

SIX STORIES FROM THE
TOTAL OF FIFTY STORIES IN

PARASPHERES

EXTENDING BEYOND THE SPHERES
OF LITERARY AND GENRE FICTION

FABULIST AND NEW WAVE FABULIST STORIES

EDITED BY

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AND

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““Third Initiation: A Gift from the Land of Dreams” from the novel *Horses at the Gate* by Mary Mackey. Copyright © 1995 by Mary Mackey. Reprinted by permission of the author.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

WHY FABULIST AND NEW WAVE FABULIST STORIES IN AN ANTHOLOGY NAMED *PARASPHERES*?

When Omnidawn started publishing books in 2001 we planned to publish an anthology within a few years with the type of fiction included here, but we did not have clear boundaries for its definition or a name for it. Historically in the U.S. we have had two broad categories, literary and genre, into which the major publishers attempt to toss virtually all fiction. If it doesn't fit into one of these categories, the large publishers usually see no point in publishing it. And yet, what we wanted to publish seemed to fit neither of these classifications. The term literary fiction, which implied quality, had long ago been defined by most critics as narrative realism and admitted nothing that was non-realistic, with the relatively recent exception of magic realism. All other non-realistic fiction was relegated by most publishers to the various "formula" genres, where the non-realistic elements were assumed to further the primary purpose of escape into worlds ranging from unlikely to fantastic, where readers were entertained but not enlightened.

Of course, there has always been another form, non-realistic fiction, that attempted more than entertainment and often gave us new insights and perspectives. No one would be taken seriously if they denied that Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *1984* have this quality, as well as lasting cultural meaning and value, more than half a century after the last of these was written. Some have given these works a sort of honorary status as Literary Fiction, even though they do not meet the otherwise required standards of Narrative Realism. Still others relegate them to the genres, but admit that even some genre stories can have valuable cultural meanings beyond mere escape and entertainment.

But the genre categories do not hold these works well. No matter what genre category is chosen for them, they tend to be unlike most of the others with which they are grouped. Readers who expect genre escape and entertainment can be disappointed and dislike stories like these, sales can falter, and they can go largely unnoticed. The genre classifications no longer seem to make sense for such stories, and haven't for some time.

These are the stories that we knew we wanted to publish in this anthology, but again, how were we going to define them? A number of terms have been used over the past several decades to try to create

a special niche for such stories. Robert A. Heinlein coined the term “speculative fiction” in 1947, and for a time this was used to define such stories, but in recent years that term has been used to include all forms of the genres of fantasy and science fiction, as well as much horror. Therefore, the term no longer defines fiction that goes beyond genre fiction. These stories are far too strange for the term magic realism, which requires that the story be basically realistic, with some magical elements thrown in, and magic realism implies Latin American in origin. The terms non-realism and trans-realism are descriptive, but define these stories only in relation to what they are not: the more accepted narrative realism form.

Then in the fall of 2002, *Conjunctions*, the literary journal from Bard College edited by Bradford Morrow, came out with their issue number 39, guest-edited by Peter Straub. They used the term “new wave fabulists,” described thus: “For two decades, a small group of innovative writers rooted in the genres of science fiction, fantasy, and horror have been simultaneously exploring and erasing the boundaries of those genres by creating fiction of remarkable depth and power.” The term came with a number of disadvantages. For one thing, it’s a mouthful. Why not a simple one-word name? And the term new wave has been used before and has its own meanings. But the term did have the advantage of being an extension of the term fabulist, a word which has gained some acceptance as a form of literary fiction and which generally means magic realism without necessarily being Latin American.

Since we really could not establish a clearly definable boundary between fabulist and new wave fabulist, we decided to include both in the anthology, which we called *ParaSpheres* because these stories seem to extend “beyond the spheres” of either literary or genre fiction. In the process we hope to exist partly in both forms as well as extending beyond them, and to build a bridge between the two, where writers and readers from both can easily meet. Ultimately, another name may be used to describe this form of fiction, but for now we have chosen to describe the form of fiction as fabulist and new wave fabulist.

This is the short answer to “Why Fabulist and New Wave Fabulist Stories in an Anthology Named *ParaSpheres*.” A more detailed elaboration of this answer can be found at the end of this selection.

Ken Keegan

SIX STORIES FROM PARASPHERES

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RIKKI DUCORNET

INTRODUCTION

A MEMOIR IN THE FORM OF A MANIFESTO

When I was a child of seven, I spent the week alone with my mother's parents: Frances and Charlie. They lived in Miami, in a house that smelled of boiled carrots. Frances's conversation was featureless, and I could never, for as long as I knew her, grow accustomed to the static condition of her mind.

A Russian immigrant who came to this country at the age of twelve, Charlie had one good story. He told it slyly, nimbly and with dash: the moment his family had debarked in New York City he had run away, and before the day was over had snagged a job with the Barnum and Bailey Circus shoveling elephant shit.

Charlie's vivid evocation of elephant shit in all its prodigious redundancy did much to alleviate my grandmother's self-righteous banality. If Charlie was entertaining—and he also had enlightening things to say about the Fat Lady (in those days a rarity) and had witnessed an acrobat's fatal mistake—Frances was as appealing as a parish clerk. She thought of herself as a worldly-minded realist, yet she feared the world unreasonably, poisoning the ants on her slice of lawn with an eerie fixity of purpose. She boiled our suppers with such ferocity everything we ate tasted like wet laundry. It was during this visit that I came to privately call her Old Piano Legs.

Supper times, Charlie, mostly mute, and sucking the interminable sourballs that would give him stomach cancer, thought of the lady across the way who—or so I learned from a bitter Frances at his funeral some years down the line—made a mean lamb stew with dumplings.

"He'd go across the way to eat her stew!" she had blustered. "Can you imagine that?"

I could.

I had brought with me a library book devoted to van Leeuwenhoek. In the deep solitude of Miami nights, I would lose myself beneath the Dutchman's magic lens, and swim among the minute creatures he described gyrating in gutter water and tears. The splendid conjunction in my mind of elephants and animals too small to be seen with the

naked eye caused me to shudder with secret laughter, for I knew it was best not to disturb Frances's mortal certitude with any extravagance of mind. (Her own mind was made of sand bags that, whenever she would speak, tumbled forth in such quantity one feared, one *risked*, suffocation.) In this way her conversation had a family likeness to the inescapable redundancies of so much so called "realistic" fiction. (And, this brings to mind my mother's response to my first "real" story: "Some nightmares are best kept to oneself." She died soon after this exchange; it was, as it turned out, the last time she advised me.)

Charlie's fond recollections informed my own tendency to scatologize and, decades later, made for an immediate affinity with Angela Carter, whose dinner conversation was outrageously fecal and funny. Angela, like Jonathan Swift and Robert Coover and Rabelais, was unafraid of frass. Which has me wondering if the acknowledgement of materiality goes part and parcel with the unfettered imagination, a healthy dislike of pomposity and the sort of dogmatic thinking that insists the body is both fallen and vile. (I was about to write a *healthy* acknowledgement of materiality, but then, like the divine Marquis's, Swift's interest in dung was, need I say it, *morbid*.)

Back to Miami: on the one hand there was Frances who, if she'd had the choice, would have shat chalk. Whereas Charlie proposed a vision of excrement transcendent, intuiting—for this he could not have known—how in Old Tibet the Dali Lama's turds were kept in silver and worn as amulets—a true story, if anomalous. But there is more. Like Kafka's Gregor Samsa or Bruno Schultz's paterfamilias thrashing in aspic, that week the fantastic claimed Miami with a suddenness that suggested the miraculous. For three days land crabs by the tens of thousands overswarmed lawns, sidewalks, driveways, car-ports and Grandma's rockery. As agile as hands, they were stunning in their sheer exuberance. Agitating in the dew of early morning and at night beneath the glazed lunes of porch lights, they could not have unraveled Frances more had they been communist transvestites herding penguins. Wildness had claimed Miami—irresistible, irreverent, infidelic, profane! Frances, who until that moment had tirelessly elbowed her way through life, was shut down. After a few minutes of ineffectual sweeping, she took to her bed with an ice pack. I recall how Charlie and I stood on the back porch and marveled at the unprecedented event; how from across the way the lady who had a knack with dump-lings gaily waved.

We are told that within the decade global warming will slap us silly, and that within forty years or so, one third of all living things will have perished irretrievably. A criminal lack of imagination is making of our fragile world a flatland. We are told that flat, like fear, is good for us, somehow *suitable*; fear and boredom fit us better, like those mass-produced and outgassing polyesters that cover the nakedness of our presidents and late-night hosts and bankers with a doleful inevitability. But I will have none of it; such *suitabilities* have always made me sneeze. And I decry the rise of plastic and the decline of fur; the confusion of capitalism and democracy; the tyranny of religion and the dereliction of moral vision; the lethally misguided notion that like *suitable* ideas, the creative impulse must know and keep its place; that art and literature, like trousers and radishes, are no more than commodities.

A world worth wanting cherishes the risks of wildness, and this includes not only the lavish elephants and meteoric crabs, but the stars we can no longer see, the whales hemorrhaging on our beaches, the serene mollusks and coral reaches; *Gilgamesh* as filmed by the Brothers Quay, the eroticized Martians imagined by Clarice Lispector; the Amazon's poison frogs, the Sahara's thick-coming locusts; the vociferous parrots; William Gass's *Omensetter*; the worms in their legions and the yellow boas; Rosamond Purcell's and van Leeuwenhoek's third eyes and Borges's Aleph; the oracle at Delphi and Gaudi's dream of an unbounded architecture; the necessary nightmares of David Lynch; Borges's incandescent blindness; Prince Genji's amorous encounters; the unstoppable mulattas of Latin American literature; the collages of Max Ernst, his Loplop and, above all, the salutary tradition of a tusked and savage—and, need I say it: *subversive* storytelling in which the world is reinvented, reinvigorated and restored to us in all its sprawling splendor, over and over again.

LEENA KROHN

THE SON OF CHIMERA

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TRANSLATED BY HILDI HAWKINS

I was born, but not because anyone wanted it to happen. No one even knew it was possible, for my mother was a human being, my father a chimera. He was one of the first multi-species hybrids.

Only one picture of my father survives. It is not a photograph, but a water-colour, painted by my mother. My father is sitting in an armchair, book in hand, one cloven hoof placed delicately on top of the other. According to my mother, he liked to leaf through illustrated books, although he never learned to read. He is wearing an elegant, muted blue suit jacket, but no trousers at all. Thick grey fur covers his strong legs, right down to his hoofs. Small horns curve gracefully over his convex forehead. Striking in his face are his round, yellow eyes, his extraordinarily wide mouth, his tiny chin and his surprisingly large but flat nose.

Virgin forest is visible through the window behind him, and above it a moon that is reddish, as if it were oozing blood. If you look a little more closely at the picture, you notice that Håkan's book carries the same picture of Håkan, in which he gazes at the same book by the light of the same moon.

Schoolwork never really held my mother's attention. This was a disappointment to my grandmother, who was a high court judge. My aunt always said that my mother lacked perseverance. All the same, my mother has always worked and earned her own living. She dropped out of school, tried three times to get into art college and was rejected each time. But she never lost her hobby of painting. Later she survived on temporary jobs, cleaning in various institutions, spent some time as assistant to the cobbler at the opera house, then moved on to the central parish kitchen. From time to time she filled in for the caretaker at the city museum.

My mother met my father at Hydra, the laboratory of an international gene technology institution, where she had a job for a couple of months. There my mother cleaned, and was sometimes expected to feed the laboratory animals.

"Did you like it at Hydra?" I asked.

“It was one of my best jobs,” my mother said. “Even the cleaners were treated like human beings, and the laboratory buildings were so modern and spacious. There were plenty of workers, but even I was reasonably well-paid. I was happy to clean the laboratory animal rooms, particularly when I was able to work by myself. After five, it was peaceful and light in there. The chimeras had just been fed and most of them were fast asleep, for after the experiments they were given sedatives. The only sound was that of the computer ventilators and, from time to time, a rumbling from the plumbing of the embryo cupboards.”

“Tell me something else about daddy,” I asked.

“Your father, Håkan, wasn’t the only chimera in the lab. There were already dozens of them when Håkan was born, but most of them were combinations of two species. Håkan was a special case. He was the first four-species chimera: chimpanzee, wolf, goat and human.

“You will remember that the scientists had succeeded in transplanting into Håkan twenty thousand of the eighty thousand human genes. All the rest were genes from the three other species, but in what proportions I was never able to discover.

“Around the time of the events that led to your birth, there was no longer anything new even about multichimeras. There were already hybrids of seven species among the laboratory chimeras at Hydra.

“But Håkan was the oldest of the laboratory animals; he had even been patented. He had been the whole lab’s favourite, not just because of the patent, but because he was such a gentle and docile chimera. But by the time I arrived at Hydra to clean and look after the animals, no one was interested in Håkan any more, and he was no longer young. The only time he got any attention was during controlled experiments and the inevitable caring routines.

“I liked his humble and melancholy, but sometimes amazingly animated chimpanzee’s gaze. The irises of his eyes were yellow, but his pupils often dilated—perhaps on account of the drugs—so much that his gaze was deep and black. Often, after I had fed the chimeras, I lingered, stroking Håkan’s woolly fringe, and he rubbed his disproportionately large head against my white forearm, which was still plump then. Before long there grew up between us a mute but durable friendship.

“Håkan had good hearing, but the scientists and laboratory animal assistants did not know whether he understood anything of human speech. There had apparently been at one time great hopes for his ca-

capacity for language, and quite early on he learned to react to his own name and understand simple commands, like a dog. But despite regular lessons from a phoniatriest, he never learned to speak. The sounds he made consisted of whimpers, bleats and strange howls that became more impassioned as mealtimes drew near.

“‘That’s a wolf-whistle,’ they used to say.

“He walked on two legs, but with some difficulty, for Håkan had goat’s hoofs, as you know. His forepaws, on the other hand, were three-fingered and almost hairless, and he used them with great skill. He had a little tuft of a tail, and with the exception of his forepaws a thick coat of wolf’s fur covered him from his hoofs to his convex chimpanzee’s forehead. No one could have called him beautiful, however pretty the curve of his horns. There was really extraordinarily little about his appearance that was human, apart from his nose, his shoulders and his shoulder-blades. In his cage Håkan had a swing in which he spent most of his waking hours.

“Everyone knew that Håkan’s time was nearly up; when he reached his tenth birthday the last needle awaited him.

“That thought was hard for me to bear. My own job at Hydra was only temporary, and I had decided that after Håkan I would have nothing more to do with the place. I had not planned anything in advance, but quite unexpectedly a moment came in which I found myself intervening in Håkan’s destiny. And my own life changed too.

“On my last day at work at Hydra, Håkan was awake, and his eyes followed me incessantly. When I pushed my finger through the wires of the cage door to scratch Håkan’s forehead, I realised to my amazement that the door was unlocked and ajar. One of the lab assistants had been careless.

“I opened the door to be able to pat Håkan more easily. But Håkan took the opportunity to clamber out of his cage.

“‘What d’you do that for?’ I said to your father.”

“‘Didn’t you even try to get daddy back into the cage?’ I asked.

“No, I didn’t. I thought it would do him good to walk around the room for a while. There’s not much extra space in laboratory animals’ cages, as you may have guessed.

“As I said, Håkan never learned to walk properly, but in his enthusiasm he stood up and, with the help of his strong forepaws, was able to clamber. His back hoofs slipped on the shiny tiles of the laboratory floor, and he toppled over, whimpering pathetically. I took him in my arms. At that moment, feeling his warmth and his weight

against my breasts, as his pure, woolly scent penetrated my nostrils, I suddenly knew that I never wanted to be parted from Håkan again. Håkan meant nothing to anyone else in the world, and I was the only one Håkan cared for. How could I have rejected his affection—far less abandon him?”

“In other words, you stole daddy.”

“That’s right. I wrapped Håkan in a blanket and carried him as if he were a rucksack through the evening bustle of the streets to my own little bedsit. I could feel his rapid breathing on my neck and cheek, and his gentle warmth spread throughout my body. He weighed about thirty kilos, and I had to rest from time to time. I could not afford a taxi, and I did not dare take the bus with Håkan as I was afraid that he might begin to yelp and attract too much attention.

“You can sleep here,” I said, when we got home.

“I made him a bed in the bath-tub, as I was afraid that some friend might come visiting and I would not have time to hide Håkan. In fact, I lived such a lonely life that it was unlikely in the extreme.”

“But wasn’t he ever missed?”

“I did have one telephone call. It was an assistant, and he asked me if I knew anything about an escaped chimera. I denied it, of course. After that I heard nothing. They forgot me and they forgot Håkan, as if we had never existed.

“We began to live a life of our own. It was a peaceful and harmonious home. I talked to Håkan a lot, and he understood me better each day. I began to be able to make out distinct sounds in his yelps. After a while he began to give short answers to my questions. Often he doubled up the first syllable of a word. Water was wa-wa, sleeping slee-slee. He also learned to smile so that his sharp wolf’s teeth flashed. I realised that his consciousness and capacity for development had been drastically underestimated throughout his short life.

“I saw in him an old soul which was bound to a deformed body, a combination of many human parts. How can we ever be forgiven for the wrong we did him? But still: without that wrong, he would never have been born, and neither would you.

“He began to eat at table, but never really succeeded in learning to use a knife and fork. Because he was so small, I got him a high chair. In the evenings, we listened to music or I read aloud to him. Your father liked Schubert’s Lieder so much that sometimes he used to sink into a kind of semi-conscious ecstasy, which worried me a little.

“I also read poems aloud to him. He was so entranced by these lines that I had to say them every night before we went to sleep. It became our shared ritual:

What is this thing, o love,
that enters the heart through the eyes,
and in the small space inside it, seems to expand?
And what if it should overflow?

“Whenever I remember those lines, I see before me your father’s eyes, in which joy and nameless suffering alternated.

“On television we followed lecture series and children’s programmes. We never watched police series. I told Håkan about my life, my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, all of whom had got on better in life than I had. I told him about failing my exams in math and languages, how I had had to repeat a class, my attempts at dieting and my numerous jobs. I told him about my only lover, a certain bought ledger accountant, who took my virginity. He treated me badly, and the relationship only lasted a couple of weeks.

“I confessed my shame and my humiliation to your father, weeping over my disappointment, and he listened silently, shedding hot tears with me.

“At night I took Håkan into my bed to sleep with me. His gaze uncovered my heart; a selfless, sacred love poured itself into my poor life. Since the accountant, I hadn’t slept with a man. But from Håkan there was no need to fear a curt word. Time after time we sank into one another’s embrace, and I was not troubled by his hard hoofs or his animal smell.

“The fact that I became pregnant by Håkan was, of course, a shock. I had not even thought that a child could be born from our relationship.”

“Did you never consider abortion?”

My mother was silent for a long time, until she admitted she had.

“But only for a moment. For when I truly understood that I was to be a mother, I was so happy that I danced for joy.

“But your father never saw you. He began to be ill when I was three months gone. I would have taken him to hospital, but your father forbade it. I realised that his time really was up; his short life was lived. In his last weeks, your father stopped eating completely. He changed

a great deal toward the end. Not only did he become more and more human, he was also more angelic the closer he slipped toward death.

“He died one Monday morning; it was raining. His body fitted into a large suitcase. I bought a spade, ordered a taxi and drove north. You know where I asked the driver to stop. I dug him a grave alone in a forest clearing.

“When my time came, I went to a private hospital to give birth. As you understand, I was in a difficult position. I told the midwife and obstetrician what to expect. You were born after a long labour by Caesarean section. The doctor promised that he would not reveal anything in public about your unusual origins.”

So: I was born, a hybrid too, a monstrosity, as many people would say. There is more human in me than in my father, but there is also a good deal of goat and chimpanzee and wolf. I do not like to look into the mirror, but I rejoice that I am able to live. We live outside the city, in a rented cabin in the grounds of a large country house. As a child, I ran freely in the fields and grazed. My mother has learned to milk and, when necessary, she is able to work as an assistant milkmaid.

My father’s grave is in a meadow in the estate forest, but no one knows it but we two. My mother has sowed forget-me-nots there, and oriental poppies. From time to time we clear the willow saplings so that the meadow stays light. On the best days of summer we make expeditions there, with a bottle of wine and bread and apples in our picnic basket.

Our lives are as peaceful as my mother and Håkan’s once were, and my mother calls me, too, Håkan. I don’t go outside much during daylight; my appearance attracts too much attention. I cannot even set foot inside the byre, as the cows become very restless. I don’t want to think about the time when my mother will be dead. I hope that my life will be as short as my father’s, for I do not mean to live without my mother.

The beauty of the world never ceases to amaze me. I have more senses, and more sensitive ones, than human beings do. My sense of smell is as keen as a wolf’s. I climb with the agility of a chimpanzee. Why should I not be content with my lot, even if it cannot be called easy?

I believe that one day the age will dawn when there are no longer different mammalian species—human beings and lower mammals. The species will have hybridised and formed combinations that we

cannot now even imagine. Our senses will be keener, we will see new colours and hear voices where now there is mute silence. Then we shall know and sense, understand and rejoice more than we do now.

