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Attack Of The 50-foot Verbose Mutant Killer Fountain Pens From Mars

Selected Words of Literary Adventure & Aspiration

by Mark Cantrell

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By The Author

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INTRODUCTION: From Way Outa Here To Somewhere Over There

THINGS were getting serious.

I was fresh out of fags.

The coffee had congealed. And the beer was definitely off.

Yes. Out it went, through the door, slithering along like an oversized amber slug.

Always sensible in any crisis, a pint, but I was in no state to follow course and sup the bitter dregs of retreat. So, in the thick of all this chaos, I went for the less-than-heroic option and made like The Scream.

They were coming in thick and fast all around. Porting in through the hollow points in the quantum-foam-wash of real space like, well, like hollowed out bullets bludgeoning through flesh.

The doors of perception were being well and truly gate-crashed. What was to be a rather genteel soiree of a literary persuasion, was turned into a cyber-boot-stomping montage of fearsome verbiage. There were words everywhere. They merged into one writhing, putrescent orgasm of frenzied composition. The cascading babble deafened right down to the bowels. The walls and windows were drenched in spilled ink, the floor was awash in black and bubbled with more words emerging like ectoplasm ghouls to eat the flesh of literary taste.

It was horrible.

It was

The Attack of the 50-foot Verbose Mutant Killer Fountain Pens From Mars.

And try saying that in a bookshop without getting funny looks.

It was all my fault too. I just wasn't capable of controlling my pen. I let it prod and probe where pens were not meant to ponder, and cracked open a splurging orifice of psycho-babble into an unprepared universe.

With those words flooding into this doomed world, and me out of chemical inducements, I figured there was only one thing left to do. Make like a writer and delete the scene, but the only part of me capable of running was my bowel.

Fortunately there was a deafening flash of inspiration and the ink-blinded windows imploded. Black-clad figures, straight out of an action flick, chased the cascading shards like a punctuation expletive. I managed to duck as they abseiled into the narrative flow with the [full-]stopping power of a full-metal-colon.

The Editors were here to save the paragraph.

Red pens flashed like maser-death. They scythed through the invaders. Dismembered clauses floundered on the ink floor bubbling a death rattle tattoo as the editors hacked and butchered these babies. Streams of high velocity tippex wiped their asses clean off the face of the Earth. I just ducked under a table and admired the sheer choreography of this high-power revision.

Even so, it looked tight to the deadline. These editors were tough S.O.B.s, but the words were giving a tempestuous backchat. We were far from clear of the verbiage yet. Truth is, those editors were in serious danger of becoming overwhelmed by the sheer deluge of noisome composition. I was definitely destined for somebody's bad books...

That's when the Critics smashed through the doors. You should have been there to see it for yourself. Some piece of work. The action didn't last long after that.

They destroyed them. Drowned them in scorn. The Fountains Pens From Mars just withered and died under the Critics' combined vitriol aplomb and heat-beam stares.

With the last bubbling decomposition writhing its last on the ink-swilled floor, I crawled out from under the table. I had to thank these guys for saving my arse from the verbiage swamp. I went up to the nearest editor, grinning like a classic hippy with a bowel full of good shit.

He saw me. This Heraclean Hero of the Delete Key watched me sidle nonchalantly his way. He turned and holstered his Red Pen. Adopting a casual stance, he rested one gauntleted hand on his hip while the other reached up to peel off his respirator hood.

I stopped then, and stuttered a few grateful incoherences.

The Hero's mouth curled in disdain.

"Goddam passive voices," he said, "more trouble than worth."

I grinned a little weak.

He must have mistaken me for some other scribe...

Mark Cantrell, Bolton, 16 November 2004

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In the beginning there was...

A word or three from our sponsors...

Penning The Altered States

Hunters Of The Untamed Idea

Dance With The Muse And Write To Dissent

It Just Got Harder!

Primal Expression

Don't Publish My Collected Works!

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Penning The Altered States

EVERY session at the keyboard is a journey to unknown places.

My body might reside in the here and now of the physical universe, but like the ancient shaman high on exotic herbs, my mind - or soul depending on your inclinations - is away elsewhere.

Not to the gods. Or the spirits of animals and ancestors.

Just. Elsewhere.

To that place that somehow reaches back to this world to manifest itself on the glowing screen or the coffee-stained paper.

It's a hard place to reach.

Some, again, we're back to shamans, have preached the wondrous facilitator that is illegal drugs. Pop a pill, snort some neuro-chemically interesting powder and open the doors to perception.

Others might swear by various concoctions of alcohol.

And yes, there's always the boring swot who preaches the virtues of hard work.

They overlook something.

Not about the hard work, that's a given whatever substance you abuse or none. And it isn't sleep deprivation either, which can sometimes be a wonderful hallucinatory mind-swirling phenomenon for the creative writer out for a quick nib.

No. They forget.

That writing itself is an altered stream of consciousness. The words themselves, and the fizzing incandescent ideas they dance to represent, can themselves open that mystical doorway to perception and otherworldliness.

I think, drugs aside, those ancient shamans knew that little secret too.

These days they have a phrase for it. Typically boring. The kind of label that only someone who's spent years using their mind to learn the theories and hypotheses of what makes the brain work rather than the mind itself could come up with.

Hey, let's take the essential mystery out of the mind, they might have declared. Then thought even that's too scintillating and figured let's just map the neurons and stick a few electrodes in to see how they mechanically behave.

They call it the hypnagogic state.

It has different brainwave patterns apparently, quite distinct from phases like REM or deep sleep, or various neurologically and experientially interesting substances.

I suppose as writers we forget this too. We just say we are on a roll.

On a whole roll of flying carpet, maybe.

Because that's when we're flying.

We've got there without chemicals. Only the most powerful drug known to man: words.

Opening the door might be hard work. We might stare at the keyboard or at the paper for ages. Frustrated. Grumpy. Wondering why we bother. And then the idea detonates in the head, or else we get 'back into the flow' and suddenly we're there.

Not at the table or the PC. Not in the cafŽ. But out there.

In whatever world we're struggling to create.

Once we're there, the outside world, this mundane place, is gone. It's beyond our perception, because - temporarily at least - we have moved on to a higher plane of existence.

So sure, it exists only in the mnemonics of words, but mathematicians express the entire complexity and beauty of the Universe in the mnemonics of numbers and algebra. Why should ours be any less real because the mnemonics assemble in our heads and encoded on paper by the mechanics of the motor cortex, bones and muscle. Oh yes, and the pen (or keyboard).

The Muse is out there. Hiding, and giggling coy in the cosmology of our altered state.

And we search in strange places every time we sit at a desk.

So be adventurous. Don't just push at the doors, fling them wide and see what's out there. You might be amazed at what comes back with you.

Writing is metaphysical, spiritual cosmic exploration, without never a need to worry about the vice squad a'calling.

Unless, that is, you like to wind down with the old prohibited stuff.

Me, I'll just stick with the words.

December 2003

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### Hunters Of The Untamed Idea

The invention of writing might have domesticated the story, but the beast can still bite...

BEFORE the written word there was only the spoken word. The attempted domestication of the story is a mere blink of an eye in the history of storytelling. Scarce a few thousands years old, writing has far from tamed the story. They are as wild and free as they ever were, and the author is still a hunter-gatherer tracking ideas across the dreamscape.

So we can capture them in words, pin them to the page like insects in a museum collection, but the breed goes on. It grows and shifts in the same chaotic patterns that enthralled our distant forebears. All we have done is shift the balance, for the story still evolves - along with us. The story lives feral in our imaginations, skulking in the shadows of our darkest fears, or soaring high on the thermals of our greatest dreams.

The world is reflected in our dreamscape. As we change the world, it changes us, so too does the visionary stuff of fiction shift under our fingertips. What writer hasn't felt the story fight back, twist and wriggle to become something else? Fiction is a living thing for it is nothing less than an idealisation of ourselves, of our world in all its sordid, nihilistic complexity.

Fiction is the place where reality and imagination merge. This is the dreamscape. Ideas are derived from the world around us. They are fashioned into shape, spliced with other notions and fermented in our minds, only to be frozen in time on the written page. In that sense our modern stories are dead things, yet like fossils they can reach out beyond their own age to tantalise generations unborn.

Like all storytellers, we are rooted firmly in our age. The tales we weave are dependent on the world around us, and what we know of the world that went before. We may fantasise the future, but the truth is tomorrow is forever unwritten. Our future-shocks are a product of present day fears and hopes, projected onto our children and their children. Yet paradoxically, by envisioning the future we can shift consciousness towards realising at least something of that vision.

So our stories are rooted in time. Yet the very best can reach out, become timeless by capturing the eternal essence of what it is to be human and to convey the very spirit of the age in which it was written.

In a sense that gives us a far greater power than our forebears who wove their words only in the transient human mind, through the medium of the spoken word. Their stories were timeless in the sense that such peoples rarely had any notion of linear time. To them, time was cyclic. The present was simply the here and now on the way to future, which was itself merely a foretelling of the past. Divorced from a sense of history, their stories could only shift and change as they and their world shifted and changed.

Yet for these people, these ancient hunter-gatherers, or simple farmers, who existed on the edge of the war-zone that we call civilisation, stories possessed a far greater power than their modern descendants. For them, stories were a powerful rendition of their daily lives. The storyteller possessed an almost magical gift to walk with the Gods in the mythic realm. He wove great heroes, gave his audience an expanded sense of their own lives. In this way, he expressed the values and provided the living links with one generation to the next.

Through the story, our ancestors learned who they were - not just as individuals but as families and communities. Stories expressed the relationships between humanity and nature. They strove to make sense of the world at the dawn of time. Reality and fantasy intermingled in these stories. Heroes became mythologised into demi-Gods, the ills of the world were given shape as the beasts and demons that made us shiver from their hideaways in the shadows. They explored the limits of their world and inscribed on the mental map 'here be dragons'.

As they entertained, so they informed. These storytellers taught the ways of the world, transmitted culture, gave meaning and a sense of belonging to the people sat around that ancient blazing fire. Throughout the millennia, the story has reflected our lives and our existence. As with our ancestors, the search for meaning still lies behind our urge to tell a story - even though we seek to preserve the words on the medium of paper, or even of quantum digits.

In our fragmented, restless society that search for meaning can be as little as the author's own personal quest. By writing, they may seek to resolve personal traumas. Beyond that, they seek to impose meaning on the senseless world around them. As readers, we look to be entertained - to escape from the banalities of the world - and in that sense we are little removed from our ancestors. Like them, we want to be enthralled and released into a world of mystery and adventure. And if in some way we can find some kind of meaning, so much the better. No matter that the sense is far from profound, as long as it reinforces and reassures our own personal shield against reality and the uncertainties that surround us.

Beyond this there is surely the desire to be noticed. In the days when the material and the spiritual worlds were separated by no more than a thought, the story was the means by which humankind danced among the Gods. We strive to be noticed, to make our mark in a cold and vast cosmos. Perhaps, as he wove his visions into words, that ancient storyteller perceived his Gods and Spirits on the outer edge, listening along with his all too human audience.

The same is true today, in a way. The writer craves attention. Not of the Gods, perhaps. Ours is too secular a calling. We crave the attention of our peers, we wish to make our mark in the human world. The story is our graffiti - 'Kilroy is here!' we are crying - our plea for attention in an indifferent world.

Even as we have gained with the advent of writing, we have lost something. Though our stories have flourished with the time machine that is writing, we have lost our ability to provide a sense of community, we no longer transmit those cultural messages that bind us together as people. That isn't to say that stories still can't - and don't - perform that function. But as our world has grown ever more complex and fragmented, so too has the human experience, and so too has the unifying potential of storytelling. We see ourselves reflected in a broken mirror.

Yet this provides a wealth of material for the storyteller. The very stuff of drama: conflict. Not merely the conflict of every day life set within the narrow parameters of a particular sub-culture - but between sub-cultures, between class. We have a new age of heroes and villains, new demons and angels in our modern myths. That is the rich and the poor, the struggle for human dignity to raise itself above poverty and the struggle against those who enforce it.

A rich vein indeed for the storyteller, if only they choose to delve deep beneath its crust. For all too often the world of storytelling reflects only a narrow view, a view of only one facet in our seething society. The novel arose on the backs of a triumphant bourgeois class. It helped to shape their view of the world, gave them a sense of identity and purpose even as other writers gave shape to their ideas of business and social organisation. Like those ancient storytellers, these magicians of imagination carried forth their cultural values to infuse others in their struggle to pull down an aristocratic world.

Where are the storytellers in a similar vein today? Where are those who dare to dream of a world beyond the narrow strictures of the commercial, and seek to disseminate their dissent through characters and stories and enthralling, captivating words?

Underground. Existing here and there, far from the light of the flickering fire, making do with candlelight and the glow of the moon until their time comes to bask in the full limelight. That is where the hunt leads, the story plays with us in the ongoing drama of humanity's struggle for freedom and dignity.

The chase is still one of meaning and understanding, but in the face of an ever more complex - yet paradoxically simple - world. And with it the story still develops, the real and the imaginary still bubble and boil in the dreamscape. Completely untamed.

For the moment, we writers remain hunters, tracking the spoors of inspiration - if only we dare to follow the trail to its phantasmagoric conclusion.

October 1998

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#### Dance With The Muse And Write To Dissent

ACCOUNTANTS and management gurus are the Commissars of Capitalism, and they make for extremely bad muses. Likewise, the real muses have no time for balance sheets and cost accounts. They don't care about the bottom line. All they want to do is sing.

Writers are - or should be - addicted to this sweet melody of inspiration that magically transfers raw thought into crisp prose. Without it, the writer is frustrated and grumpy, as if a lover has developed a predilection for headaches.

The muse is a fickle lover at the best of times.

Yet aspiring writers will eventually encounter advice to shackle their muse in commercial chains. They must develop an intimate knowledge of the markets, its states, and think in terms of commercial viability. To write something deemed uncommercial is a sin. The bottom line is all - writing is a business, just like any other. If it cannot be quantified in financial terms then it is considered irrelevant.

Of course, at its most fundamental level, there is some sound advice contained in the market sermon. To send a romantic story to a publisher of hardcore horror is foolish and a waste of time. So it makes sense to nurture a knowledge of markets as pools of potential readership: to know who is publishing what.

The danger exists that this can be taken too far, until the 'business' ethos takes over. The question ceases to be: "Where is the best portal to reach my audience?" To become: "How much money can I make, and how do I maximise my earning potential?"

The markets lead, the writer follows. Eventually, the muse wanders off in search of a more appreciative amour. The writer has become a hack, churning out endless reams of formulaic dross tailored specifically for some market, as quantified on an accountant's spreadsheet. It may produce functional, competent, even moderately entertaining prose, but hardly anything inspiring. A pot-boiler to kill an hour or two, not a shared vision that sears through the mind like lightning.

Good writing sneers at such narrow commercial considerations and mocks attempts at empirical calculation. After all, how can vision, imagination and flair be truly quantified? They cannot. They exist beyond the slide-rule.

Artificial constraints should never be placed upon a writer's imaginative horizons. A piece of good literature (in the broadest sense) not only stretches the imagination, it is also capable of expanding the markets and breathing a little life into the drab existence of Capitalism's commissars.

Had Tolkien, for instance, followed the dictates of market forces, then the Lord of the Rings would never have been written. Nor would many other novels that grace the shelves of bookshops and libraries. The market knows nothing about the quality of literature, and therefore is a poor guide to follow. Far better, to trust in the muse, our writers' instincts, and those of the readers.

At the end of the day it is the shared vision between reader and writer that makes for good fiction. Whether this touches a handful of souls or a million, the words are merely a delivery system. A means to trigger imagination and emotions. This is a process the writer can never fully control. The readers bring to each work their own subtle nuance of imagination, experience and emotion. Together these facets of the soul effect the way in which the audience read between the lines.

Our readers' response to our words is as individual as the people themselves; a process that is far more engaging than viewing a flickering screen of visual hackery. The visual medium tends to be passive in that we merely observe. Literature is active for it involves us. We, the reader, experience the characters. We see and feel and experience ourselves through that character.

This is the world of the muse; from where she reaches into our hearts and minds. Through the writer she crackles into the collective human brain and down through the ages, growing and ramifying in our consciousness like a glorious oak.

How can the markets come to terms with that? What can the balance sheet really tell us about the quality and worth of a piece of literature? Nothing. Follow such narrow horizons, and writers will inevitably sever themselves from this great flow of human vision. At the end of the day, human beings are creatures that dwell in dreams. These are what compel us to crawl from our beds in the morning and motivate us through our lives - the urge to put flesh on our dreams, no matter how great or small they may be.

WRITERS have always come into their own when striking out against the narrow boundaries of their society. In so doing, they expand our dreams and create them afresh. Consequently they need to be bold. They cannot be timid, for they are expressing the shared experiences and fantasies of the human race, nibbling away at the constraints placed upon our perceptions and viewpoints, exploring what it means to be alive on this planet.

To do anything less not only short-changes the reader it withers the writer. Unless a writer pushes at the bounds, writing cannot develop. If genres were never mixed and merged, if new techniques were never tried, then creative writing would die. As human experience grows and develops, these must be reflected in the

novels and short stories that somehow capture the spirit of each age and reach beyond to those that follow.

NONE of this need be a call for literature in its biggest form - whatever that really is. There is no need for a crusade to sell high brow works. More often this is just another genre, one for a cultural elite to masturbate with relish over their "superior" reading tastes, while showering the hoi polloi in the discharge of their contempt.

Beyond that, it is just another marketing ploy, a way for the markets to neatly package and categorise a form of human expression it is incapable of understanding.

To hear the muse and be transported into the human dreamscape, the writer must throw salt over their shoulders and into the eyes of the whispering Commissars. They must be honest in their writing, possess enthusiasm and a joy for what they do. Above all, they should have something to say and a burning need to express it - even if that is only a damn good story.

Liberating the muse from market forces is an attitude, not a technique. It stems from a love of words and an enthusiasm for human expression. Unless a writer takes pleasure in their work, how can they communicate this to others? How can they inspire a mind to dance through the dreamscape, even if only for a little while?

The market is the last totalitarian system on Earth<sup>2</sup>. It is also the most highly developed, the most subtle and consequently the most powerful. More than most, writers have an opportunity to give totalitarianism the two-fingered salute of contempt. And they have the luxury to do so, without risking the sinister knock in the early hours of the morning, followed by a terrifying journey to some distant gulag.<sup>3</sup>

Capitalism, after all, is a strange form of totalitarianism. It is a system that is quite happy to profit from the seeds of its own destruction. And that is why a call to reject market principles in writing need not mean the production of "unpublishable" works. Remember that much literature held in high regard was initially rejected as "commercially unviable" by the Commissars of Capitalism.

Writers should challenge the restraints of capitalism. Never should the totalitarian principles of market forces be unquestionably accepted. Perhaps writers are so bound, but it should be an unwilling slavery and good writing will always - at least - rattle the chains.

September 1998

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It Just Got Harder!

THEY say that writing a novel is one of the hardest things you can do.

It's not like writing a poem or a short story or an article, though each of those has its separate challenges and headaches for the poor scribe.

But a novel - that's something else.

For one thing it's a long haul. Obviously. Day in day out, the writer is struggling to piece each word and each sentence together. They have to sustain the characters, the plot, the dialogue and the narrative over several hundred pages and many thousands of words.

