pillows and blankets and... and a bucket."

Somehow he was fooling her. *She can't tell, my God, she can't tell, just keep it going.* "How do you know all this?" he asked.

Her answer scared him. Perhaps he really had gone completely crazy. "You," she said.

And it made perfect sense. Yes, him. All she knew of him was work, work, work. She had been trying to know him through his work, and this was the logical result.

It happens now, thought Perry for no reason. Now she says, at last, that she wants her mother. And then I die.

Minnet took a DVD out of an already-opened manila envelope and put it in the player. She turned on the television. Then Perry was looking at himself.

"Hi," the centuries-younger Perry on the video said, "I'm Perry Oatman of the US Bureau of Earth Imaging and Sensing. The video you're about to see, called 'The First Fifteen Minutes', comes from a huge amount of research done by the folks at BEIS." He paced calmly in front of a blue background. "Studies have shown again and again that the first fifteen minutes will make all the difference in a successful Darkout, and that educated youngsters are the key. For you kids watching, *you* are on the way to becoming Darkout champions."

He'd forgotten all about the video. It had been filmed painstakingly in little snippets over the past eight months, updated and revised as new strategies and research came to light.

He looked young and sharp and determined on the television screen, his voice firm and calm. Min stared at the image on the screen and slowly backed onto Perry's dead lap, watching with him. She placed his arm around her. He could smell her hair.

Perry started feeling a little better. As long as he didn't move, the dizziness shrank. The video lasted about twenty minutes and then gave a list of phone numbers and web sites offering more information. Perry let the television take over for a while.

He didn't know what time it was when the Seinfeld rerun canted, leaned drunkenly, then died with a *pop*. A radio playing somewhere

He had become Zwyc, the Drooping Boy, out later than everybody else. Minnet would be so upset with him. Since he knew he was not a lazy or thoughtless man, he thought, perhaps he had gone crazy. But no, not if he were wondering about it. Something else. Perry felt something wet on his hand and looked down to see a line of cold drool spreading out along the web of his thumb.

The line of drool escaped freely through a numb corner of his mouth and at first Perry thought he was having a stroke. A muffled panic made him jerk in his seat. It was probably a nervous breakdown. That sounded right, that fit the facts. At a very bad time. But that was when they happened. He tried to say something to the driver, but a confused walrus bark was all that came out. All along the street the futilely closing windowshades and shutters seemed to follow his progress like a shy snake. The stars shone down with mad insectile intensity.

It would be him they'd see. He'd hidden the world and failed to hide himself. Perry got off the shuttle in front of his own house. The outside lights were still on because he was not yet inside. That made sense. Yet he stood perfectly still because of his stick legs. He looked at the mailbox for a moment, getting his bearings before shuffling to the front door. As Minnet answered the door and his eyes fell on her, some primal reserve battery inside Perry clicked on. It filtered through him as rage and determination. When she opened the door for him, he managed a perfectly unalarming explanation for what was happening to him: "I have a headache," he said cheerfully and without preamble. "Am I late?" She took his hand and brought him inside.

Min led him dutifully to the couch and he plopped in front of the dark-ened television. "I'm not Zwyc," Perry stated. She shot him a fearful look. He beckoned for her to come to him. A tear welled in his eye. "Min," he said, his head beginning to clear, "Don't... don't be disappointed with me, okay?"

"Daddy?" "I've been under a lot of pressure lately." His own voice sounded like it came through a long tube of wrapping paper. "I know, Daddy," and he thought, *Oh my God, this is it. It's Darkout time and my baby's all alone. Worse than alone. I have to get up* – He tried to get up, and nothing happened. No part of him, physical or mental, felt broken, but somehow he just didn't get up. "Everything's ready, Dad."

Almost two thousand faces turned to look up at them. There was a sudden pop that made Perry duck into a crouch, then a massive cry arose and confetti and streamers shot all over the place, rising clear to the high hangar-style ceiling. Someone grabbed the woman next to him and planted her a big wet one on the mouth. They pointed at Perry and seemed to be reaching out for him. One man wore a t-shirt with Perry's face on it and a dialogue balloon he couldn't read from the top of the stairs.

The room swam. Perry smiled, tried to step down the first stair, and only Dick's strong arm around his shoulders stopped him from doing a nose dive down eighteen metal steps. No-one seemed to notice, and Dick's voice drifted down from someplace far away, saying, "Are you alright, Perry? You alright, boss?"

Some reflex told Perry he should answer, and he said I don't know, I don't know, speculative, as if it were really quite an interesting question. He tried moving forward, testing his legs, and found he couldn't judge the distance to the ground without looking at it. "I don't know," he said again.

Dick lowered his arm and locked it around Perry's ribs. He began helping him down the stairs, and still no one seemed to notice. They reached the floor. Faces flashed or swam in front of Perry as though he watched through a fish-eye peephole. Dick led him out through the crowd to the empty parking lot. Perry forgot what he wanted to ask about generators.

"The weather," he said to Dick. "Jesus Christ, what's the weather report? Is there cloud cover?" Dick didn't answer, only studied him through his half glasses that glinted in the sodium arc lamps of the BEIS parking lot, so vast it rolled into the distance in subtle waves. The shuttle thrummed beside them. "I wouldn't let you drive like this, Perry, I don't know if you're drunk or what, but since you're taking the shuttle..."

"Right," said Perry, happy that Dick Myer had no idea how disoriented and dizzy his boss felt. He climbed into the shuttle gripping the handicap rail and then walking his hands along the seatbacks until he flumped down in the back row.

Dick fell away into the dark distance. Something terrible occurred to him as he watched the streets darken along the road home, watched the curtains and the shades being futilely drawn. He thought of families moving down into their basements and cellars having gone through all the right steps, and a panic hit him.

Dick knocked on the door just as the phone rang. Perry held up a finger, nodded and turned his back.

"Oatman," Perry complained into the phone. He'd almost made it out the door.

"Pare?"

Perry froze. *Oh, no*, said his weary mind, *not now*.

"Hello?"

"*Wendy?* How did you get this number?" His feet felt nailed to the floor.

"Perry... I want to be with you tonight." She sighed. "You and Min."

He felt a wash of pity and fought it. "No," he said.

"Can't I just come over? With everything that's happening..."

A long moment passed before Perry started shaking his head. He felt on the verge of hysteria and let it work for him. "No, no, no, you can *not* come over. Not within a hundred yards."

Perry felt his head beginning to throb, from the base of his skull to the backs of his eyes.

He happened to glance back at his computer monitor, where new footage had begun streaming, and he stared at it. Wendy started crying, and he refused her again in a quiet disbelieving voice.

The video must have been shot in secret or released by mistake. Perry put his hand on the wall and leaned on it.

Gi's stalking through bamboo groves pushing down old men who tried to poke rice holes in the earth. Flame units shrivelling Ethiopian gardens to the soundless cries of flea-bitten stick children who would not live out the year.

Wendy started cursing and pleading and Perry wanted to cry himself, but all he had were a few acrid drops that were like piss in his eyes.

By the time he hung up, Perry was covered in sweat.

Outside his office, Dick smiled and shook his hand. "Just wanted to say it's been good working with you, boss. You've done a fine job, Perry. I'll walk out with you."

Thousands of people at the complex would soon head home and not return for (at least) six days. The hundred or so who remained would receive triple pay, almost sixty dollars an hour, then flock into the underground shelter at 3.00 am.

Dick put his hand on Perry's shoulder, for which Perry was grateful. The hand steadied him in a way he hadn't been aware he needed. They emerged onto the open staircase that led up to Perry's glass-encased office, and a sudden hush fell over the huge central room of the complex.

and get them. They must have had help. They're demanding Allenstock's release or they're going to signal the threat *on purpose*, the ballsy sons of bitches."

"So –"

"I knew you'd be really worried so I wanted to tell you that we've got it under control."

"What? How?"

"At 0800 we launched a classified new glider called a Duck – that's dee-you-queue – from a carrier group in the Gulf. We've been building them in secret for the last five months. They're engineless, pilotless, totally dark, and they've got enough lift to circle the earth twice before landing. Each one's got a payload of two hellfire missiles and fifteen hundred rounds of ammunition. We're routing a squadron to Houston at this moment."

Perry didn't know how to feel. It was brilliant and horrifying. "How many of these are there?"

"We need this deal to work, don't we?"

"Unless we want to resort to plan B."

"That's why we built thirty-five thousand of these puppies. They'll circle the earth for days. They've got gimballed sensors so the controllers can watch and take out any Z that pops up, just about anywhere, anytime."

Perry froze. An icicle seemed to slide up the base of his skull. He shook his head. "How long?"

"How long what?"

"How long will they stay up?"

"About two weeks."

Without thinking Perry hung up the phone. He stood utterly still, breathing, thinking. About two weeks. Not six days. Long enough, he thought, to take care of the Darkout, and then establish a New World Order during the chaos that followed? The concept felt thin, wild, but not unthinkable. He wondered if the payloads also included smart bombs and bunker busters and tactical nuclear weapons; if the DUCs wouldn't just happen to be whispering over Moscow, Beijing, Damascus, Tehran on October 25th.

He'd wondered all along about Allenstock and the Warning. Wondered whether they would be watched by hideous strangers among the stars or whether they might – on the off chance – be getting taken for a ride by their own people.

The only worse possibility was that it would turn out to be both.

of the blast on the other side of the world, some tremble or tingle, some subtle wave of cooking heat. He waited to see birds or butterflies suddenly take wing or to hear a lonesome dog begin baying.

None of these things happened.

Is this what it will be like? he thought. Would he have nothing but his knowledge, his creepy, murderous knowledge of the terrible, as he huddled beneath the foil blanket with Minnet in the basement, fearing darkness and daylight the same?

As he watched and waited to feel, the sky seemed to grow thin as eggshell. Perry could feel the cold spaces beyond and believe deeply in the spying eyes, somewhere, somewhere, roving and watching hungrily. Perry Catman had lost the blue sky's protection. He was a spaceman, now, and he lived on a ball in a great big scary universe full of things much older than him.

And then Minnet came through the door in his dream and said, "It won't be anything like this, dummy. At least somebody warned you." Perry woke, motionless and very quiet, and more tired than ever, on the final day before the Darkout, as the last of the man-made satellites were brought streaking down into the oceans.

October 18th: Darkout Day

All Perry wanted was to go home.

No, not want. It was all he could think of. His breath was rancid from coffee-dehydration and lack of sleep, and his mouth felt hot. He'd lost nine pounds since July, and he could feel a dry cavity boring into an upper molar.

Perry looked at the clock. Eight forty PM. If Certa had been willing to leave Min sharply at nine before, she would do it without a second thought tonight. He could just make it.

The phone rang. Obin had become a regular caller. "Perry," he said, "turn on the news and don't panic."

He browsed to CNN.com, and a video immediately began to play. Obin said, "This started half an hour ago at a farm outside Houston."

Uneven helicopter footage of some sort of demonstration. The pilot knew he'd be in fly-ban trouble and was doing some fast manoeuvring with the skids in and out of the shot. A great mass of burning torches was sorting itself into shapes outside a farmhouse. It looked like a clan meeting, but the hooded sheets were brown, the figures difficult to see. They began forming what looked like giant Greek letters.

"These bastards," said Obin, "waited until the flying ban took effect and set up far enough from all our active assets that we can't safely go

two, we don't take any chances. I think you know what I mean, and I'd like to get your vote."

Me? thought Perry. Who am I, all of a sudden?

"Can I tell you," said Obin, "A little trick that works for me, during these times? I think of a little farm in Arkansas, the one where my grand-kids live. I think of my family."

That was not what Perry did. His relentless logical work-self pushed to the front and moved his lips and tongue. He whispered, "We have no choice."

Black-and-White newsreel images of the nuclear-gutted crowns of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Random walls stark against flattened city blocks with the shadows of twisting human forms burned into them. Stock television footage of mushroom clouds rumbling toward space and shaking the viewframes. Asian women with their hands burned off. They really dug it all up; the reporters couldn't actually get near P'yongyang yet.

Perry Oatman bent over in his chair, feet apart, knees together, hands dangling, newspaper between his feet.

THE SILENCE HEARD AROUND THE WORLD

Death toll estimated at 661,000

No phone calls came out of P'yongyang, North Korea this morning. No television broadcasts. No cars started, no trains whistled. Nobody got up in the morning and made breakfast, nobody went to work. Nobody said "I love you."

Nobody breathed.

At 4.17 am Korea time, a stealth bomber invisible to all but Space Command released a 2000 lb nuclear bomb named

Confinity over P'yongyang.

Perry had desperately tried to get a hold of a transcript of the Warning, but they wouldn't give him one.