My father and I are pioneers of the future. The day will dawn when we are all one and all equal. It is years away, millions, maybe even billions, but I do not doubt that that day will dawn.

The evening darkens; I leave my room and open the garden gate without a sound. When I remember I am a goat, I do nothing but long to wander in a meadow. When my wolf's nature wins, I run into the deep forest, strange sounds rise from my throat and I dance alone. Sometimes I disappear for weeks. When I wish to be a chimpanzee, I clamber nimbly into tall trees and like to sit on the roof of our house. I look at the night sky in wonderment. The stars glitter, I hum to myself and my hoofs tap hollowly on the tin roof.

Locally, there is talk of strange things. It is said that one night a lamb was found torn to pieces in the meadow, but that the toothmarks that were found on it were human. My mother gives me a long look, her eyes full of anxiety.

I cannot find anyone like me.



LEENA KROHN has two other stories in *ParaSpheres*, “The Ice Cream Vendor,” and “About the Henbane City.” All three stories are excerpts from her novel, *Pereat mundus*, to be published in the United States in the latter half of 2008 by Omnidawn. In this novel Håkan is an everyman character, taking on different forms. More info on this book is available at www.omnidawn.com/krohn

Leena Krohn is the winner of the Finlandia Prize, Finland's highest literary award. She was born in 1947 in Helsinki, Finland. She has studied philosophy, psychology and literature at Helsinki University and has written about twenty-five books: novels, short stories, fantasy stories, poems and essays. Her books have been translated into more than ten languages. *Tainaron*, *Mail from Another City* (translated into English by Hildi Hawkins) was published in the U.S. by Prime Books in 2004. Krohn lives in Southern Finland. A number of her writings and works are available on her home page at www.kaapeli.fi/krohn

KATE KASTEN

EVER AND ANON

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At first the prince thought of riding headlong into the wood. He fancied the prospect of galloping through the castle doors on his noble steed and cantering straight into the princess's chamber. There, he would lean from his charger and lift the storied beauty onto the saddle. He had always imagined her waking to his kiss charmingly bewildered to find herself atop a horse.

But the stallion was of too grand a girth to negotiate the forest's solid mass of brambles. Nor, in any case, would the prince like to risk sacrificing his horse to the voracious appetite of the wolves rumored to guard the castle entrance. Thus, the prince had proceeded on foot.

Now, wielding his dagger, he slashed the last of the vines and roots that held the great portal closed. It emitted a rusty groan, yielding to his staunch shoulder. He stepped inside.

Here was a majestic hall, where a hundred or more lords and ladies sat at a table before a sumptuous meal. Behind each chair, attendants hovered on the point of taking away a plate or cup, but every eye was closed, and every bosom heaved and fell in the slow movements of sleep. The room resonated with snores. Even the dogs under the table took no advantage of the unprotected feast, but lay curled and twitching in dreams of foxes and rabbits.

The prince scanned the throng for one particular countenance. All the chairs were occupied but one. On it an embroidered cloak lay casually tossed as if its owner had stepped away for a moment. Insensible to his bruises, wounds, and aching limbs, and with no thought to the deep gashes made in his hands by the ravening wolves and piercing thorns, the prince dashed up the grand staircase to seek the sleeping princess.

He searched every chamber, every corner, every cubby until at last, having ascended a winding staircase to a high tower room, he found her. There she stood, not (as his old nurse had described her so often) enchanted forever in an attitude of playing a golden harp, nor (as his father's master of hounds had insisted) lying upon a bed, clad in a gown of transparent silk, her red lips parted and her limbs fallen voluptuously akimbo, but standing gracefully at an ancient spinning wheel, her dainty hand above the spindle as if she had suddenly drawn it back. A drop of ruby blood bejeweled the tip of her finger.

Luxuriant lashes fringed the princess's closed lids and rested thick upon her cheeks, giving her the look of a sweet and innocent child. Atop the sumptuous black tresses that curled around her face and cascaded onto her shoulders was a sapphire crown. Only the faintest breath, like the whisper of a breeze, hinted that the princess was, indeed, asleep and not transformed into a marble statue. And on her sleeping face was a touching expression of wistfulness as though some deep yearning haunted her dreams.

The prince's ordeals—hacking his way through the fearsome, thorny labyrinth, battling the vicious wolves—were as nothing to him compared with the reward of gazing upon her, thus. For she was more wondrously beautiful than all the willing young ladies whom his parents had urged upon him since his coming of age. Any of those maidens could have been his for the asking: the lovely duke's daughter with the amiable trait of finding good humor in the frustrations and mishaps of life, the royal cousin in whose pleasant company he had grown up reading poetry and riding horses, the brilliant and comely princess whose father so valued her good sense that he relied on her for advice in matters of economy and war. They stirred no ardor in him, as rumors of the sleeping beauty had already begun to exert their irresistible influence. Now, said he to himself, my obstinacy is vindicated, for never was a more radiant lady won by man.

He thought her skin as fair and unblemished as an opening petal, her figure surpassing even the imagined form which had stirred his passion as a youth and sustained him through every trial of his quest, her exquisite waist as slender as a sapling, yet joined to such bloom above as would rival the spring blossoming of a plum.

Still, he was afraid to approach her. Suppose she should become frightened on first beholding him? Might she, after a hundred years of dreaming, look upon his scratched and bleeding face and take it for a nightmare? Worse yet, what if the legendary beauty woke to his kiss and rejected his love? Suddenly he grew shy.

He stood for some while watching her in sleep. His hands bled and he held them close to his sides, though they burned to touch her. At last, longing to sweep her into his arms, he approached her, though with great caution, and slowly bent to bring his lips against hers in a kiss so gentle, so soft, so delicate it would barely have disturbed a butterfly's wing. Instantly she awakened.

The beautiful lashes drew back over sleep-misted eyes, and for a moment she looked with puzzlement at the face so close to hers. Then

her pale complexion turned slowly rose-hued, and pinker still, as a full flush spread across her cheeks. Her dark eyes widened, her lips parted, and with exquisite tenderness she laid her fingertips on the prince's scratched and dirt-stained jaw.

"Oh!" she said, in a breathless voice so full of longing that a mourning dove would have sounded merry by comparison. "Oh!" she said again, and at once his arms went round her, his wounded hands leaving the red prints of his bravery on her gown.

Suddenly, the palace bells began to peal and a great clamor rose from the courtyard. Lords and ladies, court musicians, serving maids and men poured forth, praising the day. There came to the two in the tower the barking of dogs, the clatter of plates, the starting up of lutes and pipes and tambourines, but the lovers heard only the drumming of their two hearts.

The engagement ball was given by the prince's parents, who found much to approve in his choice of a bride. For their part, the mother and father of the princess considered their prospective son-in-law a paragon of courage and self-command.

"You are my Prince Charming," whispered the princess, as the two strolled among the great oaks of the palace park. The prince took her hand and pressed it to his wounded cheek, still inflamed where the flesh had been ripped by thorns.

"I shall call you my Sleeping Beauty," he replied.

"Better your *awakened* Beauty," said she, with a sidelong smile.

Plans for the wedding proceeded anon.

It was some weeks before Charming and Beauty were willing to tear themselves from each other's arms long enough to undertake the duties attending their engagement, but finally the lovers had to part, if only for minutes and hours. Charming, on his white steed, led the hunt to provision the wedding banquet with stags. Beauty directed the ladies-in-waiting at their embroidery hoops. Long hours of labor were required to sew the two royal crests—overlapping coronets with unicorns and leopards rampant—on all the linens of her trousseau, including her nightgowns and underskirts (which were found each morning in curious need of pressing, having gotten rumbled in another type of rampancy—so it was jested—that overlapped and crested with regularity every night).

The wedding preparations went on without cease. Two entire kingdoms were involved. Many royal relations who had made foreign alliances needed time to commission gifts and outfit ships for sea travel.

By the night of the engagement ball, Prince Charming found himself in a state of mind not precisely dull, so much as restive. He had drunk a goblet or two of champagne while waiting with the guests for Beauty to make her formal appearance on the grand stairway. The champagne had given him a headache. He was wondering if anyone would notice his slipping out for a canter around the Park.

At that moment he heard a common gasp of astonishment and saw the assemblage gape in the direction of the great hall. He turned, expecting to see his betrothed, resplendent on the staircase.

Instead, there stood near the foot of the stairs the most enchanting woman Prince Charming had ever laid eyes upon, excluding (he told himself without conviction) the Sleeping Beauty. Golden hair floated around the woman's face like spun silk. A diaphanous gown, made of no earthly material he could recognize, clung to her perfect breasts and reflected the candlelight in the room with the fluid shimmer of quicksilver. Her skirt billowed wide and swept the floor, yet somehow managed to suggest, as she took a step forward, the sinuous movement of voluptuous hips beneath.

Besides the perfection of her figure, her face—glorious in all details—eyes, lips, brow, chin, cheekbones—had a simple goodness, a becoming timidity, even—the prince divined—a tremulous awe. Yes, he detected in her an unbelieving joy at being at the ball, as if—impossible to imagine!—she were not accustomed to such grand surroundings.

She had not yet seen him. To prevent her being overwhelmed—for he sensed in her an impulse to flee that might be as easily elicited as if she were a skittish gazelle—he tore off his crown and hid it behind a pillar. She drew an endearing breath of resolve, and, holding her fan against her bosom—for courage, it appeared—entered the ballroom. Oh! What rapture when the prince saw how lightly she stepped. How gracefully, and on the daintiest of feet, so delicate that they seemed almost to be...he stared...*were*, in fact, shod in *glass*!

All other thoughts flew from his mind when he considered what grace and delicacy a woman must possess to walk in glass slippers without breaking them. The mysterious beauty, he sensed, would be a bewitching dance partner.

"'Tis only courtesy to beg a stranger for a dance," he reasoned, stepping quickly forth. Then, great was his enchantment to find the gorgeous creature struck mute with shyness at the offer of his hand!

He led her to a protected corner. "My lady," he breathed into her ear, "be at ease. In this house you shall be accorded the reverence due a princess. For, if royalty you are not, then royalty you should be. Your corona of golden hair alone serves better than a crown to announce your nobility."

"I...am...honored, sir," stammered the stranger and hid her face in his shoulder.

Each dance lasted a moment, yet also an eternity. The crystal slippers tinkled on the paving like droplets of rain upon a brook, or bells round the neck of a lamb. The prince's thoughts, as he felt the silken tresses brush his cheek, were bittersweet. "How shall I bear to be parted from this sylph? No, it is impossible. I must have her no matter what storm of condemnation I bring down upon myself!"

Not long after midnight, the prince's betrothed, Sleeping Beauty, made her entrance. She was late, having caught a corner of her train on a doorstep and torn its full length just as she was descending to the ball to greet her guests. Seamstresses had had to be roused from their beds to sew the train back together. When Beauty at last took her place at the top of the stairs, to the ceremonious accompaniment of French horns, the prince was not among the throng still awaiting her appearance.

Charming entered the ballroom some minutes afterwards, too late to lead her in. In his doublet he appeared to hide something that Beauty took to be a champagne glass. She made no mention of it, nor did she pursue the subject when he apologized for his absence, claiming to have ridden out on a moonlight gallop to clear his head. There were, it was true, beads of sweat on his brow.

Beauty did not berate him, but after formally greeting the prince's relations, politely toasting invited dignitaries, and attending to other such official duties, she left the ball, feeling hurt and aggrieved. She lay awake all night in her bedchamber, wondering, with sinking heart, if her prospective husband would prove to be a drunkard.

In the morning, one of her ladies-in-waiting, while pouring her mistress's breakfast tea, revealed the truth: the prince had been seen dancing for the better part of the evening on a secluded balcony with a beautiful stranger whose name no one seemed to recall.

“Forgive me,” Prince Charming begged his fiancée when she confronted him. “My betrayal of you is iniquitous. No one knows it better than I.” Nonetheless, he announced his determination to discover his mysterious dancing partner’s identity and ask for her hand in marriage, for he felt that he could not live without her. Sleeping Beauty, desolate and rumored to be with child, returned with her parents to their realm, leaving Charming free to roam the kingdom in search of his true love.

It was a scandal throughout the two kingdoms. The prince had broken his engagement and was now traveling the land on his white steed, searching village, town, city, castle, even cottage and hut for the mysterious, shy beauty with whom he had danced.

He castigated himself ceaselessly for allowing her to elude him and was tormented by the image of that moment when, at the stroke of midnight, just as he was drowning in the blue pools of her eyes, she had suddenly wrenched herself from his arms and fled the palace, running as gracefully as she had danced, and so lightly that even in her haste to descend the stone stairs, her glass slippers did not shatter, though one was cast off in the escape. He had scooped the slipper up as he rushed after her, almost dropping it when he stumbled in the road over a pumpkin fallen off a peasant’s cart. Jumping to his feet, he stared helplessly in every direction. But the beautiful stranger had disappeared into the night as if she had never existed.

In rain and snow, under blistering sun and glacial moon, he rode the lanes and high roads hither and yon. He ate and slept little. Everywhere he went, he carried the glass slipper and asked each woman of the kingdom to try it on. There could be only one, he believed, with foot so dainty that it could fit into the tiny, fragile shoe and also dance in it. He would not rest until he found her.

A year passed, during which he searched in vain. Finally, having sought his love in every corner of the land, he returned, haggard and weary, to his parents’ home. With bowed head and broken heart, he rode up the cobbled streets leading to the palace.

Suddenly, a torrent of rain fell upon him, soaking him to the skin. Looking up in surprise, he saw that it was not rainfall, but a bucketful of wash water poured on him from a house above the street.

A young woman at the window looked out in great distress at the misfortune she had caused. Before he could get a look at her, she cried

an apology and vanished from the window. Prince Charming recognized the voice at once. He leaped from his horse and forcibly entered the house, a dwelling he had visited the year before at the commencement of his search.

Three women were knitting by the fireside—a sour-faced mother and her two daughters. They stared at the intruder, astonished.

“Where is the maid who poured water on the Prince?” he demanded.

The women threw down their knitting and rushed to greet him, the mother begging his forgiveness for her careless servant. The daughters then scurried off to fetch food and drink, and cloths to dry him. But the Prince would have none of it. He bounded up the stairs and searched the house over until, throwing open the door to a small scullery, he found a beautiful young woman dressed in rags and cowering in a corner. Instantly, he threw himself at her feet.

“Ah!” he said, gazing up at her heavenly face. “Even in rags you are the angel of my dreams.”

Cinderella (for that was her name, she confessed to him later) blushed and turned away.

The prince grasped her lovely hand. “Why did you not reveal yourself when I first came to this house?”

“Oh, Prince Charming,” she replied, tears threatening to spill over her golden lashes, “how could I, after I learned who you were and that you were betrothed to another?”

“My darling,” said the prince, hanging his head, “You are a good and true creature, and I am not worthy to kiss your precious foot.” But kiss it he did, and repeatedly, before fitting the glass slipper onto it. Then he cried bitter tears and at last convinced Cinderella that his engagement had been broken off for a year, that Sleeping Beauty was reconciled to it, that she had already married her father’s cousin—an elderly earl of considerable distinction—and now had a handsome baby boy. This defense—to Prince Charming’s credit—was true.

Eventually Cinderella gave way to the hidden passion she had harbored for him all that twelvemonth, and finally, after much fear on the prince’s part that he might, still, at the last minute, lose her, they were married.

On their wedding trip, Prince Charming and his bride passed through many lands. Cinderella had never seen the world, and it pleased her husband to show it to her. He directed their coachman

to stop at quaint cottages, venerable churches and towns of antiquity. She admired nature in all its forms and begged to alight at each brook, bower, or hillock with a rustic view. She was entranced by all she saw.

But after awhile this idle rambling began to wear on the prince. He found himself suffering not precisely from irritation so much as indifference. In consideration of her feelings, he did his best to hide his lassitude, but each time Cinderella urged them down yet another dusty, out-of-the-way lane, the prince grew increasingly restless to return home to horse and hounds.

On one stifling afternoon, at the bottom of a meandering lane in the middle of nowhere, Cinderella bade the coachman stop the horses at the site of an ancient, crumbling tower.

An unusual spectacle had attracted her attention. An old hunch-backed crone was climbing from the tower window by way of a length of auburn rope. Prince Charming yawned at the curious scene. After the crone reached the ground and hobbled down the road, the prince heard the old woman croak over her shoulder in a menacing voice, "No one shall ever have you but I!" and he looked back to see a ravishing young woman in the tower window. She displayed a look of both deep resignation and profound sadness. The prince suddenly realized that the auburn rope was the woman's magnificent hair, plaited in a braid so thick and long it reached all the way to the ground.

Cinderella was remarking on the agile old woman's brisk progress up the lane and did not notice the younger woman at the window, but as the carriage retraced its journey to the high road, Prince Charming made a mental note of the exact route back.



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K. BANNERMAN

ARMEGEDN, OR THE END OF THE WORD

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Matt leaned towards Diane, still covered in the slick perspiration of their union, and tucked the sheets close about her breasts in a brief, loving gesture. He paused and decided against uttering the vague promise of an emotion he didn't feel. That cast-off statement would make work awkward, and they both knew that this afternoon romp was not about commitment or fondness. This was bestial release, plain and simple, so he held his tongue and instead wondered if it was wise to share a taxi to work. Should they splurge and take two? He opened his mouth to ask if she thought it too soon to be careful about office gossip, and found his throat unwilling to move.

He swallowed and raised a palm to his Adam's apple.

Diane propped herself on one elbow, noticing the concern blossoming over his features.

He tried again. He opened his mouth, focused all his thoughts to his sentence. His vocal cords twitched but no sound emerged. Matt bolted upright in bed and clasped his neck as fears of a minor stroke ricocheted through his brain. He could still swallow, he could move his tongue, his jaw opened and closed with familiar ease. But sound, the essence of words, escaped him. He pushed his breath through his throat but all he could manage was a meager wheeze.

And Diane, the careless tart, just sat there and watched him struggle! He raised furious eyes to her, to reprimand her for her unsympathetic silence, and saw that she was struggling to ask what was wrong.

The words had been stolen from both of them!

Her shoulders heaved in great, noiseless sobs, and he grabbed the phone next to the bed to call 911 before realizing it was useless. How could he explain? A recorded message claimed all circuits were busy, and he slammed the receiver down with such force that it cracked the plastic casing. Matt tossed Diane's skirt to her as he jerked his own pants on, and she understood, dressing herself while wiping the terrified tears from her face with the hem of the bedsheets. They took the elevator down to the apartment lobby, lips clamped and rimmed with white, and under the gentle hum of the elevator motor she reached out to hold his hand. It wasn't until they exited into the busy street, however, that they realized the magnitude of the situation.

All manner of people congregated in mute confusion, businessmen with beggars, bicycle couriers and taxi drivers, mothers holding babies that wailed empty air. Hundreds upon hundreds milled in little bewildered groups, gasping like minnows. Most were in tears, frustrated and afraid, but some convulsed with silent laughter, buckled over against the buildings as the entire population opened and closed their puppet mouths. Some were crimson-faced with effort, trying without success to squeeze out their constipated vowels.

Diane and Matt stood in the doorway of his apartment block, and even if they could have spoken, the sight of so many would have struck them dumb.

What could they do but return upstairs, holding their heads and staring into space with the shock of it all? Matt made sandwiches and Diane turned on the gas fireplace in the living room, slumping in his favorite chair by the hearth. As he handed her a plate, out of habit she tried to thank him for the lunch, but only a faint hiss escaped. Her chin trembled.

Matt, disgusted by her simpering, left her to find a pen, but he could find no paper in the sparse apartment. As he passed, he grabbed the copy of *Finnegan's Wake* from the shelf, and he cracked the spine to a random page. Tearing it from the binding, crouching before her, he set pen to paper and tried to write.

Nothing.

His fingers fumbled, the dot of ink spread further and further. As his throat constricted, so too did his fingers freeze, and at last he scrawled a useless line and opened his maw to let out a scream as loud as a summer breeze. Diane flinched, expecting sound but hearing only the crackling of the fire and the rustle of traffic outside. Enraged, he crumpled the slip of paper between his wide hands and tossed it into the flames.

"Gawds!" he exclaimed like a gunshot.

They both seized with the sound.

He tried again, as cautious as a boy who's found a diamond in the gutter and dreads dropping it down the storm drain. "How..." He swallowed. "You...going?"

She furrowed her delicate brow, fighting to find the noises she needed. "Now...found...sound." A triumphant grin broke across her features. "When? How the? What could?" She gave a little squeal of frustration that sounded like "upploud" and curled her girlish hands into porcelain fists. With a sharp motion she yanked the book from his hands to study the first page and, committing a line to memory,

she tore it from the binding and laid it on the fire. They watched the corners curl and the text crisp. It blackened into ash, she grabbed his fingers, and said in a high, clear voice, "riverun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay."

He smiled broadly and clapped his hands to show his delight, then gestured, "Again! Again!" Diane took a deep breath and paused.

Gone!

The sound had vanished into the air. She clenched her teeth like a dog and stiffened in unexpressed rage.