Beyond that, the satisfying point of completion - of gaining a sense of achievement - can be months or years away. Seldom are there any mid-point grains of satisfaction to cheer the author on. But still, if they are going to be a novelist, they must persevere.

Take it from me, it's hard, often soul-destroying work. One of the hardest things ever. And it gets harder, because after that final word is added to the manuscript, the novelist must start again. Savagely. No novel is written. It is re-written, hacked, edited and revised until both editor and manuscript look - or more like feel - like a bit-part victim in a cheap slasher movie.

Butcher your baby, dear novelist if you ever want to make the grade. But don't expect to retain thy sanity.

Okay, so don't just take it from me.

Try Tom Clancy, and he must know, because he writes some mammoth tomes: "Writing that book must become the most important thing in your life. If it doesn't you will fail. If it does, you might just succeed... Success is a finished book, a stack of pages each of which is filled with words. If you reach that point, you have won a victory over yourself no less impressive than sailing single-handed round the world."

Clancy is spot on, but I prefer Orwell's take on the matter.

"Writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle," he said, "like a long bout of some painful illness."

Orwell, of course, was not only suffering the pains and birthpangs of the novelist, he was also genuinely ill with consumption. You might say he took his research for *Down And Out In London And Paris* a little too far, as that's where he apparently picked up the wicked bug that eventually brought his words to a permanent end.

Of course, after all that hard work, after sailing single-handed round the world and finally reaching - salt encrusted and storm battered - the safety of port, the hardest part of all is yet to come.

For when that manuscript is finished, it must be touted to publisher and agent.

Expect them both to be hard-nosed and cynical, 'cos they've seen it all before and crushed many a shrinking violet author in the clenched fist of their business realism. Hard work? You ain't seen nothing yet.

After months and years at sea in an ocean of words, the novelist now has to boil the whole thing down into a mere page full of words. Condensed, concised, rendered down to its barest and simplest points. And all the way through you have to make it clear what an exciting, original unmissable work it is.

So, you still think writing a novel is hard?

Try selling it to a jaundiced publishing world. Ocean sailing! Where's my life jacket?

July 2003

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## Primal Expression

ALL humans beings are storytellers, cave painters, poets and musicians. We are creatures of creation; it's central to our nature to express ourselves.

This has been true ever since the first spark of self-awareness compelled us to ponder the dark depths between the stars, to search for meaning in our relations with those around us, and with the world in which we live.

Creativity is the central strand that binds our diverse cultures together. It strikes out from one generation to the next to transmit those cultures from the dawn of time to the ever-distant tomorrow. This urge to create ramifies into everything we do, even into the darker aspects of our collective psyche - the capacity to destroy.

Art in its many forms was mankind's first expression of dissent; a subversion of the dominion of Nature. It stood for our own battle to escape the incarceration within the savage Eden that is the natural world.

Countless generations later, artistic expression in all its forms is still a basic act of defiance and of dissent. This time nature is not the object of our rebellion, but the human society that surrounds us and stifles us in everything we do.

From the day we are born, we are subliminally informed that we are fit only to labour or to perform some functional task for the market and its support systems. That and to dutifully consume material products.

Modern society catalogues humanity. It compartmentalises the human soul, splits it into components and neatly files them away. Here is our box, and there we must remain.

Capitalism needs throwaway components. We are expected to be near automatons performing repetitive tasks, regulated by the manager's clock and to live out our lives in the service of the market. This is called freedom.

In return, we get a little food, a roof over our heads, and a varying ration of pocket money to spend on consumer things like clothes and cars and holidays in the sun<sup>4</sup>.

Capitalism does not need a wealth of thinkers, or visionaries or people with untrammelled imagination. Such people are in general a hindrance to the smooth flow of profit. Instead, the vast majority is expected to channel imagination into other avenues.

So the accountant finds clever ways to boost a client's profit. The scientist working for an armaments company finds ever better ways to kill and maim. The labourer is simply crushed.

Or so it would seem.

Dig a little deeper into the Dark Continent that is the majority of mankind and we find the burning fires of ancient creativity. Sometimes it screams at us from the walls of our prison cities in the most colourful displays of graffiti art.

At other times we must peer a little harder into the crevasses and shadows of our narrow world, think a little laterally to realise that despite its circumstances, humanity still fights to express itself, any way it can, by whatever limited means.

"Shaz was 'ere" the scrawl tells us from a wall. This and many like it, sometimes accompanied by crude drawings in a primeval mimicry of the 'higher' graffiti art or indeed of ancient cave drawings, scream their creator's desire to be recognised in their existence.

As for the story telling tradition, that is alive and well in the most unlikely of places. Look to the pub, or similar gatherings where people flock to converse. In the simple telling of anecdotes and gossips, stories of their lives are performed for the small audience of family and friend.

Here are the rawest forms of self-expression, the human mind declaring its existence in the face of perpetual indifference. Perhaps it is also the most pitiable, but in a sense it shows that some spark of defiance still sputters in the human soul.

Some may find it difficult to perceive such notions in pointless scrawling, or in the casual gossip and boasting of a tap room milieu. Yet it represents in its most basic form that which lies in all human souls - creativity and expression.

In recent years, there has been an explosion in popularity for poetry. The muse sings to the masses and takes form in their own words and creative explorations. Yet so many of the cultured elite talk of taking the poetry to the masses, unaware that poetry exists there already. Like missionaries, they take the light of wisdom to the heathen savages, only to find the torches burning bright where their arrogance said were only shadows.

Light already blazes, burning with the fuel of poetry and prose and music and art. Words and deeds define humanity as something that is not content to be bound by the fetters of capitalism, anymore than ancient humans were content to be bound by the fetters of nature. Like them, we lash out, consciously and unconsciously we tell the world that we are more than our allotted function. We break the bounds, shatter the blinkers of censorship and of sense and sensibility.

We are dissidents and subversives by the very act of writing. By putting our thoughts and deeds into words and image and song, we lash out against the bonds that attempt to strangle our minds. We are saying that we are more than just a function, more than a dutiful consumer. We aim a blow at the ideology that says we are less than human. The ideology of cultural elitism, that trains the masses to hold themselves in contempt, to turn away from creative endeavours until an essential part of their mind is withered and atrophied.

The farm labourer toils on the land, he is not supposed to write. The car worker mans the production line; he does not compose stanzas. The secretary files her nails; she does not create images in pigments and paint. A few insipid lines about a daffodil are mundane beyond words when penned by a poet laureate. From the pen of a miner it is a most revolutionary thing - because through that daffodil he has said I am more than a digger of coal. I am a man, a human being able to comprehend the beauty of the world and to be moved by it.

We are the torchbearers, carrying what was bequeathed to us by our storytelling, cave-painting forebears, in the days when humanity still knew how to love and live and dare to dream.

Art was and ever remains the primal scream of human awakening.

October 1999

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Don't You Dare Publish My Collected Works!

EVER tried calling the future collect? It's difficult, and I don't mean because the person at the other end refuses the charges. I couldn't dial because I didn't know the number, and as yet there is no Directory Enquiries for phones still to be.

So instead, I sent this plea as an email.

Not that this is a perfect solution, mind you, because I don't know who it's for. But I can guess at the address and hope that it makes its way to the right recipient. For those who don't know, the address is [the-guilty-party@the-future.co.anywhere](mailto:the-guilty-party@the-future.co.anywhere).

That's all I know, other than the resonant echoes transmitted on the retro-tachyon carrier wave emitted by my words. I know from these distant echoes that it's some time in the future, as far away from the here and now as possible (thank you very much), where I am in my grave and not feeling too happy about it.

My mortality, however, is way beside the point. More important is what is happening in this parallel universe that, for me, is yet to be. I have to tell you that a terrible Crime Against Literature is about to be perpetrated. So I send my message, in the hope that I can prevent a shattering travesty.

You see, something shocking has happened in the future: I made it as a writer. My words stood the test of time to survive beyond my death. Amazing.

Now that's not the problem (other than finding a way to collect the royalties in the next world). This is: some bright spark has hit on an idea. It's a real money-spinner, or so this bloke hopes. He wants to cash in on my post-mortal success by publishing the Collected Works of Mark Cantrell, author extraordinaire of the early 21st Century.

Okay, fair enough, it's some kind of acclaim and I am gracious enough to accept the compliment even it's from some money-grubbing bastard out to rob my tomb - but it's also a total disaster. I mean this individual cannot be serious, right?

I hope you see my problem, or at least the first inklings. Then again, looking at your face I can see you're in some doubt. Hang about, you say, I'm dead so my opinion just can't hack it. Well, that's the reason for this - ultimately posthumous - message. So stop picking over my corpse and I'll explain.

Now, when I was breathing I tended to be prolific; I'd heard it said that a writer should strive to write something every day. I did my best to live up to that. I wrote articles, news, comment, stories, poems, novels and stuff I couldn't make head nor tail of.

And now this bright spark wants to pull it all together?

Are they mad in this future world?

Do they have specially reinforced shelves?

They obviously have no idea of just how much crap they are about to unleash on an unsuspecting public. Nor do they seem to care about the bucket of shit they're about to smear all over my reputation as a writer.

I mean, to create the gems that made my name I had to wade through a lake of slurry. That's the nature of the writing game.

My life as a writer was not a phenomenon. It wasn't a singular event. It was a process, which like a story had a beginning a middle and an end. And contrary to narrative causality, my beginning wasn't a great hook for the reading public.

In that literary beginning, I may have got lucky with my words but sooner or later lucks runs out. A writers' development must leave luck behind (in the creation of their words) and develop their craft. And so I did. Learning with each assembled sentence, each completed passage each rejected (or published) manuscript.

My first words as a literary creature were but the proud products of a newly-potty trained toddler. A milestone in life, a necessary step to onward development, but still essentially a potty full of shit.

It takes time to hone and develop the scribing skills and it is a learning process that goes on for a lifetime. Even the best of us are but journeymen.

As for the end, so maybe I got lucky and died face down on that final conclusive manuscript, or truly unlucky and my brain turned to still metabolising jelly. In this worst case scenario, I lost my skills and spent my final years as a dribbling geriatric infant. 'Nuff said on that score, let's focus on the middle. The realm of the great journey.

Here is where I produced my great works; the ones that caught your eye and emblazoned my name on your souls. This is the realm of my literary life, of so many days spent thinking and living and writing. All of it now to be collated and collected.

So let me ask you a question, and please think very hard.

Was everything I wrote a gem?

No.

No it was not.

Others will tell me the proportion, the ratio of crap to gold, but you in your quest to cash in on my fame seem to have lost your ability to appraise. So I say to you, be a prospector, pan the stream of my work and separate the gold from the dross. If I have made my name sufficient for you to consider throwing every word I ever wrote upon the publishing pile, then your task cannot be that difficult for the appraisal has gone on throughout my life.

Don't, I beg you, poison my work, my legacy, my reputation by polluting the good with the bad.

Sort them. Judge them. Edit them by all means, but don't mix them up to make a weak alloy. Junk the dross where it belongs: in the backroom archive, a dusty repository of interest only to academics studying my development.

For in my life I wrote much that was good, but also much that was bad and indifferent. That is the nature of the literary beast. We have good days and we have bad, great words and drivel. We scribes are not Engines of Perfection. Nor should we be.

So don't poison my oeuvre. Publish the selected works by all means but don't collect every last word I ever wrote. It would bury me far heavier than the earth that holds my bones. And I have no wish to spend eternity in my grave spinning dizzy with shame.

January 2003

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The story was...

... That after the frivolity

There came...

A Walk In The Woods

The Ghost Of Sarajevo

The Rise & Fall Of Sisyphus

Sinners In Streaming Video

Joe's Last Meal

Time Changeth The Man

You Looking At Me? - The Almost True Story Of Paddington Bear

Shopping For Katie

Nathan's Friend

To Heal The World

Deadly Night Shade

A Walk In The Woods

ONCE, there lived a simple woodsman called Grimble. He made his living from the Great Forest, cutting timber to serve the meagre needs of his family. Life was hard, but he was his own master and the Forest did not unduly suffer from the tender pruning it received.

Yet all things must change and such a time came to Grimble and his kind. Great cities arose throughout the land, spreading southwards until a city was founded on the very borders of Grimble's forest. This city needed wood. For craft, for fuel and for art. Grimble and his kind supplied the wood and prospered.

Soon there came to this city a man of great wealth. This fortune he had made in one of the lesser cities, and hearing of the Great Forest he became enamoured of its promise. Together with the City's rulers he conspired to possess the Forest, even though it had been in the possession of all.

So it was that this man became known as the WoodMaster and built himself a great palace in the City. An edict was issued that none may touch the Master's wood: the woodsmen were ruined and dispossessed.

The cities cried out for wood, as the Master knew they must. And so he made an offer to the Woodsmen he knew they could not refuse; they would cut timber for the Master and he would sell it.

The Master's wealth increased and he grew fat from the proceeds of the timber. The woodsmen and their families survived from day to day on the little the Master paid them. And so it went on year after year.

Now the Great Forest was not the only forest in the land. Soon new masters appeared. The WoodMaster struggled to sell his timber.

His anger was great. More timber was felled and the Master sold it for less than his rivals. The woodsmen had to toil all the harder to calm the Master's wrath.

"My timber sells for less," he raged. "And so you must work for less."

The woodsmen suffered terribly, yet still the Master grew in wealth and girth until he could no longer walk, but lay on his couch while servants stuffed his mouth with grapes and other succulent fruits.

And still the years passed with no end to the toil. Until the Great Forest began to dwindle, its majestic trees as sparse as the hair on a bald man's head. The Master was loathe to spend his wealth on replenishing his forest. His rivals did no such thing. So he did not, but conquered fresh forests instead.

So it was, that one day Grimble ventured into the thinning Forest, axe in hand. With a heavy heart he approached a young tree and prepared to strike the first blow.

At that moment a woman appeared before him, so close he had to strain to turn his blow and avoid hitting her. Instead the axe struck a stone with such force that the pain of it caused Grimble to drop the axe.

The woman said nothing as he massaged his jarred hands, just looked at him sorrowfully. Her skin was as brown as autumn leaves. Her hair was brilliant gold and cascaded over naked shoulders. She was clad only in

living flowers.

"Who are you?" he asked, more gruff than he intended.

The woman walked closer, stumbled and fell against him. Instinctively Grimble supported the woman as her hands weakly pawed his chest. She looked up at him, those green eyes burning bright from a face and body emaciated from sickness. Grimble shuddered but he did not let go.

"Why do you persecute me, Grimble?"

"I'm not," he stammered. "I don't even know you."

The woman smiled feeble and closed her eyes for a moment as though gathering strength. At last she said: "Has it been so long? Once you would have known me."

"But I do not, Lady. Who are you?"

"I'm part of you, Grimble. I'm in every living thing - the birds and the beasts, the flowers and the trees. I am the spirit of the Forest. You may call me Gaia if you wish."

"Gaia?" Grimble replied in disbelief. "And what would she want with me?"

"To ask you this: why do you persecute me?"

"Lady, I do not persecute you. I simply cut wood for the Master."

The woman smiled and closed her eyes. For a moment she rested her head against Grimble's chest and then whispered: "You do not persecute me. Yet still the Forest dies."

"That is not my doing," he said sadly, remembering for a moment the Forest as it once had been. Before the Master arrived.

"Yet it is you who cuts it. But you can stop it. Help me, Grimble. Let the Forest live."

Grimble looked away sadly, ashamed of his role under the scrutiny of those penetrating eyes. "I cannot help you," he said, shrugging. "Talk to the Master. Only he can save what he owns."

The Master will not see me. And how can he own what was here before him and what could still be long after he has gone?"

"I don't know. I only cut wood."

The woman released Grimble and took a staggering step away. She pointed at a patch of bare soil between the thinning trees. "Look," she said hoarsely, moving her arms in a circular motion.

Grimble gasped as a mist swirled around him. It surrounded him with cold, cloying fingers. The Forest faded from view. A disk appeared, suspended in the mist, a brilliant orb of blue and green and white. Then slowly it faded to putrid brown and grey.

The image changed. The festering orb faded and was replaced by a windswept landscape. Dead trees littered the wasted ground. In the distance a ruined city towered over the horizon. The ground was scattered with bones.

The woman gripped Grimble's hand and squeezed. The sensation shocked him and he turned to face her. "Such is our future, Grimble. Save me! Save yourself!"

Trembling, Grimble looked back at the apparition of death. It evaporated with the mist, revealing the still-living forest. He turned back to the woman, but she had gone.

THE following morning found the timberyard in turmoil. The woodsmen had gathered round the GuildMaster. Angry words were being exchanged.

"What is going on here?" Grimble asked.

"The Master is bringing in machines to do our work," the man snarled his reply. "Most of the men are to go. Those who are left will man his machines. Our GuildMaster has agreed for his own good."

Grimble looked up at the GuildMaster standing on the old tree stump, dressed in a silk waistcoat and tailored suit. His thoughts returned to the apparition in the woods: the sick, frail woman imploring him, those intense sorrowful eyes burning into his conscience.

With a call for silence Grimble dragged the GuildMaster down from the stump and threw him into the dirt. Grimble spoke to the Woodsmen. He spoke of their dispossession. Of the destruction of the Forest and the Master's growing wealth. These words touched the woodsmen, caused the anger, the frustration, the bitterness of years to boil up from the depths of their souls. Only the GuildMaster's whining voice of protest could be heard, but soon he was drowned out in the uproar.

"Down with the Master!" they cried as one and marched to the City.

Through the gates they stomped, still calling for the Master. Many joined the march and swelled its numbers until thousands of angry voices shook the city to its foundations. Everywhere cries and cheers greeted them from windows and hovels and still their numbers grew.

Until at last they halted before the Palace gates. The Captain of the Watch stood before them. A contingent of his men already manned the walls.

"What do you want? Get back to work!" he shouted. The crowd fell silent. "This is a public disturbance. If you do not disperse you will be arrested."

"Out of the way lackey!" Grimble shouted in reply. A volley of rotten fruit pelted the Captain's men standing before the gates.

"You are under arrest!" the Captain blustered. "Take him!"

Men of the Watch hesitantly came forward to drag Grimble away, but the crowd surged forward and cut them down. Grimble lashed out at the Captain and saw the man fall. He waited no longer, raised his axe in the air and signalled the people to the attack. Together they rushed through the gates, scattering the panic-stricken Watchmen who vainly tried to stem the flow.

Fighting spread to every corner of the Palace. The cries of the people, harsh in anger, pitiable in pain, echoed from the walls as the Watchmen were steadily swallowed up in a tide of rage.

At last the fighting began to ebb as the last few Watchmen were defeated. Grimble and several of his fellow woodsmen hastened to the Master's public chambers. They burst in, but the City's rulers had already fled, taking what they could of the Master's gold. He they had left to the mercy of the woodsmen.

The WoodMaster rolled onto the floor and tried vainly to crawl away, only to be defeated by his great size. There he lay, panting with fear and exertion, groveling in his remaining gold like a grotesque, diseased slug.

"Take my money! But please don't hurt me!"

"We don't want your gold," Grimble said quietly. "Your gold has been a chain around our necks and death to the Forest. We have come to break those chains and unleash life."

The Master screamed in a terrible gurgle as Grimble stepped forward. With a look of sorrow and pity at what once had been a man, Grimble raised his axe. The others also raised theirs. And struck.

