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# **With My Mouth**

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# **Abstract**

## **With My Mouth**

This collection of short stories explores many possible forms and uses of the genre of science fiction, ranging from explorations of the impact of science upon philosophical and religious issues and vice versa, to speculations about possible future understandings of identity rooted in ethnicity, culture, and even species. These stories range in setting and mood from a bizarre but humorous alternate history (à la Dickens) to a Buddhist-inhabited far-future dystopia, and employ a wide range of techniques and strategies. While these stories tend to use traditional (realist) narrative techniques, they use them strategically to immerse readers in performative examinations of many issues which are often addressed through formal experimentation – sometimes from perspectives that address these issues more forcefully than a formal experiment might succeed in doing. While thereby seeking to literally “hack” (in both senses of the word) readerly assumptions, these stories also argue performatively for a much wider range of imaginative possibilities and suitable topics of direct examination for SF than is often utilized by its practitioners or even acknowledged possible by its readers, both those of the street and those of the academy.

# acknowledgements

Just as no text of this length or attempted depth can be written well without reference texts, it relies upon many more people than the author to bring it to life. Some people make snide notes about not wanting to thank everyone they know, but I believe that just like in any other convergence of thinking, action, and expression, all contributors deserve not only gratitude but recognition. The myth of the author as an island, or worse yet as a lone genius, deserves to be thrown away for ever; craving for this lone genius is responsible for not only a great deal of rotten writing by people who never confront their ignorance and who fail to seek accountability in their writing, but also for a lot of public (and [un]professional) misperception about how and why texts get written.

My debts are many and diverse: first of all, thanks go to the following individuals are owed for general, ubiquitous generosity in their aid toward my garage-band styled education in science and their willingness to share their expertise in the sciences, medicine, and other areas of wide knowledge with me: Charlie Bell, Dee Daley, Dan Minette, Karen Smith, and Bob Zimmerman (no, not the *other* Bob Zimmerman, I mean Bob Zimmerman the neurologist), who stand prominent among many others. In the area of cross-cultural enlightenment, I owe thanks to my friends Arash Heesh-ki (one of the stylistic bases for “Kickash Barash”), Chiraz Agrebi (whose explanation of “jihad” fired my imagination to the point of envisioning the concept’s potential role in a transitional revolution sketched out in “Metaphorz an’ Shit”, and modern German transit systems), and Helen Kuk (whose discussion with me about Mao, poetry, and Western liberal

naiveté turned me to researching a great deal about China, “Poppy” being in some ways an offshoot of this interest; her acute reading and commentary also aided me greatly in refining “Eythea”).

Many of these people also served as readers of my work in its earlier stages, and gave feedback and/or asked questions that made an honest writer out of me, over the last few years before the compilation of these pieces into their current form. In addition to those listed above, Karen Smith (who had the decency, after introducing me to the genre of SF, to help me learn how to write it as well; she is owed the credit for most of what works in “Bodhisattva”), Jessie “Jiezi” Forsyth (whose endless questions and challenges are a model to me as I learn to think better and better), Jack “Private Sex” Illingworth (who got his Uncle Chaucer joke after all), Medrie “Mrs. Pudnam” Purdham, Catherine Bush, and Rob Allen, should be added to the list of readers and/or commentators who, for persisting in the reading of my work or talking through of ideas upon which this work is based, or simply offering support to me as a writer, deserve a horrifying degree of indebtedness from myself. Rob especially deserves thanks for handling my thesis advising in extremely short order.

Certain individuals deserve special credit for outstanding and unwarranted contributions: Chiraz Agrebi (aided by Pia Haerberlin) did masterful translations from English to German for my story “with my mouth”; Charlie Bell aided me not only in the magnificent formatting of this text, but also in the refinement of my understanding of the role of the limbic system human neurology for the drafting of “with my mouth” and “Eythea” (though he’s still wrong to be so skeptical about the likelihood of linked dynamic evolutionary development of the limbic system in connection to the neocortex)

and helped me with naval terminology for “Poppy”; discussions with Dan Minette about psychopharmacology helped by divergent example to shape the views which I express in “with my mouth” as well; significant portions of “Tannenbaum” were based upon my dad’s stories of the “old days” (which happen to have taken place basically throughout the real spike in the process of East/Central African decolonization), most specifically those tales he told me about his bartending days in Malawi in which position he met a number of mercenaries involved in illicit, government-sponsored smuggling. The work done Ouskeminya and Ajina is in large part based upon the characters my dad told us about during strange, Christmasey evening gab sessions in between tales of jaguars and hippos ransacking impromptu fishing-trip campsites.

My Mum and Dad (ardent commentators and storytellers both) along with the friends listed above and other friends and family who only rarely have my writing inflicted upon them, also deserve my thanks for support, love, company, and amusement; through these things I am given an endless renewal of my sense of wonder at this universe that we share, and at not only the species that we now are but also the one that we someday could be. They remind me of what could be if we would only look closely enough to see what a stake we have in one another, and in whatever fragments of the truth we can crawl our way towards, half-blind but also half-sighted, and perhaps yet again full of hope.

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# illustrations

While quasi-illustrations appear in the form of “advertisements” in the story “Metaphorzan’ Shit”, they are integrated as part of the narrative structure of the story in which they appear, and are thus not labeled as figures within the text of the story. However, for those who might wish to refer to these advertisements, appropriate titles are given for the page numbers below.

- 156 Kangmei of Tokyo lip-treatment cosmeceutical advertisement
- 160 Uncle Yoruchi fileaces product placement window
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# foreword

That **With My Mouth** is the title story of this collection of science-fiction tales is significant in two ways: first of all **With My Mouth** is demonstrative of the fusion of sociopolitical and economic criticism, hard science(at its conclusion), and critique of popular cultural myths (such as “normative” models of mental health) which I seek to achieve in my writing generally. However, it is also an important story for me as a writer because it represents the possibility that the addressing of those questions is also the addressing of just as many questions of an imminent, personal, and essentially human nature.

If there is one focal point at which all of these stories drive, it is the confrontation of the reader with difference: whether it is the confrontation of a different imagined past, such as in **Poppy**, or the kinds of differences possible (for better or worse) in imagined futures, or differences that we encounter in cultures other than our own (especially those who confront us through our very own technologies), matters less in some ways and more in others as time passes. However, types of differences can be negotiated, approached, and to some degree understood using shares of the techniques of inquiry found both in the hard sciences, *and* in the humanities. We must resist the drive in our culture to prioritize scientific knowledge alone at the expense of all other forms of knowledge, as one of my physicist friends reminds me often, science cannot be derived from religion, but nor can ethics and religion be derived from science. Scientific reductionism is a

powerful tool...for certain problems. But nuances of difference can be lost, and these losses are, as often as not, conducive to that which benefits small élites at the expense of most of our species. As Barbara Johnson writes in *A World of Difference*:

If I perceive my ignorance as a gap in my knowledge instead of an imperative that changes the very nature of what I think I know, then I do not truly experience my ignorance. The surprise of otherness is that moment when a new form of ignorance is suddenly activated as an imperative. (16)

This surprise is not unknown to scientists, many of whom have looked upon their own bewilderment at the universe that eluded their expectations and found themselves infused with a drive to understand difference, a drive as passionate as that which has stirred the minds of philosophers, historians, and storytellers. Just as there have been many sham artists on both sides of that divide, there are still many who see the two fields, the Arts and the Sciences, as divided.

I don't want to prophesy about what happens to a house divided, because we all know the old saw about that sort of thing. But it is important to recall that these two "opposites" are actually inseparable, and part of the same dynamic process that (for better and *certainly* also for worse) has built most of the Western world in the last few centuries: science changes the nature of those questions that so often provide the fuel for art, philosophy, and feeling, and feeling, philosophy, and art that face those very problems are the human force that drive not only individuals but societies that engage in science. Much more than mind and body, it is art and science which are the twin wheels to the chariot which is our civilization.

In bringing together these concerns, I believe that it is science fiction that can



explore most vividly both sides of the fence in detail, at a point in time when it is crucial to do so. Science is ascendant, and difference is to some degree the most endangered species of all. While much science fiction is predicated on the same kinds of objectionable futurist tropes that drive the economics-centered speculations of the mainstream in our culture (generally western-centric, exclusionary or assimilationist but effectively anti-difference values), it needn't be so. SF can engage its readers in thought-experiments involving pasts or futures that, whether utopian, dystopian, or preferably somewhere in between, contain (one hopes) startling types of difference, of the kind that, as Bruce Sterling once said, "grabs you by the lapels and pushes you up against the wall". Thereby it is hoped that, by a certain kind of aesthetic engagement with startling difference, ignorance, instead of being a symptom of our imminent doom, can be catalyzed into both critical awareness *and* a willingness to act on behalf of those who will have to live with the consequences not only of our grossest sins, but our utterly quotidian ones as well; for while the futures depicted in most of these stories are unlikely to be forthcoming, they seek to illustrate that the past was, and future will be, determined by the passivity or resistance, concern or lack thereof, and either complacent ignorance or thirst for knowledge, integrity, and justice, both of which can and do exist in this world because of the choices and actions of individuals just like you and me.

*January 2001*

*Montréal, Quebec.*

# eythea

*Non est medicabilis amor herbis.*

*(Love is not curable by herbs.)*

*—Ovid, Remedies for Love*

I had no idea that we were targets, any of us, at that time. We should have been more aware, more careful. It was stupid of us to go out like we did, partying, exuberant kids convinced that the fabric of the old world was collapsing under the force of our collective willpower and concerted action. It was stupid and childish for us to believe nobody would, or could oppose us in secret, in the shadows. We never imagined anyone watching us on those long tramcommutes from city to city, across the dark night landscape of this country with its industrial farms and its dumpzones and the odd stand of commune-shacks and tent-villages. How could we have remained visible, enough to follow and track and kill, when all of these things were all swallowed up into the darkness of a charcoal sketch through a glaring window? Maybe we should have kept moving, become more like those things we saw out the train windows, transient dirty shadows between the city-zones. Maybe we should have stayed out of the lights.

But I guess we needed it, some kind of release, some other way of functioning in the world other than doing surgery on it. We needed lives of our own, lives away from our apartment where there was always some cell-sister or cell-brother crashing. And always the messages coming in: questions about people trying to organize new cells, and people critiquing our methods and sending long jargonistic essays on why we were

dangerous, and comms from leaders of cells we'd never heard of whose members were being beaten up by partisan gangs in the streets of Kinshasa and Taipei and Brasilia and were wondering what to do about it.

So we used to hit the dives, the loud places, the places that it seems have always existed in cities. It was more Eythea's thing than mine, really. She used to just dance and dance for hours, and I think part of it was that she needed to remind herself of being an animal, being in the body. Sometimes I forget that, too, but dancing doesn't do it for me, even though I do spend hours plugged into the rig with my eyes shut and my brain halfway across the face of the planet. I don't know what reminds me of my own physicality. Maybe watching her dance? She was very visceral, very animal; that at least was something.

Don't get me wrong, I would get the rush too. The rush that makes your heart skip and tumble forward in time, beating crazy. The way your breathing changes, your muscles move slightly, preparing themselves for . . . *something*. There was just a vibe about these places, especially the ones on the Southeast Coast. Feeling the rhythm pound up from under the ground, up through your body, you almost feel it coming out the top of your head, except it's too heavy to rise. So the rhythm, the haze, just hangs around you, and you sway in the crowd, and your arms reach up into the blackness above. There is something about this, something primally human, maybe. We don't hunt or work or learn together anymore, we are all in our little boxes, plugged in. So we dance, we pound through the night touching one another by accident, by chance.

But that night, I wasn't dancing. I was watching her in the middle of the crowd. That night the music was algorithmic, a loop of sound that was repeating, slowly

mutating off all kinds of crazy data-input: readings from a petrie dish with some bacteria or other in it; some calculations derived from whatever tornado was tearing through Texas that night; and as usual some crowd feedback with the diehards who were umbied into the house system. Eythea used to have this way of dancing, as if didn't take any effort. As if it was just inside her and coming out. She did this thing with her shoulders, her eyes, her hips, and swished her whitish-blue hair in this strange way; I remember trying to figure out how but I couldn't make my own head do what hers did.

I'd gotten a Hype-patch from a vending machine on the way in. Now I could feel it thudding, almost with the beat, tingling all through my arm and pumping whatever new, barely-legal variant of Hype it contained into me through my skin. I could feel my mind like a huge tingling fractal in my head, and the more I dove into the minutae, the more I got of the same. Mandelbrot. The more I got of the same, the more I wanted to be next to Eythea. I would dance, I decided. I wish I'd decided it a minute before.

The first step was the most disorienting. It felt as if I'd stepped up onto a wall in front of me, walked up ninety degrees, and every step after that felt like it too, like I was walking on the inside curve of a spiral or a donut-shaped manifold — except that I could *see* with my eyes that I was walking straight toward her. The floor moved slowly, spinning under my steps in the opposite direction from where I was walking, spinning out into the spiral that my muscles imagined and my eyes denied. I felt as if I had four knees, but that none of them were located where I knew that my knees were. I had the impression that I could feel my shoulders bent out of place, and I could feel light massaging me through my heavy jacket, as I moved towards Eythea, muttering things to her in my mind.

Eythea's zshirt lit up after a few of my steps, flickering at first with only tiny sparks. I wonder still how those things work. I think they must be powered by body heat, but I've never figured it out completely. I once nuked a shirt to see what would happen. It just shortcircuited and never worked again. But it seemed that every club we'd been to in the past year had a unit that sets these things going, all at once. Usually, when the floor gets full, and anticipation builds up, it starts up. Flash: the lights shut out completely, and suddenly everyone who's wearing z's is glittering, giving off sparks. And the more they dance, the more the sparks jump, leaping from z to z, until everyone is part of a gigantic biotechnological circuit. It's like a whitish blue webwork of light that floods the whole place, until everyone, even people who aren't in z's, is woven into the shining web. It feels like we all become this one huge alien body. It tingles, and on Hype it seems to give people a feeling of being part of the universe, part of the guts of stars again.

Eythea was at the start of the flicker, at the center of the glow, that night. I watched her face gleam, smiling. I don't think she saw me coming, she'd had her head turned to the side in that way she did sometimes when she danced. I loved it, when she did that. I was walking slowly, savouring the first few steps into the glitterweb of all the z's in the room. Looking at her, just looking at her in the middle of things, made me happy.

So I don't know why I turned my head just then. Why I looked at the older, serious-faced man with his head sideways, and a glazed look. I've seen this type before, I thought as my mind slipped into stereographic vision. Zoneheads, on beta wavers, sluggish junkies who would come and hang in places like this because the lights and music sound like some kind of divine voice when you're in deep beta. I blinked violently

as he split into two, then four, then eight of him standing at a crazy angle in my mind. Dizzy, I looked at the spaced-out expression on each of his eight faces as they refracted into sixteen, and I wondered why I was looking at him in the first place. Then I realized in the confusion that he had something in his hands, something small and dark that he was fondling while he stared intently, and that I had seen it before I had even moved. I had seen what it was. And as the urgency welled up in me, because just then somehow I knew that he was staring at the same place that I was. At Eythea.

My body was launched like a rubbery sling toward her, and only after I was in motion did I realize that this movement was of my own volition, that the muscles in my arms and legs were moving because I — some part of me — was telling them to move me toward her. When my foot hit the ground, it felt like a dollop of proteinbatter spreading out in a pan, sizzling and spreading slow. I couldn't tell which foot, because it felt like I had several feet in different places all at once. My knees felt as if they had bent backwards and forwards at the same time, and my arms stretched out in front of me, almost long enough to bridge the space between me and Eythea. I remember the way the glittering sparks, the zlight, enfolded my arms, or at least how my mind saw that. I felt my momentum build, felt myself leaning forward, the gravity pulling at my breasts as they leaped up and away from me, making room for the boiling air that burrowed into my lungs. I felt my face stretching into a scream.

And then I was separate, watching all of this from somewhere deep inside my brain. My head turned slowly, my neck muscles pulling as if they had been stretched many feet long. Everything was immensely distant, the way I sometimes felt after a fight

with Eythea, on the bad days, the days when she had been right no matter what. Or when cellbrothers and cellsisters had died and she felt the responsibility on her own shoulders. I would lie next her, on my side, looking at her sleep, and this weird trick of the mind made her look and feel as if she was a million miles away. Except I was looking at the man, the man who was lobbing something black and round at her. Numbness flickered inside me, numbness as a kind of sensation of its own. I was full of static as I took the last two steps toward her.

And then the explosion knocked me back, my body flung away from her, slamming me backwards and down against the floor, though through the haze it felt more like I was being splattered, my brain flung outward and filled with the sound of breaking glass.

When I finally managed to tear my way to her side, there was blood everywhere. I felt hundreds of miles wide, as if the sides of my body were rubbing the walls in every direction. My hair felt as if it was poking at the ceiling, at the floor, oscillating between the two at the speed of light. I leaned over Eythea, her body still lit up by the torrent of sparks rebounding between her zshirt and mine. My body breathed harshly, shocked.

There was blood *everywhere*. People were screaming, and their voices echoed inside me, melting into that sound of breaking glass that just wouldn't stop, a standing wave of that sound inside my head. She was shivering, her arms clutched across her chest. Her eyes were glazed and faroff. I don't remember if I was crying or sweating, but my eyes stung. I peeled her arms from her body, and saw the wounds. I'd seen this kind of thing before, when I'd worked with CivRes cells in the worst parts of the world. This



was the kind of shit that the people with cash or connections used: burrowers. Targeting grenades, automated assassins. By the time I was at her side, the wormbot had torn her heart into ground meat. If she'd been in a hospital, she might have survived it, but not there. Not then.

I think I was screaming at her, I don't remember what I said but I remember the way my mouth felt, moving, as if it were bigger than my head. I remember the feeling of air scratching over my tongue on the way out. I was fumbling with my pocket to get the umbjack out. My body felt like it was floating apart, slowly dissolving into the room, and I had to fight to stay in control. I looked at the wound in her chest, and shivered. Her face wasn't her face anymore, covered in that blood, glazed and absent.

When the music stopped, there was this voice shrieking her name. I realized after a few moments that it was me, screaming at her, begging her to hold on. I know that the brain lives for a few minutes after the body dies, is lucid for maybe a minute. But she'd had no oxygen for several seconds already. She was dying, really dying, not just body but brain. I could feel her mind slipping away into the nothingness.

I cradled her head in my hands, fitted one end of the feed into her brainjack, on the back of her skull, and then tried to put the other end into mine. But I couldn't find it. I screamed, trying to breathe, and felt someone take the plug from me and slot the jack into my own jackport. I stared at her face, waiting for the connection to load. Seconds. Whole seconds, it would be. As I waited, I realized she was falling apart in front of me.

Burrowers —auxiliary wormbots — were tearing her left cheek apart as I watched, collapsing her face as I watched. But then everything slipped outward, her face, my sobbing, the screaming people pulling me away from her body as I plunged into her

mind, trying to prevent the bots from killing me too.

Darkness. I felt nothing on the end of the feed. I reached out with my mind, out into her limbic darkness. I was frantic, searching; I imagined maybe I was like a sudden fire in her dying mind. I could feel all of my emotions—my want, my horror, my shock—all ebbing into her.

And a tiny flicker was all I got in response: only a small, quiet presence, faint and barely warm. Unclear, unfocused. Not even semi-words. Whatever it was of Eythea that I had found was very confused, and brushed only very softly against my mind. It was equivalent of a whisper, or a mumble. And then, the feeling of a tiny light going out, followed by a feedback hiss.

It's been months. I wouldn't say anything I've done in the time since that night has been anything like *living*, but I've been surviving off my savings. I cut myself off from our cell, when they refused to investigate. They thought it was the Right Cross party, and they don't want to stir the dragon anymore than they need to, since nobody'd been attacked since, at least not before I left. The my old cell-partners thought it was to make an example; proper Christian sexual mores, even among dissidents, and all that. I don't know if I've failed her or not, by leaving. I don't know what she would have done if it'd been reversed.

But the real problem isn't any of these things, it's something else altogether. I keep thinking guiltily back to before I quit my job at Synthromed International and dropped out of the whole corporate pro-track, and joined up with Eythea and her CivRes cell. I keep thinking of the time just before, when we were lovers but I was still a

epidemicop, as the Civvers called us. I was haunted by all the shit I saw at work, tracking epidemics, and even for months after I'd quit, it was like I was perpetually wrapped in a thin layer of hazmat shielding, even when I went home. Even when I touched Eythea. I could feel all of that insanity, all of that sickness everywhere around me, ghosts even. Whole villages of people whose insides had melted into slime as they screamed from their bodies, scattered on the ground.

And all of those months after. There in our old flat, with the hardwood floors and the stim console where I had lived with this woman that I loved. I kept on living there, for a while. Sitting with a ghost. Not of Eythea . . . we had always agreed that there's no such thing as an immortal soul. We *knew* that. It's the last few minutes, that fragment of Eythea that has remained there in my head all this time, or maybe the not-Eythea: that is the ghost that hangs around me still even now. The impact of the burrowers and the shrapnel certainly had put her into shock. I feel the spasms of her muscles in endless cascading iterations through my memory, from just before they pulled me off her. I feel the rhythm of her erratic breathing. I can remember feeling my hands on her, very clearly—the proprioceptive distortions made my hands feel like they were the size of dinner plates—but despite that, the memory of touching her is still clear. But I can't really remember her face very clearly, not any more.

Her eyes had been glazed, too, but that was just a normal symptom of shock. The question is, what kind of shock? After releasing the burrowers, the grenade had exploded outward, away from her, with a concussive force. Had it knocked her mind out, crippled her mind? I'd been at least fifteen feet away from her, and the concussion had sent me flying, after all. Maybe she'd been in some kind of dissociated state. She could have been

completely cut off from everything at the end. Even if her brain was still buzzing, she might not have heard me at all, before I jacked in or after.

That's my sickness: that I keep going back to what I felt of her, months later now, through the neural feed, in the last few seconds. I can feel it changing slowly, everything that's inside my head from that night, maybe like it's gestating. Not like a memory. Every time I think about it, it feels different. And I am getting used to the way it changes. A lot of times I wonder what it was she was trying to send me, if she *was* trying to send anything at all. What was that flicker, that whisper? Maybe it was just a reflexive action, like the way men come when they are hanged, or people shit themselves when they are shot. My mind fills with images from the hanged bodies we found in a village in the Thai bush, littered with the bodies of a few dozen people hit by Lang-xen's Flu. I remember her holding me when I got back from that job, just holding me for hours while I sat in shock, when the focus drugs had worn off and I unwound and all the images flooded back into my mind. A lot of times I wonder if that flicker I felt from the other end of the umbilical was supposed to be an emotion, love or fear. But usually I think that it probably wasn't. It was just her, a tiny strand of her roots; a physical reaction, the flutter of death.

Neural feeds were never the wonderful, telepathic links that people had been predicting for decades. Sometimes, if they were lucky and worked at it for a long time, people could carry on a conversation. Nobody has ever jolted whole abstract ideas from one brain to another; mostly, at best, they've managed some basic just verbal data, as far as neocortical data was concerned. Sentences. And what was the point of that? If that was telepathy, all telepathy requires is speech—because, really, telepathy is just moving ideas from one mind to another, something we've been doing for thousands of years. Neural links are sketchy, problematic at best. You can measure a lot of what is going on, but you

can't really talk.

What it was good for was getting a sense of one another's emotions, connecting in some way with the limbic system of the other person. The best we could do was wire up the hunk of the brain where the emotions live, the bit that's been churning out the same emotions in animals for millions of years, in ancient fish and dinosaurs, since long before there were neocortices to reflect on those emotions. We would spend hours with our minds elided, overlapped, in one another's arms. Sometimes we would fall asleep sprawled into one another's minds. Our two brains interfaced imperfectly via neural feed, but they *did* interface directly. Like mute dancers, they could not speak, confess love, or philosophize—but they could touch. Just the bare surfaces of two personalities brushing one another. This was something new in the history of the world. Or that was how it had felt; that was what we had told ourselves.

What can drive you crazy is knowing that all that is left of another human being, a whole complex and complete mind and body and everything, is what you carry inside your head. And memory is at best a partial record of mostly irrelevant facts and intuitions. I know she took after her mother, that she had come to Seattle from New Mexico in 2018, in the summer with two other women who had had enough of the States. Her birthday, the day her mother died, where her father lives, the raised dark scar on her left shoulder from the dozens of immunization shots she'd gotten as a kid. The way stress and exhaustion sometimes turned her eyes from pale green to a greyish blue. The way she said certain words with some kind of accent I couldn't pinpoint or trace.

But I'd never figured out if she really liked Shinju's fried tofu or not. I don't

know if she preferred dancing with me or alone. She never did tell me why she'd left that man, Christofo, before she'd met me, and I never figured out why something changed inside her whenever someone slammed a door.

I'm convinced that, whether or not she recognized me or could hear me that night, I *did* touch her mind through the neural feed, as her brainwaves slowed and ceased: I was with her at the end, and some kind of essence of her is what I carry inside my own brain, now. Not an essence. Just the last moment of her. Even so, it doesn't matter.

I touched her. But I also think that she couldn't feel me touching her, even through the neural feed. I think that her response was just a reflex. Whether or not it was her—the Eythea I knew—I was with her. I felt her dying, her mind going out like a light, on the end of a cable. But really it wasn't her, by the time I was touching her mind. Not my Eythea. It was some *other* her, another Eythea who I never met. She was already gone before I got there. She never knew that I was coming toward her.

Does it really matter if she heard me? Does it matter if, before her brain went silent, she heard my voice saying I loved her, screaming for her please not to die? What if she didn't recognize my voice? And now, even if she was there, if it was Eythea, and maybe even the same Eythea I *did* love, that brain has lost its spark. It would have stored the fact for a moment, and then the knowledge would have been lost anyway, seconds later, when the last of the oxygen ran out. The memory would have dissolved into darkness.

And here I am, almost a year later, asking myself: does it matter? Why can't I stop thinking about it?

They haven't left me alone, as we'd all hoped, and this time I didn't even have the cell around to back me up. So now my name is different. At this moment, though, I can't remember what my new name is; for that matter, I can't remember what my old name is. I'm wandering along some street. I don't know this city very well yet, this new city where I am supposed to be hiding out, but I know I should recognize this street because I recognize small bits of it. Still, I can't remember what street it is. It's like looking at a face, and recognizing the nose and the hairline, but seeing the cheeks collapsing underneath the skin, seeing that the eyes are alien, unrecognizable.

The street is lit up, and my Kuru patch throbs on the back of my neck, hidden by my hair. My hair is now black and mostly hacked off. People would never mistake me for her sister now, the way some used to because of our fair hair and our similar build. Kuru is a lot heavier than Hype, it fucks with everything. I've overdosed it again, but I can't die from it. For better or worse, it's impossible to overdose on Kuru, though I might forget to eat for a few days. I recognize that street drain. When I walk, it feels the way it felt to walk when I was a little girl. I miss her.

I keep having this dream that right after she dies, a man in the crowd at the club comes up to me, and asks if I want her consciousness salvaged. Every time, he says that he's a researcher, working on brain-scanning and consciousness emulation. He says that the fresher the cadaver the more likely success will be. She's a "cadaver," now, even still warm. The word gets stuck in my mind, and it settles into the thickness of my brain. The researcher says he's just been given the go-ahead to move from long dead brains to recently dead ones. He says he can begin work in an hour, with his team. Even in his hurry, he is polite, he calls me "Miss" every time. And everytime that I have this dream, I

tell him yes, yes.

Of course, I know this is a dream from the start. All of this “personality scanning” stuff is science fiction, no matter what advances big Corp pundits are forecasting. It’s still centuries off: we don’t know enough about the brain to even begin to do it yet. Sure, we have basic AIs. Like that one they built down in Texas, Deep Blue Sky. Now that was a computer I always liked—especially when it renamed itself “Cousin Pooh,” after “reading” all of the Winnie the Pooh books. That was the trick, they made it a baby mind, and made it grow up. It had to learn to think, to read, to speak. It grew up faster than any human, but it was basically a baby when it first started operating, a few years ago.

But even Cousin Pooh isn’t really the same as an emulation of an uploaded mind, not at all. It seems conscious, but...it can’t fear. It can’t die. It never feels pain. Even if those experiences are approximated, it doesn’t have a body. An embodied mind, suddenly bodiless, is a different proposition from a mind that never had a body. What do you feed the hidden subroutines in such a mind? Nobody knows. So how *could* they reconstruct Eythea? The *real* Eythea, inside a computer? This is how I know that, even in a dream, the data-mind they make from her dead brain will not be her. Would the new Eythea remember, really *remember* without physical eyes, what it was like for her to see me the first time, on a plane out of Beijing the night of the Jingsheng protests? The way I feel it in my eyes when I remember what it was like to look across the room at her dancing along, shrouded in zsparks? Would she remember what it was like to speak out against the corps and the bankers, in those CivRes broadcasts she made online? How could she remember, without a teeth or tongue or lips or a real voice with a throat for it to resonate in? Would she really remember making love, that warm curve of us in the dark that first



night after I quit my job at Synthromed and moved in with her on the Upper East Side? I remember those breathless promises we made very clearly. I remember them as much for how they felt in my throat, in my mouth like heavy droplets, as much for that as I remember them as ideas. Is it possible that this collection of numbers and patterns could actually *be* her? How *could* it?

But in my dream, I used not to be sure. I wanted to *know*.

I used to want to know so badly that the dream skipped ahead in time, as dreams sometimes do, to the moment when she was complete. And I would sit in a cool white room with barely any light, talking into a console. And she would have no idea who I am.

I call her a *she*, but that wasn't the right word. Eythea wasn't a she anymore, only an extracted mind humming through a net of silicon. It struck me the last time I had the dream, that this Eythea had no lips, and it didn't have her eyes. My eyes had nowhere to go when I talked to it. There was a screen with a very good computer-animated version of her face. Somehow, I knew—the researcher must have explained to me—that the old paths of output from her brain to the muscles of her face were simulated by the computer, and this produced the animation, along with reciprocal feedback so that it felt as if its face was moving. But I couldn't watch the way those shoulders moved with each false inhalation. The face on the screen made the pretense of breathing, and the Eythea in the computer believed that it *was* breathing, but it wasn't. I couldn't feel her warm breath when it sighed. So I couldn't stand to look at the screen.

And she didn't recognize me. It was apparent, in this dream, that her brain was damaged more severely than I imagined at the time, maybe by the concussive blast or maybe by the fall. Or maybe it was faulty data-retrieval.

But this makes me wonder about what really happened on the other end of that neural feed, for real I mean, not in the dream. If, when she was dying, she wasn't knocked completely senseless, then she was conscious of what I said to her, but not of who I was. Or maybe she wasn't conscious of who *she* was. Maybe she was a mind trapped with surging pain and a face in front of it, hanging between the sudden smooth darkness of the vacant past and the stretching darkness of the future that ebbed out of her. Maybe she would not have understood anyway.

And I have to wonder, even though she—it, the computerized Eythea in the dream—reacts to everything I say just as she would have if she'd been revived but lost memory of me. If this computer-simulated Eythea is not the woman I loved . . . what was the mind in that bleeding body that I spoke to, not in the dream, but in real life? Was it her? If she didn't know me, did I still love her, or was I talking to someone else, someone already gone?

When I've woken up from the dream, I've never been able remember whether or not I manage to shut the computer down and destroy her emulation before I surface out of sleep. Until last night. Last night, I tore the computer apart, smashed it on the ground. The scientist just stood there, looking at me, and he said, with Eythea's voice, "You've changed. You never would have done *that* before. See?" When I woke up, it was like I couldn't breathe.

I thought maybe I could find some kind of answer outside, on the street, in the Kuru. Women and men pass me on the street, this street that I don't recognize. Their clothes are full of static and faces humming with synaesthetic noise. Their eyes have a terrible, sharp screech of feedback in them, and their hair drones. This is what too much

Kuru does to the way you see things. My hair is black now, and it drones a smooth deep tone. Their voices tunnel green and bright blue all around me, and I shut my eyes against the noise, as they enclose me like light. Each moment I slide away, and another version of me takes my place. And I'm not supposed to know it's happening. But I do.

I should recognize this street, but I don't.

# Poppy

or,

The Singular, Interesting, And  
True History of Philip Pirrip, or,  
“Poppy Pip”, The English Slave,  
Relating The Details of How He  
Came Into Slavery Under the  
Celestial Kingdom

*“Texts are not finished objects.”*

*–Edward Said, Culture and Imperialism*

*“A loyal opposition does not exist.”*

*–Deng Xiaoping, referring to Wei Jingsheng*

He could be called Pip, if one were required to address him at all. His family name being Pirrip, and his Christian name Philip, his childish tongue could make no more sense of them together than the name "Pip." That should come as little surprise, when one considers the degree to which sickness and opium smoke had permeated the house in which he had lived from the time when he had been an infant until such time as he had progressed into that region of his life when it could be proper to call him a young lad; but, in any case, the childish name had been retained by him into adulthood, and was then often applied to him by all... except, of course, by the Cathayans, who called him by a whole host of other foul words in their own strange tongue; and, in pidgin, the language in which they spoke with him most often. In this language, which was as alien to him as their strange and inscrutable faces, they tended to call him "Poppy", having learned that this was the English word for the flower; that flower, vile crops of which had spawned the fruits of sickly pallor, crazed dreams, and air heavy with opium-smoke: these were the signs of the opium-madness, the yoke that they have placed upon his poor, blighted land. But in those dark days he aspired to be a good Englishman, and so Pip paid them, that is, the Chinese, as little mind as a subject of the Queen could; and thus, herein as within his heart, his truest of names was neither Philip nor Poppy but rather Pip, and so thus he shall

be called by that name for the duration of this, his true and interesting history.

It was by none of those names, neither Poppy, nor Pip, nor Philip, nor Mr. Pirrip, that he was called when a small, wizened Chinaman grasped at his coat by the sleeve, yelping out in his own language. "*Fon Kwey*," he addressed him. *Foreigner*, it meant, or that at least was what Pip had gathered from his rambles at the docks. *Imagine that, calling me foreigner, when it is he who is the foreigner*, Pip bristled indignantly. And yet, as a gentleman, he slowed his pace to see what the Cathayan wanted. He listened patiently to the garbled speech, unsure not so much in regards to the subject of the discourse as to whether the Chinaman was speaking in a Western tongue or an Eastern, until he heard the words "*Cong Foo Tzaw*". At this, Pip suddenly yelled, "No thank you, no thank you! I am a follower of Christ. Lay off me, heathen!" As he declared his faithfulness and his freedom from the need of any dubious Enlightenment available from foreign lips, he tugged his jacket arm from the grasp of the small, yellow man, who let go immediately. But even letting go, he passed not into passivity, but seemed to have the infernal fires of his sullen pagan heart fired by this rejection, and yelled after Pip as he picked his way down the street. Pip was familiar with the kind of reaction that any English vehemence and indignance bought with most of his ilk, and paid him little mind, yelling only once over his shoulder, "Be off with you, Cathayan!"

Missionaries like this one were rare, at least in London. A nuisance far more common in the streets of the Queen's City, the true Peking of the West, involved the filthy, smelly boys who lined the streets between Pip's home and the docks, a territory he traversed at least twice each day, to work and then back home again. His path was littered with the wreckage of the Chinese erosion of Britain: homeless boys, fatherless and

motherless, and untended-to by the English people. Dozens upon dozens of such boys clogged the route, increasingly desperate in their sundry situations and increasingly shifty in their comportment. Many of their parents were dead either of the opium, or of the influenza that had drifted like a black sea-fog inland, never dissipating but instead carrying its malevolent breath from town to town. These children were, Pip reflected as he walked among them on this particular evening, a millstone upon the British neck: they threatened to drag the whole of the nation down by stinking the air in its streets, by stealing and killing not only one another, but also the innocent, merely for the money to buy opium. For many of them had inherited the foul habit from their parents, and in the most barbarous way engaged in the smoking rather than the liquid application of opium. As a group they reeked of its cruel, exotic smoke even as Pip stepped over them, and as he looked them over carefully, planning his path, he observed that many of them bore the marks of scars and stains, emblems of the pathetic state in which lurked boys of the questionable type who were invariably willing to kill and steal for their atrocious habit. He wondered silently to himself whatever happened to the few English boys that the Chinese harvested from among those orphans presented to them for sale, who were found intelligent enough, and pagan enough, to be educated in Cathayan schools. He had heard rumors — never verified, of course — that those English boys emerged from the schools speaking funny, with their faces washed yellow-brown in tea and dressed in cheap, filthy silks. *Little Mandarines*, he thought, *readied to be set loose like bloody dogs on England. While the rest beg in filth in the streets, in the stink and with nobody, not even Christ, to tend to their poverty.* Sadly, Pip reflected on the various injustices of the world as he picked his way along between the boys, careful not to dirty his fine shoes, toward the

customs office at the dock on the Thames, under the shadow of London Bridge, that surrogate shadow of the Queen herself, for the second time that day, and the twelfth time that week.

At the dock, as usual, there were sepoys waiting, a crowd of the black devils in their white shirts and loose pants. Pip scowled at them, seeing before him creatures he knew to be traitorous, raping dogs, dressed like gentlemen of their own land. But he was at just that moment far too tired to be angry; he saw just such scum every day, and his anger had only survived in any form of considerable intensity for the first few years. Through the stinking umbral crowd of them marched a little gang of Chinese led by a Mandarin agent who was marked by the garishness of his costume—a flaming red robe, embroidered with white trees as if in winter, and adorned to excess beyond the English taste by scarves and ornaments from the colonies all about, shells from the beaches of Australia and diamonds of Africa, and hanging embroidered silks from India—to be of middling high rank. With a glance, Pip found confirmation in the Mandarin's hands, which bore ghastly long fingernails, one upon each gaunt finger. The fingernails were as much as any other part of his accoutrement a badge showing that the Mandarin was such a one as to spend absolutely no time in the rigging or in the ropes of the ship under his command. His long, devil-black hair was tied into a knot at the back of his head, and all the coolie sailors around him wore pairs of braids. Pip knew that such braids denoted lesser standing, for he had learned in the last few years how to read these men by their hair; all the hierarchies in their race were, as he knew, written paganishly into their manes.



Whether it was because Pip at that moment shook off the dreamish tiredness from his trip back to the dock, or whether it was because the Mandarin at that moment stepped forward toward him, it was at this very moment that Pip finally recognized him: this was Kwangsoo. He'd not been to the London maindocks for some time, and had aged, which also perhaps was an excuse for Pip's failure to immediately recognize him. The old Cathayan looked, by Pip's appraisal, as if he had been through a rough bit of hell itself, which observation of course rendered Pip not more sympathetic as much as less unhappy, for Pip disliked the strange Mandarin intensely. There was something about his demeanour, his carriage, and even his indecipherable speech that seemed to exude a kind of smugness, or perhaps superiority. Pip managed to disguise his pleasure at seeing Kwangsoo's condition by presenting it in the place of pleasure at seeing him again, so that with a smile almost mad in its intensity, he displayed the pearly treasures of his English mouth to the Mandarin. Pip believed intensely at that moment that Kwangsoo accepted this display of honest will as good currency at face value, at least inasmuch as was possible between Cathayan and Englishman.

He addressed Pip in Chinese, not sullyng his Oriental tongue with the guttural English language, but rather prattling out a string of senseless syllables. A skinny coolie-boy, about fifteen and dressed a little better than his brethren, translated for Pip. All such meetings depended on these coolie-boys, for Pip had never heard of a single Englishman who knew more than a few words of their difficult tongue. Therefore, such boys, skilled in the speech and writing of both tongues, were commonly carried in their ships — although, as always, it was said that the Cathayans did no thing without at least three reasons. The speculations about the other purposes of the boys on the ships, however,

was not fit for public discussion. In any case, Pip put all such thoughts out of his mind as the boy began to speak.

