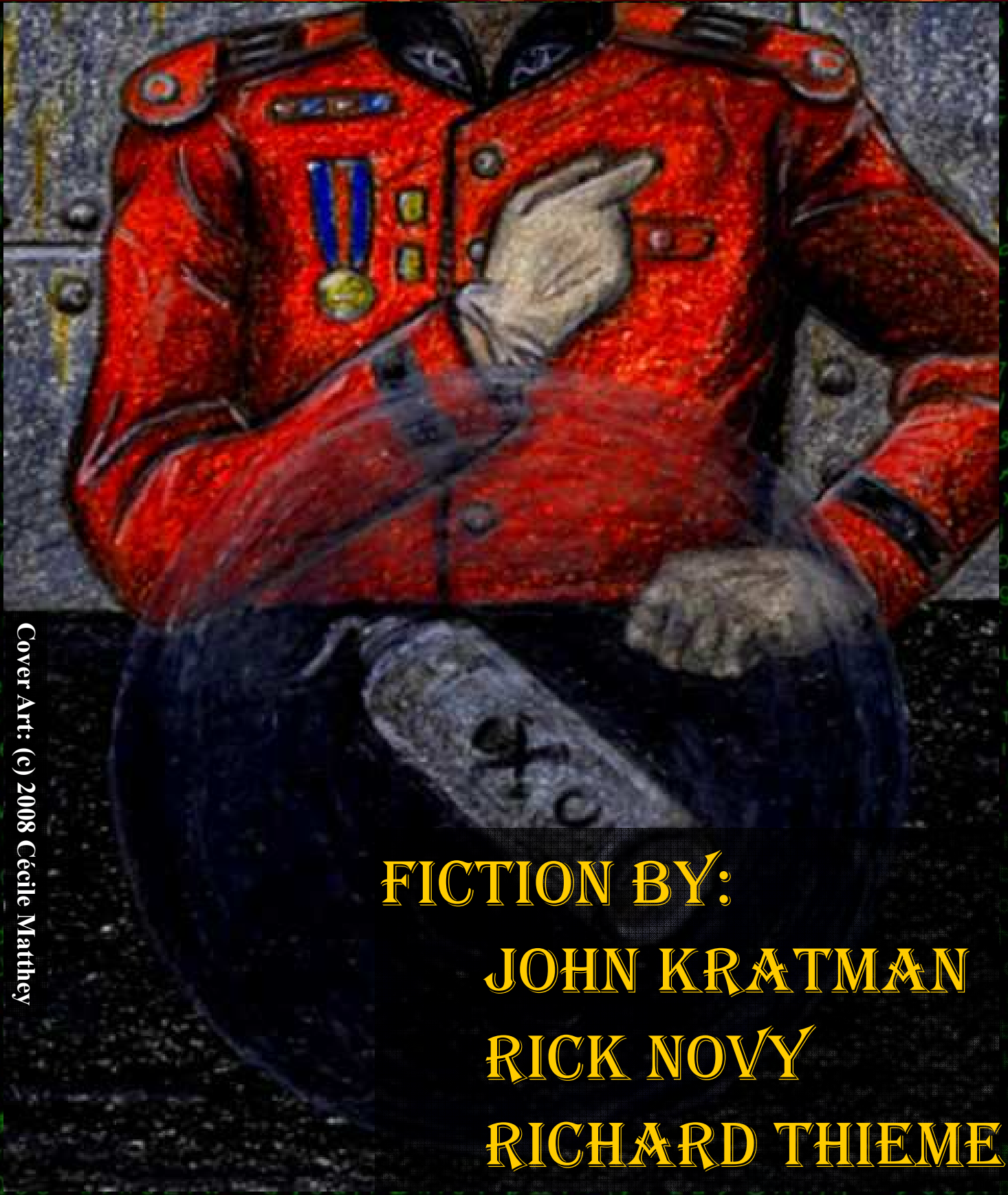


# THE FUTURE FIRE

SOCIAL POLITICAL & SPECULATIVE CYBER-FICTION

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# The Future Fire: Issue 2008.14

**Article 5. No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.**

-- *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Adopted and proclaimed by General Assembly resolution 217 A (III) of 10 December 1948.*

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**The Future Fire (c) 2008**

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In place of an editorial this month, I’d like you to read this article, which tells a story better than we could do. ‘Torture is illegal—and it never works’ (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/nov/24/torture-jack-bauer-24-redemption>), an opinion/comment by Philippe Sands in *The Guardian*. Apparently the representation of *24*’s “hero” Jack Bauer torturing terror suspects in order to save millions of lives—which some of us have been outraged by since the first series—has demonstrably contributed to the misapprehension among interrogators at Gitmo that torture is a necessary evil.

We could get into a long discussion here about why we consider the ethical quality of the fiction we publish important. About why all science fiction is political. About why being morally neutral is not good enough. About why we select social, political, and speculative cyber-fiction that asks important questions and why we will never publish stories that we feel foster views that we find morally repugnant.

But we don’t need to. Sands’s article says it all. There’s no such thing as “just a story.”

Bruce and Djibril, general editors

December 2008

# UNTIL THE PIT IS DUG FOR THE WICKED

John Kratman



The sight of the dead child did not bother Klamman, at least not in any outwardly recognizable way. Nothing bothered him anymore. He was a *sonderkommando*, one of the prisoners who emptied the gas chambers and fired the ovens in the crematoriums. He had seen enough children's corpses to harden his heart. Had he been the type to go mad from the sight of death, he would have done it long before fate brought him to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

While the rest of the men in his unit cajoled, pushed, and fabricated lies to get the transport cars unloaded of their doomed human cargo, Klamman knelt beside the tiny body, abandoned in the autumn mud. The child's mother was nowhere to be seen. In the rising and falling noise of the guard dogs barking, the screaming, and the sound of rifle butts striking flesh, he could not hear if

any one particular woman wailed for a lost baby.

The child was a little girl, perhaps seven years old. The list of possible circumstances that could have led to her death was long. Klamman let his mind brush past the worst of the possibilities.

A small book was stuffed into the pocket of the girl's coat, a corner of the binding just visible. Klamman reached out and took it, grunting with surprise when he saw what it was—*Tellehim*, the book of Psalms.

Despite Klamman's long association with death and his practiced detachment to the horrors that surrounded him, a memory of life before the Nazis swam to the surface of his mind.

*His father hunched over his workbench, making jewelry with quick and clever fingers. A hand-rolled cigarette burned in a*

*brass ashtray. Through a small window, he could see his grandmother hanging wash in the yard. His grandfather sat by the fire, reading the Torah.*

Klaman riffled through the pages for a moment, then remembered where he was. It would not do to have one of the guards see him with the book. He stuffed it into his pocket and made his way toward the train ramp.

He was not one of the *sonderkommandos* that talked to the people on the transports. He spoke Yiddish, of course, and his German was perfect, but most of the Jews coming in on the trains were Hungarian and had trouble understanding his dialect. Klaman only dealt with the dead. He extracted teeth from the corpses, gold and white metal, and did not have much to do before the transport was processed. He usually just watched.

A number of men from Klaman's unit stood in the middle of the crowd of people, calmly explaining that everything would be all right. A few Nazi officers directed Jews into separate groups. Those to the left would live for a little while. Those to the right would die, though they did not yet know it.

When the prisoners marked for death were all inside the building that housed the showers, an SS guard scrambled to the roof. He donned a gas mask, opened a small trapdoor above the showers, and dropped a dispersal canister of Zyklon "B" gas into the air duct below. Death would be quickest for those close to the canister, long and painful for those furthest away.

There was always a hierarchy to the position of the corpses—The small and weak at the bottom of the piles, the biggest and strongest on the top, the last ones to succumb.

---

Karl Becker walked alone through the shattered remains of the ancient country of Poland. Dust and grit choked the air. Only the thin shell of his radsuit stood between him and the onslaught of the hotzone. A solitary excavator mech trailed behind him, offering him companionship, but little comfort.

From time to time, he checked the radia-

tion meter on his helmet's heads-up display to be sure his suit was not breached. Extended exposure would mean a certain, albeit a lingering, death.

"*Another half kilometer, Karl.*" Colonel Ziegler's voice rang in his head, rather than the comm unit in his suit. It always gave Karl the chills to know Ziegler could likewise read his thoughts.

He stifled his unconscious musing, burying it deep beneath the mundane consideration of his surroundings. He tried to relax. If Ziegler caught his unpatriotic thought, there was nothing he could do about it.

The area around him was strewn with rubble and occasionally he discerned the vague outline of a concrete foundation. Otherwise there was nothing recognizable as man-made for kilometers. The sun rose in the east, an orange globe suspended in clouds pregnant with radioactive death.

"For God's sake, am I there yet?" Becker spoke aloud out of habit, even though Ziegler could hear his raw thoughts.

"*One hundred meters.*" If Ziegler was amused at his discomfort, he did not show it. The concentration required to operate the psi-amplifier left little room for levity.

The loose soil barred Becker from taking a rover. It could barely stand the weight of the light excavator mech that followed him across the nightmare landscape.

"*Turn east fifteen degrees.*"

Becker changed direction.

"*Stop. You're there.*"

"How deep, Colonel?"

"*Three meters.*"

Becker punched a few buttons on the mech's keypad, then commanded, "Mech, excavate. Three meters."

The excavator rolled into position and proceeded to funnel the radioactive soil through a front-loading sifter. A dynamic screen in the belly of the mech expanded to let rocks and rubble through then contracted to catch any materials that the mech identified as being of interest. Bone fragments and dust began to build up in the catch plate.

"*Anything?*" Ziegler's voice came from his helmet comm, garbled with static. He had

disengaged from the psi-amplifier.

"Bones. The usual." A glint in the catch plate caught Becker's eye. "Wait a minute. There's something else."

Becker opened the clear cover of the catch plate and reached inside. He grabbed a handful of dirt, letting the dust and debris run through his fingers until he held only a shining bit of metal.

"A piece of jewelry of some kind." It was a small brass medal, a swastika emblazoned on its front, an eagle above it. Becker turned it over. The back showed a number "12" encircled by stylized leaves.

"Keep going," Ziegler said. "*I saw it. It's there.*"

Becker repressed a shudder. The sensation of Colonel Ziegler in his mind made him feel *soiled*. Still, having someone tell you where to dig was better than blindly searching through the centuries-old rubble of Oswiecim with pick and shovel.

The mech located the canister in under an hour. Becker carved the fused clay and sand from around the steel cylinder with a handheld pulse laser, hoping to preserve it as much as possible for the trip back to the lander.

In the process, he unearthed a fragment of a vellum-paged book.

He radioed back. "I've got the canister. Coming home. You were right again, *Herr Oberst*."

"*Naturally*," Ziegler radioed back. "*Was there ever any doubt?*"

---

The camp underground brought word back to Klaman's barracks. The Nazis were planning to exterminate his unit of *sonderkommandos*. One of the women that smuggled gunpowder from the munitions factory brought the news. The camp underground had enough explosives to build a few small bombs, saved against the day when the prisoners would rebel.

Being marked for death did not surprise Klaman. His first job when he got off the train at Birkenau was to cremate the bodies of the previous group of *sonderkommandos*.

The Nazis never left them around for long.

The Nazis gave them proper clothes, decent—well, more decent—food, and a warm place to sleep. But it was only a temporary reprieve. Eventually, Klaman knew, his time would come. Then he could join his father and sister in death, and await the day when God would drop the dew of life on the remnants of his body and he would live again.

Bielecki, another Pole like Klaman, whispered to a bunch of men gathered around him in a circle. He looked up and caught Klaman's eye.

"What about you, dentist?" he asked. "Are you with us or will you die like a sheep?"

Klaman winced at the nickname Bielecki had thought up for him. "Death now, death later—what's the difference?" He reached into his pocket and took out the book he had taken from the little girl's corpse.

Bielecki walked over and stood very close to Klaman. His clothes stunk of the crematorium.

"Die if you want, dentist." Bielecki stood a foot taller than Klaman. He put his hand on his chest and shoved him against the wall. "But you are either with us or against us."

"You'll kill me if I say 'no'?" Klaman nodded and opened the little book. "In that case, I'm with you."

---

Becker's hair was still wet from the decontamination shower. He looked out at the barren landscape of Poland through a view screen in the mess hall and waited for Eva and Colonel Ziegler to arrive. A number of mechs rumbled back and forth outside in the ever-present dust storm, working to repair the main cooling unit of the zeppelin-shaped lander. The heat of reentry from New Munich space platform had damaged it. The storm was so thick Becker could barely make out the mechs' designation numbers or the swastikas emblazoned on their chassis.

The door to the mess opened with a soft hum and Colonel Ziegler and his daughter, Eva, entered.

The Colonel had twisted scar that ran snake-like from just above his left eye to his

hairline where it disappeared into a blond mass of curls. It marked him as surely as his red uniform and silver insignias of rank marked him an *Oberst* of the *Hellseherkorps*, Reichsführer Von Reiniger's psi-corps. The surgical scar on his forehead concealed the micro-miniature circuitry that gave Ziegler the ability to peer into the minds of men. It also allowed him to operate the psi-amplifier.

Eva was young, just out of medical school, and had her father's hair, but softer features, unmarked by cruelty. Her lab coat did little to hide the beautiful curves of her body.

"Hello, Karl. Welcome back." She smiled at him a little uncertainly. "Is something the matter?"

"No." Becker smiled and forced his thoughts of Eva's body deep down inside his brain. "Too many hours outside, I guess. It makes you a bit crazy."

"You brought it?" Ziegler asked. His eyes bored into Karl, probing, searching, always.

"Yes, *Herr Oberst*. The medal and the canister are in the decontamination units. The decon technicians tell me they can salvage them."

"And what about the book, eh foolish Karl?" Ziegler smiled and sat at one of the round cafeteria tables. He tapped at the scar on his forehead with his index finger. "Or did you think that was your little secret?"

Becker swallowed. He had not told anyone about the ruined book he had found at the dig site. "It's a pretty poor artifact, almost illegible."

Ziegler grunted and flicked cigarette ash on the spotless cafeteria floor. "Just what kind of book is it?"

"The computers are trying to salvage it, Colonel. I won't know what it is until—"

"Ah, but you do know, don't you, foolish Karl?" Ziegler fixed Becker with his eyes. "It is unclean, the writings of the *untermenschen*."

"Perhaps." Becker began to sweat. Ziegler's powers were diminished without the psi-amplifier, but he could still catch surface thoughts.

"Keep the book, Karl. The Reichsführer is only interested in ancient weapons. As long

as we deliver the artifacts Reichsführer Von Reiniger wants for the two-hundred year Reich Pageant, I don't care what you do."

Becker sighed. The book might be his chance to rise in status, a chance for a better life for himself and his parents among academia. The first person to crack the ancient Hebrew language would be published in all the major scientific journals, regardless of the nature of the writings. "Thank you, Colonel. The gas canister will be ready for you in a few hours."

"And the bone fragments?"

"Yes, they will be ready, too."

"Good." He pointed his chin at Becker and smiled at Eva. "Can you use Karl's help tonight, Eva?"