He did get a single brief call from Secretary Obin, who said, "I heard you were denied a transcript, Mr Oatman. Well, don't you worry, my boy. Don't you doubt. I've seen it, and boy, I could tell you such a tale."

In Perry's dream he'd stood in his driveway looking at the sky. White clouds like bursts of artillery drifted lazily against a high haze of sheet cloud.

Standing beneath earth's blue-white dome, he tried to sense some sign

Perry blanched. Many of those in the room, including many he didn't know, were stealing glances at him.

Perry went to bolt. He shoved people aside as he went for the door, crushing the carbons of the loyalty oath in his sweaty fist. He needed to get to work. Now.

A stern voice stopped him. The four-star general who'd been present-ing, "Mr Oatman."

He turned.

"God speed."

Perry ran to the bathroom to throw up but only heaved dry, groaning into the sink.

October

Perry walked up and down the rows of computer consoles and temp staff on Labour Day, unobserved this year. A kind of tainted victory seemed near, despite it all. A little garbage pail with no liner dangled from the fingers of his right hand as he went around to each group of workers who hunted tirelessly for Zyweek. Perry kept repeating the same exhausted message: "Keep up the good work, we aren't done yet."

Occasionally he'd lift a party hat or a kazoo or an empty styrofoam coffee cup and put it in the pail. He put a balloon animal into the pail, saying to the owner, "Keep up the good work, we aren't done yet."

He was so awfully tired.

Totally unprepared for the phone call he received the minute he sagged back into his office chair, the message lights already blinking yellow and orange like a dam about to burst.

He pressed the yellow button for the priority call on park one. "Oatman."

"Mr Oatman, this is Thomas Obin. How are you today?"

What an excellent question, Perry thought. It sent a strange thrill through him: nobody asked simple questions like that, anymore. "Mr Secretary. Good, good, I'm fine," he lied.

Obin launched into it. "I've asked several people about this, and they all say you're the most knowledgeable man about this Darkout process, now. North Korea isn't talking to us, Mr Oatman. They aren't talking, and we don't know what they're going to do."

Perry stiffened. He wished he could just hang up the phone and walk away, whistling and insane.

"That leaves us with basically two options. Option one, we do nothing and hope that they come to their senses concerning the threat. Option

New York!'' Bumper stickers had echoed this before the cars went. '10/19'' sprang from a crucifix on the bumpers of doomsayers across the country, and a countertrend had emerged rejecting the judgement dogma: '10/26'' was their standard.

Perry could feel Darkout syndrome in the air. People were excitable, frenetic, then suddenly distant and morose. Himself, as well. He looked around as he went to work, wondering at how it would all be gone for five long days and four even longer nights. And if it wasn't gone enough, if anyone still kissed in the park or ate lunch at Applebee's, America's favourite neighbourhood, then it might all be gone forever.

The only advantage the world had was that it knew when those eyes would be watching. It did not know whose eyes they would be or where they would watch from, but it knew exactly when. Someone – something – had sent Warning.

The Joint Chiefs lowered the security level of the Scorched Earth Plan just a hair for the sake of cooperation, and Perry saw it in all its insane glory. He watched the briefing with his back pressed to the wall of a Pentagon conference room, his fist full of carbons of the loyalty oath he'd had to sign. He turned off his phone and folded his arms and clenched his teeth to listen and watch.

Hidden in the slivers between the bands of satellite coverage wrapping the earth were hundreds of nuclear devices. A general with a thumb-sized laser pointer indicated the locations of the largest clusters on a wall screen. The Warning, for reasons that could not be revealed, was now being taken so seriously that a large enough breach of Darkout would result in execution of the Scorched Earth Plan.

If a conspicuous enough failure of Darkout occurred, then under this plan, the public would be told that the threat had passed. The Others would have guessed the extent of earth's habitation by then, so the best thing would be to show them what we were willing to do. Once everything was out of hiding and the economy rolling again, the nukes would be detonated, wiping out an impressive combination of cities, arable farmland, and preserves. With Scorched Earth, any incentive to invade would be swept away. The sheer will of our leaders would see to it. A new order would arise out of what remained, one conscious of the threat and capable of dealing with it indefinitely.

If, in the administration's opinion, Darkout failed.

it. There would be no police, no emergency services. There would be no government, no army, no missile defence. According to the Warning, Observation would begin at shortly after 4.00 am on the 19th, a Tuesday. It would end at about half past four in the afternoon on the 25th, a Saturday. On the twenty-foot-tall dry erase calendar inside the north wall at the main BEIS workroom, a palimpsest of close-packed, overlapping, multicoloured deadlines, those days stood gaping and blank.

Perry made frequent trips up and down a rolling library ladder with a fat chisel-tipped marker between his teeth like a cutlass, pushing dead-lines out in shades of urgent red.

The month of September had belonged entirely to Zwyck.

Thousands of people spent thousands of hours looking for him the way they had looked for Charlie in the Mekong Valley, decades before. It was war, jungle war.

The problem was, unlike Charley, they found Zwyck, or “Z”, everywhere they looked.

Corinth became plagued by what Perry called “Zwyck solutions”. One couple covered their entire house with foil blankets stitched together, about which Perry swore and swore because anything that happened in Corinth was bound to happen someplace else, maybe everywhere else. People used the blankets to cover gardens, livestock, even themselves. Someone reported seeing a foil parka on the street.

The agency had spent a few more million out of its swelling budget (in its panic Congress had taken to throwing huge blind sums at BEIS) in another ad surge, going out over television and the radio and internet with pictures that looked like the ones on moving boxes, flashes and jagged bursting shapes emanating from the Wrong Way, as compared to the serene-looking Right Way, to use the Failsafes.

They put dozens of long tables in the complex and laid hundreds of flat-lying LCD screens on them, then closed a complicated deal that would bring up-to-the hour aerial imagery to thousands of temp workers. They scrolled along the earth by rolling their palms over big track balls embedded in the tables, looking for power sources, crop patterns, and who knew what else. What did Perry demand to be notified of? Anything unusual.

And my, how the reports poured in.

People began scrawling with markers on public transit vehicles as the last private cars were yanked from the roads. The decal on the front of a bus or ferry would read “I won’t be running October 18th to the 25th! Thanks!” and the graffiti on the back would read “See you on 10/26,

Armageddon. And he's helping to make it happen. He's scared and he's dangerous and they're starting to listen to him."

Perry felt his tingling lips begin to pucker uncontrollably. "I'm just one vote?"

"Yes. They just want your opinion."

His silence stretched to the point of shame. "Take him." He hung, breathing and looking at Dick through the tops of his eyes.

Perry breathed for a moment, then said "It will never be the same, will it?"

Dick squeezed his shoulder as they walked down the hall outside his office. "You might not believe this, but I take a lot of comfort in you. You do what needs doing, but you take no joy in it. Come on, boss. Time for some coffee."

But there was no reprieve that night.

Minuet's nanny, Gerta, had been threatening to leave at nine o'clock for two weeks. Perry was supposed to be home at six but no later than nine at night, and this time she had done it. He knew it immediately.

He got out of the shuttle, and his black shoes clicked on the smooth driveway. He slid his key into the door and knew his daughter was alone inside.

Min sat on the couch in front of the television, her little slippers dangling off the end, little hands folded in her lap. Her eyes were too wide. It was ten forty-five. Perry stopped in front of the television. One of their favourite movies to watch together, Casablanca, was on.

"Where is Gerta?"

Min tried to look nonchalant. She shrugged, and he could see little dark commas beneath her young eyes. Perry went into the kitchen and dropped his briefcase. The empty plastic tray of a frozen dinner sat amidst a mess of Zwycck colouring posters. He smelled something, as well. He stopped in front of the microwave and peered into a huge bowl of burnt popcorn.

He kept looking at it for some reason, wanting it to appear golden and fluffy. Perry picked up a piece.

Burned.

It happened all of a sudden, the bursting of a dam. His back arched as though he would throw up. His hand went to his face, fingers squeezing his eyes, and something hot and pressurized rose from his chest into the back of his throat. He clamped his lips shut against the sobs.

September

At midnight on the 18th of October, civilization would shut down. All of

communications while mimicking ordinary solar radiation.” Signed AEF Gen. Paultz.

The list of addressees on the email scrolled on and on, festive. He pressed the intercom on his phone and a voice came back. “Corinth control, this is Lieutenant Faulks. Hello, sir.”

“Hi Faulks. Got your list in front of you? Cross off cell phones, short-waves, CBS, walkie talkies, anything wireless. We’re sending Corinth back a hundred years.”

There was a long pause. “Understood.”

More and more they could control the capabilities of Corinth, i.e. the general populace. The real problem had always been unpredictable human behaviour. Behaviour just made Perry feel tired, as if four hours of sleep a night wasn’t bad enough. He pressed a different button on his phone.

A voice said, “Graphics design.” Pamphlets, magnets, and good old mass mailings. Third shift.

“I have a change.”

Pause. “We thought you might.”

At 4.00 pm on August 28, Perry violated Maryland statute and smoked a cigarette in his office. His first.

“Blankets, Dick,” he said, pacing. “Thousands of them. No, millions. How many people won’t fit in the shelters?”

Dick Myer stood with his hands folded behind him and his hard ex-military gut poking out. “Oh, about four billion people.”

“That’s twelve billion dollars at three bucks a piece. NASA wants oversight. They’ve been making these foil blankets for half a century.”

He tapped his chin with his fingertips.

“Can the Air Force see through them?”

Perry shook his head. “They’re like six inches of lead. I want to go into production right away.”

Then came the Allenstock call.

Someone at the FBI wanted Perry’s opinion before making a move against the Congressman. Perry’s hand opened and closed as he listened. Very slowly, he said, “All due respect, sir, why me?”

Allenstock denied any connection with the whispers of rebellion that had come across the wiretaps, but he was totally unapologetic.

“He’s a patriot,” said the Hooverite on the other end of the phone. “Nobody questions that. But this is life and death. Maybe even

shapes are better than straight lines and symmetrical patterns; mixed crops are better than monocrops.

Due to time constraints, the cancer-causing defoliant agent orange will be used on many orchards.

United Nations President Sikkar Narbath will chair a high-level food crisis committee to oversee distribution of world grain reserves among participating countries.

During a meeting with the Secretary of Agriculture, Secretary of State Obin insisted: "We must broadcast a signal message, and that message is this is a dead planet."

At BEIS, an afternoon staff meeting in the main lounge. Perry's phone vibrated and he had it out and against his face in a single smooth motion. "Oatman. Go."

The voice on the other end is casual. "Hi, Daddy."
"Minnie?" He moved behind a concrete pillar and hunched over the phone. "Hi, sweetie."

A paranoid dread swept over him, tightening his bowels: she's going to say she wants her mother. He hasn't been there for her and now the three withering words would come like arrows.

I want Mom.

Perry forced himself to speak. "What are you up to?"
"Oh, just getting some colouring out of the way. How's work going?"
Perry was stunned. Getting some colouring out of the way. How's work. He didn't answer right away. "It's going great." He felt numb and tried to keep up. "What is Gerta making you for dinner?"
"Baked potatoes with broccoli on top. It's actually not bad."

She was being his lady, calling him at work to see how his day was going. Perry squeezed his fingernails into his palm, bringing pain. She's so good. So good.

A single tear sprang pressurised from his eye, and Perry wiped it away. He'd better get some sleep, and soon.

4:50 am. In Perry's inbox was a high-priority email titled "Broadcast", a copy of a memo with a Department of Defence letterhead in the upper left corner and the contentious Allied Earth Force logo in the upper right. Perry heaved a sigh of relief that was half sob, spinning in his chair with his hands and feet in the air. They had done it. *Something* had gone right. The Air Force had finally perfected the "white" pulse.
"The jamming signal," finished the memo, "will shut down global

where cooling systems had overcompensated. Contractors say the problem goes back to design, so it can't be corrected before Observation.

Congressman Dirk Allensstock, issued a warning to Americans today, citing "dangerous" Russian and Chinese participation in the "drill". Amid a tide of support from voters who feel disenfranchised by new Darkout-supportive legislation, Allensstock asserts that "we are crossing lines that cannot be uncrossed, making secret new maps of power that will lead to unlimited future wars".

August

Perry swabbed his forehead with a handkerchief. The bus jounced him a little, keeping him awake, and he held onto the metal bar on the back of the seat in front of him. He missed his Beemer, but the driving ban was already in effect. He read the public service message over the emergency exit at the back of the bus. A decal of a smiling cartoon bus bearing the text, "I won't be running from October 18th to the 25th! Thanks!"

In the sweaty elevator at the complex, the same type of decal decorated all four walls. Someone had jokingly placed more across Perry's computer screen, around his pencil, on the seat of his chair.