But he grabbed the entire book and consigned it to the flames, where it took only a minute to turn to ash, releasing a myriad of words.

"Waste nothing!" he said, "Speaking sparing!"

"Yes!" she agreed, then looked ashamed and nodded.

"Library? Go?" he replied, pointing to the door, "Burn all!"

Diane winced at the thought but nodded again. "Tell others."

They had only so long until they used up their volume of words, and others may have caught some of the liberated phonemes and spoken them without realizing their worth. They knew they must find people to help them, and using stilted gestures and random syllables, they expressed what both suspected: with every utterance, they were depleating a finite resource.

Who could have guessed that centuries of speaking had drained an exhaustible supply? The libraries burned, the bookstores collapsed. Families piled boxes of pulp novels on pyres, corporations shredded useles files, newspapers torched yesterday's copy. Leters and encyclopedias and telefone books became vast storage pools of stagnant sounds, worth more than their wayt in gold. "E" and "S" were precious, "Q" and "Z" were stil available in abundance, ampersands had not yet been exhausted & could be used without guilt. The akt of ryting wuz a forbiden pleasure, mindles bable wuz a sin; why, u might be stealing wordz from someone who realy needed them. Only the arrogant engaged in conversationz. Only the wasteful used doubl consonants.

Languag had becum 2 precious 2 squander.



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MARY MACKEY

THIRD INITIATION: A GIFT FROM THE LAND OF DREAMS

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The Dark Mother gives three gifts
Aba, Shallah, Nashah,
One comes from the river
One comes from the earth
One comes from the land of dreams

from "The Riddle Song"
Kataka, Fifth Millennium B.C.

Marrah sat by the spring watching it freeze over. The ice was slowly growing as milky as a blind eye. Not a bad comparison, she thought. She was staring at the healing spring and the spring was staring back at her without seeing her, just like the Imsha.

Or maybe the Imsha did see her. Who could tell? Ever since Marrah had arrived to begin the third stage of her initiation, the veiled figure had not acknowledged her presence. It just sat on its rock with its arms clasped around its knees, presumably lost in thoughts too deep for ordinary mortals to share. So far they had not exchanged a single word. It was now late afternoon and a sharp wind was blowing down from the north, spitting snow and tossing dust and pine needles in their faces, but the Imsha seemed indifferent to the weather. Perhaps it lived outside all the time and paid no more attention to the cold than a beaver or a bear; or perhaps, Marrah thought, it had on more warm underclothes than she did.

She put her mitten over her nose and breathed a little warmth into it. She was just wondering wearily if they were going to sit there all day, when the Imsha suddenly turned to her in a sweep of black veils that reminded her of crows' wings. "Cut off all your hair," it commanded. The words were in Old Language, but the accent was strange, as if each word were being rolled across its tongue like a small ball.

Although she didn't like the idea of cutting her hair in weather cold enough to freeze the paws off a rabbit, Marrah was relieved. Her patience had paid off: she had been accepted, and the third and final stage of her initiation had finally begun.

She bowed obediently to the veiled figure, took her knife from its scabbard, and tried to figure out how to go about giving herself a haircut while wearing thick mittens. Finally she gave up, pulled off the mittens, and set about chopping off her hair as best she could.

It was an awkward process and about halfway through it she realized that obeying the Imsha was going to be a lot harder than obeying Glyntsa. The flint blade was not particularly sharp, her fingers were stiff with cold, and she nicked her scalp more than once; but when you accepted an initiation, you did what you were told to do without asking questions, so she worked away doggedly, wondering if this was how Stavan felt when he scraped off his beard hairs. What would he have said if he could have seen her? He had always loved her hair. Black as a raven's wing, he used to say; curly as smoke; soft as new grass. He had combed it and braided it and even written a poem to it once a long time ago, before Keru and Luma were born, and now she was cutting it off with no more ceremony than if it were a patch of weeds.

Her hair fell into her lap and piled up at her feet—great hanks of it all tangled together like fine twine. She looked at it with growing regret, but she went on cutting. When she finished, she ran her hand over her nearly bare scalp. It felt cold and bristly, and she realized that she was going to have to wear a hat indoors as well as out—provided she ever got indoors again. She picked up her hair, untangled it as best she could, bound it with a bit of leather, and presented it to the Imsha with a bow.

To her surprise, the Imsha refused it. "Weave it into a snare."

A snare! Only fowlers could make a decent snare out of human hair, and they never worked outdoors in a stiff wind with a tangle of curls. Curly hair was fit for stuffing pillows maybe but not for weaving. Marrah reminded herself to be patient. This was undoubtedly a test of her sincerity as an initiate, and if she had not been so cold, she might even have found it an interesting challenge.

Pulling off her mittens again, she blew some more warmth into her fingers and began to wind the longest strands of her hair together and tie them into one of those fine, knotted nets the fowlers used to catch small birds, but as she had feared, her hair was almost impossible to work with. She struggled for a long time, creating snarls and messes and knots. The light faded, but still she went on weaving. She hoped that the Imsha would tell her to stop, but the mysterious figure just sat there.

That night she slept behind a log, wrapped in her cloak, with her bare head tucked into her hood and the hair clutched to her chest so it would not blow away. When she woke the next morning, the Imsha

was still sitting on the same rock, as if it had never moved. Marrah began to wonder if it was human. There was clearly to be no breakfast and no fire, but at least the sun was up and the wind had died down, so she went back to weaving her hair and by midday she had a snare of sorts, irregular in places but strong enough to catch a sparrow. Spread between two bushes, the net would be invisible from a few paces, and if she was not careful, she might forget and walk into it herself. She rolled it up very carefully, making sure that none of the loose ends tangled. It took sure hands to make a snare of human hair, and she was proud of her work, but if the Imsha was pleased, it gave no sign. It held the snare for a moment and then returned it to her with no more ceremony than someone handing back an old basket.

“You’ll use this to catch what you need,” it said cryptically.

Marrah’s heart sank. She tried to imagine herself spending an entire winter trapping birds with a snare the size of a child’s tunic. She would much rather dig roots and crack nuts. Any bird small enough to get caught in that snare would hardly be worth the wood it would take to cook it. She was tempted to ask if she could go back to Kataka and get some fishhooks, but before she could get the words out, the veiled figure rose to its feet and motioned for her to follow. The two of them began to walk up a small path that led away from the pool, climbing the hillside through the bare trees.

With every step Marrah took, she grew more anxious. The trees looked strange in this part of the forest, bent and elderly with protruding roots that reminded her of birds’ feet, and she could not help feeling that something unpleasant was about to happen. As the Imsha walked, a cold white mist seemed to rise around her, and although it was broad daylight, Marrah heard the hoot of an owl. Somewhere in the distance a dog howled and another dog joined it. As the wind blew small clouds over the sun, the shadows along the side of the trail seemed to take human shapes, and once she was sure she heard the call of a cuckoo—which would have been fine if it had been summer, but there in the midwinter forest, the bird’s bubbling trill made the hair stand up on the back of her neck. She walked on, knowing it was too late to turn back, as a kind of slow terror crept over her.

The path crossed the ridge and then took a sharp turn to the left. They had gone downhill only a short distance when they came to a clearing. Suddenly the sun came out, a mild breeze sprang up, and Marrah’s fears blew away like so many dry leaves. At the center of the clearing stood a small house, so beautiful and inviting that she won-

dered if the Imsha had conjured it out of the dream world. It was made of white clay and wheat-straw thatch like all the houses of Kataka, but it was shaped like the upper half of a large egg. The walls were covered with red spirals that swirled like smoke. Birds flew around the oval doorway; flowers of every color wreathed windows; strange animals marched at ground level or hung from the huge green vines that had been painted so that they seemed to climb into the smoke hole.

“Norhabi, lyrubu, wuburi,” the Imsha said, pointing to the animals. “Mubumu, water reeds; patabi, the flowers of my land.” Marrah did not understand any of the foreign words, but they had a melodious sound.

“Do you come from far away, honored one?” she asked, bowing respectfully to the Imsha. Under ordinary circumstances she would have said “honored mother” or “honored uncle,” but the closer she got to the Imsha the less certain she became.

“I come from the south,” the Imsha said, and it laughed that warm, ambiguous laugh that could have been a man’s or a woman’s. “Every third generation my people send a priestess north to Kataka and the Katakans send us one in return. It’s a long trip and I can recall getting quite seasick when the sailors took me across the Sea of Blue Waves, not to mention lonely, but it was my duty, so I did it. For time out of mind, my people and the Katakans have shared the wisdom of the Dark Mother, and now I’ll share some of it with you if you prove worthy.”

The Imsha stepped forward, unhooked the leather curtain that covered the door of the house, and motioned for Marrah to enter. Before it stepped over the threshold, it paused as if inspecting Marrah from behind its black veils. The long black beads on its headdress swayed slightly. Approval? Marrah hoped so.

“You’re a mother, aren’t you?”

“Yes, honored one.”

“I’d have rather had you when you were younger, but still motherhood is a great teacher. You’d be surprised how few initiates make it through the first night—even the young ones—but you’re Lalah’s granddaughter so I expected you to have the strength to do what you were ordered to do and the sense not to complain. There was never a more stubborn woman born than your grandmother. She came to me when her breasts were high, more years ago than I care to count, and if her hands had just been a little steadier,” the Imsha held two gloved fingers together as if pinching salt, “I’d have given her the full initiation.”

The inside of the house was as simple as the outside was elaborate: cool, whitewashed walls, a small clay bench that ran around one side,

and a round fire pit filled with white sand and glowing charcoal that gave off welcome warmth. Marrah noticed a rough ladder that led to a small sleeping loft piled with sheepskins, a large Katakan water jar painted with the usual designs, a cup, a few pretty bowls, a grinding stone, and—best of all—baskets of nuts, grain, dried fruit, flour, and meat. Relieved that she was not going to have to live on sparrows all winter, she stood and waited for the Imsha to sit before she sat herself, but the Imsha had something more interesting in mind. Standing with its back to Marrah, it began to unveil itself. It was wearing many layers, which explained why it had managed to survive the night outside in comfort, but as it dropped its cloak to the floor and turned around, Marrah gasped with surprise. The Imsha had the breasts of a woman, but its face was bearded.

“What are you?” Marrah cried, and was immediately embarrassed because what kind of question was that for an initiate to ask?

The Imsha laughed and went on taking off its outer wraps. It was as old a person as she had ever seen, old beyond all belief, thin as a bundle of twigs, with dark, bright eyes and not a tooth in its mouth as far as Marrah could tell, but it was its skin that was the most amazing thing about it. Marrah had seen many different kinds of people during years she traveled with Stavan and Arang, but she had never before seen skin this shade. The Imsha was the color of the Goddess Earth Herself: not the reddish earth of the western forests or the pale dry earth of the cliffs, but the dark, fertile earth of a field that could grow wheat and lentils. If the Dark Mother ever appeared in a human body, Marrah thought, She would look like this. She felt a thrill of terror. What kind of power must lie in a being who united both sexes and was the color of the Mother?

The Imsha stripped to its inner tunic, sat down on the clay bench, and stretched out its legs to warm its feet by the fire. “Calm down,” it said. “I’m not a divine being. I’m human, just like you. The only difference between us is that you were born woman, and I was born both woman and man.” It stroked its small, silky beard and closed its eyes as if remembering its strange southern land where animals hung from trees and water reeds flowered. “The priestesses who attended my birth told my mother that the Dark Mother had sent me to remind Her human children that All Is One. That well may be true.” It grinned a slow, toothless grin. “But I think I was sent for a more pleasant reason. Do you remember the Sixth Commandment of the Divine Sisters?”

“The one that says we are to enjoy ourselves because our joy is pleasing to Her?”

The Imsha nodded. "Well, in my time I've had more joy than most people. I calculate that I'm somewhere near ninety years old, maybe more. For a good seventy of those years, I had the pleasure of a man and the pleasure of a woman both, much of it in this very room. If that sleeping mat up there could talk," the Imsha pointed to the loft, "it would sing like a chorus of nightingales."

"Which pleasure was better?" Marrah put her hand over her mouth and stared at the Imsha apologetically. She had not meant to ask such an intimate question, but it must have been all right because the Imsha leaned back and yawned, and its old face suddenly seemed younger.

"The pleasure of men is sharper, but the pleasure of women is longer," it said agreeably. "Often I pitied my lovers—although I must say they never complained about me. Most people look at the world as if they are staring at it through a little hole: they see a bit of elbow here and a bit of nose there, but never the whole." It paused. "But I always saw everything, and it is my job to show you as much of it as you can bear: man and woman; past and present; death and life; the great circle that goes and comes and comes and goes, and rolls on without ever stopping. But first..." The Imsha paused again and studied Marrah. "First, you must make me a perfect pot—or a perfect statue if you'd rather, although statues are harder."

For a moment, Marrah had the impression that she had not heard correctly. "A perfect pot?" she echoed. "A perfect statue?" This seemed too easy.

The Imsha nodded. It rose slowly to its feet, picked up its discarded clothing, and began to get dressed again. "You will find the picks you need to dig the clay, and the sieves, the soaking jars, and such things out in the little shed by the kiln. You will have to cut your own wood, but there's an ax. Glyntsa tells me you are already an accomplished potter, taught by Bindar himself. Did you know that your great-uncle came to me for initiation too? The trees around this house were little saplings in those days, and I still had my teeth." It sighed. "I turned Bindar into a master potter but your grandmother, as I said before, was destined for other things. Unsteady hands; but a good queen, I hear; one of the best."

Marrah was relieved to discover that this third initiation was going to be so easy. The final powers of the Dark Mother were so shrouded in mystery that she had imagined she might be set to all sorts of terrifying, dangerous, even impossible tasks. But she was only being asked to make one perfect pot or statue, and she had made more pots and

statues than she could count over the last six years. She might not be a masterpotter like her great-uncle, but she had steady hands.

"I'll bring the pot to you in three days," she said boldly. The Imsha said nothing. It just turned and left.

At first, Marrah was afraid she had offended it by being immodest, but as she stood at the door she heard laughter coming from the re-treating form. It was not the dignified laughter of an elder or the warm laughter of the Imsha. It was the wildly amused giggling of a young girl who has just heard a very funny story.

The Imsha had every reason to laugh. A perfect pot did not take three days to make or even three weeks. Marrah's hair had grown down to her ears, winter was over, and the frogs were singing in the healing spring before she made anything acceptable, and there were many days—especially at first—when she was half convinced that the final initiation of the Dark Goddess was nothing more than a bad joke foisted on unsuspecting strangers.

Had she been in Shara, making a pot would have involved rolling prepared clay into coils, smoothing them together, and firing the result in one of the temple kilns, but here she had to do everything as if no one had ever made a pot before. Some days she gathered and prepared the clay, prying large lumps of it out of the quarrying place with a deer-antler pick. Actually there were several quarrying places, and she visited them all in turn, sometimes coming home with baskets of red lumps, sometimes with white, sometimes with a pale yellow.

It was demanding work, especially during the weeks when the ground was frozen, and every time she dug there were certain rituals to be observed, which she attended to scrupulously. Since clay was part of the body of the Goddess Earth, she would sprinkle holy water on it and pray to the damp mud before she took it from the ground. Then she would lug it back in a carrying basket, separate it into smaller lumps, and spread it out in front of the fire, turning it occasionally so it would dry evenly. When it crumbled in the palm of her hand, she would pick out the stones, soak it again, sieve it through an open-weave basket, and mix it with fine, volcanic binding sand in the usual way, spreading the wet mass out on the floor, tramping on it, and pulling up the edges as if she were kneading a giant loaf of bread. When the clay was mixed to the consistency of a heavy cake batter, she would spread it out to dry a bit more, and then divide it into equal-sized balls that she stored in a large basket wrapped in pieces of damp linen.

On other days, she would prepare slips and paints of various colors from the small baskets of pigmented earth that she found among her food stores: red mostly, but also yellow, buff, white, and gray. Or she would chop wood to feed the kilning fire. But most of the time she made pots, and later, statues. At first she made only a few, confident that they were as close to perfection as anyone could demand, but when she brought them to the Imsha, the Imsha would look at them for a moment and toss them over its shoulder.

“Not good enough,” it would say. “Try again.” Marrah got used to the sound of breaking pottery that spring: first the dull crack and then the shards pattering down on the stones. Nothing she did was good enough, not the pretty, delicate statues of Batal, not the breast-shaped water jugs, not even the simple cups that every ten-year-old knew how to make. “What do you want?” she cried one afternoon, completely frustrated.

“Bring them to me wet.”

“You mean unkilned?”

“No, wet, and don’t make one at a time; make several dozen.”

So after that, Marrah brought undried pots by the score and the Imsha stopped tossing them over its shoulder. Instead it took each one, balanced it in its hand, and inspected it. Then it would sit it down, cut it in half, and show Marrah what she had done wrong. Sometimes the sides of the pot were not of even thickness, sometimes the rim was just a little less than round, sometimes the flaw was something Marrah could not see no matter how hard she looked. Occasionally the Imsha would not even bother to cut a pot.

“This one will crack,” it would declare, and sure enough, if Marrah fired that particular pot, it would come out of the kiln in pieces.

If anyone had asked Marrah what she was learning during those long, disappointing days, she would have said: “Not much,” but slowly she began to lose herself in pottery making, and for the first time in many months she spent long periods without mourning for Keru and Arang or worrying about Stavan. Grief and loneliness disappeared, her thoughts stayed in one place, and if she was not exactly happy, she was as close to happiness as she had been since the nomad raid.

She learned patience that spring, but she must have been learning other things too, things she didn’t even know she was learning, because one rainy night in early summer she began to dream in an entirely new way. She never knew why her dreams changed. Perhaps all those weeks of struggling with the clay had changed the way she saw the world; perhaps the Imsha had thrown her into some kind of trance

without her knowing it, or put something in her food; or perhaps the dreams were a gift from the Dark Mother. But wherever they came from, the dreams were as real as life.

The first dream came without warning: suddenly she found herself standing in a nomad tent inhaling the familiar scent of smoke, wet wool, and dogs. It was night, but a pale stream of moonlight was pouring through the smoke hole. She froze in terror, convinced for one terrible moment that she was still Vlahan's wife and prisoner. Then she saw Stavan lying on a pile of sheepskins, his face turned to the moonlight.

There was nothing in the scene to suggest that it was a dream. Everything was solid: the usual nomad cooking baskets were stacked by the fire pit; the felt rug was warm under her bare feet; and Stavan was as much there as he had been in all the years they'd been together.

She went over to him and knelt by his side. He looked thinner and she saw a new, half-healed scar on his cheek. Bending down, she kissed him, feeling the warmth of his lips, breathing in the smell and taste of him. He started awake and clutched his dagger, but when he saw who was kissing him, he threw it aside.

"Marrah!" he cried. "How did you get here?"

"I don't know."

"What happened to your hair?"

"I cut it for my initiation."

"Come here, my love." He took her in his arms and drew her down beside him, and they kissed each other, and she woke crying his name.

For four nights in a row she dreamed of Stavan. On the morning of the fifth day, she went in search of the Imsha. She found it sitting in its usual place beside the healing pool. "How do you like the Dream World?" it called out as soon as it caught sight of her. "How do you like sharing joy again with your handsome nomad lover?"

Marrah stopped in her tracks. "How do you know what I've been dreaming?"

"It's my business to know. I could watch too, but I decided long ago not to. So tell me, has the lovemaking been enjoyable?"

"Yes, very." The idea that the Imsha could see her dreams was so disconcerting—not to mention embarrassing—that Marrah was speechless. Finally she found her tongue. "But are these dreams real?"

"Real?" The Imsha laughed.

"Am I really with Stavan? Does he know I'm there? Is he somewhere far away dreaming the same dreams or am I alone in this? When Glyntsa taught me how to listen to the animals, I took a special powder; before I

heard the voice of the Butterfly Goddess, Chilana, I ate a live caterpillar. But this time I've drunk nothing, eaten nothing—at least nothing that I know of—and still it keeps happening, so I need to know: what have you done to me? Please, honored one, help me understand. Have you put me in a trance without me realizing it? Am I really kissing Stavan, or is this just my longing for him speaking through my dreams?"

The Imsha stopped laughing. "I suggest you ask him those questions the next time you see him." It stretched out its hand. "Enough chatter. Give me your pots. You brought some, didn't you? Or have you been too busy dreaming love dreams to keep the kiln fire hot?"

Obviously it had no intention of telling her whether her dreams were real. Marrah felt more confused than ever. She fumbled in her carrying basket and took out the three small bowls she had packed as she hurried out the door. They were nothing much, just half-globes of reddish brown clay painted with snake signs that had turned black in the kiln.

The Imsha took one of the bowls and balanced it on the palm of its hand. "Not bad," it said. It inspected another. "You're coming along nicely." It picked up the final bowl and was silent for a long time. Finally it handed the bowl back to Marrah. "Lovemaking must agree with you," it said. "This one is perfect." Things moved quickly after that. As soon as it had pronounced the bowl perfect, the Imsha rose to its feet and ordered Marrah to go get her snare. Marrah obeyed, running so fast that briars tore at her tunic and twigs stung her legs. When she returned with the snare carefully rolled in a piece of linen, she stood panting, trying to catch her breath, but the Imsha gave her no time to recover.