He said, without ornament or introduction or qualification, but rather assuming to speak for his Mandarin master more or less directly, "Hello-hello Meesta Poppy. No long time long see, good see-see you again. Plomisee been made night be goodee time for meeting, yes? No laidee, yes?"

*Hm*, Pip thought to himself puzzledly, *laidee—Lady? Is he asking for a whore?* But after a few moments, his bewilderment gave way to amused comprehension, and he shook his head while fighting back his grin and muttering, "No, no raidee."

After smiling and displaying his frightfully blackened teeth, the boy went on: "Cannot affolding to lose more chests, yes? Chop-chop ovah theh," he pointed over to a large Chinese boat. Chop-chops weren't the little junks that they used to be: the object of the coolie's specification appeared rather more like one of Britain's old East India clippers, but one which Pip didn't recognize. There was no aid to the recognition of the ship in the fact that the English name had been painted over with black and red pagan Cathayan signs. The coolie-child smiled up into Pip's face through the thin glass of his spectacles, a black cap upon his head, and the black thought surfaced again in Pip's mind; he wondered whether the boy was one of the eunuchs he'd heard of, who pleased Mandarin lords such as Kwangsoo in the manner of poor defiled slave-girls. *Poor bloody filthy pagan children*, Pip thought, *What kind of people mount up in boats and don't bring women along? Even just a few black slave-girls to keep the men quiet would do well enough. My God.* The Chinese and their apparently savage customs puzzled and worried Pip. Spice and silk and silver or not, there were days when he thought — strictly

to himself, of course — that England would have been best to have gone on forever having nothing to do with them at all. But that hadn't been his choice, had it? No, he thanked both God and Victoria, it hadn't, for such responsibility was something he could not have handled, even if he'd been born of the proper station to do so. He'd been lucky enough to have merely wandered off one night from his father's house, and have with a stolen knife killed a criminal in a swamp by accident one night thinking he was a Chinese coolie attacking the village. For this serendipitous "bravery" he had been named a hero, and then had been awarded the promise of a post in the service of the government, redeemable upon reaching adulthood. Having collected on the promise and taken on the post in Her Majesty's Customs Office, he was content to mind his own business, licit or not. Which, tonight, was comprised entirely of the secret and less than licit trade of silver for opium.

Pip nodded, and made a reply in his best pidgin to the boy: "No raidee, no problems. Coolies and sepoys bringee out chests chop-chop, safe now." The word *chop-chop* was a most interesting word, meaning several hundred different things depending on context; it was a word of great richness and applicability, at least in the vicinity of the docks (although, further inland, the term *chop-chop* signified never a thing but rather only an action the execution of which against the Mandarines, of course, was longed after in the hearts of all truly patriotic Englishmen). "Quickly" was the sense of the word in this particular case, but regardless the word could in other situations mean a type of boat (most especially any boat that carried opium); or what was done to a cheating trader on either side (which invariably meant a cheating English, because when the Chinese cheated it was, of course, just a matter of course); or a kind of slimy food dumped upon

rice that Pip had once seen the coolies eating upon the docks; or the kind of knife that sailors used to cut ropes; or any number of various and sundry things.

“Carkley, Whiddleton, Bumpser! Come on, now, quick, and be at the ready with your men for the chests!” Pip called out to the merchants. Carkley of Liverpool, Whiddleton who ran always up the coast to roundabout Glasgow and across to Dublin, and Bumpser who took care of London and the south. Their ships and carts were already at the ready, though, and all their men stood at hand. But Pip made a point of glancing back at Carkley, because he’d never once trusted him. And, during that careful glance, exactly what did he discover?

There Carkley was, merry as a Dublin whore on the Ides of February with his pistol clear and visible on his side, swaggering like an old-times swashbuckler but sadly lacking both buckler and swash. Pip summoned his most commanding voice and with great consternation yelled over to Carkley to come to him immediately. When the pudgy trader complied, Pip asked what the merry h—l he thought he was up to with his piece out like that. Just to make known the depth of his displeasure, he added to the end of his question a normally reprehensible obscenity, cursing Carkley “for G—d’s good rotten sake.” That he spoke thus must not, however, be construed as indicative so much of his character as of his wit, for Pip had apprehended early in his career that one must speak in a language to which such fellows were accustomed, distasteful as it may be for a gentleman’s tongue.

“I’m just carryin’ a bit ‘o insurance, lad,” the portly Carkley grinned at Pip, grinning and drawing the pistol out to display its shining barrel, and in the process showing by terrible contrast his filthy, dark teeth, which were everywhere stained brown

from the fifty years of life that the old man had spent sailing all over the world, shipping slaves and other goods. Or, at least, this had been his life's work until the late Revolution had cut off the Americas, and the Chinese had cut off the sea lanes to the Caribbean, and they and the sepoys had taken over the coast of Africa. For the last few long years of his life, the only voyages Carkley had made were always the same voyage, that dull passage between Liverpool and London, stopping at bitty towns along the way. Misery, it was, the accursed damp misery of the coast-sailing life, back and forth and never going anywhere. *Poor scum of the world, he is*, Pip thought to himself, finding room for sympathy that always lurked available in his character, except in connexion with the Chinese. Yet, Pip noted, Carkley found some kind of merriness in his stupid pistol. Pip stared at the sailor for a moment, thinking to himself a sorrowful reverie: *My God, man, what we can be reduced to. To think that England once could've ruled the world. We almost did, we were almost the world's royalty, kings to a man*. His eyes drifted from the men to the deck of Kwangsoo's vessel, where the chests were already out and ready to be hauled onto the docks. *It's all of it well enough, though*, he resolved to himself. *I'll be glad of tonight, if only we can get these chests through*.

"Insurance be d——d, put that thing away," he insisted, turning back to Carkley and speaking the words with only the faintest discernible touch of compassion. After he had spoken those words, however, even as tempered as they had been by kindness, his tongue had curled uncomfortably, as if he could feel some pollution spreading through him originating at the tongue.

The round-faced fellow frowned at him, but complied, slipping the pistol back into his belt. He could not resist the urge to complain, however, and grunted at Pip, "I

didn't know it'd be over me 'ead to insis' on a bit o' insurance, lad, awright?"

"Well," Pip gazed at him with honest pity and regret for his sudden harshness, and said softly, "it is. Sorry, Carkley, but it is. Now, there'll be no trouble, so hide that thing straightaway. The last thing we need is nervous orientals, yes? Not with the current climate . . . Right, good man," he nodded as Carkley, with great apparent discomfort, rotated his belt so as to effectively conceal the gun is beneath his coat. But, Pip noted ruefully, the coolies were still eyeing him cautiously, for they already now knew that he was armed, which was — after it was no longer a secret — equally alarming whether the weapon was in plain view or hidden. There had been a few seizures of chests in recent weeks, but although the coolies couldn't know it, that was the last thing anyone on the dock that night wanted to happen. It was certainly the very last thing that Pip wanted, for Victoria to get her hands on the stuff. Bereft of Mandarin trust, he would have been suddenly without his secret and proprietary levies and fees, and equally the traders would suddenly have been deprived of both their opium and whatever silver and gunpowder they had hoped to trade it for; in short, everyone would have been unhappy on that night if a raid were to occur, and all looked at the prospect of one with equal, though different, anxiety and misgivings.

But Pip refused to worry: he had seen many difficult and terrible things come to pass in his life, or so he thought at the time, that he was by then convinced that worry had not the power to avert or lessen any mischance which was determined to occur. It had never undone a single death from the smoke, nor raised a single sunken ship regardless of the love of wives and daughters and sisters. It had never reimbursed a penny to the slave-shipper whose stocks of men had died in storm after storm. Worry was of no used, and he

thus refused it. Instead, he focused on getting the trade done, quickly, or, as he thought the word, *chop-chop*.

*Rot it, I'm thinking in pidgin one more, aren't I?* He quickly chastised himself after catching the term crossing his mind once again, and then turned his attention upward, to the Chinese deck, where the sepoy and coolies were busy hauling the chests toward the plank down to the dock for inspection. Putting on his best show of patience, he made a display of carefully, intensely surveying the natives at work for a several minutes. After a few chests were readily available, he selected one at random. Like the others in this batch, it was marked with the old East India Company seals, and with a flick into the lock of the key proffered by the translator coolie-boy, he opened the chest wide. The familiar smell of the opium cakes wafted up to his nose, rich and pungent and foul, as he brushed aside the poppy trash. Beneath were bricks of the strange stuff, and he picked one up and cracked it in half, poking his finger into the side revealed by the breakage. It felt something like mashed potato, or cream—still soft on the inside, though he had no idea how they were maintained in this condition. He wondered for a moment if perhaps the Chinese had begun farming poppies and making opium in Africa, but pushed the thought aside and got to business.

He turned to the coolie-boy, the proxy through whom he offered Kwangsoo an amount of silver a little below the usual, knowing that the Mandarin would push him up eventually anyway. *One thing these b——s are good at is haggling*, Pip reflected. But he also prided himself on having learned every devious, manipulative trick they used, and found a way to reverse the strategy on them. In some ways, it was nothing so much as a kind of grand game that he could engage in, outsmarting the Chinese on their own terms,

in their own ancient sport of bargaining.

But it had grown slow, sluggish, and less engaging generally over the course of the past year, as if the hearts of Kwangsoo and his ilk had failed to remain in their native domain, that world of haggling and bargaining which they had been born to conquer. They had gotten into the habit of selling the chests at a loss, for some reason; perhaps there was oversupply, or perhaps they were aware of just how terribly it was gutting England to be the main consumer of Chinese opium. Pip preferred to believe that they were cultivating the noxious red flowers everywhere that they ruled, in African and the Caribbean, and that they were selling it at this monstrous rate to everyone. Certainly, the French were almost as addicted to the stuff as the British, and the Americans seemed to be more and more troubled with Chinese opium-smuggling as well. Pip's supervisor, old loquacious Geoffrey, had been over in Versailles several months before and spoken with a kind of harried, dramatic tone about the pale, haggard faces, the ubiquity of shameful opium-trances in the Parliament, and the stink of the opium smoke. Scarcely more than two generations after the Revolution, and they were slaves to the opium! Unless, of course, Geoffrey was just telling stories again, which Pip suspected was possible, though unlikely in this case. The difficulty was that the old fellow seemed not to be interested in the difference between the truth and a good yarn. He was always telling tales of unfaithful wives and husbands, and long stupid adventures from long ago and set in foreign lands that, stories which to Pip's ears sounded very much like they were set in modern England and populated alternately by stuffy Parliamentarians and lowborn opium eaters. That, combined with the fact that the old fellow never really shut up long enough to get any work done, had made Pip for a long time very glad of the fact that they worked



in separate offices. On his darkest days, Pip simply wished in an extremely childish way some Cathayan would just kill Geoffrey, in the hopes that he could inherit the old man's post, and do like his predecessor had done for ages, simply sitting up in an office and composing dreadful poems all day.

The bargaining process was slow, as Pip was obliged to submit prices through the translator-boy to Kwangsoo, who seemed to have yet a little haggle left in him, despite whatever his secret harrying adventures had been. By the time that at least fifteen good chests were out on the dock, and three of them moved onto Carkley's carts and Whiddleton's ship by the dock, the translator was returning to Pip with the fifth round of haggling. But the boy never did get to speak Kwangsoo's offer, because just as he opened his mouth, Pip heard a shot go off. No ball struck anyone down, but the shot hadn't been meant as an attack. It had been an announcement, and everyone present knew what was happening. Carkley scampered away, rather more aware than his brethren in crime; only slightly more so, nonetheless, for he left behind his confused crew of servants as well as his carts.

"BY ROYAL EDICT OF VICTORIA!" cried the head of the guard in a frighteningly noble manner that befitted the Queen's men. He was a true and full military man, Pip reflected, half astonished at his bad fortune and half stirred with respect and the emergence of some strange shred of pride in Britannia. That thought passed in a brief moment, after which the only idea that survived in Pip's head was that he wished he'd thought to collect the duties and tariffs before the exchange of goods, instead of waiting. Tonight was now all but doomed to be completely profitless for all, when at least if he'd shown some forethought, it could have been worthwhile for himself despite everyone

else's loss. "WE ARE HERE FOR THE SEIZURE OF ILLEGAL OPIUM GOODS! BY DECREE OF HER ROYAL HIGHNESS QUEEN VICTORIA, WE DEMAND PASSAGE ONTO ALL SHIPS IN THE VICINITY AND SEIZURE RIGHTS TO ALL OPIUM GOODS ILLEGALLY SHIPPED INTO BRITAIN!" The soldier said the last bit passionlessly, which was at least commendable. Pip had heard that many fellows in the same position said the last bit of that speech with glee.

The sepoys and coolies were, of course, thrown into fits of panic, and scattered like madmen. But Pip remained calm, and so did Kwangsoo. Unhappy, but also unsurprised, they watched the soldiers pick their way among the chests. The raids had grown more and more common although, even despite this, Kwangsoo's choice to face this risk had remained wise enough. It was, after all, far better to chance losing his chests for the chance to sell them at a merely fair rate than return to France with them, or be stuck wandering the Mediterranean for weeks searching for someone who'd give him a decent price. Ill fortune would such a predicament purchase for him, a loss of *lien*—it meant "face" in their language, Pip had heard, but "face" meant "honour" for some strange reason—and Kwangsoo would thus in addition have suffered a loss of a good deal more money as a result of his newly-lowered appraisal. The old Mandarin nodded, and spoke again, unleashing all of the vile primitive music of his tongue. But Pip was grateful that he could argue the injustice was not his fault. At least this way Kwangsoo had another at whom to direct his anger: it was, after all, what the Chinese would undoubtedly see as the Queen's injustice. How could they blame England, for its act of self-defense?

The boy translated his master's words once more: "In name of Implelial Plince of

Heaven, I plotesting, he say,” and gestured to Kwangsoo. The guardsman laughed at the boy, and gestured to his subordinates to get to work seizing the chests. For his own part, he grabbed the boy by both of his pigtails, and said in an exaggerated pidgin, “If you don’t get outee of my facee, I’m gunna chop off your pretty braids, lad. Out!” The whites of the boy’s eyes flared, and he backed away as soon as the guard let go of his braids; as he moved toward the crowd of coolies and sepoys, he jabbered some kind of protest or explanation of what had just happened, and scuttled off to hide behind his master’s robe.

“Look,” the guard said to Pip, taking him aside a few minutes later while his men were busy loading the chests from the Kwangsoo’s and Whiddleton’s ships, Carkley’s cart, and from the dock into their own cart. “Look, I know how much trouble you’re in for. We could easily make it easier on you, say you were in on the seizure; that you helped set up the b——s. That’ll prevent prison time and make this night only a negligible loss. And I could even shunt you a few chests.” It was not a particularly generous offer, but a couple of chests would make up for the lost tariffs, as far as Pip was concerned. And, Pip had reflected, if the guard was giving him a couple of chests, one had to wonder to how many more he granted himself free disposal.

But this curiosity stilled not Pip for a moment. He nodded, of course, and the guardsman smiled. “Name’s Cap’n Burrick,” he smiled magnanimously, and held out his large, rough hand. They shook hands, like gentlemen, instead of what they were rather more like at this point, a question which stirred in Pip’s mind only momentarily, once again, as it tended to do on such occasions. They were Englishmen, yes, and Captain and Customs Agent, in service of the Queen; undoubtedly they were indeed these things, but they were men, first and foremost, merely Englishmen.

The sepoys finally stopped bringing chests out, and soldiers came out of the *chop-chop* boat claiming that all that had been taken comprised the total load. And a grand loss it was: fifty chests of opium. Who knows how many such cases were claimed for the whole city on all docks, during the whole night. Pip had no idea, and preferred to defer this thought until later.

“Oh, excuse me,” Burrick said. He turned to face Kwangsoo and his crew, all of whom stood aside watching hatefully, jabbering among themselves. Burrick raised his voice loudly as the last of the chests was loaded into his cart, and announced in a perfectly neutral, perfunctory tone, “THE DESTRUCTION OF THE ILLEGAL OPIUM HERE SEIZED WILL TAKE PLACE AT THE OPIUM-CRUSHING PIT AT SMITHFIELD MARKET, BEGINNING AT SUNRISE TOMORROW!” The guard nodded at Pip, and then off he went, into the night with his band of opium-confiscators. A few moments passed, and then the docks were much as they had been less than an hour before. Except, of course, that everyone was now filled with great displeasure in the place of mounting anticipation.

“I’m ruined,” sobbed Whiddleton, as the pigtailed boy translated the announcement to Kwangsoo. Kwangsoo, however, did not sob — which was unsurprising, for as Pip had often observed, his kind did not have emotions, or if they did, Pip had never seen any manifestation of them. But here, something perplexed Pip. Kwangsoo *was* reacting, but it was a reaction neither of sorrow nor desperation. The Mandarin *was* laughing, a deep hollow ringing laughter. The kind of laughter that Pip knew from Geoffrey’s endless, intractable tales was the sort that typically preceded a great evil, or followed a great wronging.

But no great wrong had been perpetrated upon the Chinese, Pip was thinking to himself at sunrise the next day. He stood in full formal dress at the rim of the opium smashing pit of Smithfield market, reasoning his way through the evils of China's treatment of Britain. *No, they're the ones wronging us, in fact. Drugging our people, making us sick with need for the opium, springing strange diseases onto us from the shadowy recesses of these chests, hidden among the poppy trash. It really is they who are wronging us!* As he thought this last, he stared across the pit, and met Kwangsoo's gaze.

There they stood, Kwangsoo and his translator-boy at the front, with other Mandarines from other ships crowded behind them. It was likely they had expected the right to count their chests, make sure at least that the theft was profitless, but in her way, the Queen's army was in all ways as effective as ever, and had begun the destruction of the confiscated goods half an hour before sunrise. And the stink of it was stultifying even at the pit, with the young lads several feet down mashing the cakes into mud, all the while with water being poured into the pit about their feet. Pip wondered casually how many hours the small, thin-looking English boys would be made to dance and stamp in that stink, and gazed at the collection of several hundred chests guarded by many men. It would be a long day of opium-smashing, if all of the chests were still as full as they were last night. Which was, of course, very unlikely as well. There were always a few chests that made it through the confiscation, such as those which Pip had already sold off by this time. Repacking was the trick.

By the looks of it, Kwangsoo and his men, as usual, seemed fully prepared protest. But what was curious was that they protested not the law, but for recompense.

They cared little for the opium itself, for there was always more: they cared only for the losses they had sustained, and the profit which they craved from the opium. And in a paroxysm of paranoia, Pip thought to himself, *I should not be here. I am the lawbreaker, the crooked criminal, as far as China is concerned.* It was true; most of the complaints made by the Chinese concerned not the Queen, but rather her lowliest servants. Yet, Pip reflected, he was in all senses an unimportant personage, a mere minor official, and England didn't know of his existence anymore, for all that he'd been a hero awarded a job when he had been young. England cared not either way for his income, or to stopper it in any way. No, he was fully aware that England merely wanted to throw off the shackles of the Cathayans and their opium. And as usual, he knew that the Chinese would say that he had accepted the opium, and that since there had long been trade through him, trade would only rightly be expected to continue through Pip via whatever means he might find. That was indeed the core of the Chinese argument: that as long as the customs office and officers remained corrupt, the opium trade would continue.

Pip was revolted by the logic that led to this conclusion. It was as if the Chinese were fully willing to pretend that it wasn't wrong of them to be shipping opium to England in the first place. In the position of England, it was patently unfair of China to take advantage of the current situation. Just as one might offer a poor man a satchel of good money: well, then, and of course he will take it. He cares not if it costs his countrymen some suffering, when *everyone* is already suffering anyway, already. When all of a man's prospects are poor, even a businessman, or in fact even a true Christian man, what can be expected of him? Very little, indeed. These were the sorts of thoughts that filled Pip's head, that spiraled outward as he imagined the whole of the world under

China.

The colonies had crumbled apart before his eyes, everything lucrative in the world had collapsed, and he was determined to escape the dreadful life that he expected awaited all men in a few years, living like a bloody soldier in a barrack and eating the Queen's official gruel each day and night. He reflected on the future that had somehow eluded him, of how he was to have been a businessman, a wealthy businessman whose business was to have been nothing more than to travel the world. But if once he had great expectations for his life, now he had very few expectations at all, of any kind. Even in the best of times, he had realized, there was but a dreadfully thin line between businessman and criminal, and well he knew that poverty brings out the criminal part that may be found in all men.

Loudly, but without yelling, one of the Mandarin's translator boys — an English lad, he looked like, who had to Pip's surprise apparently learned the jabbering Chinese tongue — translated the barbaric painty-writing on a piece of paper into English. It was the standard protest, identical to the protests that had been issued by the Chinese at each opium-destruction that Pip had attended in the past: "We, the Mandarines of the Celestial Empire, protest the illegal seizure and destruction of our goods and ask, if said destruction must be carried out, that we be given recompense for the chests seized and lost by our tally. We further protest that we have been deceived by the officials of the English Queen Victoria." The Chinamen all bowed shallowly at the mention of her name, in a strange show of mocking respect. "If the Chinese import of opium into Britain is indeed illegal, why then was such trade condoned by many customs officials?" Pip was, at this point and for reasons he could not quite fix upon, though they seemed to him to

resemble some form of responsibility, crimson-faced and wearing a guilty look, but nobody bothered to gaze at him anyway. “If it is England’s law, let England police her officials, and her people. The opium trade will continue, even if it is from American or Dutch sources, unless the Englishman stops the smoking and the eating of opium!” They were right, of course; rumors had by then scuttled the docks regarding one McGillibray, a trader who was apparently engaged in the shipment of opium from America, where it was found to be cultivated in the southern climes as easily as is cotton and coffee and sugar.

But that was beside the point. If the opium trade continued, Pip reflected, Britain would risk becoming a mere colony of China, a risk that nobody but the Chinese was willing to take. For all in Britain, the past few years had been exceedingly difficult; aside from the opium, one could never forget the terrible plague of influenza that had struck the young; the nation was haunted by the memory of that sleeping sickness which had, later on, become a dying sickness. Britain was, in many ways depleted. “Improvement” had been abandoned as a word: instead, Pip’s people looked to “rebuilding”, or even just “surviving”. Pip tended to pay little mind to the Christians who declared that the end prophesied in the Bible was well on its way, of course; but he also minded himself lucky to have not been one of the very many who were struck down by either the opium or the influenza. Little wonder was possible as to why there was such a plentitude of orphans in England—and yet their poverty in the streets was subject not to pity, but to hatred and resentment by the majority of folk, being breeding ground that it was for more and worse sickness. The cholera had been making his rounds, as well, of late, and somewhere deep in the shadowy recesses of his imagination, Pip suspected that worse waited in the wings, eager for its grand, dark, tragic chance on the stage. Pip had, after all, observed



that one could not walk down a street without hearing coughing or sneezing out of each and every window. Indeed, he would have been surprized if all of England didn't fall ill with some new plague by the end of the year. As he ruminated, he grinned because he thought it was perhaps singularly odd to harbour such thoughts, singularly dark-minded although he had never considered himself to be at all of either that persuasion of mind or temperament.

Of course, everyone ignored the Mandarines and their protest. Their declaration had been read aloud now, and published in various papers, on a sufficient number of days for most of those involved in the trade to know the speech by heart, and the Chinese knew that they were all already familiar with it. So without stopping, the lads down in the pit kept at the crushing of the opium; holding their breath against the miasma they did their duty, and everyone stood around the pit, slightly breathless and shivering a little against the cool, as the sun rose up from the East, bringing light and beginning the day in earnest.

After a good lot of the crushing was finished, Captain Burrick approached Pip, unashamed by the eyes of the Mandarines who must have known that he was discussing the chests which were obviously missing.

“Aye, I put in a good word, then, Pirrip, and I ha' a few *things* for you when y'are prepared for 'em... i'ye ken my barring.” He exaggerated the low-talkish accent that, his r's rolling like great series of barrels down a plank into the ocean. Pip realized that this was not the fellow's own natural accent, but which he seemed to adopt when he thought that some agent of the Mandarines might be listening. He ornamented his speech with

Northern convolutions and nautical terminology, sometimes to the point where it was difficult even for Pip or one such as Carkley to follow his speech.

“Alright,” Pip nodded. “Thank you.” They shook hands, and grinned as they somewhat less than earnestly declared to one another, “God save the Queen.”

But the pearly gleam of their toothy smiles failed utterly to dissipate their obvious discomfiture: Burrick wandered off with a slight limp, and for his own measure, Pip could feel a knot in his stomach as tight and intractable as a Gordian knot; as he glanced at the Mandarines, they gave him the kind of look that cannot be given but by wronged men. He knew, of course, that the pagans had a point. But, after all, he reflected, Britain had been wronged, too, and by Pip’s measure Britain had been wronged far more terribly.

Those weeks were later to be called “The Nights of the Twenty-Thousand Chests”, though the name was only first applied a good duration of time later when the profits Pip had made through the giving of a single small bribe to Captain Burrick (and that captain’s reciprocal gift to Pip of a few chests of opium) had been long spent and forgotten.

*Almost forgotten.* Sitting at his desk, Pip remembered the early mornings of those weeks, and the stench of the opium being crushed in the pit, and the way the Mandarines had looked at he and the other English gathered at the pit with contempt and naked, humiliated anger. He remembered the stink of it as if it had been only earlier that day. Quotidian, it had become, a kind of daily ritual, expected and counted upon.

But nobody, including Pip, had ever expected what had come next. Never had

they expected such an outcry, such a display, such barbarity over the loss of a few tons of silver. Pip had assumed that perhaps they simply would have learned a lesson, and limped away to the *chop-chops*, for, after all, Britain's steamers — the few that had been retained and rebuilt since the crises of cholera and influenza and the imperial losses — had been still the superior warships; or, at least, this had been the opinion of the majority of the British at the time. Pip miserably would say to anyone who listened, "They've got the whole world at their beck and call, why bother with our little island?" But asking such questions was, he knew, futile, for the minds of foreigners were explicable and strange, brutal and alien.

On the day that the Chinese took Liverpool, at the hour when that news reached London, that was precisely the moment when the thought resounded through the confused, shocked, tea-starved brains of the inhabitants of Pip's city that this, suddenly, was definitely and unarguably some sort of war unfolding around them, one that had crept in like a thief in the night and somehow gone unnoticed until this very moment.

A bloody war over opium losses: it was inconceivable. It was a sign of sheer greedy stupidity. Everyone in the streets who spoke of it, railed against the Cathayans, claiming with unmistakable vehemence that they should have known better than to try to run the British down with a drug, that their greed for silver had bought them their losses. A new idea had then passed through into the daily, inescapable diatribes of the English who gathered to speak and argue and plan London's defense, and drum up support, and bemoan their possible fate: that idea had been none other than the notion that China had counted on ubiquitous British addiction. If all of England had become addicted to opium, then the Chinese had no recourse to complain, for as addicted as Britain was to opium,

China was equally addicted to the opium trade. In the British imagination the Chinese had become, of course, nothing less than a whole race of greedy goblin-men: it was said that if you taught them a few tricks and tried to bring them to the Lord, and this type of war was what you would get in return. When your Empire collapsed, they would step in and capitalise on it, and then try to grind you further into the dirt just because they could do so.

Next the Scots were like to revolt, Pip had wagered in a pub one evening in a particularly gloomy mood, like the Irish before 'em. He had wondered earnestly what would become of England, of Britain, of the whole of the world.

And then there were the d——d Christians. If it hadn't been for Armstrong and Wickham and Garfinkle and the lot of those Churchmen, idiots all because they had been blindly bent on civilising the savages of the world, China would never have figured out half of what they knew. The mistake was apparent to any thinking Englishman, of course, especially in the middle of this war that was blooming like a bed of fiery oriental orchids across the face of England, but had never occurred to missionaries, it seemed: if you're going to teach pagans to love Christ, for God's sake do not put the tools of Satan in their hands; bring not the secrets of science, of shipbuilding and modern warfare and gunpowder, for these were never the tools of Christians. If China had not gotten that secret from the missionaries, they'd instead have been shooting muskets with the trash that they had for as long as any of them remembered used in their little rockets on pagan festival days.

And if the d——d black devil sepoys hadn't betrayed Britain after she'd lifted them up out of savagery, the Chinese would not have had the craft of building good guns

and steamers, and . . . imagine all of those savages trying to attack England with arrows and swords alone, being cut down by cannon-fire and gun-shots. This war, this new Chinese empire, none of it could ever have happened. The boldest Mandarin perhaps would not have gotten even as far as to Ceylon; *H—I*, Pip would sometimes say when having this very discussion, *they'd have been stuck in Siam, or wherever they come from*. Certainly, they would not have been in Liverpool, creeping toward London by terrifying inches both overland and by sea.

Of all the barbarians, most puzzling to Pip were the sepoy: “And what *are* those stupid Indian dogs thinking?” he would ask, with a tone of genuine frustration bearing down within his voice, spurred by the enigma of their savage minds. He puzzled their decisions apart every day, bit by bit but to no end: did they think, he would ask himself, that slavery to the Chinese was better than servitude to the English? It would be one thing to rise up and fight the British out of India — Pip could almost understand that, ungrateful as it would have been — but what had happened in reality was quite another thing. It was far different to revolt against the British, and seek aid from the Chinese, only to settle down into serving yet another master in Peking. Fighting for freedom would be one thing — not that, as a race, the black devils had it in them, at least by Pip’s estimation — but to rise up and fight for another master? It was nothing less than a full demonstration, to Pip’s thinking, of what Indiamen were truly like.

Thus it was that the problem of civilization was ever before Pip’s mind, always returning and puzzling him, like a paradox or a mystery that he perhaps never could solve. The problem with civilizing all of those people all over the world, he often reflected, was that they tended only to learn the wrong things from Britain. If Britain tried

to teach them Christ, well, and they would learn opium. England had tried to civilize them, and they had all turned around as if on their many heels all at once and tried to pay Britain back for her kindnesses by taking over the globe, pulling it out from beneath Her Majesty's very feet. *Did they learn that from us?* Pip actually ruminated upon that question, but in the end he decided that they hadn't; that it had been a failure to learn the best of English traits and virtues that had made the uncivilized peoples do so; that they had learned only what they had wanted to.

But there was nothing to be done about it at the present except perhaps to prepare to defend London. Troops were said to be advancing towards the city with great haste. The location of the Queen was discussed only rarely in hushed tones, and the dozens of stories circulated rampantly, each placing her in some unlikely locale but each of which had many vehement proponents who produced "irrefutable evidence" proving her location: in the one or the other of the courts of Scandinavia, under heavy guard on the Isle of Wight, incognito in Glasgow, and even in the American ex-colonies. Meanwhile, Pip simply attempted to attend to his daily schedule with the regularity to which he had grown accustomed; but he found this terribly difficult. In all cases of its occurrence, after all, war has ever been for those who were not at the front line, first and foremost an insurmountable distraction. A new *Punch* dating a week back was full of Mandarines and armed coolies, sepoys with muskets and cannons. And the *Times* was similarly filled, in the past few days, with noisesome alarums and reports of the coolie advances. On the front page of that periodical one morning a few days after the taking of Liverpool, for example, appeared the striking report:

## **CHINA INVADES: SEEKS RETRIBUTION,**

## **SAYS TENG JANG-SOONG!**

### **FOOTMEN A TERROR—NAVIES UNSTOPPABLE!**

It is not the wish of the London Times to alarm its readers with regards to the current Chinese activities which are under way. Indeed, it is difficult to believe that heathen China could rise from its backward state when first encountered by the English many years ago, to threaten Britain herself. Yet it is with much regret that we must report on the continued presence of Cooley, Lascar, and Sepoy troops in Liverpool, which was taken a week ago.

In discussions with the local representatives of her Highness Queen Victoria, it was said that the Mandarine representative, one Teng Jang-Soong, demanded reimbursement for the "Twenty Thousand Chests" of Opium destroyed in the spring at London and Liverpool. Jang-Soong is also reputed to have hinted darkly at the possibility of an extended war, or worse, if said retribution is not made.

Representatives of the House of Lords and the Queen were reticent to comment on the situation, commending citizens of Britannia to pray that God should grant his beloved nation of Britain the glorious aid which is her due; however, merchants fare less well . . .

"Less well." That was as apt an example of the marvelous English talent for understatement to the point of absurdity, as one might ever have witnessed. Londoners found in the end that they had nothing much to do, and the lack of occupation had

become most pronouncedly dire in the environs of Pip's place of employment, the Customs offices. Pip had already commanded his subordinates to rearrange the files systems and by the second week of the rumors, and the blockages in shipping that the Chinese had apparently set up off the coast, he had been reduced to keeping his staff busy at binding copies of *The Price*. No ships in, no ships out, this was the whole of the trade under the current conditions. At first Pip had wondered how the British economy would do under such prolonged strain, but soon enough he'd found his concerns becoming far more concrete and personal: lately he had been wondering how London would be doing in terms of food. For weeks already, from even before the "Nights of the Twenty-Thousand Chests", there had been almost no tea available. After six weeks of Chinese ships looming like bullies about the ports, blocking all passage, before even striking at Liverpool, London had drunk all of her tea and was to get not a drop more. Pip had seen people who boiled flowers for something to drink, and reflected with admiring pain in his heart on how the English suffered, all together and as a people.

His admiration extended less than his apprehension with regards to the issue of the growing scarcity of food, as well. Earlier that week, for example, he had been reduced to eating a small stock of brown rice left over by a clerk who had died on the job, which he supplemented with some bread. Pip had heard that even Indians in their frightful ignorance knew that it was best to eat bread, when one was strained with a fever or worries, much as they loved their rice, for bread was known to be a fortification against illness which no watery rice could ever match. But each mouthful had strained him more in the swallowing, and sitting at his desk thinking back on it, the memory degraded further still, the strain of it extending up into his heart, until he found himself at the verge



of fury . . . yet, supplied with none at whom to direct it, except those invaders!

To direct this anger, he pounded his fist against his desk. Such outbursts of anger, futile and uselessly directed, had become common for him, and his assistants did not bother to look up at the sound.

Pip wondered if it was perhaps merely the day which had aggravated him more greatly than usual: Tuesdays were, he now found, the foulest days, for he sat — as was his habit — waiting for *The Price* to be delivered into his possession. On other days, he found that he had nothing to anticipate or expect, and thus no disappointment to grapple with when what came into his life was nothing more than a reiteration of the singularly and inescapably bad news that seemed to be the only kind of news left in the world, or at least in England. But Tuesday had been the day that *The Price* had, until its disenfranchisement, come when it had come at all. So it was that he found himself on Tuesdays sitting expectant, and then chastising himself for his continuance of this habit in the face of futility. With worry he found that he had grown even to miss even the mere anticipation and, worse still, even the predictability of his disappointment when the periodical failed to arrive, as it had during the early weeks of the Chinese campaign. Not that there would have at the present been anything in the way of news that would have been fit to publish: all the sales, all the market goods, had been strictly home-produced and home-consumed since the Chinese had cut off the bulk of trade. Thus, all the news in *The Price* would have had nothing to do with Pip even if it had continued to be printed. But it had been nonetheless something for him to read; he had refused long ago to reduce himself to reading magazines, with their paltry romances, phantasies of golden-hearted remittance men and orphaned beauties, or the adventures of soldiers and Indian savages

fighting off the rare incursion of sepoy troops in the wilds of the Canada, and foolish but well-armed Americans in search of El Dorado.

It was only after some time that Pip had finally resigned himself to the fact that *The Price* — that is, to give its full title, *The British Price, Containing Particulars of the Following Markets, Viz. London, Liverpool, Glasgow, Hambugh, Antwerp, Gibraltar, &c.* — had gone out of business until the market itself was back in business, and thus might never be seen again. This resignation, of course, went a good deal of the way toward explaining his look of surprize that erased the vacancy and brooding from his expression at seeing the lad who had always brought it around enter the customs office, suddenly almost as if he were delivering it as per usual.

“lo sir,” he grinned, all freckles and fifth-hand tweed, dripping terribly.

“Young Mansfield!” Pip cried out, momentarily forgetting himself and happy only to be aroused from his terrible boredom and apathy. “What, and *The Price* is back in print? What, then, is at the bottom of this? Have the Chinese pulled out, then, lad? Have I missed some glorious news, pent up in this office today?”

“Oh, no, sir,” the boy frowned; his look was the look of someone suddenly reawakened in his awareness of having been wronged. It was, altogether, a not uncommon look amongst the English these days. He glanced back toward the door through which he had entered the office, and when Pip followed his eye, he saw that the rain and misery of the damp persisted still in the streets. But the fog, at least, had finally cleared: such fogs had for some time during the past few weeks settled on the city as Pip had never seen, and worsened as the weather had cooled toward the autumn. The ignorant folk who frequented pubs for the opportunity to hear their own voices raised had begun to

prattle foolishly that the fogs were the doings of the Chinese, using devilish magic. Pip was embarrassed to admit to himself that he was unsure of what to think, save that things had grown foul in Britain, and in many ways simultaneously.

Still frowning, young Mansfield drew a copy of the paper, a bit damp, from his bag, and handed it to Pip, who examined it hastily. By the time Pip looked up, of course, the boy had already slipped out. But what was this paper that Pip held in his hands? Certainly it was not *The Price*, except perhaps in title. Aside from that, the paper had been transformed, or perhaps transfigured: Pip could not decide which word better described the sea-change which it had undergone. It contained nothing of that to which he had become accustomed in the paper, and much of what to which he had become accustomed in public houses and in the streets. Headlines such as **THE CHINESE MUST BE OVERTHROWN: REPORT TO NEAREST RECRUITMENT CENTER!** and **REDUCE COAL CONSUMPTION, FOR THE SAKE OF THE NATION!** had replaced the old ledgers and accountings of values and market prices, announcements of sales, and statements about the current status of exports.

That afternoon, he read *The Price* anyway, just for the sake of occupation. He made a diligent effort until he encountered an article so utterly foolish that it could not be accounted for in any explanation that assumed its author's sanity. The tract, by one Alexander Kinlay, was entitled **EMPIRE AND THE SEEDS OF ITS DESTRUCTION**. While it was apparent that its author had been to public school, and done his study of the classics (for he quoted very well in Greek and Latin, of which Pip knew very little and was thus glad that Kinlay provided translations), he made some at

best spurious, and at worst downright strange, analogies between what he believed was the impending fall of the British Empire and that of the glorious Empire of Rome. But Pip, ever the diligent reader, and ever willing to suffer if only it would relieve his boredom, pressed on earnestly until he reached the lines in the paper that read, "And so it is uncovered, that first and foremost, the market which we have built exists solely for the sake of Britain; that the counter of our pounds and gallons and crates and prices is really the counter of our guns and our patriots as well. Was it not always so? Yet we thought to wage war against the world with our trade, our wealth, even as we spoke of spreading Christ and pursuing the general improvement of the world. And yet it was, even backed with our muskets and our cannons, uncovered that our great ships and all the opium in India, were still not enough . . ."

It was at this point that Pip threw *The Price* across his desk and upon the floor. War? Waging war upon the world? Rubbish, Pip countered the author in his mind. He regretted very much that this Kinlay fellow had not been in the room with him as he had read the tract, for he should have liked to argue with the fellow on many points. He should have liked to point out to Kinlay that Britain had given much to the world, to the backward peoples living all across its face. He should have relished noting for the man that Britain *had* given them Christ, and brought them education, and reading and writing. He should have enjoyed noting that Britain had armed them so that they could defend themselves, and that in ungrateful return the savages of the world had merely rebelled against Britain. It was time, Pip thought to himself rather vehemently, that someone should count up the benefits of civilization. He thought of writing an article for *The Price* on this very subject, but his mind soon wandered to a thought far more preferable, which

was that he should like most especially to get this Kinlay fellow into a room, where he could be argued with, struck down, beaten upon. But of course, like a coward, Kinlay had chosen to hide behind the written word, beyond response and beyond responsibility. And with that thought, Pip cast aside all consideration of writing for *The Price*, and settled into his brooding, but honorably private, writing.