Perry sat, flicking on the radio and humming along with a Zwyck children's song he knew by heart. A moment later he realized it and felt sorry for himself. He missed Min. A little fan blew on the corner of his desk, and Perry turned from it to answer the eighty-nine emails he'd gotten overnight.

An hour later, his phone blipped. Dick's voice filled the glass-encased office. "Perry? Can you come to Corinth control? We have a problem." Something in Perry's stomach tightened. He continued typing. "What problem?"

"I don't know how we didn't see it."

WAR ON HORTICULTURE!

ACCORDING TO TOP allied officials, vegetation patterns discernable from the air constitute a major threat to security. Plants emit infrared energy to varying degrees, and many types of gardens and agricultural fields can be seen easily from space.

Geometric designs are the most obvious threat. Farmers and horticulturalists are advised to vary their plants and adopt "random-looking" forms. Curves and irregular

"It's Wednesday Awareness Day. I'm going to find Zwyck fourteen times." Zwyck was in, Waldo was out. "How's work?"

"It's great."

She gave him a quiet smile, and that was the first time – the first of many – that she seemed older than him.

He drove to the compound and ate breakfast at his desk, tuning his radio to one of Min's wonky Darkout education programs – actually a puppet show – to have it low in the background.

A few hours later, Dick Myer joined him in the evernight of Corinth control. He stood at Perry's elbow, looking at the bank of monitors. "How long have you been in here with these ghoul's, boss?" he asked Perry. "You've got owl eyes."

Perry blinked. "Dick. Take a look at this."

"I don't see anything."

"Air conditioning." He pointed at a screen showing ghostly rooftop geometries. "Even if the exhaust didn't show up over *here*, you can see this green depression. I bet it's air conditioning."

"So? It doesn't show up hot."

"But we don't know they're looking for hot. It could be x-ray, microwave, or something we don't know about. My guess? They'll be looking at gradient." He addressed the technician sitting at his left. "Bring up those contour lines again."

"Uh-huh," said Dick, sceptical behind his half glasses.

"These," said Perry, "are isotherms. Each line is a one degree difference. See the gradient?" Perry withdrew his trembling finger and looked at Dick. "Jesus, what if we hadn't seen this?"

Dick's expression was suddenly wooden. He gave a single nod.

STEALTH AIRCRAFT GROUNDED!

Space Aces see "undetectable" planes "a mile away"

AIR FORCE BRASS sent up a cadre of semi-secret stealth planes on Wednesday evening in what they hoped would be a moral victory for so-called "earth forces". Test pilots took their planes low over the ground in western Utah and invited Space Command to track them if possible. Ground-based radar had already failed to locate the nitrogen-cooled crafts successfully, but Colorado Springs-based Space Command was quick to relay the message: "We have you like a cold."

The planes were detectable as temperature depressions

Zwyck books for kids were free. Educated children were the single most critical element of darkout. But Perry didn't like it when Minnet seemed to genuinely hate Zwyck. It didn't seem worth it for just five days in October. He dimly wondered what parents with retarded children must be going through.

But maybe it was extremely worth it. Perry turned a few pages in the colouring book that had been roughly filled in. The last page showed a benighted earth, oversized, and another purple planet nearby (Minnet had decided it was purple), also oversized. It looked like a Marvin the Martian cartoon from Perry's own childhood. He positively feared the huge, jointed, cartoony telescope extending at earth from the purple planet, and the dinner-plate eye that peeked through it.

In the picture, earth was totally dark and safely uninteresting. Except for Zwyck's house.

Zwyck's house looked huge and stupid, and in it a single glaring light had been left on, high up in the night.

May

With all the thousands of CPUs cooling themselves with the complex's recirculated air, it could get very hot. Perry had undone one button of his shirt and was running a blow dryer into his armpit when Dick Myer came into the office and slapped a heavy sheaf of papers onto his desk.

Perry shrugged.

"Freedom of Information Act," Dick shouted over the dryer. "We're being sued."

Perry clicked the dryer off. "What?"

"Harber Creatrix. They say we didn't open up the bid on the cold cable contract. They're hitting us with Freedom of Information. We have to back-document our decision process."

"The world as we know it might *end* on October 19th, and they're suing us?"

Dick smiled. "Enjoy lunch."

July

Perry woke feeling a presence. He turned over, and there was his angel at the next pillow, watching him with big blue eyes. He growled and stretched while rolling over, winding himself deeper into the sheet. He touched his forehead to her small one. "Hello, little monkey."

His daughter – solely his responsibility – scared him so badly that he had no choice but to be completely in love with her.

"Hello, Daddy."

"How's school?"

Perry snapped open a ginger ale and flung his tie over his shoulder, and the nerdy kid told him, "Basically, we have fifteen minutes."

The sum of all the research to date in Corinth, that all-American town, showed that Darkout either came together or fell apart in the first fifteen minutes, and children were the key.

"We want," said the nerd, "to make an instructional video. Step by step for when the time comes. But we need a good name that sticks."

"How about 'The First Fifteen Minutes'?"

The kid's face lit up.

Why they paid him the big bucks. "Alright," he said, shooing the kid out the door, "I'm supposed to talk to the Joint Chiefs in half an hour. Good work."

He conferenced in to the meeting at five minutes past noon. The concern among the nation's top military officers was the Navy's discovery of "slivers" in BEIS's new aerial coverage. A sliver occurred where the imagery looked continuous but actually concealed narrow splinters that were being edited out when the photos were snapped together, end to end and side to side, during editing. It could not be tolerated: the idea behind everything was that the Others probably couldn't see earth's civilizations if those civilizations, from a much closer vantage, could not see themselves.

There had also been disturbing talk that the slivers had been set up deliberately, part of some alternative protocol named Scorched Earth.

Dark pouches beneath Perry's eyes today.

Minuet sat across from him at breakfast, colouring. He didn't want to read the paper right now. He stared at her. He wanted a kiss but said nothing except, "Is that Zwyck?"

"Yeah, Daddy."

"And why is he called Zwyck?" He might as well run through it with her, even if there was something about Zwyck he didn't like.

"Because he's a zee, double-you, why. He's always last at stuff, like the alphabet."

"Let me see."

She slid the colouring book to him and came to stand by his side. "See? He tries to take a new shortcut, but he gets lost on Darkout Day." The picture was of a dumpy-looking little boy with drips coming off of him like candle wax. Zwyck always dripped. He never looked right, and he was slow. He made mistakes on Darkout Day. He never made it home in time, he was always last when the school children lined up in alphabetical order, and when he fell asleep he went "ZZZZZZZZZZZZ..."

latest results." Vector data layers flew off the screen, leaving just the high-res aerials and infrared signatures.

Two months ago, Corinth, a town of two thousand souls, didn't exist. A bid had gone out through the US Army to build the most average town in the country in a few weeks. They built it high in the Rockies to give it maximum exposure. The Army stocked it with residents.

Corinth was currently in Darkout.

"No human signatures," said Perry. "That's good."

The infrared showed nothing but vegetation and quadrupeds. Ultraviolet, radio crawler, x-ray bandwidths – none showed anything conspicuous. It had taken them six tries to achieve this effect.

"Well, sir, it's no good."

"What? Why not? I don't see anything but dogs."

"That's the problem. Think like you've never seen an earth before."

Perry did. He watched the heat signatures of about a hundred dogs and cats sitting in fenced yards or scratching at closed doors, the houses coldly sea green. "Zoom out," he said.

At a greater distance, a pattern emerged. The animals appeared to be lined up linearly, zoomed farther still and extruded to a height of thirty feet, they outlined the road pattern of the town.

The other Space Command guy chuckled. "Dog City," he said. "Shit," Perry stated. "Shit... shit."

They would have to change all the manuals: pets below ground. Now, how many more could they pile on?

He paid Minnet's nanny a little extra when he got home. He cracked open the door of his daughter's darkened bedroom, and a whisper drifted to him. "Hi, Daddy."

She should have been asleep. Her voice transported him, and suddenly Perry couldn't answer. He thought, *Is this what it will be like? Everything a whisper, peering into the darkness and wondering who else is watching?* Finally he said, "Hi, beautiful. Go to sleep."

A shiver raced up the back of his neck.

April

The day he found out about the sivers, Perry didn't answer the phone in his office, he just let it ring. He pressed the palm of his hand into the nerve bundle over the bridge of his nose. He called Minnet. She'd just got home from school and was working on a new Zwyck colouring book. Five minutes later, a nerdy-looking technician came into his office.

“Please get me out please. I’m all stuck.”

She moved, a few small steps, and took his cold hand into hers.

“Don’t worry, worrykins.”

He gripped her.

“Hop to,” she cried, and carried him across the water.

FICTION

The Darkout

Jason Palmer

March

Perry pinned the Morning Post to the steering wheel with one hand and held his Venti coffee with the other. He read at stoplights.

On page A3, he saw his picture with the caption, “Consultant to coordinate preparations on-the-ground.”

The euphemism of the century.

His first day at the office, an entourage of men with pocket protectors followed Perry while he dictated: twenty pounds of strong coffee for the kitchen; showers to be installed in the basement, and a shuttle service hired to pick up carless workers; prepare for his signature a cheque for \$1,090,000 for 1,100 hex-core Dell computers.

BEIS – the newly created Bureau of Earth Imaging and Sensing – had until now been a low-profile branch of Homeland Security with a political appointee as head.

After lunch, a sallow creature from optics led Perry down a long dim hallway and into a control room rife with video monitors and control panels. Two men on loan from Space Command in Colorado Springs sat in tall black chairs at the main consoles.

Perry put one hand on the back of each chair. “How’s it looking down there?” He scanned all the different oblique aerials of Corinth, Colorado. “What you see here,” said one of the Space Command boys, “are the

Outside in the playground there were twelve now, thirteen, fourteen, dropped down and kneeling, coughing into the dust and heat, spewing. The tones of their voices became wisper as their legs finally buckled under softly with the intoxicating fog.

“Fooh... clguoo... schl... lo... ksch...”

And Saty and Davy went running, running, far, far, far from the screams and explosions.

“tuml... fs... c-”

“ff... f...”

Into the desert, with the unfettered sun.

Fffffff

Fh...

For ever anddd

evv

Miles beyond the slump and mound of bleak junk in the Forgotten Blast Land, their feet scuffed and tore up the endless gravel. It was drab out, the sky austere, damp and warm grey. Rain had stopped and hung care-fully in the distance without a flicker, stoic against the alien winds that came from all directions.

“Davy...” Saty soothed.

He stared into the mist, carrying his limbs along like lumps of noth-ing, with doomed, sinking eyes.

“Davy, talk...”

He blinked in response, crumpled his lips. Words would not form. Not with the memory that still lingers, of the extinguished coaly bodies, vom-iting, eaten by fire and dust, and the great marauder, the destroying thing. Saty heard a little trickling come out of the whoosh of the breeze, and tipped her head forward over a trough in the rubble. Slowly, it seemed, they had come to a stream populated by strange water dragons, terri-ble diving beetle larva and swift shining danionins with a thousand eggs. It would be easy to cross, but beyond that, the flatness and expanse of thick stony terrain seemed to go far beyond the horizon.

“Why won’t you talk?”

Davy decelerated for a minute until he was standing still. Gradually he turned to her, and opened his mouth.

“I’m just not feeling anymore. I can’t get out of my head. I can’t get out”

She looked deeply into his troubled face, his cheeks damp and his eye-lids slowly drooping, falling down. He felt the binary in him churning, whirring.

strength. As you will have seen, my addiction is ruining me. The depraved visions and torments I have – there are some things there I think even you might not understand.

Is my suggestion heresy... or adoration?

Gradually came the sound of a deep grumbling, far in the distance. No – I don't suspect you, Madonna, have tried opium or hallucinogens. They sort of set each other off, in a funny way, you know – but both of them are going to kill me.

They can give you all sorts of presentiments, too.
CHROOOOOOOOM!

And oddly, I knew this was going to happen.

Professor Qasim turned from the light, and skidding, burst out of his bedroom door for the first time in days.

"Look outside – the abomination is become! The abomination is *you*! You will see only yourself in its confused eyes! You made it with your pomposity and gallivanting cynicism! You did this! You did this to us!" Mohammad spilled over the balcony, tears welling, his desperate voice slowly dying with the growing roar of the hellion mortal. A black foot crashed through the rooftop. Its great dark mass swallowed and churned up everything; a million books tore into their trillion pages and swarmed like locusts.

Davy! Davy!

"Oh. Fucking Christ Jesus. Oh fucking Christ."

And at the apex of the three towers, amber explosions rippled downward and the building followed in inflating clouds of dust. In the library, the fierce wind threw bookcases and tables at the walls and the monster's fist crumbled the marble balconies like sugar cubes. The Destroyer stood astride the university and laughed a manic ecstasy, commanding the wind and water. He wailed into the sky, white eyes bulging, staring upwards to a far-off place he may never find again.