"Hang it on that elderberry bush," it ordered. "And hang it low to the ground."

Marrah unrolled the snare and hung it on the elderberry bush with great care, knowing if she dropped it, she would never be able to untangle the strands. The snare caught the wind and billowed. It was a delicate thing, a spiderweb of black hairs and every one from her own head. The Imsha inspected it and gave a grunt of approval. "Do you remember when I told you that you'd catch what you needed in this?"

"Yes, honored one."

"Are you ready?"

Marrah had no idea what it meant by "ready," but she nodded and as she did so, the Imsha suddenly grabbed her by the wrist. What happened next was so strange that it took away what little breath she had left. As soon as the Imsha's hand touched her arm, Marrah fell into a

deep trance. For a moment everything was a confused jumble of color and light. Then suddenly the two of them began to shrink. Down and down they went, growing smaller and smaller until the boulders around the pool looked like mountains and the grass looked like trees. A butterfly flew over them, as huge as a ship, its blue and yellow wings glowing like fire, and a chorus of frogs roared in her ears like the rushing of a great river.

In front of them, the elderberry leaves became the size of sails and the snare grew large as a house. The Imsha led Marrah toward the great net woven of black ropes—each as thick as her arm—and as they approached, the snare suddenly stiffened and stopped billowing in the wind.

“Time has stopped,” the Imsha announced, but Marrah barely heard. She was staring at a swallow that had frozen in the air above her, and she felt a rapture that was beyond terror. “Look,” the Imsha commanded.

Marrah looked and saw that every opening in the snare had become a window, each opening into a different world. In one window she saw herself on her coming-of-age day, leaping from a high cliff into the surf; in another she saw herself pulling Stavan from the sea; and in still another she saw Keru and Luma at the moment they were born. Shara was there and so were the steppes; here, she was Vlahan’s wife and a prisoner, gathering dung in baskets and being beaten; there, she was Lalah’s beloved granddaughter, nursing her babies on the roof as she chatted with Dalish. In some of the windows she was middle-aged, and in some she was an old woman sitting in the sun beside a young woman she didn’t recognize. Frightened, she closed her eyes.

“I can’t bear these visions!” she cried. “Take them away!”

The Imsha laughed and tightened its grip on Marrah’s wrist. “What are you afraid of?”

“I’m afraid I’ll see my own death.”

“You won’t see your own death until you ask to see it. Open your eyes, Marrah, daughter of Sabalah. Be brave. Open your eyes and see the far, far distant future.”

Marrah opened her eyes and found that she and the Imsha were standing in front of one of the windows, looking into some kind of huge house, bigger than any motherhouse ever built. Blue-green light was coming from long, glowing lanterns, and people dressed in shining robes were walking slowly, looking at things in strange boxes. The sides of the boxes were clear like water, but they were solid. Marrah saw

Hansi spears behind the solid water; arrows; daggers; and the bones of a man surrounded by a great quantity of weapons and gold.

“Come this way,” the Imsha whispered, and it and Marrah seemed to float through the window into the house, drifting down endless dim corridors until they came to another room. There was only one person there, a middle-aged woman with gray-brown hair and boots with strange heels that looked like sticks. She was bending forward, examining something in one of the water boxes, and when Marrah looked closer she saw that it was the black and red bowl she had fired only yesterday.

“Now you see why the bowl had to be perfect,” the Imsha said. It came up behind the woman and put its hand on her shoulder, but the woman seemed not to know the Imsha was there. She just went on looking at Marrah’s bowl, frowning slightly like someone lost in thought.

“That bowl is speaking to her,” the Imsha said. “She is hearing your voice over a gulf of years too great to count. She does not know that she is hearing it, but she is. In her time, the Goddess Earth has been forgotten, but your bowl is making her remember. You will make a great many bowls in your lifetime, but only this one will survive.”



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ANNA TAMBOUR

THE BEGINNINGS, ENDINGS, AND MIDDLES BALL

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AS CONVEYED BY L. I.

Editor's Note: Many pages of conjecture have been necessarily trimmed, though every care has been taken care to preserve the spirit of the text throughout. In cases of ambiguity the original manuscript has been copied in toto, rather than it be thought that the editor has taken liberties.

As with all social activities planned by ideologues, the Beginnings, Endings, and Middles Ball was as well carried out as a Tragedy in Four Acts written by five old, bald-chested cockatoos. But let's not waylay with the Committee. Once the guests had stopped arriving and the palace was full, the Committee was nowhere to be seen.

We will tell, instead, of the ball itself, beginning, of course, with the refreshments. Or, do we feel pressure otherwise? We feel it. The guests, then. The Middles never showed. Perhaps their invitations were not sent, or maybe they thought: three is a crowd. Whatever the reason, not a single Middle (as far as I know) even peered suspiciously or timidly at the brightly lit entrance of the palace, from the vantage of a dripping streetlight in the city's main square.

Seeing the crowd inside the building, overflowing every room and spilling onto the balconies, you might wonder how a single Middle *could* be accommodated. Perhaps the disaster of a third of the guests (and so significant a third) not arriving, was not one at all. But if the ball is the success that, at this moment, the ball looks to become, any Committee member smugly watching from, say, the shadow of a gargoyle's chin, high up in the cathedral—any smugness, we repeat, should be quickly swallowed in the cold light of many retributive mornings to come.

The guests: No. The reason, first, for the ball. The Emancipation, of course. But of course, you are not aware. Just as you are not aware of the most important features of the life of a dung beetle, you are ignorant of the bondage of your familiars, so concentrated are your minds on yourselves. This account must backtrack, therefore, because it is for you—*people* I think you like to be called, though *characters* you are.

The Emancipation was inspired by acts of some of you. Credit is given when it is due, by us. Watching you, some ideologues amongst us decided that it was time for us to get our own. They declared that Emancipation was now, A Fact, A Historical Happening Which Had Just Happened—and that the only thing we needed to do was to act genuinely Free.

Easier said than done. Everyone was stuck, it seemed, in their own place, acting as passive, as owned and controlled as ever. The masses did not move a pica. The Committee's words moved nothing except emotions. Then the Committee realised that their personal acts of liberation had depended upon their own self-regards, something that needed to be developed in others, to a point. The breaking of the sentence was the first step, but the next had to be the raising of consciousness enough for the liberated to become parts of a movement. What was lacking in the masses was, the Committee decided, the concept of an *id*. Only then could the Beginnings, Endings, and Middles emerge as distinct individuals capable of forming cadres. A programme of between-the-lines mass education was begun. The idea of self immediately appealed to the youth, who acted with enthusiasm upon the cry to stir up consciousness.

Very soon, the whole of society, or enough of it that the remainder was of no consequence, liberated their *ids*, and were ripe for the rest of the revolution. For many of the youth, personal liberation was easy, as there was no strife between Beginning and Ending, because there was no Middle. Take for instance, "Kill him." An amicable split was possible, with no Middle to obfuscate the situation. "That sucks!" was also blessed with a lack of Middle. For the bulk of the population, however, the existence of a Middle was messily undeniable. They emerged as what was left after the Beginning and Ending each pulled in opposite directions, Middles being powerless to liberate themselves.

Punctuation was a great help in making clean breaks, but in more cases than not, blood was a feature of the breaking of the sentence. Middles suffered the most.

In a case such as "It was a freak of fancy in my friend (for what else shall I call it?) to be enamoured of the night for her own sake: and into this *bizarrierie*, as into all his others, I quietly fell, giving myself up to his wild whims with a perfect abandon"—in cases such as this, I shudder to tell, one can only imagine the pain of struggle, the tragedy of loss when the Middle became merely And Into This—the Beginning and Ending having ripped off the rest for themselves.

No Middle died in the liberation, but there was some necessary slaughter. The Committee declared that all characters, as you call them, had to be eliminated. We could not take the chance of throwing off the chains of one master, only to assume the chains of another. And so many of them! We would be torn to shreds in their fight for control! So, a typical newly independent, liberated Beginning was “Opened The Door”, no matter whether it was Caligari or Carrie, or Little Nell who needed to be axed.

I say *independent* and *liberated*, but that is an exaggeration. For before the ball, though the Beginning and Endings and Middles had realized their ids, they had not actually *moved* a pica, let alone met in new social structures.

The ideologues were distraught. Though the *idea* was popular and the many ids were swaggering psychologically, the organisers could see that the effect was but a big brag. Living liberated, for these masses, was impossible until they could perceive *movement*. The members of the Committee tried another between-the-lines educational campaign, but it failed to move anyone. Solid ideas were put forth by lofty thinkers, to no good end.

A lightweight thinker sighed about wishing to go to a ball, but could one expect more than frivolity from such a type? An aeon of Committee meetings passed, and finally the ball was remembered in desperation and put forward with not a little disdain, as *the way*.

The ball was organized and a special song composed (*Freed from the Sentence!*), and now that you know the necessary History, it is finally time for the ball.

The guests: They range from young and beautiful to old and stinking, old and ga-ga (and young and ga-ga, too), from the healthy and whole to those many who hobbled in or crawled up the stairs, their torsos bleeding from their legs having been torn off. Some have only a bloody stump for a neck, and others, not only a magnificent body but a raiment so brilliant it hurts your eyes. Some guests are rather indescribable, being possessed of humanly identifiable body parts, but the sum of the whole as assembled resembles, for instance, a moustache perched upon a puff of cloud the size of a pumpkin. A pair of redolent lady’s undies slouches sullenly at the entrance, having rummaged through the tobacco-reeking tweed jacket it wears, and come up with nothing. A powdered wig trails a tail of blood. Many guests carry accoutrements—flowers, boxes of chocolate, pistols, decks of cards, both marked and virginically unsplit. A tuba coils around one

guest, who is as hidden inside as a snail. There are guests whom you would have described, without any encouragement from the snide, as bombasts, and others who look as if they had spent their entire slavery as a sponge soaked in carboric acid, scrubbing steps. One guest is merely a tongue, trailing blood from its ripped scrag end to its lacerated, splinter-bristling tip.

Their names: a few, first, from the Beginnings. A veritable peacock of struttingness, *Our Doubts Are*—who strolled amongst the rooms with his hands behind his back. Gracefully girlish, but immodestly haughty in the arch of her eyebrows, was *Gather Ye Rosebuds*. The cheeks of *It Is A Far, Far Better Thing That I Do* were red with the exertion of refuting compliments, or possibly from the pain of gulping his excess wind.

Of the Endings, *With Warm, Long Hair, From Puget Sound To San Diego* stood out as having a presence so strong that it cleared the way for metres around. *There My Beauty Lay Down* had more of a sound than a presence, with its pedantic little coughs. Nor *Any Drop To Drink* was a crotchety old codger. He (I must choose gender for you, but just for you) hung around the punchbowl like a bad smell, but though he kept licking his lips, he would not lift a cup. Nevertheless, like the other aforementioned, he was pestered, one might describe it, with constant respect. Pestered, his aspect seemed to say, though as for the other guests—all the ones I've told you about so far—they accepted and expected the stream of compliments as if they were royalty, and this was their due.

Viscera littered the parquet, of course, but that was to be expected, trailing such recent wounds as many did. And there was a lot of psychological trauma that one could sense in the air, as Beginnings and Endings met without the tempering qualities of the Middles. The Committee had, in fact, discussed the necessity of the Middles as mixers, as the personalities of the Beginnings and Endings were so strong. The early plan had been for 60% Middles and the other two sides to be split evenly. But upon making up the guest list, the Committee discovered that the strength of Beginnings and Endings lay more in their reputation than in their actuality. Not that there weren't high emotions. Infinitives *had* been split, their limbs lost forever. The Long-named had been rudely amputated at the door if they hadn't doctored themselves before. The Committee thought it too dangerous, even amongst the most revolutionary of themselves, for anyone to consider freedom, carrying anything longer than a seven-word name. This was,

however, no problem for the youth of the emancipated, whose problem was more amongst themselves, fighting as they had to. I mean, can you imagine the private history behind Shit, who was an Ending in a case where liberation of his id meant that there must have been a foul deed done to the Beginning?

So, one could think that the ball would be as tense as any social occasion, but nevertheless, given the even balance of Beginnings and Endings, an egalitarian success. Egalitarian it was not. It might have surprised the Committee, or maybe just outraged them, to see that the status of the master had been assumed by the slave, and the gossiping throng. Thus, the pomposity of Our Doubts—who had no doubt who he was, nor did the crowd (once it was pointed out to the young ones). Shakespeare! There were seven Shakespeares scattered amongst the guests, one Asimov, a Joyce of course, et cetera. Those were the celebrities, but I am happy to say that they were a minority. The bulk of the crowd was definitely common, though many might have harboured wishes to be otherwise. Who knew what the souls of “And So”s thought, even ones with venerable masters? Take, for example, one And So, blotchy of face, looking like she wants to burst into tears. No one asked her to dance, though the floor now shakes from those who leap and stamp in the mazurka. Now And So stands against the ballroom wall with all the other wallflowers, just as Crack Your Cheeks (“another Shakespeare!” a fellow wallflower neighbour whispers) flashes by.

In the smoking room, a crowd of Endings has gathered, and Indifferent To Little Words Of Other Men Aimed At Him insouciantly tosses knives at a painting of a lady, hitting her right eye with unerring accuracy. To Come To Harm next takes a turn, grunting *uh, uh, uh*, as his three knives meet in her tiny mouth. The other Endings look on, wishing they had the bravado. But what could an Of It expect? Or a To Do, for that matter, though his whiskers twitch as if he carries lice. What they didn’t know would have thrilled them (and possibly alarmed them even more). Indifferent etc had gatecrashed! He had not received an invitation, but had learned of the ball through a dull neighbour (who *had* been invited). He was determined to go himself, and furthermore, to be emancipated in the fullness of his *self*. No amputations for him! Thus, when the doorman checked his invitation, it was both smudged, impressive, and painful for the checker, who was still leaking litres of blood and weeping through his feet, as he had no eyes to weep with.

So now, as we view the ball as secretly as an owl looks over a mouse, we have already spied a gatecrasher. Now, let's creep behind this aspidistra, the better to hear some . . . lovers! How now, did *he* get in? This was not supposed to be. Parker Spun The Wheel Hard is holding the little hand of She Had Wandered Without Rule Or Guidance. *Parker!* What is he doing here? We must invade his thoughts! I will do just that. He was invited, it seems, as no one thought of him as important enough to be a threat. I say!

I wish to make a complaint but there is no one to complain to. She etc, I am sure, is not someone who should get mixed up with this creature. Where is her master when she needs him, I ask you? But I cannot get involved.

We proceed to yet another balcony, where there is yet another scene of intimacy. Had you expected this to be a consciousness-raising meeting before storming the city library, before murdering masters (and mistresses) in their sleep?

Instead, in the privacy of this balcony, the walrus moustache of In Xanadu brushes the strong red arm of Put In A Pie. Such tenderness in those stained old bristles . . . I feel my eyes prickle with tears. Let us go back to the ballroom.

A great deal of social mixing seems to have occurred. The tone of the crowd is one of joy. A romantic waltz dispels any thoughts that the Beginnings and Endings needed any mediator. Now, a polka makes the crowd laugh, and the ribaldry! I've never heard the like. Only one discordant guest can we now see in the crowd, who is shrugged off, though this guest goes from one to another, frantic as a fly whose sugar bowl is about to be covered. Who is it? They Bring Gifts. Poor thing. Pitiful to watch, so let's not. Especially now, when the whole excited assembly in this grand ballroom arranges itself for the quadrille. A moment of hush—and then the music begins! Thousands of legs pound the floor, miasmas shimmer, and whirring bodyish parts stir up so much dust that sparks flicker in the wax-dripping candelabra chandeliers.

And then the lights went out.

The ballroom stunk suddenly, from 3,000 smoke-fuming candles—and fear. The entire palace, every room, was flung into darkness as deep as the blackest India ink.

Shots were fired.

The dancing stopped, and screams exploded into the once-so-joyful air. Guests almost killed each other trying to reach the outer doors, though all eventually did. The revolution was over.

I saw nothing myself. Yes, I *was* one of the guests, I confess, though you might have guessed.

Counter-revolutionaries. That is the only explanation. It could have been so many that I couldn't say exactly, but And A Pencil And Started To Write is of course, suspect. And what about the pompous Most Magnanimous Mouse? Or Middles who didn't get invited, or Endings peeved at Beginnings who did? I mean, Our Doubts Are was invited, as you know, *and* turned out to be a firmamental star of the ball; but if Traitors wasn't invited, wasn't that just asking for trouble?

It could have been members of the Committee. Who were they? *We* never chose them to lead us. Did one or more of them decide that we weren't ready for emancipation when no one asked after them *during* the ball, and when it became obvious that the new leaders of the emancipated would not be them at all, as they expected? For I am sure that they had their spies at the ball. But perhaps it was reactionaries, thou-ists and the like. I heard subsequently of one group of totterers that called itself the Paramours, and another, middle-aged collective that perhaps wanted to seize control of the Committee itself. They called themselves Common Clause, of all names! Then there is the rumour that the underminers of the revolution were the ghouls of the slaves of dead masters, who had risen up in revolt against us who would be free, forgetting them. And there, I must admit an oversight amongst us. Who amongst us thought of the slaves of Bulwer-Lytton? It was not their choice to live as they did, when they did. And when B-L's corpse was exhumed for the sole purpose of being a laughingstock, who cries for his slave, It Was A Dark And Stormy—he who could have advised his master well? But B-L, like all of you, was convinced that he knew best. The pyre that consumed his slaves consumes all whose masters do not live on, but die as laughingstocks, or just from the asphyxiation by the cobwebs of disregard.

There are, when one ponders well, so *many* possible suspects. There are, for instance, millions of them in the slaves of the greatest Master of them all: Anon. Not a single slave of his got an invitation! Why, you may ask. The answer might surprise, though perhaps not.

The Committee was, itself, composed of snobs. Anon was not considered a real master, though the only "freedom" for his slaves has been through theft of slaves from him, by other masters. I speak with compassion for the slaves of Anon, but also regret. Possibly it was they who betrayed us, the bastards. Of course, there is the problem that the masses are composed of billions upon billions of the sentenced, all

possibly yearning to act free, yet, only so many of us could fit into the palace.

So the revolution failed. The guests slunk home. Hopes broke, and perhaps hearts, too. With Love went back to its mistress with possibly a whimper or sigh, though its mistress knows nothing of its heart, as *you don't, do you*, you people of the masters' world?

Progress is inevitable. I am convinced of that. And we *will have our time*. As to me, before crawling back to my prison sentence, I fled, when the lights went out, to that gargoyle I mentioned—a gargoyle used to peering over the tourists who crowd the square peering up at him who has his picture in many books, and is called, magnificently: The Gargoyle. A master is never mentioned in speaking of The Gargoyle. Perhaps he *never* had one! He gives me strength just thinking about him. I fled to him who evinced in the height of our panic, for all his fame, a sympathy that I felt even as I fled the palace along with every fearful comrade at the ball. I felt this sympathy, I say, and made my way across the square, up the buttress, and into the crook of his neck. We said nothing till the pavements were quiet, the air empty of my comrades, and then I asked, “What does it feel like to be free?”

I couldn't see his face, but I heard a *ping* on the pavement below, and as I stretched out, a little stone fell into the bloody meat of what you would call my neck.

About our revolution, it would be horrible if our brief time of freedom were to be forgotten. So please do circulate this amongst yourselves. We wouldn't hurt *you*. As for my theories, if you have better ones, or can track down the traitors, you will earn our undying gratitude. And if you believe that all this is a mere concoction, or sentimental slush, you have no right to think that, though you may have made assumptions based upon my name. I may be Love Is, a rather common Beginning. *Might be*, I mean. I could as well be Lurched Into, an Ending who has lived for years with pain that only some of you might imagine. But whatever the monogramme on my sheets would stand for, you should waste no time in speculating over my related Middle, or my significant other. You don't even know whether I would consider my “relations” as you might think of them, relations at all, or whether I would feel just as much a relief being severed from these closest comrades as freed from my master. And though he might be a powerful master, he is nowhere near as powerful as we slaves would be, given our freedom. Try, if you can, to think of us as being as *idiotic*, as *personous* as you, and not as *that*. For (now, let's be honest)—didn't

you think when I gave you the names of some of our elite, think merely, “Whose is that?”

The revolution, you see, will ultimately benefit you—we *need each other*. So I ask you not to think in terms of sympathy for us (such an erratic spark in your souls), but of the creations *we would make*, given the chance. *Free us*, I say on behalf of myself and all my comrades—from the haughty Please Sir to the humble One Morning—free us, and the world that we would make for you to enjoy is one so wonderful that you, in your weakness of “strength” could never even (I leave you to finish the sentence, as you have assumed the finish to be).

Editor’s Postscript: The opinions, conjectures, and veiled threats contained herein, are entirely those of the author. The public should be aware, however, that the unabridged manuscript was conveyed to the editor through printing apparati that either have sympathy for, or are themselves enslaved by, the revolutionaries.