She blushed. "I could use some help with the recording system."

"Tonight?" Becker had planned on meeting Eva secretly at twenty-three-hundred.

"My father wants to use the psi-amplifier on that medal you found," Eva said.

"I think the Reichsführer would be very interested in that bit of brass. A soldier's medal." Ziegler threw his cigarette on the floor and a spidery cleaning mech darted out of its roost and sucked it up. "I thought we could do a biographical write-up on the man—a portrait of a hero of the Great War, a front line destroyer of the *untermenschen*."

"I'd be happy to help." Becker hid his disappointment as best he could. Recording Colonel Ziegler's experiment was a far cry from the evening he had planned with Eva.

"Meet us at the psi-amplifier station this evening at say, I don't know, twenty-four hundred hours?"

"I'll be there." Becker stood up. "*Tschuess*, Colonel. *Tschuess*, Eva."

"Hold on a moment, Karl." Ziegler stood up. "Eva, would you excuse us, please?"

"Yes, Father." Eva stepped toward the mess hall doorway and stopped. "*Wiederschaun*, Karl." She hurried out.

"What can I do for you, Colonel?" Becker's hands shook. He hid them behind his back.

"What are your intentions with my daughter, Karl?"

"Well, I, that is—"

"Eva is young, she thinks she's in love with you." Ziegler took a step forward, standing too close to Becker. He was the shorter of the two by a few centimeters. He exhaled smoke into his face. "You are not worthy of her."

"But—"

"You will break off your relationship. No more late night trysts."

"But, Colonel, I—"

"Do not cross me, foolish Karl. Think of your own family—your mother, your father. The labor camps are no place for the infirm."

---

Klaman had an oil lamp by his straw mattress and he read the *Tellehim* as the rest of his team conspired to escape. The weather had turned. A cold rain pounded the roof of the barracks and the shutters rattled in the wind.

Bielecki and the rest of the prisoners had spent much of the day caching makeshift weapons around the camp, leaving their assigned work to be done in half the time it normally took. The whole unit was exhausted from the effort of cleaning the gas chambers and loading the ovens.

Bielecki broke off his whispered conversation. "Read us something, eh dentist? Comfort us." He blew air out of his nose and waved a hand in dismissal.

A few of the men looked up. If there was interest or hope in their eyes, Klaman could not see it. He saw only hard, cold eyes set in young-old faces. He flipped a couple of pages and read:

"...He planted the ear, shall He not hear? He who formed the eye, shall He not see? He who disciplines nations, shall He not rebuke? He who teaches wise men knowledge—God knows their thoughts, and they are futile. Blessed is the man whom you do not discipline, O Yahweh, and teach him your Torah that you may give him rest from the days of evil, until a pit is dug for the wicked."

The men smoked cigarettes and thought private thoughts. Outside, the steady pounding of the rain turned the yard to a quagmire.

A single black tendril of smoke blew from the crematorium, buffeted by the wind and angled like the finger of God pointing from Heaven.

---

The mechs were unable to repair the main cooling unit and Dr. Schroeder and Becker were forced to go out and inspect the damage firsthand. Schroeder was the nominal leader of the dig, but hierarchy was always tenuous with a member of the *Hellseherkorps* involved. Added to that, Schroeder's family was marked by the Gestapo. His father and two brothers were both executed for rebellion when Schroeder was a boy.

"It looks like we'll need to cut this expedition short, Karl." It was hard to tell Schroeder was over eighty-years old. He moved easily in his radsuit, almost oblivious to the certain death all around him. "Colonel Ziegler won't be pleased."

"The secondary units are adequate for a few days, Dr. Schroeder." Becker tapped on the unit, a smaller dimple on the rounded underbelly of the lander. "We can continue to dig for a least another forty-eight hours."

"Not too anxious to end our little trip, eh Karl?" Even through the ever-present dust, Becker could see the old man's smile. "She's very beautiful."

Becker laughed. "Yes, she is."

"You can see her on New Munich." Schroeder clapped him on the back. "This hellhole is no place for love."

"I don't think I'll be seeing her again, Doctor." Becker related his conversation with Colonel Ziegler.

Schroeder turned serious. "Forget her, Karl. There are a million beautiful girls. If you cross a *Hellseher* like Ziegler, you'll end up dust. How long do you think you can keep it secret? He will know. He'll strap himself into that foul machine and he will *know*. Not even our thoughts are safe."

---

Klaman watched the guard set his rifle down and drop his pants to relieve himself. Bielecki edged closer through the trees,



stalking him. He drew close, covered the guard's mouth with one hand, and drew his knife across his throat.

The guard twisted away and let out a short, gurgling yell. The soldiers around the *sonderkommandos* turned, their rifles raised in hard-trained readiness.

All around Klaman, *sonderkommandos* drew out secreted lengths of pipe, shovels, and pick-axes. Klaman clutched a large kitchen knife in one sweaty fist.

The guard closest to him grunted and fell face first into the mud. A *sonderkommando* stood behind him, a bloody ball peen hammer in his hand. He dropped the hammer and picked up the guard's rifle. He kneeled and drew back the bolt, aimed, and fired at one of the guard towers, squeezing off a few rounds before the machine gun crew in the tower opened up on him. He collapsed in a spray of blood. A score of prisoners were mowed down in front of Klaman.

The bullets kicked up dust and swept toward him. He dropped into the dirt and threw his arms over his head, the kitchen knife still in his hand.

But the bullets never reached him. Against all hope, the machine gun fell silent. He looked up and saw a guard a meter away, unaware that Klaman was still alive.

Klaman sprang to his feet and grabbed the guard by the lapel of his coat. He buried the kitchen knife in the guard's gut, surprised at the joy he felt in doing it. The man screamed, a low and awful sound. Klaman released him, some small decoration from the guard's uniform still clutched in his hand, the knife still in the man's stomach.

The machine gunner in the tower shot at him again and Klaman ran. The gate beyond the train tracks stood open.

An explosion drowned out the sounds of gunfire. He felt the concussion on his back as he ran. The machine gun fell silent. Klaman could hear the dogs behind him. Most of the trees around the camp had been cleared, but a small vein of thick woods outside Birkenau led to a larger forest. Klaman closed the gap quickly.

"My father is wrong, Karl. She put her hand on his cheek and kissed him in the relative privacy of the psi-lab.

"Maybe he's right." Becker frowned and touched his forehead to hers. "You deserve a better man, a more successful man."

"I love you for who you are." She held him tighter.

"I'm going to finish my studies, Eva. I'll decipher the Hebrew book I found at the dig site—I'll publish a paper in the Academy of Science journal. Then your father will see."

"That *untermenschen* book?" She pulled away from him. "What will that prove? That you can read the language of animals?"

"You're wrong." Becker reached out to take her hand and she pulled from his grasp again. "They were men, Eva. Men!"

She backed away from him and opened the door to the psi-lab. "No. They were evil—they destroyed everything they touched. And you would bring them back." She fled.

"Eva, wait! That's your father talking."

But she was gone.

Becker wondered how he could ever make her understand. Her father was a Colonel of the *Hellseherkorps*. His father was a laborer on the Agriplatforms. She did not know what it was like to see parents go hungry so that their children could eat. The Reich was hard and cruel, like the soil of Oswiecim. It ground men's bones to dust.

---

Klaman awoke to the barking of dogs. The October sun was low on the horizon and a bitter wind blew from the east.

Four soldiers got out of a small truck and milled around on the dirt road. The log Klaman had fallen asleep behind hid him from view, but already the guards' two dogs were pulling on their leashes, noses to the wind.

The handler strained against the pull of his animals. The other soldiers fanned out, rifles ready. The lead man walked over to the edge of the wood and a frightened rabbit burst out of the brush. The soldier, startled, uttered a short oath and kicked, missing it and laughing. Klaman got on his stomach and tried to crawl away.



"Juden!" A guard raised his rifle and Klam scrambled to his feet, terror giving him energy to run. He sprinted for the woods, gunshots tearing around him as he fled.

---

The psi-lab was aft and Becker had to walk through the lander's sleeping quarters to get there. He took his time, not wanting to awaken any other of the various technicians and scientists who might have already gone to bed. The faint hum of life support and the power generators thrummed in the walls and floors. Zero-g handholds studded the walls and ceiling, useless while the lander sat on the Earth's surface.

He stopped at the decontamination unit and removed the brass medal and bone fragments. He dug around in a drawer and found a couple of plastic test tubes to put them in. The intact gas canister was in a much larger unit. Becker toggled a control on the device and the opaque window on its side cleared, revealing a gleaming cylinder swarmed with miniature cleaning mechs, each one polishing and restoring the artifact a millimeter at a time.

A number of cracks had appeared in the steel over the centuries, but they had been sealed by the sand and soil fused around it by the close impact of atomic warheads. The decontamination unit wrapped it in a stasis field while the mechs pieced it back to a solid whole and kept its deadly contents intact.

The Colonel and Eva waited in the psi-lab. The room was crammed with equipment, but it was the psi-amplifier chair that held Becker's attention. It resembled a dentist's chair except for the small, saucer-like cups attached to the headrest, each aligned to about where a man's ears would be. Nylon cuffs lay where the ankles and wrists would go. Wires protruded from the back of it and trailed off to the many machines and computers that lined the room. A steel coil, much like a spring, hung suspended from the ceiling.

Becker stared at it, fascinated and repulsed at the same time. The Colonel seemed

to look right through Becker when he was strapped into that chair, as if he could see everything he thought or had said, anything that resided in the blackest pit of his mind no matter how deep it lay buried.

"Ah, Karl! You're just in time." Colonel Ziegler said.

Eva moved about the psi-chair, adjusting straps and levers and checking various read-outs that ran along the attached console. She turned to smile a wan greeting and hurried to one of the cabinets to retrieve a data module.

"Thank you for letting me come, Colonel," Becker said, trying with all his might to make his surface thoughts blank. In his mind's eye he imagined a sheet of white paper, unmarred and perfect. He concentrated on the page, only the page, keeping any stray thought out of his mind, willing himself to reveal nothing.

"Did you bring the medal and the bones?"

"Yes." Becker removed the stoppered tubes from his pocket and waved them from side-to-side, rattling the bones against the glass and handing them to Ziegler.

"Excellent." Ziegler removed the stopper from the tube that contained the medal. He held it up to the light, turning it to see the brass glimmer. The data banks on the New Munich platform identified it as a twelve-year service medal, awarded to veterans of the *Wehrmacht* around the time of the Great War.

"Are we ready, Eva?" Ziegler asked.

"Whenever you are."

He handed her the vial of bones, but kept the medal in his hand. He sat in the chair and sighed as he set his head in the amplifier cradle. Eva strapped him in, tightening the straps one at a time and giving them a quick tug to ensure they were fastened.

"Karl, please sit over there and start the camera," she said, gesturing at the recording console that jutted from the lab wall. She put the vial of bone fragments into Ziegler's strapped down hand. "Ready for power up, Father."

Becker started the camera.

"You can start now," Ziegler said.

Eva turned to the control panel, flipped a

plastic cover over the main power, and punched the large button underneath it. The machinery behind the amplifier chair hummed and the large coil over the chair began to glow pale green.

"Ah." Colonel Ziegler took a deep breath and closed his eyes, clutching the vial and the medal in white-knuckled hands. His thin muscles strained against the nylon straps that held him in the amplifier's seat. "Oswiecim—Auschwitz, two hundred years ago. The air is clean and cold, the hills still green. I see five men, running through the woods. They have two dogs."

"Are you getting this, Karl?" Eva asked, back to him.

"Yes."

"I'm with him, the man with the medal," Colonel Ziegler said. "The soldiers are chasing him. The dogs are at his heels."

Ziegler strained even harder against the straps, the muscles in his neck standing out. "His cap slips off his head. A bullet strikes a tree as we run by it."

"What is it he's seeing?" Becker asked.

Eva shrugged. "I don't know."

"Ahh! I'm shot!" Ziegler slumped. "We're lying in a ditch. The sun is shining on my face."

"Father?"

"The soldiers are standing over us," Ziegler said. "One steps on the hand holding the medal, crushing it into the dirt, but we don't let it go. There is smoke rising in the distance."

"Father! Are you all right?"

"A rifle! Aimed at our face!" Ziegler whispered. He slumped forward in the psi-chair, head hung low.

Eva turned toward the flickering readouts that dotted the side of the psi-amplifier. "These readings can't be right."

"He knows! He knows I am there! He *feels* it. He feels it!" Ziegler cried.

Becker stood up. "Colonel! Can you hear me?" He stepped within three paces of the chair and stopped, casting a nervous look over the crackling and glowing coil above his head. It seemed to glow brighter every second. Becker felt it on his face like a miniature

sun.

"Who are you?" Ziegler asked in strangely accented German. "Watch out! The gun!"

Sparks from the coil above started to rain down on Ziegler.

"It's overheating, Eva. Shut the damned thing down." Becker staggered away from the sparks, his forearm over his eyes.

"I just can't shut it off cold. It would kill him." Eva typed on the console. Perspiration ran off her chin.

The sparks continued to shower down. Ziegler's light cotton uniform began to smolder. His eyes opened.

"Colonel!" Becker grabbed the fire extinguisher from the wall and pointed it at Ziegler. He hesitated. "How long?"

"One minute."

The coil glowed white-hot. The Colonel looked up at it from the chair, his mouth open. A long bolt of electricity shot from the coil and contacted the metal top of the psi-amplifier chair. He screamed.

Becker sprayed the extinguisher on Ziegler then fanned it out to hit all of the machinery. When it was empty, he drew out his pocket-knife and cut the straps off of Ziegler's legs and wrists.

---

A bullet struck a tree as Klaman passed it.

*I'm with him.*

Klaman jerked his head around, expecting to see a guard at his shoulder. But there was no one there.

*It's cold.*

Klaman tripped over a gnarled tree root. His cap fell off his head as he struggled to maintain his balance. Another bullet struck a tree just a few feet away. A burning pain flared in his right shoulder.

*Ahh! I'm shot!*

The shock of it knocked Klaman out of his stride and he sprawled in a heap, rolling until he came to rest in a shallow drainage ditch. He stared up at the clouds, strangely calm. A long column of smoke from the camp still drifted across the autumn sky.

A booted foot ground his hand into the dirt. One of the guards aimed his rifle at Kla-

man's face.

*A rifle! Aimed at our face.* A voice whispered in his ear, very close.

"Who are you?" Klaman asked. The guard hesitated, looked at his companions, shrugged.

*He knows I am there.*

Klaman closed his eyes and prayed. Over the excited barks of the dogs, he heard the guard pull the bolt back on his rifle.

Lightning flashed in great torrents on the back of his eyelids. Once, when he was a boy, he jumped off a cliff into a lake and his stomach had twisted as he raced toward the icy water. He felt himself fall the same way now, bathed in electric shocks of light, toward a cold blackness set in the center of his mind. A great rush of vacuum gripped his consciousness. He felt ripped from himself, adrift in a vast ocean, suffocated and alone.

Feeling returned slowly, voices from a great distance.

"Our orders are to return him to the camp," a voice said. "Get him in the truck."