"Shit. Oh, Jesus fucking Christ. Oh God."

The windows at the front of the mezzanine shattered like broken rain-drops. Black figures popped out of the metal shell.

"Oh God! God!"

The flooring in the courtyard rumbled and swayed; many of those running fell to their feet and the ashes devoured them.

"Fu... Jesus, Oh God help me."

"Father, father please, please lord..."

"Our faith – echgh – father who art in heav – aech – heaven..."

"S... save me, O lord my god, s... s... save me I... love I love you, I I... lov – I I – I love you –"

edly blinking. For the next few moments, Mohammad gave him nothing and stood silent through the thunder of the tirade.

"I mean that people love you because you're a bloody cryptic bastard and you think you're a genius! You have no genius, you have no sense; you have your cretinous *style*, you're disgusting, self-serving, vapid, damn... incompetent... you're pathetic, you're a stupid waste, and they want to throw *me* out of this fucking place! The absolute indignity! Can you believe it? Can you believe that? Well good riddance to you if you'll say nothing. Buzzer you. *Buzzer* you!"

Edward lifted the chair he was leaning on and charged it into the ground like a bull with his hooves.

"Go on living with no concern for your fellow man! Continue to wave your brooding bohemian dick around the place, you suave, stupid twat. You *stupid, useless shit*!"

As a means of conclusion, Garnet cried, "And by the way; absence of evidence *IS* evidence of absence, you fuck!" and bitterly slammed the black door behind him. Mohammad shuddered and stood alone again, immersed in a crawling sludge-aether that seemed to want to smother and eat him.

Hearing the Professor march along the balcony, his military footsteps trickling away along the swirling marble floor, Mohammad soundlessly through the blankness turned toward the only source of light and freed it. Through the window there was bright azure; such beauty – It was clear morning, and he had not slept.

Mother, may I have your ears in this hour? I need to – I need you to – adjust, make... sometimes I need some... some – adjustment, some clarification, of everything. I'm lost. Can you hear me?

Sometimes I feel like all the sensitivity has been drained out of the world since I was eight years old.

Maria, I wished to become a provider being. But I confess to you, I have felt no different since my eighteenth year and I worry that I will never feel different. Small shifts come to affect the scenery of living, but when I sit alone or wake from sleep, I am the same man, I am the same boy.

I wonder if education and study amounts to anything at all. It seems to me our academia is about the improvement and growth of minds, but I am wondering whether anyone finds themselves improving and growing here.

When I was a child, learning was powerful. Now lectures are all a kind of ghastly training exercise without passion or meaning. I know I complain. I'd like to be a progressive force – but I've got no will and no

“Josef – you have asked me a question. I give you my answer only. And I say... no, no.”

“Tomorrow, at 11:15.”

“No... Wa ‘Alaykum As-Salaam. Bye.”

The black door slowly closed and met Josef’s eyes.

When dawn arrived Edward finally had clumsily achieved the power of confidence and paced the night stairs, shiftily, from the clattering attum, meeting students on the steps with folders to their breast and strained face, abrupt little glances up from interrupted people navigating weeks of stolen and borrowed papers built up on the desks in the cult of trading, and low-eyed lecturers with epic, stern books. None could distract his resolve, already verified and settled, to brazen out his colleague Master Qasim, and thus, he loomed towards the murky hollow, weaving his words.

He knocked with uneven hand at the entry.

“Hi,” Mohammad said, rising behind the door. “Hullo?”

“Good-Day,” Garnet said, shocked by the directness of Mohammad’s eyes. “I’d like to talk about your absence from the meeting this week. Can I come in?”

Qasim awkwardly pulled the door back, knocking his feet with it, and tip-toeing away. “Oh I’m sorry. I think I forgot.”

“You... *think*... you forgot?” Edward said, loading his cannons.

“No, I’m – alright, I’m miserable. I’m in a bad place, you know that.” “Well,” he said with cheery cynicism, “that is an awful shame – this place is so very uplifting!”

“I just couldn’t face the other people. I’m sorry, I’m sorry...”

“Well you have to face the other people. Your job and life is here, with the other people. If you need to get out, you can get out – we will order a truck for you.”

“I li... like people here. The students know me, they... like me. I just need my own time, I can get better. I’m sorry.”

“I forgive you. But you can’t go on like this, leech-sucking off their pubescent holy adulation, the capricious romance of children. You’re on leave for this – this depression or something – but you seek no help. Listen to me. You must either stay or go. Come on. Get your damn act together,” he demanded.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean...”

Professor Garnet’s teeth quaked and he adjusted his glasses, frustrat-

will go and try to resolve matters with him. All members of staff will be convening tomorrow at quarter past eleven.”

“I spoke to him on Curphone. He seemed alright.”

“He is a deceiver. He is not alright,” Edward said, looking away.

Josef strode forward and struck Professor Mohammad Qasim’s black bedroom door with his cane. After the eleventh quiet knock the dark entrance crept off its hinge; Qasim looked out with one eye from the chamber’s hanging, sooty colouration.

“...What?”

“There’s a meeting.”

O Lord – Earth, swallow me up.

“Wasn’t this door red?” Josef said.

Mohammad sped little particles of dust and saliva into the heavy air, turning his head away towards the broken bed.

“No. Ill... I’m ill,” he said.

“We’re all feeling a bit peaky. There is a new parasite here.”

“I feel *dead*... my soul is departed. Alas, nay... I cannot go to the party – I shall stay at home, my mother, and work...”

Josef ignored him and tuned into the clatter of downstairs.

“Come on. You have to come out,” he said.

“Don’t pressure me, you – shouldn’t do that...”

Josef pushed his knuckles between his teeth and breathed some apology.

“But it’s important.”

Mohammad kicked his khaki shoes a little in the doorway, grit his teeth, staring at the glittering floor of the mezzanine outside, and the helices of the staircase up to the university’s top. His eyeballs hurt with the sight of it all, its magnitudinal untrifleness.

“For you, so many things are important. But for me...”

He caught sight of the screaming crowds hurrying about in the library, a few people ascending the stairs that he could not recognise. In the bedroom, Josef located a sound behind a door to the side of Qasim’s desk, a scratching, a whining.

“Are you going to let that dog out?”

“Yes – exactly. I have to take my dog for a walk, so I cannot go to the meeting.”

Josef stared. “You must come.”

“No. No is my answer,” he said.

“Please,” he begged, pressing his palm into the door frame. “I have not seen you in five years. We all want to speak to you again.”

Get out of there, John, it's going to blow!

"What do I think? What do *you* think?"

I elect you deputy, send them in there, agent. This is earth reporting, mission report.

"I think we're all running out of time, Saty, slowly, bit after bit."

"What can you mean, Davy?"

The war with the xraags is complete; get those diamonds back on the ship, lifting off in eleven, ten, nine...

"Oh, well look all of it..."

Quick! Man down! "...Everyone just thinks they know what the problem is but they don't and no-one's doing one thing to sort it. So that's it then..."

Powdery flecks bloomed over the soft black ground. The air was cool but the earth itself still warmed all over, burning, scorning. "...And we're all too late."

"Never is too late if you have hope."

Dust swarmed the kidsphere over. Davy's hands felt the earth's tumble.

"What is hope for?"

Saty stood and looked to east. "So we can sort it."

Come back quick, Mark, your signal is waning!

"Everyone wants to sort it but none ever sorts it because no-one can really believe the problem and the horrors, and get it to stick in their heads, so we always leave it... It was okay before. But we have to sort it Saty, it's starting to feel real now."

Are you authorised in this domain? This is *my* legion, general, I depose you!

Brown strands flew about as the breeze fluttered in Saty's hair, slowly undoing the tresses.

"Yes. I can feel it with my hands."

In Professor Edward Garnet's office, he stood holding his weight with two fists, equidistant, on the desk. His elbows quivered, his legs bent, and he slowly retreated back into his little chair.

"We are having some trouble with Professor Qasim up there. I am very concerned about his situation," Garnet said, wavering.

"What's wrong with him?"

"Oh, oh – It's very complicated, but anyone on the staff here will tell you about it."

Josel didn't say anything, but looked in Edward's eyes. "Of course, I

sharp screams and said twelve and a half things at once. I remembered studying experimental chemistry when I was nine years old, when we made flames and watched liquid evaporate. It came down the glass walls in streams of blue and green – It was beautiful. I remember looking for minnows in streams in Kentucky – field biology. I was five – and the Europa landing... not the landing itself but my parents' conversation during the broadcast. I was barely six months old – I don't know how I could have remembered that."

Professor Garnet spoke a little slowly.

"My whole past is being recounted to me in the clear morning by angels. They say 'Io, io, sono', 'sono', it means so much to know, know...' and then they start to siphon my earlier life to me through holes in the air. They say other things too, like 'you lived, you lived'. It doesn't mean anything now, but when they're here I know exactly what they mean," the Professor said.

"You should tell someone."

"...I could not tell people."

"Do not be ashamed."

"I am finding myself in vivid, delusional states for what must be several hours each day now. No one can know. My students would demand I get out. My colleagues would have me excused across the border like the rest of the mentals."

"Find someone you can trust. Whether you stay or not, these hallucinations are painful for you. There are doctors and psychologists here."

"No. Once one person knows, then the whole floor of that student hall knows. I've seen it happen. No, I cannot tell people that I am disturbed."

"And still, you are."

The fan behind him whirred and prayed lightly on his tufts of hair. The Professor took off his glasses and tapped them on his desk. Behind their rims, the monster was waiting in the sparkling of light.

"And still... I am."

Josef looked up at the rectangular window above Garnet's head, where deep orange light was slowly ebbing with their conversation.

In the summertish glow on the outside the kids laughed with every jump they made, across the sand in the playground, at the edge of the long desert. The sun was regular, half-set, booming at the periphery of their whole world, and their joyful screams were lost with cicadas in the somnolence of mid-evening, *boys work too hard, girls work too fast*, all of them alone on the inside now, *I'm sorry, children, I am so sorry*.

"What do you think, Saty?"

FICTION

Maria, the Destroyer

W.G. Lloyd

Josef knocked the heady marble floor with a mahogany gold cane, whistled a clear soprano scale of D flat major that knocked itself off the starchy ceiling and down the black staircase, slumpily released another moment's angry carbon and double tapped his feet at every step, walking through the cubic open gallery the size of a monster, uniform students scribbling and choking on their words amongst rivers of paper and trash piles of old novels, drumming hands flippantly off the jittering tables, confused and busier than the world, whilst Josef's skull faced the heady marble floor, beating into his mind like an anvil, as Professor Garnet tripped out of his office and into the hall like a haggard Jesus, brushing fallen motes from his cuffsinks, thinking about snow globes, sinking in a dirge-filled mental universe of Claudio Monteverdi and superstring insanity, searching the burning windows for the rays of a heralding dusk, whilst children played outside, whilst Mohammad Qasim PhD lay in a musty stinging dump and punctured his wild eyes with sticks, as the druggish foreign music slunk out of a crack in his bedroom door and into the ancient corridors and the black staircase, absorbed by an endless choking rattle hour after hour, dead and gone, as two strangers met across the chalky rift, and Mohammad wondered again what was the point in anything.

"Yesterday I dreamt again that the stars were falling... and that I could trace a pathway between galaxies with my hands."

"And did you tell your students this?"

"No, no, no. What would my students want with dreams?"

"But did you tell anyone about it?" The conversation moved in low tones, running through the aisles of books, and now collided with the walls of the wide Garnet office. Inside, they were lined with book cases, not a shape or piece out of place. Josef sat down.

"What would they want with it?"

When I woke up there were bars on my windows and inside my brain, and there were angels of different colours, and each angel spoke in short

sure that my companion gets a good long ride across the desert as compensation." He winked at her, then smiled at me.

She took a small step towards him, then stopped, stepped back and put her arm through mine. "Enjoy the rest of your journey."

That night she asked me to join vehicles with her.

"But some parts are missing," I said.

"They'll grow if we give them time."

"Will we have that much time?"

"Who knows what surprises, what fortune we may meet."

We kissed; we made love. We spent two weeks joining our vehicles.

Our combination had its problems as the mix of parts was incomplete and several joints didn't fit together at all. In time, though, we overcame those problems and found ways to fix them. The journey since then has been the smoothest of our lives.

We met many people along the way who had surplus parts and gave them to us. In turn we made them breakfast, lunch, dinner, or all three. Sometimes we were able to give parts to other people, parts that we no longer needed, or parts that would regrow.

Three years after we combined our vehicles we came across the man who had wanted to take her away, riding with him. He was dead and his vehicle had been stripped to the chassis; parts of that had been stolen too. We passed by in silence and she reached for my hand. I stroked it with my thumb.