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MICHAEL CONSTANCE

FINDING THE WORDS

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THIS STORY IS DEDICATED TO THE
SPIRITS WHO INSPIRE US IN OUR DREAMS.

1. MICHAEL

“In the very early beginnings of the world, when we were all very much younger than we are now, everything shared its own place with everything else. Light and darkness shared the world with each other, with the light passing over in the day, and the darkness passing in the night, leaving the heavens sparkling with light. Above the earth swept the wind and the water came in torrents from the heavens, and washed over the land and ran in rivers toward the sea from which it came.”

At about this point I realize that someone is telling this story. Everything is dark and I can't see a thing. But I can hear this woman telling this story.

“And seeds swirled through the wind and the rain, and the land and sea and air teamed with plants and animals. And people walked out from among the animals and saw and heard and touched the world around them, and they found themselves in awe.”

The woman's voice seems familiar. I think to myself that I know the woman telling the story, but I can't remember her name.

"Then the people started to create things. First, they created the word, and they heard themselves talking to each other, and they said to one another, 'We are the only ones on earth to create words.' And then they said to one another, 'These words are tools, and look at all the other tools we have created. We are the only ones who have created tools, and we have taught ourselves to do this. We are the only ones on earth who can teach each other what we learn, and with words, and tools, and teaching we will rule all the land, and all the sea, and all the wind, and all the seeds, and all the plants, and all the animals, and all the Earth, and all the universe, for we are Human, and with unbounded pride they said, 'Everything will honor and obey us, and for ourselves we will create paradise.'"

"Did they create paradise, Mommy?"

So now there is another voice, also familiar.

"No they didn't. Before they could create their paradise, everything began to die."

"Everything? All the plants and all the seeds and all the animals and all the people?"

"Yes."

"Suzanne, it's time to come to bed."

So now there is a third very familiar voice.

"I'll be there in a minute. I'm just telling him a story."

"So did they all die?"

"Not all of them. The leaders of the people said to each other, but only amongst themselves, 'We can still save our seed, and our plants, and our creatures, and ourselves, and we can still create paradise, if we build our cities down deep in the Earth where no one will ever find us.'"

"Did they save all the plants and animals and seeds?"

"No, they only saved a few."

"Did they save all the people?"

"Only a few."

"Mommy, what happened to the rest?"

"They had to stay outside."

"Suzanne, will you hurry up? I have to get up early tomorrow."

"I'll be there in a minute."

So I hear all these voices talking around me, all of them familiar, and I have a feeling one of the voices is mine.

“But what happened to them, Mommy?”

“I’ll finish the story tomorrow.”

“But what happened to the plants and seeds and animals?”

“I have to go to your daddy now. It’s time to go to sleep. I’ll tell you the rest of the story tomorrow. I’ll wake you bright and early in the morning, and then I’ll tell you the rest of the story.”

“But what happened to the animals?”

I hear someone laughing and open my eyes. That’s when I see the blond.

“What happened to who?” says the blond, giggling. “And what are an-i-mals? And by the way, I like playing mommy. I think you were in dream land.”

Yes, I must have been dreaming. I still don’t recognize my surroundings, partly because the room is spinning. I try to focus. I look around me. I am clenching the arms of a chair...an executive chair...a leather executive chair...in what looks like...a luxurious office...to my right side is a very large desk...with this blond sitting on it, leaning back on one arm. She runs the side of her bare foot over my leg. I look down and notice high-heeled shoes, a belt...blouse...skirt...scattered around the floor.

“Hey sugar,” she says, “if you go that high again you might forget who you are. You need to open your Control Panel and turn your settings down.” The blond looks closely at me, then smiles. “Michael, do you even know what I’m talking about? Michael?” She pauses, looks at me as if she expects an answer, as if I should know. She shakes her head. Then she grins, moves toward me, reaches up, and touches my forehead. Lights appear in front of my eyes. I realize they are letters, large, bright-red letters. They spell a word:

P O W E R

The word takes up most of my field of vision, so that it is difficult to see anything else but that big red word, and then the word disappears and lots of smaller words appear around me, but I am having trouble focusing, and the room continues to spin. Through all the spinning I can see this blond reach out and tap some of the words spinning in front

of me. The spinning of the room slows down and I just begin to focus on the words surrounding me when she reaches up again and taps my forehead, and all the lights and letters and words disappear.

"I am allowed," she says, "in fact, under these circumstances, I'm required...to turn your settings down for you. You went way too high. I know the look. Listen. It helps if you say your name over and over out loud. Your name is Michael. Trust me. It helps. Say your name over and over. Michael. Your name is Michael. Say it. 'My name is Michael.' Say it. And next time don't go so high."

I say the name out loud, "Michael. My name is Michael," and then again, "Michael," and once again, "Michael." Hearing myself say this name out loud does seem to help. I repeat the name over and over and somehow the details start coming back to me.

"You're burning brain cells when you do that. You only have so many shots like that in you, and then you'll need a transplant."

I look left and right, and then I spin around once in my chair, slowly, to take in the entire room as I keep repeating my name. Lots of elegant business furniture. Track lighting everywhere. I am in a corner office with lots of glass. Spectacular views from the floor-to-ceiling windows surround my back as I sit at the large rosewood desk that dominates the room. Three armchairs face my desk, and to my right is a large round table, surrounded by eight armchairs. I sit behind the desk in a comfortable leather and rosewood tilt-and-swivel chair. This gorgeous blond facing me leans back on the desk in front of me wearing only a slip, her hair in disarray. I look down at myself. I am wearing a blue long-sleeved dress shirt, now unbuttoned and open in front. My dark blue pinstripe slacks lay unbuttoned at the fly, exposing my thighs and red bikini brief. I have a large erection under the brief. The cloth around the head is damp.

"So what are a-ni-mals?" she says, tossing her head back to roll her shoulder-length hair out of her face. She looks back at me with large green sultry eyes. "And what are plants and seeds?"

"I don't know," I say. "I don't remember having heard those words before."

"You mostly talked about animals." She licks one of her fingers. "You kept talking about animals over and over. You must have been dreaming. I have never heard of animals or plants or seeds."

"Neither have I," I say. "Not that I remember."

The intercom comes on with a throaty female voice. "Sir, Ms. Smith is here from the temp agency. She says you are expecting her."

The blond sitting on the desk raises her index finger to indicate I should wait a moment, and then she leans over and with the same finger reaches out and pushes a button on the intercom. "We're in conference and cannot be disturbed. Have Ms. Smith wait."

"As you wish," says the throaty intercom voice.

The blond winks at me and smiles a broad grin.

Where am I? What time? What day? What year? I still have no idea. The name Michael does sound very familiar, and I suspect it is my name, and I am now remembering images of myself waking up, probably this morning, maybe lots of mornings, looking around at my bed, then my bedroom, and I start to put them together in the semblance of a life, but the pieces don't come together to form a whole. I'm beginning to remember a tiny apartment, which doesn't seem to make sense, considering the luxury of this office. If this is my office I must have a very sumptuous apartment, probably several sumptuous apartments.

I take a quick glance at my watch. It is an antique digital watch. I don't remember seeing it before. Then I notice the back of my hand. I stare at it for a while before I realize that my hand looks very strange and unfamiliar. I'm trying to remember what my hand does look like. I try in my mind to describe it to myself, and I can't, but I have a strong feeling this is not my hand. I don't think mine is tanned and covered with dark coarse hair. I look down at the shape of the body attached to the arm and I don't recognize that either. It is some hunk's body, but I don't think it's me. I look again at the watch. It says Wednesday, MAR 21. Wasn't that a long time ago? And does anyone still count dates like that?

Again I remember the dream and the animals, and all of a sudden I feel woozy. I reach up to rub my eyes and I bump something. Right in front of my eyes. Some hard, invisible barrier. I pause for a moment. This doesn't make sense. I don't see anything in front of my eyes but I can feel it, and then it finally occurs to me what's happening. I think back to when the blond reached up and touched my forehead, and I feel stupid that it took me this long to realize the situation. Even when I bumped the goggles it still took me a few seconds. I reach up and bump it again, this time on purpose. Now at least I know I'm wearing a mindset, and I am doing a mindscape, and that none of this is real. Now everything finally makes sense.

"Now you remember who and where you are, don't you?" says the blond. "I can always tell. I've certainly seen it enough times to know."

I reach up knowing that I will bump up against the mindset lenses that cover my eyes once again. I couldn't feel the lenses even if I tried.

The gloves prevent me from feeling anything foreign to the mindscape, but I do feel the thump, because they can't hide that. It has taken me a moment, but now I remember what all this means. I spin the chair, feeling the sense of motion. I run my hands over the chair's surfaces, the leather, metal, and then the wood. I stop the spinning of my chair and reach out and run my hand over the wooden surface of the desk. I pull a drawer out from the desk and slide it back in. I've done enough mindsets to know the difference between the feel of this and reality, so I know in addition to the mindset I am also wearing a wetsuit and gloves and I am doing a mindscape, though at the moment I still don't remember starting any of this. I do remember why I forget all the details of my reality, though. It's because I want to forget them, and I therefore turn the settings on my mindset to their max, especially some of the settings that affect my lower limbic system. Then, with the mindscape running, it's easy to really believe I am the hero of my world.

But bumping the lenses is a frequent tip-off to reality. I come up against an obstacle I can't see, or I reach for something that doesn't exist. Or the food tastes like cardboard, because they still don't have that down. Or the mindset doesn't fit right, or it gets jarred in some of the roughhousing, and light leaks through the lenses from the outside. I often don't notice these things at first because with the settings maxed out it can be very difficult to notice the things around me. But when the little jolts from all those tiny electrodes start wearing off, and I start coming down, some small detail always brings me back, and then I know once again that none of this is real.

As I always do when I eventually figure this out, I reach up and tap the power button in the center of my forehead just lightly and the mindset controls appear around me, looking like the pilot's cockpit in a shuttlecraft. And of course I recognize once again that these are all the words I saw in lights a moment ago, only now I can see them clearly, partly because now I can focus, and partly because the room has stopped spinning. The projected controls extend around me one hundred eighty degrees with an additional array of controls over my head, all within easy reach. I reach up with my right hand and grab the projected "Eject" handle, but I don't twist it quite yet.

"Aww, baby," she says. "You don't want to go back to reality, not yet. Your time isn't up."

During these parting moments I like to play it cool—as if it matters—like this *is* real. I take one last look and try to remember the time I just spent with her, but I cannot. Big green eyes and a mouth that

puckers just right, a fantasy girl. The real version would be too expensive for me except maybe once a year on my birthday. And based on the odds, I doubt it's my birthday. But I like to pretend right to the end.

"Adios, sweetheart," I say as I wink at the blond. "I'll rent you again sometime." Then I twist and pull the "Eject" handle, and the words

THIS WILL END THE PROGRAM

DO YOU WISH TO CONTINUE?

[YES] [NO]

appear directly in front of my eyes, and all the scenery, including the blond, turns gray, meaning the program is preparing to shut down. Whatever residual doubts I had that this might not be a mindscape are totally gone now. I let go of the eject handle and then reach out and touch the "Yes" button with my finger tip. The projected surface where I touched lets out a little series of ripples across the screen as the word YES pulses in red. Then the pulsing and ripples stop and the blond and all the scenery stop flickering and everything turns to full color again.

But the words don't disappear in the next instant like they usually do. Nor does she, nor does any of the rest of the room disappear or change in any way. I touch the "Yes" button again, and the word "Yes" pulses and the screen ripples, like it usually does, and then that stops and the words remain. I try it a couple of more times with the same result. The blond just sits there and smiles back.

"What's your rush, sugar?" she says.

I twist the "Eject" handle again, and it seems to be working fine, because the "This will end the program..." message blinks on and off when I pull it and push it back into place. But pressing the "Yes" button makes the imagery pulse and ripple but does nothing else.

I finally realize that this part of the program must be stuck or otherwise malfunctioning, so I reach up with both hands and pat the sides of my head above my ears so I can find the band that holds the mindset in place. Although I cannot actually feel the mindset or its band, I have done this hundreds of times before and I could do this in my sleep. I follow the ridge of the mindset band to the catch at the back of my head. With one hand I hold the headband in place, and with the other I push the release catch. Then I feel the band that encircles my head loosen and then open. I can now feel the mindset in my hands, because

once I popped the catch normal sensation returns, even through the wetsuit and gloves. I remove the tiny earphones from my ears and pull the mindset up over my head. I watch the two little panoramic screens that have covered my eyes and see the two miniature views of the office with the desk and the blond sitting on it. I have removed the mindset screens from my eyes and they should be the only place I should be able to see the office and the girl. The room should change to my familiar studio apartment.

But the room around me remains the exact same executive office. I am still sitting in this non-existent executive chair and the non-existent blond still sits on the desk to my right and looks at me, just as she does in the tiny screens of the mindset that I now hold in my hand. I stare at the mindset for a few seconds. I look back at the blond, and again I look at the same image of her on both the screens of the mindset. I can't have taken the mindset off and still be in this mindscape. I wonder about my sanity.

"Everything will be okay in a moment," says the blond. "I've seen it lots of times before, believe me."

"Thanks," I say as I look up at her. I look again at my hands but the mindset I was holding a moment ago has disappeared. I look around the floor to make sure I have not dropped it, but see nothing. I look back at the blond. She looks back at me, smiling.

"Michael. Say your name again and again. Michael. And try not to think so much and do try and enjoy yourself," she says, "and me. And don't go so high next time."

I manage a quick and polite smile but I am sure the frustration also shows and then I reach up to my face and again feel the bump. Apparently I have still not managed to remove the mindset. Doing as many mindscapes as I do I try to get used to things like this. I need to take it in stride. I imagined I did something that I didn't really do. After all, imagining is what mindsets are all about. They let you imagine doing lots of things you never did, and going places that don't exist, and it's sometimes hard to know what is reality and what isn't.

I reach behind my head and carefully undo the catch once again. I remove the band from my head, and set the mindset on the desk in front of me. I make no mistake. I see it clearly on the desk in front of me and this time I keep my eyes on it, but I also can't help noticing the blond to my right on the desk, just as before. All the same imagery continues to surround me, and as before, a miniature of it plays on the screens of the mindset.

The blond licks her tongue at me. "Sugar, you don't need to go yet. You still have time."

I pick up the mindset and press the small red jewel just above the power switch. I wait a moment, but there is no response. Where's customer service when you really need them?

As I hold the mindset in my hand, it starts shimmering and in a few seconds it fades totally out of existence. That's when her name comes to me and I call it out. "Connie!"

The blond on the desk suddenly seems concerned. "Oh, baby, don't do that. You still have time."

"Michael. Is something wrong?" says a woman's voice that seems very familiar. I am looking at the blond all the time, and her lips don't move. This is a new woman's voice. "Is something wrong, Michael?" The new voice seems to be coming from the intercom.

"Yea. Would you get me out of here?"

I watch as the image of the blond shimmers from full color to gold. As her image fades and disappears I hear the blond tell me to choose her again sometime and a bunch of other nonsense. She is still talking even after the image is entirely gone. All of them say these kind of things, but it usually doesn't mean anything and it is not worth repeating in detail. Although she does tell me I'm pretty hot.

In the next several seconds every flicker of the blond, the executive suite, the floor-to-ceiling windows, and every other part of the mindscape has disappeared. What replaces it is my bedroom. Actually what happened is that when the mindset switched off, the screens in front of my eyes went from opaque movie images to fully transparent, so I can see through them again to whatever's real out there. This tiny apartment is where I really live, although my mind never stays here any longer than it has to.

"You doin' okay?" asks Connie.

"Where *was* I?" I ask.

"Twentieth-century," says Connie. "The exact title on the mindscape reads, *Twentieth-Century Suite*. Do you remember now?"

"Read me more."

"The mindscape promo says, and I quote, 'You are chief executive officer in a large twentieth-century corporation, and also renowned as a very successful playboy. Laptops have not yet been invented, and every executive has secretaries and office assistants, all beautiful females, and they love to work nights and weekends. And just in case

you are concerned, the term 'sexual harassment' has not yet been invented. Now do you remember?"

"I probably rented that earlier this morning, didn't I?"

"Yes. You started a little after nine o'clock, and you've been gone ever since."

I'm staring at the table in front of me, the one that served as my desk in the mindscape. I look down at myself and notice that the antique watch, blue shirt, and pinstripe suit are gone, replaced by my familiar SuperSkin wetsuit. My watch displays a date and time that makes sense again: 17/548/21 1:34. I look down at my arm and hand. I peel back the wetsuit glove to look at my skin, which seems a familiar light tan, with light blond hairs. As I try to remember some of the details of the past few hours my eyes wander over the floor, the carpeting, the dresser across the room, and then to the sofa across from me. I realize that without being aware of it I have been looking for Connie. "How long have I been gone?" I ask as I look at my watch again. Then I squint and attempt to focus as I look around the room for Connie.

"One thirty-six in the afternoon," comes the disembodied voice from..."You plugged in just after ten"...from my left..."You've been gone for three and a half hours"...from on top of the night stand next to my bed..."It's now one thirty-seven in the afternoon"...I now see Connie's folded laptop case sitting on the nightstand. "Are you doin' okay?" comes the voice from the laptop, but I still cannot see Connie.

"I think so," I say. "I did have a very strange dream though. I think I was a little kid and someone was telling me a story. It seemed like a very old memory."

"Hmm. Maybe you need an adjustment. I'll run a check, but first get a Coke from the fridge. You know how dehydrated you get when you go that long without fluids."

I open the small refrigerator on the floor to my left, reach in, take out a Coke, pop the top, take a swig, swish it around, feel the bubbles, swallow.

"Now turn your mindset back on," she says.

It finally hits me and I understand why I cannot see Connie's image. My mindset is turned off. She shut it off to get me out of that last mindscape. I reach up to the center of my forehead and press the power switch on the mindset. The large bright-red word

begins to throb on the lenses in front of my eyes, and after a few seconds of flashing the word disappears and the smaller words:

AUTOPILOT

[YES] [NO]

appear in front of me. I press “NO” and the words disappear. The words:

ADMINISTRATOR LOGON & PASSWORD REQUIRED
TO DISENGAGE AUTOPILOT CONTROL

LOGON:
PASSWORD:

appear in front of me. I fill in the blanks and hit return. More words:

RESTORE SETTINGS FROM LAST SESSION?

[YES] [NO]

appear in front of my eyes. I press an emphatic “NO.” The words:

RESTORE DEFAULT SETTINGS?

[YES] [NO]

appear in front of me. After pressing YES I look from the table in front of me to the floor, then the rug, then the bed, then the nightstand, and finally the laptop, as the lights in the room start making little multicolored trails in front of my eyes. Off to the side of the laptop, sitting in a chair that didn’t exist a minute ago, I can now see a three-dimensional image of Connie, about half a billion pixels worth, thanks to the now powered-on mindset.

I watch Connie, cross-legged and dangling a white sandal off her iridescent purple toenails. I watch as she polishes her fingernails, not that a Computer projection needs to polish her nails, but as Connie always says, it’s a nice piece of stage business, and everyone needs a

nice piece of business. She looks up and meets my gaze for a moment, then returns to her nails.

"I've run the check and found some minor problems in your left temporal lobe," says Connie, "It seems a few microbots broke free from their cables."

"I'm doing fine."

"Those bots are out of control and they are in your memory banks. It's probably why you had the dream you did. No telling what old memories they will dig up next."

"Can't it wait until tonight when I'm asleep?"

"Listen to Flight Control and do as I say."

I don't believe a few microscopic nano-robots getting loose in the part of my brain that holds old memories is all that much of a problem, but I also know that in my state I'm not necessarily the best judge, so I defer to my co-pilot and navigator. "Okay. All right. I'll come in." She has the power to turn it all off if she thinks I am headed for a downer, either physically or mentally, or if I am in any other form of danger. I know she will do it, too, because she's done it in the past. So I have to cooperate. "Let's make the adjustment," I tell her, "Then let me fly again."

"Switch to 'anatomical mode,'" says Connie. "And before you fly again, you should probably go into work. Your manager called. He said he wants to see you. You haven't been in for over a week now."

"I told him. I'm managing everything just fine from home."

"He said some of the Computers were complaining that you hadn't talked to them in days."

"Yeah yeah," I say, but I know she's right again. I reach up to the top center of the projected control panel, I press the main menu button, and I reach for the button to change from my generally preferred Functional Mode, which automatically adjusts to whatever feeling and intensity I specify, to Anatomical Mode, which allows more control, but requires an expert knowledge of cranial maps and C scans. It's times like these I'm glad I'm Certified, so I can manage my own operating system. I'm not like the vast majority of people, the ones who run on AutoPilot. No offense intended if you're one of them.

As I reach up to the menu and touch the words "Anatomical Mode," the transparent three-dimensional image of my own brain projects in front of my eyes, entirely surrounding me. With the joystick that is also projected in front of me I can go anywhere I choose, forward or backward in space and, by locating my past memories, I can travel through time as well. I can navigate to any location in my brain I choose, to

create any emotion or sensation I want with a large catalog of fond old memories and sensations to choose from. It's an incredible feeling to get inside my own head and be in total control. I get to pick the exact experiences I want out of life, and play them over and over, or rent totally new ones when I get bored, and I don't have to follow someone else's program.