They dragged him to his feet and threw him into the steel back of a truck. The dogs nipped at his heels and the man holding their leashes laughed.

"Where is your officer?" he cried, cursing as they pushed him forward. The pain in his shoulder was almost unbearable. "I demand to speak to your superior!"

One of the guards grasped his wounded shoulder and squeezed. He screamed and collapsed in the dirt, the agony driving him close to losing consciousness. A booted foot caught him in the ribs. "Swine!"

He rolled back and forth, caught his breath, and hissed through clenched teeth. "I'll see you shoveling shit in the coldest work farm in the system!"

"Shut up, Juden." The truck lurched forward.

"I'm *Oberst* Ziegler, of the Reichsführer's *Hellseherkorps!*"

---

Becker and Eva stood over Colonel Ziegler's bed. A thick-pile carpet, an antique from before the war, covered most of the

steel floor. Becker thought it was probably worth more than his father had made in a lifetime of grubbing in the dirt.

Eva held one of her father's hands. "He should come out of it soon."

"I still think we should get Dr. Schroeder," Becker said.

"There's nothing to be gained." Eva knew Dr. Schroeder had his own friends at the Chancellery, friends that would be more than pleased to embarrass her father and the Reichsführer. "He'll just panic and abort the mission before we have a chance to finish the dig. We'll ask my father how he wants to handle it when he wakes up."

She kissed Ziegler on the forehead and his eyes flickered beneath their closed lids then opened.

"Who are you? Why am I here?" he whispered. He cast a terrified look around the room, noting the swastika emblazoned on the wall and the deep maroon and gold painting of the Führer above it.

"You're in your quarters, Father. It's me, Eva." She pressed his hand to her lips. "There was an accident with the psi-amplifier. Karl pulled you out and we brought you here."

Ziegler looked confused, but nodded. "Thank you."

"Colonel, what's with the accent?" Becker asked.

"Accent?"

"Colonel?" Becker looked at Eva. "Is he in shock?"

Eva shook her head. "I don't know. Possibly. Father, do you know my name? Think carefully now."

Ziegler pushed himself up on his elbows and Eva adjusted the pillows so he could lean back. "Eva?"

Eva sighed. "Yes. You've had an accident, Father. You need to rest."

Karl walked to the sideboard and poured two fingers of schnapps into a crystal glass. He held it out to Ziegler.

The Colonel's hand shook. He looked at the drink for a moment, then held it under his nose and took a small sip. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"I'm afraid I don't feel very well," he said.

"I want to give you an injection," Eva said. "It will calm your nerves."

"An injection?"

Eva took a hypo from a steel tray beside his bed and held it up to the overhead lights. She flicked it with one finger to shake loose the bubbles.

"But I feel fine. No need for that! I'll—I'll be whomever you want..."

"Hold him down, Karl. He's delirious."

Becker grasped Ziegler by the shoulders and pushed him as gently as possible down to the bed, painfully aware that he was touching one of the most powerful men in the Third Reich. "Easy, Colonel. Easy. You'll feel better after you've rested."

Eva held the contact-hypo to the crook of his arm.

"But I can work! I can still work," Ziegler said, his speech slurred. "Am I dead? Is this Heaven?" He smiled at Eva. "There are angels here." His eyes closed.

"What the hell is going on?" Becker demanded.

"I don't know." Eva said. "Some sort of amnesia, perhaps, from his abrupt exit from the psi-amplifier. Sleep will do him good."

The comm unit buzzed and Becker pressed the answer button, grateful for any excuse to get away.

"Becker, here."

"Karl, there is a problem with the secondary cooling unit. I need you to come out here and take a look." It was Dr. Schroeder. The howl of the storm was audible on the comm.

"I'm busy with Colonel and Dr. Ziegler, Dr. Schroeder."

"Please ask the Colonel if he can spare you for a few hours. If you don't come soon, the reactor core will explode and we'll lose the Reichsführer's precious artifacts, along with our lives." Schroeder's voice was heavy with static, but Becker was sure he heard a bit of annoyance in the old man's voice. *He's had enough with the Reichsführer Von Reiniger's special project.*

"All right, give me ten minutes to suit up. Becker out." He looked at Eva. "I'll be back

as soon as I can. You're sure you don't want me to tell Schroeder?"

"Not yet. Let's see if the sleep does him any good."

Becker started to speak, but thought better if it. He turned on his heel and walked out of the room, leaving Eva sitting beside her father's bed.

It took Becker almost twelve hours to jury-rig the secondary cooling unit. But the temperature of the lander's engine core continued to rise. They would need to return to the platforms soon.

He made his way to the mess hall to get coffee and stopped short in the doorway. Colonel Ziegler sat at one of the tables, an empty cup in front of him.

"How are you feeling, Colonel?" The image of a blank piece of paper rose almost unbidden to Becker's mind. He focused all his concentration on it in an effort to keep his thoughts hidden.

"Very well, thank you." Ziegler's eyes flicked up and took in Becker, head to toe. His eyes lingered on his mouth. "You have very healthy teeth."

"Well, thank you." Becker said, taken aback. He felt his surprise slip through the cracks in his attempt to shield his thoughts.

"Eva told me you saved my life." Ziegler held out his hand. "Thank you, Karl."

"You're welcome." Becker shook his hand. "I'm sure you would have done the same for me."

Ziegler poured himself another cup of coffee. "You were...outside?"

"Yes. The secondary cooling unit failed."

Ziegler, looking bewildered, nodded. "What an awful place this is." He walked to the observation port. The wind had settled a bit and the sun looked like little more than a daub of red paint on a gray canvas. "What's it called?"

"You mean the old name?" Becker wanted to talk to Eva. There was something wrong with her father. "Oswiecim, or Auschwitz."

Ziegler dropped his cup and it shattered on the hard floor. He started to pick up the pieces when two cleaning mechs darted from their roost and cleared the spilled coffee and

glass.

Ziegler gasped and took two steps backward. "What happened to it?"

"It's a hotzone, Colonel. Don't you remember?" Becker said. "There were a number of nuclear explosions here during the Great War."

"Nuclear explosions?"

"Yes. Atomic missiles, launched almost two hundred years ago. The V-3's that destroyed the armies of the Soviet Union?"

Just then, Eva walked into the cafeteria. "There you are, Father. I told you to stay in bed. The Reichsführer wouldn't be very happy if I were to let anything bad happen to you."

"The Reichsführer?"

"Come along, Father. I'll tuck you in."

Becker pretended to study a safety placard on the cafeteria wall. His conversation with Eva would have to wait.

---

Ziegler watched the countryside melt away to a dense industrial area. Smoke hung heavy in the autumn air. The truck approached a massive gate set in a high stone wall. Above the gate, formed in black iron, were the words, "*Arbeit macht frei*"—"Work will set you Free".

A railway platform stood at the west end of the compound. A train had just arrived. The guards drove the truck toward the platform and got out. Ziegler, still dazed from his wound, jumped off the bed before the guards could begin to beat him again.

A few men in striped uniforms and pill-box hats pulled open one cattle car's door and a press of bodies fell out onto the ramp. An odor of death and excrement reached nose and he turned away in disgust. It reminded him of the lower sections of New Munich where the *untermenschen* toiled in the shadows. "What is this place?" he asked, but no one answered him. Ziegler rubbed at his forehead. He felt blind without his implant.

The guards nodded to a squat brick building and corralled him toward it. A chimney dominated the center of the structure. Its

dark column of smoke turned the sunset orange.

Ziegler looked around at the crush of people wailing and the uniformed men pushing them into groups before the railway platform. His guard jabbed him in the ribs with the butt of his rifle, forcing him up against the steel door of the smoke-crowned building.

"Get in, Jew."

"I'm not a Jew! I'm *Oberst*—!" The guard shoved him forward into darkness and Ziegler fell to the dirt floor, his wounded shoulder exploding with pain. The door clanged shut behind him.

"Eh, dentist. I guess God did not save you." A low venomous chuckle emanated from the corner of the room. Ziegler's eyes, no yet acclimated to darkness, strained to see.

"Who is it? Who's there?"

"You know me, dentist. Bielecki."

Ziegler's eyes adjusted. A huge man, dark and dirty, sat in the corner of the little room, his elbows on his knees and his head sunk low.

"Will it be the bullet or the showers for us, do you think?" another voice asked. Seven other men sat on the floor of the room.

"Who knows?" Bielecki said. "If it's the showers, we know where to stand, where the gas is strongest. We'll be dead soon enough."

"At least we took some of them with us." Another man, faceless in the shadows, said.

"Yes." Another voice.

"Do you still have the book, dentist?" Bielecki asked.

Ziegler did not answer. Bielecki struggled to his feet. There was a great deal of blood on his left leg. He shambled toward Ziegler, his hands outstretched. Ziegler stepped away, stopping when his back hit the door.

"Book?" he asked. "What is this place?"

"Don't you know?" Bielecki patted Ziegler's chest and under his armpits. He extracted a book from his pocket. "This is hell."

One of the other prisoners struck a match and it flared like a star in the blackness.

Bielecki put his face close to the little book and read:

"...who will rise up for me against the evil-doers? Who will stand up to the workers of iniquity? Had Yahweh not been a help to me, my soul would have dwelt in silence...."

Ziegler stuck his hand in his pocket and drew out a brass medal the size of a coin. In the light of the match, he saw it was a soldier's decoration, a number "12" on its back and an eagle perched over a swastika on the front.

"Oh, Eva. Help me," he whispered.

The comm unit in Becker's quarters interrupted his study of the ruined book from the hotzone. "Yes?"

"Karl?" It was Colonel Ziegler. "May I come in?"

"Enter," Becker said. The door to his quarters slid open.

The Colonel stood in the doorway, his hair neatly combed and his *Hellseherkorps* uniform pressed and perfect. "I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"Not at all. Please come in." Becker stood up and offered him a chair. "Would you like a drink? I have schnapps."

Ziegler sat down next to Becker's data console. "That would be nice, thank you."

The tri-d screen of Becker's data console flashed red and green as it attempted to decipher the few lines of legible characters visible on the ruined pages of the book. Ziegler watched the square cursor flash through possible translations.

"What's this?" he asked.

"The book I found buried in the liquidation camp." Becker set two glasses in front of Ziegler and poured them each a drink. He raised one to Ziegler. "Heil."

"Thank you." Ziegler took a small sip. "May I see this book?"

"All I have here is this facsimile." Becker handed him a sheaf of paper. "The real artifact is in a stasis bubble in the main lab. It would disintegrate in open air. You wouldn't be able to do much with it anyway—it required computer-aided reconstruction just to salvage a few passages."

"Oh." Ziegler riffled through the pages, a small smile on his face. "Why all this? Why not just give it to someone who can read Hebrew?"

Becker considered Ziegler for a minute. It was possible he had read his mind. "I would need you to call up the dead to find someone to read it."

"Call up the dead?" Ziegler finished his drink in a gulp.

"Of course. The Jewish *untermenschen* are extinct." Becker poured himself another drink. Ziegler pushed his glass forward and he filled his, too. "I often wonder what the world would be like if the Great War had not happened. So many dead. The Earth almost destroyed. What great men and women might have been born?"

"And what monsters?" Ziegler's hand was shaking.

"I can still show you the original book if you like."

"I'd like that, Karl. Thank you."

They walked aft to the lab. It was crowded with technicians cleaning artifacts for the Chancellery's two hundred year Reich Pageant.

"It's over here," Becker said.

The remainder of the little book hung next to the canister Becker had retrieved from the hotzone. About twenty more stasis bubbles were suspended in midair throughout the viewing chamber, each containing an object recovered from the dig site.

"What is that?" Ziegler pointed at the canister.

Becker smiled with pride. "That's your canister, *Herr Oberst*. The Zyklon "C"."

"Zyklon "B"?" Ziegler rubbed at the snake-like scar on his forehead. He leaned his other hand against the wall.

"No, this is much more rare. The second generation of the Zyklon pesticide, Zyklon "C". Are you all right?" Becker put a hand on Ziegler's arm to steady him, but the Colonel shook it off. "I think you had better get back to bed."

"I'm fine. Tell me more."

"After your accident and the problems with the cooling units, I completely forgot to

tell you. The gas granules are intact!"

"Intact?"

"The fused sand around the canister kept it from escaping. We've repaired it."

"Repaired it?"

"The Reichsführer will be very pleased, don't you think? This is a very unique find. Even the rapid dispersal system on the canister is functional."

"Yes." Ziegler swayed a bit. "I'm sure he'll be ecstatic."

"I thought, perhaps, you could present it to him when we get back to New Munich."

"In person?"

"Certainly. I imagine the Reichsführer will be planning some sort of a ceremony when we return."

---

The guard slammed the hatch closed. Ziegler banged on the door. "I tell you, I am *Oberst* Fritz Ziegler! I demand to speak to your commanding officer. Open this door!"

The rest of *sonderkommandos* crowded around the central shower heads.

"Dentist, come over here. It will be quicker." Bielecki's face was pale, almost as white as marble.

The trap door above the showers squeaked as the guards opened it. A faint thump could be heard in the ductwork as the canister of Zyklon "C", the latest pesticide produced by the Reich, dropped in.

Bielecki's eyes held his. He held out his huge hands, palms up, and Ziegler, spellbound, walked over to take them. The gigantic Pole smiled down and the fear fled from Ziegler's heart, replaced by a tired regret. "I'm sorry," he said.

"There is no sorrow where we're going." Bielecki's hands burned with inner heat.

The gas hit Ziegler's lungs and he felt his throat constrict. A spike of pain flared in his chest. A seizure knocked him to his knees, but Bielecki's marble hands kept him from the hard brick floor. His consciousness slipped away, dancing on the edge of his agony.

One by one the men around the central showerhead fell. Bielecki lasted the longest,

swaying like a great tree about to topple at last in a final storm. He fell on top of Ziegler, his head resting on his shoulder, his eyes closed.

The latest group of Jews had arrived a few hours earlier. Of these, the youngest and the strongest were selected to continue the work of the *sonderkommando*.

With Krematorium IV destroyed, the dead needed to be dragged to Krematorium V. Ziegler's body, or what had become *his* body, was the first out of the gas chamber. The young *sonderkommando*, still in shock from his first day in the horror of Birkenau, did not notice the little book or the medal that fell from his corpse's pocket. They landed in the mud in front of the crematorium, unseen.

In the general confusion of the cleanup, a German supply officer unloaded a new shipment of gas canisters in front of the crematorium and the book and the medal were crushed into the dirt under the containers full of gaseous death.

---

Becker dreamed he was walking down the hall of the lander with Colonel Ziegler.

"I want to see the canister, Karl." Ziegler was dressed in an outlandish costume: striped shirt and pants of some poor material, a little pillbox hat on his head. He took a crumpled pack of cigarettes from his pocket and lit one with the end of his thumb, as if by some bizarre magic.

"I thought you decided to quit smoking, Colonel." The air was stifling hot and Becker felt a bead of sweat slide behind his ear.

"You only live once." Ziegler blew a perfect smoke ring. It spun in midair and twisted itself into a six-pointed star. "Tell me more about the gas, Karl."