The deed didn't take long. Grimble wiped the spattered blood from his face. Wearily he turned towards the bronze doors and the great gathering that had assembled to crush the Master's reign. The people looked at Grimble in astonished uncertainty. Then they turned their gaze onto the Master's bloody carcass.

Only one pair of eyes still watched Grimble. They were green, intense, and alive. The Lady smiled. Grimble returned her smile and held her gaze until the spell between them was broken and she turned to walk away.

"The Master is dead!" a man suddenly cried, joyously throwing his arms in the air. "We can all live again."

That cry swept through the people, crashing through the Palace to echo over the City. The sound of the people's triumph was heard even in the Forest where birds began to sing and the trees sprang into bloom.

January 1996

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### The Ghost Of Sarajevo

FOR a short while a strange peace descended over Sarajevo. It was like a ray of sunshine in the fog of war. I still don't know what happened. I know people don't believe me, I'm not sure I believe it myself, but something happened, something inexplicable.

Of course the authorities told everyone involved to keep quiet, they would; what they can't understand they suppress. For myself I can't keep quiet, I have to write it down, I have to try and make sense of it somehow....

Perhaps that's why I lost my job with the agency. At first they were understanding: an experienced correspondent suffering from fatigue and stress. Maybe I should have kept my mouth shut after all?

I hadn't been in the city long, just a few days. There was a faint scent of hope in the air, but for the inhabitants that had seen months of war, death, and want, cynicism still held sway. It was an apt feeling. Only days later the Geneva talks broke down as Izetbegovic pulled out and the war continued.

It's hard to imagine what it was really like; I watched in awe as ordinary people struggled to maintain some kind of routine. It's a survival thing I suppose. Life was hard. The people struggled to scavenge for food, for water, for wood to heat their ruined homes. On top of that they had to brave the constant shelling and sniper fire. That, for me, was the most frightening part of all, yet they lived with it constantly and somehow grew used to it. The days of peace were a distant memory, but simple living exerted its mundane demands.

Often while venturing through this ruined shell that had once been a vibrant city, I was guided by a reporter for the paper *Oslobodenje*. Despite months of siege they were still publishing from the bunker under their building, in the most heavily shelled part of the city.

I may have been amazed by what I saw in those days, but what I was to see, well... that literally changed my life.

When did I first notice it? I was wandering through a ruined suburb. My guide was delivering copies of his paper in some ravaged tenement nearby. I found it hard to believe people were still living there, it appeared dead and deserted.

I was alone, gazing at the shattered ruins around me when I heard laughter accompanied by faint music. I was entranced and I followed the sound to the next street. Turning the corner, I stopped dead. The street was in ruins, but before me was a cafe. The building stood intact, there was a strong aroma of coffee and voices came from within.

Glass and fragments of mortar crunched underfoot as I walked through the door. The cafe was full of people chatting and socialising as though the war was a distant memory. I sat down at a table and looked around, wondering what had happened to the war.

The war, however, soon shattered this image of tranquillity. The building shook. Wood, glass and stone cascaded through the air and a dreadful boom filled my ears. I was falling into darkness, until someone shook me and a voice pierced the ringing in my ears.

"What you doing here?" my guide asked in broken English. "This place dangerous!"

I looked around, feeling groggy. The building was a ruin. The people gone. The shells had struck across the street and I realised how lucky I had been.

"What about the others?" I asked, concerned.

"What you mean?" my guide asked, giving me an odd look. "This place ruined for months!"

The words didn't sink in at the time, but my brush with death had affected me, or so I thought. For the rest of the day I heard snatches of laughter. Out of the corner of my eye I saw crowds of untroubled people and the buildings seemed miraculously restored. Upon turning round I saw only the empty ruins.

I didn't think anything of it until the next day and this I could not put down to shock.

It was ten o'clock in the morning. The Oslobodenje reporter and I were out in the streets when the ruins began to glow, the air shimmered with a scintillating light, and then the Serbian guns fell silent. Laughter and the voices of people quickly broke this silence. Before my eyes, and with the fear tingling my spine, the buildings seemed to be resurrected and crowds of hazy figures walked the war-torn street unconcerned. The phantasm was imperfect, gauzy, the damage seen beneath, through the spectral image.

I glanced at my companion and I knew from his expression that he was seeing it too. This strange phenomenon went on for some time; most of the day in fact. It only faded several hours after a UN relief column penetrated the city.

They had seen it too. I listened to the soldiers. I heard about the shimmering glow that had surrounded the resurrected city, the roads that seemed to have repaired themselves, and a mysterious absence of roadblocks. They talked about keeping it quiet - of course - but I was determined to tell the world.

It wasn't for some time that I really started to think about what I had seen. That vision was a ghost, I'm positive now. But can a city have a ghost? Can it haunt its future self? Why not? What are the buildings but a shell, a carapace covering and protecting the social organism within? Each needless death only added to the

city's soul, itself murdered by the war.

I'm positive now that the city was haunted by the ghost of its past, of the spirit of happier, peaceful times. There is only one question that nags me now. Why did it manifest then and why only once?

Well I'll find out one day, I have plenty of time now. And as for me? I'm still here in Sarajevo, still surrounded by the suffering inhabitants. The ghost of Sarajevo will return, I'm sure of that. I'll just wait for the laughter on the edge of hearing...

I guess in a way everyone here is waiting for the laughter to return.

November 1993

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## The Rise And Fall Of Sisyphus

"NOT again!"

Dismayed, Sisyphus watched the boulder tumble down the hill. It bounced and clattered as it gained momentum. The day's idle crowd scurried out of the way of the broken fragments and then turned to cheer and laugh.

With a sigh he started to walk back down the hill.

"Here I go again."

The crowd came mostly from the local villages, some from even further afield; his reputation had gone far and wide over the years. The boulder sat there in front of them. For a lump of lifeless stone it looked pretty damn smug. For the millionth time he cursed the thing. He cursed the crowd too.

"Go on Si! You can do it!"

He couldn't see the speaker, but he could imagine the snide smile and the mirth gleaming in his eyes. The voice had a youthful quality. Typical young layabout. Nothing better to do but come out here and take the piss. As if the job wasn't tough enough.

A cheer went up as he heaved against the boulder. A grunt as his muscles bulged and the boulder began to move.

The sun was hot. He could feel it searing his back, despite the stream of sweat that poured off him. The boulder moved forward, higher and higher. The summit approached, gravity tried to do its foul work.

Yet again, he cursed whoever it was that invented the damn thing.

Almost at the pinnacle. Get it right. Careful. Just a matter of balance. Poise, that's all it takes, and then he could go for a beer.

Yes. Yes. It was there. The pinnacle. Caught in that null point between gravity's insidious pull. At last he'd done it.

"Oy, Si!"

The voice caught him off guard and broke his concentration. "No!"

The boulder wavered and began its inevitable descent. If only it would smash into one of those piss-taking bastards at the bottom.

"Shame!" the crowd chorused.

One smart arse added: "Never mind, Si, you know what they say, one million six hundred thousand and seventy third time lucky."

"Drop dead," he muttered.

ONE thing about the night, it was a damn sight cooler. It also meant he didn't have the usual audience of idle jokers.

Of course, having the crowd did give him something for his mind to do. He could nurture a sense of disgust and even hate for those who took delight in his predicament. Not one of them ever offered to help. There was nobody around to focus his mind on now, which meant it had time to wander and ponder.

What he wanted was some conversation. It had been years since he had a proper chat. Mind you, he knew, these days he wouldn't make a very good conversationalist. When your day consists of rolling a boulder up a hill, subjects for conversation get a bit thin on the ground. The job did tend to be a bit repetitive.

As for small talk, well he shuddered at the thought.

He could imagine someone saying: "Hi, Si, how's your day been?"

"Oh so so, up and down really."

In the cold moonlight, he really did long for some human companionship. Even a sheep would do; in the dark he was bound to be able to nip off for a while without anyone noticing.

Okay, so a sheep isn't a very good conversationalist, but at least it wouldn't contradict anything he said, or criticise him in any way. Or laugh, for that matter.

There had been someone once, not long after he'd been given this bloody impossible job.

Pretty thing she was, he mulled as the boulder grinded its rut a little deeper. What was her name? Ah fickle memory.

She used to walk alongside him sometimes and chat, back in the days when he still had something to talk about. The jokes must have put her off in the end. He shuddered at the memory; people could be so nasty.

"Hey lass - you don't want to bother with him. He can't get it up!"

"That's not right," somebody else would laugh. "He can get it up - it's keeping it up that's the problem."

He gritted his teeth at the memory of the girl's blushes, and at the banality of idle gawpers with nothing better to do. You'd think they'd get bored of the same old joke; but each time the crowd laughed as if it was the first time they'd heard it.

She vanished not long after, and he went back to being alone amongst the multitude. Although once he saw someone who reminded him of that long-nameless woman. Some old crone with a couple of leering grand children. There was something about her; yet there was no recognition in her withered face.

He'd seen her, pondered, shrugged and got on with heaving that bloody boulder up the hill.

YEARS passed. The same old routine, but it was definitely getting easier now. In fact, it seemed his long labours might soon be at an end. The years of rolling and grinding had taken their toll on his burden.

The boulder was now a pebble. The final fall had shattered the rock until all that remained was this. He gratefully thanked whoever invented erosion.

He ambled up the hill, pebble in hand. He reached the top and stared at the pinnacle.

This was it. Gingerly, and feeling fatigued beyond belief, he placed the pebble on the pinnacle. It stayed there. Not even the faintest tremble. He couldn't believe it. The labours were done.

His cry of joy and relief should have met an ebullient cheer from the watching crowd, but there had been none of them now for centuries.

He started down the hill. At the bottom, he gratefully sat down and allowed his legs a long-deserved rest. Then he lay back and took a deep breath of cool air. He watched the sun crawl above the horizon; enjoying the chance to watch his first dawn in ages beyond recall.

No more repetitive present. There was a future ahead of him now; he didn't dare ponder what that life might hold, but anything had to be better than the countless years that had gone before. For now, he savoured his new found idleness, and anticipated the cooling tang of beer.

As he sat there he heard a noise unlike anything he had heard before. He felt no need to move, merely sit and listen for whatever made this outlandish clamour.

Eventually the source came into view. Something on four wheels, of a kind he had never seen before. He imagined it to be some kind of cart. Made of metal he quickly realised, and huge. He wondered how it could move without horses or oxen to pull it, but his mind was too concerned with relaxation to really ponder the question.

The contraption stopped and a man climbed out of the metal box at its front. He watched the strangely clad man walk over, with some kind of board in his hand. He watched and wondered.

A bored face met his gaze.

"I'm looking for a guy called Sisyphus," the stranger said.

Long unused parts of his body struggled to co-ordinate. Finally he managed the relevant motion. "That's me."

"Got a delivery for you. Sign here."

Sisyphus took the board and the strange thing that resembled a stylus but clearly wasn't. After a moment, he figured it out and managed to sign his name on the smooth material held on the board.

"Cheers mate," the stranger said, sticking the stylus behind one ear. He turned back to the contraption and got inside. Moments later it made a strangely metallic rumble as the rear section tilted upwards. Quickly drowned in a rumble of another kind.

"Oh no!" Sisyphus cried as the dust settled. "No! No! NO!"

The stranger stuck his head out of the box and pointed his thumb towards the pile of stone. "There you go, mate. Bet you were getting worried, but that'll keep you going for a while."

August 2001

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### Sinners In Streaming Video

"PRAISE be to God, God the Creator..."

"Praise be to Sol, Sol the Life giver..."

"Praise be to Gaia, Daughter of Sol, womb of Man's birth..."

THE chanting nears its peak and my eyes close in fearful anticipation. Soon the melodic voices will fall silent; the High Inquisitor will read out my charges before he plunges the torch in to the kindling beneath my stake. Right now, I don't know which is worse: the anticipation of melting skin or the agony of the plastic strips that bind my wrists.

Life is full of regrets, I suppose, and like an old man all I have left is the chance to mull over mine. If only I hadn't written that damn book. It seemed like a good idea at the time. How many condemned men, I wonder, felt the same of their crimes?

Actually my charge sheet is quite simple. Just one sentence: that I, John Cavendish, am guilty of the gross crime of heresy. The Inquisitor, of course, knows his job. The man is a conductor; a virtuoso at guiding the orchestra of human emotions. He learnt his trade well, on game shows and later as a chat show host. Quite a media personality is the Inquisitor. He drew out my simple charge into an elaborate display of theatrics that guaranteed the audience would not only condemn me but also give the show its typical ratings high.

Here at the finale I am sure we will make for an excellent performance. A perfect double act. I always wanted notoriety. But this isn't quite what I had in mind when I first put pen to paper and dreamed of literary renown.

SUZANNE has gone. Just like that. Not a good day. The night's no better. Fitful sleep mixed with dreams of happier times. I can feel the warmth of her body in my dreams; it emphasises the emptiness of the bed beside me. The clock ticks away the seconds that take our lives further apart. Time is cruel that way.

I don't know how long this has been building up. Suzy's been argumentative for days, and when she isn't tearing into me she's distant. Or is it me that's distant - too engrossed with my book? The reviews were bad. I expected that. Politicians were slandered me. Again, no surprise. I took one look at the sales figures and let it soothe away the ruffles. Then I return home and she is gone. Nothing - not even a note accusing me. Just an empty flat filled with the shadows of memory.

MY eyes won't stay shut. I'd like to block the horrific sight of what is to come, but my eyes want something to do. Plenty of time for the darkness. Now they crave light and image, the subtle play of the sunlight on the leaves of the endless sea of trees, the clouds floating gracefully in the darkening sky, that explosive red on the horizon from the dying embers of the day. My eyes want to see all this. Soon I will be mingling with those clouds; I shall add my own small part to the dawn's fiery magic.

BRANDY with a hint of lemonade and ice is already on the low table by the window. Axel is good that way, never one to skimp on the hospitality. I shuffle out of my coat and vaguely wonder about the stranger. His face is familiar. I've seen him on TV, but his name escapes me. Evidently the man knows who I am. He watches intently and I wait with growing impatience for him to speak.

"John, about time. Your ice is melting." Axel, from behind. He waddles into view and carefully lowers himself into the chair beside the stranger. I ignore the mild rebuke. Axel knows my punctuality is terrible. I'll probably be late for my own funeral. I just sit, reach for the glass, and gulp. Nelson watches with stony-faced jealousy from his column rising above the autumn-bronzed trees.

"Have you read the proposal?" Axel asks.

"Yes." I break away from the stranger's steely gaze.

"What do you think?"

"Interesting...."

"You have misgivings?"

"The Gaians -"

"Don't worry, that's all taken care of. I've cleared it."

The stranger shifts in his seat and glances through the window. "Don't worry, Mr Cavendish," he says. That voice! Metallic sibilance. I know it. "I have assured Axel of our interest in the project. He has great faith in your abilities to conduct the necessary research. Can you?"

"Yes, I can do it." I resent the disdain in his tone.

He smiles, briefly, but says no more. "Will you do it, John?"

MY eyes fall on magic of a different kind; the chanting women waving their sprigs of mistletoe and dancing naked around the mock stone circle. They are a new feature, part of the ratings war with the other media conglomerate. At once encouraging and appealing to the voyeuristic delights of a bored middle class.

Axel, my friend, my employer, obviously thinks so. His eyes seldom stray from these delicate creatures, exposed as they are to the elements. Is it shame, or lust that prevent his eyes from meeting mine? The man who effectively put me on the pyre is safe from the flames, even though we should burn together. Did he not commission my book, publish it? But he is a rich man. No strict Gaian upbringing for Axel Neustadt - and no Gaian pyre at the end.

Not that I am bitter. It has to be this way, how else could we arrange for his people to broadcast the show? After all, isn't Axel my friend?

"DON'T worry," he says, wiping the incessant perspiration from his face. He stands by the door, framed in the pale light filtering in through the window high above my head. His beady eyes stare out of his pudgy face with a doll's sincerity. Almost it hides his embarrassment.

"Axel, they're going to burn me!"

"It won't come to that."

"No?"

"It's just for show. That's all - a pure formality."

"Exactly!"

He looks away sharply and glances at the walls. I can see his disgust at the mildew. That's nothing, compared to the banging of the pipes in the middle of the night - the ones intended to keep the dungeon damp and unpleasant. I'd tell him that, but he looks troubled enough.

"I'm sorry," he suddenly says.

"What?"

"I'm sorry I pointed the finger. They didn't leave me any choice. You know -"

"It's all right, Axel. I know what they're like."

"I may be a rich man, but it carries no weight with them."

"No."

"But I do have some clout. I'll take care of things. I promise."

I have to confess, Axel is starting to annoy me, but I bite my tongue. Here I am facing death, and I don't want to make him feel worse. I just ask, "What things?"

Yet another furtive look at the walls. Is he worried about bugs - in this damp? He showed no such reticence before. "Trust me," he quietly says.

At least it's a beautiful evening. The air is pleasantly cool as Sol plunges into the treeline. They say the forest still hides the remains of Birmingham. The Terra-formers didn't quite demolish it all, so the story goes, and now it's a haven to vagrants and outcasts. I wonder what it looked like, before they shipped most of the world's population offworld? They say it was a vast city - it must have been something wonderful to behold.

From somewhere a loud noise disturbs my dream. Or is it part of the illusion conjured from memory? I can't tell. I try to make sense of the world around me. But the world inside gets in the way. Then I am falling and the floor hits with a thump.

The impact pulls me away from the abyss of deep sleep. The room leaps into focus. Unfamiliar smells taste sharp in my nostrils. Booted feet look huge and bloated before my eyes. There is a hoarse susurrations that rises and falls in a harsh chord symbolic of fear. I raise my head until the muzzle fills my vision. The dark tunnel smells of oil and death. Framed through the sights of the machine pistol, the cop's masked face stares with terrifying inscrutability. He barks one muffled word and Suzanne fades from memory.

"Heretic!"

An island shrouded in forest. Such is my homeland; such is England. I guess it looks something as it did millennia ago, when the first Palaeolithic settlers ventured into mystery. Except, of course, for that transmission tower there to the Southwest, the very same monolith that will beam my forthcoming death to the heavens.

My fiery demise will bounce from the fervid birth of new stars. Is that what they mean by the immortal soul in this age of telecommunications? For all eternity, my life will be nothing more than an unconscious ghost of death sandwiched between the commercial breaks.

THEY'RE watching again. That eye staring through the peephole makes my blood feel cold. They keep doing it, watching. Silently. I hear the footsteps thundering into the distance and I know I am alone again. But I never hear the footsteps before they stare into my cell. Now they've gone again. Left me here in the dark, just the screams for company. Why do they have to scream so loud? I can't stand it. I want to go home. Where's Suzanne?

The cell is damp and cold. The mould glows on the wall. Actually glows with a sickly luminescence. Slimy ooze dribbles down the walls too, it's collecting on the stone floor and I have my feet pulled up onto the small, rat-nibbled bed. I hate this bed, it's hard and you need to be a contortionist to sleep... try to sleep.

I don't know how long it's been since they pulled me from my bed. There was an occasion when they took me to see a psychiatrist. It may have been days ago. There's time of sorts here. I can tell by the weak light that sometimes filters in through the tiny window. But it keeps no regular pattern. It seems only to be the here and now passing in endless circles.