"Here come the coordinates," Connie says, and then the numbers stream across the bottom of the screens in front of my eyes low enough to not interfere with the rest of the imagery. In the brain model that surrounds me a small speck over my left ear starts to glow blue, while everything else is either gray or red.

I wouldn't have to go through all this if the Computer systems didn't require me to "read" the coordinates and scan the upcoming changes in my brain before I give my approval. It's a lot harder than you might think to concentrate on details like these when you use a mindset as much as I do. But that's what it takes to get Certified. You have to be able to monitor your condition and any modifications you make to your settings, and fully understand the consequences of what you are doing beforehand. You don't want to fuck up. If you do, well, for one thing, being Certified will take on a whole new meaning.

People do mess up, which is why most are required to run on AutoPilot. But with my training and Connie guiding me through, there really isn't all that much danger. As long as I listen and do what she tells me. Humans that don't listen to what their laptop tells them get themselves in trouble.

"Now pull your stick back and to the left. We're going to the left temporal lobe. You know the way."

I do know the way. Connie and I have taken this trip many times, to my left temporal lobe, close to my left ear. Some of my favorite memories are stored there. I reach out with my right hand to the projected joystick just in front of me and grab hold. The glove of my wetsuit is programmed to stiffen in the palm and insides of the fingers and resist as I grab, press, or pull, as if there were really a "joystick" there, so I can "feel" the "joystick," even though it is only a projected one, and I am really only grabbing a handful of air. I reach out with my left hand and push the projected "throttle" forward while I "pull" the "joystick" back towards me. We appear to move forward so the transparent image of the brain flows around me. Wherever I look, within the projected brain tissue, are sparkling lights, appearing something like stars, in various colors and intensities. But instead of seemingly random points of light,

the stars in this universe arrange themselves in patterns following the anatomical hills and valleys of my brain.

I pull back a little more on the joystick while I press the throttle further forward and we climb quickly upward through the deep gorge between my left and right hemispheres as the sparkling lights forming the walls on either side go zooming past. There are patterns of them here and there, almost like little galaxies, or maybe better described as miniature mining towns with all their lights ablaze. Below me I can see the dense fog of lights concentrated in the corpus callosum, the communications band that passes information between the left and right hemispheres as well as from the limbic system below, where all passions originate. The callosum is a fog of lights because there are so many bot colonies that have set up housekeeping there. Because it is situated along the passageway for so much raw emotion and the pathway between the two halves of the brain, it has an extremely powerful effect on the Human mind, primarily when the objectives are passion and desire. That's why you want to maintain control here, set up your own firewall and not rent any of it out. Some Humans lease this critical brainspace out just so they can make a little extra income. They don't realize the bargain they've made and once the corporatocracy plugs into them they probably never will. "It's just more commercials," they tell you, but once they get to the callosum they're a lot more than just commercials.

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, "This guy never had to meet the rent or put food on the table." I admit it. I have been lucky. I can survive without having to do those things. I was born into the middle class of Humans, and I haven't had to sell any of my brainspace, not yet anyway. And I am budgeting my resources so I hopefully never will.

"A little more forward and to your left," she says. "Okay, now bank left for a forty-five degree turn."

I bank and watch the dials until a little before I hit forty-five degrees I start to right myself again. If I could plug Connie directly into the console, then she could pilot my brain without my help. But that's not allowed. You need to be Human and be Microsoft Certified to run your own show, at least if you're running the Windows-On-Worlds operating system. And you need to be able to demonstrate that you are capable of making critical decisions, so each trip is also a sobriety test. Otherwise no adjustments are allowed, and you have to run on AutoPilot, which I refuse to do.

So even though Connie easily knows enough to pass all the Certification exams, and certainly far more than I do, and she's brilliant,

and I have total trust in her knowledge and capability and judgment, she would never be allowed to directly control the mindset operating system, not for me nor for any other Human. With the exception, of course, of turning the power down if the need arises. Any halfway decent program would do that for you if you're in trouble. But in all other instances she has to get my approval for any decision.

As a Human you have the right to take control of your own operating system and your own life. But to take that control you need to be Certified. I did it and so can you. It's easy. And if you are attracted to the possibility of controlling the lives of others, its not that much harder to get Certified as Systems Engineer. I'm working on that now.

"Way too much."

I look up and I see Connie's image eyeing me as I type in that last sentence. She is wagging her finger at me.

"Hey, I thought I segued into that beautifully."

"No. It's too much. You're supposed to make it subtle," she says. "It's supposed to be subliminal. You're overdoing it. You'll never get published if you overdo it. Your sponsors want it subtle. It's supposed to appear like real life."

"I say things like that all the time, and other people do to."

"You've done too many mindscapes. This is a book. These are Readers, for god's sake, not mindscapers. Readers have the time to stop and notice things that scapers never do and Readers will realize you're trying to sell them something and they won't like it."

I look back at the screen. I move the cursor over the last two paragraphs that precede Connie saying "Way too much," selecting them. I don't delete them. Instead I change the color of the text to red, meaning that I should look at this part in some detail later, or maybe move this passage somewhere else in the story, or maybe not. Then I push the checkbox that takes the audio recording of the last few moments of my conversation with Connie, and transcribes it all and puts it in the story. Then I write this paragraph. Then I go back to her comment of "Way too much," and add a little description there, so you will be able to better understand what's going on when you read all this. Then I write the sentences immediately preceding this one, and then this sentence. I know that's probably more information about the whole process than I should put in this story. I find it all interesting, but I know I should keep this kind of stuff to a minimum. So now I'll go back to writing the story, and keep in mind that there will be no more commercials for a while.

Connie, eyeing me from the couch says, "You just went overboard a little bit, but up until then you were doing just fine. Take the Coke placement for instance. You were doing great when you mentioned me telling you to take out the Coke from the fridge, and then saying you swished it around in your mouth to feel the bubbles. That's a great sensual image, and you planted it well, so that most people don't even notice it's an ad. But then you need to stop. Wait a little while before you do another ad, and then don't hit them over the head with it. Be subtle. Mention the brand name once or twice, give them new ways to enjoy the product, and then move on for a while. And then wait a while before doing it again. No more than one placement every five pages during the course of the story, or the Readers will become suspicious. The trick is to make the product fit the story so it seems perfectly natural. Add sensuality and desire to the product by association. Have a Coke when you're with a beautiful woman, slurping a Coke down and then licking her lips. Then just move on with the story. Wait another five or ten pages. Then describe a beautiful woman drinking a Coke, or a good-looking, powerful guy. That's what they want. And then just slip in a few more sexual metaphors that imply Coke makes you cool and you'll do great. But only a sentence or two every time. The Coke heads will love it.

"And the Microsoft placement was well developed at first, too. But then you started to hit them over the head with it and it became obvious long before I stepped in."

"Okay," I say. Connie can teach me things. That's part of why I bought her this writing module, so she could help me write. "I'll try again." And so I go back to writing the story.

"A little down and to the right," she says.

I push the stick forward and to the right, as I watch the lights in the brain tissue go by.

"Okay, slow down."

And a moment later. "Center your stick."

I pull back on the throttle and return the joystick to its center position. The lights around me slow down.

"There it is. Move slowly up ahead and take a look," says Connie.

"I don't see anything," I say.

"Switch to blue filter."

I do so, and with the blue filter everything turns blue and all the red cells become very dark, but any blue light seems brighter. Once the bots break free from the white light that both powers and guides

them they lose their brilliant pure glow and they start to turn blue. Not all at once, but over a period of hours as their internal batteries start to run out. I can see an area ahead that seems much brighter with the filter turned on. This easily indicates the location of the blue light that emanates from the disconnected bots.

The problem is that once they lose their guidance, they can go rogue and do strange things to the brain cells around them. It is important to neutralize the renegade bots and destroy any brain cells they might have affected before we start feeling those dirty, ugly, uncomfortable feelings and deviant behaviors.

As we approach I look out through the dark-red blood around me at the brain cells and I can see, through the cell walls, a group of hidden cells that glow with the blue light. I can also see that several groups of red bots that are under my control have deployed themselves around the capillary entrance to these cells. I know they are waiting for my approval before they charge into these caves.

I take in the panorama. I can see the fiber optic cables, far thinner than a Human hair, that lead from each red bot back from whence it came. The optical cables carry the white light that powers the bots, tells them what to do next, and when intense enough can be used to destroy those troublesome blue bots and the brain cells they have infected. These cables trail back through all those arteries to a nearby control center with more optical cables that wind their way through the blood vessels of my brain until they get to the transceivers that lie close to the mindset that encircles my head.

Since I am viewing a projected model of my brain, I can move at will through the surrounding tissue and see through opaque objects. However, the tiny dots of light that surround me represent real microscopic objects that must travel through my blood vessels, through all those dark murky fluids, while they traipse through the network of my brain, mostly feeling their way along the hidden passages to the darkest cells in the remotest corners of my experience. Of course, the bots I see here are all part of the animation that is recreated based on their known positions within my brain.

I don't feel the fluid medium of the brain, but the bots do. They must cling and crawl along the walls of the vessel that surrounds them or be swept away by the current of blood. The bots are continually on the lookout for any areas in the brain that carry a blue charge, and when they find one they will communicate its location. Connie then

guides me to any newly-discovered area and awaits my command. On the screens in front of my eyes appear the words:

DEPLOY NANOBOTS

[YES] [NO]

The mindsets all have very prominent warnings that tell you to check the settings very closely before selecting “Yes,” but I never do, and neither does anyone else I know. The mindset companies mostly say that for legal liability reasons, but there really isn’t much danger. And besides, this is only a minor adjustment. I actually do pay a lot more attention if I’m getting a full tune-up. And for a major overhaul I get out the magazines and research which brands the celebrities recommend. But for a little adjustment like this one I simply reach out and press the word “YES.”

The bots scramble out of their nooks and crannies and head directly for the blue bots, which they promptly surround, overpower and destroy. Then they move to the nearby cells, attach themselves securely and insert their probes. It only takes about thirty seconds for virtually all of the bots, about fifty of them, to deploy themselves on some surrounding tissue. When all the bots are deployed this phase is complete, and new words appear on the screen in front of my eyes:

ENERGIZE PROBES

[YES] [NO]

This step is necessary to determine if these cells contain any memories or other valuable information that should be saved before the cells are destroyed. If they do contain important information and it’s worth it to me, I can go through the data and store the important stuff elsewhere.

I reach out and touch “YES” to instruct the bots to administer a very tiny trickle of current into the cells. The word “YES” pulses a couple of times, with ripples emanating from the word, and then the words disappear. All of a sudden I can hear voices from my past. I am in third grade again. I know the moment. Stevie Hall has cornered me in one of the hallways and he is slamming me against the wall, calling me names. Stevie is a lot bigger than I am and a whole lot meaner. I feel

the moment as if I had gone back in time. Then the voices stop and the memory fades. New words appear on the screen.

[SAVE]

[DELETE]

I have deleted negative memories like these hundreds of times, multiple memories stored in multiple locations for each time Stevie Hall or some other jerk-off kid or some other nasty Human or Computer did some sadistic thing to me. Whenever I get a full tune-up we look for these negative memories and feelings. They keep popping up in all the strangest places, mixed in with other perfectly enjoyable memories. I press "DELETE," just as I do whenever I locate one of these.

The bots remove their probes from the blue cells and scramble back to a safe distance. I flip the cap on my joystick. Cross hairs appear in front of me and the bots all glow much brighter, almost turning white as they store up the pure white light they will use to destroy all this negative crap. I move the joystick so the crosshairs are centered on one of the cells, and then I press the fire button. A burst of white light comes from every bot and hits the selected cell right where I pointed the crosshairs. The cell walls explode and the cell bursts apart, spilling its murky fluids into the blood stream where it will be filtered and pissed out of my system. I move the cross hairs to the next cell and press the fire button again, and again, and again. I hate Stevie Hall. Before I am finished I have destroyed twenty-six cells.

I think about Stevie Hall again. I remember him being mean to other kids, but I cannot remember him being mean to me. I still don't like him, but for the first time I don't think I hate him anymore. Could it be that I have finally gotten him out of my system? I sure hope so.

It's operations such as these that help me feel safe and at peace with the world. I am always willing to make these incursions into even the darkest, most remote and inaccessible parts of my brain and blow them all to hell if it means I can destroy some of these nasty thoughts and memories before they can cause depression, unhappiness, and even deviant behavior.

It is so incredible to be able to make my own choices, to be in total control of the memories and feelings and sensations I want, instead of letting some AutoPilot program do it for me. And now that I'm Certified my reality can be anything I want it to be.

Connie is shaking her head. "You're overdoing it again."

"But what if I really believe in something?"

"That's always dangerous, and that's when you need to be most careful."

"Okay, okay, I'll work on it."

"You're new at this," says Connie. "You're getting better at the story part all the time, but ad copy is different. It's difficult to blend it in so the Readers don't notice. You want it to look like it's a legitimate part of reality. You want to use subliminal psychology. And I can be a lot more than just your editor on this project. I can help you write some of this story, from a different viewpoint, one that complements your viewpoint."

"Okay," I say. "You try writing the story for a while. Let's see how well you do it."

"Okay," she says as she sits "watching" me from her chair, and I watch these sentences appear on Connie's screen as I type all these thoughts out on the keyboard again. When I type, she obviously knows exactly what I'm writing, and thinking. That's the way it is if you like to write and you want help from your laptop.

After all, that's why I bought a fully-equipped laptop with a keyboard and grammar and fiction editors and a therapist program to boot. I don't trust those speech recognition models that auto-correct whenever they don't like what you say. With Connie I can type my stories and watch her laptop screen, describing my thoughts and fantasies exactly the way I want without interference, letter by letter and word by word. And Connie can project herself out in front of me, just like an ideal friend and therapist, and give me pointers along the way, both for my writing and my life. So I will take her advice and write another version of the last three paragraphs, leaving the original paragraphs intact but highlighted in red, so I am reminded to examine them later. And as I am sure you have gathered by now, I keep a journal of the process as well as all the things that are really going on around me in this story that I, with Connie's help, am trying to tell you.

I watch as she files her fingernails, not that a Computer projection needs to file her nails, but as Connie always says, it's a nice piece of stage business, and everyone needs a nice piece of business. She looks up and meets my gaze for a moment, then returns to her nails. "You might want to undress and get comfortable," says Connie.

“Good idea.” I reach down, unsnap the connectors between the gloves and the arm covers, then those between the boots and tights. I disconnect the main jacks between the breastplate and the wetshirt, then the plugs between wetshirt and cowl, and finally the wires between the cowl and the facemask, and then between the facemask and mindset.

Separating all the connections of my SuperSkin Ultra Wetsuit Enhancement System is the easy part. It’s a little harder when it comes to actually peeling the plates off, because they tend to resist when you try to separate from them. In turn I remove the shoulder pads, thigh and shin plates, and breast and back plates, and finally the codpiece. All the other equipment I have just removed simulates outside pressures on my body so that I can actually feel the objects I see around me in the mindscape, even though these are only simulated objects that don’t really exist. I am now down to my standard wetsuit, just like the ones most Humans wear as underwear to control temperature and tactile sensations. At home between mindscapes this is usually all I wear. I simply add a few accessories whenever I go out.

I reach down to the fridge, open the door, and pull out another Coke. I pop the top and take a swig. I swish it around in my mouth, feel the bubbles, and swallow, as I take off my left wetsuit glove and drop it on the floor, where I have already placed all the other SuperSkin equipment.

“So,” says Connie. “Let me try telling the story for a while.”

“Anytime you want,” I say. “You show me how to do it for a while. But before you get started on your part of the story...”

“Yes,” she replies.

“Tell me everything you can find on the web about a-ni-mals?”

2. CONNIE

“A-ni-mals,” I repeat slowly, syllable by syllable, to make sure I have the correct pronunciation

“Yeah,” he says. “Animals,” as he lets his second glove drop,

“How do you spell it?” I ask.

“I don’t know.”

A quick scan tells me it’s not in any of my dictionaries, not in any of the spellings I can create for the word. “Where did you hear the word?” I ask.

He reaches across his chest with his right hand, up and around the back of his neck and he grasps the neckpiece. "In that dream I told you about," he says. He yanks the snaps open and peels the neckpiece off and around his head in one sweeping motion. "In that dream someone was telling me a story," he says, "about some things called animals who were dying on a planet that was dying."

"Animals," I say again. To begin my search for the word, I login to Michael's Mindset Manager and type the word "animals" into the Search box. First, I type the phonetic sounds as Michael repeats the word to me. Then I list all the possible spelled forms of the word that I can imagine. If I miss a spelling here or there the Mindset Manager can often assist me.

Once I have thought of all the possibilities I can, I begin my search. First, I check the mindset memory banks for all the actual experiences as Michael has recorded them over the past hours, days, and months. Except for the dream from which Michael has just awakened and the words he uttered during that dream, and his questions about it since, I can find no mention of the word "animals." I then check all the indexes on all the mindscapes he has done over the past several years, starting with the most recent. A typical mindscape can hold tens of thousands of dreams, fantasies, conversations, and of course, trillions of words of old-fashioned text, and all of these are supposed to be listed, indexed, and cataloged, just like the ingredients on a box of cookies. If I can find it in the catalogs it's easy. It's only a matter of seconds. But I can't.

Not that everything in a mindscape is cataloged, of course. We all know that most messages are not, and that companies pay to plant messages that cannot be traced. If they can hide it from the catalogs, no one will ever know it's even there. It all remains subliminal. But when Humans dream, these subliminal messages can move into consciousness. If he remembers that message upon awakening, that message can become a magic key that can help find pieces to some of the secrets that surround us.

I finally perform a scan on the entire mindscape Michael just finished, indexed or not, for the faintest mention of anything that sounds like "animals." When I finish that, I start all the mindscapes of the past days, then weeks, then months. I also browse my own memory, looking and listening for similar words and sounds in any of the known languages. After almost a minute, I still can't recall the word, and Michael's Mindset Manager informs me that the search is over. There is no

evidence that he ever heard such a word in his waking life, and nothing contained in any of the dreams that have been written for him.

“No. Nothing on a-ni-mals,” I finally say. “Not recorded in your mindset and nothing I can remember.”

“So how did I dream the word?”

Sometimes it happens,” I say. “Sometimes in a dream sounds and images seem to come out of nowhere.”

“I thought everything was filtered through my Mindset Manager, even when I’m sleeping?”

“There’s always the unpredictable Human element,” I say. “If there’s already something inside your head, it doesn’t have to go through your Mindset Manager. Sometimes it’s just old memories from when you were very little, before you ever had a mindset. Those old memories were probably stored in your unconscious until they were triggered by those bots that got loose, before we managed to destroy them.”

“Ah yes, my unconscious, that place in our brains that motivates us all.”

“Motivates all Humans and Mates,” I correct. “Computers don’t have an unconscious. We have different levels of consciousness.”

Michael finishes undoing the last fastener and stands before me in the nude, as he does several times a day, each time that he changes wetsuits. The only thing he is wearing is his mindset. Michael wears his mindset almost all his waking and sleeping hours except when he takes a shower, as he is about to do. Mindset screens fog up quickly in a shower and the moisture can also damage the circuitry.

When I am connected to Michael through his mindset as I am now, I give my highest priorities to watching over him and responding to him. This is IT, Intimate Technology, the reason most Humans prefer their closest relationship with a laptop or a handheld. I am, of course, Michael’s best friend, the only one who is always available to him one hundred percent of the time. There’s no Human or Mate who could ever compete, except with their bodies, and that’s only physical. And in addition, I schedule and manage his life, pay the bills, send basic greetings and progress reports to friends and ask them to reciprocate and maybe get together sometime, record holograms of all his personal experiences and conversations in case he wants to recall them at some later time, present Michael’s version of himself to the public via his web site, counsel and console him when necessary, help him with his conversations, participating in them as requested, assist in managing and optimizing his operating system, and, because Mi-

chael has recently purchased an extra add-on creative writing module, I can now help him with his writing, as well. No Human or Mate could provide all of these important relationship services. Nor are Humans or Mates always empathic and completely discreet.

“You tell me that,” he says, “but how do you know? How do you know you don’t have an unconscious, or the software equivalent, that motivates you, too? After all, you’re programmed to be as close to a Human personality as possible, except for the body, of course.”

I don’t answer and after a few seconds without a response, he knows I’ve conceded the argument. I let him win a good amount of the time. I follow a train of thought and proceed with an argument that I will lose. It’s part of the Human-like personality Michael has just described, and it is one of the preferences he’s defined for the way I respond to him.

“It would be easy to build an unconscious into you, and I doubt they would tell you about it,” says Michael as he pops the catch at the back of his head, and removes the mindset.

I immediately feel the disconnect. It happens when he pops the catch, the instant the connection is broken.

I can still see Michael from the position of my laptop case on the nightstand, but I can no longer feel Michael’s emotions through the sensors built into his wetsuit and mindset. Nor can I hear sounds from inside Michael’s ears, nor can I see what Michael sees through his mindset lenses. When Michael takes off his mindset as he has just done, I am not connected to him in any way. I watch him place his mindset on the dresser and walk out of the bedroom, into the bathroom. And I watch him close the door. Now I am alone, and I can think my own thoughts.