"Certainly, *Herr Oberst*. Zyklon 'C' is hydrocyanic acid, fiber, and a stabilizing agent. When exposed to air, the pellets become gaseous hydrogen cyanide."

"Is it much different from Zyklon 'B'?" They reached the main lab's door and entered. The canister sat within its stasis bubble, suspended within an insulated glass chamber.



"It's far more potent. It also had a modified delivery system that utilized compressed oxygen to disperse the gas in a wider radius in a short period of time."

"How would it be activated?" Shadow engulfed the pits around Ziegler's eyes.

Becker punched a few keys on the stasis command console and the bubble rotated toward the delivery window of the chamber. He reached into the window and drew the canister out. "Let me show you." He set the canister on a work table in the center of the room.

"Aren't you afraid it will go off?" Ziegler's skin tightened against his skull and his eyes seemed to sink back into their sockets. "Wouldn't it kill us?"

"I would imagine that it would kill everyone in a room this size in less than thirty seconds." Becker pointed at plastic box mounted on the canister. "But I installed a safety mechanism."

"How would you disarm it?"

"Let me show you. Simply press the correct number sequence on the safety keypad." Becker entered five numbers on the keypad. "Then grasp this handle, turn it to the right, and pull." Becker grabbed the handle on top of the canister and made to pull it out, but Ziegler laid a skeletal hand on his forearm to stop him.

"No need for that, Karl." Ziegler smiled. The skin on his face cracked and blackened, became nothing but ash. The inner fire consumed him until there was nothing sitting in the chair but a skeleton in a striped uniform, hat perched on its bleached head.

It held Ziegler's pose for a moment then crumbled to dust, leaving nothing but the clothes and a tiny brass medal. Becker knelt beside the pile of clothes and ash and picked it up. It was the artifact he had excavated from the dig site.

A fierce wind began to blow through the lab. The dusty remains of Ziegler's body rolled into a miniature whirlwind, engulfing Becker and then the lab itself. He screamed and threw his arms in front of his face.

Becker woke up in the main lab in his night clothes. The Zyklon "C" canister sat on the table in front of him.

He found a lab coat and put it on, shaken by his dream and confused as to how he had ended up in the main lab. He put the canister back in its stasis bubble and started to walk back to his quarters.

He ran into Colonel Ziegler, standing at the door of the psi-lab.

"Hello, Colonel."

"Hello, Karl." Ziegler was pale, the scar on his forehead redder than usual against the whiteness of his skin. Sweat stained the collar and armpits of his uniform. "What are you doing up so late?"

"Bad dream," Becker said.

Ziegler nodded. "Poland is a place of nightmares."

"You don't look well, Colonel. Shall I call Eva?"

"No, no. I'm fine. Goodnight." He walked off.

Not sure why, Becker entered the psi-lab. The recording he'd made of Ziegler's accident was queued up and still running. Becker crossed to the psi-chair and touched the seat. It was still warm, despite the coolness of the air-conditioned room.

"It's an amazing machine," Ziegler said from behind him. He stood in the door of the psi-lab.

"Colonel? I thought you were going to bed."

"I forgot my uniform jacket." He pointed. A red Hellseherkorps jacket hung from the back of a chair near the recording console.

"Ah." Becker swallowed. Without thinking, he said, "You seem changed, Colonel, since the accident."

Ziegler put on his jacket. "For better or worse?"

"Neither. A different person entirely."

"And what if I was? A different person, I mean. What would you do?"

"My duty—"

"Duty?" Ziegler snorted. "You seem like a good man, Karl. You love Eva, do you not?"

"Yes."

"Then take what love you can, Karl, and be happy. There's little enough happiness in the world."

"Can't I love your daughter and have my

duty, too?"

"Of course. But which duty will you choose? Your duty to life or your duty to the Reich?"

"You're not making sense."

"In your heart, you understand." Becker pointed at the hull of the lander. "The next time you go outside, listen to the sound of the wind and the dust. The ghosts in the storm will explain it to you." Ziegler started through the doorway, but stopped, his hand on the frame. "It is better to fight and die than go willingly to the slaughter like a sheep."

After Ziegler left, Becker sat alone for a long while, his gaze fixed on the psi-amplifier. Then he went to his quarters to sleep.

---

New Munich glittered as it spun, a great jewel against the backdrop of space. The transparent edge of the station's massive ring shone green and lush with trees and crops. The lander drew closer the massive perfection of the Reich Chancellery grew more and more visible. It was a beacon in the ring of the eleven space platforms, the seat of power and the home of the Führer.

"It's beautiful," Ziegler said. He watched the platform rotate on its axis from the main observation port in the mess hall.

"But you've always hated New Munich, Father." Eva and Becker sat at one of the tables, enjoying a last cup of coffee together before the madness of unloading their cargo began.

"Even things you hate can be beautiful," Ziegler said. "At least in their own twisted ways."

Becker thought of his home sector, buried in the inner darkness of the ring, far from the beauty of the city that defined the Chancellery. "Will you see the Reichsführer today, Colonel?"

"I'm to report to him immediately."

Eva clapped her hands. "Can you introduce Karl to him, Father?"

Ziegler crossed to where the steel canister of Zyklon "C" stood on a table, still wrapped

in the stasis bubble.

"I'd be happy to." He smiled at Karl and something in his eyes made Becker turn away. "In fact, how would you like to meet the Führer?"

"The Führer?" Becker's heart skipped a beat. "He'll be there? When you..." he pointed at the canister.

"Give this to the Reichsführer?" Ziegler stroked the canister with his fingertips. "Yes."

"Oh, Karl!" Eva said. "Isn't it wonderful? We're going to meet the Führer himself!"

"Yes. Wonderful."

The lander docked and the slow business of homecoming began. A few hours into the ordeal, a contingent of *Hellseherkorps* in red dress uniforms arrived to escort them to the Reichsführer.

The Führer's SS guards, clothed in black and silver, surrounded the entrance to the Chancellery. A security gate, lined with scopes and various detectors, stood in front of the portal. A number of drab and malnourished-looking servants were busy hanging colorful decorations for the Reich Pageant around the doors.

A warning klaxon sounded as Ziegler approached the scope. "Stop him! He has poison gas!"

"Halt!" Two guards barred Ziegler's passage toward the door, their rifles aimed at his chest.

Eva rushed forward and Becker restrained her with his hand. "There are safety locks." But his words fell on deaf ears. He looked at Ziegler. His hand was on the dispersal lever of the canister.

The Captain of the *Hellseherkorps* contingent charged with escorting Ziegler to the Reichsführer stepped forward. "Colonel Ziegler is a guest of the Reichsführer Von Reiniger."

"I don't care who he is. I cannot let him pass."

The *Hellseherkorps* Captain spoke into the comm on his shoulder. Within a minute, the door beyond the scopes opened and the Reichsführer marched out.

He was old, his lined face and vulture's

neck trembled as he spoke. A snake-like scar, much like Ziegler's, marked his brow. "What's the delay, Captain?"

"They have a weapon, Reichsführer." The SS guard gestured at the canister. "Poison gas."

The Reichsführer moved closer to get a better look at the canister. "What is this, eh Fritz?"

"A Zyklon 'C' canister, Reichsführer. Recovered from the camp."

"*Mein Gott!* It's priceless...what a find!" The Reichsführer's eyes lit up. He waved his hands at the guards. "Let them pass. On my authority."

The SS men looked at one another, eyebrows raised. Their Captain crossed to a comm unit and spoke a few terse words. After a minute, he returned and nodded his head.

"For you, Reichsführer, it is permitted."

Becker stepped forward. "Reichsführer, I need to tell you—"

"Who is this young man, Fritz?"

"My daughter's betrothed, Reichsführer. Karl Becker."

"Betrothed!" The old man's smile was cold. "The Führer will be pleased. He loves young people. They must come with us to dinner."

"Of course." Ziegler walked past the guards, the canister under his arm.

Eva stepped forward, but Becker did not move or release her hand. "Karl? Come on, the Reichsführer is waiting!"

Becker started to speak, but Ziegler interrupted him. "Eva, I'm sorry, can you go back to our quarters and bring my notes? I've forgotten them and I'm sure the Reichsführer would like to hear about the other artifacts we've recovered."

Eva looked disappointed, but nodded. "Yes, Father."

"Karl, please escort her. A spaceport is no

place for a lady to be alone." Ziegler took Becker's hand and pressed a folded piece of paper into it. "Which will you choose, eh? Life or dust?" he whispered.

Before Becker could answer, Ziegler turned and walked through the door and into the presence of the Führer. The door opened and he was swallowed up in the sounds of horns and a wash of maroon and gold tapestries, the canister cradled in his arms like a baby. He grabbed the dispersal lever and twisted it to the right. The door closed behind him.

Becker heard a muffled scream and automatic gunfire from the sealed chamber. The SS guards left their stations and pounded on the door, frantic to gain entry. More guards streamed into the Chancellery and Becker and Eva had to fight their way out like fish swimming upstream.

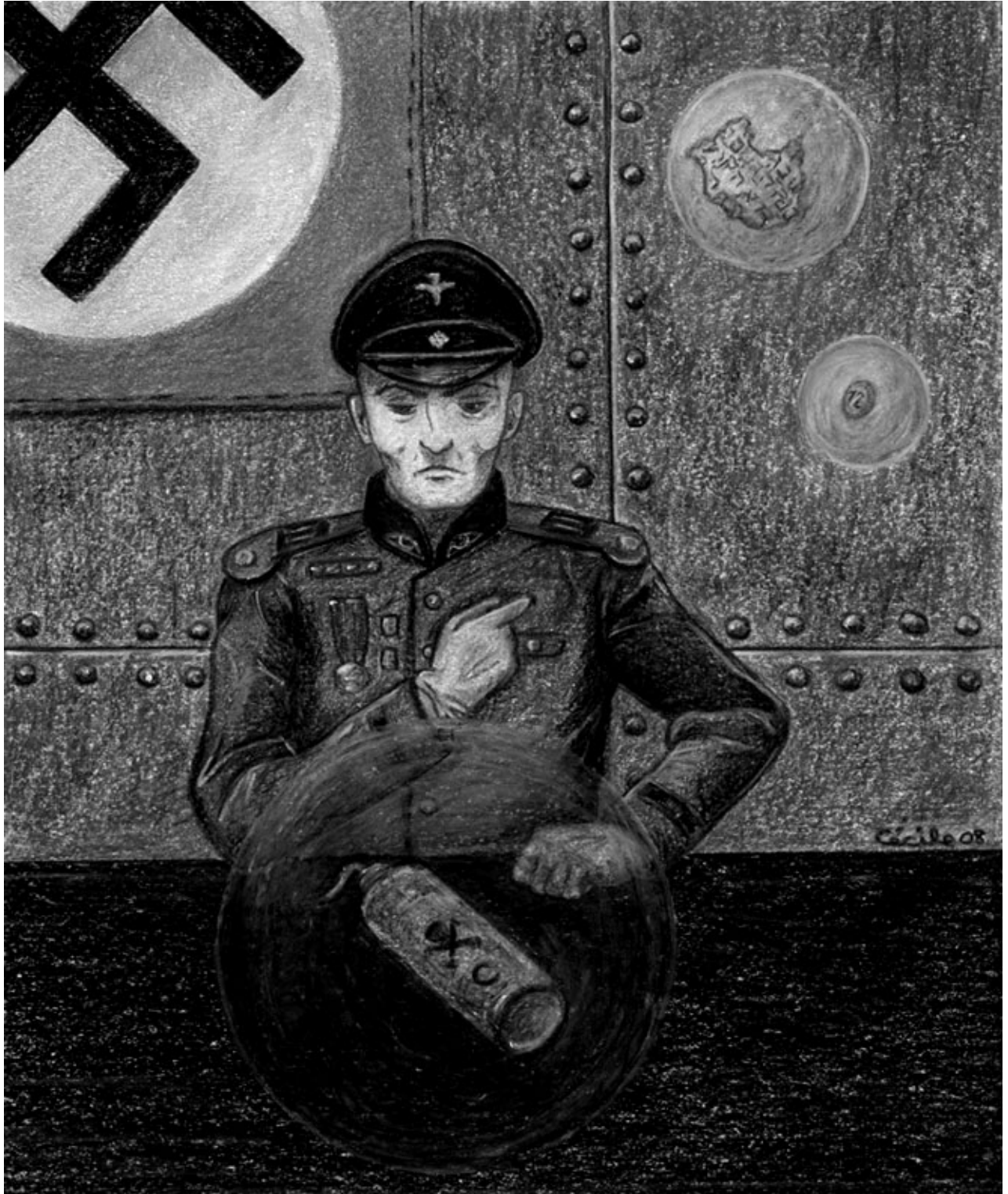
"What's going on?" Eva tried to turn but Becker dragged her forward. "My father!"

Becker forced Eva to the transit tunnels and onto a tram bound for the dark interior of the station, ignoring her protests. "Where are we going? What's happened?"

"Your father did his duty."

Becker waited until the car was underway before he unfolded the piece of paper the Colonel had passed to him. It was a copy of the book from the dig site. Precise handwriting filled the margin of the sheet. Becker read:

"...Can the throne of destruction be associated with You? Those who fashion evil into a way of life—they joined together against the righteous, and the innocent blood they condemn. Then the Lord became a stronghold for me, and my God, the rock of my salvation. He turned upon them their own violence, and with their own evil He will cut them off, Yahweh, our Elohim, will cut them off."



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# A Rock by Any Other Name

## Rick Novy



illustration (c) 2008, G. Edwin Taylor ([www.taylor9.com](http://www.taylor9.com))

"I'm angry." Heads all turned, suddenly interested in what the war hero had to say.

"I'm angry because they lied to me. They asked for sacrifice and we expected nothing in return. After all, this was a war of patriotism. Defending the nation, they told us.

"Out on the rim, the colonies became targets to those who wanted nothing better than to martyr themselves. Easy targets for a people no better than savages." Heads in the crowd nodded in agreement.

"It took us eighteen months of travel to reach the colonies, cooped up in three-deep bunks, exercising with springs and eating

plastic and drinking swill. Nothing improved upon arrival. Men, antsy for action after so many months of inactivity, waited for orders that never came.

"We sat idle while news of more sneak attacks on the colonies filtered over the net. No defense of the colonies for our unit. I didn't understand why, and I didn't care. These colonists were our brothers, and I wanted to defend them.

"Our orders came many weeks after we arrived. Our unit would not defend the colonies, our mission turned out to be far more exciting. The entire unit cheered when they

heard we would be striking the enemy at home, a pre-emptive strike.

"That meant another six months of travel, which quieted the cheering once that realization set in. Cramped quarters again, more swill, more sweat, more smell. It didn't matter. We intended to do as much damage to the enemy as we could, and that did matter.

"When we arrived, the battle had already been joined. Our troop transport was preceded by the heavy artillery, three battleships and seventeen aegis destroyers. Ours was one of twelve transports prepared to invade.

"We watched the bombardment from the rear on our monitors. Huge explosions visible from orbit, carpet bombing with mountain-crushers, all to soften up the enemy before we set foot on the ground." No sound came from the crowd. Everyone within earshot concentrated on the war story. They didn't get many chances to hear about the fighting from someone who was there.