And from that day forward, Pip read not one tract more, but only passed the hours writing in his journals, first one and then a second and a third, all of his thoughts, all of the memories of his life. The office had never been quieter, and he'd found no reason to retain his men in the office with no work to occupy them, and had therefore dismissed them until recall. Consequently, he was alone much of the time, and he found that this gave him a considerable amount of time which was disposable in any way he chose. He not so much decided as simply found himself beginning to spend it in contemplation, which increased in the days that followed.

When London was finally taken, Pip was not at all surprized. A naval battle being said to have sent the surviving portions of the Queen's Royal Navy limping away toward the north, he had already assumed at least a week ago that the taking of London was inevitable, siege or not siege. The footmen in the city could not have been expected to have fought off the coolies and sepoy much longer, for their own losses were so much worse than those of the Chinese. And so, most people simply had hidden in closets and hoped for the best.

So far, the situation had not, at least, been the worst possible. Certainly, it was neither easy nor comfortable, for there was almost no food, and the sick and old who

were not already dead were after the attack most certainly dying. But the Chinese, having finally been offered the tribute upon which they had constantly insisted, had turned about-face and begun to make still more demands. Among them, Pip was distressed to find his name.

The Queen's men appeared at his office early one morning, and politely informed him of this fact. They then proceeded to escort him to the docks, under guard of ten soldiers and several wicked-looking guns. All the while he attempted to think the situation out and reason his way towards an understanding of how he might have been singled out by the Chinese. Reasonably, what might they want of him? What could they possibly ask of him? He was fully at a loss to explain it. Perhaps they had wished to press the point about corrupt customs agents, once more? To blame him personally for the opium troubles of Britain? But the Queen had always ignored such claims, for she rightfully had no interest in where the Chinese and other savages of the world lay their blame. Pip tried slyly to interrogate the guards likewise to get to the bottom of the enigma of his being thus requested, but the guards ignored his inquiries completely, except to urge him to hurry along with them and remain silent. Surely, it must have been some great matter of interest to the Queen, as far as Pip imagined, for her to have sent such diligent guardsmen to escort him. Was this in some wise connected to that youthful heroism of his years ago, which had won him his post?

This was a consideration that he nursed only until he reached the docks, with only one distraction to interrupt that train of thought his and send it off its rails—that he had forgotten to put his journal away. He hoped quietly that none dare to impinge upon his privacy while he was away from the office, and read from its pages. But this thought

faded quickly in among the riot of other thoughts in his head, which battled one another with increasing ferociousness as his proximity to the dock increased.

And finally, when they reached the waterfront, his heart sank. He looked up in awe, in dismay, and recognized the looming dark monster that sat waiting; waiting, he was suddenly certain, for *him*. It was the old *Improvement*, a middling-quality old behemoth slaver. Long ago, she'd carried African slaves to America in her belly, and then somewhere along the way, ended up hauling soldiers back and forth between disruptions in India and China; she'd been seized by the rebel sepoys and became the property of their Chinese allies somewhere along the way, apparently. Pip knew her to see her, though, for she had been famous in her day as a "hell on earth", and part of her name — "Impro" — was still visible though painted over with a patch of black-and-then-red Chinese hieroglyphs on top.

And on the dock before her, backed as usual by a mob of coolies and sepoys, was Kwangsoo, his translator at his side. Ah, so Kwangsoo wanted to have a talk, Pip mused. For this eventuality, Pip was not prepared, but he felt certain that he could speak sense to the old fellow. But why should the guards have had to bring him here, Pip suddenly wondered. He was, after all, a British citizen, protected by his status here as an agent of the Queen. "Are you guards with me to protect me?" he asked one of the guardsmen, who remained as impassive as ever he had been during their short journey to the docks.

One of the guardsmen gestured to Pip that he ought to move forward toward the *Mandarine*, and two stepped in behind him as he did so; a show of protectiveness, Pip supposed. When Pip drew nearer to the old Chinaman, Kwangsoo merely stood there for a few moments, looking him up and down as if to appraise him like a product for sale. Of

course, Pip spoke, knowing him but being puzzled as to what business was to be attended to. Could it be that Pip was seen as a trusted Englishman? Could it be that Victoria had hoped he could negotiate a peace? “What’s at the bottom of this?” he asked, looking about for a coolie who would translate his words. “What is it that you summon me here for, Kwangsoo?”

Kwangsoo’s translator did not speak, however, but only remained at his side. But the old Mandarin himself spoke, and when he did so, he smiled wickedly at Pip, who only understood the first word of his discourse (for, with one party otherwise not understanding it in the least, one could not call it intercourse); the word was one that Pip recognized because it was by that name that he was called by Kwangsoo and other Mandarines so many times: “*Pah-pee*”, he said. *Poppy*, he slurred, addressing Pip with the name that the Chinese traders had long-ago given him in pidgin, for his association with the opium. As for the rest of his speech, it was slow and deliberate, but from the whole, all that Pip understood was that Kwangsoo suffered from the caries—a fact which he divined merely from the putrescence of the Cathayan’s exhalations. Yet he spoke for several minutes, all of them filled with incomprehensible mutterings, and when he concluded, Pip looked to his boy, his translator, who remained silent.

“Well, what did he say?” Pip finally inquired after several moments’ wait, at once both indignant and curious. But the boy said nothing, and Kwangsoo failed to instruct the boy to translate. Instead, he merely laughed, what sounded to Pip a terribly loud and un-Christian laughter, and then a gang of his coolies, armed with muskets, surrounded Pip as the Queen’s guards stepped back and away, wordless to the end of it.

Pip was, of course, in a sudden panic! *How shall they dispose of me?*, he



wondered. *Of what use shall they make me?* Surely, they would not kill him, would they? “What is to be my fate?” he inquired, but of course none of them replied in English, as they led him up the ramp into the *Improvement*, and then down into her hold.

To Pip’s considerable shock, the hold was not empty. The stink struck against his senses terribly even before he and the coolies were even down in it, and when they began that descent, he was suddenly violently ill. The coolies all laughed at him, in the loud, exaggerated way that the Chinese had always laughed in Pip’s presence. And then one struck him suddenly in the back of the head with something—the butt of his musket, one might suppose—and Pip fell straight down into the hold.

While he shook off his dizziness, and tried to sit up, more laughter thundered down from behind him. Pip tried to rise, covered in his own vomit and dizzy from the strike, but he tripped over something in the dark. He could not see, for it was so suddenly dark, but as he tripped on whatever the large, soft shape was, he was almost certain that he heard a moan. Once more, he tried to rise, but this time something struck him viciously in the back of the knee, and once again he fell and was thereafter held in place by several pairs of hands. He heard the rattling of chains, and a voice very near him, speaking in that awful, nonsense language of the Chinese. Pip asked him to explain in English what he was saying, but he did not reply, but only continued on with his prattle, alternating it with what could only be described as cruel laughter until his task was finished. Cuffs soon enclosed Pip’s wrists and ankles, and then he was struck once more — in the belly, this time, and seemingly only for sport — and left lying upon his side.

Little by little, he regained his sight, until he could see the scene in the hold of this ship. When he did regain his sight, it was unfortunate that he was made to meet with

an extremely pitiful scene, indeed; it was a scene made to match the foulness of its scent. Men—all English and Scots, as far as he could reckon—were chained to posts, in sitting positions and lying down. Not one had escaped soiling, and not one looked well. After a few moments of looking around, Pip realized that he recognized many of those around him: customs agents, merchants and traders. There were even a few women, and one of the women, in fact, he would have sworn he recognised from somewhere, although he could not place her. His eyes lingered on her, as she wept, holding the top of her dress shut, where (it must be supposed) it had probably been ripped open to expose her breast naked to some cruel Chinaman. She was bruised and bleeding. Everyone in the hold was bruised and bleeding. The walls of the hold felt closer by the moment, and the air was unbreathable.

“Slave,” muttered a voice from a man halfway across the hold, whose face Pip could not see in the gloom, and whose voice he did not recognize. “You’re to be a slave, like the rest of us,” he said, and in that longer phrase, Pip heard an Irish quaver to his voice. And then nobody said anything.

When the ship bobbed on the water, there was nothing in their bellies to be sick with, and so only burning bile came up into their throats. They never let any of the slaves out of their chains, save the girls whom they unlocked and took up to the deck. At first when they did this Pip noticed the men would begin to speak, but he could not help but hear the girls screaming and begging for long stretches of time somewhere above the hold; when they were brought back down, they wept for hours. But that had only been at first, for these occurrences had continued now for weeks and weeks, and now when dragged up

onto the deck, the women did not cry at all, or speak, or move. However, the men, who at least had been given the chance to retain their minds a little, had spent hours arguing about where the *Improvement* might be headed. The Chinese Caribbean, perhaps? Some remote opium plantation in Africa? China itself? Nobody could be certain, and in the end it was all conjecture designed more to occupy the time and offset their uncertainty, than to actually puzzle out their fate. Underneath all of the vehemence, the men had to admit that nobody had any idea where the *Improvement* was actually headed.

And only occasionally did Pip's anger surface. He asked himself, and then the men around him, "If we did this to them, what would they think? How would they feel, slaves to us? Poisoning our land, abusing our people, and then true enslavement to finish us off? This is proof that they *needed* the British to aid them, teach them, and civilize them. To save them and the world from themselves. This, if nothing else, is proof of what they failed to learn from us, and what we failed to teach them," he declared with that faltering strain of indignant English pride that he could even then feel within his heart was being eroded, bit by bit being worn down, pitiable remnant though it might have been.

Silently, and never once aloud, did he wonder what he would come to think and feel when even *that* slight remnant was finally completely gone.

# with my mouth

*You yourself have perhaps nursed a secret which, in its joy or pain, you felt was too precious for you to be able to initiate others into it. Your life has perhaps brought you into touch with people of whom you suspected something of the kind, yet without being able to wrest their secret from them by force or guile. Perhaps neither case applies to you and your life, and yet you are not a stranger to that doubt; it has slipped before your mind now and then like a fleeting shadow.*

—Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*

## **what it means**

I used to love to hit the newsnexus, one by one, for hours on end. I'd skip the cached stories when I first got there, and look for live feeds. It was always something to watch those young netfeeders trying to scrape together a decent cred rating and a following; you'd see them doing stories nobody else was willing to do. Wrapped up tight in hazmats at the newest Ipho Valley Fever outbreak. Dodging bombs in the streets of Mejioco City. Wading through poison fog attacks in the thick tumbling o.g. forests of the West NAFTAZ Coast to get that interview with "Shady Green" Kajino. Interviewing Peggy Gandhi on life as a dictator. There were always a few feeds like this going, usually totally unpolished, but nonetheless current, real-time, and interesting, in their glitzy way. I would get up early in the day just to have some spare time to check the news, to look at these luxury feeds before turning to the real news, the serious news, the analysis and content and statistics and regurge. I would spend hours on the news before turning my attention and my feed to school or work, and I used to end each day with an update on the major stories, no matter how tired I was.

It was a way of fixing my mind on something beyond myself, because of the way

my mind worked. I didnt tend to notice other people; not their comments, not their problems, not their worries. I assumed everyone was like me, no real worries, no real problems. Certainly none that mattered. I always wondered why the news was so crushing for most people, why they would fix upon it and worry and complain. Even after the feeds, it was all so far away, so unreal to me. Like something that happened on a screen. I could read about horrible things happening in the flooding Rim countries, in the sub-Saharan wars and sicknesses, in CASIAZ's crowded refugee camps, and cringe for a moment with sympathy, without batting an eye. I could watch a young netporter get blown to smithereens in exacting detail, his steadicam taking it all in from a few feet away, and I sit there just like anyone would, shocked. Except that unlike most people, I would cycle fast, and get out of it and back to work within an hour or so.

But there wasnt a lot of news like that to begin with. I had to go to special 'kives to get access to anything bleaker than the locally declining suicide rates, the local corp-collective debates, the civsoc broadcasts, and youth initiative programs. I would rely on my brother in the rural municipalities of Kashmir to tell me of news in CASIAZ, which he said was getting worse all the time. Sometimes I would listen, sometimes I wouldnt. I could deal with reality, because it was a finite thing. Sooner than later, it faded away and I was better than well again; not worried. Things would work themselves out, I figured. Nothing ever carried me down enough that I couldnt see the light at the top of the arc upward, waiting for me.

And I believed all of those myths: the bureaucrat husband, the brilliant, mildly cyclothymic, genetically robust mixblood children. (They are the prettiest babies, really.) The middleaged retirement into the lauded ranks of the Workforce Veterans, and

outreach programs among the redundant to stave of the downswing guilts. Not caring about the news about battles on the Amazon Fronts or the latest riots in SAFTAZ, which have recently started again in the slums of Rio.

Its different now. I have been through that patch of sanity where other people have always lived, now. I have seen both sides of the fence. When I read a netpost, the words dont just sit inert in a line. They echo through one another, and resonate together, not so much into pictures as into feelings. Pictures travel into the mind and they stay there, but words hum deeper down, and they can change the mind completely by what they do in those shadows. Deep, anchored feelings that are more real and permanent than the ones I feel about my own small, pointless life. Im glad, of course: who wouldnt be glad to be saved from herself, given the chance to live a really full emotional life? I was thankful I was rescued from the raft of my own dysfunction, escaped the fog of my own neurohumoral imbalances and predispositions. Despite what they tried to do to me, I owe to them the genesis of my transformation, the opening of the doors.

I am glad to get a chance to be really human: even this late in the game; even if it gets me arrested, rehabilitated; even if I end up the last real person on earth.

Sometimes I wonder sometimes what the point is, the point of thinking about all of this. I always disagreed with the majority at the commune, and later Steinn and Chrystyne, when they claimed that the point was to return to God. Thats a lie: first of all, there is no God, Id reply, and 'hammad would just grin at me coyly. Sometimes I would read that Plastic Age philosopher, Camus, again to try and remember why I disagree with him. I see Sisyphus climbing the hill, face thick with a grim smile. I see Don Juan wandering

about, seducing woman after woman in the filth of preindustrial Spain; I see whichever Dostoevski character it was killing himself—in the end I imagine Dostoevski killing himself, too.

Pointlessness has its own trials; of course this is true. Sometimes they are so difficult that I am almost driven to believe in God as a kind of escape, an easy way out of the world I have been medicated back into, this natural and despairing world. And sometimes I flood with such viscous chemical joy that I cannot imagine ever returning from its depths. It is such a long journey, and the shadows grow deeper as the light brightens.

Now that I am faced with the dilemma of choosing my self, I have begun to think, and read, a lot about the past. Actually, I began to think about the past almost immediately after I was transferred to *Freigestellt* status. “Redundant”: that is quite the thing to be declared. It only makes sense, now, after all that I have seen. So I began to read old books, sometimes even relic print books. They smelled musty, like the past. I cant explain at all what it was like to feel the past in my nostrils, real and physical, except that I crave it even now. But more often, I would read from the ubinet ’kives, about all kinds of subjects. About anything except the Nahrans, because I knew I needed to keep away from all of that. So I would read about the old Empires; about old theories of economics and archaic sociology; about old science and old art; about superstitions from different countries, and natural remedies from the rainforests of the world.

Sometimes I even would read my case transcripts from Dr. Schelling. I just sit there with my eyes closed, listening, reading them aloud with ’hammads archaic vocomp in the dark. Its her voice, but it all seems hazy, strange. I was convinced for a long, long



time that I never could have been the person she wrote about:

*When Miss Bakut first requested psychiatric evaluation, she was convinced that something was wrong with her, but she had succeeded in resisting any kind of useful self-diagnosis. She had, until that point, rejected all temperamental-humoral theories of mental illness, and as her alternative clung to the obsolete models that had achieved prominence several generations ago. The notion of dualism between mind and body, with mind treatable alone and in separation from body; the resistance to treatment of subaffective states of standard thymic and manic disorders and the attendant flouting of kindling processes and the preventability of progressive degeneration; the attachment to the romanticization of the hypomanic state: all of these were the very common challenges I faced in treating Miss Bakut to the achieving of her cognitive awareness of her own condition, as described by several comprehensive scans over the course of her first few visits.*

*The first thing I did was request a long-term release medication to be crafted to her specifications, loaded with Dipramizol and Pro-Senthamine to retune her serotonin-drowned neural environment; an amazing thing, to reintroduce the freedom to feel like a real human being into a person chemically. I opted to use a small-scale Mavectrin dispensule attached to the outside of her jugular vein, for optimal distribution of the chemical to the brain with minimal waste.*

*But the real work was getting her to come to terms with what she already knew about her disorder. Therefore I started her on a program of self-narration, for which she said she would use her own personal netkeeper equipment, including a small digital recording unit that transcribed speech into text. She explained excitedly how it had capacities for texfeed and ubiconnection, as if she naturally assumed that I would be interested in these topics. When she showed me the machine, which shed happened to have with her at the time, she seemed overly pleased with it. I*

*saw only a battered old gadget. When I looked up from it and saw the smile on her face, I knew this would be a long and difficult treatment, and would probably involve hospitalization.*

*But I also knew that she would have to come to realize what was wrong herself before we could do anything about it.*

After something like that, I tend not to have much to say at all. I sit in the dark and try to remember this person that he is talking about, this person that he claims I used to be.

Maybe thats why I dont read so much anymore. Not about myself, anyway. And certainly not about the Pacrim countries, or the Eurasz camps.

“Serotonin-drowned”: it would sound sort of pretty if you didnt know what it meant, I bet.

## looking

Nobody could tell that anything was wrong with me, nobody really knew. And for my part, Id walked around assuming that I was the sane and normal one. People do that, even today, even with the most amazing pharmacopoeia ever available in the history of our species. Theres no reason that anyone should have to live out her life blindered by a neurohumoral disorder like hypomania, but people do, just the same. I did for years, and nobody knew a thing about it.

No, that isnt quite correct; it wasnt that nobody knew. I am sure many people guessed it. Anyone healthier than me would have known after spending a few hours with me that something was wrong. That kind of thing would cross a healthy persons mind,

where it wouldnt have crossed mine. And temperamental illness is so ill-spoken of these days. You dont simply ask a friend if they generally always feel happy, if they *ever* have reclusive or disruptive thoughts. *Have you obsessed about anything recently? Wollen Sie etwa ohne jeden Grund weinen? Felt rejected without good reason? Denken Sie manchmal an Selbstmord?* These are the kind of questions for which the answers are assumed. Any civilized person ought to be at the peak of temperamental health, should know without having to be asked these questions whether she is ill or well. Everybody just *knows*. *“Zu einem gesunden Körper gehört immer auch ein gesunder Geist,”* as the slogan goes.

But not me. Id been going to work every day, not thinking about it. Doing my best on the job, going home, doing my best. Work was, after all, a privilege. I dont much mind that I cant really connect with the people around me, but I sometimes wonder why, a little. Im a very pretty woman, or at least thats what I used to think, and yet I couldnt seem to find a partner who connected with me for very long at a time — a few weeks at most. They complained that I had too much energy, that we werent compatible, all of the excuses Id heard for years. Doesnt bother me now, though. Really. Being involved with people, implicated into life in general, all of that occupies so much of life, if you let it. I wish that Id known how other people had really felt about rejection: me it never bothered, really. I never even would think of it as rejection. If he doesnt want me, then to hell with him, that was what Id always said. Id always thought that all of the hysterical stuff, all of the weeping and moaning and crying and emotion in those vids and songs was just exaggerated. Fake, yknow? I wish Id known.

It took me a long time to realize that everything Id believed had been a major

mistake, as if my brain had been dialed into the wrong localnet. I'd already been seeing Doctor Bruchmann for at least six months before I finally made my breakthrough. It was the day of the Nahrani Extinction that I realized that I didn't just need to see someone for basic psychotherapeutic treatment. It was on that day, because of the words that came from my mouth, that I realized that in fact something was very wrong with me.

But it had been so many years before that the astrophysicists at the Herzog Institute had started surveying galaxies with Hubble-II in the area of the Pegasus constellation (their specialized area), a clear patch through which we could—and still can—see hundreds of galaxies, stunning galaxies of several types, many of them very far off. It's weird, most people I know don't even know what the Hubble-II is unless I remind them of the Nahrani signals. I guess the fact that I remember shows that my ostensible recovery had only been partial, by official standards, before I'd ended it. But I remember looking at the streams for hours, watching them on my wallscreen. I was a little girl when they'd first stumbled onto the signals. I remember the voiceovers saying that some of the light coming in from that region, from back behind that particular galaxy, was actually several billion years old, from among the first galaxies to form after the Big Bang. But the Nahrani signals were coming from a galaxy not quite so old as that: NGC-7479. They arrived at Earth, hurtling through what we see as the Pegasus constellation, having traveled a hundred and five million light years, which means that the signals had been sent out when our ancestors had still been little shrews cowering underfoot among the dinosaurs.

Since they were first announced, I've always been interested in the Nahrani signals; not just because as a child my mother knew Senjar Nahrani, the astrophysicist

whod discovered them and for whom theyd been named (although that certainly helped my curiosity along), but also because of the signals themselves. When I checked the histories, it seems that some people had for a long time wondered if there were cousins there for us to someday meet: the light of that galaxy had yielded suggestions of the right kinds of mineral-richness and conditions—at least, as far as anyone can really tell at such a distance.

What would I know? Not much, really. The staff mostly kept to themselves. That is, they had little to do with me. So when I started out, I only showed up once every few weeks, weaseled the basic update out of the friendliest few snicks and the official liaison, got a few graphics from them, and went on to the other rounds.

It wasnt as if I ever misreported or misrepresented them: actually, it wasnt as if most of what I collated and reported ever got read, even by specialists in the field. Some people are bothered by doing that work, the endlessly compressed documentation of every tiny discovery, every tiny official speculation and suspicion and endeavour. But network cooperation is the only efficient way to keep science going while eliminating unnecessary redundancy. Even if only one other lab on the planet besides the Herzog Institute had been looking at the Nahrani data, it wouldve been important for them to be able to know on a weekly basis exactly what had been examined, discovered, discarded.

And of course, many other labs on the planet had long ago stopped looking at the signals. Theyd been indecipherable from the beginning, and had remained so for thirty years, almost as far back as I can remember. Nobody had made any major breakthroughs, nobody had broken the code that of course was suspected to underlie the looping signal. And finally, nobody was paying attention anymore.

When I'd been transferred to the job, the signals had been old news. In fact, I suspect that this was part of why there *had* been an opening for me to fill as network coordinator for the Herzog Raumstation at all, and why everyone there had been so reluctant to speak to me. The world had been taken by storm, when the announcement of signals coming from the Nahranis, as we affectionately called the beings we imagined had sent the signals, a few hundred million years ago.

At the time, I had paid almost all of my attention to the whole ruckus; instead of going out to play, I would watch scientists talking about the possibility of decoding the signal, and debated publicly about whether replying was an option open to us as a species. Instead of studying, I would search for 'kives of commentary, or spend hours watching the streaming feed that relayed the signal to the network. Why did nobody find it interesting and surprising that we had for ages mispredicted the frequency of the signal, and had run across it by accident nowhere near the "natural" frequencies that scientists had assumed would be obvious choices to transmit on, and thus had been scanned and updated and scanned again for so many centuries? Or that the medium had been mispredicted as well? Why did so many grown-ups ask "Why should I care what the message says?"? I wanted to know what the message said, and so for me it was a far more frustrating time than I think it was for anyone else I knew. The best they could come up with was "repeating pattern far too complex to be sourced in a natural stellar phenomenon" and then some chatter about "advanced mathematics" and "post-Gödelian logic systems". What this said to me, in my infinite childish wisdom, was essentially that nobody really had a clue about what the message *said*.

But then again, by the time I'd figured *that* out, most people hadn't cared anymore.

Slowly, the Nahrani signals had ebbed into the end sections of the dailies, under SciTech and most often without even a headline link. I checked everyday to see if there was any small bit of news, but more often than not there was none. And all around me, people seemed to forget that this discovery had ever happened.

Not so, elsewhere: a rural religion had started back in India, not long after they first found the signals, my brother told me. Hes seen recent tattoos in Sanskrit, the snippets about Rama and a sky chariot, all these years later still being applied to believers. He says its really all just symptoms, signs of the kind of world it was to live in when psychopharmacology was not yet the norm. A world full of superstitions and excitement over irrelevancies, humans trapped in that unprivileged, primal agitation and fixation. Precapitalist redundancy, really. He says it would never do for a proper postindustrial culture, but to be honest Ive sometimes wondered about that. *Their* reaction I can understand — some kind of reaction, *any* reaction to this news.

Really, *anything* other than silence, disinterest, made sense to me. I mean, these were other beings — more intelligent life in the Universe! This was what hundreds of millions of our ancestors had dreamed of, some of them centuries ago! Someone, maybe not to solve our problems, but someone to talk to nonetheless. It made me think about whether we would ever start sending signals out again, if for nothing else than posterity, to be overheard in some future age by beings who would dream about how we had lived long ago in a small, now-long-gone galaxy. I wondered if perhaps they had taken to space, and were looking for others. Other intelligent beings, like us. I wondered if we would do this too, someday, before the decline of our species that everyone expected to come, sometimes only several generations down the road. Though of course Id always

seen it as pessimistic, until my treatment had begun.

Anyway, most people had no time for this business. “Theyre probably all extinct now anyway. Like we are soon going to be, soon, if we dont smarten up.” It maddened me to hear that, what I thought was just morbid and unimaginative discussion of the extinction of another species, twisted into a morality play for us. Or people would say, “Who cares? You know how far away they are? It would take hundreds of millions of years to get even just a tiny probe out there, maybe longer. No matter what, well never find anything out about them.” I couldnt believe how people could say and think these things, out of nowhere.

Over the next few decades, the message from Nahrani lapsed into essential irrelevance—or, in fact, in many cases into nonexistence—in the public mind. Those who remembered anything at all simply recalled that someone had existed, somewhere a little farther than a hundred million lightyears away, and had sent a message out, which we had stumbled upon sometime a few decades ago. *They might still be around*, people would argue, *but then again, they might not. Some scientists have even calculated that increasing complexity and intelligence in a tool-using species like us increases the likelihood of extinction by as much as ninety-five percent*, the common argument asserted. When I heard a tubby German man explaining this to a bored and argumentative-looking Icelandic-faced woman in a small Münchener *Kniepe*, Id had to pause for a moment. “*Unsere Spezies wird voraussichtlich in den naechsten 10000 Jahren ausgelöscht werden*,” he said without any kind of evidence or apparent worry. Ten thousand years? Id been surprised his claim hadnt given us a maximum of a thousand years, the cynical oaf. But Id turned the idea over in my mind, all that day. Could it be



that intelligence, the ability to build things and make things — including weapons — inevitably leads to self-destruction? Or had he expected our destruction to take the form of natural forces, secret movements of objects in the darkness of space, unseen things on collision course with us? *How pessimistic*, I thought to myself in the end. But I wondered how come it seemed to make sense to so many people.

This was maybe why I found the passage of time soothing, despite the lack of interest in others: at least they stopped saying cruel and ignorant things about the Nahranis. Years passed, with my curiosity seemingly being the only real, overpowering, visceral one that lasted through my childhood and into middle age. The scientists studied the signal for a while *en masse*, but they really couldn't make heads or tails of it. Before I'd turned twenty, mass attention had turned elsewhere, and by the time I'd turned thirty it was a historical non-event, lost in the haze of people's daily lives and the business of restructuring our society in the continuing aftershocks of its near-collapse. And so a time came when I thought very little about the whole thing.

For a while, at least. For that time, I threw myself into my studies. One of my favorite pastimes was reading about history and watching feeds on different historical figures; I would imagine myself in the court of Tamerlane among the burly warriors of his *ordo*; another favorite was Colonel Riley who led one of the lesser wars of the Plastic Age, in what was then called the Amazon Rainforest, in SAFTAZ. And I would watch feeds from modern Samarkand and Tashkent and the remains of the jungle and New Rio, trying to see the shards of the deep past still embedded in the high-rises and mosques and the old wrecked jungle bases in the horrifically verdant radioactive patches of rainforest. I studied chemistry and biology with a passion as well, something that perhaps I'd been

drawn to because of the Nahranis; when the signals remained indecipherable for more than two weeks, evolutionary psychologists had begun their campaign about the futility of the decoding attempt, and somehow I'd gotten interested in neuroanatomy at that time. Then there was ideology studies. But after a good while, I settled on netkeeping. I worked hard, gained some seniority, and failed to make any lasting friends. But I did get promoted, until I was a full-time netkeeper.

My first major assignment was to a psychopharm unit called Xanzicorp, a PACRIMZ company with rented researchers in München. Day after day of simple reeking, repping, crossreffing, and upping somehow became my life. No longer did I stare up into the sky, or seek out Pegasus as soon as the stars were out. I was too occupied making sure that all refs for all of the chems upon which our civilization was based were in order.

It hadn't been my job alone, of course. I'd only been the local netkeeper. All over the planet, in each of the old tradezones, dozens of netkeepers were doing the same job for Xanzicorp alone; analyzing the work of the localnets, 'kiving the newest correlations and shipping information. But it was my first netkeeping job, and I'd been good at it, and I liked the feeling of being part of a large group of people, all tuned to the same thing, to something besides ourselves.

I spent a lot of time working at the local Xanzicorp labs in person. This was unusual for someone in my line of work, but I chose to go in person mostly because it was either that or be at home ubinetted in, and I liked to be around people. So I went in almost every day. It was an interesting experience, really, because it was also my first exposure to Workforcees my own age. Unlike my parents, they seemed to have very

pronounced cycles, and most of them had to tune their cycles artificially. Anytime I went to the toilets, someone would be in there in front of a mirror, affixing a patch to some discreet segment of skin.

I never did figure out how much their cyclothymic tuning was company policy; I wasn't technically an employee of Xanzicorp, because I answered to Münchens Municipal Civserv Ubinetdept, so I had to work mainly off observation. But it was rather pronounced, really. During their morning breaks whole teams of techies would be, all of them, either totally hypomanic, or hyperthymic, or blue as could be. Because I was hypomanic most of the time, I didn't think much of the upswings — even the noisy pairs of techies coupling at lunchtime in the toilet stalls hadn't fazed me too badly, once I supposed that a happy team equalled better productivity — but when everyone went on a downswing at once, I had to wonder. Their work would turn slow for a week at a time, and they'd snap at me so that I suddenly begin to work with another team of techies.

Sure, I thought about how come they were so severe in their cycles, but it seemed to me that it was probably some local variant on standard Workforce attunement. Maybe Xanzicorp had found that workers with more extreme thymic-cycles were on the whole more productive despite sharp periodic downturns? Maybe it was because of the synch, in that as much as mood rubbed off, when it rubbed off en masse it could form a negative feedback loop? Because I was working for Civserv, and this was my first job, I had not been exposed to the tailored workcycles of other environments, so I decided that I hadn't been in a position to judge.

But I didn't socialize with people from Xanzi, that would not have worked well at all. Some of them got so dysthymic that it made me seem hypomanic even to myself.

Which of course I was, but I wasn't ready to acknowledge it. So I got into the habit of making friends and meeting lovers in other ways, and separated my work from my life in a way I think puzzled the Xanzi techies.

For a while they'd done some genetics work in the München Xanzilab, though I never quite figured out from all the math quite exactly what they'd been doing. I'd been working at Xanzi for a decade and a half by then, and though I'd formed nothing in the way of really close relationships with anyone there, I'd still felt connected to the company. I'd been interested in the company as a whole, and asked around about the genetics tests for curiosity's sake. Most of the labbies hadn't much of a clue either: they'd simply done what the comps requested, test after test in some great experiment that must have been laid out somewhere else, by someone who'd wanted to know something, but who'd found it easier to set up the experiments blind. Competent techies were necessary, but not competent analysts.

It's only been since I've had my treatment that I've begun to figure out how that had really worked. I thought back about it, noting obviously that the computers weren't running the show. Puters are useful tools but they're not smart. They can break things down, calculate, crunch numbers that can't be crunched any other way... but they're not *that* smart. Otherwise, there wouldn't still be a need for netkeepers. But even now, I still wonder what they were testing those genes for, modifying them for.

Maybe the extreme cyclothymia they'd induced had been part of the subject of study, though, because soon after that genomod tests, Xanzicorp notified all of the employees that they were closing up shop and transferring everyone out. I hadn't grown close to anyone there, but most of them were on a dysthymic downswing and confided in

me nonetheless. Some were pleased and hopeful about Berlin and Perth, others apprehensive about Shanghai and Tashkent and New New York. Nobody notified me, however, and when I checked into it, nobody had notified my supervisor either.

So I did what the Civserv ref'kive instructed, and reported the impending Xanzicorp closure. A few days after the labs were cleaned out, and my work was absolutely finished with them, the Herzog Institute cropped up as one of my new netkeeping assignments. "Herzog Raumstation," I said to myself when the assignment came in by ephemail. I said the name of the lab a few times, because it did flicker a 'napse, but I didnt know why. A Spacelab. I wondered what I would be doing there.

Imagine my surprise when I conducted a ubinet search. Surprise, mostly, that I could forget how I knew about that place.

## **paper**

There are so many stereotypes associated with netkeepers, I just dont know where to begin. We are not timid people: that is a carryover from our predecessors, librarians. Librarians were the people who worked in libraries, which were these places in which books — yes, the physical objects, I mean, those antique print-objects you see occasionally — were stored. Libraries had existed for centuries, really, and for a lot of that time the books in fact had not been print but rather were hand-copied texts, scrolls and parchment books. Paper and animal skin were the only media available to these people.

Long after Gutenberg, the face of the library had been transformed. The books

were in the vernacular, instead of in Latin. That is, they were phased out of the international language, in a way the reverse of how primary textual production has settled mainly in the English language today. As a result, libraries were flooded with commoners, the preredundants and the preoccupationalists of the early and middle industrialization periods. People would go there to read, to look at books they might not otherwise be able to buy for their own private collections. Remember, texts were not simply immediately duplicable as they now are: even with print, books were expensive and special objects, products in fact.

Libraries were the closest thing to the ubinet that had existed in those days: a kind of slow, inefficient, but workable network of data transfer. You could read messages from other people in other countries, from people in the far past. But you had to go to the library to read them. Exactly the opposite of the ubi, which is open into every private home on Earth now, but constitutes its own kind of public world networks, libraries were public places which contained hundreds of tiny private worlds. People read these books at tables, and so libraries had to be quiet places. And thus librarians tended to take on the classical guise of the quiet, mousy, stern type: the absolutely repressed hypothymic, in fact, although they didn't often use that term in those days.

In some ways librarians seem a lot to me like paper: they are purely an artifact of the past and like paper they don't really exist anymore except in old preservatories, yet they are woven into the fabric of our lives in a subtle and ubiquitous manner. The sediment of books and paper and ink and repositories for books and keepers of those books resonate in the ubinet, in the way text is displayed when we choose to use screens and in the way files are categorized and stored. But there is more to it than that, more to it

than the mere stereotype that lives on in the mousy, reclusive netkeeper. There is something ancient and moldy about knowing things, something very privileged in the person who has read all, who can point you in the right direction. Sometimes I think the librarian was always just a kind of shaman, and I think sometimes that this is the one thing that we are missing most in the world.

## **Die Selbstmordrate in München**

At first I found myself mostly tracking the Herzog Raumstation's projects by steadyfeed. All I had to do was set up the proper organizer and it went steadily, because each research team was specialized in one distinct area, and though each scientist there was on several of the teams, the combinations were always different. Therefore, just by the names on the internal communications, I could immediately sort and collate everything, autosummarize it. Its not every netkeeping job that goes easy on you like that.

But I had another reason to be interested, one that wouldnt allow me to resist the pull of the place... NGC-7479. A distant galaxy located somewhere far away from the Earth. The Herzog Institute had been the organization that had first stumbled upon the signals, and they were still the prime investigators in the whole area. The message occupied a lot of their time and work, to the point where the other research subgroups ground to the relative importance of footnotes—with the exception of stubborn Schöngruder and his SOD taskforce, for Solar Observation and Diagnostics, or at least thats what it was in English. Decoding, continued and improved reception of the signal, and the impossible task of locative pinpointing using the faintly controllable and barely

useable extrasolar probes occupied the inhabitants of the Herzog Campus for the bulk of their working lives, which is to say the bulk of their whole lives.

They were a secretive bunch, though. I was new, and not tested yet. When they werent calling me Flegel – that is, *kid* – and asking me where my mommy was in argot *Deutsch* that they thought I couldnt parse, they were snapped shut like clams with their faces buried in archaic deskmonitors. They would give me what I needed for my work, brushing off the remainder of my excited questions with comments like, “You wouldnt understand if I explained that,” or, “Hör mal, hasst du nights besseres zu tun?”

But that didnt stop me; week after week I would find a reason to drop by, and since I was their netkeeper—and, even Schöngruder had to admit I was a damned good one. Efficient, quick, and clean—I had the right to come onto the campus at anytime, which was probably not all that remarkable, I suppose. Nobody but me would have cared, or at least that was how itd seemed at the time.

I would get up early in the morning, leave my microvillage for the one-mile walk to the local commute station at Strammersruhe where I could catch a regional transport tube southeast-bound over to the edge of the München infrastructure. Those once-a-week mornings, Id sit always looking out the window of the tube; everything was a blur, but Id still look out the window, pretending I could separate the blurs and see the little satdishes clearly on the edges of each community; Id stare in the nearly electronic-green of the crops, the violently productive maize and barley and wheat in the fields.

The München infrastructure was legendary across Europe as being only slightly worse than the universally reviled one found in Dusseldorf. The central tube systems all dated back at least three-quarters of a century, and the whole of the upper transit cabling



setup was built off a design only slightly improved upon since its inception at least a century and a half ago; it was still prone to lockjams, and strange, apparently unexplainable smells pervaded most of the cars on a regular basis. At least once a week I would find myself cringing in a corner seat, waiting for the jam to end and wrinkling my nose, because I couldn't even get out and walk. When a tramcar gets stuck, you simply have to wait, suspended above the city by a miniscule, wicked little sharpwire.

But for me, even for the longest tramjams, it was always worth the wait. I would arrive at the Herzog Institute, and see all of the latest work on the signals. Even though I had nobody to talk to about them, even though it seemed to me that the rest of the world had lost interest in it, I would always come into the lab excited to see any new breakthrough, however small.

"You are an encouragement, Asha," Belsenleider used to say. "I know I should be as interested as you are in this, but somehow I just keep losing it. You're a good reminder. But I think it's a good thing that you don't work here. You're too interested, really. It's not really healthy."

I'd ruffle his blond hair and smile, and just ask my questions as usual. I did this because I was not genuinely annoyed at the implication. Me? Hypomaniac? Absurd. There were days when I felt lazy like everyone else, felt that urge to just stay in bed, to jeopardize my employment, to refuse to fit in the system. Sure there were.

There was nothing wrong with me, I was convinced, so I would just start in on the questions. Questions, questions, questions. My duties included my clients' popular netsectors as well, so I was always inquiring about how best to explain this or that, clarifying my understanding so I could dumb things down a little for a wider audience (a

peripheral duty of mine). I would brush away all of those inquiries with questions. Maybe because I knew, deep inside, that Belsenleider was right.

At the time, though, all I could think to myself was that he probably had no business trying to diagnose me; rather, I was pretty sure I'd be diagnosing the Spacelabbers endlessly. Unlike the Xanzi techies, their cyclothymia was slower and less volatile, with the dysthymic period of their cycle somewhat more pronounced than the more mild hypothyria on the other end of the cycle. However, the whole of the cycle was far more organic, far more smooth, and less likely to interrupt on the business of employees' work. Whatever their work was, anyway. Even after many months of netkeeping for them, all I really figured out was that they were watching what seemed like hundreds of thousands of details about several specific galaxies, and tracking a great number of objects in our own solar system. However, the local tracking — the objects within our solar system — was all automated and ran off transmit tags and scanning controlled from the ground computers and programs up in the scan sats scattered in tandem or orbit with plenty of bodies that passed from time to time between the Earth and Mars.