I must have done something wrong. But they won't tell me what it is. Sometimes I hammer on the door and yell at them to tell me what I have done. They never reply, but the screams fall silent and the dank air is filled with a dreadful sense of too many listening ears. It shuts me up. Even though the silence is more frightening than the screams and the footsteps.

Suzanne laughs pleasantly. She tells me that she loves me and I feel her arms around my waist. I know I am going mad when I smile at the private thought she whispers in my ear.

THERE was an Infidel, Christ, who died a heretic. Like me, he went against the powers that be. Like me, the masses were cajoled into condemning him. They say he went meekly. They also say he found resurrection on his death stake. Perhaps I should have asked Axel about this, but did that ancient heretic also feel my dreadful impatience?

My fingers are senseless. At least they won't feel the flames. I wish I could say the same for the rest of me. The ceremony is winding down. The director is signalling off camera. Join us after the break, the studio announcer is telling my audience. The last grains of life are trickling through my numb fingers and Axel has yet to acknowledge I exist. Do as you must, Axel, but soon - I am the modern Christ and I crave my resurrection.

"INTOLERABLE! Do you know they even threatened me? How dare they!" The first words Axel says to me. He adds something more, but the slamming door drowns his words. I stay seated on the bed, trembling with cold and fear. It's nice to see a familiar face. I haven't seen another human being for... too long. The tears spill over.

Now Axel is pacing. No mean trick in that confined space. I just look up at him through the blurring tears and thank Gaia for some company. Taking a handkerchief from his pocket, he turns towards me and looks down. "I'm sorry about this, John," he says, wiping the perspiration from his face. "One of the other cartels moved against us. They tried to come against me, but they haven't got the clout for that. This thing has gone right to the top of the Gaian Ascendancy. Might work to our advantage, that - it just might tear them apart."

"What about me?"

"Don't worry about it. You'll be okay."

"Axel! I'm on trial for heresy!"

At least he has the grace to look embarrassed. By rights he should be here too. But he is a powerful man - with

a lot of favours owed by influential Gaians. I must pin my hopes on that, and just pray that he is owed enough.

"It isn't all bad news," he adds after a pause. I just look up bemused. The tears have died, but the salt stings my eyes.

"They haven't been able to stop my presses. The book's doing well. The money's rolling in. There hasn't been a publishing success like this in decades. It's being read out there on the industrial colonies. People are reading what you've said - millions of them - and it's got the Gaians scared. You're going to be a rich man."

I can't help laughing bitterly.

NATURALLY, I will be forced to take on an assumed name. Axel will take care of the details. All I have to do is assume my new identity and enjoy the comfortable life that the Royalties will bring. I am sure I will be able to write. I shall literally exist under a pseudonym - Axel can take care of that too. The only thing that concerns me is Suzanne. I miss her and I want her back. Will she return when I am a new man?

LIGHT gushes from the opening to Gaia's womb. It glimmers from her pregnant belly painted with the continents of the world. On either side of the portal - symbolic of Gaia's open thighs - are the benches where my judges sit in shadow.

A figure appears in the depths of the light. It emerges in the form of a young woman wearing the ceremonial robes of a Gaian priestess. She walks to the centre of the hall, her brazen eyes fixed on me, her swaying hips perversely creating flutters in the pit of my stomach. Close enough to touch, but for the chains, she stops and leans forward. The smell of musk mingles with the lavender and beeswax of the hall. Her breasts and eyes vie for my attention. Then she smiles.

"Heretic!" the priestess whispers, and with a flourish she turns to raise her arms high above her head in an act of revelation to make old men weep. Gazing with flagrant excitement towards Gaia's open belly, she clutches her breasts before longingly reaching out. Another shadow appears in the shimmering depths.

"Behold! Justice made flesh. Son of Gaia. May the righteous know delight. The wrongdoer dread. For it is he that..." her voice rises until her speech is lost in the embrace of ecstasy. The shadow flits towards her, places an arm round her slender waist, kisses her and leaves her staring breathless in his wake.

The Inquisitor looks so different to that urbane man in the business suit. Bare chested, his tattooed, muscular torso glistens in the candlelight. His long hair is wild and his kohl-rimmed eyes are hypnotically dark.

Suddenly he screams as though in agony. "Can you hear Gaia's pain?" he cries to the assembled hall. "One of her wayward children has fallen from the light. Gaia weeps for her lost one. She feels such pain but we will soothe the Mother!"

The sounds of weeping come from the witnesses in the shadows. Tears spilled for Gaia.

"Who does accuse this man?"

Axel appears in a flood of green light. The halo of cigar smoke makes him seem unearthly. He does not look at me. "I do," he says in the voice of an old man.

The High Inquisitor turns on me like a fox. "John Cavendish. You are accused of heresy - the worst of crimes - is there any possibility of a plea on your behalf?"

On cue my attorney rises to his feet like a condemned man. A flurry of folders scatters across the floor and he

struggles to stem the flow with trembling hands. The Inquisitor's stare has him pinned like a rabbit in the rushing headlights.

I want to scream, but the bit prevents anything but a dull grunt. Heresy shall speak no evil! The attorney turns to the judges. "My client can offer no defence. Only throw himself upon the mercy of our Mother."

The words leave me numb. The priestess wails and weeps in horror at this poor sinner. The judges stand and recite in chorus: "From the womb do we come, and to the womb do the virtuous return. You, John Cavendish, are declared an orphan. Let the heretic's soul be released and cast out into the cold night."

THEY approach in procession. The Inquisitor leads the congregation, guiding a priestess dressed in green. Feminine curves peek through her thin robes. Shining eyes gleam through the veil. They approach my pyre. The torch sputters in the Inquisitor's right arm.

Finally Axel deigns to see me. His face looks like a child's model in dough as the Inquisitor turns to face the televisual crowds. The torch sways precariously as he raises his arms in the air. "Children of the Mother! See how we cast out the sinner!" He leans forward to kiss the priestess's hidden brow and I pray to Gaia for Axel to hurry.

The woman takes the torch. All I can do is watch, like the cameras that observe on the viewers' behalf. The veil is cast aside and I choke on the sudden urge to cry. Suzanne smiles at me and breaks my heart. "It's time to go, John," she says. "Only one thing sells more than a heretic - and that's a martyr."

November 1998

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### Joe's Last Meal

THE meteorite was a fiery streak through the blood-red sky. Joe felt its howl tear a strip from his bowel as it hurtled over the horizon.

It detonated with a blinding glare. He closed his eyes and turned away with a dull moan of fear. God alone knew how many people died in the blast.

More supersonic blades sliced incandescent scars in heaven. Joe couldn't stand to watch anymore. He turned away from the future and wearily sat on the top step of what - only a day ago - was the entrance to a proud skyscraper. Now nothing existed but a heap of rubble stretching south. The leftovers of a glancing strike that had gone on to take out a whole stretch of the city.

He wiped away a tear. Friends had perished in that pear-shaped scar. They were obliterated with the rest of man's vanity, without ever knowing why. Only one man knew the reason. One man left alive, that is. It had all been a terrible mistake.

HE'D flown in choppers many times, but this was the most incredible journey of his life. He couldn't believe his luck at being picked for the team and he felt the self-satisfied smile ooze through his diplomatic mask.

"What are you grinning at?" Joe looked up at the stern tone of Special Envoy Norton. The smile died.

All eyes were on him. His rivals, his superiors, and his underlings waited for him to say something foolish. Norton wasn't the easiest man to work for. Many a junior had burned their wings flying alongside this hawk. Now the fire erupted beneath his skin, the words tripped over his tongue, and he knew he was glowing like a warning beacon. Norton only laughed. It was the first time he ever remembered his boss showing genuine good humour.

"WE'RE all alone, Mr President. Communications are out with the rest of Nato. Last reports said Allied capitals had suffered major damage. We can only assume the worst."

General Gerber's matter-of-fact tones didn't seem to reach the President. He stood at the window of the Oval Office and peered out at a deceptively peaceful summer day.

Joe watched it all quietly and wondered how much they really knew. His boss was unusually subdued these days. The hawk's wings had been clipped, just like those of the US Eagle.

"It'll be our turn next," the Secretary of Defence said. "We should evacuate the capital."

At last the President spoke. "And go where? They took out the Russian's deepest bunkers. You don't think they'd do the same to us?"

"What went wrong?" Norton sounded like the old man he really was. Joe was glad of the poker face. He'd got good at it over the last few days.

EVERYBODY went quiet when the President and his entourage entered the room. Joe shuffled in behind and took his place by the wall, where he instantly merged into the background. The anticipation tasted like the best Chinese sweet and sour. This was it, the first official engagement. He couldn't believe his luck to be among the witnesses.

The President swaggered into the centre of the room and the genial smile fell from his face. "Shit, they're ugly..."

One of the man's typical gaffes. Joe flicked on his usual diplomatic poker face. Usually, this was where one of the senior diplomats smoothed out the ruffles. Watch and learn, junior.

"Don't worry, Mr President," Norton said. "They think the same about us."

General Gerber looked appalled, but said nothing. Joe knew from briefing that the delegation was to be respected. They were guests, not detainees, much to the General's chagrin. He was an old Cold War warrior, and the loss of the Soviet enemy for softer targets had not reduced his ire.

Preparations for this historic meeting had been underway for the last three months. He hadn't seen any of the delegates, but he'd heard stories. Now one of them stepped into view and he was glad of the poker face; it hid his disgust. The face appeared vaguely human, but it topped a body that made him think of a giant slug with tentacles.

"Good morning, Mr President." The words spilled from the horribly human lips. The voice possessed none of the uncertainty that comes from speaking a newly acquired language. "I hear the weather outside is beautiful. Now that quarantine is almost over, I look forward to feeling the air of your world on my face."

The President rallied beautifully. His genial smile returned in an instant and he approached the glass with the consummate ease of a life-long actor. The moment was important and cameras recorded for posterity as well as for public consumption - suitably edited of course.

"It is indeed a beautiful day, Mr Teeg, and I would be honoured to take the air with you."

THE aliens were just too good. Even the level headed Norton was swept away by the excitement of First Contact. Joe slumped down in a chair and sighed. The papers caught his attention, and he reached over for some solace in the mundane, but there was no joy there. The Press was having a field day. No other story

came close.

Joe picked up a copy of Time and snorted at the cover. Teeg smiled at him from the cosmos. The alien was getting everywhere. He turned to the National Enquirer, but the adulation was worse - and much more twisted. Teeg is the father of my baby, a headline screamed. An image of utter revulsion flickered in his mind. People were so dazzled they couldn't see the hideous truth.

A president isn't important. Joe knew this straightforward fact, but it was the first time he'd seen it. A useful fiction that's all the man was. Now he lay dead, caught in the crossfire during the mad scramble for the helicopters. Joe pulled himself to his knees and ruefully watched the choppers hurtle towards the horizon.

He didn't know who fired the first shot, but he guessed someone decided to settle old scores now that everything was falling apart. The CIA shot the FBI, National Security shot the CIA, the FBI shot each other, and the army, well they just opened fire on anything that moved. Joe hit the deck and stayed there. Shame the President wasn't so quick off his feet.

The survivors scurried towards the helicopters, completely unaware that they had saved his life. He watched as a blastwave slammed the choppers into the ground. The explosions blew apart what remained of the US Federal Government.

HE burst into the room and instantly regretted it. They were all there. The joint chiefs, the president's advisors, the senior diplomats, and assorted Secretaries of State - all his political masters - and he'd stormed in like he meant something to the cogs of government.

"I want something to do," he stammered. And then because the silence went on, he felt compelled to fill it. "You can't shut me out."

Gerber turned towards Norton and to Joe it was like watching them through a closed circuit link. "You know, Mike, you have kind of closed him out of the loop."

Norton pondered for a moment. "Actually, there is something you could do. We were discussing it before you... arrived. Think you're up for it?"

"Yes... yes. Sir. Of course."

"Good. I don't know about you gentlemen, but the thought of taking these aliens to dinner really turns my stomach. It's good to see our young people are made of sterner stuff."

"Enjoy your date," somebody said, to a chorus of laughter.

DUSK was an angry affair. He remembered something his father used to say when he was a boy, and he repeated it to himself softly. 'Red sky at night, shepherd's delight'. One of those meaningless utterances from boyhood, imbued with the optimism of youth.

He picked his way over the rubble, tripped over tangled steel, stumbled past broken cars. He didn't know where he was going. He moved for the sake of it, either putting off the inevitable or searching for it. He wasn't sure.

Such a little mistake. How was he to know; who would have believed such a mundane decision would lead to such a catastrophic consequence?

"TRY it," he said with as much enthusiasm as he could muster. "Go on, it's an Earth delicacy."

Joe had lost count of the restaurants they'd been in, but this was the first time he'd seen Teeg look at his food with a dubious expression. The alien looked how Joe felt. So did his entourage who stood discretely in the background with the more human looking spooks from the Secret Service. The aliens' combined smell was atrocious. Mildew and mould, like an old decaying house.

"You've hardly eaten anything, Joe," Teeg said, pointing with a tentacle. "You really ought to, you know. It must be tiring keeping up with me."

Joe managed a weak smile, and forced himself to swallow a mouthful of food. Nauseous perspiration felt cold on his face. The alien grinned.

"Ah! That's brought the dampness to your face. You look better already!"

He didn't feel any better. "Aren't you going to try it?" he managed to say. He didn't know why. Frankly, he'd prefer it if the alien abstained.

Reluctantly Teeg began to gnaw. Joe felt mesmerised by disgust, like some kind of sick voyeur. One last swallow and Teeg looked at him. "That... was the most disgusting thing I have ever eaten."

His expression turned to agonised shock. His grey skin began to change colour as he gagged, and then choked. Joe looked at him in mild concern. "Hey, it's not that bad -

NORTON put the telephone down and stared gravely into space for a few moments. Joe clenched his sweaty fists and resisted the urge to wipe them on his trousers.

"That was the President," Norton quietly said. "They've bombed London."

Joe said nothing. The room was spinning counter-clockwise to his whirling mind.

"How did it happen, Joe? You were there. We've checked out the staff. They're clean. How the Hell did someone get to the alien?"

TEEG groaned, clutched his analogue of a stomach, and swayed in his seat as slurry gushed from his mouth. Then he tumbled from his seat and writhed like an epileptic snake in time to the crowd's screams. Joe felt the confusion spin him around. He was the centre of a vortex of frenzy and growing rage.

He slipped out of his seat, but instantly felt his knees buckle and he stumbled into a table. The other aliens bent over Teeg in a desperate effort to clear his throat. The security men struggled with the crowds. Cameras flashed like a nightclub strobe.

"What's wrong," he stuttered. Louder. "What's wrong with him?"

One of the aliens looked at him darkly. "We have sensitive palates. Didn't you realise? This junk is killing him!"

THERE was nothing to see but a flattened wilderness of broken stone and twisted metal.

The city he recognised had gone to dust and devastation. Guided meteors lit up the angry sky. Fires raged in the distance. Columns of thick smoke belched towards the heavens. Still, he knew where he was now. This was where it had all started: the place Humanity had its Last Meal.

Only one structure remained intact. Joe gazed at it numbly; realising it was probably Humanity's final

memorial. Proud and perverse, the Golden Arches stood like a gateway to Hell.

November 2001

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### Time Changeth The Man

MY nightmare begins with the birth of each day, when it drags me from the security of sleep. Today is no different; my eyelids open, still heavy with the burden of the coming day, to find the sun pallid through the shabby curtains. There is nothing welcoming about the light. The few weak rays possess a lifeless, opaque quality that seems quite alien. All the same, I crawl from the pit I call a bed and shake myself free of the bedclothes and the drowsiness.

Once dressed I throw back the curtains and squint at the sudden glare. Even that pale liquid glow manages to hurt my eyes, dazzling my mind with memories of pleasant summer days long since past.

Turning back to the gloom, the mirror catches my sight and I meet my own stare as if it belongs to a stranger. All I perceive is a near shadow with indistinct features, but I know what this inversion of myself wears. What it has worn for days beyond count: the crisp, white shirt; the suit, as grey as the overcast sky; the tie, dreadful in its gratuitous lack of taste.

With a despondent sigh, I wonder what happened to me, at what point did my world turn grey and monochrome - like an old black and white movie but without the charm? The answer is lost, forgotten somewhere in the vault that we call memory.

Reluctantly I walk out of my home. The cold air instantly mists my breath into dancing ghosts of long-dead joys. The day has only just begun, yet already it weighs heavily on my shoulders. As it does with those who shuffle through the streets around me, as if fearing the world might somehow notice them and disturb their grey solitude.

They resemble my own hunched up self so completely, that it almost seems I have undergone some kind of fission, to produce a world of clones.

Eventually my place of work towers above me. The building reflects the sky from its brooding facade, as though to remind me that that it forms the centre of my life; the source of mundanity where my mind is crushed in the day to day grind of providing it with sustenance. I know that I have worked here too long, and I sigh at the prospect of yet another day within its grim walls. Then my clones and I shuffle through its doors, gulped down in one greedy swallow.

Inside, a clock fills the foyer with an ominous tick like the heartbeat of the universe. With each swing of its pendulum I feel more of my life transferred into the company's dusty vaults. I turn away from its frowning face and make my way to my assigned place, the desk where I must perform the same tasks day after day. Here I am like the hamster running endlessly in its wheel, except I am aware of the dynamo that turns my activity into corporate power.

My tasks fill the minutes that slowly turn into hours. Life passes by without noticing, while my work progresses to the symphony of time: the ticking of the company clocks, the watch at my wrist, the beating of my own heart. My life is ebbing away, its own tic-toc subtly out of sync with the rhythm of man-made time.

Mechanically, I carry out my chores until the boredom strikes. Right on time, I notice from looking at my watch. With remarkable derring-do, I take an unscheduled pause to look around at the rows of desks. At each one sits another clone of myself, feverishly slaving over equally mind-numbing tasks. I know they are bored, that dreams and thoughts of colourful days turn the greyness of their lives into a living torment. The

thought strikes me, that - here - even boredom faithfully follows the company's schedule.

A slamming door startles me back to work. A supervisor, perhaps? I have no idea; my furrowed brow is suddenly concentrating anew on the forms and papers on my desk. In that way the day drags on. Yet the body provides reminders of its humanity, thereby distracting me from work. My stomach rumbles, even though it is not yet lunchtime. My body disregards all externally applied schedules, knowing only its own needs. My mind has little choice but to follow these timetables, shaped as it is by them, and so I must ignore the anarchist demands of my body - if I am to fulfil its needs at all.

As I try to ignore my stomach's demand for attention, I also try to ignore the fatigue that transforms my eyelids from flesh to lead. I rub them, but they remain eager to look into that place where my mind can wander free of company shackles.

Nervously I leave my desk. I am afraid that the supervisor will notice my unscheduled toilet-break. It is a risk I must take, for I need to splash my face with water in the hope that it will shock me into wakefulness. Fear is a white-hot knife in my stomach, all the same, as I scurry furtively towards the toilets.

In the disinfectant-smelling confines of that tiny cell, my fear turns into a thrill of excitement. I am the dissident, acting to subvert the company's schedule and take back some of the precious time that I have sacrificed on the altar of Profit. The cold water revives me somewhat and I rub my face, massaging a little life into the grey skin and the tired muscles beneath.