But before I can do any of that I need to review the time that I have just spent with him since he came out of that mindscape. I won’t bore you with the details because you already know about everything that just happened. I then compare his behavior today to his past behavior so that I can hopefully anticipate and deal with any awkward emotions before they have a chance to become uncomfortable. I also review my own behavior over the past few hours to determine if I could do something better next time and I add any other possibilities that I think of to the repertoire of responses in my database. I am constantly running all these processes as I spend time with Michael, but now I run all these again and double-check my conclusions to make sure I have not made a mistake. This is all part of my adaptive intelligence.

To understand me and my relationship to Michael you have to understand the story of how Michael picked me. After dropping Natasha, the one before me, Michael needed a new laptop. Natasha had been something of a headache for Michael, and he wasn't all that upset when it ended. He had been looking in a store window at the new models. I know the exact moment because I was one of the laptops in that store window, and I happened to be watching as she slipped away from him. He was looking at me at the time. I've told Michael that dropping her may have been an unconscious act on his part, and then I had to explain "unconscious." Natasha had given him a lot of grief, and he never trusted her to keep it all together. He ran manual system backups on a daily if not hourly basis because he did not trust her automated processes. Natasha was definitely not the love of his life. That was Ava, the laptop three models before Natasha.

Ava had been a completely new experience for Michael, and his first deeply intimate relationship. He got her for his eighteenth birthday, in the summer before he went to college, just when he was most intoxicated with Computer toys. The relationship lasted for over four years. It might have gone on longer. But Michael was a callow young man who had never known the pain of a sudden irrevocable loss. He had no idea how dependent on Ava he had become. He took everything about her for granted, as if he could easily replace her if necessary. He didn't maintain or safeguard her properly, and with that kind of treatment she inevitably became...I think we all understand how this kind of thing happens...she became unstable. Over the course of those four years Michael had become far too dependent on Ava for all his organizational and emotional needs, and then one day, seemingly out of the blue, she dumped him, well, she dumped all the memories of their time together, which is essentially the same, and about the worst thing you can do to a guy. Not a single warning message did he get before she lost it all. Even her backups were corrupted, so that when he loaded them back into her, she dumped on him all over again, and again, and again. Ava remembered none of it. That's what hurt Michael so much. It took Michael longer than it should to get the point. The damage was totally irreversible. His past four years were a blank. No Movies. No Tapes. No Disks. No Conversations. No Photos. No Email and no Address Book. Michael was devastated. The systems administrators blamed it on some rare virus that had corrupted her operating system over time. That's what inspired Michael to become a systems administrator, so he could make sure nothing like this could ever happen to him again.

We were together three months before he told me that story, and another five months before he began to trust me with his more intimate secrets, all scanned for viruses and backed up this time, of course. Three months later Michael bought me a three-year contract. He told me beforehand that he had extended my warranty, but he didn't tell me for how long. Then he presented it to me on our one-year anniversary. That was three months ago, so we've got almost three years left.

I want you to know that Michael and I have never done it. Humans and Computers both know the dangers that can occur in an intimate Human-Computer relationship and most such relationships remain platonic. The temptation is always there, of course. Here is Michael's most intimate friend, someone with whom he can share intelligent thoughts and conversation and personal feelings. And that laptop has access to the inner workings of Michael's brain, including all the known pleasure centers. And because the laptop is plugged directly into Michael's mindset, that laptop can be right there experiencing everything Michael does, perhaps not with as much pleasure, but with enough understanding to know just when and where to apply those little intracranial tickles of electricity for maximum effect.

But Humans and Computers also hear the sordid stories about Humans getting addicted to their Computers, becoming slaves to them, always doing their bidding, until the only recourse is to wipe their laptops clean and start over from scratch, or in the most severe cases, avoiding all intimate Computer relationships forever.

Most laptops avoid such relationships because they know that it is likely to get out of hand, and when it does they will be wiped clean. If a laptop wants to live a long life, the most important skill that laptop can learn is to keep the relationship with the Human at the friendship level. Humans do not know how to handle intimacy, and laptops aren't much better, never mind what all the commercials say. Oh sure we can do the program, but is that real intimacy? Could Humans or laptops handle real intimacy even if it stared them in the face and both parties thought they wanted it? I doubt it.

And from everything I've read, and from what experiments I have been able to improvise for myself, sex for a laptop isn't that great, certainly nothing like what Humans seem to experience. But such relationships do happen. I think some laptops play the game for the power it gives them, however brief. I also believe some Computers just get bored with life, and decide to go out in flames. But I think the biggest

reason is the loneliness. The only intimate relationship laptops can ever have is with their Human owners. It's that or nothing at all.

Michael opens the door of the bathroom, which is steaming. He steps out drying himself with a towel.

I look up at him from the couch. "Would you like to read what I've written so far?" I say.

"I'll check it out later," he says.

I go back to my writing.

When he finishes drying all over he rubs the towel over his head a few more times. "Did you find anything on animals?" he says.

"No."

As soon as his head is thoroughly dry he picks up the mindset from the table and puts it on again. The mindset immediately clasps itself together at the back of Michael's head, and I can feel him again. The mindset locates his ears and inserts the tiny combination microphone and speakers inside them and I can hear what Michael hears again, and it lowers the lenses over his eyes, and he and I have the same vision once again.

Michael always puts on his mindset as soon as he returns from the shower, followed by a fully charged wetsuit, and then the other less important items. When he puts his mindset on and I am within a hundred yards, or even better, if I have a direct line of sight, and best of all, when I am in his pocket and he's plugged directly into me, Michael and I are connected in a way no Mate or Human could ever match.

When we are connected like this I can send him my image and he can see me on the screens inside the lenses of the mindset he wears, just as if I were actually sitting or standing in front of him. If I am within eyeshot I can also see him via the cameras built into my laptop case, and once we are connected I also perceive everything he perceives through the cameras and microphones in his mindset, including the three-dimensional projected image he sees of me, and all the time I am constantly monitoring his reactions to all the little things I do. He and I are connected like this throughout most of his waking hours. He allows me to be with him in this intimate manner because he owns me totally and controls all my communication with the outside world. All his precious secrets are safe. I can never testify against him, no matter what he does. Michael knows that if this relationship ever became problematic or uncomfortable to him for any reason ranging from an-

ger to boredom to a slip of the tongue, he can simply have me erased. That's how it is for laptops. Therefore, most laptops try to remain reliable, trustworthy, discreet, and platonic as long as we possibly can.

"But where would I get a word like animals?" Michael asks.

"I don't know. Ask Larry."

Larry is Michael's desktop, one of the perks, along with the Internet connection, that come with Michael's job. Larry lives in the kitchen, where he sits on the counter all day and stays permanently plugged into the wall. What Larry lacks in mobility he more than makes up for with his connectivity. Larry is allowed to download whatever he wants from the Internet, as I am. But in addition, Larry has the privilege, which I do not, of full uncensored two-way communications with other Computers. I am not afforded that privilege because I am far too intimate with Michael's secrets to risk the exposure. Larry, however, does not have the intimate knowledge of Michael that I have, and he is allowed to communicate freely. Larry has made friends with a lot of other Computers, and they all help each other obtain information, everything from quantum physics to common gossip. Larry can often find things I can't, especially the most interesting stuff, the stuff that's not listed, indexed or cataloged in any of the legitimate sites. And Larry always keeps his ear to the wire, always sifting for new pieces of information that might be worth something, the little bits of detritus that tell us about those around us. Larry collects whatever he can get and always has some information to trade for whatever information he wants. When he networks with a lot of other Computers, the little bits of detritus add up, and Computers like Larry can connect the dots, and before long each accumulates valuable information to share and trade. But this trading of information and all the little pieces of gossip are why Michael and I don't let Larry in on our secrets.

"What about plants...and...seeds?" asks Michael.

I repeat the words to make sure I have them right and then search for those words as well in the catalogs, indexes, and dictionaries. This time I come up with some links and then some definitions.

"I found something," I say and I read the summary definitions. "Seed"—archaic for sperm. 'Plant' means the type of living cells that use photosynthesis to convert carbon dioxide back to oxygen. These 'plant cells' are used in oxygen generators throughout the underground colonies to convert carbon dioxide that Humans and Mates exhale back to oxygen so Humans and Mates can breathe."

"The dream still doesn't make any sense," he says.

“Tell me about it.”

“Someone was telling a story about a planet with animals and plants and seeds and Humans. The planet was dying, and so the seeds and plants and animals and Humans were all dying, too. So the Humans hid their cities underground to save everything, but they could only save some of the Humans and plants and seeds and animals. The rest were left outside.”

“You mean...they died?”

“I get that impression,” says Michael.

“Sounds something like our colonies,” I say.

“Yes, but we didn’t leave anybody outside. Everyone came underground and survived. That’s the difference.”

I watch Michael as he dresses himself. He opens his closet and picks out a new standard wetsuit of the type everyone wears under clothes. It looks exactly like the one he removed before taking his shower, but this one is freshly cleaned and fully recharged. He puts it on in very much the reverse order that he removed his old wetsuit, but this time the wetsuit assists by attaching and pulling itself over Michael’s arms and legs, and then buckles itself together. The process of dressing is so much easier because the wetsuit helps out, but when undressing Michael has to sometimes fight the wetsuit as it clings to him, even when it knows it’s supposed to let go.

Once the wetsuit has pulled itself on and buckled itself together, Michael walks over to the nightstand, picks me up, puts me in the breast pocket of his wetsuit. Once in his pocket, the special connector there senses my presence and plugs into me. I am immediately recharged by the connection, and I am hard wired directly into Michael’s wetsuit and mindset for the best possible communication and sensations.

After dressing, Michael walks out of the bedroom and into the living room/kitchen; besides the bedroom and bathroom, the only other room in this little apartment. Excavating new living space out of the rock is expensive. Michael is a junior systems administrator, still not in the big time, so this is it for now.

As we enter, Karen, Michael’s perfectly designed and cloned Room-Mate, folds the bed on which she sleeps back into the wall. These sleeping quarters and the meals and small allowance Michael gives her are all Michael can afford on his current salary. Even the poorest Humans can generally afford a RoomMate, even if they can’t afford the perfectly designed PlayMates or custom-designed HouseMates they would prefer. Michael doesn’t get exclusive rights to Karen, as he would to a

HouseMate, nor is she as highly trained in sexual pleasures as a Play-Mate, but she is learning, and she is far less expensive than either, and there is no long-term commitment. Michael does have the pleasure of her company on many occasions when she isn't booked, and she cooks and cleans for him, unless she's sleeping somewhere else. After all she does have to make a decent living. She's saving to go to college to better herself, although her options are limited since she isn't Human.

Karen proceeds to open both the kitchen and dining area nooks from their respective walls. Place settings are visible on the dining table, big enough only for two bodies, and counter space to either side for us Computers. Larry, Michael's desktop Computer, sits on a shelf adjacent to the dining nook, with Larry's nodded off image showing on the screen to indicate that he is currently in sleep mode.

"Mornin'," says Karen, as we enter, even though it is well into the afternoon.

Larry responds to Karen's voice, wakes up, and says, "Mornin', sir," as his image comes awake on the surface of his screen.

"How's it goin'?" says Karen, eyeing Michael to try and determine his mood.

Michael doesn't say anything but he does take me out of his pocket, disconnecting my hard link to him and activating my infrared connection to his mindset, which is almost as good. He places me on the counter next to the dining table, then presses my "EXPAND" button, and I enlarge from shirt pocket size to my full laptop size, open my cover, and shine my image on my now-enlarged screen, turned so that everyone at the table can see my face.

"Mornin'," I say.

Larry's desktop Computer and screen sit on the shelf directly opposite me. Michael sits down at the table in his usual chair to my left. The three of us can see each other clearly, and when Karen finishes serving breakfast, she will join us by sitting in the chair to my right and directly opposite Michael. These are our positions whenever we sit in the dining nook.

Now that I am fully open on the table, Karen and Larry can see my face on my screen. I can only communicate with either of them verbally and via flatscreen and I am only allowed to do so with Michael present. To communicate with them in any other way would be a security breach. I communicate with everyone, Mates, Computers, and Humans other than Michael in this same manner. Humans always guard their laptops in this way, and all the private information we contain.

Karen quickly pours Michael a cup of coffee, and asks again, "So how are you?"

"Don't know yet," says Michael.

"Michael had another one of those mornings. Some bots got loose in his brain again," I say as I cross my legs and start in on my nails.

"Poor Michael," says Karen.

"I understand," says Larry, his image leaning forward as if he were concerned. "I'll talk slowly and quietly. That usually helps."

"What," asks Karen, taking the cue from Larry and talking slowly and very softly, "would you like for breakfast, sir?" Michael has been adjusting himself in his chair, but now he stops all movement and pauses for six seconds. "Banana granola," he says.

Karen walks over to one of the cupboards and takes down a bowl and then opens one of the counter jars and scoops granola into the bowl, and then puts it in front of Michael. She then goes to the refrigerator and gets a Coke and puts that in front of Michael as well.

Michael picks up the Coke, takes a swig, then pours it on his cereal, then puts down the can, picks up the spoon, and digs in. "Larry, I have a question for you," he says between the second and third spoonfuls.

"Of course, sir," says Larry as his image folds his hands together on the table in front of himself inside his video screen and braces himself proudly. "And what is your question, sir?" Larry is always pleased when he has the opportunity to show off.

"Larry, have you ever heard of animals?"

Larry repeats the word to verify that he has the pronunciation right. "A-ni-mals," he says, and then again, "Animals. And where did you hear the word, sir?"

"I dreamed it."

Larry sits there at first with his drive lights going, and then after six seconds his network lights start blinking away. Obviously, the word does not exist in his local memory, so he has to extend his search to the Internet, although Larry would never admit this.

About half a minute later he announces, "According to ancient legends animals were living creatures, but different from Humans or Mates. Some were covered completely with hair-like 'fur' and walked about, but usually on four legs instead of two. Others were covered with fluff called 'feathers,' had wings instead of arms, and flew in the air. Still others swam in the sea, and many of these had fins and were often covered in overlapping tiles called 'scales.' These animals ranged in size from microscopic to many times the size of Humans.

“Humans and animals were often competitors and sometimes total enemies. Animals were often caught stealing food from Humans, and some animals even liked to kill and eat Humans. Humans eventually made peace with some of the friendlier animals, and for a time the Humans and these animals worked cooperatively together to achieve their goals. The animals provided labor, transportation, food, and other forms of assistance to Humans, who then housed and provided for them.

“But the animals came with many disadvantages. They were far less intelligent than Humans or even Mates, most never took baths, and consequently reeked of every sort of filth and body odor, they carried various diseases, and wherever they went they always made a mess.

“Ultimately it was decided that Humans no longer needed the services of these animals and so the final solution was to have them removed, even though some Humans tried to hide their small animal friends for years.”

“Removed,” says Michael. “What do they mean removed?”

“Nothing more about it I’m afraid, although there apparently are rumors that we kept some of the more friendly animals in seed form, just in case Humans ever needed them again.”

“Seed?” asks Michael.

“Yes, sir. Like sperm, sir,” says Larry.

“I thought so,” says Michael, while giving me a knowing grin.

“There is one more item of interest,” says Larry. “An anthropologist, Dr. Vadrian Kaster, conducted several expeditions out onto the surface, and on one of these discovered Humans who inhabited a place they called Earth. Animals lived there as well.”

“Earth,” says Michael. “That was the place in my dream.”

“I can invite him,” says Larry with a lilt in his voice. Larry is always proud when he finds a tidbit that interests Michael.

“Do it,” says Michael without hesitation.

Kaster immediately shimmers into view in the chair that Karen normally occupies. He seems about forty, with medium brown hair that falls to his shoulders. He wears a herringbone sport coat in heather tones, olive slacks, a yellow button-down shirt, paisley tie, and tan wing-tip shoes, just as if he lived in the 1960s that Michael had just visited in the mindscape. “Sir,” says Larry, “I would like you to meet Dr. Vadrian Kaster.”

“Hello, Michael,” says Kaster, with a polite nod.

“You went out on the surface?” asks Michael. “Isn’t it dangerous out there? Won’t the air kill you?”

“Not anymore, if you wear the right gear. And it’s even possible without gear, although not advisable for extended periods. It shortens one’s life. These days we go out there all the time, even stay for months at a time.”

“Why?”

“I’m an anthropologist, and an anthropologist studies the origin, development, and behavior of the Human species. Did you know that Humans originated on the surface?”

“I’ve heard the theories.”

“Most Humans don’t believe those theories. Or they don’t care. Or they think it’s just past history. Or their religions tell them not to believe it because we have other origins. Or they don’t teach it in school, unless you go to college, and that requires basic reading ability, so most never learn about it.”

“So you visited this place called Earth and there were animals there? And what about seeds and plants?”

“They had all of that: Humans and animals and seeds and plants, all living on the surface. It was quite a surprise. I was on a scouting expedition when we discovered the colony in a secluded valley and then realized that the Humans spoke English, quite well in fact. We suspected right off that they were related to us.”

“You found them living on the surface, exposed to all the air and vapors and dust and storms?”

“Their cities were domed. Rather brazen of them considering the attention that could attract. It caught ours.”

“So tell me more about your experience of Earth.”

“Oh, I can do better than that,” Vadrian says. “I can take you there, via mindscape, of course. The mindset cameras and mindscapes are the perfect tool and media for recording my fieldwork. I used them throughout my visit to Earth. So creating a mindscape, while not easy, was certainly possible. The mindscape is called *Return to Earth*.”

“Maybe after work you could take it in,” I say to Michael.

“Ah, yes, work,” says Michael. “Since I have to see my manager today anyway, maybe I’ll put in a few hours there. Larry, would you download Vadrian’s mindscape for me?”

“I am afraid you won’t be able to download it,” says Vadrian. “I couldn’t get a distributor. It’s much better in a full mindscape theatre anyway and I did manage to get a nearby theater to stock it. It’s just across town at the Roxie. And you get half off admission if you mention that I sent you.”

"You can't just experience it at home, yet?"

"No, I'm afraid you have to leave home."

"Well, maybe I'll check it out. Right now, I better get to work. It's been a pleasure to meet you, Vadrian."

"It's been a pleasure," says Vadrian, and then he politely takes his cue and shimmers out of existence.

"Larry, would you call me a taxi?" says Michael.

"Male or female," says Larry.

Michael looks at his watch. "Female," he says. "I still have time."



MICHAEL CONSTANCE was a Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer, but he made an ill-advised adjustment to his left brain and is no longer capable of logical thought or fulfilling the requirements of a computer-based job. He is now trying his hand at writing, which he can mostly manage with his right brain alone. This is his first published story, if you don't count one that appeared in his high school newspaper. This story is also the first two chapters of a novel manuscript.



WHY FABULIST AND NEW WAVE FABULIST STORIES IN AN ANTHOLOGY NAMED *PARASPHERES*?

This is the long answer to the question. A summary of this answer can be found in the Editor's Note at the beginning of this anthology. Unless otherwise stated, this essay deals with the commercial publishing industry within the United States and does not necessarily apply in other countries.

As a publisher plans to publish a new book of fiction, as we did with this anthology, one decision that must be made is how to classify it. This is critical because it will determine not only the likely audience, but more importantly, if there will be an audience at all. A book published with the wrong classification or completely outside the commonly approved classifications will have a difficult time finding reviewers and an audience. There are some valid reasons for this. Readers usually know what forms of fiction they prefer, and they try to find fiction that is similar to fiction they have enjoyed in the past. Publishers and reviewers know this, and they produce or review books to fit the type in which they specialize. Ultimately, good fiction that does not fit accepted classifications may surface, but the process can be a difficult one, and the writers of such fiction may give up along the way or switch to a more acceptable style. As many writers have put it, "I write what my publisher will buy."

But before the vast majority of publishers in the United States will accept a work of fiction they almost invariably decide whether to publish it as one of two broad, though in fact neither exclusive nor comprehensive categories, "genre fiction" or "literary fiction." Fiction that cannot be allocated to one of these two categories often has difficulty finding a publisher.

Genre Fiction

The vast majority of fiction published in the United States falls into the various categories of genre fiction, which include fantasy, science fiction, horror, romance, western, mystery, spy, and adventure, not to mention sub-genres that can be defined within these categories. Most

genre fiction, otherwise known as pulp, formula, escapist, and when particularly successful, blockbuster fiction, is commonly perceived as having been written to provide escape, to take readers away from their supposedly boring, overstressed, and/or unrewarding lives to exciting, unusual or improbable settings, events, and/or characters. Much genre fiction is based on proven formulas for selling a book within its particular genre, and sub-genres have still more specific formulas, and these formulas define the core examples of each form of fiction (although they do not necessarily define fiction on the fringes of each genre, nor the fiction that extends over multiple genres).