"From space, the scene took on a surreal feeling, the muted explosions turning vast swaths of continent into a flaming hell, yet only silence reached our ears. Sound doesn't travel through space. When the bombardment ended, we still waited.

"One never knew what passed through the mind of a General. The Commander-in-Chief appointed these Generals to lead this assault. The Commander-in-Chief stands by his people, ready to protect them against the heinous crimes of the enemy. That's why we're here. That's why I volunteered for this service, volunteered for the risk and danger, to protect my family and my people.

"Time lasted forever as we waited for our invasion. When we finally got the word, adrenaline surged, and tension hung in the air. The hull of our transport vibrated as we entered the thin wisps of the upper atmosphere. This gradually amplified until it reached a violent quaking that tapered off as we dove deeper toward the surface.

"The officers turned off the screens once we hit atmosphere. We rattled around inside that transport until everyone sported bruises. We didn't mind, the bumping around heightened a soldier's awareness.

"When the hatch of the transport opened, row after row of soldiers jumped in unison, landing with retros, falling hard, but ready to fight.

"And fight we did. Machine gun fire from the front ranks mowed down the enemy. We made rapid progress, advancing as fast as we could move, slipping on blood-stained surfaces and stepping over enemy bodies.

"The blood-lust in my fellow soldiers surprised me, though I trained with most of them, and fought along side others. I never expected to see this much glee at the stock end of a rifle." A child began to speak in the crowd and several people hushed the little boy.

"The advance halted at dusk. We secured the perimeter and settled in for the night. I shared a fire with three other soldiers. I don't know their names. I didn't forget, I just never learned them. I'd been a soldier long enough to know you just don't ask names until your companions live at least three weeks under fire. Getting attached will get you a section 8.

"When the time came for *Taps*, I was ready for sleep. Invasions take a lot out of a body, and a soldier needs rest to be effective. Yawning and eager to crawl into bed, it riled me when an officer tapped me on the shoulder.

"I followed the officer to a clearing where seven other men had gathered. We had all been hand-selected for a special mission, the details of which we would learn on a need-to-know basis. This was why I volunteered for this service--Secret missions, clandestine adventure, all in service of my country.

"Captain Mayne led the eight of us toward a stone bridge leading across a major river. The bridge somehow escaped bombardment and scorched earth defense, and on the other side, a tall tower loomed. I knew we were headed toward that tower.

"We took heavy fire when we reached the bridge. I watched three of my comrades fall, leaving only five of us and Captain Mayne. We launched a rocket through a window of the tower and much of the gunfire fell silent.

"Once we had the chance, it didn't take

long to storm the tower. The locked gate slowed us by mere seconds, and another rocket opened the door for us.

"Inside, we fought in close quarters. Captain Mayne ordered us up, and up we fought. The stairs spiraled around the inside of the outer wall of the tower, making good cover both for us and the enemy throughout the climb.

"At one point, a group of enemy defenders charged down the stairs, but we mowed them down and hardly lost a step. Resistance thinned, and we burst into the room at the top of the tower with nary a shot fired.

"I expected we would burst into the Imperial palace and storm the Imperial throne. The main thing I can say about our target on this raid is that it was unexpected. The chamber at the top of the tower, I discovered as we raided the place, held only documents.

"Captain Mayne ordered us to stand watch as he rifled through drawer after drawer of filed hard-storage disks. With a sigh of relief, he grabbed three disks and turned around without even closing the file drawer.

"As Captain Mayne walked past me to get to the front of the unit, I glanced at the disks in his hand. Only the chicken-scratching of the enemy's language appeared on the disks. Curiosity got the better of me, and I asked the soldier next to me what he thought the disks contained. I said it loud enough Captain Mayne could hear. He pranced in such a giddy state, I guessed right. He wanted to talk about it to somebody."

Still rapt by the battle story, the crowd leaned closer, hoping to learn of some valiant act or dirty little secret. Oh, the dirty secrets to reveal.

"Do you know what those disks contained? They contained the locations of all the enemy's palladium asteroid mines. Palladium--the one element that allowed reasonable commercial space travel. Earth had always been short of palladium in quantities. Earth imported palladium from all over the known universe to make up for the shortfall at home.

"Now, here we were, getting ready to take palladium by force. I held my tongue. A sol-

dier doesn't get into it with his commander in a hot zone. One's own life might depend upon that commander to get out again.

"That providence turned out to be true here. We took fire as soon as we got back to the bridge. Heavy fire. Captain Mayne called for backup. We dove off the side of the bridge and rolled down the hill toward the river. The enemy ceased fire for the moment. My flank man crept up the hill and poked his head up to see what he could see. His headless body slid back down the hill after a burst of staccato.

"Pinned. Captain Mayne called for artillery support. The most important thing, he said, was to get the disks back to the transport. If we accomplished that, the invasion would be an unqualified success.

"Not long after, we heard the incoming artillery exploding around us. We thought it might be safe to proceed once the shelling stopped, but that was before a shell hit the bridge. It hit the bridge just above our unit, the section we hid beneath.

"Stones rained down from above. Captain Mayne had been farthest under the bridge. Nobody could survive the chunk that fell where he sat. I managed to roll clear of the biggest pieces, but I took a serious beating from smaller stones. Mob rule once executed people with stones no larger than a man's fist. Small stones are lethal in sufficient quantity.

"They didn't kill me, though. In my case, the stones merely crushed my legs. The enemy captured me and the other surviving soldier, and I spent three years neglected in an enemy prison. My crushed legs went gangrenous and the enemy butchers amputated without anesthetic.

"It took a raid by some brave soldiers to bust me out. The soldier caught with me died a year after the mission, beaten by the prison guards for coughing at the wrong time.

"Our Commander-in-Chief never got his palladium. The three disks Captain Mayne pulled from the tower died with him under the bridge. I never inquired about the success of the mission, but we are still importing palladium from around the galaxy, and we have



yet to take any enemy asteroids by force.

"We also still let the attacks on the colonies continue. This was never a war about protecting our fellow citizens in danger from these attacks. This war, this invasion was about palladium, though nobody has ever admitted it. Now, we're entering our fourth year of this madness. We've lost six colonies in the past three weeks, and still we pay for palladium from the enemy.

"I supported this government; cast my votes in their favor. Their platform seemed like sound policy. This leader's appointees to the High Court slanted the bench away from

the ambulance-chasers, and that was the reason I supported this administration.

"But this! This is madness. I gave my legs for palladium. I ride in a wheelchair because of high-level back-scratching and personal vengeance on the part of our Commander-in-chief. You recall the enemy once attempted to assassinate his father. Personal vengeance and palladium, that's why we're in this war, folks. It was never about the attacks on our colonies. This is a personal vendetta, and our soldiers are paying the price.

"That's why I'm angry."



# Less Than the Sum of the Movable Parts

Richard Thieme



Nothing gets us through a long day more than an image of a constant self.

My life is one long day, so believe me, I know. It helps. Thinking that "I" was here "yesterday", "I" am here "now", "I" will be here "tomorrow"—it's wonderful, isn't it? Using an imaginary temporal index linked to a mirage of an equally illusive self to manage an inchoate flow of impressions which turn into pictures in the "mind" to simulate fixity?

I think it's wonderful, anyway. I think it helps us stay engaged with tasks that might otherwise drive us to despair.

Or worse.

There's a bigger question, however: is there a connection between the connections?

A real one, I mean? A single template that works from top down, instead of bottom up?

Otherwise, it's just a coding trick—memories encoded in chemicals programmed to disclose aspects of what we call "selves" like origami unfolding to that same subjective self. This recursive program would be a stroke of genius, if a genius existed. A reflexive self, embedded in its own structure, suggests continuity; seemingly real memories frame the phantom self like planes in a cubist painting constructing odd geometries—inside of which we, all unassuming, happily thrive.

Or—to put it another way—it thinks, therefore we are.

Or, in cases like mine, agencies think for

us, relieving us of some of the work.

OK. We emerge from braided twists of code like cookies from flour water and sugar. But where does the recipe come from?

Well—who knows? Maybe it evolved. Maybe we were cooked up in a kitchen. I prefer fun hypotheses like Charles Fort's. It sounded crazy when he said it; now it sounds reasonable, now that we know that UFOs are real and have been around for a long time. Fort, you recall, combed through newspapers and periodicals in the New York public library in the early twentieth century, filtering anomalies into his notebooks. Then he bound them into a vision. He suggested that we might be property, owned by an alien race. He didn't know if they won us in a lottery, inherited the planet as part of a bequest, claimed us after a battle, or agreed to accept us in lieu of cash in a game of intergalactic poker. The reasons, whatever they may be, are unthinkable because we have no point of reference. They relate to memories in the storage banks of the alien race(s) linked by connections as invisible to us as dark matter. We don't know if or how they design histories or store memories to preserve identities distributed through folds of space-time. We can't even see them, much less understand how they evolved. We don't even believe in them yet. All we can do is suppose that they, too, construct peculiar geometries in the blank space of the zero point field. Perhaps the multiverse unfolds in their imaginations like origami too, a multidimensional canvas on which they paint or sculpt the equivalent of art.

Who knows? Anyway, the first steps are the hardest: believing that they exist, and then, believing in our belief. At this point in time, we don't believe. We believe in disbelief. By design, I believe.

In a court of law, lawyers tell me, three witnesses who say the same thing are considered the best evidence. Well, witnesses have testified to the presence of our watchers, owners or visitors, whatever they are, by the thousands. The data points are voluminous. They plot countless visits by beings in luminous discs, silent triangles or elongated craft

with portholes; they have been documented for decades, perhaps centuries, they have been here anyway a long long time—they or their robots or clones—but we act as if they don't exist. We can't map what we can't comprehend. We have impressions, images of conspicuous displays, stored in collective memory banks, but we turn them into myth. We make fiction instead of history. Fiction is the province of the fantastic and distracts us—and their manipulations of energy or matter seem fantastic, make no mistake. The effects we have observed imply an understanding that we can not apprehend. And they seem to hide and show themselves, they seem to play a game of cosmic boo and peek—but to what purpose?

Once again... who knows?

Anyway... the DNA came from somewhere. Whatever the source, perhaps our owners think of us as dairy farmers think of their herds. Perhaps they sip like emotional or intellectual milk our cultural excrescence which is useful in some way, or tasty, an occasional treat, a distraction from the task of searching for meaning. Maybe we add a page to the choral songbook of the multiverse. Maybe they feel affection when we head for the barn at the end of the day, the sun steeping the pasture with its lone oak tree slanting in shadow. Maybe the twilight sky that brightens before it fades is a liminal image that stirs them, too, a portal to something they have lost and can not recall.

Or maybe they are proud of our halting progress as parents delight in a child's first steps, watching us splutter into our neighborhood in primitive machines, skipping to the moon or Mars like toddlers coming downstairs and walking around the block for the first time, seeing with wonder that there is something real indeed across the real street.

Seeing the street at the same time for the first time. Seeing the bridge and seeing the distant bank in the same moment.

We have been born or bred to believe we are individuals, discrete entities, selves with will, feeling and intention, and more than that, that we are the apple of God's eye or—in a more secular vein—the top of the food

chain, something special... instead of transient manifestations of energy and matter in complex relationship to everything else.

But it's not true.

We are more mist than mountain, more metaphor than mist.

Disorienting, isn't it, thinking like this? It gives me a headache too. Better to believe our beliefs, believe we are the selves that we experience reflexively as points of reference for the shifting contours of our so-called interior lives.

The task then is to manage the threat of chaos. There are three ways to do this: the Small Way, the Big Way, and the Biggest Way. My colleagues see management of the Small Way as their job. We leave the Big Way to visitors by default. The Biggest Way, we leave to It.

Okay. So... are we the sum of our moveable parts?

Who knows? And does it matter? We will do what we do, think as we think, regardless, take comfort in what we call "cultures" which like "selves" exist as higher branches on a fractal tree and also seem to be sums of, more or less, all of their moveable parts.

The machinery breathes. That's what matters. People believe in their beliefs.

I was walking home the other night at dusk. It is November, and the weather is changing. The dry leaves of maple and ash and oak were blowing on the pavement, the bare branches of trees clean and leafless against a luminous sky. Clouds streamed from the northwest, obscuring moon and stars, low clouds illuminated by light from the distant city. The road was empty. There are no streetlights in the village, and I trusted the pattern of the pavement to channel my walking toward the bridge across the ravine without bumping into something or stumbling into the shallow ditch along the road.

High on the right, through a tall hedge marking a line of property, windows blazed from a mansion built to the right scale for the land. It was an old home, brick and stone, and its high windows glowed. I flashed back to a cold night when I was a child sent to buy

a loaf of bread at a commissary in a high rise. The white bread was in a paper sack in my gloved hands, and coming back, the wind stinging my cheeks, I saw through the blurry prisms of my tears high on the right the bright window of a mansion above an elaborate entrance. Through the window a portrait on the wall of a library filled with books lining shelves from ceiling to floor, a woman in a dress in a chair in a golden frame, a picture light illuminating the portrait, the bright window signifying a refuge. A nexus. A place. A node. *A home.*

That mansion is gone. It was torn down years ago to make way for a high rise, a glass stack of lighted windows fronting the city on the dark water. Now a bluish candescence spills through glass walls floor-to-ceiling into the night and dissipates before it reaches the ground.

The image of that mansion is a memory, don't you see, a chemical trace. There's nothing there. The house no longer exists. It never did. Oh, something was there, once upon a time, something that we agree to call a mansion, but I don't know what it was. Or what kind of life was lived inside. Or who that woman was. And neither do you. You think you know but you don't.

You believe in your beliefs.

We presume so much, don't we? We presume everything. These little slides or luminous images in our minds are slotted into a matrix made to hold them like tiny panes of painted glass, buttressing the belief that we inhabited a past and that the past existed. We believe in the reality of vanished landscapes.

If history is a symphony played in a hall with dead spaces, so are individual lives. The chemical bonds between memories weaken, bleed into one another, leak through once-firm walls of cells of a database housing a house of self. The diminishment of memory contrasts with the illusion of fixity of purpose and self-definition that sustained us. The terminator, the line on the moon where darkness meets the light, throws mountains into sharp relief, but the light and darkness on either side of the line are absolute. Only by contrast do we see anything at all, and

then, only for a moment.

The darkness and light, as the man said, are one.

A plumb line of gravity sinks as a point of reference for the floor on which we think we walk. Everything, it seems. We are always in freefall in the deep well of the night. We project imaginary patterns onto stars but cannot see our nearest neighbors, even when they cross the street and walk into our yard. We see them if at all through a glass darkly. Civilizations more ancient than we can imagine, invisible because they are unthinkable.

"Ants can't get that dogs exist."

That's what the professor said.

The professor is also named Paul. When I last saw him, he sank into the billowing cushions of his immense wing chair. His white hair flamed from his face like Einstein's. He is more massive than Brando, he is *huge*, but embarrassed by the obsession with obesity. It's only a fad, he says, dismissing it with a wave. Then reaches for something to nibble on, something to suck.