When I reach for the towel I notice something strange above my temples, just within the hairline. I pause to stare into the mirror and I am shocked at the obscenely throbbing bumps. My fingers probe the fleshy protrusions, feel the heat of the pulsating blood within. Then there is no more time to ponder as a wave of dizziness threatens to throw me to the floor. I steady myself on the washbasin, suddenly aware that I have broken out in a cold sweat. My skin itches all over, my suit rejected to cause extreme discomfort.

I stagger out of the toilet and the harsh banging of the door adds to my alarm. It is a small relief that the noise brings no management wrath, and my colleagues ignore the noise. For all they know I am the omnipresent supervisor, forever casting a watchful eye.

At my desk I slump back into obscurity and rest my face in my hands. The dizziness spins the room counter-clockwise to my gyrating guts. A groan escapes my throat, horrifyingly loud to my ears. I look around, fearful that I might draw attention to myself. What I see makes me groan once more. This time in fear.

My colleagues are ignorant of my distress. They continue with their tasks just as before. But now they are different in their uniformity. Chitinous heads with twitching mandibles look down at desks through bulbous eyes framed between dangling antennae. Barbed, multi-jointed limbs emerge from segmented bodies still draped in tattered clothes.

One of them finally looks up in an act of daring nonconformity. In those eyes I witness distress, but also I see that these eyes are twin clocks staring at me, just as the clock on the wall stares.

Never have I known such fear. I know that I must escape, but lunch is still an hour away and even in my terror, I cannot rip myself away from the precious schedule. Somehow, I automatically process my tasks.

It is a Hell I have seldom known. Each minute stretches to impossible dimensions and dawdles through the present, until lunch finally - mercifully - arrives. With unseemly haste I rush from my desk and flee into the outside world. All around me are the chittering bodies of my colleagues. It is madness that surrounds me and I scurry home, desperate to hide myself from things I cannot comprehend, to shut the world out of sight behind my bedclothes.

Home at last. I struggle with the door, only to find my hands will not co-ordinate. With a whimper of frustration I finally manage to open the door and slam it shut behind me. Secure from the horrors of my day, I lean against the door and pant heavily. I try to close my eyes but for some reason they wish to remain open; a far cry from work where they wished to stay closed.

I stagger to the bathroom in search of the painkillers I know are in the cabinet. And then my nightmare reaches its conclusion. Two bulbous eyes stare back at me from the mirror, and a shocked chitter escapes my mouth parts. With a clawed appendage, I reach up to stroke my antennae.

The terror evaporates. The nightmare is over and I wonder at what I have been afraid. I realise then, the madness was not outside; it existed within me. And that is now cured. The grey days are over for I have found myself once more. My body is no longer out of sync with the world; my heart beats in time to the clock.

May 1998

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You Looking At Me?

The Almost True Story of Paddington Bear

(With Apologies To Michael Bond)

SMOKE 'em if you've got 'em, sit back with your beer, or the beverage of your choice, while I tell you the story of Paddington Bear.

No, not that Paddington Bear - the real one.

Mind you, the real Paddy wore a blue duffel coat too. And he liked marmalade sandwiches; kept them under that funny hat of his, you know just like in the kid's programme they made about him.

Poor old Paddy, he never saw a penny from that show, you know.

Course, that wasn't his real name. He took it from Paddington station, just like in the show. Had this sign around his neck, 'please take care of this bear'. How could anybody resist such a cute bear, his folks thought.

Where was he from? Oh yeah, that's it - Darkest Peru. Never been there myself, can't even place it on the map, but I remember reading something about it once. Nasty place. Used to be full of trees - a bloody great rainforest would you believe?

Course, it's all desert now. Some fast food firm tried to feed their cattle on fields that replaced the trees. 'Cept it turned into a bloody desert didn't it. Soil was no good, see, without those big trees to hold it in place.

Anyway, that's where Paddy came from. Spoke good English mind. Wouldn't think he was a foreigner to hear him speak, apart from his funny ways.

His folks were desperate, so I hear. Things were bad. They used to live in the forest, but people kept cutting and burning it down. Not that the fires were the worst, no. The loggers used to hunt the bears with guns. Woe betide any of Paddy's lot who were caught by the loggers.

So his folks traipsed for days through what was left of the jungle. Then they hitched to the coast. Headed for Lima, I think it was. Dangerous journey, of course, them being bears and all. Folks didn't take kindly to bears. Thought they were holding back progress an' all, stopping the loggers from making money so they could feed the kids.

They got there somehow, you know, and a right lot of adventure they had too. They hid him on a ship, our Paddy. Could have been any ship, but this one just happened to be heading for Britain.

A right wreck it was, from what I heard. Hardly seaworthy at all. But there he was, our Paddy, his freshly made marmalade sandwiches stuffed under his hat and his weeping folks saying their goodbyes.

Paddy didn't know why he had to leave, or why they couldn't come with him. He didn't know why the greasy looking sailor smiled so broadly when he took the few nuggets of gold from his Dad. He didn't know that his folks couldn't carry enough of the stuff for all of them, or why sailors liked the stuff so much. They had lots of gold in Darkest Peru, so much they couldn't see what to do with the stuff.

He just knew he was leaving for somewhere strange. He'd never sailed before, never been to England, where he heard they had funny ways and dressed a bit silly.

The only thing he did know was that he didn't want to leave home.

"You've got to go, son," his father said, giving one of those hard stares that the Bear's are famous for. "It's for your own good. There's no future for Bears here."

He was glum when he clutched his little suitcase. The sailor wrapped him in an old sack and slung him over his shoulder.

"Don't worry, mate, got to sneak you aboard. Longest game of hide and seek you'll ever play," the man said with a wink.

Poor Paddy. He didn't know what was happening. When he finally dared to pop his head out of the sack, he was stuck in the dark. It stank of oil and stagnant water. There were voices somewhere far above his head. Boxes were all around him. Nah, they was crates and containers, a whole cavern full of them - and poor old paddy was cold and alone in there.

It was probably only a few weeks, but it felt like months to poor Paddy. He tried eating his marmalade sandwiches, to keep his spirits up. But the swaying and the rocking upset his tummy. He couldn't hold them down for long.

Sometimes he heard voices coming near. That's when he ducked into the shadows and crawled between the crates to hide. The sailor had told him to do that.

"It's a game see - got to see how long you can stay hidden," he'd said.

Paddy had never heard of the word stowaway. But he heard it a few times when the men came by. There was something in their voices that made him afraid, and he just knew they were immune to the hard stare.

So he kept quiet, and stowed away the hours thinking of home and darkest Peru where his mum and dad must be missing him so. He had a lot of nightmares, from what I heard. Well, you would, wouldn't you?

But they weren't as bad as what really happened on that voyage. It's just a good job he was so small. He could climb right in amongst the crates, when the sailors came, so they couldn't find him or get to him.

There were others on the ship. Big people like the sailors, hiding in the hold. But they couldn't duck into the corners like our Paddy could. A pity that.

One day the sailors came down to the hold. Paddy heard the screaming and the shouting, but he didn't

understand it. Him being so young like, he really didn't know much about the world. But he knew about fear. When he heard the screams and the thumps and the cracking of bone, he knew enough to be scared and he ducked deep into the crates.

He didn't come out. Even when the sailor called to him kindly like. They didn't find him. They cursed a bit. One of them said, "We'll have to chance it." Then it was all quiet again, for a while. Until more Big People came, their harsh voices bouncing off the crates until Paddy couldn't tell where they were. He just clutched his suitcase and stayed hidden.

"Like we told you, we ain't got nobody aboard. Our ship's clean," he heard the sailor say.

"Well," replied a harsh, but suspicious voice. "We have to check. There's all sorts of riff raff desperate to get past immigration."

There were no more people in the hold after that, and Paddy was all alone.

Well, to cut a long story short, the ship reached port soon after that. There were men in the hold again. Big men with funny accents and they hoisted the containers upon a crane and took them up into the light.

Paddy wasn't used to the light anymore. He'd spent a long time in the dark, so it hurt his eyes when he squinted up at the patch of sky. They were taking away his hideaway, and he was terribly afraid 'o the voices. He thought they might find him, and if they did he'd disappear like the big people that used to be in the hold.

He got desperate, so he did. In the end. Hiding away between what was left of the crates, he clutched his little suitcase in one hand and climbed up the containers. When the crane took a container up alongside where he was, he was so desperate he jumped onto it. For you and me, it wasn't a great jump. You could pretty much stride onto it if you was quick. For poor old Paddy it was the scariest leap of his life. But he did it, and there he cowered on the top, praying that nobody would spot him.

Luck was with him, that's for sure. Paddy clambered down and found he was on dry land. They lowered the container onto the back of a truck. The driver was shouting something to some of the men on the dock. Paddy didn't like the voices. They sounded so outlandish to him. But he knew he couldn't stay where he was. He clambered down, clumsily clutching the suitcase that held all his worldly possessions.

He watched from behind the giant wheel. He saw the man in the front open the door and clamber down. He walked over towards some of the men on the dock and they started talking and laughing. They put sticks into their mouths, and Paddy watched bewildered as they passed around a flame and lit the sticks.

By now, Paddy was afraid. He was alone in a strange country. He didn't know where to go, or what to do. Can you imagine it, him being only a little bear an' all?

But while he was watching the smoking men, and feeling afraid of their raucous laughter, he got an idea. He noticed the driver had left the cab door open. It wasn't so much as daring, but desperation. Paddy clambered into the truck and found a place to hide back in the sleeping compartment. You and me would never get away with it, but then we're not as small as Paddy.

Without knowing it, the driver took our Paddy deeper into England. There were a few unwitting hitches like this along the way. As soon as he got the chance, Paddy clambered out of the truck, and then found another motorist to take him along. He didn't 'ave a plan, our Paddy. It was more a fear of discovery that kept him vehicle hoping. But to cut a long story short, he eventually got himself to London, and there he made it to Paddington Station, as you already know from that kid's programme.

So, there he was at Paddington station. Lost and alone. It was dark and cold so he hunched up inside his duffel coat and sat on his little suitcase. He wept a little and thought of home and sat there glum like.

We all know what was supposed to happen. Somebody found poor Paddy and took him in. They gave him a home and he turned out all right in the end. But that was the kid's programme they made, after some TV type had heard about it. Our Paddy, the real paddy, well his luck had just run out.

Walking up towards him were four of the meanest people in town. They'd been a terror for years, and nobody had ever been able to sort them out.

Boot Boy Billy plodded along, downing his can of beer. When he'd finished, he chucked the can in the air and booted it as hard as he could. "There!" he shouted with triumph. "My 14th pint!"

"Fuck off!" Doris Karloff replied. "You're supposed to drink them in one night - not one a day for two weeks!"

Billy glared at her sullenly until Jack Boots intervened, casually adjusting his thick rimmed glasses. "Forget all that. Let's go trash a hospital."

"Oh, we did that last night!" Billy said.

Doris pulled out a pair of handcuffs and dangled them in the air. "Will there be any women giving birth?" she asked and uttered a malignant cackle.

"Put them away Doris -"

"Ere look over there."

They turned to look in the direction of Billy's outstretched finger. His eyes were wild and he had a lusty leer on his face, almost as good as old Tone's.

"What is it?" Doris asked.

Jack Boots made a noise of disgust. "Eeugh! It's one of those awful refugees!"

"Wot, you mean one of those bastards trying to exploit our natural generosity and kindness to Johnny Foreigner?" Boot Boy snorted.

They walked over to Paddy. He hadn't heard their talk and he looked at them expectantly. Hopefully, he lifted the sign around his neck so that a light shone more clearly on the words: 'Please look after this bear'.

Jack Boots peered through his thick lenses. Then he grinned. "Don't worry mate, we'll take care of you."

Doris glanced at Billy and the two leered at each other. Paddy looked on hopefully. He'd heard about the English sense of fair play and a respect for human rights. He never bothered to wonder if they'd extend it to him.

Something flashed silver in the streetlamps. The next thing Paddy knew, he was lying on his back staring in disbelief at his middle. His duffel coat was slashed. Not just his duffel coat. He began to cry as he saw the stuffing coming through the slit in his skin.

"That'll teach yer - yer brown bastard!" Boot Boy cried triumphantly. He pranced about, waving the blade in

the air, while Doris hooted like a lunatic.

"That's no way to treat a visitor to our shores," Jack Boots said.

"Eh? You goin' soft or wot?" Boot Boy yelled. "This bastards comin' 'ere - nicking our jobs, wrecking our hospitals, ruinin' our schools and taking the piss out of our superirororoor... eriror... better Anglo-Saxon culture -"

"That's our job!" Doris cackled.

Jack Boots calmly adjusted his glasses again, and glanced at the whimpering Paddy. He was trying to push his stuffing back in, but each time he tried it only made it worse. By now the pain was terrible. He wanted to go home. He wanted somebody to help, but he was all alone.

"You see," Jack Boots said, "you have no idea of efficiency. That's why you're just a silly homunculus without any power, you thick bastard. You should take care of it like this..."

With that, he took out a can of lighter fuel and opened the spout. He smiled as he poured the petrol all over Paddy. The little 'un tried to crawl away, leaving scraps of stuffing on the pavement. He snuffled and screamed and pleaded as the cold petrol soaked into him and stung the slash inside him.

When the can was empty Jack Boots threw it away and lit a match. "Observe," he said.

The match dropped onto poor Paddy and up he went. The screams were terrible from what I hear. You could 'ere them streets away, but nobody came to check things out.

Well, that was the end of our Paddy. All that way to end up a scorchmark on the pavement outside Paddington station. A bloody tragedy. As for his toasted marmalade sandwiches, a passing dog ate them.

April 2001

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### Shopping For Katie

KATIE was such a wonderful child. A dream come true for Lynn and myself. I suppose all parents say that, but we had been trying for years to have children. Never with any success. Imagine our despair when we both discovered we were sterile. That our dream was shattered, that we would never become a real family.

Lynn took this hard. She wasn't a real woman unless she could have a child of her own - so she kept saying. I had to keep my own emotions hidden, yet inside I was as upset as she. I needed to be strong to help her you see. To give her some kind of support. Yet it never seemed to be enough; the sound of her weeping often filled the house.

These scenes always followed a visit to friends. The photographs came out, Lynn would play with the children and be all smiles. It was like watching a different woman then. She came alive, her eyes were bright and she laughed a lot. Then at home she released her tears. I was watching her fall apart and there was nothing I could do.

Several times I tried to talk to her about adoption, but Lynn wouldn't have anything to do with it. Our child would be of our own flesh and blood, or we would have none at all. That's how our marriage continued and it was becoming unbearable, I can tell you.

There were some - rare - moments of pleasure. We shared in the joy of our friends as their children grew older. But it was always second hand, never our own. Then I heard about Wonder Child and our lives were turned around.

Wonder Child was a company specialising in treating childless couples. And they were no fly by nights. They had been around for years and, by all accounts, they had a solid reputation. I wouldn't have bothered with them myself. I suppose it's because I'm a bio-engineering technician, so I've seen enough of the industry's fuck-ups to be somewhat wary. Lynn was so eager, however, that I couldn't possibly ignore the chance.

And so we finally had our first child.

I can still remember when little Katie was born. Lynn was overjoyed. So was I for that matter. I was a father at last. After all those years of disappointment we had a real family. Naturally, we became walking clichés.

The birth itself was nothing. So I'm told. Lynn's labour was easy enough compared to some, though not painless as many are. My wife insisted on going through the pain of natural childbirth. It assists maternal bonding or some such thing. (What can I say? Lynn reads a lot of women's magazines.) So there she lay, crying out with each contraction, covered in sweat while I held her hand and offered encouragement. It really was miraculous how our first child came into being: a miracle of technology.

What was it Dave, our client advisor had said? Ah yes - the most natural birth modern technology can provide. Well it certainly was impressive. I saw the pleasure on Lynn's face as they removed the virtuality headset and the techs brought in little Katie, still wet and bloody from the birthing vats. I remember grinning like an idiot as they placed my daughter in Lynn's arms. She was perfect, right down to her little pink toes.

"Congratulations!" Dave said, slapping me on the back. "You have a beautiful daughter."

After that we went outside, leaving Lynn and the baby to rest and become acquainted. I puffed happily on my complimentary cigar even though I didn't smoke. We discussed the company's After Birth Service plan but my mind wasn't really on it. My eyes kept straying to the doors and my new family on the other side. Two hours later both Lynn and the baby were home.

You should have seen Lynn's face. She glowed with happiness when she placed Katie in the cot I had built from a kit. During the nine months that Katie was growing in the birthing vat I had converted the back bedroom into a nursery. Lynn bought all the furnishings and toys and all the other paraphernalia a newborn child needs. I had not seen her so happy since we were first married.

Well, that was the birth of my child, my little girl. But it wasn't when she was born, not to me. No. For me that took place ten months before. The actual birth was just a matter of the biological mechanics that have taken place for time immemorial, albeit with a few man-made modifications.

Katie was born in our hearts and minds during that first meeting with Dave. All the red tape had been sorted out a week before. We had signed the contract and cell samples were taken from both of us. This session was... well, I suppose there's no other way of saying it, to design our daughter.

You can't know what it's like unless you've been through it. It's something you never forget. I remember it so clearly, more than the birth itself. Lynn and I were so nervous when we walked into Reception at the Wonder Child branch in the high street. There were other hopefuls there, like us eager to have that perfect child.

Looking back, I can't see why we should have been so nervous. The staff was so friendly and went out of their way to make us feel at ease. I guess it's something to do with the baby-making business that fills everyone involved with a warm glow.

Coffee was made available while we waited for our advisor. I studied the place as my wife flicked through the brochures scattered in strategic places. I could sense Lynn's nerves as she studied the happy couples helped by Wonder Child. Boys and girls stared back at my wife from scenes of family contentment and gratitude. In ten months we would be one of those happy families. I confess I couldn't wait.

A smart young man in a suit walked over and greeted us pleasantly: our client advisor. "Mr and Mrs Richards," he said, shaking me firmly by the hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you. My name's David Turner but I'd be happy if you called me Dave. I'll be your guide into parenthood over the next ten months."

The man led us to a booth at the back of the reception area. It was a cosy set up. If you're familiar with most offices then you'll know how most of the time there's a barrier between you and the corporate face. They call it a desk. That wasn't the case here. We sat on a little couch. Dave sat next to us, turning so that he could face Lynn and I.

Dave pulled out a notebook computer and flipped up the lid. As it popped open a remote screen came to life on the wall. The company's logo was displayed - a baby's smiling face - on an ever-changing background of alpha-helical molecules that I knew instantly as DNA.

The display changed when Dave hit a key. Up came our credit details, personal history and contract. "Ah, I see you're hoping for a daughter," Dave said brightly, a mere formality since the gene programmers would be making our hope a certainty.

"Well, if I can take the rest of your details..."

"There won't be any problems will there?" my wife asked. "I mean, she will be our daughter won't she?"

Dave smiled at my wife and placed a comforting hand on her arm. "Don't worry Mrs Richards," he said solemnly, "your daughter will be your own flesh and blood as much as if you carried her yourself. Our programmers work from your own cell material and the child is grown in the most natural environment possible.