The night is cold in the desert and our lives are at an end. We shall die together. Some of the friends we have made on our journey are here with us. We will never make it to the city at the edge of the desert. As far as anyone knows, no-one ever has, so this does not trouble us.

In the morning, our friends will bury us, dismantle our vehicle and take the parts that they need for their own. The chassis will become our tomb and, we believe, will be left alone by those that pass by.

The remaining parts will be left in our tent for other travellers to take. What kind of people they will be we don't know. No one can ever know what others will do with their parts, salvaged after death. It can only be hoped that they will help them on their journey.

vehicle, including my part. I fought her. She took her part of the vehicle and she jumped onto the other man's, towing her own."

"She joined with him?"

"No. Just travelled with him. She never joined vehicles with anyone again. Last I heard she was travelling with yet another man, the sixth since she left me, never using her vehicle at all."

"Did she take much of yours?"

"Nothing vital. Nothing that can't regrow in time. You?"

She placed her plate on the sand and stared at the deep blue sky. "Several men have taken bits of my vehicle after travelling with me. But I never combined vehicles with them."

"Do you regret that?"

"I don't regret not joining with my travelling companions. I just wish I'd joined with another in particular. I left it too late and he joined with someone else."

"Just him?"

"I wanted fun. I got it. When I was ready to join vehicles, all the ones I wanted to join with had someone else. I've travelled alone ever since."

We sat in silence for a while longer, she staring at my vehicle and I at hers. It was she who broke the silence. "I'll make lunch for us. If you're interested."

I looked at her and past her to her own vehicle. "I'm interested."

At midday I left my tent and walked over to hers. She emerged from her tent and stood there watching me and looking again my vehicle. She smiled. "I heard your footsteps on the sand."

"Worried?"

"A little. We've only shared breakfast." She smiled again. It's a smile that I loved then and I love now. There was a warmth to her smile that she has never lost.

We ate together many times over the next few days and travelled short distances together. Short distances were all our separate vehicles could cope with. One night we erected our tents side by side, in the space between our broken vehicles. She made breakfast that morning.

After a few weeks another man came past. She studied his vehicle carefully, but never got close.

"How did you manage to get your vehicle so close to completeness on your own?" she asked him.

"A little bit from someone, a bit from someone else. I always make

FICTION

Vehicles

Martin Willoughby

I remember when we met. We were travelling across the desert, trying to keep our vehicles working, each of us doing it alone. Her engines were stuttering, and it wasn't out of choice that she pulled up beside me. I had hoped she would pass by.

We were suspicious of each other at first. We both knew that getting across the desert would be easier if we combined the best parts of our vehicles, but we were also careful lest the other prove untrustworthy. So we chatted a while and soon realised that we had no spare parts to help each other. The sun was low and it would soon be cold so we camped there, our weapons ready in case our mutual fears were realised.

I woke first, lit a fire and cooked breakfast. The smell of frying meat woke her and she walked over to me, wiping her eyes and looking around.

"Hungry?" I said.

"Mmmm. A little." She sat down, hugged her knees to her chest and waited, all the time looking around at the desert, but mostly at me and my vehicle.

"Been in the desert long?" she said.

"Yes. Forty years. You?"

"About the same." She looked past me at my vehicle again. "Have you always been alone?"

"No. I travelled with a woman once. She left me some time ago."

"Left you? Or did you discard her?"

The meat was cooked, so I placed some on a plate and handed it to her. She picked at it for a moment, then ate.

"She left. Our joined vehicle was never truly joined. Some parts of our individual vehicles continually fought each other for dominance. One time, she decided to travel with another man, just for a night. A few years later, she travelled with another man for a year, though never leaving me or taking the vehicle. Then she told me that she wanted me to leave the

“You can stop calling me ‘sir’, that’ll do for now. That and a ‘Thank you.’”

“Of course, sir, thank you.”

“And, Toby?”

“Yes, sir?”

“I only have two tickets for the airship.”

“Only two? But...”

“No, no ‘buts’, Toby. You’re a free spirit now. That certificate proves it. A free spirit *and* the champion. You can do anything. Defend the title. Walk away. Start a new life. I hear the Dimensional Navigation Company is looking for new staff with military experience.”

Toby didn’t answer straight away.

Then he tore the certificate up.

“Toby! What are you doing?”

“With respect, sir, I don’t want to be a ‘free spirit’.”

“But —”

“All my life I’ve followed orders. That’s what I was created to do. That and win fights. I don’t even understand this concept of ‘free spirit’. And now I’m supposed to just start a new life, with no guidance, no figure of authority? You are — as you have always been — my commanding officer, but this time I refuse...” He saluted. “...Sir. Now, do you have any money?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Because the airship leaves soon, and I need a ticket.”

“But Toby —”

“No ‘buts’. I’ve made up my mind.” He stooped to pick up the Tinkers’ luggage. “Now let’s go home.”

and shawls in a self propelled wheelchair – waited at the landing platform. Beyond them, the airship was waiting, and – further still – the massive Lazell gate throbbed and flashed as its spatial distortion ushered other airships, ornithopters and a flight of Her Majesty's Dragons to and from Mars, Andromeda, and beyond in a matter of hours.

Tobias looked at Mister Tinker. Ever since their victory over the Surge, the engineer – although obviously happy – seemed to be ill at ease, as if consumed by something that nagged at his conscience.

Finally, as the other passengers began to board the airship, Mister Tinker seemed to crack. "Toby, before we go, there's something I need to say," he said.

"Certainly, sir."

"First... I... I need to apologise. I need to apologise for all the times you had to lose. But I needed to play a long game. Not only did it take a lot of time and money to make you a winner, but I needed to massage the odds on you. I needed them to be so favourable that betting on you would make this possible, the return to Mars."

"I know, sir. I know"

"But I need you to understand," Mister Tinker continued, earnestly, "that I felt *every blow*."

They grasped hands, and Toby saw tears in the old man's eye.

"You understand, don't you?" Tinker said, as if desperate for some sort of validation. "I have to get Mrs Tinker back to Mars. It's the gravity here. It's just too strong for her. She'll be much better back on Mars."

"Yes, sir, I understand. Better than most."

A bright smile rose on Tinker's face. "Excellent! Excellent!" He reached into his coat. "Now, here. I have a gift for you." He produced an envelope.

"What is it?"

"Open it and find out."

It was difficult for Tobias. His hands had never been the nimblest, but finally he opened the envelope. "What's this, sir?" he then asked, confused.

"A certificate of citizenship. I... arranged it through a friend in the MOD."

"Citizenship?"

"Yes, citizenship. It wasn't easy, either. They're usually reserved for aliens and fantastical individuals who have distinguished themselves in the service of Her Majesty. Normally they aren't available to mechanicals, but..."

"Mister Tinker, sir, I don't know what to say."

"You owe me money," he heard Widow Hide state from somewhere far away.

Now Blacknail understood. Suddenly he understood the power of his forged notes.

Time slowed, and events below waded through treacle to reach him. The Pit was in uproar, fights breaking out between punters, suspecting a fix, and the Pit's staff, suddenly forced to defend themselves as Gol Kein bouncers flooded out of backrooms. The Surge's engineer was prostrate on the floor, having attacked Tinker, only to be felled by a deft blow to the temple from the old man's cane. All of this meant nothing to Blacknail. He'd bet on Tobias, and won...

...And now he understood. Just as the forged note had meant Marcel, "Honest" Johnny and all the rest were obliged to give him money, so now was he obligated to Widow Hide.

He turned to her, and, even as the time about them was distorted, there seemed to be a tunnel between them – a connection. Through this mystical distortion, she stepped toward him again. "How much?" she said, "How much do you owe me?"

He couldn't answer. All about him, time was askew, and he saw himself, his future laid bare before him as he stared at the skin Widow Hide was wearing. "Over fifty thousand pounds," he said. Now he, not Tobias, was dull-witted and slow.

"Do you have it?"

He couldn't answer. A calamitous cacophony of thoughts drowned out the slow, distorted throb from the Pit as he thought of begging, or trying to flee. But, as ever, all he could manage was a gargled gob of bloody nonsense.

"I said 'Do you have it?'"

"Yes... Yes I have," he said, mumbling. "I... I have..." He reached into his pocket, looking for just one last note, one last forgery, that could reverse the debt and save his life. But he knew it was for naught. Every single note he'd produced – every single little masterpiece – was in that tight little roll Widow Hide was holding. "...I have nothing," Blacknail finally conceded.

"Then we have a problem, don't we? But, don't worry yourself," Widow Hide said as, with a flash of candle-light on steel, she produced a small knife, "I have a solution. Shall we try it on for size?"

September 1st, 1888

Tobias stood dutifully, sheltering his owners with an umbrella. Beside him Mister Tinker and his wife – a shapeless mass of layered cardigans

couldn't ignore an uneasy, sickening feeling that stirred in his belly as the fight unfolded. Sure, he knew from experience that any losing bets placed with the forged notes would always end in his favour – "Honest" Johnny had proven that – but what *exactly* was going to happen if Tobias won? That was a scenario he'd both failed to foresee, and failed to explore.

And, blow by blow, it was looking increasingly likely that Tobias was going to win. At first Blacknail couldn't believe Tobias had become so fast, but then the forger remembered where he'd seen the engineer before – at the jewellers. Blacknail had no doubt the old man had been buying the expensive mechanisms which now made up Tobias's new Babbage machine.

Blacknail looked on, mesmerised. As Tobias landed blow after blow, ducking and blocking whatever jabs or wild hooks the Surge threw, Blacknail's apprehension grew. Soon, he was shouting, urging the Surge on, trepidation and desperation lacing his every word. With every passing minute, his panic grew, and he prayed to God in the vain hope the Surge could win.

Tobias landed another blow on the Surge's flank, and the Surge's arm finally collapsed. A fraction of a second later, Tobias's brass fist thundered into the Surge's exposed face, and the automaton was sent toppling onto his back, dazed and waiting for the inevitable.

All about the pit the crowd bayed for more, egging the combatants on. Even now, this late in the fight, Tobias could see money was still changing hands as the more optimistic – or foolish – spectators chose to take advantage of the increasingly long odds they could now get on the Surge. Their hopes were soon dashed as Tobias set upon his foe, punching and kicking. The Surge did what he could to defend himself, but Tobias wouldn't be denied. After all this time, all the fights as the underdog, Tobias refused to lose. It was all over for the Surge.

Then a towel swooped into the pit like an oily, ragged dove, and the mechanical referee duly stepped in, waving his spindly arms to signify the end of the fight and victory for Tobias, the rank outsider.

The Pit erupted as the referee raised Tobias's arm in triumph, and Tobias looked up and saw Mister Tinker on the edge of the pit looking down at him, motionless as the crowd boiled and heaved about him. The engineer smiled broadly, and Tobias closed his eyes, head falling back. This victory had been a long time coming and a lot of hard work...

But it was worth it.

* * *

Gol Sab looked at Turd, who, in turn, was watching the tic-tacs in the Pit as they signalled the fluctuating odds to the surrounding punters and bookies. Even now, as the two fighters stood face to face and listened dutifully to the referee's final instructions, the odds on the fight continued to oscillate.

"They've just gone down to thirties, against"

"Nonsense!" Blacknail said, his courage bolstered by his sudden hold over Widow Hide. "When I went to lay my bet, they were sixty six to one! I demand –"

"You'll demand nothing, mate," Gol Sab snarled, twisting Blacknail's arm viciously. The forger cried out like a slapped child.

"Leave him!" Widow Hide said. "Let him stand."

With a hunted glance, Gol Sab complied, and Blacknail stood unsteadily, nursing his arm and avoiding the Gol Kein's glare.

"Blacknail," Widow Hide said, voice slurring still further, "I am so confident you're about to lose this money that I give you odds of one hundred to one. Do you accept?"

Flabbergasted, Blacknail tried to respond, but his jaw dropped. Blood dribbled down his chin.

"Now," Widow Hide continued, not waiting for an answer, "let's watch the fight."

Trapped in a pit, the hulking military automaton, the Surge, tried to avoid having the bolts beaten out of him.

Chin down on his broad chest, the Surge swayed from side to side as he tried to slip the barrage of punches with lateral movement alone. He tried to keep his hands up, but Tobias was canny enough to keep attack-ing the Surge's flank, targeting the pistons in his *latissimus dorsi* assembly with hook after hook. Slowly, but surely, the Surge's pistons began to fail and the hydraulic pressure in his arms started to fall.

Knowing his opponent's ability to defend himself was starting to wane, Tobias pressed on with his assault. The Surge tried to hold Tobias back with jabs, but the champion's strength was failing rapidly, and his usual quick, confident attack had become a series of slow, ponderous blows that Tobias found easy to evade.