The professor is a loveable cuss who cannot stop looking. He says he's retired but doesn't know how. He can't help it. He still wants to *know*. He calls it blessing or curse, depending. What else would I do? he asks in mock exasperation. Play golf?

The idea is funny. I imagine clubs like little sticks in his huge hands, his enormous bulk as solid as a building as he whiffs. I laugh.

The professor is always in the grip of some confounding event. He thrives on irregular shapes, feeling rough edges with his fingers, liking the occasional ouch. He wouldn't know what to do with a smooth surface or a curve that didn't challenge him. He prefers to live in hair shirts of perpetual perplexity. Itchiness makes him feel alive.

His eyes often look into the distance. Sometimes people turn to see what he is looking at and can't see anything at all.

On the other hand, the professor often trips over his own feet.

He obsesses about our owners. He knows

they come and go. He has been immersed in the data for decades. He has written hundreds of papers, good ones with careful documentation, reasonable conclusions, and of course, he is ignored. His work is published in periodicals that nobody reads. He lectures to empty rooms but no one puts it on YouTube.

He doesn't know how long they stay or to what end. Even if we analyzed the metal from a crash or their flesh, it does not tell us anything important. We can do that analysis, it is well within our competence, but to what end? We want to know the *story*, and the story is a muddle without a point of reference. Where's the narrative? That's what we need. A narrative, not abstractions. They seem to want to make it a muddle too and so do we, our own people, guardians of the interface, he winks, meaning our colleagues, who muddle the muddle more.

Ideas can be as alive as people, more alive than some. The people who appointed themselves guardians of the interface, keepers of the secrets, do nothing but dream them up. They invent and alter and manage perceptions and images and ideas in the battle space of our minds. They create relationships between things, then fill in the blanks.

Most keep the faith and die in silence. But once in a while one will have misgivings. Then there's a crack and a little light gets in, as the song says. Someone gets an itch that has to be scratched.

My friend—call him Herb—is a social scientist. Like the professor, Herb is a tenured academic. But he has worked on contract for years. People like Herb say they distrust us but believe me, they're easier to recruit than hookers. They talk the talk, but they always take the money.

Herb looks like an academic. Can you picture one? Got it? That's Herb.

Much of his research has been funded in the dark. Of course, a lot of research in social sciences has been done that way for fifty years; everything is dual use, there are always plausible reasons, and then there are the ways the "intelligence community" as we call it with a laugh can use it, too.

You think I am alluding to something small. You have no idea. We have spun a vast dark web for generations through media, research in and out of industry, entertainment, universities—you cannot imagine how vast it is. Because they turn everything typical into an anomaly. That keeps you from seeing it whole. You never see it all mapped out.

Try. Go ahead. Try to imagine how big it is.

<pause>

See what I mean? You can't even come close.

Herb works in the blur between social and psychological, looking for means of manipulation, although he doesn't call it that, and partners with experts in particle beams, lasers, electromagnetic energy—there are many interesting effects. Like stopping people in their tracks. Making them vomit. Or heat up. Or their brains go fuzzy. Or putting voices in their heads.

Memory, too. Herb works with memory. It's a passion, not a duty. He works with individual memories, not "memory" in the abstract. He makes memories and he makes memories go away. Or he keeps them intact but breaks up the index so they can't be retrieved without a good program. You have to know the code that unlocks the code. Herb can intensify some memories and reduce the intensity of others. It's like using a mixer, he says, recording a song. A little more bass, a little less trumpet, and you wouldn't know it's the same song.

'Of Mice and Men', he calls his current research.

Herb can make mice forget what they just learned. It looks like magic if you don't know the science. He distinguishes short term and long term encoded proteins and plays games with them. He has a blast. His playground is small at the moment, just little mice minds, but as Herb said the other night, looking at the streetlight refracted through his glass of sherry, "Just you wait." Then smiled at me and I smiled back.

His wine looked like liquid ruby from across the study. The wind rattled the orna-

mental shutters on his three story brick colonial home. His neighbor had raked that afternoon but the leaves blew from his piles onto Herb's lawn. We could see the leaves swirling in the wind. A neighbor was waiting for his dog, scooper in one hand and leash in the other. The dog was a blur. Then the man and the dog moved away, their distorted images flowing along the thick panes of antique glass.

Herb sipped his sherry and smiled again. He and his colleagues had moved a memory from the brain of one mouse to the brain of another. Then they distributed memories randomly in a dozen mice, busting up the culture in a way, the group still knowing everything but not in the same way. The different juxtaposition in time and space changed the frame. The memories could all be retrieved and resequenced in the proper order, restoring the right tilt to the world. But as I said, you had to know the code.

But that wasn't why he wanted to talk. That was gossip. He invited me over because he had an itch he needed to scratch. When he turned at last to the subject on his mind, his smile faded.

Herb had been invited somewhere for the weekend. They came through a friend with a channel to the place for the meeting. They wanted to discuss disclosure. That's all he would say. A tap on the shoulder came like an invitation to Skull and Bones, and off he went. A weekend away, expenses paid. He never says no. When he flies, sometimes windows are blacked out. Sometimes elevators take a long time to go down. You can't even see the road into the mountain, that's how good they are. Google Earth is their toy, too, and all the mapping platforms, so unless you have your own satellites, or code to correct the altered images, you haven't got a reference—don't you see?—so you can't really see the earth. All you see is the floor they have given you, seemingly concrete.

A weekend away with men and women from diverse disciplines was a treat. There were several dozen, I think he said. Or did I fill in a blank? We make connections without thinking, fill in the blank spaces. Without

thinking consciously, I ought to say. Narratives complete themselves. No, I think he did say a couple of dozen. The agenda at any rate was simple: should they tell? They talked over the pros and cons. How long can we sit on this? How long should we? More people know now, despite our work, how well we have hidden it all in plain sight, but they don't know that they know. That's the kicker. Some know but don't know that they know.

But—how long should we keep it up?

Then their facilitator said—now, this is a direct quote, and Herb looked perplexed as he said it, his affect appropriate to the words—"What will the cattle do? Will they stay inside the fence or will they stampede?"

<pause>

Hm. I see that the metaphor *cattle* might be confusing. I use "cattle" as a metaphor again, but not the way I meant before. The cattle to which I am referring here is the whole herd of humanity, the mass of all humankind, our shared mental space. *Not* the cattle I meant before, when I said that we humans might look to our owners like cows. Then I meant cows. That was a simile. This is a metaphor. That was speculation. This is historical fact.

So let me back up and say it again.

One morning my friend Herb received a call. There is going to be a meeting, he was told. People will come together. Then the meeting will not have happened. There will be no minutes, no memory of the meeting.

We need to discuss disclosure—again. Again we must make a decision.

Your expenses, he was told, will be paid as usual through the Department of International Studies at Oberlin. They will request a paper and you will send one. It won't be published so it doesn't matter which.

Then the caller became serious. Things have been warming up. You understand what I mean? Yes, exactly. We don't know how hot it will get. It's not in our control.

The question is, has it percolated long enough through the mind of the herd to bring us to a tipping point? Will people understand and adjust? Or will they go through the barb

wire?

<pause>

I did it again. That wasn't much help, was it? Of course you don't know that point of reference, either. How could you? It's from another story. So let's go there, okay? It's a detour, but the shortest route to all goals is the detours.

Once upon a time, I was waiting at a neighborhood bank—it doesn't matter, but it happened to be Midwest Bank, a local institution with a dozen branches. I have lunch with some of the officers now and again at a nearby club. Some play tennis, we all play cards. I was waiting that day to renew a CD. A new vice president was helping me, middle aged, mostly bald, a little fringe of gray and darker hair, a paunch pushing at the tight belt of his not very expensive suit, starting to edge over the belt like a shelf. He was friendly enough, the kind of fellow who might manage the branch someday; he was processing papers to renew my CD. A sheet of paper and a couple of cards were on the glass top of his desk. His eyes moved back and forth between a computer screen I couldn't see and a pad on which he made notations. We chatted as he calculated interest.

My last conversation with the professor—we had gone to a local casino and walked in winding paths among the noisy slots, turning this way and that as we talked, altering the curve of the interface, in case—was on my mind. In the past, I wouldn't have said anything. But now, I'm old enough so I don't care. Let people think I am crazy. Besides, it's part of the job, part of the latest persona. My current job is thinking about things and saying stuff. At least, that's how it looks. Like Paul the professor, my puppet "Paul" is intended to look creative, eccentric, be genius-level at times, but always what up here they call "different."

So as I waited I said to Glen, that's the new V-P, I said, Glen, you know, I read this article the other day, and told him about the sighting I heard from the professor how pilots and air traffic controllers and radar stations all reported the same thing, how huge the thing had to have been to make a blip



like that, how huge in fact it was according to both pilots, they literally soiled themselves, I said, and he nodded, filling in my name on a blank.

We had something happen on our farm, once.

Oh? I said.

Yes, he scribbled on a card, up north, on the family farm. One night this trooper came speeding along the road chasing after this bright light flying low along the hills. The thing glowed with incredible intensity, not like something *with* a light, but like the thing itself glowed from the inside out. It was white but it was *so* white, the purest white light, and he skidded to a stop, which is when we heard him outside on the loose gravel and went out to see. This thing whatever it was had apparently come down behind our barn. The trooper was a guy we knew, everybody knew Luke, he was standing at the open door of his prowler, behind the door like he was hunkering down, looking at this bright light behind our barn illuminating trees and everything back there. We stood there looking at it with him for a long time. He told us he chased this thing from the other side of town through town and out along the highway by our farm.

Are you going to go back there? I asked.

Hell, no, he shook his head. No way in hell he'd go back there alone.

Then whatever it was suddenly rose up so silent and it moved fast so we couldn't really see or it disappeared. But one minute this bright white light was hovering over the barn and then it was up there looking like a star and then we couldn't see it anymore. It was like night descended suddenly upon the house, the pasture, on us, everything, and everything was still again. Then the insects started chirping and we realized they had stopped.

I'll never forget it, he said. He turned two cards toward me and handed me a pen. I signed the cards on the lines at the X.

That was the end of it, then?

Well, no, he said, see, the next morning we went out behind the barn to see was anything there, and we found broken branches in

kind of a circle like something had snapped them off, grass scorched and the edges of the branches burnt too and some of the leaves.

But—do you know much about cattle?

I shook my head.

He said, something scared hell out of the cattle. Cattle know about barb wire. They know what it is. But that night, so many of our cows went *through* the barb wire, they went right *through* it, they tore themselves up so bad, udders and all; we had to destroy most of them, they were so cut up.

Nobody ever saw anything like it.

He folded the CD and put it in a plastic sleeve.

OK. So I told you the name of the bank where we had this conversation. I can tell you we put money into that bank or another, but money is another null set, isn't it? Money doesn't exist, either. Money is energy stored in a form we pretend. We act like money is real, interest will be paid, businesses exist, and that's the thing—it's all held together by couplers that are imperfect but good enough and it stays together because nobody pulls at it too hard.

You don't want something scaring hell out of the cattle so they go right through the barb wire and cut themselves to pieces and have to be put down.

Anyway, that's what the facilitator meant when he said about cattle, will they stay inside the fence or stampede? He meant what Glen at the bank meant but Glen meant real cows.

So Herb went to the meeting. Now, I know Herb. I know him as well as one can know another. Or oneself, as I have been saying. Herb went to the meeting intending to weigh in on the side of telling people everything. It's our planet, he said. People have a right to know what's happening. It's time, he chimed like he was an alarm and humanity a clock. Like he knew all about it.

Then he went to the meeting. And when he came back—I never saw anything like it. He had turned completely around. He went away one hundred per cent in favor of disclosure. He came back just as adamant against.

I asked him what he had heard that changed his mind but he wouldn't say. Well, I asked, who was there? He wouldn't say. I wouldn't say, myself. Lots of different ones, he said. Most knew a lot more about it than me. He was leaning forward in his wing chair looking like that trooper might have looked, as I imagine him looking in the memory of Glen the vice president of the bank, staring at the light behind the barn.

He wouldn't face me exactly. His gaze was at an angle. He was looking out the window but looking at nothing. There was nothing there to see.

That's all I'm going to say, he said. Then he said, they're afraid it won't hold.

What won't?

He looked at me with sorrow and I believe pity.

Paul, we wake up and get dressed and go to work. We have breakfast and watch TV. We buy stuff and cut the grass. It's the little things, the things you can't make people do. They have to want to do them. They have to believe in them. They have to believe in their beliefs.

The way we do it, it's good enough, it's not perfect, but it's good enough. You know that. We can't take the chance.

He sat back, sinking into the billowing cushions of his immense chair. His white hair flamed from his face like Einstein's. I knew why he was upset. And he knew I knew why. The loop completed, as it will.

Is it just chemical, I wondered, looking at it from the outside? Looking at Herb leaning in his chair, looking at how I must have looked, looking at Herb. The way fear is transmitted, I mean? Is it some primordial pheromone that triggers fight-or-flight? That makes the hair stand up on the back of the neck? The heart race and the palms sweat?

That makes us want to get out while we can?

Except that what we're in is ourselves. And there are no boundaries between us. Each the bridge, each the other side.

And we're in it together. Us and them and then some.

Old men have the luxury of telling the truth because no one pays attention. Old men are irrelevant to currents of action, reflection beside the point when life is brutish.

People concede to us wisdom or perspective only because they don't matter.

It was right around that time, if I remember correctly, that I met Susan for lunch in Chicago. I have known Susan for years. Susan is a social worker which can mean lots of things. She worked for community services for a while, had a stint at County Hospital, and I think she worked for a time at New Life Counseling Center. Now she works mostly with addicted women who get beaten up a lot. She has done it for some time so she must have learned how to use herself as a tool and still go home, kick off her shoes, and watch TV the rest of the night.

We had lunch at a trendy restaurant on the near north side. We laughed when we read the names of the fancy vegetables. "California stuff," I said, looking at a waiter setting down a plate of white and pale green stalks and leaves.

Susan had a sandwich with three kinds of cheese and asparagus and a red paste on yellow bread with lots of seeds. The little bit of salad on the side was full of curled greens and coiled carrots. I went for something hot. I had my leather coat zipped up the whole time. I was still cold from walking from my car in that wind.

Susan looked good. She sounded solid. She was into a new relationship so she was hopeful—again. She usually picked horses that came out of the gate strong but faded in the stretch.

I listened a lot and seldom spoke, nodding to indicate what she called "empathetic listening." Through the plate glass window the gray sky had lost all definition. The discoloration became rain and then the rain turned into snow. There was sleet too and slush along the sidewalks by the time we finished eating, ankle-deep and cold. Susan had parked in front of the bistro and drove me to my car parked a couple of blocks away.

My cold feet flexed in my wet shoes as

she turned on the heater. The sleet squeaked on her worn wipers. She turned all the way around to pull out and went slowly down the narrow street.

There it is, I said.

That one? I was looking for the Ford.

The Ford's long gone. There was even a Mazda between.

She pulled in behind the old Toyota and turned off the wipers. The end of the scraping sounded good. Sleet ran in thick rivulets down the clean windshield.