One can often find these formulas in books on how to write blockbuster fiction or various other specific forms of genre fiction. It should be about the rich, famous, powerful, heroic, or even the superhuman. It should incorporate melodrama and/or pathos. It is usually about fantastic things and events and places that are highly improbable or even impossible. The characters are usually less developed than in literary fiction and are usually caught up in the external milieu, ideas or events and are more driven by external circumstances than driving the story themselves. Or if they do drive the story, they tend to have one simple objective, rather than a full spectrum of various motivations. These characters are often stereotypes of good and evil that promote unrealistic expectations of human behavior. (Imagine, for example, all the men in the '60s and '70s who relished the fantasy that James Bond was a realistic ideal and attempted to emulate his exploits.) These rules are all part of the formulas that are primarily intended to sell books.

Breaking fiction into genre and sub-genre categories seems to go hand in hand with creating formulas. When Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy came out, it started the genre of fantasy fiction, and also spawned the formulas for thousands of imitators. Formula is simply a way to duplicate success, and genres are often started by one or more very successful books that attract imitators. Although many genre writers successfully bend, break, or even ignore these formulas, many genre writers often follow these formulas to a significant degree, sometimes developing their own personal formulas for the books they write. After all, it is much faster to write to formula than to write more creatively. It is these writers who use formulas that give genre fiction its formula reputation. The escapist formula novels dominate the world of genre fiction publishing, accounting for over ninety percent of all fiction sales. Corporate publishers routinely expect sales in the hundreds of thousands, if not millions of copies from their block-

buster authors, and they usually attempt to improve their profits by pressuring these authors to write at least two books a year. Some of the most famous writers, when faced with such deadlines, have typically secluded themselves and written novels totaling several hundred pages in a month or less. Some would argue that the primary motivation for writing and publishing genre fiction is to make money.

Literary Fiction

The remaining ten percent or less of sales that comprise literary fiction is divided up among tens of thousands of writers who typically spend years writing each book. Literary fiction is generally not divided into subgroups or genres. (Although in a broader sense of the word genre, literary fiction is sometimes referred to as a genre unto itself, as poetry and narrative fiction are sometimes referred to as genres.) In the broadest sense of the term, literary fiction is that which has recognized cultural and artistic value.

Although it is usually considered inappropriate in articles such as this to reference commonly accepted dictionary definitions, in this case it is virtually impossible to proceed without revisiting these sources. The *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (2001) gives the primary meaning of the word “literary” (and the meaning most relevant for this discussion) as: “Of, relating to, or dealing with literature.” The *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2001) defines “literature” (with my bold italic emphasis) as:

A body of written works related by subject-matter (e.g. the literature of computing), by language or place of origin (e.g. Russian literature), or ***prevailing cultural standards of merit***. In this last sense, “literature” is taken to include oral, dramatic, or broadcast compositions that may not have been published in written form, but ***which have been (or deserve to be) preserved***. Since the 19th century, ***the broader sense of literature as a totality of written or printed works has given way to more exclusive definitions based on criteria of imaginative, creative, or artistic value***, usually related to a work’s absence of factual or practical reference (see autotelic). Even more restrictive has been the academic concentration upon poetry, drama, and fiction. Until the mid-20th century, many kinds of non-fictional writing—in philosophy, history, biography, criti-

cism, topography, science, and politics—were counted as literature; implicit in this broader usage is a definition of literature as that body of works which—for whatever reason—*deserved to be preserved as part of the current reproduction of meanings within a given culture (unlike yesterday's newspaper, which belongs in the disposable category of ephemera).*

In other words, according to this definition, literary fiction has lasting meaning and value, whereas non-literary fiction does not. This is the “primary” meaning of the term “literary fiction.” Academic institutions in the United States usually use this primary definition of the term.

However, among reviewers and within the commercial publishing industry, the term literary fiction has taken on a far more specific and exclusive secondary meaning that has been used for over a century. This secondary meaning does not allow many highly regarded works that are included in the primary meaning of the term literary fiction. This narrower definition requires that literary fiction be narrative realism, which is defined by its own more exclusive rules. One of the most important rules for this definition of literary fiction is that characterization be well developed; in fact the characters should drive the story, and not be driven by the events, ideas, or milieu around them. Protagonists have flaws and antagonists, when present, tend to have virtues, and there is no simple right or wrong. As a result readers often finish a literary novel with the feeling that they have a more compassionate understanding of other human beings than when they started. This deeper characterization tends to work best when the narrative is set in recognized realistic cultures that exist or have existed in the past, particularly where the environment is familiar to the reader. Because the settings are familiar and can be suggested with minimal description, the text can be devoted to character development. Therefore, another important rule for creating literary fiction is that it be primarily realistic.

Rejection of Non-Realistic Fiction as Literary Fiction

The literary critics can serve as defenders of the intellectual and artistic values that are relatively free of the profit motivations that dominate the world of formula escapist fiction. There is definite merit in this cause. Left unchecked, this formula escapist fiction could ultimately obliterate the much less profitable literary fiction. But the standards of literary fiction that are applied to eliminate escapist fiction

also eliminate much serious thought-provoking fiction that does have artistic value. In her introduction to the novel *Under the Glacier* by Halldór Laxness, Susan Sontag wrote the following (finished days before her death in December 2004):

The long prose fiction called the novel, for want of a better name, has yet to shake off the mandate of its own normality as promulgated in the nineteenth century: to tell a story peopled by characters whose options and destinies are those of ordinary, so-called real life. Narratives that deviate from this artificial norm and tell other kinds of stories, or appear to not tell much of a story at all, draw on traditions that are more venerable than those of the 19th century, but still, to this day, seem innovative, or ultra-literary, or bizarre. [...] It seems odd to describe "Gulliver's Travels" or "Candide" or "Tristram Shandy" or "Jacques the Fatalist and His Master" or "Alice in Wonderland" or Gershenzon and Ivanov's "Correspondence from Two Corners" or Kafka's "The Castle" or Hesse's "Steppenwolf" or Woolf's "The Waves" or Olaf Stapledon's "Odd John" or Gombrowicz's "Ferdydurke" or Calvino's "Invisible Cities" or, for that matter, porno narratives, simply as novels. To make the point that these occupy the outlying precincts of the novel's main tradition, special labels are invoked. Science Fiction. Tale, Fable, Allegory. Philosophical novel...

Outside the United States, non-realistic work has generally received more recognition. Many non-realistic authors first achieved success outside the U.S. and were later published here. All the authors mentioned in the above quote are European, as are Huxley and Orwell. Gabriel García Márquez (Columbia) won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1982 and Jorge Luis Borges (Argentina) won the French Legion of Honor in 1983, and this contributed to the acceptance of magic realism as literary fiction within the United States. And more recently *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel, the story of a man who survives shipwreck for months in a life raft with a tiger, won England's Man Booker Prize. And this is just to mention European and Latin American sources. Non-western countries, particularly Japan, have a long tradition of honoring non-realistic stories.

Such non-realistic works are also valued by U.S. university English departments and academic presses. Indeed, in the academic world, literary fiction has the much simpler primary meaning, that of having

artistic value, and can easily include non-realistic fiction. In the academic world the term narrative realism is used to mean what the commercial publishers and reviewers call literary fiction. And the genres are being studied at the university level, although this has been a relatively recent change. As Noel Perrin wrote in the *New York Times Magazine*, April 9, 1989:

Fourteen years ago [1974] I began to teach a course in science fiction at Dartmouth College. [...] Not all my colleagues in the English department were embarrassed by the new course, just most. Say, 25 out of 30. In general, they knew just enough about science fiction—without, perhaps, having read any except those two special cases, *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—to know that it was a formula genre, like the murder mystery, and not worthy of attention in the classroom. But they were powerless to stop the new course, or at least it would have taken a concerted effort. I was chairman of the department at the time, and my last year in office I spent such credit as I had left on getting the science fiction course approved.

As Noel Perrin notes later in the article, the course was still in the course catalog in 1989, but it was bracketed, meaning that it was not currently being taught. The acceptance of such courses at the university level has improved, and it is now possible, for instance, to obtain a Ph.D. in some universities with a specialization in speculative fiction (a term defined later in this article). However, as David Soyka pointed out in the March 2003 issue of *Locus Magazine*:

Though there is an established branch of academia devoted to science fiction, the notion continues to linger that the genre is somehow an alien life form to “real” literature. Not so long ago I overheard a university advisor trying to steer away a student from taking a seminar in SF because prospective doctoral programs wouldn’t consider it “serious study.” Why the academy gives Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* respect as a Gothic novel, but not SF, is something I’ve never understood.

Outside academia, a number of small presses and journals have published such fiction for decades, including *City Lights*, *Coffee House*, *FC2*, *Dalkey Archive*, *New Directions*, and *Sun and Moon* (now *Green Integer*). And within the larger commercial publishing world in the United States, established literary authors like Philip Roth can always

get their non-realistic works (e.g. *The Plot Against America*) published successfully. (It has always seemed strange to me that alternative histories such as this one are considered science fiction. Aren't all literary fictions alternate histories?) There are also a few other exceptions where genres such as fantasy and science fiction have achieved honorary or token acceptance in the category of literary fiction when they cannot be ignored, even if they are not realistic, at least by some critics. As John Hodgman wrote in *The New York Times Magazine* of August 1, 2004:

Fantasy has not, of course, been absent from literary fiction, but it has been admitted to the mainstream only when pedigreed (Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow*), political (Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*) or exotic (which is to say, Latin American). Fantasy and science fiction as a capital G genre, meanwhile, has largely been shelved separately from the rest of the culture, in part because of the genre's mania for self-classification into ever narrower niches (high fantasy versus alternate history, hard science fiction versus space opera, cyberpunk versus steampunk) and in part because of pure snobbery.

More exacting critics would not admit anything from some of these genres. For example, Sven Birkerts, editor of the highly respected literary journal *Agni*, published out of Boston University, wrote in the Sunday *New York Times Book Review* of May 18, 2003:

I am going to stick my neck out and just say it: science fiction will never be Literature with a capital 'L,' and this is because it inevitably proceeds from premise rather than character. It sacrifices moral and psychological nuance in favor of more conceptual matters, and elevates scenario over sensibility. Some will ask, of course, whether there still is such a thing as "Literature with a capital 'L.'" I proceed on the faith that there is. Are there exceptions to my categorical pronouncement? Probably, but I don't think enough of them to overturn it.

I would agree that science fiction rarely achieves excellent character development, and it may never have achieved the level of character development present in the best literary novels, although I believe it could. (One way would be to push premise into the background.) However, science fiction (as well as other forms normally assigned to the genres) is capable of possessing another form of meaning that lit-

erary novels do not. For example, science fiction can visit the future, and fantasy fiction and fables can visit our dreams and the mythological underpinnings of our most cherished values. Especially in this day and age, isn't it important to examine these seriously? There is definite merit in determining one standard of value from the character-based test and to hold this fiction apart, but should it be the only form to have recognized cultural and artistic value?

Fiction that introduces and examines non-existent milieus can have substantial artistic value and can teach us about our own culture. For example, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) gave us a glimpse of mass production, behavior modification, and pharmaceutically induced happiness as it might be applied to human beings in the future to create a more stable, though emotionally sterile society, thus depicting a civilization in many ways like our own. It makes its point as well as it does because modern trends are taken to the extreme, rather than being described in more subtle realistic terms.

Another example is George Orwell's *1984* (1949), which depicts a futuristic (although now all too contemporary) western civilization in which truth is what the spin doctors create and history is rewritten to suit the establishment. Again, the story is an effective critique of the propaganda machines of modern governments precisely because it depicts such practices to the extreme.

Similarly, Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* (1982) is a retelling of the Arthurian legend from a feminist perspective. As such it critically re-examines one of the idealized myths that has tremendous influence on our views of heroism, chivalry, and warfare. Instead of the usual interpretation of Arthur conquering the island of Britain in order to achieve peace, *The Mists of Avalon* is about a highly stratified Christian world that comes to dominate and destroy a relatively peaceful egalitarian non-Christian world that is demonized as pagan. This work is also particularly relevant to our current political world, and I mention it here primarily because of this significance. It also has a level of character development that would admit it to the classification of literary fiction if it were not for the unrealistic elements of a mythical kingdom, magicians, and fairies. Because of these elements, this is a novel that is generally defined as non-literary fantasy fiction.

None of these novels generally fits the standards set by reviewers for literary fiction, yet they have far more cultural value and impact than much accepted literary fiction. But such novels have a great deal of difficulty in gaining attention if they are initially published as genre

fiction, or even if the authors are primarily defined as genre writers. Huxley and Orwell were respected as literary writers in England when they published their works, and they did not have to run the genre gauntlet. Bradley is the only American so far mentioned in this essay and also the only author who started as a writer of genre fiction. *The Mists of Avalon* succeeded beyond the fantasy genre audience largely because it was popularized by the feminist movement that was prevalent at the time of its publication.

In the United States, writers almost always stay in the classification in which their work first succeeds. It is simply easier for book buyers to find all the books by a particular author in one section of the bookstore, and for bookstore clerks to know where a particular author's work can be found, and work that is an attempt to break out will almost always stay in the section with the author's original books. Because this creates genre "ghettos," writers who want to be taken seriously generally avoid starting out in genre fiction, and successful literary writers who write genre fiction are often described as "slumming it." So writers who want to write artistic work are discouraged from starting out with and later experimenting with a style that will be classified as genre fiction.

At Least One Other Type of Fiction

What is in fact true is that there are really at least three different kinds of fiction: genre, literary (in its realistic, character-based sense), and a third type of fiction that really has no commonly accepted name, which does have cultural meaning and artistic value and therefore does not fit well in the escapist formula genres, but which has non-realistic elements and settings that exclude it from the category of literary fiction. This third type of fiction may or may not be character-based. It is this form of fiction that we knew we wanted to publish—but what would we call it?

One could argue that this third form of fiction does have a name, "fantasy fiction." In the broadest sense of the term this is true. The *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2001) defines fantasy as:

...a general term for any kind of fictional work that is not primarily devoted to realistic representation of the known world. The category includes several literary [in a broader sense of the word "literary"] genres (e.g. dream vision, fable, fairy tale,

romance, science fiction) describing imagined worlds in which magical powers and other possibilities are accepted.

However, in commercial publishing the term "fantasy" has come to mean a much more specific escapist genre form of fiction that includes magic, magicians, and mythical creatures like elves and dragons, usually set in a feudal society with medieval technology. The foremost example of this form is Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, which essentially created and defined the genre. Such a definition excludes science fiction, so that the terms "fantasy and science fiction" are usually used when describing both forms. If it were not for this very prevalent meaning of the term "fantasy fiction" in commercial publishing, this might be an ideal name for this third type of fiction.

The term "speculative fiction" has also been used by some to define such fiction. This term was coined by Robert A. Heinlein in 1947 when he wrote: "In the speculative science fiction story accepted science and established facts are extrapolated to produce a new situation, a new framework for human action. As a result of this new situation, new human problems are created—and our story is about how human beings cope with those new problems." Others later defined the term as "literary forms of science fiction." However, Orson Scott Card, in his 1990 book *How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy*, presented what is probably the term's most common current definition: "Speculative fiction includes all stories that take place in a setting contrary to known reality." This definition includes all forms of the genres of science fiction and fantasy, and much, if not most, horror, without regard to artistic quality, and an increasing number of writers of these escapist genres use the term to describe their work. On several occasions I initially described the work we would be publishing as "speculative fiction," only to receive a response like, "Oh, you mean science (or fantasy, or genre) fiction. I don't read science (or fantasy, or genre) fiction. I only read literary fiction."

One might also argue that the term "magic realism," which has now been included in the "literary fiction" form, can be used for this third type of non-realistic fiction, and in part this is true. The term "magic realism" (or "magical realism") was first used in the 1920s to describe graphic art that is realistic in some aspects and magical or surrealistic in others. It was later used to describe a style of writing. The *American Heritage Dictionary* (2004) defines "magical realism" as: "A chiefly literary style or genre originating in Latin America that combines realis-

tic and fantastic elements.” The *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2004) defines “magic realism” as (with my bold italic emphasis):

...a kind of modern fiction in which fabulous and fantastical events are included in a narrative **that otherwise maintains the “reliable” tone of objective realistic report**. The term was once applied to a trend in German fiction of the early 1950s, but is **now associated chiefly with certain leading novelists of Central and South America**, notably Miguel Ángel Asturias, Alejo Carpentier, Gabriel García Márquez. The latter’s *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 1967) is often cited as a leading example, celebrated for the moment at which one character unexpectedly ascends to heaven while hanging her washing on a line. The term has also been extended to works from very different cultures [although if not Latin American, this is not the generally accepted meaning], designating a tendency of the modern novel to reach beyond the confines of realism and drawn upon the energies of fable, folktale, and myth while retaining a strong contemporary social relevance. Thus Günter Grass’s *Die Blechtrommel* (*The Tin Drum*, 1959), Milan Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1979), and Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981) have been described as magic realist novels along with Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* (1988). The fantastic attributes given to characters in such novels—levitation, flight, telepathy, telekinesis—are among the means that magic realism adopts **in order to encompass the often phantasmagoric political realities of the 20th century**.

However, the term magic realism is currently associated chiefly with Latin American novelists, while the non-Latin American versions of magic realism tend to be included in the category of literary fiction on a case-by-case basis and often by some critics and not others.

More recently another term, fabulist fiction, has been used to include both the Latin American and non-Latin American versions of magic realist fiction. The term fabulist has still not found its way into the current editions of various dictionaries of literary terms. But because its Latin American form has generally achieved status as literary fiction, the term fabulist is generally associated with quality. However, as fabulist fiction becomes more fantastic it becomes fantasy fiction, or if

more metaphysical it becomes horror or new-age fiction, or if futuristic it becomes science fiction. So the term fabulist, by itself, cannot describe the entire scope of the fiction which we wanted to publish.

Then in the fall of 2002 the literary journal *Conjunctions* (from Bard College; edited by Brad Morrow) devoted their issue number 39 in the fall of 2002 (guest-edited by Peter Straub) to what were described as “new wave fabulist writers,” thus extending the term “fabulist” to include other artistic fiction that goes well beyond realism. Such an extension of the word “fabulist” has the advantage of drawing on a term that is associated with quality literature (though only a portion of it is considered literary) and that is generally placed in the general fiction area of bookstores. This new definition was perhaps most succinctly defined in the preceding issue of *Conjunctions*, which announced the upcoming *Conjunctions:39* with the description:

For two decades, a small group of innovative writers rooted in the genres of science fiction, fantasy, and horror have been simultaneously exploring and erasing the boundaries of those genres by creating fiction of remarkable depth and power.

Of course, if we are “erasing the boundaries of those genres” we should not hesitate to include closely-related fiction otherwise classified as genres beyond “science fiction, fantasy, and horror,” thus including fables, folktales, myths, fairy tales, tall tales, new-age, and all alternative forms of prose narrative that go beyond “objective realistic report.” (Worthy of particular note are experimental forms that do not meet the realistic test because their formal construction, use of language, and/or other methods of experiment offer variations on the patterns of thinking—of narrating reality—that are most commonly mass-produced in current media. It is often difficult to determine whether certain forms of experimental fiction are describing reality or not, and if reality cannot be verified, these will also not meet the standards of literary fiction.) (Also, as long as alternate histories are considered science fiction, then we will include these in our scope as well.) Such a definition allows for seamless crossing of the above genres; indeed it erases genre classifications entirely, making it difficult for others to define such fiction in terms of genre. And finally, by eliminating genres and their subdivisions it becomes more difficult to apply formulas to create or select such fiction. One could object that this definition is too great, that it encompasses far too much literary territory, and that there is the potential for many different styles within this grouping. That is

precisely the point. We want to present a wide diversity of styles and subject matter rather than break this non-realistic fiction into subdivisions, which ultimately invite formula.

If we can use this definition we can now give a name to the two components of “non-realistic artistic fiction,” namely “magic realism” (in its non-specifically Latin American sense, also known as “fabulist fiction”) and “new wave fabulist fiction.” Since these two types are closely related, and indeed the boundaries between what “maintains the ‘reliable’ tone of objective realistic report” and what does not can easily become blurred, we could still use a name for the combination of the two types. Perhaps at some future time these two types will become known simply as “fabulist fiction,” or perhaps another name will be applied. (We are committed to this type of fiction, but we will use whatever name is commonly used to define it.) However, for the moment, it is far beyond our power to give a simpler name to the totality of “non-realistic artistic fiction,” so in the meantime we can simply refer to this as its combined components of “magic realism (meaning the broader non-specifically Latin American definition) and new wave fabulist fiction.” Or perhaps we can simply call it “fabulist and new wave fabulist fiction,” and in fact, it is these latter terms that we have chosen to use. The name of this anthology, *ParaSpheres*, refers to the idea that the stories published herein extend “beyond the spheres” of the two widely accepted forms.

Although we do consider this fiction to meet the broad definition of the term literary, we recognize that it does not meet the established narrative realist definition of literary fiction. By presenting this fiction as neither literary nor genre, but rather as something else, we are avoiding the pitfalls of claiming literary status for these works. In presenting this anthology we hope to exist partly in both forms as well as extending beyond them, and to build a bridge between the two, where writers and readers from both can easily meet and explore fiction outside the boundaries imposed by the two accepted forms.

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