“Whats that?” I asked Belsenleider one day as he did one of the few manual sweeps I ever saw done at the Raumstation. I was pointing at some kind of object orbiting the earth, which was traced out by the computers on the display. I expected it to be some kind of commsat, but that didnt matter. The point was to get the young fellow to talk; I'd seen a chink in his armor and I wanted to see what made him tick. Hed been friendly to me before, so I tried the opening carefully.

“What, that?” he pointed at the screen, and when I replied that he was pointing at

the right thing, he punched at the air above his keyboardless interface. Onscreen, the view zoomed in on the object, which was some kind of . . . contraption. It looked like a rock with two sticks pointing out from either end, spinning. “That’s the WSE cable 2. Didn’t you study any astronomical history?”

I shook my head, though the name sounded vaguely familiar from my youthful Nahrani-watching days.

“It’s just a cable that they stuck in one of the Lagranges, I think it was L3. It was used for cheap launches out into the rest of the solar system. You know, gravity and momentum, free torque.”

“The Worldwidens, right? That was...”

“A long time ago,” he frowned, and stared at the monitor for a few moments, before looking up at me. “Anything else? Work stuff, I mean?”

They got like that a lot. Sometimes I thought I maybe really was crazy. I didn’t think of it in terms of thymia or neurohumors or temperament, though. More just like, how come they were always so down? How come they weren’t like me? Sometimes I would have to jump the ’kives, look at all of these old pictures of people from the Plastic Age. You know, if you look at photographs of people living in another time, even just a few hundred years ago, you can see that they were living in a different world entirely. You can see some of their culture in the muscles on their faces. People at the height of the Plastic Age all have this strange look in their eyes, a kind of edgy confusion, but they’re always smiling in their photos. Smiling, but confused. A lot like how I was at the time. I felt like I’d been born too late, and maybe I’d belonged with all of those endlessly smiling

people of the Plastic Age, instead of all of these endlessly cycling techies and astronomers.

Now, of course, I think it was all an expression of an unconscious knowledge that things were just too good to be true. For me, yes, but also for them. I think that maybe their bodies knew what their minds didnt, that there was a building poison in everything, including themselves. Maybe they could smell everything that was to come after? I dont know.

But when you look at them, you can see how broken down they are. Imagine a whole society of people *working*, working almost every day. For what? Its obvious from what Ive read from that time that people were aware that the profit was all going up, but they stuck with it anyway, kept grinding themselves through an industrial, and then a postindustrial hell: coal miners and factory workers replaced farmers, and shipping agents and clerks and models replaced coal miners and factory workers, and infotechnicians and instantiator-designers replaced shipping agents and clerks and models. And to keep up with all of that, all of that in only a few generations, theyd relied upon hypomanic illness: the frenetic, the vigorous, the obsessive, the driven, the truly sick. And you can see it in their faces; they look as if they are trying to smile, so very often. They look painfully underweight in ways that sometimes remind me of Holocaust victims or the starving peasants in photos from the Central Asia camps; unhealthy, exhausted, confused, and lost, they look out from the magazine pages chillingly, sporting the oblique fashions of their time. What makes me shiver is how unhappy they all look, even through the smiles and the grinning and the exuberance of advertisements.

The frenetic, the vigorous, and the obsessive are not usually all that wise. A

society built upon illness and fixation and pushing beyond healthy limits is blind. It does not look to the sky and watch the tornadoes breeding and multiplying, and see the waters of most of the worlds rivers turning to black slime, the coastlines migrating inland slowly and steadily. It does not listen to its dysthmics, who always are present, off to the side, telling the truth about the mess that is being made. It medicates them, turns them into sex machines and profit machines and consumer machines and tells them that to think, to worry, to question the wisdom of their hypomanic peers is not only wrong, but a sign of illness. As it leaves the age of industrial manufacture behind, it begins full-on to manufacture consciousness, and what it does manufacture is a version of normal that is so far from the truth of normal that it can only destroy those upon whom it is imposed. Eventually, when media and even public sector experimenters sought to eliminate the dysthmic temperament not by kindling hypomania in early youth but by transforming the values of polite society, manufacturing taboos, and simply denying the possibility of dissatisfaction, the consciousness of generations of people was deformed, scarred. We have still not recovered, as a society.

I found myself looking up the suicide rates for München for one of the years at the heart of the Plastic Age, a few centuries ago in 2041, as a simple inquisitive gesture; because it was at the height of that Age, this time was also at the height of the cultures promotion of hypomania. 2041 was also apparently called “The Plague Year”, a year in which the levels for what they called “depression” reached dramatic levels.

<b>Selbstmordrate in 2041</b>	
<b>Männer</b>	<b>Frauen</b>
22	
73	
584	
342	
409	
427	
203	
278	
301	
435	
198	
226	
217	
103	

The report I browsed was actually a scan of a local print publication from the time, scanned and stored on the ubinet. A copy of the scan was available in the local public 'kives for the city.

The numbers were fairly frightening, considering what it was that these people considered "depression". The estimates were that one out of every two-and-a-half suffered from this "disease". Think about that word.

Disease: as in something abnormal, something requiring treatment. This being something so common that one out of every two-and-a-half people suffers from it. This disease being pretty standard dysthymia by our standards, treated most optimally not by ripping the humoral imbalance away to be replaced by another, but by retuning it to a natural cycle. Their instinct was to diagnose and treat all in one quick process, as long as it produced results, the more immediate the better. This sort of reasoning is, of course, integral to a society that devalues the inward voice, the internal questioning and dissatisfaction. I realized, one day, that I had never contemplated suicide as far as I could remember. If you think, question, or feel in any way that is not "productive", you are ill and need to be medicated. Never mind that this illness will probably lead you to question the world you live in.

Still, I remained certain at that time that there was really nothing wrong with me, for never having felt depression. I was convinced that I was just like the other one-and-a-half people who never experienced it, whose cyclothymic patterns were merely extreme limits, and dipped only mildly into the dark pits; and just as mildly, I thought, they eventually reached into the summits of happiness. For I was convinced that the kind of brimming contentedness that I felt for so long was also normal.

The scars and the deformation of that time are all still with us, working at us slowly, so that we do not even realize it. The lies, the shame. It is not difficult to imagine some of those people feeling the darkness, but lying about it. We cannot all be natural hypomanics, can we? It is also not difficult to imagine the ones whose inner worlds were so blotted out by all of the other voices, the advertisements and the pictures and the illicit sex that clogged their society and the secrets, the millions of secrets. It is not difficult to imagine that only a few were hypomanic, and imposed their will on the others, who tried their honest best to be that way too. I wonder how many of them kept their dysthymia a secret, hid it away even from themselves just as I did my hypomania.

After all, it isn't difficult to imagine millions of peasants in the Dark Ages knowing there was never any such thing as God, but going to church, dropping their pennies into the plates, and consuming the bread anyway. Things are just easier that way.

For a while.

## **poetry and wonderful garbage**

The walls of München were covered with poetry. I didn't see it as poetry at the time, but

that is what it was.

What I remember is faint, sketchy; a lot of it has been blotted out by everything I have experienced since. I am not good at remembering the way I thought before my treatment and subsequent liberation. This, I've been told, is unusual, and probably a sign of some kind of dissociative coping mechanism that I'm relying upon to carry me through the whole of this really active period of humoral retooling I've been going through. I wonder if I will ever remember it better than I do.

Its faint, what I remember, but primary in my mind is the fact that I always thought that the streets were small. They had always seemed incredibly narrow, beneath the tramcar. I remember seeing kids playing down there, dozens of them in their standard corp-issue permafiber jumpsuits, running down the snowy streets.

I remember seeing into windows, far more than I remember the faces of buildings. I remember seeing people talking, eating, sometimes having sex, almost always wearing frowns on their faces. I remember wondering if that was how I was supposed to look, sometimes wondering if that *was* how I looked to other people. How presumptuous of me to pity them for their expressions, and myself for such a possibility.

The buildings as I remember them on the way into München were at first newer, and taller; they extended quite high into the sky, and rose up like a thick wall from the rolling farmland, the fields teeming with their automated tenders. I saw, in those bots, freedom. People not having to work in the fields the way our ancestors had needed to do; people being free to pursue other goals, other ends. People free to seek employment, and perhaps gain the privilege of work, or otherwise to browse the net and engage, through their attention-metering, with the nexuses that drew interest, and corp funding. Freedom



to be utterly redundant. That was what I saw in those fields tended by the crawling spidermetal bodies of thoughtless robotic drones.

As the trancar neared the seeming wall of the city's outskirts, I saw the bastions of industry: the pipelines of tax, the breadbaskets of the nation. It was these business that supported the local administration and the masses. When they had succeeded in achieving higher and higher rates of human redundancy, they had no choice: it was cheaper than the foolish rebellion that the extremists of the Union had been calling for, and easier too. It had been the way that the greatest benefactors of industry had managed to maintain their place in the world, to create a minimal surplus runoff providing the minimum for life for the masses had been a small feat, considering the way nutritional supplements and industrial polymers had advanced in the last few decades before the undertow had hit. Now the masses could all live, free of the chains of work and free of the whipcrack of materialism that their great-grandparents had slaved for . . . a jacket of Xinjiang hypertextile could easily last sixty years almost identical to its first day of existence, and a lifetime feasting on free Guntherstrassecorp nutribars would result in the procurement of the majority of the truly essential vitamins, proteins, and minerals for basic health maintenance. There was no reason for anyone to be unhappy, I remember thinking. Sure, it wasn't a perfect life, but humanity needed to get past the foolish aesthetics and desires that unsustainable materialism had bred in us. That kind of dissatisfaction was just the echoing illness of the Plastic Age, something we'd not been purged of yet, or so I thought. These people lived without; they were stark believers by necessity, and this made them strong and good, models for us in the Working minority. I saw what I thought was the unadorned, staid simplicity of this neighborhood, saw the endless, beautiful, intricate

writing upon all available walls which were an endless canvas of free human expression for the redundant.

After that, when I passed over the small, ancient roofs of old München, central München, my vision grew hazy from boredom. *They are kind of old*, I would say. *We could have such a nice city, maybe, if we could modernize this area.* I would say, *something worth looking at on the transitroute in at least. But the houses are cute, I suppose. Yes, they are. And its nice to know there is a past here.* I hadnt read much about the local past back then.

And then, when the Herzog Institute Campus became visible, my heart would jump again. I would anticipate the greens, the wonderful gardens of the campus. I almost never thought of the eyes behind the microfeeds that surrounded us all, eyes in the bushes, eyes in the air around us unseen. I never thought about the scanning that went on as I entered the campus, except for when I was stopped and “ticbathed” with a burst of static and low microwave to scramble and confuse the gidgets nestled for an illicit free ride in my coat and hair. I never worried about what the Herzogans might want to keep so secret, or what they worried they might have to keep so hidden away. I was simply glad to live near enough to München to have an excuse to visit with such frequency.

## **cosmic jets**

I said, “For a while,” and Id been right. Things had been easier for a while, just denying that I wasnt well, but I couldnt do that when my day of reckoning came. Of course, it wasnt a *real* day of reckoning: the real one came when I realized that my imposed

dysthymia, and the expected cyclothymia of a Workforce Corps member, and my diagnosis of hypothyria, were all bogus. The real day of reckoning came when my personality became something subject to my own choice and selection. But for a long time, I was convinced every time I thought back on it that the day of reckoning had come one warm spring afternoon in the Herzog Spacelab, when I bought into a lie, because suddenly it seemed easier this way. Because I had, for some strange reason I still cant explain, believed the whole of the mythology of sickness and health, and accepted the gift of the label of sickness as my own, and felt, believe it or not, relief.

I dont remember anything else about that day very clearly, aside from what happened on the Herzog Campus. People always claim that they remember this or that day very clearly, the day that this or that historical event occurred. It wasnt like that for me, or at least it isnt now as I think back on it. Nobody spoke mysteriously to me during the inevitable tranjam; nobody said anything particularly prophetic; there was no reason to think of this day as any more out of the ordinary than any other.

In fact, that was the absolute truth. No mass extinction actually happened that day, at least not one we know about: Nahrani had actually been wiped out a few million years before that particular day when the tiny, dwindling burst of cosmic rays reached us, and the signals cut out completely.

Id been coming to the Herzog Institute for three years, a kind of endless weekly ritual. Normally, Id arrive at a very quiet, almost desolate, lab. Never had there been more than three or four people seated at desks, another ten huddled at the break-table speaking softly and quickly, at least until I approached and they all turned back into quiet Germans. And I mean even pudgy old Montegña and lanky, frenetic Jazeel, when I say

“Deutsch.” It didn’t matter if those two had been engaged in even the most esoteric argument, they would shut up like waterclosets when I showed up. It was like a kind of stylized Teutonic silence that scientists learned out of ancient history lessons about Newton and Copernicus or something. I imagined them studying the expressions on the faces of these ancients, and practicing that reticent, secretive expression with digital mirrors—checking every angle, striving for likeness.

But to be realistic about it, I guess I’d just never really grown onto them very well. Maybe I’d been too interested in their work? I don’t know. But they’d also never stood in my way, or prevented me from seeing anything. The Herzog Institute had always had an open door for me.

Until that day. That day I’d been met by young Belsenleider at the gate, with a shaky, excited, cracking voice. Cracking like a boy asking a girl over to his flat for the first time. “What is it?” was what I asked, honestly confused; he replied with a stream of gibberish and excitement, half in German and half in English. It was so incomprehensible that I simply nodded, and began to push my way past him.

“Nein.,” he said, touching my arm, holding me back. Restricting my entry. “Tut mir leid, ich muss. Nimm es mir bitte nicht übel.”

I simply ignored him, of course, and blustered my past him. Unlike me, he didn’t have the will to fight, to push me away, so I blustered past him and he trailed after me across the campus, yelping out his protests. Halfway across the largest lawn, still newly sprouted from the thaw, he gave up and walked behind me, not quite dejected. And I remember glancing at him, feeling a little annoyed at what I know now was a natural reaction.

But annoyed or not, I was also extremely curious. I slowed my stride as soon as it was clear that he had capitulated, and let him catch up to me. “Bad news,” he said, just before bursting into tears. I stopped my stride, and looked at him quizzically. “What is it?” I asked, as I drew him to me and hugged him. It was a first; I had never hugged Belsenleider. But it was no use, he only sobbed harder and mumbled incoherently.

So I let him lean on me, perturbed by his outburst but not all that surprised. Scientists are like that, after all; a lot of the historical baggage of the profession simply hangs on, even now. The pressure to be cold, detached, and exacting; to write one's findings in the most uncreative, inorganic—essentially, the most inhuman—manner possible. If anything kept science back, and continues in the lag of science in our age, it's the legacy of this bizarre idea that scientific thought was somehow different from human thought, and that one needed to keep the compartments separate. Even now, when things are considerably better, scientists still seem to have a tendency to be all too prone to fast-cycle thymic disorders, problematic temperaments, and a whole mass of other problems.

What I had previously seen at the Herzog Institute, however, had failed to prepare me for what I found when I entered the lab. A large crowd of outsiders was gathered at a large displayfield on one wall where a diagram played itself out. It was of a galaxy with a large, bulky center and a long, sprawling equator, spinning slowly. One tiny point pulsed, a tiny blinking green point somewhere toward the outer edge of the galaxy. It looked familiar, similar to models I had seen of our galaxy, down to the rough position of Earth. Something was happening to the galaxy as I watched: a shuddering blur exploded in the middle, toward the edge of the core, flickering horribly. Suddenly, circular ripples of

blurriness erupted outward, diffusing into a kind of flaring white halo that crept outward only slowly but constantly, as if attempting to reach outward to trace the edge of the galaxy. They soon covered about a third of the galaxy, and softened slightly as they continued along their way.

I listened to Dr. Ostermann, a fellow I had heard of but never seen, explain the diagram in clear, collected English, and a shudder mounted in me: “While technically the cosmic rays are emitted as jets, the impacting neutron stars are spinning at such incredible velocities that it really looks more effectively like a burst outward in all directions. The force that is released in only a few seconds is far more powerful than several hundred thousand supernovas, and is directed omnidirectionally. Likely the cause of several earlier mass extinctions on Earth and the one major mass-extinction on Mars, it is known that such forces are normally powerful enough to kill almost all biological life in a large sector of a galaxy, say with a radius of three-thousand light years, and within that radius they are very certainly are powerful enough to kill any life complex enough to build technological devices of any kind. . .”

Was this happening now, as I watched, in the Milky Way? Were we going to die in the throes of a . . . what was it? A cosmic ray jet? It was only a few moments later, when Ostermann finished his statement, that I could sigh and relax into the chair near me.

“ . . . including anything of the type that we believe the Nahranis must have been using to send their message.”

**striving for likeness**

LIMBIC: (li•mbik), a. Anat. [ad. F. limbique, fr. limbe, LIMB sb.<sup>2</sup> + -ique, -ic]

As the middle-section of the centuries-old **Triune-Brain model** proposed by **Broca** which, though **deeply flawed**, still is used in some contexts today, the limbic system is a fascinating chunk of our brains anatomy that we often take for granted as a purely human feature. In fact, we share it with many of the animals that we see every day. Almost all **species** more sophisticated than the most basic **insects**, including all **chordates**, have some form of limbic system, although its **interactive dynamics** with the **neocortex**, most importantly the **autocatalytic developmental interaction** between these two neural structures, are most sophisticated in more advanced **mammals**; this is why, when looking a mammal in the eye, we get some sense of emotional **reflex**—an emotional identification and response—which seems lacking with reptiles and all other classes of life. The effects on the **mirror-neuron** emulations on which we depend to model others around us, in order to read their reactions or predict their responses, is highly influenced by this difficult-to-explain **kinship** we find in the expressions and eyes of other mammals, which is referred to as **limbic resonance**.

It has been known for a long time that the limbic system is not only the seat of **primary stimulus filtering** and **processing**, but also of what we have traditionally referred to as emotions. While it has been shown that emotional experience really involves a complex interaction of those regions of the brain classified respectively as **medulla** and the limbic and **neocortical systems**, it is true that a great deal of emotion-related activity arises from this area.

The importance of the limbic system cannot be overemphasized in all areas of mammalian social interaction — including that of humans. Many studies have tracked the *kindling* of various *neurohumoral-system* damage that lead to *thymic-cycle illnesses* and many other afflictions of the “*mind*”, all of which have been tied to traumas caused by experiences of isolation from and abuse by other limbically-resonant animals, primarily those of the same *species*. It is perhaps a lack of these kinds of evolutionarily shared underpinnings of mind that make the *Nahrani signals* even more inscrutable to us than the minds of house-snakes and kittens.

This seems, at first blush, to suggest that all of interactions with other limbically-resonant beings thus necessitate our due care and attention, to avoid inadvertent damage to others. Even in the case of *inborn* or *developmental deficiencies*, interactions with other limbically-resonant creatures can mitigate or exacerbate a subjects condition, whether this is merely a mild *temperamental aberration* or a severe *thymic maldisposition*. However, searching any one individuals experience for the triggers that set off such illnesses is generally futile: was it a harsh classmate in kindergarten, or the violent barking and snarling of a neighbours dog through a fence, that did more damage to the child which later culminated in a tendency toward periodic fits of *dysthymia*? And how culpable can either be held if the child was predisposed temperamentally to higher sensitivity to these kinds of stimuli?

While it is obvious that major *traumas* are damaging—such as child abuse or the loss of a loved one early in life, both of which were long held to be damaging



without the benefit of scientific corroboration—we find it impossible to navigate the networks of interaction to any degree deeper than the obvious. However, we do know that the kind of formations and processes involved are constant, incremental, and dynamic. When we set out to lay blame, instead we stumble upon a discovery of just how interdependent human and all mammalian minds are on other mammalian minds for their development. Our minds, and what used to be called our *“spirits,”* touch upon one another constantly, building one another in a dynamic process; in a sense, we are *neurosocially networked* and rely at the most banal, physical level upon one another from the first day in early *infancy* when we enter that localized interaction-based network by first recognizing an *“other”* as a part of a *basic cognitive binary*, the other half of which is comprised by our “selves” and made available to us cognitively by emulations within the *mirror-neuron* network that would have evolved almost to its present capacity in humans before *speech* and *cognition* were even remotely feasible.

**quiet, you**

The thing that shocked me most was how the Herzog Raumstation scientists reacted to the extinction.

Certainly, some of their reaction had been anxiety about their work. While the Nahrani discovery had been an unarguable success, it had also opened a whole new collection of problems for them, now that the civilization—if indeed it had been one—

was dead. Probably, anyway. The signals were gone, their galaxy silent again. There was still plenty left to study, and the code had not yet even been sufficiently cracked to explore even the most superficial analysis of the messages. Grant money could eventually be a problem, really.

But I sensed that their reaction went deeper than that. I would show up, and happen upon Belsenleider at his desk, silently staring off into space with a packet of protein milk in his hand. This continued for months and months. When, seven months after the extinction event, I asked him what was wrong, he had nothing to say. Not a word. Just that look, directed at me as if I were the strange one, having to ask.

“Nahrani,” he eventually whispered to me.

I paused, looking at him to make sure he was not joking with me. Then again, I had never seen Belsenleider joke with anyone without having this awkward, familiar smirk of his on his face, which he definitely was not wearing. He did, occasionally, engage in black humor. But this was not a joke: he was serious. He looked as if real despair had settled into his heart.

I was incredulous, but I held back my reaction and simply asked, “Yes?”

“Nahrani,” he implored, as if that answered my question. “Dont you ever think about it?”

“Well, sometimes,” I offered. “But it doesnt bother me so much. I mean, well . . .” Here I paused, uncertain of how to justify my apparent lack of compassion.

“Well, what?” he asked, his face a little aghast.

“Well, I mean, first of all, it happened a long time ago. Theres nothing we can really do about that, and really, I mean, its the kind of thing that shouldnt shock us. From

what Ive read, you scientists knew that this sort of thing was possible at least a century and a half ago, maybe more.”

“Yes, but . . .”

“No, wait,” I interrupted his protest. “Im not done explaining. Look, its not like we were likely to meet these beings. I mean, they lived very far away, and by the time we found a way to visit them — that is, if we ever got around to trying — theyd probably have evolved into some other species, or wiped themselves out, or decided to move somewhere else. Or else we would have. Probably both, if you think about it. I mean, a hundred thousand years by light speed is a really *long* distance, isnt it?”

“Yeah, but . . .” He looked up at me, his eyes a little anxious.

“What?”

“Dont you see? If it happened to them, it could happen to us, too. It probably will happen to us. It might have happened already. Maybe some jet of cosmic rays is on its way from the center of our solar system too.” I didnt know what to say for a moment, as I looked into his face. I could see his eyes blinking uncomfortably, the muscles around them straining secretly to hold his tears back.

“Oh, Hermann,” I giggled, “you shouldnt worry about that. If thats going to happen, I really think theres nothing we can do about that either. It was just their bad luck that it happened to them when it did. If its going to happen to us, well, nothing we do will help. Least of all, worrying.”

“Exactly,” he said, the look of dejection on his face increasing as he turned back to his desk silently, his face unable to conceal his suffering.

## physician, heal thy aleph

Laughing at Hermanns pain was probably a mistake. Not because it was registered on the survsystems, and would be questioned later: if I hadnt asked for a psycheval, that would have probably gone unnoticed and I think Hermann was the type not to say anything that would get me into trouble, really.

But that laughter of mine stuck in my mind all that day, and the day after, and the day after that; after all of the strangeness, and the shock, and the way that I had been inexplicably different, perhaps inexplicably cold. Why did everyone have to be so sensitive, I wondered. Then I realized that maybe it wasnt they who were ill, but me. Maybe I wasnt sensitive enough? Maybe I was abnormally insensitive?

Things began to fall into place in my mind one by one: during the trancar ride, I remembered wondering why lovers left me one by one, always with a hurt look in their eyes — or, that was how I remembered it. Alone in my cottage, I wondered why I never really felt all that lonely, although I knew that I was supposed to on such a dark night all alone with nobody to talk to. In the toilets, I would look in the mirror and wonder what it was that I was smiling about so much of the time.

And one night, when I looked into the silent, endless spaces between the stars, I wondered how I could ever laugh about the extinction of the Nahrans. Staring up into the silence of space, I was stunned by how callous I could be about something as gigantic, and as tragic, as their extinction. I imagined their continents bombarded with invisible death, their alien atmosphere burned away, and even beautiful spaceships flooded with killing radiation.

Then I imagined it happening to us, and remembered that we wouldnt know about

it until it was too late. And somehow, still, even as vivid as that in my mind, I didn't feel any shock or worry. I was unmoved.

I filed a report on my current condition, and requested a psyscheval the next day and was assigned an appointment a few days later at the Civserv München Workforce maintenance compound.

The first few hours of my checkup involved only one human being, a receptionist who showed me to a room and asked me to sit in a low white chair in the center of it. "Some automated tests will run, and afterward you'll see Dr. Schelling."

For two and a half hours, the computer ran its tests, after only one short inquiry: "Deutsch or English?", It had asked in a drone-like voice. I selected English, and then just sat there, being communicated with by the system only when it was necessary for It to request me to move my head one way or another. Even the chair swiveled on command from the system, automated. When I tried to speak with the computer after a half hour of silence, It made only poor conversation:

"Is there someone running this machine? Hello?"

"Hello," It replied in its flat voice. "No there is nobody running this machine. I am automated for all major diagnostic scan protocols and am currently running psyscheval diagnostic routine number 3 variant 1."

"What is that?" I asked.

"What is what?", It answered, barely intoning this as a question.

After a pause, I replied, "The diagnostic you are currently running."

"I am currently running psyscheval diagnostic routine number 3 variant 1."

Id paid attention to the numbers this time, so I phrased my question carefully.

“What *is* psyecheval diagnostic routine number 3 variant 1?”

“It is a standard diagnostic routine, one of five for which I am programmed to run in this session. It evaluates the activity of the receptor cells for various neurotransmitters in your brain based on your current apparent state. Utilizing stimulus that is filtered out by normal cognitive processing, but which is not normally consciously perceptible, your state is altered slightly and the attendant dynamic patterns of neurological activity are evaluated. Is this language too difficult for you to follow?” It asked without a hint of sarcasm. Which shouldnt be surprising, I suppose, since It *was*, after all, a computer.

“No, its fine,” I replied. On reflection, I had noticed myself growing warmer and more anxious, a little out of breath, so after a few moments I asked, “Is that why I feel hot?”

“No, that is a side-effect of the scanning. However, your respiratory reaction and anxiety are normal. Please try to—”

“Wait!” I interrupted. “How do you know Im anxious?”

“Analysis of your neurological activity suggest this, as do your current facial expression, and thermal and respiratory patterns,” It said blithely to me. “Now, please try to relax, and turn your head slightly to the left... yes, that is perfect. Thank you.”

Dr. Schellings office was a cool, quiet room down the hall from the scanning module.

The walls were bare, with only a pair of chairs in the room, set face to face in the middle.

They were big, soft chairs, white like the walls and floor. In one of the chairs, a middle-

aged woman sat in a white outfit. I couldn't see clearly on entering whether she was tall or short, heavy or slim. All I could distinguish was that she was looking directly at me, and smiling.

"Come in, come in, Asha. Please sit," she gestured at the other chair, which was facing hers. I complied apprehensively, moving slowly toward the chair and sitting in it. As I moved across the room, the lights dimmed slightly, so that I could see Dr. Schelling only slightly more clearly, even though now only a few feet separated us. The big white chair was big and soft, but somehow it was also uncomfortable regardless. "Asha, I hear that you had a nice discussion with our computer? I trust that the scans were not too disquieting?"

"They were fine, just... a little cold. Nobody in there but me and the machine."

"Hmmm," she nodded, and looked me over slowly. "Your report to Civserv was forwarded to me to aid in your eval," she said, and suddenly I felt panic welling inside me. I had throw away everything: my career, my future, my training. I knew, sitting in that chair, that Dr. Schellings decision was only supplemental, and that she and I both would only do our dance in the process of coming to terms with what the machines read, found, and decided.

It wasn't until later that my head filled with images of old women selling their bodies to disease-ridden men for food, of the coin lockers in which the destitute sleep by day (for the cheaper rate) in the stink and vermin left by the last inhabitant who slept in the locker the night before, of newsreports with pictures of the bodies of deeply dysthymic freigestellten floating in blood-filled public coinbooth bathtubs. All I could think of at the time was that relief, an answer, a word that could encapsulate all that was

wrong with me, was what this woman could give me, and would give me, right then and there. And, as if she knew this was what I wanted, she smiled at me and quietly began, “There are a few things I need to ask you about.”

## excursions

I was, of course, wrong about the coin lockers and the starvation being immediate. As long as I was undergoing treatment, my living expenses would be at least marginally subsidized, and I had enough free time during that period to find my way into a collective, at least in theory. But before I set out about that business, I decided I needed to experience the things that a member of the Workforce would normally experience at retirement into the Veteran League. I didn't have twenty years to enjoy this retirement, of course, but I had a little time.

So, with my spare savings, I traveled several times before the treatment got to be very intense. I went to Berlin twice, and to Firenze and Paris once each. I also went to some kind of national monument northwest of München —or was it northeast? I can't remember. Whichever direction it was, I remember people saying that some kind of genocide happened there a few centuries back, something very big and awful. I remembered reading about it later, after I'd gotten back to my cottage and slipped into a deep dysthymic downswing, and I was thankful then that I hadn't known what the place had been all about when I'd gone there. That would have been far too much for me to handle, and I think even on a midrange thymic-cycle equilibrium I would have had trouble stabilizing the temperamental oscillations that slid upward and downward,



rounding the circle of temperament in fast slippery lunges for days on end.

But some part of me had known all the time that the place was somehow the site of something terrible. Something had just felt *wrong* the whole time I'd been there, or at least that's how I remember it now.

## messages

*Yes, Miss Asha Bhakut . . . we have a package marked urgent for you to be picked up at the München Fexpa Shipping Office. It will be held for two weeks before being returned. If you cannot come within two weeks, please **reply to this message** and we will hold it for a more extended period, subject to notification and space availability. Package receipt is at an all-time low, so this should not be a problem. Thank you.*

*Asha, you know who it is. where have you been? Not a word out of you in three weeks and we've been worried.  
Namasthi, honey. Gimme a call.*

*Mitteilung : Das Münchener Archiv für Buchwesen bedauert,  
Ihnen mitteilen zu müssen, dass die Leihfrist für das Buch  
Twenty-first Century Digital Culture: Anachronism and Atavism  
von Luftwasser und Stendal (Signatur: 42413736 – A423) seit  
zwei Wochen abgelaufen ist. Ihre Ausleihberechtigung wurde*

*aufgehoben und gilt erst dann wieder, wenn das Buch  
zurückgegeben und die angefallenen versäumnisgebühren von  
Ihnen vollständig beglichen (oder "bezahlt") wurden. Mit  
freundlichen Grüßen....*

*[analog "click"]*

*Asha, its me Benjamin. Listen, where were you?  
Was starving for you. Hope alls good.  
Gimme a holler when you are back in town,  
girl.*

*Persönlicher Depot-Auszug. Zahlungen erfolgten auf folgende Konten: Mieteinnahmen;  
Mitgliedsbeitrag; Depotkosten; Risikoversicherung; Risikoversicherung; Servicekosten.  
Restguthaben 2348 EU.*

## **something more**

I remember that when I first met Muhammad he was standing outside of a corp-issue yurt with a small handheld in his left hand. He stood out there in the open air, talking to it and moving his head around slowly, his eyes hidden behind some kind of archaic faceplate interface, something like the purposefully gigantic sunshades you see sometimes worn by children in old photographs.

I passed him slowly, and he didnt comment on my passing, though I was certain he know I was there, because he lowered his voice as I went by, staring at him. We were

in the open park of the Künstler barracks, where the building projects had all been torn down long ago after some kind of disaster, the land consigned back to nature, with only the odd ancient marble or metal sculpture to punctuate the encircled wilderness. Now, it was a getaway for the more adventurous among the freigestellt masses, those squeamishly daring, incompletely rotted souls who found life in the collectives a little oppressive from time to time.

By this time, my dysthymia had progressed properly, like normal dysthymia-kindling treatment usually does. I had confessed my coldness, my unreason, my emotional hollowness. I told my Doctor that I hadn't wept the way Belsenleider had about the Nahrans. I hadn't wept, or at least not near enough, over the lovers I lost over the years. I didn't miss people most of the time. I wasn't, I had admitted to Schelling, really human, not the way everyone else around me was. I didn't accept her diagnosis, as much as I diagnosed myself. I was the cooperative patient. When I looked inside myself, I didn't see what I imagined others saw when they looked inside themselves. And so I began to write this journal, of which some scraps survive. I braved the storms of chemical adjustment that swept my brain, swinging me downward into the deeply human, deeply primate world of the dysthymic. I praised my luck in Schelling's office, in the language of a patient, and thanked both providence and my doctor for their intervention in my life. I would be truly human, I said. I would live as all the species had lived for ages, and had been meant to live. I would not be abnormal, I would be healthy. Unclouded by the distortions of the last sick, dead civilization.

And I believed it, at least enough to go through with the treatment for the time being. I found my way into a small collective of faithful dysthymics, mostly alumni of

Schellings treatment. It was a quiet, safe, and very standard life for a newly freigestellt. I wept, but I was not alone. Suddenly, I began to see my ties to the humanity that had evolved over millions of years, and which was not subject to culture, law, or idea. We lived in groups, large groups, because large groups keep the naturally dysthymic mind tempered. Whenever the weeping came, even when I couldnt explain it, there was someone there to hold me and talk to me. I would hear the sounds of the others in sleep, and their breathing and snoring lulled me to my own rest, among the warmth of their bodies. We ate together, and we did not hide sex any more than we hid loneliness, or being ill, or living, or that endless fatigue that held us all in place. It was all just part of being human; these were what wed come to believe were the eternal conditions of being human, for all except those poor who were deprived of their humanity for the utility of their work, and given apparent luxury as recompense.

I can tell you now that I believed it, I believed all of this without question and accepted it because it all made sense, from where I was looking out at the world at the time. Sometimes my imagination ran away with me and I was even a little grateful to live the way our neolithic ancestors had. But even then, something was missing for me, after months of living with Byashar and Meyerhausen and Windsor and Lazhro and Qang and Berg and the others. I dont know what it was, some niggling doubt, some question. And that question rustled when I saw this strange man perched outside his yurt, seemingly latched into the ubinet from the middle nowhere.

Not that connecting to the ubinet was so difficult. Even I could do it from where I stood, watching him a little while later, with my old multifunc tool, the same one Im using to record this entry. But why he was connecting to the ubi in public, and especially

in a marginally lawless place like this, was beyond me — and I could not find a good reason to use such an archaic setup to do it.

He shocked me when he yelled, without turning in my direction, “What do you want?” He had the voice of an angry man, something I had not heard in ages. Its true that some healthy people — that is, some dysthymics — have some tendencies toward aggression, but for the most part that is marginalized by meds that are activated by the subsidized additives in the free, prepacked Guntherstrassecorp nutribars that most of us who are freigestellt eat daily. I took a few steps back, and then stood in shock as he danced up to me. *Danced*. I swear it, he danced up to me, discarding his goggles and handcomp on the way. It was a kind of strange, spinning, wavery dance, like nothing I’d ever seen before.

He had a serious sort of look on his big, Turkic-looking face, and his clothing was not corp-issue. He came right up to me, put his hands on my shoulders, and smiled down at me, and then whispered to me in a strange, Persian-sounding language, although it wasn’t anything I could puzzle apart into meaning something. When I looked blankly at him, he mumbled his way through it again, slowly, in English, carefully pausing at the ends of lines as if he were reading them in a book hidden in his mind:

*this drunkenness began in some other tavern,*

*and when I get back there to that place,*

*I will be completely sober. meanwhile,*

*I am a bird from a faroff land, sitting here in the cage,*

*but the day is coming . . .*

He stumbled a little, and then after a pause, added, “*Who is speaking from my mouth?*”

And then he grinned at me with this strange, alien look in his eyes that seemed to stare right through me — or, rather, to stare around me in what seemed to suggest some weird hyperdimensional warping of light — and I didnt know what to say.

I later found out that hed been quoting some ancient religious Turkish poet at me. The poem was about the poet, who suspected himself of speaking for anothers voice, which everyone supposed to be the voice of a dead friend but which was also a voice that relayed the message of the ineffable. It was partly invitation, partly involuntary reaction, and partly a request to be helped back into his yurt, which he moments later confessed that he could not see.

He could not see it because he was blind, almost completely blind with the exception of the murky half-sight bestowed upon him by the retina-directed lasers in his interface system that used the little bit of visual acuity left in a few living cells scattered across the inner surface of the back of his eye. Having lived most of my social and working life among suburban members of the Work Corps or kids expected to become part of the Corps, Id never seen a real blind person, of course, because the blind were almost always automatically redundant, or — in the case of a really promising worker — surgically corrected.

The inside of his yurt was a spectacle: rigged with cables and other archaic junk, all pre-ubicomp gear from at least a generation or two ago. This was eminently practical, he informed me much later, because there wasnt a lot of contemporary gear suited to blind users, thanks to a highly-visual bias in the manufacturers and systems engineers. But at the time, it simply appeared to me as a kind of bizarre wonderland of ancient technology, a roughshod museum in a tent.

As I looked around, I realized that the place was full of neurofeedback gear. It was him logging what looked a lot like his own mental state. Even in my dysthymic downswing, I retained some of my natural curiosity, so I asked him about the gear and what he was doing.

He turned to me in a slightly spooky way and his eyes, though clearly blind, pierced me nonetheless. "You're not used to dysthymia, are you?" was all he said, and it took me a moment to realize he'd asked it as a question, rather than simply making a statement of fact. When I didn't answer, he said in sloppy Deutsch that he could hear my confusion, my brooding disappointment, my pathetic and (though I didn't know it) stereotypical angst. And he could hear in my voice, he claimed, that I was not meant to be a dysthymic, unlike so many of the masses around us. That something in me was resisting it. "If you are a natural resister and you don't get some help, it will crush you, the struggle will."

I'd taken it for a line, and told him I needed no help. I said that I was simply having difficulty readjusting to my proper and natural thymic and neurohumoral balance. I insisted that I was grateful for my treatment and would be fine soon. And he'd just nodded skeptically as I backed away from him, out of the tent, away from those piercing, strange eyes.

He'd called something out after me as I left, and though I had no idea what the words had been, the message had been clear: he would be seeing me again.

**walls, paint**

The buildings were not cute, could never have been cute, and I could not imagine how or why I had ever had thought so — although I could even then remember the fact that I had once had thought that very same insane thought.

The writing on the buildings was not poetry. It was not beautiful or some sign of the democracy of language: it was the pained, ineffectual ravings of a destroyed civilization, the whining of a dying species sprinkled with umlauts and mistaken Anglicisms. It was black and blue scrawling, squiggles that crawled the walls of the old city as a form of visual pollution, like excessive light blocking out the stars at night or noise infiltrating the night streets as it so often did in inner München.

The freigestellt people and their children, all around me, were not beautiful, they were broken and poor and miserable and reduced to wearing rags, devoid of any dignity. They mostly were uneducated, and had very little to fill their lives, just as I had. Of course, to someone who had never worked, it might perhaps have looked otherwise: ones emotions, ones inner life, suddenly felt absolutely crucial, easy to focus on to the exclusion of all other things. But if one was used to having ones life structured around other things, habits, rituals, work, then it was sometimes maddening. I felt continually as if I was wasting time, but I could not get myself to move about, to do anything except wander aimlessly, deferring any kind of attempt to find something else to try to do with my life than simply rot in this ugly, filthy, stupid city.