Susan continued to talk about what she wanted to do next, wondering was it too late, and should she give this guy a chance? Elmo

was his name of all things. Maybe it was made up.

She lowered her window an inch or two, letting the car idle and keeping the heater on. Warm air flowed from the vents while a thin stream of cold air from the open window felt like white icing on a cake.

It was one of those conversations. You can't make it happen, but when it does, you don't ever want it to stop. First, there was the meal, hot chowder and crab cakes for me, fresh hot bread with drizzle to dip, a delicious sauvignon blanc from Cloudy Bay, the chatter and glasses and silver around us at precisely the right level. We hadn't seen each



other for a long time, and it felt so good just to be with her, eating quietly, taking our time, letting the ambient noise be a cushion for the pauses. It was like a real community filling in the blanks so we didn't have to do everything ourselves. Beyond Susan at the next table, a young couple were playing footsie, the movements of the draped cloth betraying their game, looking at each other with little smiles. Made me nostalgic. Outside, the snow and sleet were really coming down, the snow blowing slantwise across the window and people hurrying through the mess, holding their coats closed at the collar, dipping their heads in the bitter wind when they had to wait for a light. But we were inside, warm and dry. Susan talked on as she often did about her life. I had heard a lot of it before. It wasn't what we talked about so much as knowing one another for all those years.

Sitting in the car afterward, I thought I was doing OK, nodding a lot like I said, paying attention most of the time, when she turned off the heater and gave me a look.

"You haven't said much about your work."

"Oh?" I shrugged. "I told you some things, what I could, what I thought you might find interesting."

"Paul," she said, her eyes not letting me off the hook. "Paul, you told me you were talking to people who were tortured. You were working with people doing it, too. You told me about it last time. How it affected them. Then you were off about where the planet might be headed, other kinds of life forms and God only knows what. But I keep going back to what you said about the Turks. And the Uzbeks. It was chilling."

I shrugged and shivered. I leaned over and turned on the heater.

"The techniques aren't the thing. It's pretty cut and dried."

She looked at me for a long time.

"Paul," she said, reaching and taking my hand. "Do you remember what you said once? About people going over the line?"

I did, but forgot I had said it.

"I guess."

"Paul—you're over the line."

I had a sinking feeling and looked down at her hands. Her hands are where the aging showed most.

"You told me yourself, you don't know how to talk to normal people anymore. You don't share their points of reference."

I turned to look outside. "I said that?"

"Yes," she smiled, getting inside. "You said you live in a world that people don't want to know. You didn't want to talk about it, either, but you did, some. Do you think I would forget something like that? Do you think I can't see what's going on?"

"Why? What am I doing?"

"Oh, Paul," she sighed. "For someone so smart, you sure can be dumb. Do you remember the books I gave you on trauma? How it affects people?"

"Sure." I nodded. "I read some of it. It was interesting."

"Why do you think I asked you to do that?"

I shrugged again. "Because the people I talk to, whether its ones doing interrogation, or ones who have been worked on, or ones who have had encounters, or the ones who keep the interface, manage the deception, whoever it is, they all show signs of trauma, right? You wanted me to understand what symptoms they would have."

"Yes, but why else?"

I shrugged a final time. "I don't know." I was truly blank.

"Because," she said, squeezing my hand, "you're showing symptoms too. From listening. It's almost the same as being there."

I guess it was obvious to her, doing the work she does. But have you ever not known something so completely that when someone says it, the recognition of it is like all of the air rushing out of the room? You can't breathe, you can't even think of breathing. Then, when you do speak, your emotions are so raw, like someone sank a shaft and hit oil, because they have been buried for so long, you can feel the sobbing rising inside but refuse to let it out.

Susan could feel it, too. She took my other hand and I saw she had lost weight. I noticed for the first time that her navy skirt didn't

pucker as much on her belly.

"Paul, you can't not know what you know. You can't unlearn it. It's who you are. But part of you must know what it does to you."

I nodded. She was wearing a ring, not an engagement. Then I looked up into the deep well of her eyes.

Everything let go.

"Do you have any idea what we do? Or what they do? Or how long it's been going on? Do you have any idea who we are? How much we are not what you think? Or who you think?"

She had unleashed a beast and realized it now. The fear in her eyes was evident.

She shook her head. "Do I want to know?" She had lost the offensive and knew it. She was looking for a place to hide. I watched her cover and duck.

"I'm concerned with what it's doing to you. You say you kind of retired but you still talk to all these people, and —"

"No," I shook my head. "You think you're concerned but you don't know. *You don't know*. You're concerned about the wrong things. That's how it's designed, Susan."

The floor on the deep well of the night gave way. Her eyes darted back and forth looking for something to hold. During that transient glimpse into my life, into all life, she understood, felt it like a sudden chill and almost went into panic mode. She almost headed for the barb wire. Then her eyes shifted from my face to the window where snow was dropping from the trees and she found a reprieve. Everyday people passed on the walk in overcoats and parkas, a woman tottered by in sheer hose and four inch heels,

comic relief, watching her step through the melting slush. Behind her, the old stone of a brownstone mansion was whitened by snow blowing off the roof. Susan saw as she tilted her head and looked up an elegant doorway with its black wrought iron gate and above it a second story window blazing with electric light.

"Paul—" she said.

I shook my head.

"Susan, my name isn't Paul. It never was."

She looked for a connection. That's what people do. Try to plug in.

"I remember a few years ago," she almost laughed although nothing was funny. "Someone called you Herb. You made a joke of it, saying they were getting old."

I shook my head again. "It isn't Paul and it isn't Herb. And I am not a professor. I never was."

After thirty-seven years. Thirty-seven years.

"I've had so many names, Susan, I can't remember them all."

She let my hands loose and they came back to my side of the car. I believed she accepted my confession and all of the things that it shattered with professional equanimity. So I leaned closer, hoping to hold her in my arms. I wanted to feel her and inhale her scent. I wanted her warmth. That was all. I just wanted to be close. But the fracture was too abrupt. In the moment, I thought I confessed in order to be real, but as she drew back, her eyes receding into the distance, I realized that she saw more clearly than I ever would that I had, as always, simply needed to prevail.

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# Reviews

**GUD (Greatest Uncommon Denominator) Magazine. Issue 3, Autumn 2008. Pp. 204. \$10.00.**

Reviewed by Johann Carlisle

This professionally presented paperback volume is the fourth issue of *GUD Magazine* (the first issue was numbered zero). *Greatest Uncommon Denominator* is a magazine that prides itself on being eclectic, slipstream, surreal, undefinable, weird, and fantastic (in their own words, they publish "literary and genre fiction, poetry, art, and articles"). This issue, which is the size of a short paperback novel, is nothing if not eclectic. The theme is nominally "mechanical flight", but the stories and other contents range from the tragic alternative history, the challengingly speculative, and the chillingly cruel to cheap comedy and surreal collage; and from the brilliantly original to the unutterably silly or the frankly unreadable. It is great that this magazine exists and that its editors have the courage to take risks with unusual material: no reader will like everything in this issue, but there is more than enough good in here to justify the material that I was not fond of.

The first lengthy fiction piece in this volume is Darja Malcolm-Clarke's 'A Song, a Prayer, an Empty Space', which is a very classily written, twenty-page story about a disgraced bishop in an alternative reality where God can only be addressed by means of *euchoi*, coins imbued with prayer and then processed by a machine that translates the prayers into divine form. Bishop Adan has been exiled from his monastery in Algeria (it is never clear whether the monks in this story are Muslim, Christian, Jewish, or whether "Yahvist" is a catch-all term for a single Book faith) for giving away *euchoi* to the poor who could not otherwise afford to pray. In addition to rising taxes, a daemon is stealing prayers before they can be euchomified, and the world around the church is starting to crumble. Although this story is well-written and the characters engaging, there was something lacking for my tastes. If there was a political overtone behind the



plot, it was only that people ought to be able to speak to God without the mediation of an élite church that charges them for the privilege. The replacement of one church for another is hardly a radical conclusion, and a moral harking back to Reformation sentiments may well have gone over this reader's head. A well-written story, but one which left me a little flat by the end.

Tina Connolly's 'Facts of Bone' is a near-future story about a pair of sisters who run a business harvesting down feathers from cliff-side birds' nests. Jules rides a "flycycle" which allows the freedom of the skies as she patrols the cliff face, looking out for the birds and their nests; her sister Marnie is a businesswoman, always travelling and always too busy to come home. A run-in with a poacher injures Jules, and a rare genetic disorder manifests itself in hospital, a condition that threatens to interfere with her ability to fly and do the work she loves. The conclusion to this story is an incredibly sensitive treatment of disability, of mental health affected by physical fragility, and of the psychological implications of virtuality

and remote experience. An excellent story, for me one of the outstanding pieces in this issue.

Another subtle but clever story is 'Think Fast' by Michael Greenhut, an understated and original take on the multiple-realities idea. A young man with a tragic family history finds that if he thinks hard and fast enough he can send messages back in time to his younger self. These messages, which are interpreted as instincts, allow him to benefit from his future experience and avoid the worst things that can happen to him: getting into a fight, being murdered, being arrested; he can then take great risks with impunity, since he can prevent the worst from happening by sending messages back again and again until he finds the successful course of action. The protagonist is not a superhero, although he does protect the innocent and fight crime; he makes morally complex decisions, and the reader may not always agree with him. This is a thought-provoking and heart-breaking story, as the hero finds himself always unable to go back and prevent the original, ultimate tragedy.

Perhaps my favourite piece in this collection is the long story 'Night Bird Soaring' by T.L. Morganfield. In an alternative history where the divine Aztec emperor defeated Cortés in 1521, and a great Aztec empire dominates the world in the twenty-first century, Totyoalli is a talented boy chosen by the priests to be Teotl Ixiptla, to be sacrificed to the gods at the age of 29. Befriending the immortal emperor, Totyoalli builds on his talent for science to pursue a career as an astronaut, although he may not live long enough to take the voyage he dreams of. This story contains a fine mixture of rational and spiritual elements, remaining respectful to both. Totyoalli is a scientist and an atheist, but he cannot entirely turn his back on the ancient religion and expectations of his culture. It is perhaps slightly disappointing that in this alternative history, the twenty-first-century Aztec empire features almost entirely mediaeval religious and cultural setting alongside almost entirely modern technology, as if the two would not have co-evolved

to create a culture unrecognisable as either. This is a minor quibble, and this remains an excellent and most worthwhile story; sensitive, provocative, and powerful. This one will stay with me.

Jason D. Wittman's 'The Train' is a nightmarish, Alice-in-Wonderland-like story set on a train full of refugees fleeing across war-torn Russia in 1942. Katya is fleeing from the besieged Stalingrad, along with so many other civilians. Her husband is an officer, fighting on the front lines. She knows that his life is in danger, and somehow the old man with the magic coin and the dwarf she meets on the train have something to do with it. This is not a terribly original story, with the protagonists caught up in giant games of chess, chasing fate down the length of the train and pursued by angels and automatons, but it is engaging and moving and well worth reading.

In 'Flower as Big as the Sky', Matt Dennison tells the story of a perhaps unusually gullible young boy and the man building a mysterious construction in the garden next door. Despite the boy's awkwardness, it is the adults in this story whose naivety, and emotional immaturity, and lack of respect for others really earn our pity and contempt. Seemingly befuddled on the surface, the boy turns out to have the best grasp of what is going on in the world around him out of everyone.

A nonfiction piece, Christian A. Dumais's 'Counting Nuns' is a study of phobia (in this case of needles) that contains a richness of language and imagery that many fictional stories lack. A perfect example of the editors taking a risk publishing an unusual piece that pays off.

Two stories that I want to finish with both deal with pathos and desperation/despair in different ways. Frank Haberle's 'The Great Big NOTHING' is the story of an alcoholic who takes some time off from his thankless life to meet up with a woman from his past and hike in the wilderness, but he is unable to overcome his fear of failure and make the most of the opportunity, so knows that nothing will change. Nick Antosca's 'Soon You



'Will Be Gone and Possibly Eaten' is a story of alien visitation, abduction, and departure, and studies the themes of jealousy, fear of loss, and the fragility of the most passionate and mercurial relationships; also the way we become reliant upon those we love to the extent of physical addiction. A truly heart-breaking story.

Alongside the many powerful (and a few less impressive) short stories in this issue, there are some dozens of poems and pieces of artwork, a few of which are worth highlighting. Dangerous Innocence by Joe Roger is a drawing made up almost entirely of faces, skulls, smileys, and slavering bestial maws. The central figures, asleep or dead, have biblical references tattooed on their flesh, but it is hard to read most of these and the significance is obscure. It is a shame, because this is probably a very subtle piece of art, but the small size, low resolution, and poor quality paper rather ruin the piece. In Clockwork Wings by Kiriko Moth a naked male figure with mechanical wings stands before a clock against a background of cogs and wheels. The juxtaposition of tender flesh and harsh machinery is intriguing (as is the weird metallic buttock-corset the main figure

appears to be wearing).

Two poems (which I am usually reluctant to review) caught my attention. 'How to Fetch Firewood' by Michelle Tandoc-Pichereau is dedicated to the women and children of Darfur, and has been published in multiple venues prior to this. It is a powerful, both moving and chilling poem about the horror and desperation of living in a war-torn and famile-wracked land with no hope and no help. Jim Pascual Agustin's 'In Every War'/'Sa Bawat Digma' is a bilingual poem published here in both English and (I presume) Filipino. Like the above-mentioned poem, this one focuses on the plight of non-combatants in wartime, in this case parents who cannot sleep for fear of what might happen to their children.

If the aim of *Greatest Uncommon Denominator* magazine is to be eclectic and challenging, then issue #3 has certainly succeeded on both counts. Enthusiastically recommended.

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***Metamorphosis*, by Franz Kafka. Adapted for the stage (2006) and Directed by David Farr & Gisli Orn Gardarsson (2008).**

Reviewed by Leoba.

Music by  
Nick Cave,  
Warren Ellis

Designer  
Borkur Jons-  
son

Sound by  
Nick Manning

Costume Designer  
Brenda  
Murphy

Producers  
Rakel Gardars-  
dottir and Kate  
McGrath



Before I start this review, a caveat: I have not read the Franz Kafka novella on which this play is based, so I am unable to provide any kind of comparison between the two. Those readers familiar with the story will no doubt find differences between what they have read and what is described here. Such differences are only to be expected when a story is translated from one format to another. What I offer here is a review of the play *Metamorphosis*, based on Kafka's story and adapted and directed by David Farr of the Lyric Hammersmith Theatre, London, and Gisli Órn Gardasson of the Vesturport Theatre, Reykjavik. Premiered in 2006, the show ran at the Olympia Theatre in Dublin, Ireland, as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival in September-October 2008. I attended the matinee showing on Saturday October 4 at 2:30 pm. I was very pleased by the show

and disturbed by the questions it left with me—questions I don't know that I can answer.