At first Blacknail had been jubilant. For the first time in his life he was in a no-lose situation. Either Tobias would win, and Blacknail would win the bet, or Tobias would lose, and Blacknail would still walk away with Widow Hide's money.

Now, however, as he held a handkerchief to his bloodied lips, he

a small fumble – laid his hands on the wad of notes, the fruit of his month's labour.

"Five hundred pounds, in five pound notes," Blacknail said, his mouth dry.

Widow Hide looked at the notes in Turd's hand. She then looked at Blacknail. "What is it you do for a living, Blacknail?"

"What?"

"A living. What is it you do?"

"Um... I'm an artist?"

"No, you're a liar. You're a liar, aren't you?" She stepped forward and punched him in the jaw. He bit his tongue, and felt blood flood into his mouth. He yelped, and began to cry. "A liar, and a forger."

His strength deserted him, and he would have collapsed if it were not for Gol Sab holding him up.

"So you – Crookshank Blacknail, forger and liar – come to me with a five hundred pound bet on a rank outsider, and you think I'd just take your bet? Do you think I wouldn't suspect the notes are forged? How stupid do you think I am?"

Once more, little more than an inarticulate gibber staggered from Blacknail's lips.

"How *stupid*?" she demanded again, grabbing his face and squeezing it hard, distorting it.

He had to do something. He had to think of something quickly, or he was going to die. "They're real," he said with a gasp, spattering her with blood.

"What?"

"The notes, they're real. All of them!"

She paused and looked at him before laughing in his face. "Oh, Blacknail. Do you really expect me to believe that?"

"They're real. Have a look. If they're forged, you'll know, won't you? An intelligent woman like you. You'll know."

He watched her, eyes wide in desperation. All he needed was for her to touch the notes...

Another pause. Then she snatched the notes from Turd's hand.

...And she was his.

She stood holding the notes. One hundred of his magical forgeries, all in one neat roll. There was no way anybody – even Widow Hide – could resist.

"What are the odds on Sergeant Tobias?" Widow Hide asked Gol Sab. Her voice had become slow and almost slurred, as if drunk on the forgeries' spell. Her eyes were fixed on the roll of notes.

With that, Mister Tinker pulled the cover from Tobias, finally revealing his automotive charge to the Pit. Standing, Tobias detected the sudden, unexpected hush that befell the crowd.

Were they that obvious, the changes Mister Tinker had made? Were, even at this late stage, punters suddenly dashing to lay bets on Tobias or glancing nervously at betting slips with the Surge's name on them?

Whatever the case, Tobias focused on his opponent.

"Presenting the reigning and defending champion. Making his first defence of the title, he is the Pride of the Pit, and the apple of Her Majesty's eye! He is the Terror of Tel al-Kebir! The Conqueror of Kassassin! He is... THE SURGE!"

Having waited at the kiosk, Blacknail had then been escorted to Widow Hide's office, barely aware of the sudden rush to lay last minute bets on Tobias – the midget being first in the queue.

Widow Hide was, as ever, stood watching the plebeians, and paused slightly before turning to Blacknail. "So, Mister Blacknail," she said, "I hear you want to bet on Sergeant Tobias. Heavily."

"That's right." Despite the looming proximity of Gol Sab and Turd, Blacknail's chin was in the air, and his hands on his hips. A subtle smile lurked on his greasy face. "Five hundred pounds. To win."

She regarded him from behind the impenetrable facade of her metal face. "Mister Blacknail," she said, "you seem to have little – if any – idea of how a bookmaker's mind works."

"Then –"

"Shut. Up." Reacting to the sudden edge in her voice, her goons grabbed Blacknail by the arms. A whipper escaped his hips as his bravery began to desert him. "I'm not an idiot, Blacknail. I didn't get here by taking stupid chances. Whilst you're little more than a dirty little shit, I'm a business woman. I'm not about to be fleeced by you, or anybody like you." She glared at him. "Now, I'm not sure how you conned me out of over one hundred pounds when you were last here, but, that aside, when somebody like you suddenly comes into my establishment and lays five hundred on a rank outsider, don't you think I'm going to get suspicious? Don't you think I'd want to know why? Don't you think I'd want to see the colour of your money?" A subtle signal from Widow Hide, and the goons once again shoved Blacknail to his knees. "Show me. Show me your money?"

"In... Inside pocket," Blacknail said.

She nodded to Turd, and he reached into Blacknail's coat and – after

hand flew to his head so swiftly he smacked himself in the face. Alarmed and ill co-ordinated, he fell onto his metal backside, almost taking the back of the shed with him.

Sitting very still, he looked toward Mister Tinker, who was smiling broadly. There was a glimmer in the old man's eyes, and a smile Tobias hadn't seen in a long, long time. "How do you feel, my boy?" Mister Tinker enquired gently.

Tobias's reply was instantaneous. "Fast, Mister Tinker, sir." He looked toward the cat. Its mouth hung open, chin on the floor, as it gaped at Tobias in amazement. "I feel fast."

August 30th, 1888

Ensnosed in her small kiosk at the back of the Pit, the teller looked at Blacknail with a mixture of surprise and suspicion. "Say that again, cock," she said.

"I said I'd like to bet five hundred pounds on Sergeant Tobias. To win."

"That's what I thought you'd said." Now she looked even more suspicious.

"Is there a problem?" Blacknail was irritated. He'd waited long enough, and now he was becoming impatient. There was only ten minutes until the bloody fight started!

"I'm not takin' that kinda money here, cock. I can't even count that high. Stay there." She reached to a small telephonic device by her side, and lifted its small trumpet to her lips. "Gol Sab? This is Marge. There's a fella 'ere wants to drop five hundred on the Sergeant. Wanna take him to the Widow?"

She switched the trumpet to her ear, and nodded as she received instructions. "Right, you wait there, cock," she told Blacknail. "You'll be seen soon. Now, out of the way. I've other punters to see to."

It was dark. Very dark. He didn't move. All he could hear was the slow, expectant bubbling of the crowd around the Pit as they waited for the fight, their appetites whetted by the night's proceeding bloodshed and destruction.

Then the master of ceremonies began. "My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen! Now we come to the featured bout of the evening! A contest of unlimited rounds for the Pit's coveted automaton title. A fight to the finish! A fight to the death!" This brought a resounding cheer from the crowd. "Introducing the challenger! Newly repaired after his last, brave defeat, he needs no introduction. He is the soldier who refuses to die. He is will! He is courage! I give you... Sergeant Tobias!"

the kind of odds Blacknaill liked. "And when's he due to fight again?" he said, feigning indifference.

"Well, he's *supposed* to fight whoever wins tonight between Hammerlock and the Surge. They always throw in a mook for the first title defence. But you'll be lucky if we ever see Tobias again, if you ask me..."

August 28, 1888

It was dark. Very dark. He couldn't move. All he could hear was the stackato drip dripping of water as it came through the hole in the ceiling, syncopating with the rhythm of the rain on the tin roof. That... and the sound of a cat washing.

The shed. He must be back in the shed.

"Still alive, eh?" the cat asked. "Gotta say, I'm surprised."

"Toldyou." Tobias stopped. His voice seemed strange. Distorted.

Spedded up. He wanted to put a hand to his throat, but he couldn't move.

"What did you say?" the cat asked.

"Imuststill." Once again, he stopped, confused.

Suddenly there was the sound of keys in the shed door.

"Sssh!" the cat whispered. "The old man's here!"

Then came the sound of scraping on the floor as the door opened, followed by the sloppy shuffling of old feet on a wet floor. Presently Tobias

detected the old engineer's presence. He was stood very close, his

unwashed, mouldy odour betraying his proximity.

"Now, Tobias," Tobias heard the old man wheeze, "I know you can

hear me. You've been asleep for a week now. You were badly hurt. Very

badly..."

The frail voice trailed off, and it seemed as if Mister Tinker was composing himself with a deep, ragged breath. "I thought I'd lost you, boy,"

the old man said. "But now... Well, I've spent all this past week... repairing you. Now it's time to switch you back on. But Toby, you need

to know this. I want you to be prepared. You won't feel the same. You'll

feel very different indeed."

Tobias felt the old man fumbling on his back, and then heard the *skree*

of valves being turned. The subtle sensation of heat began to seep

into his chest as the boiler stirred into life...

...And then he was awake.

Sensation after sensation washed over him. All those years seeing in

monochrome, all those years with flat, limited hearing. Suddenly his

mind was beset by an assault of colour and noise. Startled, he reared up

so quickly his head punched a hole in the roof. Startled still further, his

out of Troughon's Drift! I've quelled rebellions! I've smashed tanks! I! Am! A! *Soldier!*" He lumbered forward and loomed over the stunned engineer. "I'm a soldier, and all I need are the right parts, the right equipment, and I could beat all these pit fighters: Tin Lee, Hammerlock, the Surge. All of them! All I need is the right equipment!" His voice lowered to an impassioned whisper. "Please Mister Tinker, sir. Please. I need to win, sir. That's all I need..."

His voice trailed away into nothing, and once more his head lowered as he looked away. Feeling impertinent, he began to turn away in dejection.

"Tobias... Toby." The engineer's voice was every bit as passionate as Tobias's outburst, but it was much softer, laced with care and an almost paternal understanding. "Help me up, Toby."

Tobias turned back to see the little man's trail hand, outstretched and needy. With his usual slow, deliberate movements, he turned back and helped the old man up, the engineer's tiny hand held delicately in his huge brass fist.

"You," the engineer said earnestly, still holding Tobias's hand, "are the only reason I am still alive, Toby. You saved my life at Carter's Landing, you saved my whole brigade at Kanalkia Tor. I know how you fight, I know how you think, and I know losing like this hurts you. But I need you to do one thing for me, Toby. Even after all I've put you through, even after all these beatings, all the shame, all the defeat, I need you to do just one more thing."

"Yes, sir," Tobias replied dutifully. "Anything, sir."

"Trust me, Sergeant," the old man said with a genuine smile. "That's an order."

August 20th, 1888

"See? I told you. That Tobias'll never win."

The midget sank a beer, and Blacknail watched what was left of Tinker's Sergeant being lifted out of the pit.

It really had been a severe beating. There was very little left of Tobias this time. He'd fought hard tonight – even harder than usual – but Tin Lee was just too quick and strong, and the results spoke volumes. All that remained were the endoskeleton and a few pistons. Even the Babbage machine seemed to be completely smashed.

"What did you say the odds were on Tobias tonight?" Blacknail asked the midget, eyes narrow as he studied the remains.

"Forty to one."

Blacknail whistled. Forty to one? In a two way fight? Unheard of. Just

The old man didn't answer straight away, he merely froze as he looked sideways at Tobias.

"Only, I was wondering..." Tobias's voice tailed off, and an uncomfortable silence filled the little shed, pestered only by the sound of rain on the roof. He could see the cat studying Mister Tinker closely.

"You shouldn't worry about such things, Toby," the old man said. "You have another fight next week. We're on the under-card for Hammerlock's title defence against The Surge. We should prepare for that."

"Another fight, sir? But... I'm still badly damaged, Mister Tinker, sir."

"Yes, well, that Surge certainly did a good job on you, that much is true." The old man regarded what was left of Tobias. Heavily disassembled, the salvageable parts lay strewn about the shed. The rest were piled into a bin outside. "But, fear not! I've bought some new parts. A few hours and you'll be as good as new!"

Using all his meagre strength, the old man duly heaved a sack into view. A quick tug on the knotted rope securing it, and it flopped open, a ramshackle assortment of old cogs, flywheels and joints spilling onto the floor.

If Tobias had possessed a heart, it would have sunk, confronted with such a rusty, knackered collection of clapped out rubbish. Even the cat, springing down from the workbench for a cursory sniff and closer inspection, turned away in disgust.

"There. What do you think?"

Tobias couldn't bring himself to respond.

"I... I can't, sir," Tobias finally said. "I can't do it anymore."

This seemed to stun both the engineer and the cat, and Tobias couldn't bring himself to look them in the eye.

"But... But Toby, why?" the engineer asked.

Tobias refused to answer, and just looked at his feet. He suddenly felt very little, very vulnerable, and longed for his glory days back on the red planet.

"Toby? Did you hear me?"

An element of annoyance seemed to have crept into the engineer's voice, and this touched – and ignited – something inside the automaton. "Why?" Tobias's voice was a roar as he stepped toward Tinker, who – alarmed and ill-co-ordinated – fell onto his thin backside as the cat fled under the workbench. "Why? Because I can't *lose* anymore! Because I was built to *win*! I fought at Red Ridge! I helped the Red and Tans break

delicacy of the clockwork the old man was poring over was equalled – if not surpassed – by the delicacy of the old man's fingers.

Definitely an artist of some sort, Blacknail concluded, wondering just what this old man specialised in.

"Fine work, sir. Fine work," the old man said with a frayed smile. "It was twenty pounds, wasn't it?"