I was now fully dysthymic, in the standard freigestellt sense of the word, so that nothing mattered to me, least of all the fact that nothing mattered to me. Well, that was almost true, anyway. It couldnt have been fully true, because if it had been, then I wouldnt have felt that tiny tug of anxiety inside myself at each day that I rose with no



sense of what to do, and I wouldn't have filled with anger to supplement my ubiquitous regret as I fell asleep in whatever smelly vacant coin sleeplocker I managed to scrounge enough to procure for the night. If I'd been fully dysthymic I wouldn't have left my collective and gone out on my own after Qang had been raped and killed there. If my dysthymia had completely occluded my ability to care about things, I would not have been horrified each time I contracted some colony of fleas or lice in those sleeplockers, probably of an unknown new species. Nor would I have been able to force myself to walk so much everyday, without destination but determined at least to walk.

And if my dysthymia had completely overpowered every other impulse in me, I would not have even bothered to notice that same strange-eyed, Turkic-faced man passing me one cool November evening. I would not have stopped him in the street and talked to him, nor would I have bothered to be surprised when he recognized my voice, and asked me if I was finally ready to get some *real* help.

But I must recognize that my dysthymia must have imparted that standard uncaring, selfless recklessness that it is so often associated with, because I had, without inquiring, demanding explanations, or even really worrying, told him that I was, and followed him to his communal flat. I didn't worry when I saw several other men in the flat, all of them eyeing me not only with suspicion but also with curiosity.

Finally, I would never have entrusted my mind and my life to this stranger and his confusingly explained, mildly conspiratorial and clearly very illegal treatment program, had I not been so destroyed within, and so desperate. I would not even have known how blind I'd always been. And so, for this reason, I am grateful for the malpractice of Dr. Schelling and for the wrongheadedness of the system of which she is a part.

## Dunkelheit

Now sometimes I wonder what they were doing at the time when the cosmic ray jet hit their atmosphere, and rained radiation down on them like the voices of all of hell.

I sit in the dark silence and I wonder what it felt like. I wonder what they thought was happening. I wonder what they would have used to describe what was happening, what specific species of metaphors they would have used in the way that we would have used the idea of “hell.”

There are, as I need not explain, inherent problems in phrasing this curiosity to myself in this particular way.

But I know one thing for sure: this is not enough.

## every direction

*Stay calm*, he whispered to me, and I tried my best to do so.

But when I first began my descent into *tabula rasa*, as the state was called, I had gone down into those shadows of myself absolutely panicked, terrified. It was probably because I understood what was happening inside my brain far too well for my own good, and was awake to watch it happen.

I looked it up on the internet, and the first hit had been on a terribly technical scholarly site, reporting on the “The Role of Remyelination in the Facilitation of Highly Receptive Neural Network Replasticization and Adaptation in Adult Brains.” This article

had bombarded me with information about the uses of horrors like the acids described in this text which I fed into my vocomp off the ubi:

special receptor-targeted compounds containing monocarboxylic  $\omega$ -amino acids such as  $\gamma$ -aminobutyric acid (GABA),  $\beta$ -alanine, glycine, taurine, and guanidino in the effecting of synaptic inhibition, which suppresses the established modalities of certain regions of the neural network allowing for neurocomputational reinforcement and attendant re-myelination, paired in tandem with precisely target-regionalized implementation of tailored amino-excitatory compounds (detailed below) for the reinforcement of more regularized neural pathway establishment intended to occur along lines newly outlined (as well as along significant extant lines that must in the process be re-outlined) by specifically chosen stimuli and experience; attendant to this process is the peripheral and limited demyelination of neural pathways that are neglected (or, in traditional evolutionary terms, “selected against”) in this process.

Since this had made only a little sense to me, I kept looking, until I’d found a page that was more accessible to my level of understanding. It turned out that the *tabula rasa* process was as radical as any form of surgery, perhaps more so since it was unaided by any precision devices aside from highly receptor-targeted neurochemical compounds, and yet at the same time it demanded a kind of trust from me that could not be extracted from a person under the care of a laser-wielding surgical technician.

It felt like a kind of descent into a warm bath, but one only involving my mind. Everything simply relaxed inside me. Was this the inhibition of several chunks of my

crosslinked limbic/neocortical network, the first set of several chunks that would be isolated and reworked in sequence? Or was this just me going blank during the beginning of the procedure? Mentally, I did something like the person in a dream who feels her own body just to make sure it's there. I couldn't find anything missing, but then again if it were, would I know?

Something was going on at the base of my neck, but I didn't know what. It was probably the second of the pair of networked dispensules being installed into my neck; the first one had been put into place an hour or two before, and had already begun to feed its stream of highly specialized chemicals into my brain. This second one was in place to filter them out before the blood returned to the heart, and recycle them to the primary dispensule. *Stay relaxed... that's good, Asha.* I realized only a few moments later that this was a voice external to me, and that the comment was directed at me, because I was, after all, Asha. Was there something shutting off that was really me, the part of me that recognized itself as Asha? A slight panic swelled somewhere in my brain, but I didn't want to think about it so I endeavoured to relax further, although somehow even with that tiny worry flitting about in my mind I already felt completely anaesthetized. I thought of how I imagined it felt to sleep, and aspired to that kind of inner stillness. At first it was difficult, and took me a great deal of energy to actively trust 'hammad and his cohort.

But soon, that worry eroded away, washed out on chemical tides of *tabula rasa*. The state was not complicated. My rational, cognitive mind was aware enough even in that muddy stillness, to remember what was going on in the organ that produced it, even though I could not for the life of me produce a sensation or an emotion at the moment. I tried to remember why this might be so. What I had read had suggested that the state of

the *rasa* emulated the stimulus feedback loops that occurred in infancy, such as in the biological rhythms perceived by sleeping infants held in the arms of their guardians — for children lucky enough to have been nestled to bed with a parent, rather than tucked away in a separate room as was commonly done in the period spanning the Renaissance to the late Plastic Age. The openness of the infant brain not only to stimulus, but to the neural programming that eventually became effectively hardwired into it as a result of that stimulus, was something that at least to some degree was built in developmentally; but was also something that could be tripped again. It was complicated, and involved a lot of shutting off, rebuilding, renetworking in creative ways, and intensive full-time communion with at least one other human being, but it was possible. In my case, it would not stimulate a massive pruning of neurons like in an infants brain, but it could at least reinforce those neural pathways and — with long enough exposure and receptivity maintenance — neurohumoral behaviours that were prompted by whatever experience I would have in my months of *tabula rasa*, while weakening the rut of those pathways I would prefer to be less dominant. In other words, my mind was like soft clay again, the way it had been when I had been a little girl, and it was to be molded by those around me, and most importantly by 'hammad, who would be to me as a mother is to an infant. Those around me, I had trusted not just with my life, but with the person I would be at the end of the procedure. And their names, I realized at the moment, I could not correlate to their faces even with the greatest effort, although their faces were definitely familiar and their names clear in my mind.

After a few minutes, the descent itself was all over, and I was simply dizzy, slow to think, and confused. I remember a severe feeling of dislocation, and a sense of

astonishment as I looked at this body that was responding to my own volition, arms and legs moving. I remember this selfless, centerless self within me puzzling at the experience of another human body, one that carried mine into another room, lay it down on a cot, and put one arm around it. When I saw the face – and I am certain that it was 'hammad's face – I was fascinated with it, and stared at it wide-eyed, as I have seen on the videoclip that Steinn made of the procedure. I remember being shocked at how, somehow, though I didn't know how, I could feel my own face making the expressions that I saw on his face, as I mimicked them back to him.

It was somewhere in the middle of that realization that everything simply dissolved. I remember feeling the heavy sink of sleep engulfing that self, and then there is what I now map backwards into my memories as a long dark silence, during which I only recall a crawlingly slow growth in my awareness, which frustrated some other part of my mind that somehow was more aware and able to observe the process. There is a hint of the strangeness of waking from time to time to hear a voice screaming from my mouth, or just breathing in synchronicity to this other breathing outside of it, but nothing is clear in my memory for a long stretch.

Since then, I have been told that the majority of the time I spent in *tabula rasa*, I was babysat by 'hammad, but at the time I felt a simple awe for this strange being, this external shape that was always near me and didn't need a name. It simply *was*: it somehow seemed as if it were more solid, more complete, more present than my own seemingly-ephemeral body. 'hammad says that, like most *rasas*, I slept off and on for about a week, kept "open" on a steady series of medpatches and stims designed to leapfrog over the chems already in my body, once my older Mavectrin dispensule was

fully disconnected and shut down, registering with the ubi as if I had simply been weaned off treatment, my receptors having finally fully attuned to my newly re-tuned neurohumor levels.

After a few weeks of talking — Im told that I eventually got to be rather highly responsive, though I dont remember much of that — we began to go out into the streets in daylight. When we did, it was like venturing into an alien world, like the one Id imagined during my childhood for the Nahranis to live in. The vidclips Ive seen of me during that time suggest I had not yet become once again fully comfortable with my body, and apparently I walked with a kind of awkward surprise most of the time. I had to relearn not to simply expunge bodily wastes or touch my genitals or pick at my nose or spit or belch or shriek whenever I felt like it, just as I had learned as a child, and I had a wide range of reactions to the world around me: depending on the humoral and thymic disposition we were tuning or detuning in a given period, the streets would look silly, nightmarish, annoying, divine, or outright weird. I dont recall knowing what was being tuned, but it seems that 'hammad always seemed to know. I remember not the scenes themselves, but only this sense of continual and recurring surprise. Im told that like most *rasas*, I reacted to the same objects in widely differing ways: one time out, a statue would be delightful, and I would sit and smile at it like a connoisseur. Other days, I would shrink from the thing, terrified, or yell at it defiantly.

Apparently, a similar set of shifting reactions governed by relations to other human beings around me. 'hammad, as a pseudo-parent figure (by virtue of being my *rasa*-bonding object), got the best and the worst of it, but I am told that I saved my most surprising reaction for Virdani, a young man who had been in and out of the group for

years. It seems that he had assumed, perhaps because we were both ethnically Indian, that I would find him the most suitable mate in the outfit. He also, Im told, had some cyclothymic problems, throwbacks to a terrible gig with a big pharmacorp who tuned their employees to some outrageous extreme which had not been completely mendable via *tabula rasa* treatment.

On a particularly ill-fated day, Virdani decided to make a pass at me while 'hammad was in the toilet. 'hammad tells me that his pained shriek made him shiver for days afterward, and I vaguely remember lashing out at someone touching me in a way I didnt like. Virdani hasnt been back yet, and I dont expect to see him, but this was obviously far into my treatment. Thank my luck for that: if it had been nearer to the beginning, when Id simply been, neurologically speaking, an open receptacle to anyones whims, then I could have come out of my *rasa* very different than we had hoped.

As the treatment went farther and farther along, I remember seeing the city for what seemed like the first time, stripped of any connotations derived exclusively from my mood. I saw the writing upon the walls neither as "graffiti" nor as "poetry", and I saw the old buildings as neither "ugly" nor "cute." I saw people separately from how I classified them, as if I had two brains going at once — one for perception and one for classifying — and depending on the day, I could note objectively that the classification tended to follow one pattern or another.

*Tended*, I say: for the first time in my life, the classification did not simply fall into the standard cognitive rut of my daily existence. It wasnt a case of just seeing people and then realizing somehow more remotely that they were poor or wealthy by appearance, and that meant something. I mean to say that the notions of poor and wealthy



were completely divorced from my perceptions of others altogether. It was as if I had a categorization system in my mind that, instead of slotting images as I had done in the past into absolute categories, my brain began to work more like the ubinet. Images, people, things all seemed to have hundreds of connotations, moods, and emotions tied to them. Nothing was absolute, and inspired joy could be intermingled with horror.

Of course this state of affairs cant sustain itself indefinitely. But now, at the end of the program, which has lasted two long months and brought me to something close to full awareness, right at the outer edge of *rasa*, Ive started perceiving things in a completely different way. Its not an ability to perceive nuance, so much as a kind of attraction to contradictions, that Ive found has been nurtured in my attunement period. This is something new to me. "Everyone is different," 'hammad has warned me. Steinn, on the other hand, had always lived with an extremely wide cyclothymic range and had simply stabilized to a kind of middle-oriented homeostasis as a kind of coping method. Chrystyne is still reluctant to talk about her own retuning, though Ive suspected for a long time now that it had something to do with an extreme hypomanic attunement enforced on her during her time in the Work Corps; whatever it was, it was something awful: even now after her retuning, it would haunt her some nights and make her retreat off into a separate room by herself only to emerge hours later, raw and needing to be held by someone, anyone. As for 'hammad, in his own attunement period, hed mainly worked through a lot of issues related to emotional ties with people, and found that they could actually be less central to the life he wanted than hed been wired to expect. So now, he is capable of a kind of detached affection and closeness that is almost indispensable to sitting with people deep in *rasa*.

Im still in the process of working out what I want. Thats why so much of this record is tentative: I dont know if it will be deleted or invalidated by some later version of me that I choose freely. Im thinking I will probably choose a type of slow, wide cyclothymia, with short plateaued nuances that I can control by basic chemostasis treatments, but Im not sure yet. Its difficult to balance this sense of loneliness with the depth of feeling I have these days. Sometimes I wonder who I ever was, because I dont recognize myself in the woman I am now.

So I sit in the dark, on and on and on. I find that Muhammad is right: blinding the one sense helps heighten my experience of the other senses, and of that other thing that I feel inside, now more nebulous and now less, from which my self seems to bubble up and my emotions seem to resonate outward. Sometimes Steinn or 'hammad or Chrystyne arrives at our flat and asks me what I am doing, sitting in the dark again. Its usually Steinn, and he always asks, in his softest voice, in Deutsch, "Was machst du denn ganz alleine im Dunkeln? Was ist loss?"

But what Im doing just sitting here in the dark is something that I feel like I can never explain to them, really. I think 'hammad understands, which is why he never asks — that, or her just never notices that it is so dark — but Chrystyne and Steinn never seem to get what I mean from any of the answers I give them.

They seem to worry Im stuck in some other time, thinking. They dont seem to understand that, of all things, I am not trapped in the past, even though I am almost always returning to it. Visiting the past is the one thing that gives me my anchor, because unlike me, it is a stable, fixed thing. I have seen my emotionality, my capacity to feel this or that thing, be collapsed and rebuilt again, and its a much larger landscape than I am

used to, with brighter lights but also with deeper shadow. And sometimes I just like to imagine I'm seeing the deep, heavy emptiness of space stretching outward, constantly stretching itself in a kind of endless movement in every direction.

It's difficult to say what I am really doing. I have so much to decide about what and who I will be. I am concerned fundamentally not with the past, but with the future. I've looked at my impromptu thymic-cycle charts, the medications that facilitate them, the projected effects on other aspects of my health. I think the hardest decision in the world is picking which kind of person you want to be; most people never even manage to figure out who they are, let alone who they want to really be. Who am I? is a much more impossible question once you manage to involve volition into it: it maybe becomes impossible. How *can* I choose? How do I know that the I who makes the choice is the one who should choose?

In some small way, the agony of the decision is something I've played out over and over, trying to record this story so many times. I am certain this is not the last time I will tell it, that this version of the story is not the final version. I know that I will record it again, and in the process I will delete this version, and all I can think about is what happens to the last version when I record the new one? Do traces of it remain? Is it still true? Was it ever true?

When I don't know where to begin, I think about people I've known or wanted to know: my brother, my mother, the labbies at Xanzi and at the Herzog, the Nahrans, and now 'hammad and his crew. There are times when I think a lot about the Nahrans, because I think they give me a way of thinking about myself. They give me things to imagine different emotions about, and even feel emotions I never felt at the time when I

first experienced them. The past is frightening, because it is not real to me. It shifts and changes with my brain, and because the past is simply all the things I have been. It is known, and thus a mystery. What I look to is the future, where the only mystery is the decision ahead of me.

Its ironic, isnt it? Now that I have the freedom to pick who will speak with my mouth, who will think with my brain, I dont know who to choose. I talk about this sometimes when its 'hammad who is asking, but with everyone else I just smile and tell them that Im doing nothing. *Just listening to myself*, I say. Will I leave this place, and go to where my brother lives, where the corps have failed to seize control, or simple decided it wasnt worth the trouble? Will I simply settle for dysthymia? A thought of another possibility has been burrowing its way through my brain in the past few weeks: that I will do my part in a small, secret network. Something to tear apart this world, to give back people to themselves. I imagine secret signals passing through the belly of the ubinet, unseen for ages except to those for whom they were intended; poems of dissent on the walls of old buildings; echoes of another place and time, of the possibility of something else. I feel a powerful, burning desire to do this, but I have no idea how. Those genetics tests at Xanzicorp keep coming back to my mind, and I wonder what will happen if I start looking at the genes of children today, whose preemptive thymic and humoral treatments have been mandatory for a few years now. I have no idea if I can even salvage my mind enough now to do all of this. Theres so much of a war inside me already. Sometimes I would rather run away, somewhere like where my brother is, or where 'hammad is from. Somewhere far away from here.

But for now, I know that it is alright to not wonder even a little whether

something will come of it, because something already has. I am alive, in this world, I am loved and love this dear friend of mine in a way that most people never ever feel after they leave the breast of their mothers. I know some of it is the fact that he was my bonder, the one from whom I took my biological cycles from the earliest state of *tabularasa*, but that doesn't make it any less real than what a child feels for her mother before she even can think clearly.

I have become incredibly close to 'hammad. He has been telling me stories about life back in Uzbekistan, which is the ancient name for the region of CASIAZ from which he fled twenty years ago to Deutschland. He has told me haunting stories of ecological devastation dating back to the Plastic Age, of enmities dating back to the Bronze Age, and of new, powerful cults warring for control of the tradezone. His stories are always sorrowful, yet he tells them without sorrow in his voice, only this kind of strange detachment that I can tell he found only after a long and hard struggle, and a terribly difficult decision in which he had to choose that detachment, and all the apparent anaesthesia that came with it. Sometimes it seems as if he had to choose between memory, and feeling. And from the stories he's told, I also wonder whether he once had to choose between his sight and his ability to go on, although he claims he was blinded by a mistaken treatment as a young man in a standard medical procedure in a substandard facility back in Uzbek.

We went for a walk last night. In my old life, my life in the Corps, this would have been something I'd have misconstrued as some kind of mutual overture towards involvement. We walked along the streets of München until we reached the statue-adorned edge of the Kunstler barracks. The lights from the windows all around us were

nearly all dim by the time we arrived there, and the stars were all visible. We looked up together, and I told him about the Nahranis. I talked about how I had watched that patch of sky nightly as a child, about how I had watched the demonstration and later the footage of the extinction there; I'd thought I could have held it together since I hadn't reacted much at the time of the extinction, but from some new place inside me that I'd never seen before, shuddering and burbling surged outward and claimed me for a long time. What it felt, to feel these new, gigantic movements of things inside me, these deep shadows hidden inside me.

He put his arms around me, and we stood there in the cold with him telling me I was not crazy, that I was going to be alright. He told me that he knew what I was going through, that he'd seen something like it himself once, and that I would be alright in time. He muttered to me in Uzbek for a while, and just held me, and not for a moment did I worry or hope about whether this was some kind of overture, like I might have once. For the first time in my life, I was with another human being, and we were both present to one another, to the scars of loneliness and pain and hope and confusion.

I can still feel 'hammads arms around me that night when we went out walking, closed tight and warm around me, while I struggled desperately to see the stars clearly through the blur and dizziness and confusion. I can still hear his voice in soft Uzbek, and then in Deutsch, telling me I would be alright. I think that memory will be 'kived in my mind forever, like a signal passing through all the constellations of my selves, even to the last one and out into the darkness beyond her.

**tannenbaum**

Georg watched with something that was probably a lot closer to irritation than curiosity as the lanky foreign man in his long black coat picked his way along the hull of a rusted old fishing boat. As he wandered past the side of the wreck, a swarm of little devices followed him in a loose cloud. They glinted in the sunlight, and Georg frowned to himself. If he had known the highly idiomatic word that people used in really hip North American English when disapprovingly seeing such things go on, he would have muttered the word *disasterporn* derisively to himself when he turned his attention back to his work.

The truck was going to need more repairs than he could do at the Station, sometime very soon. The fuel-cell array was close to shot, and the linkup was in danger of conking out at any moment. This was nothing all that new to Georg: in the last couple of decades and the dozen or so Stations where he'd been positioned along the Corridor, this had been true of several hundreds of the CATA trucks that had stopped in search of repairs. Still, it was maddening. Whoever had arranged the purchase of these trucks had loaded the things up with dozens of cheap gadgets, doubtless convinced that this would make the trucks more efficient. Autopilot and GPS linkup and multi-fuel-compatible cells were great... if you could afford to keep them maintained. But the governments of the



Central Asia Traderoute Alliance had made the same mistakes as dozens of countries, from China to Tanzania, had made before with other technologies: in this case, the Corridor states had splurged on trucks so over-featured that they couldn't keep running properly.

And now, a few dozen stations like the one Georg was working at were relied upon to keep the Pan-Asian Transport Corridor running, like a great river of money and goods stretching from Moscow and Tehran in the West to Ürumqi in the East . . . despite Kazakh- and Uzbek-based Pan-Turkish-nationalists. Despite hundreds of isolated bands of rural religious crusaders willing to blow up the transport trucks in the name of Allah, or hijack them in the name of free petrol and food. Despite the rumors of brewing turmoil again in Xinjiang about rebellious Uighurs threatening the puzzling alliance between Muslim and Confucian blocs – turmoil that was officially unconfirmed, but somewhat substantiated in the stories told to Georg by braggart mercs who'd driven through there. Despite the increased posturing of India and Pakistan, and the hypocritical yelling and screaming that could be faintly, continually heard out of Europe and North America...despite all of this noise and pressure, the traffic along the Transport Corridor had to be kept going.

Georg had to wait a few minutes until he had finished hacking through a wicked cough of the type which, harsher than any he'd had before, had erupted from his chest with increasing frequency over the last few months. Then, two-handed, he pulled out one of the truck's many fuel cells from its slot inside the convoluted, tight-packed interior of the open engine, and set it on the ground. He crouched down close to it and began to fiddle with the casing, removing his gloves to get a better grip on it: after all, it was only

a little under zero-C out. Georg preferred to work on repairs indoors (and in fact he preferred to do just about everything indoors) but the garage had been full for a few weeks in totally trashed trucks that he couldn't make run even enough to send on to the next Station. Anyway, he had decided a few days before, working outside wasn't so bad because it never got cold enough here to bother him. It wasn't like he was in Outer Mongolia or something.

*But the wind*, he thought to himself, as a salty-smelling breeze bit into his nose, and he shuddered. Even after twenty years back here, he wasn't used to this insanely dry air. Who could get used to that? Probably even the people who'd lived here all their lives weren't used to it. *Especially* here, where the salt poisoned the air and water alike. He looked out again across the dusty barrens, past the rusty hull and its interested tourist, out to the foothills, and wondered how anyone could have lived here without central heating, without air conditioning, without satellite TV and radio and Net connections. No wonder the hordes rode East and West under this or that chieftan. Killing whites and yellows and browns had to be more interesting than sitting in a yurt in the middle of this godforsaken place.

But it couldn't have been as bad as that, way back when, Georg reflected, as he turned his attention back to the cell. After all, *nobody* had had any of that stuff back then, right? Damn salt, he thought to himself suddenly, tangentially, as he looked at the inner facing of the cell which was coated by a thin detritus of distilled salt. There was salt in everything around here. He wondered to himself, *Didn't the Romans used to salt the fields in places they'd wanted to devastate? Goddamned Stalin, goddamned cotton*, he cursed mentally at the man and the crop widely remembered as responsible for draining

the Aral. So much for the soil: so much worse, the people in such a land: Georg did not want to see the interior of his lungs at that particular moment, as he had a few years before, at a miraculously rare doctor's visit. He could feel strange encrustations without having to look, and that was more than enough for him.

“What’s he doing?” The voice, coming from behind him, spoke in Kazakh, and he knew immediately that it was Guryatta’s.

Without diverting his attention from the fuel cell, which he had now opened and was cleaning out with a small spray can and a cloth, Georg replied in Kazakh that he had no idea, and wasn’t sure he really wanted to know.

Gurya just stood there for a while. Georg was certain he was watching the man pick his way about the rusty ship’s casing, but all he could be certain of was that Gurya was still there. This, he ascertained by the sound of his co-worker’s laboured breathing. Everyone at the Aral Station for more than a day or two breathed like that. Georg reminded himself to file a transfer application again. Tashkent, maybe. Tashkent would be a good place for a while. There were girls in Tashkent.

Eventually, Guryatta interrupted his thoughts, with a dramatically loud, “Aaaaaaah!” Then, in English, he proclaimed, “He come make movie of dead Aral Sea! A warning for world about eco-, ah, eco-...” He let his voice trail off, not knowing any proper suffix that could be appended to that prefix.

“Maybe,” Georg answered, pensively. “Maybe something like that.”

“I hope Ajina see him,” Gurya said, and though his facility with the language was weak, Georg didn’t fail to note a very sarcastic tone, followed by a sharp comment in Russian that Georg just barely missed.

“Mmm hmmm,” Georg nodded to the English comment, at least, and then sprayed the cell’s inner facing once more, rubbing it gently to remove the crusty white deposit.

“So then,” Ouskeminya continued in his sloppy Russian, with all of the drama of a roughneck-Gorky or a bar-brawl-Solzhenitsyn: “We all just pulled into the warehouse, and got our guns ready just in case. Piotr and I were talking in Hollywood English on the coms, trying to make sure we all knew what was up, but most of the guys had no English anyway, so, it was, you know, *not so good*,” he switched to English to make his point. Georg had the faint impression that the big blackhaired Russian was imitating some Anglopopculture figure, but he didn’t get the reference at all. Neither did most people in the Station messhouse: nobody but Gurya laughed at the reference, so Ouskeminya just continued on with the story, in Russian, after he’d finished laughing at his own humor and gulped down his drink. “We just sit there for while, waiting for their trucks to come up so they can get their men start loading. There’s few dozen, little Chinese-looking guys.

“So, when they finally get a couple of trucks in, and start loading, we’re relieved. Maybe nothing funny is going to happen. We had been, you know, hearing, you know, things. We were a little, you know, nervous. Well, they’re half-finished loading when the shooting starts. Blam, blam, blam,” Ouskeminya swung his gun about the place, roaring expressively, grinning manic as an old Red, though he would’ve killed you if you ever used the analogy to his face.

He might’ve killed you just for asking him to put his gun away, after all, if he didn’t know you as well as he knew Islam. Not the *religion*, mind: this Islam was the

short, skinny, gristly-looking bartender, whose faithfulness to his parents' religion seemed to have manifested in inverse proportion to their apparent hopes. But when Islam said to him (with a tone betraying not so much compassion and mercy, as utter boredom and annoyance), "Put it away, Ouskeminya ," the Russian only grinned and pointed the wicked, gigantic one-handed gun – which in some ways looked almost more like a shrunken cannonade – at Islam to roar one more "*Blam!*", simulating the shocking kick of the gun as he did so. Then, immensely satisfied with himself, he tucked it back into its holster, and went back to his story, leaving Islam scratching his gigantic brown beard, eyes rolling at the puerility of this grown, armed man upon whom the Station's supply for clean water had depended this week.

"So, what happened next?" Gurya asked the mercenary in masterful Russian. It was so masterful that Georg couldn't tell whether he was throwing in a minor element of hyperbole in the exaggeration of his curiosity. Georg wasn't really following the story all that well to begin with, his Russian being as rusty as it was. His parents had insisted on teaching him German, and he'd picked up some Kazakh from the neighbor kids, but his Russian had never gotten past the basics: soliciting prices for food, vodka, and whores, ordering repair parts from the photo-accompanied charts in the truck interfaces, and cussing out China and India.

He didn't even try to follow the story, because with or without Russian, he already knew how this story went. They all went the same, by force of logical, pragmatic necessity; if the storyteller had escaped whatever bad situation was being discussed, it was because he or she had blown everyone to pieces. It was a very old, and very predictable story, and the only things that most people found entertaining anymore

throughout its various manifestations were the Schwarzenegger-like quips that got thrown into each telling, and changed with retelling. Georg had seen some of those old American action-films when he'd been a kid in Dusseldorf, and they seemed to have come back into vogue in most of the places he'd since worked along the Corridor. Maybe it had to do with looking back at the old Cold War for some kind of identity, or enemy, or maybe it was just that roughnecks the world over simply relished blood and guns and gaudy explosions and white women with exaggeratedly big breasts.

Georg wasn't all interested in those things. So, instead, he watched the door, waiting for two things to happen. The first, he was certain, was that Ajina would come in. She always showed up when she was most needed, and besides, she was due in today. Her rides were always five days, just to the Eastern border and back. Georg, for no good reason, hoped that she hadn't been held up by hijackers again. He grinned to himself, wondering whether he hoped that for his own sake, her sake, or the sake of anyone crazy enough to try take her truck from her.

Ajina had told him in rough Kazakh about the last time someone had tried something stupid like that. That had been a long time ago, a few years ago, and at another Station, somewhere in the middle of the middle of nowhere – that was, somewhere else in Kazakhstan. She told him about how they'd come up onto the road from the sides, pulled their own trucks across the roadway to block it, and waved their guns about like arrogant idiots. She'd told him about how they'd been real fundies, had decried her for turning her back on Islam and Allah and taken on a man's work. She'd told him about how she'd quoted the Q'ran at them about the finer points regarding the status of women in the One True Faith, and then explained that she could not hold it against them that they didn't

really understand their own religion, being that they were just a pack of ignorant country boys fresh off the farm. She'd even thrown in some ancient lines by Jelaluddin Rumi, just to piss them off because, as everyone knows, he was pro-Turk and a perverter of Islam in the minds of these rurals. But they'd missed the reference. (To Georg, the world was full of missed references in other languages.)

She'd told Georg about how they'd protested like maddened old women being beaten by their grandchildren, and pulled her out of her cab, and about how she'd politely, patiently warned them that a woman had the right to protect her virtue. About how one of them had called her something that implied she was a whore. Then she'd told him about how, when she'd finished with the bumpkin hijackers, only two of them were left standing, leaning on one another to stay in that position. According to her, they were mercifully sent back on foot to their camp with the message not to mess around with the trucks on the Corridor. And Georg wasn't sure how much of it was true... but on some level, he didn't care either.

He knew, after all, that it was potentially all true. Nobody could survive more than a couple of trips along the Corridor without being either untenably lucky, or a honed killer (even if a reticent one). Sometimes the Corridor seemed to Georg like the only place in the world where bullshit was unfeasible. Bullshit either ended up with bulletholes in it, or it ended up being the truth. No two ways about it. Too many other pressures prevented bullshit from lasting very long. Out there, it was practically desert, and in desert, in poverty, people pulled together on all kinds of crazy grounds. They grouped around a version of Islam that had less to do with Allah and more about ways to justify awful necessities like killing mercs and stealing supplies. They sent barely-armed

troops into Xinjiang to try “aid the Uighurs” in their “resistance efforts,” while China itself was trying to bind with the cities that dotted the desert, all the way to Tehran and even Cairo.

Georg had been out on the Corridor many times, never alone (because he was not a trained killer) though it always felt like he had been alone. Even when the Al Tau mountains – they were not as purple as their name claimed in Kazakh – had come up on the horizon, and eventually surrounded the Corridor, he’d gotten the sense that the mountains themselves were not solid, not permanent, but instead just some kind of transient massiveness that could collapse around him at any moment, like a world order, like a nation-state, like a war. He’d felt that behind them there lay an indefatigable endlessness, flatness; it was like stumbling mentally upon a hidden but inescapable extension in all directions; as if desert hid underneath the mountains, biding its time. And everytime, he’d been left with the feeling that he was being pulled in ten of those different directions at once; the dryness in his lungs, the salty taste of the air, the silence out there all conspired to produce that claustrophobic sensation, of course. Still, it bothered him in a way that he couldn’t even begin to piece together, beyond this awkward realization that he’d felt like he was surrounded by forces much larger than himself, and that they would inevitably determine his fate to the last.

Ajina seemed to serve for him as one antidote to this sensation. He’d never been out on the Corridor with her, but he’d seen her drive in, coming off of it: eyes fixed, shoulders squared, tearing along with a trail of dust thrown upward behind her, at some insane speed. She was the last kind of person he’d wanted to meet when he’d come back to Kazakhstan as a young man; not the kind of person one generally imagined would



buck fate and determine her own path. She wasn't tall, or glamorous, or even pretty, really. She was a small, husky little woman, maybe only ten years younger than him, with arms as thick as his and a couple of missing teeth that she never seemed to notice or care about; she couldn't have cared, or she would have had them replaced. It wasn't as if she couldn't afford to do so, on the merc wages she was making doing all of these shipments, back and forth, through some of the most dangerous territory on the planet.

She was a woman from what she'd implied had been a pretty strict, traditional Uzbek family, and she had been raised to know her Q'ran and Hadith inside out. Somehow, she'd kept clear of the Talibanis who'd come up out of Afghanistan into Uzbekistan when she was still a teenager, and likewise steered clear of her flashy and superficially-rebellious clubbing peers with their glittery brassieres and extremely short skirts who always, inevitably, ended up expiating for their sins and being even more middlebrow-conservative in the end. Somehow, she'd come through all of that push and pull and settled herself in a marginally honest job – *as honest as there is in this world*, Georg had once heard her say to Islam, who'd happily reminisced with her about growing up in a rather strict religious family – but also an independent job, a demanding job, and a dangerous job. Ajina was only one of hundreds of mercs who, week after week, simply ran food, petrol, tech, and weapons across the middle of Asia as all the borders and values there collapsed around the Corridor. She and her kind were in the discreet hire of at least a dozen governments and would-be governments, and they questioned nobody who had enough money to pay for the goods and the shipping.

So, Ajina's arrival was the first thing that Georg was awaiting. But the second thing that he was waiting for, it turned out, was what happened while he was still

occupied dimly considering the first. A tall, loping fellow walked into the station mess, and nobody but Georg seemed to notice. He might have been an Australian national, as the official report on his background clearance for Station accomodation had claimed, but on the spot he looked like an Indian straight out of Bollywood, complete with high black boots, a long coat that was probably supposed to pass for leather, black sunglasses, and long black hair ponytailed behind his head. The tall man's entourage of hovercams floated in behind him, and he simply stood at the doorway, scanning everyone in the place from behind his shades.

"Oy!" Islam yelled, and everyone suddenly looked up, following his gaze. "Do you understand me?" he asked in Kazakh.

The stranger, seemingly unfazed, replied in Hindi. Apparently he did not speak Kazakh. His reply was equally indecipherable to everyone in the Station, or at least nobody stood up to offer to translate. Georg sighed, not excited to be around this fellow for even a few minutes, but it *was* after all part of his job. He rose, and asked reticently, with a strong but bewildering accent, "How about English?"

When the Indian nodded without any expression beyond assent, Georg groaned inwardly, and offered him a seat at the bar . . . on the condition that he shut off his cams. He'd suspected from before the man's entrance that this was something he'd have to be convinced to do.

"We don't care what you film . . . *out there*. But in here, there's people who need to stay... anonymous," he said. Islam stood behind the bar, watching them while swabbing a glass clean, and nodding from time to time; he probably could understand some English, although Georg had never heard him speak it.

Surprisingly, he capitulated quickly: “Ah, I gitcha,” he said, with a strong Aussie twang in his voice. Maybe he at least understood that, in some places, one did not start crying about WTO/UN free information rulings and so forth. “Right, off they go,” he nodded, and then turned to one of the cams. “Full System shutdown now,” he said to it, softly, and the cams all floated onto the bar in front of him, settling down and going inert. “Thanks, mate,” he said to Georg.

“No problem,” Georg nodded, genuinely surprised. Most artistes he’d met had been idiots. Without initiating even an exchange of names, Georg asked him, “What is that you’re doing here?”

“What is *it* that am I doing here?” the fellow said, correcting his English almost unconsciously. “I’m doing research. Document’ry. Ecocides of the world. Need a segment on how Stalin crashed Central Asia,” he grabbed his vodka and slugged some of it back. Georg had trouble understanding his words through the accent: “segment,” for example, sounded more like “sig mint”, and “central” like “sin troh”. However, he puzzled through as the fellow continued, “And the focus is prob’ly gonna be the Aral Sea. Whadja think about that, anything you can point me to?” he tipped his head forward, looking over the top of his shades, which were downright unnecessary in the dark Station mess-hall.

Georg shrugged. “I here only been for six months. Not know it so good, except to say it’s shithole.”

“A shithole,” he corrected him, and grinned. “Six months, hm? Say, can I ask you a question?”

Georg knew what the question would be, or, at least, he was certain that he knew.

*What're you doing here? What's your name? Georg? Isn't that German? How did you get here?* Georg was ready to tell the whole story, the way his, yes, East German grandparents had been intelligentsia wannabes, and had moved about the Eastern Bloc, agitating covertly until they had gotten themselves caught and shipped off to Kazakhstan under Stalin, just like any and every troublesome ethnic loudmouth (or, for that matter, every troublesome bit of toxic waste) in the Communist bloc. He was ready to explain that his parents had been raised by those same grandparents of his in Semipalatinsk, had known one another through childhood and married one another like so many diasporic peoples, mainly because they were the same background. He was prepared to tell him about how they'd returned with him to what *their* parents had raised them to think of as the Fatherland after the bloc fell apart when he was ten years old; he was about to tell him that he'd never felt at home in Dusseldorf, or even in Berlin, and had come back after a few years of wandering across Europe, bored; that he'd signed up to work on the Corridor because of a utopia-brained Swede girl, and that he'd stayed with it long after she'd left because, well, because it was good enough for him, really, and it definitely beat hypocritical Europe, in his opinion. But for some reason, ready as he was to explain all of this grand multigenerational epic worthy of a post-Thaw Tolstoy, this Dostoevskian narrative that was at least some version of his life, he turned to the stranger and said, inquisitively, "Mmmm?"

"Y'know what day it is today, mate?" the fellow asked. His shades were down again, but Georg caught some kind of strange nuance in the question. As if it hadn't really been a question.

Georg had to sit back and think about it. Ramadan was what first came to mind,

because some rural idiot had wandered into the station at roughly noon a week or two back, and had started yelling and waving around some kind of rifle, and had gotten shot to pieces by at least a dozen of (the bartender) Islam's more appreciative customers. But Ramadan had already finished, or was close to it, if not. Was it the equinox? No, that had already come and gone too. Georg eventually shrugged, and said, "What, is it Christmas or something?"

The stranger looked him in the face, and frowned. "Uh, I dunno, mate. Just asking. Never, ah, never mind."

Georg was silent for a moment, wondering in a kind of passive way, which was the way he wondered about most things, about why it would matter either way. He couldn't think of a good reason why it should, so instead of pursuing the issue, he asked, "What you filming boat for?"

"The Aral Sea, man, the Aral Sea. One of the worst ecocides in Central Asia, just about all gone now. People here had TB for almost a century because of that. They're looking at trying to get it refilled, y'see."

"Refilled?" Georg shook his head, and said loudly, for the few people nearby at the bar to hear, in Kazakh, "You hear that? He says they're going to try refill the Aral Sea. I think he's filming it in case they do it!" Everyone broke out into laughter around him, and the stranger looked confused, or maybe annoyed.

"Why're they laughing?" he asked. "Wouldn't it be a good thing?"

"Good thing? Maybe. But how long they keep it filled? What they fill it with? Toxic waste?"

"Hey, come on now..." the fellow tried to reason with Georg.