"In fact, you made the best decision in coming to us. Our rivals are still using metal and glass vats, not very healthy for the baby in my view. We use the latest state of the art birthing technology - a process pioneered here at Wonder Child. Your baby will be grown in specially bred wombs. The only conventional technology will be the feeder unit that supplies oxygen and nutrients to the womb. Only the best is provided here Mrs Richards. It's the most natural birth modern technology can provide."

That satisfied Lynn and Dave proceeded to take down Katie's details. The image of a child appeared as he typed in our preferences and slowly the image began to grow...

"Attributes?" Dave asked.

"Intelligence... only not too intelligent. We don't want to put men off when she's older. She should be kind, considerate... a sense of humour."

Dave laughed, not unkindly. "We can do something as regards intelligence, Mrs Richards, but the rest... well, that's down to programming inputs we can't provide here at Wonder Child. Now what about any particular talents?"

"Oh! I'm not sure. I hadn't really thought. Music perhaps? I've always thought it would be nice to have a musician in the family. Or sport, maybe. What do you think John?"

My wife's question broke my quiet contemplation. I was fascinated by the image on the screen. It showed a five year old girl. My daughter was growing before my eyes, the future possibilities unfolding. Unclear, until we finally filled in all the gaps.

"I don't know, why not both?" I replied. And that was that. My daughter was to be a sporty musician.

"Now how about physical attributes?"

"She must be beautiful," my wife instantly replied.

"Mrs Richards, looking at the pair of you I know your daughter will be just that without our programmers touching a thing!"

I smiled at the sincere piece of salesmanship. Still, my daughter was beautiful so I suppose he wasn't lying.

"By the physical attributes I mean certain cosmetic alterations. One of the wonders we can perform here is to make slight but very startling modifications to your child so that she'll be the best complement for the both of you."

"I hadn't really thought about it. I suppose she'll be pretty much similar to us, John?"

I just grunted in a noncommittal fashion. Shopping decisions were Lynn's affair as far as I was concerned. Dave wasn't put off by our indecision though.

"If you would allow me, Mrs Richards," he said suavely, "might I suggest an aryan style would suit you down to the ground? Blonde hair and blue eyes are very fashionable at the moment. And as you know, gentlemen prefer blondes."

That was a nice touch. I suppose every parent worries about their offspring meeting the right person in years to come. As much as they worry about the quality of the people they do become involved with. It's one of those things I suppose. In any case my wife liked the idea. Mind you, once I'd seen the result so did I.

At the end of the session there she was simulated before me on that computer screen. And she stirred most unfatherly thoughts I have to say. Katie was an angel, and I thought of the hearts she would be breaking in years to come. She had already broken mine. Katie was the perfect child. All we could have hoped for.

That was how my little Katie was really born. As you already know, we took her home ten months later and we settled down into domestic, family bliss.... Almost.

Don't get me wrong. As the years passed, Katie proved every bit the beautiful child we had seen displayed on that screen. There were all the milestones in a child's development that parents have gone gooey over for generations; that first word, toddling, walking, nursery. On the other hand you've got the down side; dirty nappies, teething, crying at all hours, potty training, childish tantrums. Still, you take the good with the bad, don't you?

Those first years were pretty trying. Lynn and I were used to being a couple. Now we were a threesome. A baby takes some looking after; we weren't quite prepared for the grim realities of parenthood. Sometimes I wished we'd never had a child. But when I looked at Lynn playing with Katie, such thoughts evaporated in to thin air.

Katie grew up like any normal child. She was a good kid, well behaved, happy. Of course she was naughty too, had the odd tantrum. I mean, she was our little angel, but she had a devilish, mischievous side too. What

child doesn't? There were moments when my darker side wished we could have programmed obedience into Katie. But who wants a robot for a daughter? I certainly wouldn't. There was nothing about Katie we would have changed. Except for one thing.

When Katie was five she had the most luxuriant blonde hair. Lynn and I were unhappy with it. Somehow it just wasn't us, you know? It's always the way isn't it? You see something in the shop and you think to yourself that's just right. Of course once you get it in the home setting somehow it's not quite right after all. That's the way we felt about Katie's hair. I suppose we allowed ourselves to be guided too much by Dave. Indecision is a salesman's best friend. If the client isn't sure hit them with an option. Chances are they'll take it. We certainly did.

Matters were easily fixed. I bought one of those new GenChrome hair colourants. How Katie struggled. We had to promise her that pet rabbit she'd been after for months before she would settle down. Even then Lynn had to hold her firm and keep soothing her as I prepared the application. I still can't see what all the fuss was about. I found the vein easily enough and in the blink of an eye the application was in Katie's bloodstream.

After that we were waiting impatiently to see if the application had taken. After a few weeks she had a good few inches of auburn hair. I had to buy Katie a second rabbit to placate her after I cut away the blonde. "Don't worry, it'll grow back," I told her. Katie still sulked, until I produced the second rabbit. She loved those animals. She would play with them every chance she got. You know, I never had the heart to tell her they were artificial.

Katie's childhood was like any other, just the usual vicissitudes. I don't know if the gene programmers had done anything to upgrade her intelligence. Personally I'm skeptical about such things. In any case, she was a bright girl. She excelled at school, coming top in most of her subjects. Except maths. Katie hated that subject.

As for her musical and sporting talents, there wasn't much evidence of those. Sure she was average at school in any sporting activity. But she never displayed any musical abilities of any particular note. Looking back, I'm hardly surprised. The talent may have been there but Lynn and myself have hardly been musical enthusiasts. So I guess the background was never there for her talents to flourish. I can't say I'm sorry, but we were a little disappointed at the time.

Ah! How could I have felt disappointment at my little girl, my bright, talented little angel? My Katie; not when she was to leave us so suddenly.

I'll remember that day as long as I live. It was a Monday morning, not long after Katie's seventeenth birthday. The weather was bright and cheery, not exactly the herald of bad tidings. Lynn's scream was terrible to hear. I ran out of the bathroom clad only in my pyjama bottoms and my face covered in shaving foam. Lynn was outside Katie's room, crying hysterically.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

Lynn cried out Katie's name in a strangled sob and pulled me into her room. I couldn't believe what I saw. There was my little girl, barely breathing. Her pallor was deathly pale with dark rings around her eyes. My heart leapt into my mouth. Katie had rarely been ill as and now she seemed close to death. I couldn't understand what was wrong with her. The night before she had seemed in perfect health.

I don't remember much of what followed. Obviously I called an ambulance because my next clear memory is of the hospital. Lynn had stopped crying as we waited anxiously. I could tell by the way that she sat that her calm was only a brittle, skin-deep facade. She could break down at any moment.

"Katie will all right," I said and put my arm around Lynn. She buried her face in my chest and clung to me

tightly. We sat like that for some time. It was the worst period of my life. I felt so helpless. My little girl was fighting for her life and there wasn't a damn thing I could do for her. Except wait.

Dave arrived an hour later. Over the years he had become a friend of the family. That was normal; Wonder Child liked to stress that their clients and staff were like one big happy family. He had been like an uncle to Katie; an uncle to God knows how many children developed at their facilities.

"I heard about Katie," he said. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Nothing. The doctors are with her now. All we can do is wait."

Dave guided me a few steps away from Lynn. She just stared into space as though she didn't know where she was. "How's Lynn?" Dave enquired.

"Not too good," I shrugged. I wasn't feeling so good myself. Dave just nodded and looked away a moment. I could feel his anguish, but I could sense it had to do with more than Katie's illness.

"John... Christ! I don't know how best to say this."

"Let's sit down."

I walked to the other side of the waiting room. Lynn still appeared cut off from the world at large.

"The doctors sent us tissue samples. It's a standard procedure for any of our children when something like this happens."

"Like what happens?"

"Haven't the doctors told you anything?"

I just shook my head. Anxiety had momentarily taken away my capacity for speech.

"I suppose they've been too busy. The thing is, Katie has suffered... ah... massive control gene failure. I don't know why that should have happened after all this time, but..."

"What the Hell is control gene failure?"

Dave looked away when he replied. "Think of it like cancer. It happens very fast and the cells basically forget what they are. It's a mess...."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing so I stood up and walked away. A rage was building up inside me and I wanted to hit something, someone, maybe Dave. Instead I did nothing, just let the emotions build inside me, buried deep. It's something I learned to do in our childless years, a way of coping with life's shit. I turned to face Dave. The sight of his pained, apologetic face somehow stirred some anger to rise from the depths.

"Are you telling me you didn't program Katie right?" I shouted, shocking Lynn from her private world. "Is it? Is my daughter dying because you fucked up?"

"John, please... I'm just a company interface. I only know what they tell me...."

"Shut up! You can get back to your bosses and tell them to do something for Katie. They can sort out this mess."

Dave had gone pale. Maybe I was too hard on him, I don't know, but he was their salesman. That made him just as responsible for my daughter's illness as those who programmed her. At least in my eyes.

"I'm sorry, John. That won't be happening."

"Why not?"

"John, please calm down. You're not making this any easier," he almost whispered. I grabbed his collar and dragged him to his feet. Dave couldn't look me in the eyes when he continued. "The company is no longer liable for Katie's genome. You used an unauthorised genetic application on her. That voided the company's liability. I'm sorry."

Those words hit me physically. I was a bio-technician, I should have known better. I should have read the small print. Instead I acted the fool and killed my daughter on the ridiculous whim that she didn't quite match my personal style. I told Dave to go, that I never wanted to see his face again. I couldn't believe what he had just told me. The man had been at Katie's Christening...

Katie was pronounced dead an hour later. I'll say no more than that. The emotional stress was too great and I don't want to relive what I went through with Lynn. The funeral took place a fortnight later. Dave sent an elaborate wreath so maybe there were some sincere feelings in him somewhere. But I haven't seen him since that day in the hospital.

All I can think of now is why me? Why was my daughter taken from me? Out of all the hundreds upon hundreds of children living normal, healthy lives thanks to Wonder Child, why did mine have to go so horribly wrong? Who should I blame? Myself?

Yet it is my fault in a way. I shouldn't have used that application on her. But I know enough to say that it didn't kill her. It only affects functional hair follicles. No. Wonder Child fucked up somewhere when they programmed my little girl. Maybe their debugging simulators weren't quite up to scratch. Whatever, the responsibility was theirs, except for one minor little legal technicality.

Perhaps they could have cured Katie. Perhaps not. Now that Katie is dead it doesn't really matter. Nothing can fill the gaping hole left in my life.

And as for Lynn, Well, I have to see her later today. She's apparently making good progress after her breakdown. She still hates me, though. No matter how many times I apologise it falls on deaf ears. I'll apologise again today. I'll say to her: "I'm sorry I voided the warranty on our child."

How many times have I said that now? Maybe today will be different. Maybe today Lynn will forgive me....

July 1996

Nathan's Friend

TONIGHT was the night Nathan told himself. It was game time: the Mating Game. Despite the annoying lights and the gloom, his eyes scanned the dancing crowd; analysing, searching, hungering for love.

"Where are we?" Richard asked sleepily. "Oh not here again! You'll never pull here. You never do!"

"Shut up," Nathan replied. The alcohol was surging through his body now. Yet it never seemed to blot out Richard's chatter. Perversely it made him worse. Nathan wished he would go away. He could do without the perpetual innuendoes and remorseless jibes. Sometimes he wondered why he bothered with him.

Nathan moved towards the bar where he brazenly studied the women around him. Dare he hope to catch an eye, to converse even? Some of the women noticed his scrutiny and stared back.

"She's looking at you. You're in there!" Fear swept through Nathan. Drink in hand, he fled. Richard laughed at him all the way. "Loser!"

Away from the bar and the dance floor, Nathan occupied a no-man's land; a moment's escape from the pleasures of the flesh. Time to ponder strategy, if only Richard could keep his mouth shut and let the brain do its work.

A girl walked past. She smiled and looked sidelong at Nathan, casting her head down as she brushed nearby. He nearly choked on the surge of panic and quickly walked away. The girl disappeared into the pack.

"You should have grabbed her and stuck your tongue down her throat!"

"Why don't you piss off?" Nathan said. He took another sip of his beer. Someone jarred his arm, tipping the tepid fluid over him.

"Can't handle the pints, can't handle the bints," Richard sniggered.

"I don't see you doing so well"

"Me? I got nothing to prove. I can have any bint I want. When I want."

Nathan ruefully looked at the dregs of his beer. There was nothing else for it, he would have to get another. Maybe he could lose Richard at the bar? There was always hope.

"Living dangerously aren't we? Your second half!"

"Piss off, this is my third pint."

Nathan fought his way back to the bar. Too many sweating bodies crushed in. Someone stamped on his foot and he was jostled this way and that by the press of bodies.

Everybody was shouting at once, clamouring to be heard over the musical din and each other. The orders came thick and fast, the staff rushing to supply drinks and rake in the cash, sweating into the beer and playing off one customer against another. The barman passed Nathan over again, serving people left, right and behind. Humiliation raised his body temperature, slowly bringing his blood to the boil.

"Mine's a pint," Richard screamed in his ear, sharp pain causing him to miss the barman yet again.

"Get your own!"

"God! You're useless. Let me do it."

Richard stood on the footrest and leaned over. As soon as the barman returned Richard grabbed him and shouted: "A pint of bitter!" The man looked sourly at Richard and shrugged him off, but to Nathan's surprise he poured the pint.

"You grab me again and I'll fucking kill you!" he shouted as Nathan paid.

Richard laughed. "Any time, mate!"

People stared malevolently. The girl who should have been served first mouthed something obscene. The attention was too much. Nathan hurriedly moved away, cursing Richard's brash aggression even as he envied his confidence. It wasn't fair. The Richards of this world seemed to get everything. While more sensitive souls were brushed aside.

"Not sulking are we?"

"No."

"Good. Drink up. We're gonna play hunt a cunt!"

An involuntary wince flickered across Nathan's face. Richard was always so crude. He had no respect. Women were just cunts on legs, use and discard them, like a surgical syringe, except in this case Richard was the needle.

Some friend. Why did he hang around with Richard? Maybe because no one else would bother with him. And occasionally he could be entertaining.

"Women are people too, you know," he said.

"Oh for God's sake. Do you wanna get laid? Or write poems!"

That cut to the quick. Nathan sipped his beer and turned away to hide his pain. Of course he wanted to get laid. But there had to be more to it than sex. You had to feel something more than lust, he thought, at least a mild liking.

How could Richard go through life like that? Did he never get lonely? Surely, deep inside, he wanted somebody to hang around for longer than a couple of minutes - or half an hour to Richard's internal time frame. Nathan shivered at the cold emptiness of it all. Yet Richard's life seemed more fulfilled than his own. That really rankled.

With a heartfelt sigh of despair he gulped his beer. Would he never find someone? Was he cursed to be forever alone? It was all Richard's fault. He was everything that was obscene about the male of the species. Guilt by association, wasn't that it?

Nathan drained his drink, spilling some of it down his chest. Then he let the glass fall to the floor and moodily kicked it under a seat.

"Finished?" Richard asked disdainfully. "Good. Let's go."

THIS was it. The moment for which he had been building courage all evening. She stood by herself, leaning against the wall, with a glass held casually in one hand. Nathan's eyes scanned the girl's body. She had an appealing shape, even if the gloom hid most of her features.

Time to act. He walked towards her. The girl didn't move as Nathan sidled up. He feigned indifference, casually leaned against the wall and glanced around the club. The girl raised her glass and sipped.

"Go on then! Or are you chicken?"

His guts felt rancid from a combination of alcohol and terror. Nerves jittered and it was an effort to control his body. A muscle in his cheek twitched uncontrollably and he prayed it wasn't noticeable.

"Well?"

He couldn't do it. Richard's scorn was rising. Still he couldn't do it. Then his body moved closer to the girl, trembling with fear. She'll tell me to fuck off. They always do. He moved closer. Almost touching. He opened his mouth to speak.

The girl threw the remains of her drink to the floor. The glass bounced off Nathan's hip and poured the dregs down his leg. Richard laughed.

"Oh God! I'm sorry!" the girl cried out.

"That's okay," he replied, "my fault."

The girl walked away, followed by Nathan's rueful gaze. A man appeared from the dance floor and put his arm around her waist.

"Hopeless!"

"She was with someone, didn't you see?"

"So what? You could have had her you useless twat. Prime opportunity. Beer on the balls - what an opening!"

"Why don't you just leave me alone?"

Nathan stomped off into the crowd, disappointed and disgraced. A dull ache throbbed in his chest and his eyes tingled. The world seemed a dim and distant place as he chewed on loneliness.

The music changed, heralding a mass exodus to the bar. Nathan let the tide of bodies carry him along until he was washed up like social jetsam.

Another drink to drown the sorrows. It tasted of water but he didn't care. Richard followed him. Nathan could feel his presence, feel his sneers and his leering assessment of the women that crowded around, women that flaunted themselves to the males in their version of the Game.

A couple embraced amongst the press of bodies, like Siamese twins joined at the lips. Nathan brushed past, averting his gaze but unable to shut them out of his awareness. They seemed so tender, so considerately aware of each other's needs. A pang of jealousy erupted beneath his sternum.

"What a slag! I wonder if he even knows her name?"

"Not everybody's a total shit like you!"

"Oh dear. We are in a bad mood aren't we?"

BACK in no-man's land once more. Not to think this time, instead to brood. The Game was over. He'd had enough. Richard had ruined it, just as he always did.

"Excuse me?"

The sudden intrusion flustered Nathan. He looked up and found himself meeting a woman's gaze. It was the girl that had smiled shyly earlier in the evening. She was pretty. Bright, glossy eyes looked at him with a hint of nervousness. There was a cigarette held between delicate fingers. Unlit.

Automatically Nathan began to pat his pockets, then felt foolish. Of course he didn't have a light.

"Sorry, I don't smoke."

The girl shrugged. "Never mind." The cigarette disappeared back inside its tattered packet. Then she leaned against the pillar close beside Nathan and looked towards the dance floor.

A hot ball of terror bounced through his insides. The tension returned with rapid, fiery breaths. He looked straight ahead. Oh shit, he thought. Oh shit oh shit oh shit. She was still there. She should have left. Why hasn't she left? He glanced towards her, she returned the glance and smiled. Nathan smiled back.

The girl straightened herself and moved closer. He could feel the heat of her body, and his own tingled in response as some of his reserve began to melt. Events moved of their own accord now. But that didn't ease the terror he felt; the fear of saying the wrong thing or making the wrong move.

"You're in here a lot," the girl said.

"Oh yeah. I like the place, you know. It's all right." Pathetic small talk. Nathan desperately tried to get his mind into gear. It wasn't easy. Show an interest, he thought, keep her talking. What did you say? When you got right down to it, what were you supposed to say? Richard would have known. Crude, shallow Richard would not have been lost for words.

"I've seen you around as well," he found himself saying. "I would have spoken to you before but I'm the shy type."

The girl smiled again and her eyes lit up. Evidently he had said something right. "I'm Lisa," she said.

"Nathan!"

This couldn't be happening. Adrenaline surged but his body was immobile, trapped between fight and flight. He wanted to run and hide. Equally he wanted to stay and talk. The twin urges cancelled out and dumped Nathan in the gulf of a sudden silence.

Lisa didn't seem to mind. She moved her body to the music and occasionally glanced at Nathan. He smiled back at her and sought for something to say.

"It's nice to have a bit of space, isn't it?" Lisa said after a while.