"Indeed, Mister Tinker."

Blacknail watched as the old man passed over the money, detecting no element of hesitation. This was, Blacknail thought, a man not without resource, despite his dishevelled appearance.

"Excellent. Thanks again, Albert," the old man said as he turned to leave, leaning heavily on a cane Blacknail recognised as army issue. Martian Expeditionary Force unless the forger missed his guess. Worth a bob or two.

Finally the shopkeeper turned to Blacknail, and smiled obsequiously. "And what can I do for you, sir?" the shopkeeper fawned.

"Gid me a wadch. Thad one."

One expensive watch later, Blacknail sauntered out of the jewellers and into the street, flushed with success and yet more money. He checked the time with a flourish. Only twelve noon? More than enough time to get to the races.

"Honest" Johnny Cockburn had that familiar dazed look about him as Blacknail waited up to collect his "winnings".

One of the oldest bookies at the racecourse, Cockburn had scoffed at Blacknail when the forger had backed one of the oldest nags in the three thirty – a twenty-five to one shot with no hope of winning.

The horse had done its duty and come last, and now Blacknail watched with interest as Cockburn moved mechanically, in the thrall of Blacknail's magical note. Blacknail hadn't used one of his "special" notes to make bets before, but the effects were just the same.

"Five pounds at twenty five to one against. That's one hundred and thirty pounds," Cockburn said.

Five minutes later and Cockburn had counted out the money with his usual exactitude, and Blacknail walked away, stroking his beard.

The experiment had worked. That was interesting. Very interesting, indeed. Now all he needed was a little time, a few more bank-notes, and revenge on Widow Hide would be his.

"Mister Tinker, sir," Tobias said cautiously, "what happens to our... purse money?"

"Hmm, yes," the cat said with a chuckle, "and he does such a good job, doesn't he? Only the best materials for you, eh?"

"Mister Tinker tries his best. I try my best!"

"And you keep getting your backside tanned. How quickly did this

'Surge' beat you tonight?"

"Inside two rounds."

"My point exactly."

"It's not Mister Tinker's fault. It's mine. I'm too slow."

"Stop making excuses for him, Toby. He's just using you."

"Well, he's entitled. He owns me. The Martians didn't leave much of

me to find at Red Ridge —"

"Oh, Toby, how many times have I heard this? Just scrap, blah blah.

Tinker's brigade rescued you, blah blah. Rebuilt you, blah blah. You and

Tinker fighting side by side. Brought you home when he retired, blah

blah."

"Well, it's all true. He didn't *have* to bring me home —"

"Well, he obviously knows a cash cow when he sees one."

"And another thing. Mrs Tinker's very ill," Tobias continued, ignoring

the cat. "Her medicines can't be cheap —"

"Toby, Toby," the cat said as he looked away with supreme disinter-

est. "All the excuses in the world can't change the fact that if Tinker

really cared, if he really wanted you to win, he'd buy better parts and

make you faster, stronger. But he doesn't, does he?"

"Now, either he hasn't got the skill, or he hasn't got the desire. Either

way you just look like a glorified pension to me."

With that the cat began to slink away as an element of anger crept into

his tone. "Where I come from, Toby, slavery isn't just illegal, it's

immoral." The cat paused by the ill-fitting shed door. "And people like

Tinker are the worst kind of scum. So, please, use what little strength

you've got left and get away, before you die in the Pit."

With that, he was gone, bounding through a hole in the door and into

the rain outside, leaving Tobias with his thoughts.

August 13th, 1888

Blacknail waited impatiently for the old man — who he seemed to recog-

nise from... somewhere — to finish his transaction.

"There you are, Mister Tinker," the shopkeeper said. "Created to your

specification. Light but hard-wearing, they should be able to stand quite

a pounding. You'll need to make sure the cradle's well sprung, mind..."

Blacknail looked on as the old man picked up each and every piece of

machinery and inspected it through his *pince-nez*. Blacknail noted the

pounds. Tell him he is welcome back at any time. But he really must refrain from winning *too* often.”

Gol Sab picked Blacknail off the floor and, with that familiar dazed look, he and Turd handed him back the bank-note before escorting him to the cash office.

Ten minutes later Blacknail was thrown onto the dirty street, one hundred and six pounds richer, convinced – despite his smashed nose – that he was indestructible.

Later that evening, Blacknail – still feeling on top of the world – indulged the whole gamut of his emotions on a young whore he’d picked up on the way home. Now the skinny, snivelling teenager was curled up in the corner of his room.

It had taken two minutes to pin her down and tear her clothes off, and another minute to spend his most primal currency inside her.

“Ged oud,” he now ordered the girl, his voice distorted by the state of his nose.

“That... that’ll be six shillings, mister,” she mumbled.

He looked at her as she gathered up what was left of her clothes and clung to them. Painfully thin and malnourished, she needed a good meal. He laughed at her, and toyed with the idea of handing her one of his forged notes. “Ged somedin to eat,” he then said, handing her six dirty shillings.

Grasping the cash, she fled, the door slamming behind her.

He turned to his printing press as it squatted in the corner, taking up most of the pokey lodgings. Inky and solid, it sat waiting for another night’s industry. All about him, ten of this goose’s magical paper eggs – the fruits of last night’s endeavours – hung from string as they dried.

Magical paper eggs, and his means of revenge on Widow Hide.

“So, what exactly *does* happen to all your purse money?”

Tobias didn’t answer at first, not quite understanding the question. “My what?” he finally said.

The cat looked up at Tobias with that kind of languid amusement all cats show their intellectual inferiors. “Purse money,” the cat said, licking his paw. “Old Tinker’ll be paid just for you showing up. You don’t have to win to earn money in the Pit, y’know.”

“No,” Tobias said. “I didn’t know.”

“So, like I said, what do you think he does with all that purse money?”

Tobias took a long time to reflect on this as the cat continued to wash himself. “Well, I suppose it does cost money to repair me –”

onto the floor, rubbing his face – broken nose and all – into his own blood and urine. He felt what was left of the bone in his nose disintegrate further, and, down in the Pit, he could see the patrons looking up to take a sadistic pleasure in his pain. Money began to swap hands as bets were laid as to his fate.

"I said, 'Do you have what you owe?'"

Gol Sab and Turd hauled him to his feet to look in her mechanical eyes, her visage as arbitrary and merciless as fortune itself. His mind raced. He was pretty sure he had about fifty ill-gotten pounds – but that wasn't nearly enough.

What about the note? he wondered. Would the note work on Widow Hide, a human brain in a mechanical shell? Marcel and a few shop clerks in the West End were one thing, but *her*? Surely she'd just see through whatever magical powers the banknote possessed?

But what choice did he have?

"I... I do, yed," he finally said through the blood and bone in his nose and throat.

She didn't answer straight away. "Show me."

Hands shaking, legs like jelly, he tumbled in his pocket, extracting the note as various other half crowns, guineas and shillings spilt out of his trousers and onto the wet glass. Still shaking, he held out the note, which twitched and quivered in sympathy with Blacknail's fear.

She snatched the note from Blacknail, staring at it critically. "Five? Pounds?"

Blacknail gulped. "You offer me *five pounds*?"

Yet again, all Blacknail could manage was an incoherent gargle.

"Yet you owe me...?"

He tried to speak, but, instead, succumbing to fear and cowardice, his legs finally failed him, and he collapsed to the floor.

"How much?" Widow Hide asked Turd. "How much does he owe me?"

"One hundred and six pounds, miss."

Blacknail groaned, head in his hands. This was it. He was finished. Any second now he was going to be Widow Hide's new overcoat, and his beautiful, magical banknote would be lost amidst her fortune.

He waited to die. He could hear the faint bubble of whatever solution kept her brain alive, and the ticking of her mechanisms. A gentle whirring told him she had moved, and he peeped through his fingers to see her handing the note back to Turd.

"Give this back to Mister Blacknail," she said as she turned to watch the next combatants entering the pit, "and his one hundred and six

his partner, Turd. They towered over him, and their jet-black skin and tribal markings creased as they tried to smile.

"It's taken us ages to find you, Blacknail," Turd said. His breath suited his name. "We never thought to look this far uptown."

Blacknail tried to respond, but – once again – all he managed to mutter was a futile collection of incoherencies.

"Mrs Hide wants to see you, mate," Gol Sab said as he lifted the forger out of his chair with ease. "So let's be havin' you."

"Presenting your winner! The Terror of Tel al-Kebir! The Conqueror of Kassassin! And now, the Pugilist of the Pit! I give you... THE SURGE!"

The words barely registered with Blacknail as he was pushed through the bubbling crowd. Having been manhandled into a cab and driven down to the Pit, Blacknail was now forced into Widow Hide's office. There stood Widow Hide with her back to him, stock still with her arms behind her back. As ever she was wearing a coat of human skin she chose to wear as a warning to her creditors. Presently she was rumoured to be wearing that chap Hartnell – a man Blacknail knew was also indebted to Widow Hide. Presently the coat looked a little worse for wear – a few days past its best – and Blacknail had no doubt as to whom she had lined up as a replacement...

He shuddered. With Gol Sab and Turd stood behind him, he had no way to escape, but he would have given anything to flee.

His fear flourished as Widow Hide turned toward him. Piss ran down his leg and tinkled on the glass floor. A mechanical woman, she possessed a human brain that was visible through her glass cranium. "You owe me money," she said. "The line of credit I've been generous enough to offer you has reached its limits."

Like a gorgon's victim, Blacknail froze. She approached him, ticking quietly, and they were soon nose to nose. She clicked her fingers. With a swiftness that betrayed their own fear, the Gol Kein complied, forcing Blacknail to kneel as they crouched to hold his arms behind his back.

Blacknail whimpered and began to snivel, searching for something to say.

She reached forward and took hold of his nose between index and fore-finger, twisting so sharply the nose fractured and blood cascaded down his face, mingling with the urine on the glass.

Blacknail howled.

"Do you have what you owe?"

He couldn't answer. He was in agony.

She gave a further gesture, and the two thugs pushed him face down

both. It was shaking its head in dismay. Tobias ignored the creature and focused on the old man.

"What money I had was spent on those pistons," the engineer said as he continued to attach the ugly, ad-hoc plating that now served as Tobias's face. "You'll need to be right on top of your game next week."

"Who am I fighting?"

"A new automaton. Ex-army issue. Straight out of the Egyptian campaign."

"Petrol driven?"

"The engineer didn't answer straight away. "Yes... Yes I'm afraid so," he finally said.

They both fell into silence. They both knew exactly what that meant. "But, never mind!" the engineer said with an unconvincing smile and a slap on Tobias's patch-work back. "There's life in your old boiler yet! You take my word for it!"

"Yes, Mister Tinker, sir."

August 8th, 1888

Blackmail sat in the expensive café, quietly studying the *nomenklatura* and *cognoscenti* of the city as they passed by in their evening apparel. This was more like it, he ruminated as he sat back and gulped his wine. This was what a man with his talents deserved! He wasn't just some petty thief scratching out a living down the Dark Arches. He was an artist! He had consummate skills! Wasn't his latest creation proof positive?

Indeed it was. After a week of free meals down at Marcel's, he'd tested the properties of his magical bank note to the limit today. Rising early, he'd hurried to the West End by hansom cab in time to be cheerily and Wolstenholme's first customer of the day. Duly buying the most expensive suit they possessed, he had then breakfasted at the Imperial before availing himself of a haircut at the Ottoman baths. Then it was on to the new exhibition at the gallery before lunch and the matinee at the Apollo.

Now, having taken dinner at the Dorchester, he was just about ready to return home, his pockets positively bulging with the ill-gotten gains of his day's frivolities.

Or maybe he wouldn't go back to Spittlehouse's tonight. Maybe he'd take a train to the coast and holiday for a day or two.

After all, money was no object now, was it?

He felt a hand on his shoulder, and startled, looked up.

"Evenin'." It was two of Widow Hide's Gol Kein thugs, Gol Sab, and

He chuckled to himself, and raised his wine in a silent salute to Fingersitch.

God bless you, sir: He smiled to himself. As one artist to another, God bless you.

In the tiny hut that passed as the engineer's work-shop, Tobias sat patiently as he watched the engineer working. The old man – having removed Tobias's battered face – now had the bent, brass visage on a bench, and was doing what he could to repair it. Tobias knew it was no good, however. What few materials the engineer could afford had been used to repair more important things like valves, pistons and plating, and Tobias's face was bottom of the list. As Tobias watched, he idly stroked a cat – a stray the engineer had taken to feeding which now lived in the shed with Tobias. It was purring gently as it lay in Tobias's lap, one eye open as it watched the engineer.