Georg, of course, would have none of it. He simply translated the jeers from the mercs and from behind the bar: *What will they fill it with, Moscow's sewage? Maybe our blood? No! Nuclear waste! No no no, Mulatov's piss! He's a big one, Mulatov!* Mulatov, currently the main whipping boy for the Station, was probably the fattest Russian President on record; that much at least made sense to Georg, despite his poor grasp of Russian.

The stranger shrugged off the mercs' cynicism, though, and said, "Well, I'm doing this documentary up to convince them that, before they decide anything about it, they need to check in with you lot... but, I think the refill is a good idea."

"Where the hell they get water?" Georg growled, annoyed.

"Inland glaciers. They're melting, just need to be diverted and directed. Less diversion of the main tributaries through better irrigation systems, say. Pull-up from one of the aquifers they found near the—"

After checking with the man on the meaning of the word *aquifer*, Georg retorted, "Aha, and how long that last? Then they empty aquifer, and it crack up and be ruined. Don't like that one, that idea. What they really want?"

"Do you think everything is about what people *want*?"

"Yes. Look around you. Look at world. It fallen apart; maybe it always apart. When I was little boy, I believed people sometimes did things without wanting something else back. But now? I come back here. If that true, if people give and no take back, wouldn't USSR have been success?"

"Maybe. Maybe *any* political system would have been a success."

"*Would have been?*" Georg asked, stumbling on tense, as the door swung open

behind the stranger's back. His eyes changed focus immediately, adjusting to the light coming through the door from the Station's tracklights.

"Yes, would have been. By now, I mean. How long does it take before we admit we're bloody well beaten, we can't organize ourselves properly?" It was Ajina who had just come in, looking scratchy as usual, striding in with the frightening confidence and vicious grace of an Aiyarabalatinsk truck slamming through a wire fence. "But I don't think you should write off all of humanity. Look, I'm a Aussie Hindu in Muslim territory, mate. I think people can learn to overcome differences. And I think some people in this world really are out to do good, damn it! That there is more at bloody stake than mere survival," he said with an obvious effort to sound convinced.

"Ah. Well, I have friend who might test that theory for you," Georg grinned, and beckoned to Ajina.

Later that night, he sat in his small Station-assigned quarters drinking from his own private stash of vodka, staring with dull eyes at the spotty, stained coat of paint covering the old last-century wall. He could hear Ajina still laughing at the Hindu who was yelling at, and pleading with, her in English. Georg found himself wondering whether or not it really was Christmas. He got himself onto his feet and kind of tightrope-walked his way to the old, decrepit console on the desk, an old portable computer a decade old, which only allowed puretext access to the Net. But it was enough to check the date, and then to inquire whether that date meant Christmas. He was surprised that he couldn't remember, but then it had been many years since someone had even mentioned the holiday to him. One without family or long-term friends tended to avoid such memories, and still moreso

when nobody else in the area celebrated the holiday in the first place. But there it was: 2:23, 25 December 2035. When he checked, he was informed that it was indeed Christmas Day, early on Christmas Day. The Netreference wished him a Merry Christmas in English.

He remembered something about this holiday from when he was a young man. For him, though, it was an alien thing, an artifact of his long adolescence in Dusseldorf and his shorter stays in Berlin, The Hague, Amsterdam, Prague, and Copenhagen. It had suddenly appeared when his family had gone to Europe, and just as suddenly disappeared when he'd come back to Asia. The whole of the thing seemed to have centered on this wild tree that people cut down, dragged into their houses, and decorated ornately. That cutting the tree down amounted to killing it, well, that made the ritual perhaps a little more explicable to him: killing seemed to be something that Georg had found to be universally festive, no matter where he went. But even so, he had experienced enough instances of this holiday to intuit that it was not the killing of fir trees itself that was central to the ritual. After all, when they'd been poorer, his parents had used to dig into a closet and pull out a plastic tree, a fake *tannenbaum*. They'd put candles on it, tentatively and always with a kind of distrustful surprise at how the thing looked in the end. This wasn't because the tree lacked an aura of deadness, Georg knew. His parents were simply people who had only ever seen such things in books, or been told about them by their own parents. After all, how many fir trees grew in the deserts of Central Asia?

Then there were the presents. Unlike other children he'd known, Georg had never believed in Father Christmas. He had never been fooled into believing that some magical stranger would break into his house in a fit of global philanthropic inspiration for the



express purpose not of stealing things, but leaving things behind. He had missed out on this part of the mythology, in which young children were deceived by everyone they know into believing that such a philanthropist actually existed, and had found a way to make herd mammals fly, and all the rest of it. After all, by the time they were living in a place where anyone else celebrated Christmas, Georg had been eleven. After their years in Kazakhstan, and the stories their parents told them of life in the bloc, the holiday certainly hadn't been about any supernatural birth of a god or anything of the sort. Everyone knew full well that it was the time when you gave presents to one another, always practical and necessary presents, along with maybe one toy or a fun book. People gave one another things, and congratulated one another on surviving another year, without the pretense of magic. To have not gotten shot or died from TB was enough of a miracle.

Maybe it had been a way of reclaiming their ethnicity? Georg had never heard a Christmas song in Kazakh, after all, only in German and English, and later, at some of the more Northern Stations, in Russian. Well, and Georg fancied himself post-ethnic. Not that he's had his face changed, to blur the clearness of his race. But for all practical purposes, he didn't think of himself as belonging to any given group. Nor was he convinced that most people thought of themselves this way: he remembered meeting North Americans and Western Euros so functionally unaware of any subdivision of the word "white" that even he had been shocked. What he'd rejected by practice, they'd never even noticed. He was certain that their respective omissions were therefore of entirely different natures.

So, then, what did it mean, that this Hindu fellow was bringing up Christmas to

him, was what he wondered. After all, he was certain that this was exactly what the fellow had been getting at. The Bollywooder was as out of place in the Station as Father Christmas would have been. So was his optimism, and so were his gadgets. But in a matter of days, the latter at least would be ruined by the salt – if Ajina hadn't already shot them to pieces. In a matter of days, the fellow with the cameras would be gone, with his faint hope and his dream of the Aral refilled. This was a place where that kind of thing was impossible; the sea would not grow, no more than a fir tree could take root in the salty dirt and thrive. This was a place where such a thing as a *tannenbaum* or a great humanist scheme was simply impossible, and would have been absurd.

He was still trying to figure out what that meant, that the stranger had brought up the holiday, when, a few minutes later, Ajina threw open his door and growled something ugly but undecipherable in Uzbek. She threw something heavy to the floor, where it thudded loudly, and then crossed the room, climbing onto the bed and crawling toward him with the same grace she'd displayed entering the Station mess-house earlier. He noticed another scar-line on her, this one on the side of her neck, and he wondered where she had gotten it. Wondered very loudly, inside his head, but didn't dare ask.

Then, he wagered to himself, privately, about whether she'd first go for him or for the vodka.

Though he didn't check the time, the stars were still in the sky when Georg went outside to find the Bollywoodian.

The thing that Ajina had thrown onto the floor had been one of his cameras. Georg couldn't tell whether it was broken or not – it wasn't out of a truck so he had never

fixed one, and he'd never even seen such a thing, and consequently didn't know how to check it over – but he suspected that it was probably generally alright. Semi-autonomous flying cameras probably were designed to be pretty durable, he reasoned. He could have marched up to the fellow and left the inert camera beside him, but for some reason he wanted to talk to him. Maybe just to talk; maybe to see if he was serious about this whole Aral Sea refilling scheme. He wasn't sure why, but he stood next to where the Hindu sat, on a large rock, with his jacket pulled tight around him, his breath misting out of his mouth.

“What your name?” Georg asked softly.

The stranger looked up at him, and moved over to one side of the rock, giving him space to sit. After a few moments, he said, “My friends call me Raji. You?”

“Georg,” he replied, “like George, but in German.”

“Ah.”

After that, neither of them seemed to know what to say. It was an impasse that anyone else might have found humorous, would have started laughing about and pointed at their respective ethnic homelands to explain; to do so would have been an invocation of places that could not have resonated for these two in the way they would to others. Raji, with his Melbourne accent and attitude, was nothing like any Delhi-ite Georg had ever seen, and Georg was as far removed from Berlin ethnic politics as could be. But still, they sat there for a few minutes in silence like strange foreign trees perched on a cliff over a desert plain, as the acrid wind rose a little, and they both squinted their eyes against it. Georg followed Raji's line of sight to what he could just barely make out as the silhouette of the rusted fishing-hulk's hull.

“You really serious about refilling Aral Sea?” he finally asked Raji.

“Me? No. But I’m really serious about making it known that some people are very seriously thinking of doing it, and I’m serious about the idea that they need to talk to you people to see if it’s a good idea. I’m really serious about making a documentary that might help warn people about what happens when nobody’s paying attention. About how a sea can die, and a half of a continent can be choked to death and sickened and poisoned by that sea dying. For example,” Raji said, not turning to face Georg even for a moment.

“You really think one film is going to make difference? It is really so that important to you?”

“Doesn’t it matter to you?”

“It’s already done,” Georg said quietly. “Not much can we do now. Refill it, it drain again. Anyway, people already poisoned. Their culture dead now, you know. It barely exist anymore.”

“Mate, same thing’s true of most cultures. Whaddaya think several billion people are hard at right now? Exchanging *presents*,” he spat out, and the word ‘presents’ sounded more like ‘prisons’ for a moment. “Presents made of, well, plastic, presents that use up power under stupid bloody fake trees lit up with so much electricity that, if it were shunted to over here, could probably be harnessed to put in some decent plumbing, or a decent water treatment plant.”

Georg ignored the exaggeration, because the spirit of it was, in his estimation, essentially correct: it was lights and heat in business buildings that were closed for a week, but more importantly energy wasted putting up hospitals that were not needed in little towns to please local constituents, energy wasted on heating gigantic houses full of

rooms that people never used, energy thrown into violent film, pornography, border wars, and all that energy driven into defining identity, ethnicity, self. He remembered all of that, so vividly that it made him cringe. The stupid lights on the *tannenbaum* were something Raji was just using as a shortcut to make his point, and Georg knew it. "Yes, I know," Georg therefore grumbled. "I know about all that. Why you think I live here?"

"I had no idea why, actually. I thought maybe you were hiding from some government, or maybe were a religious convert?" Raji shrugged. "Is that it? You some kind of criminal or something?"

Georg was quiet for a few moments. "No. Just come somewhere where at least I know what right and wrong is. Can see clearly. Because wrong is so big. So bigger than me. So big you can never be comfortable, can never forget it. You forget pretending make it right, but not because you become lazy. You forget because you know can not never change it. You learn to live in the desert left behind. That's life." Raji turned to Georg, for the first time in that conversation, and Georg added, "Your camera." He gently placed the thing on Raji's lap.

"Thanks, mate. I thought I might get it from you. That Ajina is, a, well, interesting birdy, ay? Uh, anyway, yeh. I should get some sleep soon. Can I wish you a *Frohe Weihnachten?*" Raji said with the worst pronunciation of German that Georg had ever heard, and tapped his spex. They must have had a linkup to the Net where he could have looked up the phrase in German.

"I don't speak that language," Georg said sharply in English. *Not anymore*, he added silently.

"Nor do I, mate. Alright, no merry-merry, then, just g'night." Raji politely nodded

his leave-taking and walked off toward the Station, leaving Georg alone on the rock, staring out toward where he knew the remnants of the Aral Sea lay. He sat there for most of the rest of the night, trying to imagine a world where it could be filled with fresh clear glacial water; a world where tuberculosis and new strains of smartflu didn't decimate villages as a matter of course; a world where nobody would have to be hardened the way Ajina and Islam and Guryatta and he himself were, and a road like the Corridor could be sanely embarked upon without a small cache of munitions. Try as he might, though, he was unable to imagine a world in which the wind across the desert didn't carry salt, and whose nightly howling didn't remind him of that ghastly old, rotund, red-tinted ghost of some dead Russian or other to the North.

When he got tired of looking out into the darkness where the Aral was, he turned around, to face the Station. It was a small, flat compound, very last-century, plain and squat and really quite ugly; it was nothing like the sorts of buildings that regular people lived and worked in so many other places on the Earth. But it was serviceable, and even mostly habitable. There were a few lights projected onto the walls, but the rest of the compound lay in deep dark, under the countless horde of stars. And as he looking around into all of that endless dark, a tiny constellation of lights split and moved away from one another. Slowly, the pinpoints of light drifted apart until they were configured in the rough shape of the lighting-pattern on yet another Aiyarabalatinsk rig roaring past along the Corridor, carrying who knew what to who knew where, under an agreement of inestimable legality but definitely in secret.

Georg liked the noise of the truck; it sounded like something happening, at least. This was at least a place that could be driven through, even if it had been left

uninhabitable. Was there some kind of happiness in that for him? As the truck roared past, he tried to see the driver, but he couldn't make anyone out against the dark, because the light was out in the cab. And he couldn't even begin to guess the cargo of the truck, not even hazard a guess for his own amusement. But, yes, there was something about that truck, that random truck on this incredible, brutal road that made him smile to himself, just because it was there, and he was around to see it. And so he waited until the red gleam of its lights had faded from view in the rising dust before making his way back to his room.

**metaphorz an' shit:**

**an encounter  
with  
Ayaz  
'Kickash' Bharash**

*By Aiko Ryshu, Montréal correspondent,*

*(UPLT 25437162, cr. 78%, avg.o/p 250K/day)*



3 Feb 2035

Friends, fans, and fellow travelers: the rumors are true. This is my farewell *encounter*. I don't want to dwell on the why or how, because I think that will be clear from the *encounter* itself. But I did want to take the chance to thank you for the last few years. All of your interest, excitement, and feedback made this a fuggin' great job. (Well, almost all of it. The concealed slinkycam on live feed in my bathroom I coulda lived without, but, well, bygones and all...) But it's time I move on. There are other things to do. Take care of yourselves, keep asking those questions face to face, and keep thinking for yourselves. *Arigato*.

And now, down to business... This one's a little longer than usual, and there is a moral to the story. But it's worth it, I promise.

"Naw, naw, man, z'*good* poetry," he said, very seriously. "Yo, sirusly! I got metaphorz an' shit, ebyting you needa gedda chigs 'ot." He spoke with a kind of fake-Indonesian hang in his voice, as if he was trying to sound like a hardrubble rapper or something. You'd never guess he was a third-generation American Saudi from Burlington; yup, I mean from lovely Burlington, *Vermont*. Well, actually, you might have guessed it, if you

talked to him for more than five minutes at a time, after which the accent cooled off a lot. Me, I guessed it in about twenty seconds.

He was on a tangent, definitely. We'd gotten there from the subject of his womenfriends (which he made sure to explain to me didn't mean the same as girlfriends), and we'd gotten to the subject of his womenfriends from the subject of his hang in Montréal. The explanation of his hang in Montréal was clearly on-topic, related to his reasons for being here instead of Burlington, Vermont. Which were, as he put it, "awl feggin' tydup in . . . like, all kanna shit". Even at the time I was pretty sure that this meant different types of *crime*, because from the rest of what he said, it seemed that was the only reason he was here. He had had a way with words that made me really want to see everything he said in print. I didn't even care if any of it was true, really. It was more about the way he told the stories that really flowed through my circuits, you know? Mmmmm. I guess that's part of why this is coming to you via indie channel, and not in a real webdaily: sometimes it's just discourse for discourse's sake, right? Better than more President Winfrey propaganda.

But even looking at what I've written here, there's something missing about the way he spoke that I couldn't capture in words. I knew that from the moment I started talking to him. But then again, maybe that's why I *did* start talking to him. That something that doesn't fit into the screen, that can't be contained by mere pixels? Something about his voice, maybe? Not just his words, anyway. All I can say is that I hope you'll see why in the next few pages, and in the sound samples included in this *encounter*, *hopefully*, I write, because I suspect that if you don't get it now, you'll never get it.

It was odd, how I met him. I'd been in getting the translator in my spex updated, as in getting the hardware tweaked, obviously (or I'd have done it at home, if it was just softstuff). Now that I've gotten used to trying to pass myself off as a real writer (journalist is too stuffy, isn't it? I like "writer" much better!), I've needed to be right smack *in medias* to be in the media, watching it all come together around me. If some choyboy 'couverite says "piao liang" and I translate it as "byooooo-tee-full" and it really means "fucking ugly" with an ironic twist this week, or when I can't figure out what the hell someone figures out when they say "p'tit-grand!" . . . well, I look like an idiot, don't I? Young people and their irony. Oh, their SARCASM, I mean! I love 'em... the little fidgets.

I especially love 'em when they make me feel young. Look, it's *not* a shock when a man looks me over . . . Hmmmm. I know I should say *ugh*, I'm supposed to and I sometimes *do*, but I was kind of smiling when Ayaz did it. Hey, this is the news. Gotta tell the truth, and all that, since this is real jer-nawl-is-um. It's mostly the scumbags who are a turnoff. And the starers. Yuk! Anyway...it's not yet a shock. I mean, look at me! I think I'm a *fine* example of estrogenic (or is it progesteronic?) human, even if 29 is now considered old in whatever culture this passes for. I'm sorry, but those plastichix on the H-wood channel have been upgraded and repackaged so many times you'd think they were property of Bill Gates by now. Well, okay, one of them is. . . but the point is, I take care of myself. The Dowzell-Chang scale appraiser gives me an 8.7 out of ten, and I've never met a Japanese girl who's gotten higher than that. Dowzell-*Chang*, people. Ahem. The writing's on the wall, set your spex to Poutonghua. (That's what barbarians like us call "Mandarin Chinese," hon. Try to keep up with us here.)

Anyway, like I was saying, it's *not* really a shock when a man checks me over or starts up an IRL chat with me. AFAICT, I'm quite attractive and personable. So I wasn't shocked when Ayaz approached me. But it's rare that a guy is so forward, so forthwith, and so polite to me all at once. "Nice shoes; wanna fuck?" is forward and forthwith, but usually not polite. Forthwith doesn't mean bandwidth, after all; you can be an open cable and carry data but transmit nothing. Behaviour is like media, though, isn't? Yeah, girls, I see you nodding. *Just* like media: a guy can be polite and still be a prick on the inside. But the illusion, the semblance of politeness, is a message and a medium in itself. Or something. It's nice for the moment, because it lubricates the machinery of interaction, right? If we both stay polite, nobody gets hurt.

But Ayaz wasn't "polite" with me, ... he was downright *decorous*. (Look it up [right here](#), Oxford Dicto access is on sale for all links from this article. What can I say, they *love* me.) At first, he just smiled at me from his place, three spots ahead in line. He looked bored. I looked bored. We both looked bored. Maybe we clicked, I dunno. The maybe was the click, I guess. It's simple, really. Girls, you say you never meet people? You probably don't update your IANg<sup>2</sup> translator apps often enough. [ahem . . . does that count as product placement, fellas? . . . [beep beep bleep] . . . Oh, crash it, that sucks. "*Commentary on placement obliterates the effectiveness?*" jerks! Okay . . . well, then this is my political statement of the week! screw the ads. . . speaking of which, set your stream to high so you don't hang, because here one comes:

every woman\* carries the secret to more luscious, beautiful lips in her genes:

our patented betatriner system helps unlock the real you: the younger, beautiful you, the natural way . . . by unlocking the beauty your genes always carried, but never expressed.

*Luscía Therapeutic Lipeloss*

*Available in Expressions in Lipeloss Cream and Lipeloss Lipgloss*

\* Consult your physician before using. Not to be used by pregnant or nursing mothers. May trigger unexpected genetic expressions. If your lips become too "young" or "fresh," immediately discontinue use. May induce temporarily decreased sex drive, slight hair loss, slight weight gain, infertility, or other side effects. Those with family histories of cancer, lung disease, arthritis, alzheimer's syndrome, or aging should consult physicians before using. Luscía Therapeutic Lipeloss should not be swallowed or applied internally. Use at your own risk.

Right, girls, where were we? Ah, yeah. Look, I'm telling you, *you* can meet people, no problem. Yes, even you, Bertha with the big bad butt and the thick black mustache.

[DEPILATORY CREAM, girl. Come on. *Get it here*, it's on special for all customers linking from this article. *Everyone* loves me.] Yes, you *can* meet people. But you gotta be careful. They may not be the kind of people you want to meet.

Ayaz was the kind of guy I wouldn't have wanted to meet at all a few years ago, before I started doing *encounters*. Okay, wait, maybe I would have wanted to meet him. In every public place. *Maybe*. And those of you who read me regularly will find out just how much crazier I am than you thought: ohhhhhhhhhhh no, not narcissistic of me, not at all! ☺ I *know* how many of you read my articles just to see if I am gonna spill any more beans.<sup>1</sup> But today, I have a much more *serious* issue to talk about:

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<sup>1</sup> Okay, just one. Turned out that Murdunjee was really a SHE! But it's okay. I'm all better now. :) Remind me to stay outta NAFTA-PolCrt pubs.

<obvious>

The world is full of dangerous people.

</obvious>

But you don't know what I mean yet, because you don't know who I mean is dangerous. I'm sure you think that you have an idea, right? You have these fantasies about what really goes on in the heads of the drug-dealing, electronics fencing, gangbanging youth of NAFTA today, right? Believe me, I'm a madgirl for a good crime spectacle too, a murder mystery flick or a good rousing live car chase on the newsnet, frex, but . . .

The fact of the matter, girls and boys, moms and dads, is that *you do not live in the world in which you think you live*. I said *full* of dangerous people. Now, who do you think I mean? Every time you use the word criminal, every time you use the word "illegal", you're speaking in a language. Languages are like how a person can be polite but be thinking unpolite thoughts. Language might be the social machinery, but it secretes its own lubricant too; and he who lubricates the machine controls the machine. Yes, *he*. For example.

Or, better yet: languages are like computer networks, see? A lot of what happens goes on spontaneously... but there's also an architecture at work, and you gotta see that to understand the network. What you think is reality, well that thing is really just the rules to a game that thousands of people have wised up to and quit playing with blindfolds on, a game played on a network that had to have been programmed onetime once, even if people didn't know what they were doing when they programmed it (which is how it is these days with most networks). Dangerous people? Whose fault is the poison in the Yangtze River? How about the giant vege-glob of organic matter living in the guts of

Lake Superior? Whose fault is the ozone layer? Just who's dangerous around here? Are *you*? Wait . . . I'll get back to that. I should get back to Ayaz, who's now stuck in freezeframe.

So there we are, both of us just bored in that lineup. BORED. And he smiles at me. He's kind of fat, really, and you notice when you look at him the first time. Fat in a way most people just aren't, these days. "Charmingly fat," he later says to describe himself, saying it with a perfect WASP accent (which is the first moment I recognize that he doesn't really speak like an Indonesian hardrabblar); he smiles and tells me that this is what a girl named Senna, ("a hot Libyan-type chick") once told him that he was.

And he *was* a little charming, really, once you got past the incongruousness of all that gangsta stuff. Very attentive, at least by the time he talked me into getting a tea with him. I remember my mom's stories about how in her day it was coffee, and now it was newfangled faux-tisane, the localfauna herbal tea revolution. I don't like coffee much anyway. Sane, humane people don't support regimes or fuck over poor people just because they live far away in a hot place suited for growing some kind of bean and happen to have funny names and skincolors. And besides, you have no good excuse to not know by now what coffee does to your nervous system. So I like tisane just fine.

So anyway . . . when we sat down, after walking a few blocks in the slush of the street, I hadn't decided if this was going to be a kind of teadate or an *encounter*. (Look, bok choy, cut it out with the crito, right? This is how I *work*.) It almost turned out to be a bad date, by the way: when he found out I was a journalist (the word was still back in style – this was last week!), well, then he was suddenly full of stories. You know, posture, stance, attention to discursive authenticity and authority, that kind of stuff. I'm

glad, I didn't give up on him though, despite the hacky startup.

Like when I asked him about how he got into crime. I didn't even *think* about the word. He said, "Crime? Well, I guess that's what I thought I was into at the start, yo, but I moved on. I stopped smokin' that shit and dropped some reality. *RE-A-LI-TY*. Look, nobody wants to do crimes. Nobody wants to sell drugs to desperate fucks who'd trade their moms for one mo' hit a' Blackfire. Really, girl, I'm tellin' you. *Pimpin'*? You think anyone's gonna be prouda *that*?"

I told him, of course, that I didn't think *anyone* was proud of being a criminal, but all the same, it was all about doing illegal things, and that meant it really was a fair definition of crime, didn't it?

Instead of answering the question, he asked me where I grew up. Well, readers , those of you who know me, know that this is the first hint of something I'd want to dig into. I wanted to get into his head, see what made him tick out such a strange beat, and to make him talk to me. When someone changes the subject, that's when you know there's a story waiting to be told... So, of course, I told him about where I grew up. Those of you who haven't read my earlier columns will know about my living in Brussels, Tashkent, and Tokyo. No point in dragging that up again, but you can refer to my bio page for collations of this data, [here](#).

But for those of you who *have* read my work, you'll be pleased to know that I dug right into him with stories of my uncle Yoruchi. I told him exactly what I've written here before, about how Yoruchi was the uncle I never had, who was in with the Rebel Angels of the Red Night in Hong Kong and the PLA black marketeers in Shanghai and the slaving rings in Bangkok and bankers in Kuala Lumpur and Vancouver and the right



cadres in Beijing and just about anyone else who mattered around the Rim outside the Nihon crime scene. “You don’t do crimes in your own country,” he used to say in prim Japanese, as if he had to speak carefully because he had all these delicate little kanji letters right in his mouth. Or, that’s what I told Ayaz. That uncle of mine, he was a smart fortune cookie.

*Hrrrrraahhh!* It’s hard to believe that he was that uncle that I’d made up on the spot one night. It’s hard to believe that gang of Nihonese punks believed me and were scared of him. It’s hard to believe that he has served me so well in the years that have followed. Because, as those of you who read me regular-like know, Yoruchi is my imaginary uncle who’s gotten me out of trouble—and into it, when I needed to be into it—I don’t know how many times.

Well, I knew from the start that war stories was *the* way to go. Scarred up kooks

love to tell the backstories on their mutilations, especially to girlies.

Ayaz traded some stories with me, told me about his buddies on the street, in the shadows of the major cities up and down the East Coast.

It was strange, the picture of the world that I got from his words;

I’d known that the underground

existed long before I ever met him, but it’d never seemed so real, or so complete a world.

I imagined it as some gigantic pulsing secret cut off from the world I have lived in for all

these years. *Swoosh*. Cities became full of dark, shadowcrusted holes in the skin of the normal world; suddenly they were not the wonderful kinds of places you went to see people, or talk and drink tisanes on the sidewalk and sit in the sun like we were doing. *Plink! BLAM*. Instead they became these huge iron and glassite places you went in cars that had illegal plating armor added beneath the plastic exterior, and where people sold drugs and women and children and stole and resold stolen hardware and data, and did their best to avoid being killed by members of a rival gang. *BOOM*.

And cities, the way he told me about them, were linked by networks. Networks, networks, networks. It's funny, that word, "network." We associate the word "network" with information, freedom, equality, apple pie, dead fascists, tubby teenaged nerds who, for the first time in the history of humanity, have a decent chance of getting laid before college because they are the few who understand the world's economy better than anyone over the age of nineteen; we associate the word "network" with just about everything nice and decent and good, these days. But there's a flip side to that: the connective systems that these groups of people use are hidden, secret, silent networks. Friendships and partnerships established on a tenuous handshake and current circumstance. Agreements that can and eventually do go up in smoke, or explode in your face at a moment's notice. Explode, literally.

But when I heard him talking about all of this, and looked him in the face, I realized that I was wrong. This world wasn't disconnected with the real world; and it isn't. There I was, staring him in the face and thinking, "I could have easily stood behind him in line at the grocery store, or sat beside him in a movie theater, without ever having known." If I bought a TV, it was a TV that he or someone like him had declined to steal.

The semilegal drugs that circulate at all of the hi-fal parties I go to are sold and supplied by the people who populate his world. His world, and my world, were like symbionts; a creature that hunts by night, in secret, and its mate that hunts by day and in the open, each dependent on the other.

This bothered me, of course. So, just like I always do when I'm a little bivved, I started asking questions.

When I asked about what it was like to rely on crime for one's income, he said, with his increasingly clear diction, "Crime? You want crime? I'll show ya 'crime'. I been goin' a school, gettin' my shit together so I don't have to fence no more 'lectronics'n'shit. You know what I learned in school? There's AutoCthon Reserves, up north, still ain't got flush toilets. No fuggin' toilets, girl. *Kids* livin' up there."

Well, I pointed out to him that they hadn't had flush toilets *ever*. Before NAFTA was settled by Euros, the natives hadn't even heard of toilets, let alone needing them. *So what?* I asked him.

Then, he pointed out that before the Euros showed up, the Indians could still "hunt and drink the fuggin' water. The game wasn't all fugged from the still-growing ozone hole, pollution, and the noise of every fuggin' NAFTA jet and cheap suborbital flight to fuggin' Shanghai." That, as he put it, was what "the fuggin' difference" was. Then he asked me, in his husky and grizzly tone, "How many fuggin' kids in urban NAFTA *you* see ain't got flush toilets? They have fuggin' *kids* up there. And this fuggin' Zone is the richest crashfugger on the fuggin' planet."

And, of course, I had to agree, really. I've seen pictures of life up in the reserves, and some of them are fine, but there are some that I'd rather die than have to live in. Kids

with no shoes. Houses heated by wood stoves. Tuberculosis breakouts. Well, when I conceded that he had a point, he looked pretty pleased with himself, and started calling me “baby.” You know what I mean. Well, this was in the middle of my interview, so I pushed for more. I wanted the details about what he did for his “synd,” as he called his old criminal network. I thought he was saying “sinned” until I realized it was short for syndicate. One thing’s for sure, these kids are good at thinking up new terminology for just about everything they do or say. But that was when he surprised me. He had one word that described his synd, and it wasn’t a new word that he used. It was an old one, a very old one: “*jihad*.”

I know what you’re thinking: *Jihad*. It’s a word that took on many connotations in North American English during the last century, many of which remain to this day. People still talk about Jihad fighting McWorld, though that little chunk of ad-copy rhetoric deserved to die twenty years ago. But the word “jihad” was messed up long before that; it was a word that was used rather adeptly by politicians to bring to the minds of their constituents all kinds of disproportionately extreme images of, well, to be frank, towelheaded uzi-toting religious fanatics. Airplanes dropping out of the sky, hostages and fascist theocrats; factions running Afghanistan and uprisings from Morocco to Indonesia. This image, you should try to remember, was primarily promoted by a nation full of Christian-fanatics, gun-fanatics, and sex-fanatics. The Most Puritanical Society In The World talking about The *Other* Most Puritanical Society In The World — but you already know which one was putting more titty on TV (and selling more guns) than any other society besides the French. So *please* try to remember that, maybe think about it for a minute. Then listen to what Ayaz said about *jihad*.

With a serious look on his face, he said to me: “Lissennup, just forget about what you *think* that word means. ‘*Jihad*’ don’t only mean ‘Holy War,’ or ‘Kill The Great Western Satan of America’: it might mean that to some people, hell it might even mean that t’me some days, but there’s a bigger picture you gotta look at. *Jihad* means . . . ‘struggle.’” He stopped to think it over, and then nodded to himself and continued. “That’s the best word for it, ‘struggle.’ It means fightin’ to make sure you got a decent house and food for your kids, that your gov’ment ain’t some piece of bullshit or, if it is, at least that people’re free to pray ’n work ’n not get beaten on the street ’cause them the wrong color or family. It means fighting for what’s right, an’ how’s we s’posed to know what’s right an’ wrong when we all playing by someone else’s rules?”

“So you mean,” I asked carefully, “that crime is a form of protest, a form of struggle that questions the values of the ruling class and critiques inequity not simply in an ideological space, but also in a practical, materialist sense? Crime is class struggle that is manifestly a performative questioning of the hierarchized morality of the status quo?” I was fishing for what he meant by right and wrong, of course, for some kind of anchor in our PoMo soup of relativistic discursive polyphony. Thinking on my feet, pulling together things I’ve read and thought through myself but never seen face to face.

When he looked at me funny, I regrokked it, melted it down into something more palatable to his discourse: carefully, I said, “Less talk, more rock? You’re *taking* a piece of the pie because nobody seems to be willing to give one? And because *their* definition of right and wrong claims that your taking a piece is wrong, but won’t ever, ever define their keeping it to themselves as wrong?”

“Zackly, Aiko,” he grinned, getting my name pretty close to proper

pronunciation. “I knew you was smart, hon,” he poked me on the shoulder with his index finger, one eye shut as if he were sighting me with a gun, and wearing a goofy grin. “The whole point is, like, uh, ‘class struggle.’ That Marx jacko mighta fugged up some of his shit, and ain’t nobody read him right since the day he first wrote, but he was smack dab gamelan about one thing: there’s people who’s got, and people who’s ain’t got, and the only way anyone gets from the group two to group one is fightin’ their way across. Class *jihad*, babe. Tha’s it.”

“Class *jihad* as in class struggle, not class warfare?”

“Sure, well, yeah, uh, sometimes it’s war. When it’s necessary. We got weapons if we need ’em, but I don’t like having to. I just wanna take a piece of the pie, like you said. It ain’t theirs anyway. How many of us on this planet now, anyhow? Seven billion? Who said only a few should have? Put it back in everyone’s hands. Share and share alike, like my ma said.”

Next, the compulsory inane question. It keeps ‘em talking. In my most ditzy voice: “So, like, you’re like, against, uhm, property rights?”

“Hey, when’d I say that? You mean ownin’ stuff? Come on, babe, how can anyone *not* own stuff? I just think the rules that say how we figure who’s who’re all fugged up. You know who set up the rules: it wasn’t your grandpa, Yokomama,” [he’d grinned winningly at me at this point, thereby defusing any insult I could’ve possibly taken from the made-up Japanese name] “and it sho wun’t mine neither. Not on this planet. Or leas’ not in this country, anyway. Yo’ people did pretty good, mine did okay fra’ while until some scientists found sumthin’ that burned cleaner an’ cheaper n’oil, but basically, it’s been fugged up everywhere on this planet for, like, few hundred years.

Fugged right up. Foo *bangsat monyat tai*, baby,” he nodded gravely. [I had to look up the phrase on my spex when I got back to my dock. It’s Indonesian for “crazy monkey shit”, though it got a flag as ungrammatical. Guess listening to hardrubble isn’t the best way to learn the language.]

When I asked him about how selling stolen laptops and TVs helped the class struggle in North America, he laughed. “Well, when you put it that way, yo... maybe think of it like this. Everyone in NAFTA’s going crazy chasing after the American Dream, right? What the fug’s that? I mean, really, what’s the American Dream?”

Well, I’d already played the ditz card and suspected he’d known it was just a ploy, so I just waited for him to answer his own question, and failed to laugh when he did so only with great difficulty, starting and stopping himself several times before he managed to grunt out, “It’s all boo-gee, right?” I had to concentrate on parsing his phrase before I realized that this word he was saying was “bougie,” as in *bourgeois*. Apparently he really *had* read some Marx; that word hasn’t been used in American media for ages now, except maybe in Seattle . . . and, of course, at Harvard. “Yeah, so, like, you have all these people who want in on that dream. And what crime is, well, crime is *unfair*. Like, an element of unfairness in the system, ’kay? But hey, how much you wanna bet the person I’m ripping off is already living the American Dream that dozens of other people would kill for? I mean, we don’t bust into peoples’ houses for their TVs, you know. We go for quantity, and always new hardware. Tha’s the shit, girl. Shipping, warehouses, that’s where you hit ’em. They got insurance, it’s a writeoff, whatever. But the point is that yes, it *IS* unfair. *Unfair* is the only fair kind of payback, get it? It’s chickens comin’ home to roost, girl.

“An’ who’s it unfair to? People who ain’t gonna notice. People whose whole lives basically are made outta being part of an unfair system. I don’t feel sorry for them, not a bit. You can get a new vocomp from me for a few hundred bucks, or buy one at the store for a couple thousand. ‘Sup to you, I guess, but I’ll tell you what I think’s fairer: fairer depends on who you ask. And for waaay to long, we been only listening to one gang’s definition of ‘fair’. Well, we got our own gangs now.” He’d waxed quite comprehensible by the end of this rant, so he tacked a wonderful gangsta aphorism on the end in hardrubble, accompanied with a ’nesia-rap headshake: “Time’a summin starta liz’in’ d’us.”

Yes, yes, my dear cynic, my lovely delightful chunky rabble-distruster, my wonderful grouch of a reader, of *course* I asked him about political approaches. I didn’t get this job solely based on my good looks, you know, and after all, we’re approaching a period of white minority in NAFTA, and it’s something the “top gang” he’d been describing was pretty worried about even in terms of mainstream politics. But he only smiled, and asked me, “Do you really think things’re gonna change like that? Don’t hold your breath, girl. That’s an old story. Why don’t nobody never think of any new stories?”

I could see he had a point. The network was set up, and even if the admin duties changed hands, it’d still probably hold together. It was robust because all the elements in the network were set up to interact in the same way. That’s how it works out when the heads of synds get killed off, too, he pointed out to me; it had been the same with almost every major coup in the last few centuries in fact... including, with some special circumstances (like the temporary widening of the upper class), the American Revolution. Okay, so he’d chucked the idea of Marxian utopia where the goods were



suddenly seized upon by the peasants, and he'd chucked the standard opposite too, in which the upward mobility was possible and all the peasants needed to do was McD their way out of the ghettos and slums to, at least maybe, cash in on the American Dream. So I put on my best journalist smile and asked him, "Okay, what d'you think'll happen?"

And he promised to show me.

An hour later, we were in his car which was hurtling down the wintry highway at a hundred and sixty kilometers an hour, just barely into Vermont somewhere. There was snow on the ground like cruft on an old Windoze app, thick in most places but in some spots almost nonexistent. There were hundreds of trees that had survived the recent ice storms, but the forests still looked a little like the conspicuously thinning hair of a middle aged man. The car was leaving a wall of snow-dust thrown up into the air, and exhaust, that would have confounded any efforts to track us.

Freed up by the autopilot, he'd been trying to pull his metaphor together with both hands, full on. Networks, yes, architecture and programming, yes, I'd followed all of that. He'd used the car as an example of that, of how autopilot seemed to be spontaneous, but was really just a simply-constructed algorithm. "A few million lineza code, hon. That's all," he grinned. The postulate he'd been leading up to was a question: if our society was like the car, a network of hardware parts and software running on autopilot, how could we hack the autopilot? Could we change the programming in mid-ride? Or just take over manually? I pointed out to him that at one-sixty manual takeover would give most people nothing but a good chance of ending up as a splattermark and scattered meat on the tarmac.

And he nodded, and smiled, and then simply turned to the dash and addressed it (the car was named “Frankie”), muttering something that sounded like “stage two, go for it . . . now.”

And then all hell broke loose.

Frankie obediently leapt clean off the snowy highway, shunting upward and sideways to the left, and took to the air in increasingly powerful bounces. Strange things were happening underneath the floorplate, and I could feel the consequences of these alarming mechanical activities vibrating in cascading waves up into the passenger compartment. Our belting tightened against us as the car did a turn in midair, and then spun to land on its wheels, somehow smoothly. All of this I experienced with my eyes, and my inner ear — the yank of gravity on landing was crazy at that speed — but the inside of the car was silent. Not one mechanical noise entered the cabin. Over the steady electroschlocking sound of Indonesian hardrubble beats, Ayaz explained his point: “Well, even when you skip out of autopilot, and try to drive manual, you have a problem. First of all, the network isn’t just all the hardware and software you got, right?” He was surprisingly more lucid when he used techno-analogy. “The network also includes, and assumes, like, y’know, infrastructure, right?”