Nathan nodded, caught in the warm glow of her company.

"Bloody hell! She's a babe!"

Trouble was back. Nathan stiffened in horror and cursed under his breath. Why couldn't Richard leave him alone? Lisa didn't seem to notice and he struggled to recapture the gist of what she was saying.

"You're a dark horse," Richard said quietly. "You pulled her all by yourself? I'm impressed!"

"What was that?" he asked Lisa, leaning closer. He could feel Richard leering again, dreaded the suggestive comments that were assembling in his mind.

"Do you want to dance?"

"Me dance? I'm too drunk for that. I'd fall down!"

"He would too you know. Hopeless at dancing he is. Even when he's sober."

"That's all right," Lisa smiled. "I'm drunk as well - we can both fall down together."

"Bloody Hell Nathan what are you waiting for?"

Lisa took Nathan by the arm and began to drag him towards the dance floor. "Come on," she said and giggled. Nathan allowed himself to be pulled along. Richard followed.

"Ask her if she'd like some juicy red meat inside her!"

"NO!" Nathan screamed, spinning round. "Just go away, okay. Just get lost!"

"Nathan..."

"Just go away. Leave me alone. I've had enough!"

Lisa staggered backwards into the crowd. Nathan turned round just in time to see her disappear. Her confused face held a hint of pain and rejection. "Lisa. I didn't..." he began. But she was gone.

"You idiot!"

"Bastard! You just couldn't leave me alone. Could you? I was actually getting somewhere. Lisa actually liked me. And then you came along and ruined it."

"Wasn't me Nathan. You fucked it up all by yourself. Anyway, she wasn't your type."

"Just leave me alone!" Nathan stomped off, pushing people roughly out of the way. The bar beckoned.

SHADOWS danced before his eyes. Nathan wasn't sure if they were real or phantasms bred by alcohol. The images he perceived were grainy and unfocused, seen through a tunnel of darkness. The world sounded distant; noises just muffled thuds and tinny, high-pitched squeals that could have been voices. Only the double whisky in his hand was real. All else was illusion.

"Getting yourself drunk won't help," Richard said.

Nathan grunted incoherently.

"Plenty more fish in the sea."

Grunt.

"Just going to grunt all night are we?"

Nathan grunted.

"Okay Nathan. I'm sorry. I was jealous. That's why I got so nasty. Satisfied now? I've apologised. So are you going to snap out of it?"

Another grunt. The whisky slipped from Nathan's limp fingers and crashed to the floor.

Movement. His body was upright. A message left his chemical cocoon and somehow managed to get through. "Wha's h'pp'n'ng?" he slurred. He swayed a little before regaining sufficient control of his balance.

"I'm your friend Nathan - you can laugh - but I am," Richard said. "So I'm gonna help you get a woman. Okay?"

"THERE, she'll do," Richard said. Nathan didn't reply. He felt queasy and his head was spinning. Despite that he looked up and tried to focus on the girl in question. Vision failed to respond. The world seemed grainy, like a badly tuned black and white television.

"Get ready, Nathan, here comes the woman of your dreams!"

"Get off!" A woman's shrill voice pierced Nathan's stupor. It sounded distant and hollow in quality. Like it was coming from another room. A scream followed, then another.

Nathan felt himself thrown around. A wall - or something hard - slammed into his shoulder. Something else scratched his face. Another scream blasted through the dull humming in his ears.

"She's a goer this one!" Richard growled. "Come 'ere!"

The deep-buried, sober Nathan struggled to take control of his body. The chains of alcohol began to tear and Nathan fought to stop Richard.

"No!" he yelled as the girl pounded at Richard with her fists. He laughed and dragged her towards the toilets. Nathan struggled harder to fight back, aware of the horrified onlookers. Aware as their shock turned to angry action.

The girl was free. She ran off into the crowd, crying hysterically. Richard cursed. "Damn! The one that got away..."

An impact exploded in Nathan's face. He fell to the ground and something heavy landed on top of him. Hands roughly grabbed at him and suddenly he was yanked to his feet. Angry voices buzzed in his dazed mind.

"Where's Richard?" he heard himself cry. "Get Richard - it's all his fault!"

Down on his knees now. Somebody was standing over him and he pawed at their legs as his vision began to go dark. Then the cold floor touched his cheek and the world faded out.

CALM silence heralded the return of the world. Nathan lay in a null state between waking and sleep. Then he remembered flashing blue lights, men in uniforms and a hysterical girl.

"Oh God Richard! What have you done to me?" he wailed as the tears began to pour.

"Shut up you cry baby," Richard snarled. "I told you I could get a woman anytime I wanted. Well last night I wanted. So it's your fault we're in here."

"It's not my fault. How can you blame me? I didn't ask you to...."

"If you weren't such a useless lump of shit I wouldn't..... ach! Why did I have to get stuck with you?"

"But I didn't do anything!"

"No you never do. You whining little turd. You make me sick."

"Leave me alone!"

"That's so irritating. That's all you ever say. Well I'm not going to. It's your fault we're in here!"

Rage ignited in Nathan's heart. All he ever wanted was a little love and affection. Last night he nearly found it, only to lose it through Richard's cruel behaviour. He'd had enough of Richard, with his shallow, scornful ways and his insulting comments and aggressive manner. ENOUGH!

"Shut up! Just shut up. I'm sick of you, Richard. You hear me?"

Nathan unbuckled his belt, unfurled it from his jeans and wrapped it around his fist. Then he gripped the buckle and held the pin securely between two fingers.

"Nathan? What are you doing?"

The buckle flashed in the dull light as Nathan turned a menacing gaze on Richard. "I've told you to leave me alone!" he snarled.

The pin punctured flesh. Richard cried out. The pin struck repeatedly, shallow wounds multiplying to make a mass of torn and bloody flesh. Richard's screams grew fainter, until at last he fell silent. Still Nathan did not relent and hacked and stabbed with the pin. The only sounds now were his harsh breathing and the squelch of mutilated flesh.

Finally the pin, slick from Richard's blood, slipped from Nathan's grasp. The belt unwound and fell to the floor just as the cell door burst open. A man swore. Nathan giggled.

The cell was awash with blood. The two men followed Nathan's gaze down towards his stained and shredded crotch. Beneath the ripped material the mutilated organs gushed thick and red.

"He can't taunt me anymore," Nathan said, looking up at the ashen-faced men. "See - I shut him up forever!"

September 1996

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## To Heal The World

IT took a long time to heal the Earth; but humanity in its confused way got there in the end.

For centuries Man had plundered and pillaged; He poisoned and despoiled the Earth as if there was no tomorrow and He had to make as much of a mess as possible. Enthusiasm was the order of the day, as He hacked and burned the garden with a passion, like a child eager to make the most of His time before being put to bed.

Earth had been a beautiful garden, back in the days of innocence, when Man first inherited His state of grace. By the time of His racial maturity, however, He had managed to turn this precious gem into an orbital slag heap, barely fit for human habitation let alone fit for anything else.

In the beginning, of course, Man hadn't been so inclined to mess His own nest. In childhood, Man was well behaved and lived as part of Earth's diverse pool of life. He played by the rules and, naked in the face of tooth and claw, He fought for the right to exist.

He got very good at the rules of survival, this precocious child, and success went to His head. In winning the right to live, he kind of forgot that every thing else had to live too. He was that thing which is worse than a poor loser. Man was a very poor winner. Arrogant and smug, Man became a serious pain in the terrestrial arse.

In adolescence He got no better. Man became typical of those painful years. As growth accelerated and the changes occurred too fast for His bewildered mind to cope, He became grouchy and ill mannered. No longer a child, but not yet an adult, Man started to drift from the path to become anti-social and belligerent. He became a troublesome teenager that had no respect for His Mother Earth.

Some knew about this unintended planetary matricide. These quiet souls, quite unlike their boisterous and messy siblings, recognised that they should pay more heed to the needs of their Mother. They lamented the mess Humanity made, and tried to argue that they should take more care.

"We must change Our ways. Our Mother is unwell, and needs much care."

"Nonsense," the Others scoffed. "There's years yet left in this Old Dear."

"And that is the problem: that she has only years, when instead she could have known aeons."

Still they scoffed, and strutted their manly stuff, flexing their youthful muscles and wrestling in the dirt.

As they argued, and Man laughed at the worriers and the swots among them, it began to seem that the patient was terminal. Mother was dying. The womb of Man's birth was turning barren - and they were still connected by the umbilicus of their birth. Alone, they could not live.

But Man was having too much of a wild time to care.

This sorry situation went on for generations. But even the wildest party comes to an end, and after the hangover comes introspection. Man eventually sorted himself out and found the solution to the Earth's terminal decline.

So healed, the Earth became the beautiful maiden she had been in youth; verdant, healthy, flourishing with life.

The air was clean and sweet with pollen. The soils were fertile and supported a multitude of flora, which in turn nourished a teeming array of fauna. The seas and oceans teemed with life, and echoed with the song of carefree whales.

Once more she lived, this proud Mother Earth, and gave haven to the fruits of her loins.

The solution to her salvation was simple yet radical.

Of course, it hurt the Mother initially. But as a surgeon can tell you, it is sometimes necessary to harm the patient's flesh in order to heal that flesh and make it a strong vessel of life.

So it was that one last burst of pain was needed to heal the woes of Mother Earth. Man wielded that knife of salvation and saved His cosmic haven.

In war He found the cure. In the roar and bomb, the whine of machine gun, and the scream of dying Man He purged the plague that brought low the patient. With the radiotherapy of nuclear catastrophe, he purged the cancer that ate the Mother's breast.

Man's bones nourished the soil. Man's rich flesh fertilised the Mother's rebirth.

In extinction Man found his Mother's life. Simple yet radical, this solution of Man's. But what a pity that Man, in saving His home, demolished Himself.

March 2001

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deadly night shade

THE night air kissed her shoulders like an unwanted paramour. She shivered at its chilly touch and pulled her jacket tight around her slender body. The cold and the dark were terrible. She hated them, but they seemed like perfect companions for somebody alone.

It was dangerous, hanging around street corners. Supposedly she was the one to be feared, but so far they hadn't convinced her. She just looked down at her feet, and hoped nothing in the world would notice her fear. That was supposed to be the victim's problem.

"Shade!" She looked up. They called her that because she was afraid of the dark. She hated the name - it was meant to be a joke - but she didn't mind when Damien used it. Now his broad shoulders and tall body loomed up from the darkness. The figure brought a sense of security and she felt her body relax.

His hand took her own. Big, firm, reassuringly warm. She let him pull her deeper into the shadows. She knew what he wanted. What she wanted too, in a way. The bile rose in her throat but she fought to swallow it.

"You'll get over it," Damien said. A memory. It felt like telepathy all the same. He was like that. He sought to ease her into the life. Not like the others who simply laughed. That was Damien. He was the first man who ever tried to make her feel worthwhile.

Just as her body was unused to the frigid night, so her eyes were not yet accustomed to the shadows. Not like Damien, who could read them like a book. Even now, they told him what he needed to know. Shade watched his silhouette. He'd found something, she could tell by the delicate shift of his head. He was smiling. That much she knew.

The sounds of traffic emerged from the distance, laughter, and shouts of joy and despair. Revellers on their way home. A world she longed to rejoin. She swallowed her tears, and watched her lover intently. At least she had him. Company, a guiding hand, some kind of affection.

Damien beckoned her forward. She moved reluctantly. A boy squinted from the shelter of a doorway. His eyes stared dully from a wasted face, cracked lips moved: "Spare any change?"

Darkness flowed in a blur. Light glinted from a pale face, from a blade. The boy struggled. His legs kicked uselessly at the air. No sound from Damien, even of exertion. A gurgle followed by a jet-spray of fluid. Shade felt her legs liquefy, her stomach heave. Damien's firm but guiding arm pulled her in until the blood took hold. It smelled of living death, yet it triggered the terrifying lust that took her with strength far greater.

Tears felt hot on her cheeks and stung her eyes. The blood felt hotter on her lips. With Damien's heat by her side, she found herself at the centre of a cocoon of warmth. Her tongue darted into the wound of its own volition, channelling the boy's heat until his struggles weakened.

A grunt from the shadows as Damien's lust neared its peak. Shade felt her own rising. A tooth pricked her tongue, mingling her blood with the boy's. She whimpered. Her skin rippled with electricity. A ball of energy tightened at the base of her skull until it exploded down her spine like lightning and discharged between her

thrumming thighs. She screamed and the fear retreated into the shadows.

EVEN through the dark glasses the city's glare stung her eyes. Not that she cared. Damien's arm held her waist and she felt wonderfully alive beneath his touch.

He stopped suddenly and pulled her in. She moaned at the sensation of his lips pressed against her own. Here was a hunger she could understand, not fear. It spoke of life, and the promise of life. Now she felt her own enhanced and fulfilled.

She tried to speak, but Damien's lips swallowed her words. Instead their bodies communicated, and she enjoyed his hands mapping her body. The sound of a car back firing interrupted their passion. Damien flinched. Shade began to laugh but her giggles were squashed by his increasingly painful grip. He grunted. His mouth jerked and his fangs pierced her lip. Her knees buckled under his weight and she went down with him. He slumped to his knees and looked up with gaping eyes and a mouth that belched blood.

"Nononoooo -" her shivering voice seemed to come from somebody else. A low rattle in Damien's throat turned to silence. A few moments, that's all it took. All it ever took. She was alone again. A wave of numbness froze her body.

The outside world returned with a savage click. Shade looked up through her tears and saw the few scurrying figures and their screaming faces. A man smiled from the midst of the panic, and raised a shotgun's hungry muzzle. Before she could even fully comprehend the scene, the primordial urge to survive took hold. Her loss forgotten, she ran into the maze of alleys.

THIS time the shadows welcomed her, or maybe she welcomed them. It didn't matter anymore. The fear was no longer all around; it was focused to a point closing from behind.

She turned corners blindly and stumbled over rubbish. Somehow she kept her balance. Even with her eyes closed, she couldn't tell where she was going. There was no heat, even if her eyelids worked properly. They tingled, but there was only the occasional blur of an ill-formed image.

Something snagged her feet. She flew forward and landed heavily. Pain brought tears to her eyes. In the poor light she saw the boy. His stiff fingers were tangled in her skirt as though trying to hold her back. The footsteps grew louder, the boy's eyes stared, the gash in his throat looked like a grin. The killer turned the corner and came towards her.

She cried and broke free. Then she was running unsteadily until she came out into the light on the other side of the alleyways. People scattered from her path. Muttered voices and shouts followed in her wake. She scarcely noticed - she could scarcely see - it was just background detail to terror. It wasn't until the city centre was left behind that she eased her pace. Her lungs ached and her throat felt sticky. Sweat was clammy beneath her armpits and there was a painful stitch in her side. At least the streets were darker now, and that eased the burning in her eyes.

Without people around, she felt somehow lonely and exposed. She hurriedly glanced behind, and scanned the shadows for any hint of human heat. Police sirens sounded distant but comforting. It seemed safe. Maybe - just maybe - she'd lost him. She hoped so, prayed it was so, and with the hollow ache of grief opening in her heart, she headed for the only home she had left.

NOBODY was laughing now. She almost wished they were. Even laughter would be better than the awful silence. She could feel the eyes of the gang staring from their hideaways beyond the firelight.

She looked at Morgan. She'd never been able to look at him directly before. Now his dead face held a horrible

fascination. His eyes peered up at the ceiling; one partially closed in an eternal wink. His mouth retained its cruel sneer, though his lips were wet with blood. She could smell the stench of his spilled life, still dribbling from the rib-fringed crater in his chest. The others were scattered nearby, watching with the unflinching stare of the dead.

The warehouse had always been a place of unease. Only Damien ever made it seem welcome. Now, empty, it was alive with hideous motion. The shadows danced beyond the firelight, and each flicker brought a fresh urge to crawl into a ball and hide. She didn't know what to do, or where to go. She was completely alone; everything that gave shape to her life was gone. The old was forever closed, and the new was lying cold all around.

A sound of metal on metal echoed through the warehouse. Shade stopped breathing, and peered into the gloom. She closed her eyes, but saw nothing except for the heat-glare of the fire. She swallowed a whimper and staggered back out of the light, edging precariously towards the way out.

When the door creaked it felt like her insides were being torn apart. The sound was that loud. She froze and listened to the night. Her breathing sounded too loud, the blood rushed in her ears, her heart pounded like a hammer on the hollow walls of the warehouse. She ducked into the shelter of a twisted girder embedded in a concrete block and peered into the gloom.

Someone emerged from the warehouse and walked across the rubble. She felt her body tremble, but part of her mind simmered with a burning rage born of sheer terror and grief. That rage forced her to stalk the killer. No man could do what this one had. It went beyond belief, beyond reason. They were the ones to be feared. That's what they always said. But now they were dead, and this man walked away so casually.

He stopped. Shade froze and hoped the shadows were enough to shield her from sight. The man pointed at a silver Jaguar. It beeped, and then he opened the door and climbed inside. A sense of desperation stung Shade as the man started the engine. She couldn't lose him now, not so easily.

On an impulse she ran into the road and forced a taxi to stop. The driver leaned out of his window and began to shout abuse, but Shade ignored his rage and climbed in beside him. The driver's expression turned from anger to uncertainty. "I'm off duty, luv," he said, suddenly nervous.

She lunged. The engine screamed. She was a wild thing. Her snarls sounded strange in her own ears. She watched herself from the calm place in her head, as this stranger chewed at the man's neck. He tasted bad, the smell was even worse. The teeth were useless. She knew she should have used her knife. The taxi driver struggled and lashed out. A blow caught her face but she didn't let go. She gripped his head with the strength of madness, kept on scraping and chewing until she was finally rewarded with a powerful jet of blood. It cascaded into her throat and she let out a reflex yelp of elation.

The man's struggles became more intense. Shade tightened her grip and widened the gash. Soon the man weakened and began to whimper helplessly. Shade regained control of herself and leaned over to open the driver's door. She flung out the dying man and clambered into his seat. "Don't call be luv," she said, and slammed the door.

FRESH from the kill, her head buzzed with confidence. She was the hunter, Death prowling the shadows. She wiped her sleeve across her chin, slipped the car into first, and moved off.

This first solo kill had changed her in some way. She felt different, bigger, stronger. For the first time the world made sense. No longer was she the lost thing, afraid of the shadows. Now she had a purpose, a reason. At last she knew what and who she was. She would find Damien's killer, and explain it to him in painful detail.

Trouble was, she'd delayed too long over the kill. She cursed her useless teeth yet again. In the films they always seemed so perfect. What did humans know? They didn't have to live with the sore tongues and punctured lips; that's all her teeth were good for. The trademark wasn't a patch on a good solid blade.

Turning a corner, she suddenly found her prey. The Jaguar cruised across the junction ahead like a great white shark patrolling its feeding grounds. She tensed. Her knuckles whitened on the wheel, but she forced herself to relax, flexed her fingers and casually followed. Just a taxi driver cruising for trade, that's all. She kept the killer in sight, but otherwise held back.

This discrete pursuit kept on for more than hour. The tension knotted Shade's insides. They left the city behind. The traffic dwindled as she found herself in quiet country lanes. The roads twisted and turned until she began to worry that she would lose him, and then the shark turned into short driveway leading to a solitary house. This was it, her mind screamed, time to put her thoughts into deed. Fear returned from its brief sojourn.