Finally the old man seemed to abandon his attempt to repair the smashed face, and turned to Tobias. "I'll have to see what I can do about this tomorrow, Toby," he said. The sad, frail smile was as bereft of teeth as it was of hope. "I'm sure it's not as bad as it looks."

Tobias nodded. "Very good, Mister Tinker, sir," he said. "But now I have to get back to Mrs Tinker. It's time for her medicine," the old man said, wheeling as he rose stiffly from his bench.

"Yes, Mister Tinker, sir. Very good, Mister Tinker, sir." The old man moved toward the door, and even Tobias – who lacked any kind of dignity or co-ordination – thought it was a miracle such a random assortment of jerks and twitches could propel the old fossil at all. Standing by the door, the engineer turned and looked at Tobias.

"You...," the engineer began. "You did well tonight. Thank you."

"Yes, sir. Thank you sir."

With that the engineer was gone, blowing out the oil lamp as he left. "Not a word..." Tobias said to the cat, his voice a low rumble.

"Please yourself," the cat said with a yawn.

August 3rd, 1888

The iris valves in Tobias's eyes adjusted as he focused on the mirror. "It's the best I can do, Toby," the engineer said.

Tobias reflected on his new face. Once, when he'd first been built, he'd been rugged – handsome, even – but now...? "Very good, Mister Tinker, sir," he said as he lowered the cracked mirror with his usual cum-bersome lethargy.

Over Mister Tinker's shoulder he could see the cat watching them

tional three pounds and six pence. "Pleasure doing business with you, sir," the landlord said with a diseased smile. "Same time next week?"

"Um. Yes," the forger said, eyes flitting from Spittlehouse to his heavy, who also looked equally dazed. "Next week."

With that, the landlord limped away, his cohort in close company. Blacknail watched them go before closing the door, elated and confused in equal measure.

There could be no doubt, Blacknail reasoned with a swelling of incredulity and excitement, that he'd stumbled across something exceptional. Something magical.

Once the landlord had left, the forger had decided on a tougher test and – giving into hunger – left his dingy lodgings and headed for old Marcel's place.

Huddled and hurried, he had made his way through the crowded, pulsing high street that festered like an open wound. Hansom cabs and horses had made their way along the cobbles as assorted robbers, urchins and harlots went about their business, and the raucous sound of carousing had washed out of the assorted pubs and brothels. Beleaguered peelers tried to remain as innocuous as possible, and shifty looking shopkeepers stood in the doorways of equally shifty looking premises. This was a desperate, dirty little place to ply a trade, let alone live – but then Crookshank Blacknail was a desperate, dirty little man.

But at least he wasn't desperate, dirty *and* hungry anymore, he now reflected, the devastated remains of the meal either strewn about his plate or lost in his matted beard.

Reasoning old Marcel wouldn't be as easily fooled as Spittlehouse, Blacknail had ordered the meal upon arrival, and handed over the note with the same trepidation... and the same results.

Sure enough, Marcel accepted the note, and his ancient features had been softened into a dim-witted stare as – like Spittlehouse – he'd not only passed the note back to the forger, but the price of the meal.

This was, Blacknail concluded, too good to be true. He couldn't understand it. All his life he'd been dogged by ill-fortune. What had changed? Sure, the forger was good – his work always was – but still... Was it the materials he'd used? It couldn't be the paper, it was the same stuff he always used. The blocks? Unlikely, he hadn't altered them in months. The inks? Perhaps. He'd used some hooky stuff Fingertstitch had lifted from God knows where. Maybe that was it. People always said Fingertstitch moved in unearthly circles, and maybe they were right. And maybe now Blacknail had a magic banknote.

That's what else he'd done last night. A new five pound note. He inspected it fervently. He remembered now – remembered thinking it had looked pretty good when he'd finished it. Then again, even Nora looked good last night.

But, he had to admit, this one still looked excellent. His best yet. He wasn't sure the ink was dry, though.

"Blacknail! Open this door, or I'm coming in!"

The increased ferocity of the banging showed Spittlehouse was serious, and Blacknail – his stomach beset by butterflies – knew it was now or never.

Blacknail duly answered the door and peered out. The landlord – a scarred, malevolent rat – promptly shoved a boot in the breach. "Time's up, Blacknail," the landlord whispered, his voice twisted and pitted by the war-wounds on his neck. "Where's your rent?"

Blacknail tried to respond, but all he could manage was an incoherent gargle. Spittlehouse was intimidating enough, but the heavy behind him was even worse. At least the landlord was only five and a half feet of scar tissue – his old pal from the Martian campaigns was closer to seven.

"Time's... *gak*... Jesus!" The landlord choked and put his hand over his mouth. "Don't you ever bathe, Blacknail?"

"Please, Mister Spittlehouse, sir," Blacknail said, hands wringing as head lowered, he stared at his shabby boots. "How much do I owe you, sir?"

"Eleven weeks at five shillings and six a week, that's –"

"Three pounds and six pence?" There was a querulous aspect to Blacknail's voice.

Spittlehouse sneered, clearly not expecting Blacknail to possess such a sum. "Three pounds and six pence, aye."

Grasping what little courage he had in both hands, Blacknail – left with no real alternative – offered the forged note and looked away, not daring to watch the landlord's reaction.

At first, however, there wasn't a reaction. The landlord merely snatched the note out of the forger's hand and then... nothing. Blacknail felt bereft. Had the landlord seen through the ploy so easily? He gulped and looked back at Spittlehouse, gulping.

Spittlehouse, however was merely staring blankly at the note. Then – a glazed, distant look stealing across his face – he handed the note back to the forger. "Thank you, sir," the landlord then mumbled, "an' there's y'change."

Further to Blacknail's note, Spittlehouse handed the forger an addi-

gravity, well... Their Babbage machines can't handle it, see? Our gravity makes 'em too slow, too dull witted. Their hydraulics can't cope either. It takes a lot of money to convert a brass hat like that to fight on Earth – an' his engineer's as tight as a gnat's chuff.

"No, I'd stop wasting your money an' back a few winners," the midget said with what Blacknail assumed was her best "come hither" smile. "I can give ya a few tips."

Blacknail smiled thinly and looked away, watching Tobias's engineer – an old man so frail simply standing seemed to defy gravity – picking up what few scattered pieces of his charge he could manage to carry. Meanwhile Tobias was being winched out of the pit, the dirty white towel draped over him like flag of surrender.

Blacknail looked away from the sad wreck, his gaze rising to the hall's ceiling. Created exclusively from glass, it allowed the Pit's owner to watch her little empire at work from the comfort of her office above. Sure enough, she was there now, watching them all. Stood perfectly still, hands behind her back, she was cast into silhouette by the chandelier of delicate crystal that hung above her.

Blacknail shuddered. She was looking at him, he was sure. The owner. Widow Hide. A mockery of a woman and a killer of men. Suddenly even more keenly aware of just how bad his credit had become here, Blacknail snatched at his drink and gulped down what was left. Then he fled the Pit, scurrying into the night.

August 2nd, 1888

Blacknail awoke with a start, still slumped over the printing press. Momentarily dazed, it took him a few moments to realise he was in his dirty little flat, and the banging in his head told him this hadn't been his first port of call after leaving the Pit. The sick feeling in his stomach screamed cheap wine and loose women down at the Whore and Strumpet, attempting to drown his sorrows in Nora Strug's tits. Slowly the banging on his rickety door penetrated his hangover. "Blacknail? Blacknail, do you hear me? I know you're in there!" Blacknail groaned. It was his landlord, Spittlehouse. "I want my rent, Blacknail!" the disembodied voice continued. Money? How was he supposed to give Spittlehouse any money? He'd wagered, drank and whored away what little he had last night. He was about to sink his head into his hands when he saw they were covered in ink.

Wait a minute! He looked up. Sure enough, it hung there on a piece of string, drying. Standing on wobbly legs, he snatched at it.

Another blow sent Tobias toppling onto his back, and he waited for the inevitable.

Time slowed a little for Tobias as he lay there, looking up. All about the pit the crowd bayed for more, egging the combatants on. Even now, this late in the fight, Tobias saw money changing hands as the more optimistic – or foolish – spectators chose to take advantage of the increasingly long odds on Tobias.

Their hopes were soon dashed as his opponent set about Tobias, punching and kicking. Tobias did what he could to defend himself, but he was too old and too slow. It was all over.

A towel swooped into the pit like an oily, ragged dove, and the tiny mechanical referee duly stepped in, waving his spindly arms to signify the end of the fight and another victory for Hammerlock, the odds-on favourite.

Lying there as the referee raised Hammerlock's arm in triumph, Tobias looked up and saw his engineer on the edge of the pit looking down at him.

The engineer smiled weakly, and Tobias closed his eyes, head falling back into the dirt.

The pit was sunk into the centre of an ornate hall bedecked in brass and dark wood. This hall formed the nucleus of a dark, savage club known as the Pit after its arena. The club's patrons were gloriously eclectic, with a plethora of villains, adventurers and hobgoblins all happy to place their wagers on brutal clashes between automations, amazons and aliens, and to frequent the many small bars and betting kiosks that lined the Pit's walls.

One such patron was Crookshank Blacknail. A forger by trade and flotsam by nature, his instincts had, once again, failed him. Dejected, he screwed up the betting slip and cast it aside. It bounced across the hall's floor and teetered on the edge of the pit before falling in.

He'd felt sure this time. He'd felt sure Sergeant Tobias would win.

"What I don't understand," Blacknail said as he sipped at what passed for wine in this dive, "is why that Tobias never wins. All the time I've been betting here, I've never seen him win a single fight."

"Well, yes," nodded Blacknail's drinking companion – a midge-sized woman with a wooden leg, an eye-patch and a humped back, "but he's one of those old steam driven brass hats the MEF built to operate in Martian conditions."

"Mars? Then surely he can handle a few patchwork pit fighters?"

"In theory. But once you bring those things to Earth, with our higher

with cult film-maker, Herschell Gordon Lewis, and features on “zombie” films and organising genre events.

Also, a new website – a *Pantechnicon* archive – is currently under construction at <http://removalvan.wordpress.com> to house all the previous issues of the zine. So, together with even more new fiction and non-fiction to follow in April 2010 – well, you haven’t seen the last of us yet!

The Pantechnicon Editorial Team
December 2009

FICTION

Money

Paul L. Mathews

August 1st, 1888

Trapped in a pit, the hulking military automaton Sergeant Tobias tried to avoid having the bolts beaten out of him. A crowd on the fringe of the pit roared as they watched.

Chin down on his broad chest, Tobias swayed from side to side as he tried to slip the barrage of punches with lateral movement alone. He tried to keep his hands up, but his assailant – another automaton – was canny enough to keep attacking Tobias’s flank, targeting the pistons in his *latis-simus dorsi* assembly with hook after hook. Slowly, but surely, Tobias’s pistons began to fail and the hydraulic pressure in his arms started to fall. Warning, Tobias tried to hold his opponent back with jabs, but his failing strength restricted him to slow, ponderous blows that were easy to see and evade.

Another blow landed on Tobias’s flank, and his arm collapsed by his side. A fraction of a second later, his opponent’s brass fist thundered into Tobias’s exposed head, and Tobias fell back, his metal face buckled and cracked.

The Ups and Downs of Publishing a Zine

EDITORIAL

Publishing a zine can be an emotional experience. On the one hand, it provides those of us involved in it with a great sense of achievement. It's also fantastic to hear of writers we've published who've gone on to be published elsewhere. That's especially true when, like *Pantechicon*, the zine was originally set up in order to help new writers on the road to publication. On the other hand, it's a real downer when things go wrong. And those of you who've followed *Pantechicon* over the last year or so will know that things really have gone very wrong of late. Sadly — due to technical problems, virus-wielding hackers, and other issues — we've had to make the difficult decision to close down the zine for good.

That left us with a dilemma. We'd already agreed to publish several stories, articles and interviews, and the thought of letting all those writers down — not to mention our readers — was most upsetting. Now, this may sound corny, but the thing about the community of people who produce genre zines is that they're like one big family, all wanting the best for the genre. There's no cut-throat competition between these small press publishers, and people are very willing to step in and help each other out when needed.

Hence, thanks to Stephen Theaker, here we are publishing this issue of *Pantechicon* back-to-back with *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction*. This arrangement has the added benefit that, for the first time, this issue of *Pantechicon* is available not only in its usual form as a free PDF download, but also in ebook format, and to purchase in printed form from Lulu. So, thank you so much, Stephen — we couldn't have done it without you!

We originally thought that this would be the final issue of *Pantechicon*, but we have sufficient material for another issue too. Therefore, this is now the penultimate one, with the final issue also going back-to-back with *TQF* in April 2010.

So, what do we have to delight you, dear reader, in this issue? We have brand new stories set in the past and in the future; both poignant stories and ones which will fill you with fear. In addition, we have an interview

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