I blinked as hard as I could. It felt like that was about all I *could* do at the moment. Everything was spinning, and I was being revisited by the horrors of my days back in Writing School, my brain flooded with phrases like, “the world spun in its lunatic carnival blur.” We bounced rapidly, and with increasing velocity, across the snowy flats of a farmer’s field. We were headed toward something, I could tell from the map, but I didn’t know what. I finally sputtered a response: “Well, yeah. Like, you mean, the road is

part of the network too, I can see that.”

“Zackly. Cut off the roads, suddenly cars are a lot less useful. You got cars, *boom*, you need roads. Unless you got cars like I got cars,” he shot me a proud grin, and raised an eyebrow. A car like this had to be only semilegal at best, and probably downright stolen from some military outfit. I declined to ask, and anyway he’d gone on almost right away: “The trick is, you make the network flexible. If you need the car to look normal, you make it able to do that. If you need a car that can do the highway stuff, you make sure you got it in there. But then you make that network so much more powerful, that you can jump off the road. So powerful you can fly.”

I hoped deep down that his car couldn’t *actually* fly: bouncing was far more than enough for me. “Okay. So . . . you’re reprogramming our society? ’Zat what you’re telling me? You’re making the old infrastructure redund—” the car interrupted me, thudding to the ground and spinning in a jarringly smooth, sharp motion, before tearing eastward along some kind of elevated, snow-cleared dirt road that must have been a few kilos from the highway. I groaned softly, dizzily, and abandoned the sentence altogether.

“Mmmm, something like that,” he laughed. “But *not* quite. Hang tight, you’ll see in a min, girl.”

Maybe he couldn’t tell, but I was already hanging extremely tight.

A few minutes later, his car daintily settled itself in a small, snow-free spot in front of a barn, in the middle of nowhere, and gleefully announced in a bubbly robotic drawl that the destination had been reached. A cloud of exhaust and snow-dust spun up from the landing spot, but the doors flew open, leaving us little chance to regroup before climbing

out on our wobbly feet.

Not that he would have. From the way he hopped out the car with his spare tire belly jostling through the front of his coat, I guessed he was very used to the kind of ride we'd just experienced, and also that he knew this place very well. He was somehow comfortable here in a way he didn't seem to be, elsewhere. I got out, and looked over the big, trashy-looking barn. First glance? Last-century. Inert architecture. A piece of crap, brainless as a rock. An uninhabitable antique. But when I looked around closely, I noticed that the roof paneling was all made of those new, fancy, supergood solar collectors. There was a sat dish on the ground beside it, and music drifting out one of the windows. Somebody was home.

Ayaz told the car to go for a drive, and come back only when it was called. "Security," he said in a vaguely explanatory way to me as the car tore off across the field following the same trajectory it had before, as we walked up the steps to the barn entrance. We went in a smaller, insulated door that had been fitted into the old, huge barn doors of the original design. Maybe, I reflected, it had been gutted and refurbered inside? Maybe even fully wirelessed?

We walked in on a young Nipponese bleachboy, about fifteen, with a mess of scalded hair and wearing a plain tracksuit, who was sitting in a huge and ancient-looking easy-chair, bopping his head to the syncopated beat of what sounded to me like sixty-year-old Caribbean music, "reggae" I think it used to be called sometime onetime once. Obviously this was one weird kid: I don't know how I could tell, but on my first glimpse I figured he was either a LAWN hacker or some kind of econokid. He had spex on and seemed at first to be unaware of our entrance, so I followed Ayaz silently past him. The

barnhouse was sparsely decorated: a few old couches and some funky flatscreens on the walls, a few workstations, and a huge stereo were all that there was in the main room. Upstairs there was a catwalk and what looked like doors to private rooms.

When the boy mumbled something, barely audible, I turned from my inspection of the room, but he still had his spex on and was staring off into space. I guessed that he must be working on something in his spex, LAWNned to one of the workstations. Ayaz grinned and winked at me, and then interrupted the boy's reverie: "Tomo, you still on satfeed?"

The boy pushed his spex up tentatively with one finger nestled under the left lens, and looked us over for a few seconds before saying, in a perfect Californian-nihilist tone, "Uh huh. Pause," he commanded his spex, and held them in place above his thin, small nose, waiting for whatever Ayaz wanted.

"Good. Leave it up fme, kay?" Ayaz smiled, and then gestured toward me. "'s Aiko, she's here f'r an 'informational session'." The last few words he said in a formidable imitation of Tomo's Silicon-Valley-Burnout-Existentialist voice.

"Uh huh," Tomo said once more, in the same unenthused mumbling tone as before, and without turning his head he let the spex drop back down to his nose. As they dropped into place he mumbled, "Unpause."

"He's probably on the skinloop again."

"Skinloop?"

"Yeah, you know. Like, wacked-out people who wear their spex into the shower, or forget to shut 'em off before getting changed, that kinda stuff. There's search services that look for that kind of random feed. I think they can detect a feed's skin ration by color

analysis, even get racial prefs in if you want 'em. You'd think people would be more careful, but..."

I nodded, and made a mental note to check my spexfeed more often when I discarded them before heading to the bath or whatever. Nothing like doing a reverse linksearch to see whos linking to you, and find pix of you in the shower, or naked in front of a mirror brushing your hair. Ayaz cleared a space for me on one of the old couches, dumping an armful of old computer parts onto the coffee table nearby. When he gestured eagerly for me to sit on the couch, I cleared some space for myself on his grungalicious couch, ignoring his sloppy hospitality. Once I'd snagged myself a spot on the far end of the couch, I plonked myself down into it. He smirked, and then cleared some more space, so that he could fit into the spot he had intended for me.

"This whole place is cool 'sfar as the LAWN goes," he smiled, as if most Local Area Networks weren't Wireless nowadays. "But I find the couch is most useful. I wanna show you sumthin' on the satfeed, so you need your spex," he said, and reached up his own pair, which sat on the top of his head; he'd worn them on the way up, using them as a UI accessory with the car. As he slid them down, I pulled mine out of my coat pocket where I had stored them, hoping to protect them from the violence of the car ride down. But before I put them on, I took another look around the room: entrances, exits, heavy objects. Just in case. Like you knew I would, right? *Right.*

When I slid the spex on, there was already a blinking red fleck in the upper left hand corner of the visual field; a connection had been requested. I reached my hand out in front of me, selected it by spatials, and pipped it. Next thing I knew, several windows opened up in my view, against a brickwall background. I dested the brickwall and set the

background to transparent in one of the menus, wondering whether or not Ayaz could see on the shared connection whether I had changed the setting, and the room flashed into view, behind the windows and blinking file links.

Ayaz said, "Hey, guess what? Hunh." A translucent green pointer swerved into my vision, and came to rest on a tiny icon in the far corner of my right lens. "Yeah, I was right, it's skinloop again. How does that kid get anything done?" He cleared his throat and I turned to see his hand up in the air, moving sideways as he moved the slider across the lens-top, which we seemed to be sharing. He brought the green pointer to a stylized little speaker icon, and activated it with the slightest pip of the finger. The Marley went silent and he called out, in a voice not altogether loud, but which was somehow amped into the household speaker system, "Tomo, show's over. Go out and meet some real chicks, will ya?"

Over the network, and in the spex earpieces (but not over the barnhouse's loudspeakers), Tomo's characteristic, "Uh huh," echoed, and I had to laugh.

"Well, it's cheaper, even if it ain't easier, pal," Ayaz snarked through the stereo once more. In the lenstop, the green pointer closed off a feed entitled *Live Feed Candid Spexsearch*. This provoked a mumble and some thumping in the general area where Tomo had been, but I didn't bother to turn and look in that direction, because, at that moment, a window had opened into the lenstop. In it, I could see streaming video of the same man from three different angles: he was a middle-aged, balding fellow in a suit. He was walking down the street in a city, I couldn't tell which city but it looked like a big one, and he seemed intent on some sort of business.

"See the big ol' white guy?" he paused, and moved the green pointer onto the

man's face, tracking him on the lenstop until I said yes. "Leo. He's got a finger in just about every pie on the East Coast: mafia, big business, got a brother who's a senator, some dope charities. I mean, dope, like, fine. Not like, y'know, dope." The man was walking into a big business building, and he got into an elevator. Ayaz continued, putting on a bit of a highfaultin' tone: "I think he's out to change the world because he's seen enough of it that his conscience, whatever is left of it, is really really fucking him up and down and sideways, like, over the shit he's done. Which is good. We need more people like him. Good connections."

The balding man – Leo – soon reached his floor while Ayaz rattled off a string of other connections, most of which would probably either sue or kill if their names appeared here, and so they won't. But I was still stuck on the cringe that had swept over me a few minutes before. "Out to change the world? Uh, like, I thought that was out of style. Last-century and all"

"It's back in, hon," Ayaz said with something a little less like conviction than good-humored optimism. "Now, see the secretary there?" Leo had walked up to a secretarial desk, where a tall, heavy, older African-American woman sat, typing at a computer. She looked up and greeted him politely, and Ayaz brought the sound up.

They spoke for a minute in perfect business etiquette of the kind that has been the same for ages and ages: Mr. Grazini – that was Leo's surname, at least for the duration of this visit – had an appointment with someone or other in this office. I wouldn't have paid much attention to the secretary except that Ayaz had brought her to my attention. She handled the reception without anything notable to suggest why he had done so, though.

Grazini sat in the chair and waited, while Ayaz chuckled expectantly. "He's



meeting the New York suit for Nixnet . . . 'ideas acquisitions'. Guess who penciled him in?"

"You mean she's one of your syndies too?" This was just too much for me. Econohack (that's the term I made up for their m.o., it just smacks of, well, *something*, doesn't it?), well, econohack was one thing, but grandma econohacking? *Whaaat?*

"Liz?" he said the name softly, tentatively as if the answer required a great deal of care in order to be properly delivered. "Mmmm. 'Synd' beats 'gang', s' far as titles go, but it still ain't quite right. We're not quite so organized as all of that. More like she's wired to the network. See, all that old revolution stuff was all, well, basically industrial: simply organized groups of people acting in simple ways. They'd pull a few people out of their cars, and put themselves in their place, and then just go on driving on the same roads. That's not change, that's just shuffling the – "

Outside of the spex and the realm of the lens-top, a ringing sound interrupted him. I realized after a moment that it was the doorbell. Tomo got the door, talked to someone who was not visible at the entrance, and then took a package and shut the door.

"Heads up, Tomo. Remember to scan it this time."

"Uh huh." He set the box onto a small plate beside a fixed monitor on a nearby table. After a few moments, he announced, "S'clean, no wiring or jits." He tore open the wrapping, and pulled out a handful of the contents, chucking it at Ayaz, and then returned to digging in the box. The embarrassed gangsta fished at one of the glittery things that had landed on his round gut but slid down into his lap, and offered it to me, and as a good guest I accepted.

Nutribars. "Oh, cool, look: Tang," Tomo mumbled momentarily but with

minimally voiced enthusiasm, digging out a couple boxes of the drink mix and showing them off like a delighted-but-still-existentially-plagued prizewinner, his face half-frowning. Then he made a purely snide face and made off with them, presumably to whip up a pitcher of the stuff.

“Your, uh, political movement is sponsored by Tang? And whomever makes these nutribars?”

“Microsoft?” he asked, seriously, and only when he refused to join in laughing did I realize he was serious. He continued: “Oh, no, no way. We’re not about corporate sponsorship. I’m not no basketball star, Koko. This is more like, uh, shrinkage. A tax writeoff. A box that went, uh, ‘missing’, heh, yeah, ‘missing’ in the shipment. You’d be amazed how little of the GDP gets used up on necessities. Check it, there’s hundreds of people living off this kind of lost stuff, and nobody seems to care all that much.” Yes, he had used the word GDP. I was beginning to wonder if he’d somehow bribed or threatened his way to Harvard business school or something. As he spoke, I looked the packaging over, and finally found a logo between all the warnings that these bars were experimental, and that they were *“not intended to replace in excess of 70% of a traditional organic diet.”* In fact, he was correct, I discovered on finding the distinctive, archaic little multicolor icon in the wrapping: Dankenbørretsån experimental-1, a company I just so happened to know about from my encounter with Jan Schauer, the MS Peripheral Acquisitions Liaison Officer. (Come on, you know you wanna read it.)

“This is what you call hacking the infrastructure?” I asked, peeling off the wrapper. It smelled faintly like plastic. “Shrinkage product movement? Free nutribars and Tang?”

“Naw, only part of it. This is ‘crime,’ right? The car adjusting to the price of oil by supplementing its power supply with high-delivery fuel cells, maybe. But someone has to build the cells, someone has to distill the alcohol for the cell to burn off, or pump the water if we find a way to make ‘em run off that, or whatever. Someone’s got to clean the roads. Someone’s gotta make us think about driving different, someone’s gotta make music to listen to on the drive, someone’s gotta figure out how to make paint that grows back when the car takes a scrape. You gettin’ da biiig picture?” he asked, and then flipped his spex back on. I declined to do so for a moment, looking over the bar as I munched on it.

“Uh, I think so. You mean anarchy? Everyone doing what he or she pleases? Revolution by collapse? Instead of fight the power, just fug the power?”

“Nope. You’re still thinking 1950, 1850, maybe Jerusalem at da year zero, even. Moscow, Berlin, Rome, British Coal Board under Maghag Thatchy. Beijing, if you wanna talk coal. Think about networks, I mean the old telecom webworks from the nineteen hundreds. Even when they was mostly decentralized, they were still imperfect; there were still nexuses, hubs, and conduits, shit like that. Back then, most people had only one main in-out telecom portal into their homes, the phone-line, and computers had to piggyback onto those. Until, of course, it was phones – and later, everything else – piggybacking onto the computers.”

So. Ayaz *did* know some big words. Computer words, no less.

This was all true, of course. But as you must know, faithful browsereader, I knew this already. My older friends talked about those days with a kind of awe that I imagine the pioneers exuded when talking about the old days before the automobile replaced the

horse-drawn buggy. So I interrupted him with one of my yeah-buts, which in this case went along the lines of, “Yeah, but so what?”

“So,” he said, “the whole thing still was stuck, networkwise, in a real 1950 headspace. Before it went totally distributed, before the hubs proliferated and there were suddenly LAWNs overlapping everywhere, you could still trace shit, yo. You could still control shit, or try. They used to talk about information with metaphors about things traveling along highways, y’know! Now, that’s a totally grandpa way of thinking, as

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outta of date as Communism, really. Hey, check this,” he switched tangents, and a green pointer moved across the lens-top. Liz, the secretary, was talking to Leo. The spex produced automatic subtitling, as there wasn’t a sound feed.

As they chatted about how the meeting went, and set up another appointment, Ayaz told me about them: “These two are both wired to the same network. Liz knows a

friend of Leo's employer, and they got linked up just a week ago."

When I asked about the meeting, Ayaz said with a grin in his voice that it was a great scheme to create an encryption system based on human DNA or something. That it was totally bogus, a kind of ticking R&D time-bomb as far as the investment was concerned, and that it would lose the corporation that invested in it a *lot* of money. And when I asked if this was a good thing, Ayaz just said, "Well, there's losing money, and then there's *losing money*. We figure that they'll be working on something else anyway, and that the crypto stuff is only a front."

"For what?" I asked.

"I dunno. Yo, who can keep track of everything?"

"Quite an operation you got going here," I smirked. Uncharacteristically, this had been an attempt at my old standby, deadpan; and a surprisingly failed one, at that. Maybe it was the Tomo-vibe, or something, but Ayaz took it as a serious comment, and pressed on.

"Just think about it," he urged me. "I'm linked with Liz, and know Leo through her, but only a little. No need to know. I'm doing my own thing, anyway. If we all do our own thing, maybe sumthin' good'll happen. All I know is, we can't *fix* the system. No way." His eyes began to gleam, and I could see what just *had* to be his first-year history course, rearing its detailed head: "Look what happened when the French tried to do it: they was guillotines everywhere. Shunk! Or the Russians; life mighta been shit under Stalin, and sure it was, but... but it's gotten a hell of a lot worse since the USSR fell apart. At least there *were* breadlines before. Now, *everything* is run by heroin mafias and, well people like me, but way more violent. Same as friggin national army in China, hon.

When you get on up an' try change things too sudden, too quick, all at once, and from some single plan, it's full of holes you never saw, and all of these motherfuckers come jumpin' out the woodwork, wu-dang-shan-type assholes you never imagined were there, and ... well, *crrrrrrrrrash!*" He demonstrated the idea with his hands, angling his arms inwards in front of himself to make a pyramid, and then slamming his arms down on the last word. He still has his spex on, though I could see he had them on transparent lens-top and was looking at me, and could tell I was looking at him.

I had to reflect for a few moments, before my next question, which was, "Old syndie falls to new syndie?"

In the lens-feed, Liz was facing her monitor again, typing on an old-style keyboard. Leo was walking out of the office, back into the streets of whatever city this was, back into the roiling untraceable profusion. The cameras didn't follow him; instead, the feed went silent.

"New Syndie, old syndie: same 'zact thing. Crime — yo, whatever that means, like maybe the one thing left that leaves you facing the question of right and wrong — well, crime is . . . is an important part of a balanced breakfast," he grins. "*Balanced*. It's one piece of the puzzle. But you don't want your criminals taking over, 'cuz all you get then is Russia. Life turns into hell for everyone, including the damn criminals. After all, they don't wanna actually *run* the country, ya know," he paused.

I jumped in, finishing his thought, "*But*, you also don't want to leave things like they are, because that's only the old version of the grandkids of waybackwhen criminals who took over one time once with big ships and guns, right?" It was starting to make sense, to fall into place.

“Right, ‘zackly. So whaddaya do? F’now, we gotta get some *transition* going. Get some moving going, start a fuggin’ beat. We can’t dropkick the system all at once, an’ who wants to? The system makes some neat, useful shit. Check these spex I got, they do everything. Here’s one basic crapola function out of thousands: they run GPS the local LAWN, or by relay off the nearest dish, if there’s no localband open. You know what that means?” Of course I knew, but I let him say it, just the same. “That means you *can’t* get lost wearin’ these things! Yo, I got fine wheels, too. I like Industrial Production, yo. But the places where power collects, well, that’s gotta be poked, let the power drain out, spread it around some.”

The words, *No ideas but in things* trembled through my mind: what if that American poet had been born a hundred years later? *No democracy but in things?* I asked myself. “You’re talking about . . . about, well, I guess distributed democracy, right? Decentralizing the White House, decentralizing the government into everyone?”

“White House? That’s *so* last-century! The world cashed out on that place back in the seventies, I figger. Like, after Nixon. Who they got in there now, huh? Answer’s the same’s it’s been since the start: some old white muthafugga. The White House ain’t meant shit for decades; just, nobody’s figured it out yet. But everything takes longer when they got you mushroomed.”

Mushroomed. Kept in the dark and fed on shit. That was an old saying. His influences were showing, suddenly. I could hear Standowitz, and Lummis, and Chomsky, I mapped them backwards into what he’d said. Technotopian visions based on stuff these guys had said and written a couple of generations back, like a hardrubble remix or something. He’d strapped these geezers into his car, and took them for a ride,

figuratively, and this is what you got on the other side of a farmer's field worth of bouncing. It was exciting. It was . . . real. But . . .

As I was, you know, mulling and stuff, Ayaz smiled at me, and said, "So what do you think?"

Well, patient browsereaders, my mother always told me I was a dreamer. My girlfriends always said I was jumping from one crazy scheme to another... and they said that when I started this column, too. But I'm not stupid. So it shouldn't be surprising that this is my last *encounter* — but not because Ayaz was right. Look, I think his theory is crocked. Cacked. About as out of it as his haircut (which, by the way, was pretty out of it. Ayaz . . . if you're reading this, hon, *see a professional*).

Take the way he thinks of the whole world as nothing but a bunch of networks networked together. Hey, it's hip-sounding, it's cool, it's radical! Wow, yeah! The new revolution of the social sciences, waiting to happen, riiiiight? Well, those of you who have read my column in the past know very well that I have little sympathy for thaory that puts all the shit of the world on the shoulders of a corporation, or a conspiracy. Remember Bangkok on Black Thursday? Remember what happened in Inner Vancouver last year? Some of that shit was done by corporate slime, but lots of it was just people. Just Jenny from down the street. Just Kabir in the house next door. And hey, remember the XuroCorp People's Hospital of Beijing during the airstrikes? Or the Washington Exposures? Sometimes corps do things that actually are *good* for people, even if it's just incidental, or for photo-ops. The good, the bad . . . it's all irrelevant in this frame of reference. Networks don't care about good and bad, and you can't make them do it either.

Networks, after all, are only connections between things. They're made up of



large numbers of subnetworks, all competing. Ayaz's synd, in fact, would be one subnetwork in the larger network he's trying to hack. And anyway, all of those big confusing jamhead networks function the way they do, because of all the people who are part of each network. Don't believe the hype. Networks don't run off natural; law, any more than you do. Do you? Maybe it wasn't you who made the decision to eat that burger. Maybe it was natural law that made you do it. Suuuuure.

Do the networks and subs and subsubs limit our actions, like, I mean, the individual who chooses between one subnetwork and another? Now, that I could *maybe* buy. If some information is being held back, then your freedom to act on it is being, you know, jammed, right? Think back to when your parents were kids. You could go buy makeup, or cheap clothes, or a cheap knockoff clone PC, and nobody would every say boo. You wouldn't even get reminded of all the ecological and antihumanitarian crimes being committed in the making of that thing you were buying. Now, we're much more advanced. You can run a PurchaseAlert on your spex and see the little Hindu kids make your shoes, see the pregnant Thai woman horking her guts out from working without even a mask in a chip factory so you could have a nice cheap PC. And so on. But how many of you run them? Do you have the choice?

*Of course* you have the choice, silly rabbit.

That's the problem: networks, in the end, break down into pieces small enough to have a conscious mind, a decision-making capability; a conscience, in other words. Responsibility. Do networks stop us from being people? From having free will? Nah. That means you're the network, kiddo. You. Me, your mom, your dog, everyone around you is a piece of that network. If you're still buying shoes made by little brown kids for

thirty cents a day, well, then nothing's gonna change, right? No amount of econohacking will ever take that responsibility away, will it? No, it won't.

That don't make it easy, I know. Look, tons of people sitting up in libraries crammed with books have spent the last couple of hundred years trying to figure out why most of the network just goes on and on and on like business as usual, when it's getting fugged in a million different holes and ought to know it. They've written billions of words about it, and nobody knows any more about it than when they started. They have taught generation after generation of kids the words, the handmotions, but nobody seems to know why the networks just survive everything. But when you think about it, all they're doing is writing, right? Scribble scrabble scribble. So what? Pens aren't mighty at all. You can only write with words, and if the words don't exist, well...

Which makes me think about these *Encounters*. I'm not sure what I set out to do anymore, but I know that whatever I wanna get done, well, I don't think I'll be able to do it in these articles. Yeah, big shock, I know, but I'm shooting from the sacro-illiac here, alright? Remember Koppel and Weston and Xiang-hua? I guess I feel like they must've. Wham, suddenly one day you realize maybe what you're doing really *isn't* making things better, waking people up, ringing any bells.

I guess it just seems to me that I'm doing the same as those people who aren't doing nothing. Which is, you know, okay for a while. It's been fun. I just think that . . . well. I think that Ayaz is way out on some crazy American-Cowboy crusade, and I think he's gonna crash, hard. He reminds me of a lot of people I've clanged into in the last few years, drifting across North America and the Pacific Rim, though. To be honest, more and more of them keep popping up all over the place. It used to be I would have to actually go

looking for them in, you know, revolutionary-ain't-we-hip-cuz-baby-we-soooo-radical-type bars and underground lectures and stuff. But now you see them everywhere, in all those little don't-matter types of places, places like cafés and pubs and shopping malls.

Well, I've spent months and months just sitting and dictating these articles. I think we've gotten us a pretty good version of the big picture. So what do we do with that? See, when I started out, I am pretty sure (though it's not in my memory banks anymore) that I had a bigger purpose than, you know, just painting the big picture. But it doesn't work that way. The more I wrote, the more you stayed home and read me; the more your butts gott flabbier and the more you were able to get content with staying home, reading about all these places and people and things. That is, the more I wrote, the more comfortable most of you got. Isn't that so?

Say it ain't so.

And quit looking at the screen like that. It's time you woke up, kids. Not that, when you wake up, anything will be any clearer. It won't. It'll be a big bombdamned mess, a bigger mess than you ever imagined. New York Blitzkrieg Ballet On Ice. Because you won't be sure how much of what you imagined was there because of the network, y'know? You won't know where the network stops and you begin.

You might feel lost without the smart and wonderful Aiko to guide you. You know what I say to that? Fug it! I wasn't guiding you, I was teaching you a lesson, boyz and gurlz. *This is the way we check out the world, check out the world, check out the world. This is the way we check out the world, so get up off your aaaaaa-ass.*

I know what you're all wondering. What am I gonna do now? That "I" referring to me, Aiko. Well, that depends. I mean, if enough interesting things start happening, I

might start writing again. Not encounters, maybe, but something. Reporting. Who knows. I'm *not* joining up with Ayaz, that's for sure . . . but not because I think he shouldn't do what he's doing. He's just making his contribution to the network, and somethin's gonna respond to that, and something else to that. Who knows, maybe he might have some effect that helps things. Maybe.

But anyway, the question, the really real question, isn't what *I'm* going to be doing. It's what *you're* going to be doing. Yes, you, the person reading this. After all, I wouldn't want to think I'd done all of those Encounters up just for entertainment value. I would hope I didn't almost get my ass shot to pieces in the streets of Taipei for that. I would hope my three weeks in a Mexican detention camp was for more than just to put a smile on your face. All that stuff I've done, I did it so that I could *look* at the world. Maybe give you a peek of what I saw. And you? What about you?

*Meanwhile, back at the ranch...* Right? Nothing, right? I mean, most of you.

Don't take that as ingratitude. It's not. I should say it now, loud and clear, since by my wordcounter I can see I'm way past your attention spans and wanna end my last *encounter* with something nice: *Arigato* to you all, my readers and friends. I hope you all look, and find something too. But let me warn you. Ayaz might have been way off on some things, but he did get one thing right. Looking at the world with two eyes open, just looking, *let alone changing it*, is a struggle, a kind of endless *jihad* if you wanna use the word.

Nobody can tell you the truth. When you're convinced you know the truth, facts come up and bite you one the waybehind and you're back at Confusion Central. Synd or no synd, guns or no guns, hiding or advertising yourself, and whether or not you write

anything up, the most important thing to start with, and to keep coming back to, is the looking. Looking at all is the hardest thing, because it means maybe risking everything. After that, though, everything else is *way* easier.

So, like, hop to it, you silly rabbit.

XXX 000 XXX

Aiko

# **bodhisattva**

*“The challenge for beings in the future will be in accepting what their ancestors have done, and for that acceptance to occur, a measure of forgiveness will also be necessary.”*

*– Joanna Macy, Buddhist environmental activist*

The Dharma King destroys all illusion when he comes among us into the world, and yet it is by this that he accords with the true desires of all who live. His law is preached in many ways, in many tongues. The One Who Comes Thus deserves all of our reverence, our ears for listening; this is the truth and the wisdom which all must hear, for that one is wise and profound, deep like the fathomless ocean and utterly great like the craggy mountain face. He does not hurry, for silence is his peace, and he sits in it endlessly. He drops upon us like the rain, he comes into us like breath, he informs us in our sleep and in our silence.

May we always be more like him, in this world that has grown quiet again. May we not record history, because history happens somewhere else, far away from us. Nothing here needs to be recorded that is not written by the Earth into itself: a perfect record of the damaged atmosphere that will never heal is kept in the mountaintop ices, and the seasons which have been twisted out of themselves and tumble crazily between awful extremes. The layers of ash from an eruption are blown by hot winds, but they eventually settle to mark time as one more layer in the skin of the planet. In the depths of the sickened oceans, the magma still flows out slowly, a slow endless breach that counts out time and writes it in the weak, faint magnetism of the sea-bed. These are all that are

written, and even they, even the mountains to which the ices cling and the turn of seasons and the frail hood of atmosphere and even the very magma and core of this world, will be erased one day. It is all meant to flow away, to cease someday, just as the beautiful, life-filled world of the older times—a world I have seen only in old pictures and videos and stories—could not last forever. And in the face of that, of the monstrous destruction and the finity of it, the only thing that makes sense anymore is compassion.

When I wake every morning, I remind myself of this, of compassion. It is the centre of my life, and of all our lives now. I remind myself of that by saying my vow again. After all, vows are not made once, but rather over and over in each thought and action—if one achieves mindfulness. So I say my *bodhisattva* vow as I said it ten years ago, as a young woman in the courtyard of the *sangha*, looking out to the sea and then looking in towards the desert, with all of the other monks and nuns saying it with me:

*As long as time and space endure,*

*And as long as living beings exist,*

*And as long as the poison fire burns,*

*Until the end of all things may I remain too,*

*To drown misery in compassion and kindnesses.*

When this is the world that one lives in, history matters so little. The old ones—who thought about the world in terms of a history of projected events, necessary developments, of ways to expand and extend their species—are all gone, something that they often said was expected and necessary, predetermined in the nature of humanity. Maybe it's true, maybe humanity could not work though all of its blindnesses and mistakes and problems on just one planet. Maybe the Earth *was* only the cradle of



humanity, and they had to leave eventually, once they had grown too big for it.

But it doesn't seem that way to me. To me, it seems as if they ruined it, took as much as they could and thought nothing of the other creatures around them, and then when they'd ruined it badly enough to need to leave, they managed to find a way to get away. Just barely. And they did—they went in ships that move faster than the mind can comprehend. The files I have read say that they went in ships faster than light, that someone discovered a way of making things move that quickly. I can't imagine that, though: one would need to be immensely powerful to achieve such a feat, and from what I see every day, I don't think these people *were* that powerful. They were weak, foolish, and unable to think clearly—and they were broken and driven out by their own suffering. Suffering that they created themselves.

Old Selaksara said to me once that I have a very deep heart, because I weep so easily. I told him that I weep because I love, and because I love I sometimes can feel all of the suffering of the world, every tiny animal under the awful sunlight, and the ghosts of people who loved this world and tried to save it, and the ghosts of those who realized too late that they had destroyed it. And I imagine the pain and the suffering of all those children, those few remaining descendants yet to be born into this world we've been left. There is such risk, in children: such danger. We so often fail them, trying to use them to fill our own emptinesses. It is difficult to be mindful. And with children, we so often fail ourselves. We let our love for them swallow us; we become lost in love for their birthfathers, and for them, we forget to see them as our latter peers. We make them into children in our minds, and then make them alone the object of our compassions. But they do not fill our emptinesses, and we cannot fill the emptiness that they will someday feel.

That emptiness, that suffering, is a symptom of the universe itself. Mothering, fathering, and being mothered and fathered, these alone will not dispel the pain. Only mindfulness and compassion can aid us. But at the same time, those emptinesses are our hope, because we can see them clearly and speak to them silently and meditate until they are clear and pure in our minds.

When I go walking outside, sometimes the pain is too much for me. I find a small animal, a kind of insect that crawls on the sand, and I pick it up, and I can feel how difficult life is for the little thing. Most of what is left in nature are little things, tiny animals like this insect, this precious and alive and sacred little creature, so I hold it in my hand, in my gloved hand. There were times once when the Buddha urged us to be kind to snakes so that they could be likewise kind to us; it seems that our massive unkindness to the world has made almost every animal unkind back to us, and to one another as well. It must be possible, but it is so much harder, we have made it that much more difficult for these creatures. We have made the world such a hard place for compassion to take root.

That is why it is difficult to imagine those old stories of the lives of the Buddha having happened in this same world. A hare who would give his life for stranger, a traveller on the roadside; a kusa grass spirit who would save his friend the tree. How could these sudden flashes of kindness penetrate the poisons, the hardness of life in this world? Here on the coast, almost no plants grow on the shore and the inland is dry and barren, so most animals are carnivores, with the local ecology based on the bacteria and the small fish that sometimes survive for a while in the shallow waters of the coast. So even the smallest insect is armed with ways of attacking and killing, and its pincer or bite

could harm or even kill a human being.

Still, I always hold the little thing up in my gloved hand to look at it, to feel its life and realize it is the same life I have in myself . . . that we are connected somehow, deeply and unexplainably. I hold them gently in my shadow, because the sun is painful for everything in the world, now. Where the smallest animals somehow mutated to adapt to the dangers of sunlight—those that did not become nocturnal or die out—we few humans who did not flee had to alter ourselves artificially. It was a difficult decision, I am told; I was not born yet when the debate occurred, but of course we all know the story of how Aja Ayaë finally convinced us to be willing to give up our biological humanity in order to guard the world from humanity's legacy. Of how the computers which were left to us were finally used to access that information—of how to change the shading of our skins, make use of some of the poisons left behind in the world. The computers were the storytellers who told us no longer just of news from the other *sanghas*: instead, they told us how to change ourselves entirely, to become the first new species born by will from the blistering scars of the world left to us.

I set the little creature down on the ground, and it wriggles a little. They always move away slowly, so very slowly. As if to say that there is time enough left for them, for all of us; that if an end is inevitable, so is the present. And I feel as if I myself am crawling away into the sand, like them, silent and true. I am a creature of this new, harsh world, a new animal of this old desert coast.

Once every week it is my turn to go down into the earth and observe the tanks where the poison fires are kept. Even in my condition, I go. There has never been a true leak,

because we have always found the weaknesses in time and repaired them. We are guardians, and this is part of the work we have stayed here for, to protect what few creatures still live here from what humanity has left behind. Compassion is merely the desire to decrease another being's suffering as much as possible. So I go down into the earth, miles down to the deep tanks, once a week, no matter what. This is my practice, the core of my life.

The elevator is slow and quiet: if I didn't know it, I wouldn't think that the elevator was moving at all. The things that people made before they left, sometimes one has to be completely mindful to be aware of how complicated some of it is, what an achievement. After all, an elevator that moves without tugging the stomach is an amazing feat, a beautiful marvel of technology. There is a kind of inspired craziness that makes it all the more beautiful; I am fascinated with our ancestral species, so long gone, and by the wonderful, bizarre things they left behind. The world is full of simple things, strange things like this elevator, I think as the little room plunges down into the ground. And then I relax, and close my eyes, and enjoy the quiet, motionless descent.

When the elevator stops, I only know it because the door opens with a soft whishing sound. I step out into the quiet hallway and the lights switch on swiftly and in succession, like a sudden surge to waking or ripples on the surface of still water: this is the bunker, the place of guardianship. It is my turn again, and I didn't let Jochi talk me out of my duties. All my life has been devoted to facing the truth, and it is important that I continue now, of all times. If there is need for repair, I will leave, but not before. There has not been a problem since I was a young girl, after all, and I don't honestly expect need of more repair for a very long time, perhaps a few lifetimes after my own death.

The hallways are long, and smooth, and white. It's always strange to be down here, far beneath the surface of the planet; the way they built these hallways, it's as if they were doing their best to show that what they were doing was unnatural or, that they thought so. Of course, its a mistake to think so . . . the fact is that it is as natural as a gull bird building a nest in a cave at the beach, or a worm its tunnels in the soil. The only difference is that we have the capacity to think about balance, even if we didn't for so very long. Even our leaving this world when we collapsed so much of it is not so unnatural, but merely what roaming predators do when they ravage one area and have to move on. The strongest—the most wealthy—found a way offworld, and took some of the poor with them. The rest died, of course. There was so little we could do to help them, they were so many and so damaged already.

The difference, I suppose—between us and other predatory animals, I mean—is that we have the capacity to cultivate reflective compassion, rather than simply have it burst into being within us as inspiration. In all times and circumstances, we learn from reading the Buddha stories, we can open our hearts to the explosive light of compassion and kindness—but in addition, the human heart, at least, can study the teachings, feel them, think upon them for years, and seek enlightenment. As I walk down the hallways, I look upward. Beyond the white-lit ceiling, somewhere far beyond the edges of our solar system, there are thousands upon thousands of people hurtling toward other worlds, or orbiting them. By now, those who set out for the nearest ones should be finished the final stages of self-modification and integrating into the strange worlds they've found. Someday the images they have already sent will reach us, and we will wonder at the things they've found: strange-colored sunsets, weird plants and animals and endlessly

different types of sentience, I hope. And I hope that they meet them with more compassion than the beings they grew up with on their cradle-planet.

It has been a long time since I have felt the strange nudges of fear and anger in my heart, and I observe them, moving myself aside from these emotions softly and smoothing them with compassion and sorrow. If you close your eyes, the only thing that can be felt is a flooding sorrow, from all the worlds of suffering beings throughout all space and all time's reaches. Hatred has no place, and anger is only a symptom of the suffering we share in. I stop myself in the hallway, and I try to feel, to really *feel*, this, rather than just *think* it. I try to imagine all the planetsful of beings everywhere, suffering and pained, and I imagine my compassion spreading out to all of them; I imagine the child I will someday give birth to, and flood it with compassion—not a mother's love, but a fellow human's boundless, soothing compassion. I cannot shield it from anger, but even now I can begin to teach it how to look at the world and live in the world, how to learn from the mistakes that our ancestors made.

When my heart is still and calm, I begin to walk again.

The main storage unit is actually naturally-based: the reinforced tank was carved from a gigantic piece of impermeable rock, a chunk of an old batholith from far up north. It is so very strange; they took the batholith from somewhere far away North rather than building the storage station, our temple, there . . . because long ago the world was partitioned off into countries, and the one that used to exist here thought that it would last a long time, long enough to guard these wastes until their awful poison fire died out. It was apparently very powerful in those days, that state. Separate nations, some divided from others along

the lines of the color of skin or the name of tribe, and some divided from others only by mere historical accident, or connivance, or cruelty. I have sometimes tried to imagine what it was like to live like that, with so many mental divisions in the world. I wonder if people really believed in all of those things, or if it was just all on paper and written as ephemeral lines on their computer screens; was it all just a game that people played together, a whole world of people playing at a game that they all secretly knew was nonsense, all of the time? If it is true, they must have been afraid to admit what they secretly knew: they fought such awful wars, and they exterminated whole groups of people over these divisions, these slowly shifting lines drawn onto the world and the limits that the lines placed on their compassion. It is strange how something could be so clearly wrong, and maybe every heart in the world could sense it, but nothing was done about it until after they left the world completely.

The tank is encased in a clever apparatus, a unit that absorbs the shocks when the plates go walking and mountains stir from their sleep, and the first thing I always check is the integrity of the shock-cushioning system. The technology involved is so complicated that I still don't completely understand how it works, though I have been studying it for a few years now, through the old files in our archives, and from my mother's notes. When I was a child, my mother had to learn about this cushioning system, and every time I look at the monitor on the casing of the tank, I think of her. I was never allowed down here when she was working on the problem that they had to fix.

I understand, in very rough terms, what was wrong, but what I see most clearly is an image of her which feels like a memory, although it is only my imagined sight of her in this room. Sometimes, when my mind insists on wandering from the discipline of my

mediations, it seeks some sign of her here almost as vigilantly as I watch for problems. I can see the way she would have stood at the readout, with that patient look on her face, and maybe a little bit of worry. There's as much of her in this room, looking at this readout, as there is of me. There's nothing wrong with the casing apparatus as far as I can tell, so I move on to the seal on the batholith segment. The rock may be impermeable, but it is not impenetrable, and the seal on the cap is not made to last forever. A long time, but not forever. I inspect the cap carefully, lovingly. It sometimes takes effort to remember that, just because it is inert material, a kind of metal that doesn't occur in nature except where humans bring it into being doesn't mean it doesn't deserve thankfulness. As much as I and all of my family at the *sangha* are guardians, it too is a guardian.