Gregor Samsa lives with his younger sister, Greta, and their parents in a small apartment. Following the collapse of his father's business five years previous, Gregor has worked long hours as a traveling salesman to support the family. This leaves him drained, but he is happy to work so his parents won't have to (his mother suffers from ill health), and he saves up what extra money he can—secretly—so that Greta might be able to attend the conservatory to study the violin in the future.

One morning, the family awakens to discover Gregor's shoes beside the door—he has not left for work. They discover, to their horror, that Gregor as they know him is gone from his bed, and in his place is a giant insect-like creature (*Ungeziefer verwandelt* in the original German). They are afraid and disgusted. Over the course of the play we see each family member dealing with the situation (and with Gregor himself) in his or her own way: Mr. Samsa's denial, Mrs. Samsa's equal parts maternal devotion and horror, and Greta's naïve belief that if she just keeps things going everything will be fine—an attitude that gradually gives way to resentment and eventually to outright hatred.

Mr. Samsa and Greta take jobs outside the home, and Mrs. Samsa brings in sewing. Once the breadwinner, Gregor becomes unnecessary, remaining hidden from the outside. He is ignored and almost forgotten until the family attempts to take in a lodger. This scene builds to an exciting and very funny climax in which the family feels forced—whether they are or not—to make some decisions that should be more difficult than they are. For the Samsas, the play ends on a positive note, relief tinged with joy, that I found rather sickening.

This show was fabulous both for the story, and for its overall quality. The acting was quite good throughout. As Mrs. Samsa, Kelly Hunter was perhaps a bit overwrought but I expect that was as much the character herself as the actor. As Mr. Samsa, Ingvar E

Sigurdsson was believable as a man clinging to what pride he can find as a former business-owner now having to work for someone else. As Greta, Nína Dögg Filippusdóttir was absolutely heartbreaking as a loving (and much loved) sister and it was an uneasy pleasure to watch her change over the course of the play. In what was essentially a walk-on part as Herr Fischer (the lodger), Jonathan McGuinness played a small role but made a huge impact, providing much needed—and uncomfortable—comic relief. Finally, I cannot say enough about Gisli Örn Gardasson as Gregor (Gardarsson also co-adapted and directed the show, along with David Farr). Ironic perhaps, but he brought such humanity to the role. It was a pleasure to watch him try to figure himself out, come to terms with what he'd become and his eventual acceptance of it, even while he attempts to maintain some kind of relationship with his ever more distant family. What amazed me the most is that he was able to maintain this human connection with the audience even as the character he was playing was very obviously not human, and that the physicality required for carrying that off (on which more later) did not interfere with the emotion of his performance.

Coming into the play, the main question I had was a fairly practical one—how to present Gregor? Well, the creative group responsible for this show has come up with a marvelous approach to illustrating Gregor's otherness. The set itself is the actor's costume. It's designed in two levels: the lower level, consisting of the main room of the house where the Samsa family spends its time, and the second level, consisting of Gregor's room and a small hallway (connected to the room below via a small staircase stage right). Gregor's room has been flipped 90 degrees away from the audience, so that the floor is on the back wall, his bed directly in the middle of the wall, facing the audience. The first glimpse we get of Gregor is his head, pushed through the sheets of his bed, window glowing above (his wall, our ceiling). His bed, chair, lamp, potted plant, and later his food dishes, all are

attached to the wall, and Gregor moves around through a series of handholds—creeping, crawling, at times hanging off the furniture or swinging on the drapery. The "floor" of the room (the wall parallel to the window) contains a trampoline, on which Gregor performs jumps and flips when he is feeling particularly rambunctious.

Gregor himself appears normal to the audience. He does not wear a costume; instead he is dressed for work in a white shirt and trousers (which become more and more tattered as the show progresses). His speech is intelligible to the audience, although obviously unintelligible and even *painful* for his family. They cover their ears and flinch when he attempts to communicate, and during one especially heated tantrum Greta does an impression of what she hears when he speaks: a series of loud, piercing squeals resembling something like a car alarm combined with an air horn. Not a pleasant sound, and not at all human.

The appearance of Gregor as fully human was the single most interesting aspect of the show, making him into an exceptionally sympathetic character. We in the audience are able to share with him as he discovers his transformation and seeks understanding and love from the family, and finally realizes that they can give him neither. Gardarsson is expressive; he has large eyes and a face that effortlessly shows emotion, and his physicality is exceptional. As he moves, climbs, crawls and dances around the set, you can sense his confusion, fright, and occasional moments of happiness. His final moments are especially moving.

I found many different questions rolling around in my head in the hours and days following the show. Some of these were the questions I imagine are the ones I was *supposed* to have: What would you do if you woke up one morning to discover you are not who you once were? Not just someone else, but *something* else—something your family cannot understand or communicate with. What could you do? What could your

family do? What would your life become?

However, even as I watched the show I found myself grappling with these same questions but from a slightly different point of view. You see, I have an older brother. Growing up, his room was in the attic of the family home (in fact, he still lives with my parents, and his room is still in the attic). I saw a lot of my brother in Gregor, and I fear that I also saw myself in Greta. The relationship between siblings is not one that I think about very often but it can be both intense and maddening. I find my brother to be wonderful and incredibly annoying in roughly equal amounts, and I like to think that I would do anything for him, but watching "Metamorphosis" really made me question the limits of my devotion. And it was an uncomfortable questioning.

Indeed: what *would* I do if my brother turned into a creature that I could not communicate with nor understand according to any social or cultural cues? It's unlikely that he would wake up one morning as a giant insect, but he could be rendered comatose or brain-damaged in an accident, or he could develop debilitating drug abuse problems, or mental illness. Any of these could make my brother into *someone else*: someone I might not recognize, someone I might not want to recognize or even to know. Would I still love him? Would I forget my brother, would I grow to hate him? What would be my sisterly duty? I felt so much sympathy for Greta as she dealt with these questions and came to her own conclusions. I like to think that I would have done a better job than she (and certainly better than Mr. and Mrs. Samsa, who did not hold onto Gregor for nearly as long, or as strongly, as did Greta), but how am I to know? I only hope I never have to be tested as the Samsas were tested.

I've visited the websites for the Vesturport Theatre and the Lyric Hammersmith and neither have future show dates listed, but if you do discover a local presentation of this show, don't miss it.

**Pete Butler (ed.), *Triangulation: Taking Flight*. PARSEC Ink, 2008. Pp. 126. ISBN 9780615152806. \$12.00.**

Reviewed by Djibril Alayad

This is the fifth anthology published under the title *Triangulation*, brought out by the PARSEC Ink press. *Taking Flight* brings us a clutch of stories on the theme of things that fly, or that try to fly, or that ought to fly. The subjects of these stories are streamlined, jet-propelled, or space-faring; gas-filled, lighter than air, or fluffy and flighty. It is an eclectic collection with some pieces that approach the theme daringly and imaginatively, that push the boundaries of genre and taste alike. As a volume *Taking Flight* tends more to the light-weight and flighty end of this scale: at 124 pages of fiction, there isn't really room for many of the 20 stories herein to get going, and some are so vignette-like and perfunctory as to be almost incomprehensible. There are more than enough moving and shocking pieces, however, to reward the patient reader, and I have no hesitation in declaring this volume good value for money.

Among the stand-out pieces in this quite varied anthology is **Elizabeth Barrette's 'Peacock Hour'**, a story that reads like a Near Eastern fairy tale about the eldest daughter in a tragic family who make flying carpets. While her father spins spells and prepares magic wool and other materials, her mother weaves rugs with a life of their own, and her seven brothers risk their lives in a series of failed flying experiments, Haylaa helps as best she can. But she is a girl, and while she can (somewhat scandalously) gather rumours and conduct research into the history of magic carpets, there is little else she is allowed to do. This sensitive story ends with a slightly incongruous combination of, on the one hand, a feminist reaction against the limiting and veiling of women, and on the other a re-affirmation of the classic (and oppressive) assumption that a woman's virginity is somehow pure and powerful and virtuous.

Perhaps the most challenging and even shocking story in this collection is '**Seeing**



**Stars'** by **Shanna Germain**, an intense and graphic depiction of the practice of autoerotic asphyxia. The narrator is a medical professional who offers the service of making sure that her clients do not accidentally kill themselves by strangling, hanging, or suffocating themselves while masturbating. This story manages to be sensitive, erotic, non-judgemental, and deeply disturbing at the same time. A very impressive achievement.

**Jacob Edwards's 'Stone Cold'** is a short but interesting take on the cliché of using parallel universe theory to pick a single, infinitesimally unlikely outcome out of the range of all possible outcomes of a particular decision, thus having apparently superhuman powers of foresight and/or good luck. If one in a million of you from all these parallel worlds is successful, what happens, this story asks, to those that are not successful? What, moreover, are the moral implications of manipulating your own luck at the expense of your clone in a parallel dimension?

Another piece with a different take is '**It Takes a Town**' by **Stephen V. Ramey**, in which the eclectic (and often eccentric) citizens of a depressed Midwestern town unite under the guidance of a talented schoolgirl to cobble together a mission to bring back soil samples from Mars. The story comprises of twelve short chapters as they countdown to

launch day, each from a different viewpoint but linked by the attempts of the local pig farmer to talk them out of this mad mission. This is ultimately a story of affirmation, of small town pluck triumphing against the odds, against opposition, and against skepticism, despite the fact that to all appearances the skepticism would appear to be well-founded. Not only is the attempt to build a rocket from a disused grain silo, a water heater, and other varied farm junk based on a design put together by a twelve year-old girl exceedingly unlikely, but (as Tom the pig farmer rightly points out) there are more pressing problems to solve here on Earth, without which we will not possibly survive long enough as a race to colonize Mars and the other planets needed to support the desperate Earth's population. This is an allegorical story about the need for hope and the value of co-operation, to be sure, and I do not wish to be obnoxiously pedantic or use this as an excuse to damn all space exploration. There are many good reasons to continue to conduct research in outer space, not least the opportunity to learn more about the Universe and our place in it, but if we abandon the health of this planet because of dreams of colonizing some other, then we really are doomed.

By far the most original and striking piece in this volume is **David Seigler's 'Graveyard of the Cloud Gods'**, one of the most inventive stories I have read this year. The protagonists are Llaunu, gas-filled creatures who float above the clouds of their

world (which is probably not our own), living a rarefied existence and despising the filth and miasma that exists in the world below. Conservative and pious, they believe that the mere sight of this sinful world will surely kill and possibly even steal the soul of a Llaunu, and that those of them who fall give up their souls to heaven before their bodies can be corrupted and decayed. Ju'utu, an open-minded and inquisitive character who is mistrusted and eventually branded a heretic by his fellows, is not satisfied by the pious teaching of the elders and decides to see beneath the clouds for himself. On the Earth below Ju'utu discovers that fallen Llaunu are worshipped as gods by the base creatures that inhabit the surface, the bodies of the dead reverently disposed of and the survivors tended and fed. As is clear from this brief summary, this story is full of religious language and imagery, and it is not kind to those who hold to the old ways or insist on their blind faith despite any evidence to the contrary, especially those who will repress or attack those who threaten their Panglossian view of their world. This piece manages to be scathing, tragic, philosophical, and optimistic in equal measure, and is a tour de force of a short story.

Among a handful of flighty and fluffy pieces in this anthology, therefore, there is a hard core of sophisticated, streamlined, and jet-propelled excellent science fiction writing. All in all another very good collection from PARSEC Ink, who are proving to be a press worth watching.

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**Bryan Collier, *2012: A Conspiracy Tale*. Matador, 2008. Pp. 243. ISBN 9781906510541. £8.99/\$19.95.**

Reviewed by Terry Grimwood

Cambridge-based IDSys have won a contract to supply the government with its new RFID implant, the human version of the company's successful transport tracking device. For CEO Mitch Webb (is the author a fan of a certain comedy duo I wonder?) and his team this is the contract of a lifetime. But



things are not as they seem and very quickly the whole project develops a nasty smell. What are the RFID implants really for? Is the major atrocity that takes place just as the RFIDs are ready for utilisation, really the work of terrorists or part of a government-sponsored conspiracy to curtail the freedoms of British citizens?

And in the background, shadowed by a mysterious organisation that consists of the world's top industrialist, politicians and even royalty, there is yet another, unearthly layer, bent on restoring what was once their role as rulers of the earth. It is down to Mitch and his team to unravel these apocalyptic conspiracies and somehow stop the countdown to disaster, while at the same time keep themselves alive as dark forces close in.

So, an exciting plot and, I have to say, an utterly compelling read. It kept me turning those pages, and prevented me from sleeping at night and from getting out of bed on a couple of the mornings when I should have been up and painting the bathroom. The book builds inexorably and efficiently towards its climax, the characters are well-drawn and convincing and the science seems credible, even more so as the author is an electronics engineer. The cover, designed by Mark Hows, is also suitably menacing.

However, I was not so impressed with the actual writing style. Okay, this is a thriller, it is about ideas, plot and the issues raised (more about which later), so it can sustain a workmanlike style. *2012*, however, was stylistically below par in places and really could have done with a ruthless edit. Not in terms of cutting, I hasten to add, because the plot is well honed and sharp and there is little overwriting. Repeated words are an example. These jar and make reading uncomfortable and should have been cleaned out at the editing stage.

The most irritating problem is a structural one. When a character is introduced the author tends to write a potted biography straight away. This is a particular problem at the beginning of the novel, because, halfway through the first paragraph, the narrative suddenly loses pace just at the time when it

should grab you, throw you inside the story and tell you to read on. These are the people involved, it should shout, something big is happening, don't worry about their backgrounds yet, there isn't time right now, you've got to read this, come on, come on, *hurry up*. Biographies can be provided at a point when you need to catch your breath. Instead, we have this piece of loose, literary carpet over which we trip just as we start to run.

Anyway, back to the positive. The book raises some very important issues about personal freedom, globalisation and just who is in charge. Yes, there are some David Ickeian elements to the story, which were handled quite cleverly by the way, and with a certain amount of wit, but looking beyond that, we, like the society in the novel, are faced with an increase in surveillance and with the possibility of ID cards. We, like Collier's fictional citizens, stand on the brink of the whole 666 nightmare which dictates that without that much misunderstood number tattooed on forehead or arm, no one can trade, work or eat. In the story we have a stark choice. You want a bank account, to shop, a job? Then accept your RFID implant or you'll get none of the above.

The frightening reality raised by this tale is the ease with which freedom can be removed and the ruthlessness with which lives can be sacrificed in the name of expedience and the so-called "good of the many". It also gives a view into the world of conspiracies and shows us that although we may not believe in the often weird and wacky universe of the conspiracy theorist, there is often no smoke without fire. It reminds us that although disasters and atrocities may not, in real-life, be government-sponsored, political advantage can certainly be extracted from them.

*2012: A Conspiracy Tale* is a good read. It is compelling, good fun and thought provoking. It is also a first novel and hopefully Collier will iron out those prose ripples in the next one and give us another sharp, intelligent and thought-provoking work.

# Masthead

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To invent stories about a world other than this one has no meaning at all, unless an instinct of slander, belittling, and suspicion against life is strong in us: in that case, we avenge ourselves against life with a phantasmagoria of another, a better life.

(F. Nietzsche, *Götzen-Dämmerung*)

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