Inspecting the cap is not so much about finding cracks: any leak that occurred would be miniscule, detectable to the instruments long before it would be detectable to me. Being in this place means something, though. When you are in a room with the most toxic materials in the world, materials that make the wastes of the last five centuries seem paltry and short-lived, you cannot help but become mindful of so many things. A wall of stone, just a simple small wall of stone, is all that keeps it from harming me, and even so, it eats away at that wall, slowly and patiently. It reminds me of attachments, that way: it makes me think of how I feel about my mother, of the afternoons I spent with old Selaksara, and the nights I crept away with Da-yi. And of the frightening, dangerous love I feel when I touch my hand to my belly. Love cannot do anything in the face of poison fire. Only awakening can change us, in order to survive the emptiness of it. And so love, and fear, and all other emotions, must serve my mindfulness.



I am not expecting problems with this tank. Its very unlikely that more than one tank has a problem at exactly the same time, and one of the others, deep under the monastery, on the eastern coast of this continent at the Eastern Isle *Sangha* (the one founded by Aja Ayaë) is having trouble. Still, its always possible: probability is never more than just a guessing tool. And more important, being here with this tank, deep alone in the dark earth, is part of my practice. It cultivates my feeling for all things. I settle down to the ground, into quiet, to meditate as I do in this room everyday. I feel strange hungers arise into my mind, and discomforts which I have never felt before. My stomach rebels against whatever I may have eaten, and my back troubles me. I acknowledge these complaints of my body, and then let them drift off into the darkness within me.

I visualize the terrible poison fire behind the tank apparatus and the stone casing, and I try to feel something toward it other than utter horror. It is so toxic that almost any interaction with it causes it to become unstable, to become more toxic until is can settle and calm back into its primary state. It burns away the sense from DNA at the slightest exposure, and it eats away at any material it gets in touch with. Even dense and impermeable material is affected in this way, although only very slowly tearing the material apart atomically and thickening its poison soup. The stone of the holding tank was shaped to be thick enough to contain it for millions of years, long enough to guarantee, people thought, the discovery of some alternative treatment for the stuff.

But none came. I'm sure they will think of one, somewhere, eventually. But it wasn't poison fire that drove humanity from earth. The poison fire was, if anything, an afterthought that barely nagged them on the way out, a minor mistake to be added to a list of many others: crashed ecologies, mass extinctions, punctured skies, poisoned oceans,

radiation-vibrant plagues of life in dangerous, life-mad poisons zones, and the scarring of unthinkable diseases and wars.

There is an ancient poem that Da-yi used to sing to me at night, about love. The poem said that love is like being at the bottom of a very deep well, all alone and full of secrets but unable to tell them to anyone. When I brought him here, he told me later that the words to that poem would not leave his mind, as we meditated here in the quiet. Now I settle into the stillness, the lights switch down low and then off, and the hum disappears. Love *is* like being trapped at the bottom of a well, but so is all of life. When your eyes adjust to the dark, and your ears to the silence, however, the well itself becomes a blessing. And you spin off through the silent dark, toward release.

And it is so quiet, down in the womb of the earth, for so very long; like the place that the scriptures describe for the souls still bound to attachments, to *samsara*.

The sun is whispering itself down toward the water a little, when I come to the surface again. The sounds of cave-birds are audible, but there are none to be seen—very few animals come out during the day at all, for fear of the burning sun. Even in my skin, my thick black skin, I feel the sunlight sandpapering itself against me, the burn so incredibly slight but so persistent. People weren't always black like we are, pitch black. People used to be of many different colors, I've seen images of them all from long before the collapse and the exodus. The shapes of their eyes, noses, lips all different and so endlessly beautiful in their variety. Nature was harsh in humanity's childhood—it was always harsh—but it was at least comfortable enough that such small, simple, pretty differences were possible. Now, there are very specific necessities that are inescapable: without

blackened skin, we are burned too easily. Without the proper folds around our eyes, we would lose sight too easily, for our eyes would burn blind. Our lips and our mouths are small, and we are small as well—people used to be much larger, and to walk among their buildings as many of us have done in our youth, it sometimes feels like walking in the halls of an ancient race of giant people. But there is only so much food in the world, now. Our noses are a little bigger than theirs were—the better to smell with, Ayaë said in her description. And our large chests: our swelled ribs stretch around our large lungs, out of necessity.

Humans used to be so much more graceful—and I suppose they still are, those who went offworld. They would have had time to re-engineer themselves without the pressure of immediate survival to force them to throw aside aesthetic considerations. It was very hard for Ayaë to accept the changes that she had to make in order for the *bodhisattva* communities to survive. I read, once, that she said that she'd always believed nature had given to humans everything that they needed, and to change us was the most difficult thing she'd ever contemplated. But she argued that we would still be humans, and the changes we were making would have occurred if the environmental changes we'd wreaked had occurred over millions of years, rather than centuries. And the final point was the strongest: that we, as the descendants of polluters as well as being sentient beings, have a duty to the other few remaining creatures of the Earth, and if we must suffer a little, and lose our natural appearance to preserve our ability to dispel suffering, then we must do it. And so we are changed, and so I and my family guards the poison fire.

I don't regret it, and I don't see it anymore as suffering, no more than any being

suffers. The world, damaged and awful as it sometimes is, still contains beauty. I often stop as I do now, and look out across the waters, to where I know Da-yi is at this moment, working at the *sangha* at the White Mountain, the one founded by Old Ruyju. I wonder if he will survive, and return. I wonder if the child will know him for its father.

“Yana,” a voice says softly, behind me. It is unexpected, but I am so calm that I hardly react. I recognize Selaksara’s voice, of course. My beloved old Selaksara; he touches me on the shoulder. It is so grounding, another human touching you, softly and without motive except to touch itself, to be human with me together in the world. You realize that, when your mind begins to open up and you spend a lot of time alone and in silence; you realize how much simple touching means. “Alright?” he asks. Selaksara has always been a man of few words, very mindful of his speech. His eyes are very communicative, though, the deep black pupils and the hazy irises. Peoples’ irises didn’t used to be shielded like that, and buried in folds of skin, but I think his eyes are almost the most beautiful I’ve ever seen. They are full of the sorrow and dark memory and love for all things that Selaksara’s every word and action embody. If any of us is a real *bodhisattva*—a soul who long ago attained nirvana but swore to remain in the cycle of *samsara*, being born and dying endlessly, until all other beings have preceded it into nirvana—then it is Selaksara.

“Yes,” I reply, and I turn to face him. My face has a look of tenderness on it, the same look I always have when speaking to my sweet, kind old Selaksara. There is something we can learn from every being we encounter; every meeting with another is a kind of homecoming, and with Selaksara it is gentleness that I learn, a new depth of gentleness every time we are together. His face is beautiful, wrinkled and dark black,

with those deep silent eyes looking out at me. My sweet old Selaksara.

“It’s time for the welcoming and vows. Murdi’s babies were born last night. Twins,” Selaksara smiles. Murdi is a young woman from Usak Plot, the small, vigorous farming *sangha* not far from our own; she is too young to be a nun, although we all think she will choose to be when she’s old enough. We knew that she was expecting a child, and that the father is Eylam Rees, a handsome young man who’s been living at the same farm *sangha* since last winter. From the few times I’ve met him dropping off food at our *sangha*, I’ve found that he’s a kind man. I’m glad she and he have grown close. They remind me of Da-yi and myself, not so long ago. He lets me think for a moment, gently because I’m sure he knows what I am thinking about, and then Selaksara adds, “We should go now. The others will wait for us but they’ll be eager to begin.”

I nod, and we turn to go to the walking trail that leads to the nearby farm-*sangha*. The path is paved with stones. I have read that we used to prefer walking on the earth itself directly, that there were forms of meditation that depended on walking barefoot upon the soil and the plants that grew naturally almost everywhere. This grass stuff, I’ve seen it in old recordings of the past, read about it in some beautiful poems, but I haven’t seen it. When we walk, we do so on a trail paved with stones—almost completely with stones. Every few minutes we walk across a flattened paving-block of metal, shining in the sunlight. The pieces of metal are taken from things that were made and discarded wastefully, long ago when such an action was possible. And so now, paving the road, they remind us of the dangers of waste, and carelessness.

“Perhaps you will be able to take the child to the Free Land?” Selaksara says softly, walking beside me with his hand on my shoulder.

“I hope,” I reply, and I feel my heart flutter at the thought. The Free Land—every one of us is meant to go there eventually, to spend some time in the great domes, and see what the world once was like, as best they have been able to rebuild it. I wonder what it would be like to walk among so many creatures of old nature at the Roof of the World: Selaksara spoke of it as a kind of return. He spoke about walking in the grass, feeling it brush his legs. He described seeing large animals, which I didn’t believe when I was a child, but which is true. There are herds of them, wild and gentle in the grass. Great horned animals, and small furry ones, and they come out in the daytime, shielded and protected from the bitterness of the sun.

“I’m certain you will be able to go soon, and if you bring it while it is young,” he says of the child within me, “it will be able to return again when it is older. Two trips to the Free Land. That is a great happiness for a soul.”

“Yes, I have thought of that as well. Do you think I will go there soon?”

“Sooner, later, it amounts to the same thing, yes?”

“Yes, you are right.”

“You are a good soul, Yana. But be careful; you have some of the older ones in you, you excite sometimes easily. There is a kind of calmness you must strive to return yourself into, which is your birthright.” We walk across a paving plate of shining metal, and he looks down at it as we do. “Whole societies have been sidetracked by excitement. It can feel wonderful, and sometimes it leads to wonderful things. But it can also obscure the mind, obscure compassion. Excitement can make things seem simpler than they are. Or more complicated.”

I nod, because I know that he is right. It’s a thought I myself have had before,

asking myself just *how* the world could have become what it is, when it was such a vibrant, life-filled place at one time. Of course, I know the standard answers: greed, hatred, selfishness, delusion—the things we confront daily in ourselves, those very human things. It has been thousands of years that people have been following the *bodhisattva* path, and still we struggle. I wonder sometimes whether it might not be better for us to alter our minds artificially: it is possible, of course—of that we are certain. We *could*, if we wanted to, engineer the perfect buddha-mind into each human being on earth, pruning desires and attachments, increasing compassion and imaginative association with all other beings. We could make our way an inevitability in each of us, or at least our children.

But somehow I know, and not just because I have learned it from Selaksara, that this would be wrong. Because the struggle itself is important: I think the struggle itself *is* the way, really. Many of the Buddhists who went offworld in the last ships to leave, said that our way had failed earth and that perhaps it would succeed in our new homes, whatever places humanity went to live the rest of its lives. And I believe it was important that many went along, to carry mindfulness out to the stars, to those new worlds. But I believe that it is the same struggle, everywhere, even among us who they would not recognize as human, that matters.

To find the compassion that is tethered to us, but floating somewhere inside, in our inner darknesses, always ready to be found again. That is the whole of it. And this is the reason for all of our quiet. It's not, not any of it, meant to save the world, really. Not directly. The real work is changing oneself. Learning to think healthily. That is why, even though so many of the last civilization fought to save nature, they didn't fight to change

themselves. And so they failed and lost it all, even the right to live in their birthworld.

Selaksara and I walk together in our comfortable silence, until we reach the Usak Plot, with its low dry scrubble-plants growing all around, their only fruit the edible tubers secured under the soil. In the space outside the doors of the *sangha*, all the people of both of our communities have gathered. Jochi and Khaayn are playing shawms, and the rest of us are chanting. Demmus, the oldest nun of the Usak Plot, strikes a cymbal at the appropriate times. It is not only at the adoption ceremonies that we perform this ritual, however: if that were so, we would not know it by memory, for children are rare in our world. That Murdi and I are both bearing children in the same year is very unusual.

But I observe my mind as it wanders from the ritual, and then I stop it. I return it to the chant, thinking of Murdi's children, as she steps out into the light, the two infants borne in her arms, one in each. The shawms buzz their nasal pitches, and we chant with one voice, a single deep and guttural, multi-toned voice that feels like it is coming from down in the ground. And Murdi stops in the center of the circle we have formed, stops on her heel as old Demmus sounds the cymbal. And we keep chanting, making the words from our throats and putting them into the world, again. First, our *Bodhisattva* vows, and then the vow of family:

*Sharing blood, sharing our home,*

*We are one family, many souls together,*

*Gathered in searching and in ending the search,*

*Becoming the dharma and the Buddha ways.*

*We will teach these children compassion, and*

*Teach them what can be taught, and*



*Support them with silence and community  
Into the depths of mindfulness, and nirvana,  
And in the struggle of the Bodhisattva Way.*

As we chant, my mind wanders into the future, touching upon the child within my belly and thinking of how the child will soon be out of my belly. I don't think that Da-yi will be present at the adoption ceremony, although he need not be. The blood father of the child is the blood father, but my baby will have many fathers and mothers, and be beloved to all of them. It will perhaps play with Murdi's children, and sit at dear old Selaksara's feet as I did in my childhood.

And there is in me a pang of missing Da-yi, although now those pangs are less bitter, and I can see through them to the simpleness of my identification with him. Together, we found a way of seeing the other soul, being present, and it is important to me to remember that that sort of immense compassion is something I ought to feel for *all* beings, with passion and depth and admiration. Not the flaming, quickly moving love I felt for him when he gave me seed and child, but the deep, continuing emotion that remains. The stillness and the solitude that grow within me and extend to all beings. Love is a way of being in the world, I learned, and I am still learning, with Da-yi.

And the music of our voices is so dark and heavy and sweet and strong. When the sun is high above us, and the infants sleeping quiet in Murdi's arms, our voices echo out as if to the far edges of the world.

The next evening, I realize, in the midst of the mindful quiet that fills me as I sit looking

out at the evening ocean, that I can hear hurried footsteps growing louder, coming toward me. Part of me wants to rise and turn, and another part wants to remain seated and in stillness.

And, unbidden, suddenly, I see Da-yi in my mind. The breath catches in my throat, and I turn. Jochi is running toward me, along the paved path to the beach. The sound of the chants, the shawms, the clattering cymbals from yesterday, all whirl in my head, and I feel ready to fall over, and I don't even know why.

But I *know* something is wrong.

"Yana," Jochi calls out, breathless and excited, but somehow distanced. "Yana, there's been an accident. Come, I'll explain on the way."

And I rise and walk quickly toward him, telling myself to breathe, surprisingly calm. *Da-yi*, I think. *Da-yi*.

The screen shows me something worse that my own fluttering mind could create. A human body is curled, bent terribly, and shaking, and swollen. I cannot recognize the face, so alien has it become; I only know it is him because someone on the other end told Jochi so. He's under a kind of glass casing, and he's destroyed. His body moves in a way that somehow looks dead, evokes deadness. The movement doesn't look alive, it looks as if he's been poked with threads and made into a child's puppet, a toy Manohari or Prince Kumaradvitiya. His face beautiful face, a face like his mother's, has been twisted and reshaped somehow. It twitches, frighteningly mechanical. His arms and legs are stuck out at strange angles from his bloated torso, and they shift their positions slowly and in a hypnotic dance, volutions to mechanism, banging against the glass case dully.

Is this what the old ones saw, that made them think of the body as machine?

When they saw illnesses and physical problems as mechanical problems, before they saw how disease is the binding of an animal to its surroundings? The feeling makes me shiver, as if the ghosts of all those strange, cold ideas have welled up into me from the dry, aching sandy humus of history, and not even ancient history. People were still thinking this way only a few hundred years ago. This is where we learned how to make the changes that Aja Ayaë made, so that we could survive the world with its crashed ecologies.

“The monk on the far end, his name is Kanju,” Jochi tells me, as we look at the screen in awed sadness. “He says that Da-yi stumbled onto another weapon machine, and that it gave him the black sickness.” At those words, coldness floods me fully, and I struggle to stay standing. The black sickness is awful, it’s one of those weapons that was made long ago and left in so many places that it was not possible to find every last virus cache. Every once in a while, a monk or worker stumbles onto it, gets ill, and dies terribly, sealed away from other people to prevent spread of the disease and burned immediately on death. To have to be burned at death is awful, it precludes the final *bodhisattva* kindness, the giving by the *sangha* of one’s flesh to the wild beasts to eat. The disease infests everything, and in the worst cases transforms the infected person into a horrible parody of humanity, a monster. The reflection of the inner self of those who themselves once built the illness.

A shiver travels upward through my torso, the echo of a vivid, steel-shining coldness in my belly, where a baby that is part Da-yi grows now. Because I will never see Da-yi again. He is already gone, his brains reprogrammed by the illness, his body

transformed by it. There is not even memory in him. Da-yi has himself not been cast out, but rather erased, like old storage crystals in a computer that has been wiped blank before being throw away.

To remain . . . detached. Impossible. *Breathe. My eyes shut. Breathe.*

It is so very difficult. I close myself, my eyes, make my silence. I want the wisdom of The One to flood me, too, like a torrential raining into the dust. I want the flower of The One's wisdom to bloom in my mind, and I wait for the peace that I imagine is meant to descend into me at any moment like the rain once did on everything in another age.

There are, of course, tears. It doesn't help to know that all life is suffering, that suffering proceeds from attachment. Sometimes it doesn't matter what you know.

The next day, I eat and drink a little bit. Not a lot, just a little bit of the tubers, my living food, and some of the processed seawater, with the salt removed. I find it difficult to exult in eating, to feel the proper gratitude that I know I ought to. And so I refrain. I sit with the others at the main low table set at the center of the big hall, but I am alone.

Jochi and Khaayn and Eyini, and old Pitta and Uus-daht and Selaksara have all looked me in the eye many times, silent with pity and compassion. And I have looked into their eyes, into them, with the same, for Da-yi was beloved by all. Even if he and I were beloved, once, he was a child of the whole *sangha*, as I am. And so I fight my natural tendency, to be alone, and I sit with them in quiet.

And they wait for me to speak, to become open.

And I don't want to.

What I keep thinking about is very strange. It's not Da-yi, which is what I expected. I think about the black sickness. It is only one of many diseases created by human beings, in a time when wars had grown very rare and very dangerous. I've read a little about this, but I want to *know*, so I go down to the computer, a little way down in the elevator, and alone, I begin to read. As I do, it comes back to me in a flood, the speckly images and the awful words in my memory. I remember how, as in all times, war and economy were linked very closely in the time of the making of black sickness. The economy—money, trade—was what ruled the world. And for the sake of money, and not real war, black sickness was made.

It was a reckless world. The mistakes those people made, they are so terrible that I sometimes wonder if they did not live in a more terrible world than we do now, for they would only see the world through their minds. Our calm, stilled minds can see the beauty even in this destroyed planet, but even while living in a world covered in plants and animals and endless numbers of people, they saw such horrendous things in their imagination.

Who could actually *want* to make black sickness, after imagining it? I simply don't understand.

But they made it. Enough of it to infect all of humanity—billions of people—many times over. They made it vicious, and painful, and virulent. They hid it inside

terrible machines whose programs have long since been warped and ruined, and which release the awful stuff into the world in conditions they were not created to. Those afflicted were torn apart and rewritten into different beings completely; their genes were scrambled, rearranged, and the changes spread throughout the body at high speed. Those who did not kill became raving, dangerous monsters, spreading the disease to those whom they had once known, loved, worked with, and defended.

Not that this mattered much in the days of black sickness: the production of an inoculation was not only a matter of great pride, but a lucrative operation. Like the black sickness, the inoculation was originally specifically tailored to the human genome; the sickness could only attack the bodies of humans, and the inoculations worked only in people as well. But eventually the virus mutated. Nobody ever discovered how, or why it happened, but the virus began to afflict other creatures, species by species, until more were gone than remained, and then almost none were left. And of course, the specificities of the human genome were part of the cure, the inoculation; by the time they figured out how to produce a similar protection for another species, specific to its genome, hundreds of other species had been wiped out.

That was one part of the beginning of the long, slow collapse. Stupid, stupid. Evil and incredibly stupid. I'm filled with anger, shaking.

And then I see Da-yi's face as he was before he left. Beautiful, a beautiful shaven-headed monk, a dark smooth face and wide, beautiful white teeth and those shining black eyes tucked into their thick, warm folds.

As if running, my mind returns to anger. Stupid, stupid. The inoculation for us is impossible, by a quirk in the changes that Aja Ayaë had to make in us. We cannot resist

the black sickness, but only succumb when it strikes, hope that it kills us, and try to meditate into the end of the self when the mind collapses. It is lucky that the virus died out in nature, but since the illness in the form tailored for human genomes can infect us, while the human cure has no effect, we are helpless to cope with it when we encounter one of the remaining ancient weapons. We, like the animals, have been given no sanctity or protection by humankind, and been unable to create one for ourselves. And this reminds us that we are not what humans thought they were. Even the world does not recognize us as separate from nature, as they felt they were even when they knew it wasn't true. We are like the lost, unnamed beasts.

And my anger is heavy, like a big piece of stone inside my chest that won't allow me to breathe; I can feel it claiming first my mind and then my body, taking control of me wholly, heart beating more quickly and breath staggered.

The elevator is silent, again. Silent, unnatural. How could I ever think that this was a miracle, a beautiful thing? Machinery that conceals itself? This, used by billions of people, is the kind of machinery that would exhort constant usage, unnecessary usage. It hides itself, along with its costs and destructions. It is another medallion of their stupidity, bearing me down to the epitome of their selfishness, their blindness.

And then I am in the hallway, the hallway where lights—wanted or not—switch on. *One, two three, four, five.* I count my paces to try to calm myself. *Six, seven, eight.* Many paces to the room, and then I am in it. I do not look at the gauges, the gears and needles. I sit, instead, in the place where so many times before, I have sat with my eyes shut, drifting through my own consciousness.

Except that this time my eyes are open, narrowed on the chunk of batholith. I feel the burning poison fire inside it, roiling, trying to burrow out into the world, to destroy us. *This is the crowning evil of their civilization*, I think to myself. *This, their afterthought. They had no pity at all.*

I decide that I must meditate, first, before I do anything.

After my eyes are closed for some time, I am calm again, although still furious in my mind. Selaksara is right: I *do* have some of the old ones in me, my anger and my frustration. Who wouldn't be frustrated by a civilization so pitiless, so smallminded, so capable of good and so blinded by delusion and greed?

How does Selaksara do it? How does old Demmus of Usak Plot pass through life so calmly? Where is the quiet?

Blindness, greed, hatred, delusion. All the cardinal violences according to all that I have learned along the *bodhisattva* way. The pitiless monsters.

I leave before finishing a single prayer.

The days that come after are like the stone prayer beads around my wrist: they are all the same, the same prayers inscribed across the same shapes, but they follow in a sequence that seems both to continue on forever, *and* lead back to the same place over and over again. The wilds around our *sangha* are my refuge for many of those days, so many that I cannot count them between my yelling, my weeping, my vicious striding back and forth. They are large, empty rolling hills of dune, supporting only tufts of spare brown weeds and the odd slithering thing. I move through the wilderness with full awareness of just how alien I really am to it.



I scream out after each dozen or so steps as I walk, sometimes, but most of the time I move silently, because always there is left one violent scream smoking inside my body but refusing to escape, no matter how hard I try to let it out. I slap my left hand with my right, and then my right with my left, as is my habit from my studies of *sangha* debate, as I work through dozens of arguments with myself, with the Buddha, with the veil of *samsara* itself. There are times when I even forget to walk carefully, one of the first lessons of the *bodhisattva* way. I walk but have no sense of walking, because I am caught up in the *I* and fail to truly apprehend the *walk*.

How can this be? It isn't fair, not at all! These thoughts whirl around me like ancient paper kites borne on the winds of my churned emotions. I try to think rationally, to attain some kind of detachment from them, but again and again I am drawn back to this, like a wound that I cannot leave alone long enough to let it seal shut so that it can begin to heal. So I walk as if I were between two absolutely different worlds; the inner and the outer are separated, the outer nothing more than a spinning surface into which is carved symbols of the inner. I remember Da-yi's face, and hear his voice. There is nothing on the ground, nothing in the sky, but this. I do not know if I walk past scorpions, or spiky poisonous cacti, or miniscule predators, or at the edges of blast-cracked cliffs, because I am led by my the searing attachment I feel to him, to his death. I know what it is, and how it pains me, yet I can neither let nor make it pass away from me. So I charge across the poisonous ground, and I drive myself further and further away, until I begin to feel other things I have not felt in ages. My newfound fear distracts me, and the novelty of pain from the sharp burrs and stings of the plants that clutter these hills drive my mind away from that which obsesses it. I spend hours underneath the burning, merciless sun,

fighting to breathe and pushing myself forward, anywhere.

This is how I spend my days, but I return to the sangha, by night, when I can. Whenever I do, the others try to get close to me, one by one. They want to help me, to bring me out of my trouble and back to how I was before. They do not realize that this will never happen, I think defiantly to myself, and I make terrible faces at them all. I go to my room, no longer caring about their expectations of me, and when they come to my room I scream, and shriek, and sometimes I slam the door at them. After many days of this, though it is impossible to say how many made up that stretch of grey aloneness, there is a quiet knock at the door of my sleeping chamber. It is a little after I have risen from my sleep and dreams of Da-yi and have passed through the waking-sickness which still rises in me in the mornings.

“Come,” I say softly, sitting on the edge of my floor mat. I turn to face the entrance, and see that it is Demmus of the Usak Plot *sangha*. I do not know the old nun very well, but I do admire her from what I know of her. She is among the oldest of monks in the area, almost as old as Selaksara, and many turn to her for advice.

She looks at me through eyes that show her concern. “Jochi told me about what happened,” she says softly and then falls silent, not moving. Waiting for me to reply, I suppose. I say nothing, and she stands still for several minutes, until I turn my head and look her in the eye, and tell her the truth; that is, I tell her my suspicion.

“We’re wrong, aren’t we?”

“Wrong?” she cocks her head, and moves closer to me.

“About everything. About compassion, about ourselves. Even if we think that we have learned and changed now, it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t change the fact that

everything we grew out of, all of our ancestry, was greedy and malicious and stupid.

They made *such weapons*,” I whisper, knowing that such a statement of fact carries much in implication. That such a statement is really, said by a sane being, the indictment of a species.

“Yes, Yana, that is true. Many of our ancestors were misguided—”

“No,” I interrupt her. I have never interrupted anyone, but now I continue without thinking about it: “Not misguided. Evil. They were monsters, and what made them monsters is still in us. They didn’t see it, and neither do we. We think we do, we think we’ve discovered it and found a way to work around it, but maybe we haven’t after all, Demmus. Maybe we’re just as blind as them. Maybe we have no choice in the matter, and we are doomed just to carry the same filthy seed in us too, hiding and waiting to reemerge . . .” My voice trails off and I glance down to my belly.

Demmus’s face remains calm, but her voice is a bit strained. “Yana, you already know the answer to that. The Buddha told us the answer to that question thousands of years ago. He said that there is no karma, except where we create it and fulfill it ourselves. Karma doesn’t exist, Yana. Not out there,” she points to the outside wall of my chamber. “Only in here,” she says, and places her hand over her chest.

“In fact,” her forehead tenses as she gazes at me, “the old ones failed because they made the very same mistake as you. They didn’t call it an evil seed, but they thought that what they were doing was inevitable. They invented a whole mythology of human nature, and of the world and the universe, in which greed drove humans. They attempted to turn selfishness into their highest virtue. And they believed in the unavoidable—that was how they spoke sometimes of their tools, and even of their weapons. From the center of a

landscape completely created with tools and machines, they forgot to think, to question. They gave away that responsibility, and simply said that the poison fire, and the black sickness, and the most horrifying weapons imaginable, were the inevitable endpoint of a journey begun with the first stone tools. And they turned those awful tools, and those awful tendencies they found in themselves, into their highest good. And they accepted, because someone said so, that it was inevitable, and unavoidable.

“Yana, don’t make the same mistake that they did. There is no unavoidable, there is no one way only, there is no karma. Our failures are our own, even our failure not to choose. In each action, all we can do is too try to become the buddha way, to pursue and dispense compassion, or fail to do so. Nothing else matters, but what we choose, mindfully, in each action” She touches my shoulder with one hand, and my belly with the other. “And Yana . . . I know what anger is like. I’ve felt it myself,” she says softly, “and there is always something else behind it.”

I don’t believe her, or rather, I don’t want her to be right. To diminish my anger, and my... sorrow. *How dare she*, I think to myself.

And, as if she knows what I am thinking, she closes her eyes, and sighs. “Did you know that Murdi is my birth-daughter?”

“Yes,” I reply. It’s not a secret, after all.

“And do you know who her birth-father is?”

I look at Demmus, confused. I’d never thought to ask, honestly. I’d known he wasn’t present, but after all, that is not uncommon. Men and women become monks, move apart. The bonds of childmaking, and of paired-love, are unbreakable—but they very often exist only across great distances. “No,” I reply, “I don’t know. Nobody has

spoken of it.”

So very small, and old, and quiet, Demmus looks me in the eye and asks, “You didn’t think you were the only one to lose your child’s birth-father to the black sickness, did you?”

I am not sure whether the tears are for her, or for myself, or for Da—yi and for the child, or Murdi’s birthfather, or the old ones’ blindness, or for everything. I don’t care, because the tears are all the same in the end. I can feel Demmus trying to put her arms around me and I fight her off, yowling and tearing myself away from her.

The next thing I know, I am out in the wilds again, in the darkness of night. Strange little lights hover here and there, blinking down below the hills. I can hear his voice. I run far off into the dunes, into the scrub, and only my breathing makes sound.

What comes into my mind is the instructions we have received for death. To avoid the red light, for it can bring only pain and entrapment although it entices like joy. Beyond the red light can be only one thing: birth, life, another turn upon the wheel of *samsara*. But I do not feel red light; not all attachment is pleasurable, not all attachment is joy. This is the pain I remember imagining in the Buddha when he saw the old man in the streets of his city, in the face of a woman choked with sickness, in the faces of those mourning the dead. I am not the one, I know this, but I know the pain of The One, I can feel it in my body and it is mine. I know the suffering and unhappiness of The One like a fire in my breast.

And somewhere along the course of my flight, I trip and land in the dust. It is cold on my face, but the cold is not real. I should know that it is merely a trick of the mind, of *samsara*, to frighten me, but somehow this knowledge is overpowered by whatever this is

inside me that moves like a storm across sand, screaming with wind and throwing everything at opposite angles. And as I look out, trying to see past this storm of Da-yi and the child and my Buddha which are all the storm of myself, I see a dozen small things; living things, moving with frantic grace only a little distance from my nose.

It is a crowd of tiny, barely-furred, baby *midithni* straggling away in random directions away from what I imagine must be their mother. They scatter as quickly as possible, which is not all that quickly; if I were hunting them, as a predator might, I would have several in my maw already. Except . . . the mother is standing stock still, an inch-long little beast staring at me, her thin hairless tail moving slowly from left to right. Her wide, dark little eyes glint at me, but she does not make a sound or move toward me. *What kind of a mother is this?*, I ask myself. She does not defend, or attack, but merely stands still and watches. Watches any beast come out of the shadows and feast upon her young. Like the universe, this *midithni* mother is, I think to myself. I start to stand up, and she steps toward me, a single slow step. She looks up at me, as if expectant.

And when I am looking right into her eyes, I remember the story. It was a story I was told long ago by Selaksara, one of the *Jatakka* tales. In this particular life, the Buddha was a doe, which was a kind of very large mammal that lived all over the world in those days. He found a mate, bred, and bore an infant stag. When the stag was only a few weeks old, he heard the voice of a hunter coming through the woods, for this was in a time when plants grew very tall, tall enough that humans had to wander among the plants to find animals or sometimes even other people. The Buddha had the immediate instinct to run away from the hunter, making sure that the baby stag would escape, but as the hunter approached, something made him stop to listen. The hunter was singing a song, a

song about his hunger:

*It is a stone in my belly, yes,*

*It weighs heavy in me and my children.*

*How I wish I could find a deer*

*To feed my children, and my woman,*

*To feed my woman, and her children.*

*Where can I find such creature,*

*When shall my karma deliver me freedom?*

Something in the hunter's song made the Buddha hesitate, and remain in the woods nearby his path. Perhaps it was a tone of despair, for the hunter halted in his search and began to make camp, building a fire first to keep away the wild animals, for animals were plentiful in those days.

The doe watched the hunter pray for his family, and for all souls in the world, and was moved. Suddenly, the doe which was The Buddha was moved, and leapt forth from the woods, appearing in such magnificence that the hunter didn't dare draw his bow to strike it down. Instead, he simply sat and stared at it, without moving or saying a word.

Eventually, the doe spoke: "I have heard your pleas, and I know your need. It is not karma that delivers me to you, but I myself in compassion. For I, too, have a child whom I love and who I fear you will kill. But although my instinct is to run away, I remain here, frozen like a deer filled only halfway with terror. I offer myself as the meat that can sustain your family," the Buddha said, "but I ask that you do not slay my baby stag. Let him roam the forests and learn to perhaps offer himself someday, if that is his dharma. If it is not, he will find his dharma." And the baby stag heard this, and ran away

for fear because he did not wish to offer himself, dharma or no. But the hunter simply smiled, and nodded, and drew his bow immediately, and with love and gratitude he struck the doe which was the Buddha down with a single clean shot into the heart, freeing Buddha's soul once again to progress onward toward nirvana.

I stand up slowly, staring at the *midnithi* in silence, marvelling at how, in seeing its instinct, I see my own freedom to choose, and see maybe the ghost of my own dharma through the fog and mist and anger; and then I turn to go, slowly, back to the *sangha*, weeping my way through the lightless chill.

This darkness is not the same as in the wastes; it is cool, calm, and still. I can feel the presence of the poison fire, that continual companion to me, teacher and guide that speaks to me through the silent ancient stone. I think again, my vow, a silent solemn chant in my head:

*As long as time and space endure,*

*And as long as living beings exist,*

*And as long as the poison fire burns,*

*Until the end of all things may I remain too,*

*To drown misery in compassion and kindnesses.*

All the lights are off, the room is completely silent, and I feel as if I am drifting in the void, before all things existed. I am on the doorway of that kind of world, of that kind of life. A life filled with silence, calm reverence and kindness, covered in the sweet dew of my *dharma*.

And I feel a strangeness toward the poison fire, blooming underneath my fear and



pain. Intertwined with my fear and horror is something that feels almost like respect. That ancient poison, the scarring awfulness of it and its persistence, cannot but be impressive. Several thousand lifetimes as long as my own will pass before it is safe enough for anyone to handle. There is an immense oldness to it, and a hugeness to it as well, which dwarfs me. For me, here and now in the stillness of my mind, the poison fire is the history of my species. It is the history of the world., intertwined with me, and I am at one with it.

My anger, the awful blossoming flower in my chest and throat, is a kind of poison fire. My anger at those who created poison fire, the billions who led awful wasteful lives which demanded it, those whose actions produced it and destroyed the world, my anger toward them is the same pitilessness that they themselves felt looking at nature, and I think secretly themselves. I am looking at them and it is the same as looking at nature. But when I look at them I feel pity, and strange stirrings, within myself. And beneath all of that, there is a sweeping compassion and sorrow. All of that suffering. All of that fear of the world, and sorrow, the outer mask of anger and the inner mask of blitheness, both arising out of the pain. I can see all of the anger inside them, inside the poison fire and it is the same anger that burns inside me. Their pitilessness for the world, my pitilessness for them, and its pitilessness for all things.. And then I think of the child in my womb, already in the world, as human as me and as the old ones, the child I already love and who is already in this terrible world of endless suffering. Because I think that, twined through all of it, is compassion. The wanting and needing of it, and even in the lost, the seeking of it. In the face of all this, the only thing that remains to me is the capacity to desire the soothing of it, and to desire the soothing of it for others as much as oneself.

And then I think of the child growing in my womb, already in the world, as human as I am and the old ones were; I think of the child that I already love and who is already in this terrible world of endless suffering, this unbounded world.

And inside me swells the urge to protect my child; the frightening engulfing maternal love swells. And yet I see through it, as I did through my anger. The maternal love, like the fear, arose from my nature, my genes. My still-human genes. But there is no karma. I can look, I can choose to look, and when I do, through the haze of my maternal love, I see the whole of the universe. The surface of it is complex, shimmering, this maternal love, but once I pierce through it, all things are there. And fear surges up in me, the way the waking-sickness does. It is so immense, so much bigger than me, and so I fear it in exactly the way I do the poison fire. I could be swallowed up in it, and never find my way out of it. For the first time in my life, I feel as if I can imagine all of space, all of time; I can see the universe that I speak to in my *bodhisattva* vow.

A ghost of the living Selaksara crosses my brain as I feel this strange expansion within me, and I have to remember to breathe because I am dizzied by this awareness. It is love that is like the poison fire itself: indiscriminate, incomprehensible in scope, and its presence capable of negating all denial or dishonesty. There is no discernment in this love. It is me, I am it, we are the same immensity existing to the same purpose. Intertwined. My mind gropes to rationalize it, to connect it to my genes, to the internal changes within my child-altered body. But rationalizations do not touch it, cannot even approach it.

The stone beads scratch a little as they come off my wrist and slide around my hand; they make tiny noises when they touch, sliding down the strand of fibers that holds

them together. I do not choose a bead specifically from the circle, but only reach for the one nearest to me and grasp it between my fingers and thumb. Then I begin, my voice like a beacon for me myself in the darkness, the prayer a beacon too; those, and this faint feeling of movement within me.

# references

*A text with the kinds of attention that I have herein attempted to pay with regards to scientific, cultural, and historical issues cannot be written without a great deal of research. While many years of foundational texts underlie the work in this thesis, such as for example my readings of Dickens novels other than Great Expectations which play a part in my writing of "Poppy", I have here restricted my list of sources to texts that were used directly for researching necessary background for the competent drafting of the works of this thesis. In cases where the same information (such as for example certain cosmology issues, which were important for the plausible construction of the Nahrani Extinction scenario in "with my mouth") was discussed in two texts, I included references for both only when the auxiliary text handled the subject in a way more useful or accessible than the primary text. Following the references list, a more specific listing will catalogue all direct quotations by page, indicating their sources.*

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# quotations

All direct quotations or important reference sources used in the writing of this thesis are

listed below arranged by page number of their appearance in this text; references give the page on which they were found in the source text.

- x The quotation from Johnson is from Johnson, 16.
- 1 The quotation from Ovid's *Cures for Love* is one I found, rather appropriately, in Wack, pg. 126.
- 19 The quote from Edward Said is from Said, 259; the Deng is from Van Kemenade, 389.
- 49 *The British Price, Containing Particulars of the Following Markets, Viz. London, Liverpool, Glasgow, Hambugh, Antwerp, Gibraltar, &c.* was a real periodical (which I found in microform stacks in the Webster Library of Concordia University, Montreal); a perusal of the paper, at least from the period of the Opium War, is a fascinating study of the pure resource-driven and resource-centered arguments for British Empire, which nonetheless often rely upon ideologies promoting the "glory" of the Empire and references to the Roman Empire.
- 59 The Kierkegaard quotation is from Kierkegaard, 27.
- 108 The quotation of Jelaluddin Rumi's poem "Who Says Words With My Mouth?" is adapted from a translation of that poem found in a collection of Rumi translations by Coleman Banks titled *The Essential Rumi* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998).
- 189 The Macy quotation is from Kraft, 298. The interview from which this statement was taken served as the original inspiration for the story "bodhisattva", and therein can be found a more optimistic and direct critique of the handling of toxic waste and the potentials that such dangerous materials for mindful guardianship, which Macy and others seek to realize through their Nuclear Guardianship Program.
- Furthermore, the opening passage and several other sections of quasi-incantatory exposition in "bodhisattva" are a reworking of the beginning of the



famous Buddhist Lotus Sutra; the main version I used for my rewriting of this scripture was found in Kraft 43-48. In addition, the *jataka*—that is, didactic past life tale of the Buddha—recalled by Yana when she stumbles upon the *midithni* is loosely modeled on some of those presented in Kraft, as well as from several other sources that I have encountered over the years.