SHE stalked the lane and flitted through the night's comforting gloom. The house looked sinister in the shadows, as though there was more of it than there should be. The windows were dark; no sign of life, but the Jaguar gleamed in the glow of a solitary street lamp. The engine was still warm, and she savoured the heat by running her hand over its graceful bonnet.

There was no turning back now. She swallowed her fears and stealthily headed for the door. To her surprise it was unlocked and she slipped inside. Just enough light filtered in from outside to allow her to see. Compared to its brooding exterior the inside of the house was disappointing. The hall was perfectly normal; it might have been a flashback to her childhood, until she glanced down at the umbrella stand by the door. The shotgun's muzzle peered out, no longer menacing, just an object. She stared at it for a few moments, and then picked it up. Finish the man with his own gun. Damien would have appreciated the symmetry.

She became a cat prowling a rival's territory. A faint light flickered from a door at the end of the hall. She stalked towards it and carefully edged through the opening. The stairs creaked slightly, and she winced with each noise.

The cellar was filled with candles. A large coffin dominated the floor. Its silver furnishings glinted like something from a horror movie. Posters of those very same 'B' movies covered the walls. Bela Lugosi and Christopher Lee stared from the walls. Anthony Hopkin's rendition of the duel-scarred Van Helsing studied her until she began to feel like Lucy, trapped in the unforgiving tomb.

Reminding herself that she was the slayer, Shade wandered over to a bookcase and ran her fingers along the book spines on the top shelf. Each one related in some way to vampires. A desk nearby was littered with papers. A skull held them down. From the teeth it had obviously once belonged to a vampire. She pushed it aside with distaste and flicked through the papers.

More vampires, but the papers made no sense. She scanned a yellowing newspaper clipping. 'Escaped vampire gunned down,' the headline screamed. She felt an ache in her chest as she thought of Damien and she threw the clipping aside. She picked up an official looking document and tried to understand the language. Complex, scientific jargon, it meant nothing. Something about retroviruses, activators and genomes. She threw it aside and ransacked the pile for something she could understand.

"You should always know your prey, don't you think?"

Shocked, she turned round. The man was casually leaning against the doorway, his arms loosely folded, his piercing blue eyes mapping her face. She'd heard no movement, sensed nothing - not even the slightest shift in the air. Shaking, she raised the shotgun and watched him over the wobbling muzzle.

"Do you like my little museum? I find it fascinating, this cult that people have made." He unfolded his arms and stood up straight.

"Keep your hands where I can see them!"

"Of course." He slowly began to walk around the coffin, allowing Shade to creep towards the door, and some sense of escape. "By the way, we haven't been introduced. My name's Kemp, Simon Kemp. And you are?"

"Sh... Shade."

A little smile touched his lips. "Please, no games, your real name?"

"Emma."

"Such a pretty name," he said, leaning against the desk. "You know, I've been looking forward to meeting you in the flesh. I was worried I might have lost you."

All her confidence was gone. She trembled with fear and edged back towards the door. She didn't dare take her eyes off him. She sensed some underlying threat, yet his body seemed so relaxed and unassuming. He watched her with mild curiosity, as though the shotgun was nothing more than a child's toy. Despite her fear, she couldn't help the question that formed in her mind.

"Why?" she blurted.

Kemp laughed pleasantly and then looked her over. His face turned serious, sad even. "Your kind are an abomination, Emma. You're freaks insulting nature. Man-made vampires. They made you to entertain, you know. Nothing more chilling than the real thing they thought, until one got loose and learned how to pass its genome into wider circulation. They shot it, the original."

He stepped forward suddenly. Shade's nerves snapped and jerked her finger. The shotgun sounded deafening in the confined cellar. Kemp's chest exploded crimson and he flew backwards against the wall. Shade struggled to chamber another round. She pulled the trigger. The shotgun knocked her off balance and stung her ears. One more time. The shotgun clicked its impotence. Kemp slithered down the wall.

Shade stood frozen. Her ears rang. Her arms ached from the shotgun's weight. Her lungs ached for air until she finally remembered to breathe. The smell of gunsmoke mingled with the blood and the candles.

"You... see... I'm a traditionalist." Kemp spat blood and struggled to stand. Shade moaned in dull fear, and watched the blood ooze from the wound in his chest. She looked up at his bloodstained face and was horrified by the revelation of his smile. Two fangs slid from hidden recesses to form a perfect cutting point.

Shade dropped the shotgun, and backed away as quickly as her shaking legs would let her. This couldn't be happening. She felt confusion and terror in equal measure. People died when you shot them. Damien had died. The others had died. Yet this man walked.

"Mortals playing at vampires, Emma, that's what you are. I find that so offensive. So you have the trappings demanded by this strange cult, thanks to some creative genetic engineering, but that only makes you a worse caricature of my kind."

"We're not fake, we're real, I am what I am!"

"No. You're a figment of the imagination. You don't exist. You never existed. But I'm real."

She fell backwards onto the stairs. From somewhere a clock chimed the hour, a strange intrusion of normality. Kemp approached slowly as though savouring the moment. She crawled up the stairs and was amazed at her sense of detachment. It was as if the urge to survive had sealed her terror and panic in a glass cocoon, safe from harm's way.

"You should feel special," Kemp said as he stepped onto the stairs. "I've never killed one of your kind this way."

Shade finally dared to turn her back and run. She raced to the front door, only to find it locked. Kemp laughed from behind. "Looking for these?" He stood at the cellar door, and jangled a set of keys.

This couldn't be happening. There had to be a way out. She rushed towards the living room, feeling a knife-blade of fear as her feet took her closer towards Kemp. He stood where he was, smiling so the light reflected from his fangs with an eerie luminescence. He was the cat to her mouse.

Inside the living room, it was too dark to see. Some light filtered in from the hallway but not much. She stumbled over furniture and placed her arms out like a blind man to feel her way through the unknown. She heard Kemp shuffle into the room

"There's no way out," he calmly said. "Don't fight it. It's a beautiful way to die - two souls flaring in the void of lifelessness, one shining all the brighter until there's only me left."

"No!"

The panic was beginning to break from its cocoon. It rushed into her mind like a tornado. She turned round, her eyes desperately trying to pierce the veil of darkness for some avenue of escape. Suddenly a shadow appeared in front of her. The smell of blood rushed into her nose and brought with it the usual feeling of giddy lust. She stepped backwards, frozen by the shape like a rabbit caught in the glare of headlamps. A hand lightly gripped her shoulder. She screamed. "It's getting late, Emma. Time to go," Kemp whispered.

His lips brushed her cheek. She whimpered and tried to pull away. Pain. Sharp with a white-hot intensity, so that it took her breath away. She looked down instinctively and saw the dawn sunlight peering through a crack in the bottom of the curtains. Already her calves were bubbling with porphyric blisters. Kemp's lips explored her neck with a lover's sensitivity, moving towards the fatal spot.

With a yell of fear and rage she found the strength to push Kemp away. She turned and leapt, grabbing handfuls of the thick fabric. As she fell to the floor, her weight tore the curtains down. Light flooded into the room and bathed her in pain. Kemp's scream stung her ears.

Blisters bubbled on her hands. Her face already felt swollen. She moaned and struggled to stand. The cellar was all she could think of. Shelter from the sun. Safety. Relief from the pain. Not even Kemp mattered now. She rushed for the door and saw him stumbling ahead of her, his body shrouded in smoke. A vague thought wondered what was burning, and then she pushed past him. A brief glimpse of charred flesh and then they were falling together: a nightmare of choking smoke and tangled limbs, terrible pain and monstrous images.

They landed heavily in the cellar. The fall left her dazed and she found herself staring at Van Helsing's image. There was something knowing in the eyes. In her dazed state, she almost felt as though he was trying to speak. Eventually, she struggled to sit up. The movement brought a fresh burst of pain. She looked down at her raw legs. Her skirt was damp with the excrescence of ruptured blisters so that the thin cloth clung to her flesh.

A rattling gurgle sounded from Kemp, and he stared with horribly white eyes. His burned body looked ancient, just like in the movies. She couldn't understand why he didn't just blister, but a rising sickness pushed

away the last of her rationality. It no longer mattered as the revulsion brought the bile to the back of her throat.

She swallowed hard, and tried to recall Damien, but the memories were gone. She no longer remembered his touch, or saw his face. The tenderness in her lover's eyes was replaced by the ferocity of his killer. She especially hated Kemp for that. Now, she saw the fear in his eyes. It gave her the strength to overcome both the revulsion and the pain. There was only one thing left to do. This time she would do it properly. She fumbled in her pocket, and pulled out the knife.

February 1999

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It is time...

To face the

articles of faith...

Writing A Living Memorial

Taking Bradford By Storm

The Naked Verse

Poetry Bridges The Pond

Scrawling On The Megalith

Poets Launch Peaceful Dissent

Not in this pensioner's name!

Mild-Mannered & Foul-Mouthed

Genetically Modified Muse

The Horror & The Ecstasy: Poets Commemorate The Victims...

Asylum Seekers Speak Out

Hostess With The Mostess

Mayakovsky's Pants

A Tragedy Of Ego Over Idealism

Writing A Living Memorial

AUTHOR and playwright, J.B. Priestley gazes statesmanlike towards the city centre. Pipe in hand, overcoat open in the breeze, he is an excellent target for the pigeons.

This is the statue to one of Bradford's most famous sons, situated in front of the National Museum Of Photography, Film & Television, a memorial that perhaps many writers - both known and unknown - secretly

crave.

Forget cold, lifeless stone, though. Further up the road, is a tribute to another Bradford writer. Lesser known than old J.B, she nevertheless enjoys a living testament to her short life and work. This writer is Andrea Dunbar. The tribute is known as the Write Place.

Andrea Dunbar is probably best known for the Channel 4 film: "Rita, Sue and Bob Too." It focused on two teenage girls living on a Bradford council estate. The gritty language and sex scenes caused controversy when it was released in 1987. But the film also gained international acclaim.

Before this she won the Levine Award for Young Playwright in 1981 for her first play: "The Arbor". This was staged at the Royal Court Theatre in London.

Despite these successes she never became rich from writing. She continued to live on the Buttershaw council estate where she grew up. In effect she was a working class writer who wrote about the working class, presenting them as they are, not as they are perceived.

In 1990, aged only 29, she collapsed in her local pub. She later died in hospital of a brain haemorrhage.

The Write Place is her "statue". Based in the ground floor of the Central Library, it provides equipment and a place for local writers to work. The room is quiet and self-contained, and offers the choice of a word processor or electronic typewriter. Reflecting the city's diverse ethnic mix, the PC supports a variety of Asian languages - Urdu, Hindi, and Gujarati, to name just a few.

Users book two-hour slots and are then left to get on with creating their masterpiece. "It's the library equivalent of being at home in your Garrett," suggests co-ordinator, Sally Williams, "but using reasonably good facilities."

Something of an 'honours system' operates in the Write Place. It is up to the users to report faults and respect the equipment. "There's no way we can monitor what people are doing 100 per cent of the time," Sally Williams points out. Occasionally they do perform random checks to ensure the facilities are not being abused. Which has happened at times. Largely, however, the library staff has found that it is used for its intended purpose.

Pretty much the same applies to the stipulation of creative writing. They tend to judge each case on its merits and grey areas do exist; journalism, "commercial" work, reports and so on. "Practically speaking, if for 90 percent of the time it is being used for what we consider as creative writing, then we won't get upset if someone does a CV or letter with the other 10 per cent."

Definitions of "creative writing" include novels, short stories, plays, poems, autobiography and reminiscences.

Other libraries commonly have word processing facilities these days, and doubtless some are used for creative writing. Consequently, Sally Williams is reluctant to call the Write Place unique. But: "It is certainly unusual," she suggests, "I don't know of any other library that has that."

Established four years ago, the Write Place has become an important resource to local writers. It now has over 100 registered users, predominantly poets, but it is also used to produce manuscripts for short stories and novels.

An advantage of the Write Place, according to one user, Janet Plankey, is that the phone isn't going to ring. "There is nobody to disturb me. So I am free to roam in my mind and unconsciousness," she says.

Like a lot of writers, she lacks access to sophisticated word processing facilities at home. The Write Place gives her this access. "The place also disciplines you to write," she points out. "After two hours you have to get out." That tends to focus the mind.

Another user, Judy Polland, is typical. "I really use it to improve the presentation of my work," she says. After scribbling drafts of poems at home, she relies on the equipment to produce good quality output. She is impressed with the facility: "It ties in with the other events, like the poetry evenings."

This is something else that Sally Williams points to. The Write Place is one of a range of activities the library has promoted, as it has become more involved in literature development. "Our main objective is obviously to encourage reading, but there is a link between encouraging reading and supporting creative writing," she says.

There was also the desire to find a fitting tribute to Andrea Dunbar. "This seemed like the really appropriate thing to do. She was an excellent example of an ordinary person in the community who was writing, and she probably didn't have access to fancy equipment. Hopefully this room is fostering other talent like her's."

Bradford Council provided £1,500 from its Cultural Grants Fund to get the Write Place started, with a grant of £3,850 from the Foundation for Art, and Sport. Since then it has required little in the way of running costs.

Essentially it is a free service, though users are expected to buy paper and disks from the library. This covers the only ongoing expenses of toner for the printer, and ribbons for the typewriter. As for the disks, the insistence in purchasing them from the library is a security measure to protect the PC from viruses. So far it has worked well. From a one-off grant the equipment has sustained a great deal of use and survived.

"The crunch would come if the equipment broke down and needed replacing. Other expenses can cover running costs, but for capital expenditure to replace the machines, the money would not be there. We would have to seek funding."

For the moment Andrea's memorial is going strong. "I think she would have been satisfied with this," Sally Williams suggests. "Because she lived on a council estate and this is helping similar people who want to write, but who are handicapped because they can't afford the cost of a computer."

"Hopefully we make it more of a level playing field for these people to get into the writing scene."

Surely this is the best memorial any writer could hope to gain - and not a pigeon in sight.

January 1997

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### Taking Bradford By Storm

EIGHTY-two years ago this month [November 1999], the Bolsheviks led the Russian workers and peasants into the limelight of history. They took the Winter Palace, Russia and the world by storm. This was an epic performance, and rehearsals were a luxury they could not afford.

For the two grey-bearded men plotting in a mildew-scented basement somewhere in Bradford, that's not such a problem. One is stern of face as he meticulously goes through the plan of action. He mercilessly drills the other man, who has an enthusiastic gleam in his eyes from contemplating their plan becoming reality. For them, rehearsals are an absolute necessity as they prepare to follow in the footsteps of the Bolsheviks and take the city by storm.

Fortunately, for the theatre-goers of Bradford, director Howard Frost and producer/performer Karl Dallas are not plotting insurrection, although the latter is a self-confessed revolutionary. Instead, they are putting

together a stage performance to celebrate the anniversary of the Russian Revolution.

Some will undoubtedly ask why anybody would want to celebrate the Russian Revolution, particularly ten years after the symbolic demolition of the Berlin Wall, and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union. Yet, the world today would be horribly familiar to the Bolsheviks. Their battle-cry of 'Land, Bread and Peace' still carries a dreadful resonance for millions of people living in a world of unprecedented disparities between rich and poor.

The dust has settled on the bones of the Soviet age, but its builders in 1917 still speak to people today. The words of Lenin and Trotsky and Marx - voted Man of the Millennium - still inspire hope and struggle for a better world built from the bottom up.

And this is the reason for the celebration that is Red October. The show is a literary performance described as a multimedia experience. Computer generated slides and music by Stravinsky will play alongside performances and readings of poetry and prose. Featured authors include Akhmatova, Bertholt Brecht, Hugh MacDiarmid, Mandelstam, Mayakovsky, Lenin, William Morris, Pasternak and Yevtushenko. The performance is to be rounded off with a reading of J B Priestley's *They Came To A City*.

The centrepiece of the evening, however, will be a complete performance of the narrative poem *The 12*, written by Aleksandr Bloc in 1918, and translated from the original Russian by the producer. Its warts and all depiction of a bunch of Red Guard patrolling the streets of St Petersburg generated much controversy in its day - as did its depiction of Christ leading the way with the Red Flag held high.

A Christian sub-text, such as that depicted by Bloc's poem, is an important element in the show, which the more secular-minded might miss. This isn't simply an expression of the producer's personal religious convictions, they are also an expression of his politics. "Christianity, like communism, has been perverted for oppression, but in its true sense Christianity is a revolutionary movement. To me Christianity and communism are just two sides of the same coin," Karl says.

In preparing for his stage debut, Karl is benefiting from the acting experience of his director Howard Frost; a poet, actor and opera singer with experience of over 250 dramatic productions. He agreed to work in the role because of its challenging nature. "It's always a challenge to do a one person show," Howard says. "Karl won't mind me saying that acting is new to him. The challenge has been to create something worth watching for its own sake without overtaxing the abilities of the actor, at the same time as giving someone who lacks previous experience of acting an idea of how to approach his subject. It's working. I think at the end of the day we'll both be able to say that we've achieved what we set out to do."

When he shuffles out before the lights and the audience at the Priestley Centre for Arts on Saturday, Karl will have realised a ten year old ambition. "I've been wanting to put on this show since I first came to Bradford in 1989," he says, "but it was met by a lack of interest from the local communists when I suggested we do something to celebrate October. Then I mentioned it to this group of 'non-political' poets and they agreed to do it."

The group of poets in question is the Bradford Interchange Writers' Network, of which both Karl and Howard are members. Several of its regular participants have agreed to perform work, though some have misgivings about the subject matter of October, or indeed its secondary aims of raising funds in support of the *Morning Star* newspaper. Such misgivings haven't dampened their enthusiasm for the project, however, and several admit to finding the project thought-provoking and informative.

"The poem I am reading is very much about the relationship between poets and the way that poets are shaped by their society," says performer Bruce Barnes. "Also, it's about what happens to poets when they confront the system. It's made me want to read a lot more Russian poetry. I think it was some of the finest work that was

being written in Europe at that time."

In the main, as might be expected from a group of writers, it's a love of literature that is firing up the performers. From the selected works and the rehearsals it is clear that a tantalising selection of literature has been chosen, promising a good night of enthralling entertainment. But, and this probably won't embarrass him in the slightest, the willingness to help with Red October is a testament to Karl's popularity at the regular Interchange meetings.

A celebration in literature is certainly unusual, at least for those not overly-familiar with life in the Soviet Union. Poetry was taken immensely seriously during its 75 years of existence. Ideological battles raged through the rhythm of poetic thought and action.

"The audience is in for something different," Howard adds about the 12. "It's a different presentation of the subject matter from what I've usually come across. Previously the October Revolution has been done either through out and out drama, or purely in documentary terms. This is more a dramatised presentation of a poem rather than a full blown drama."

The assemblage of poets and writers selected for Red October were chosen not just for the celebration of a political event but also for a celebration of the literature. Indeed, many of the works show that the two go hand in hand. Like the aspirations and the dreams of ordinary people that lay at the heart of October, the writing has a contemporary feel and a modern resonance.

It would give too much away to provide even a cursory run-down of the works that the Interchange performers are to bring into life on Saturday. Suffice to say the show promises to be entertaining and thought-provoking.

It explores both the human and the inhuman faces of the Soviet age, its successes and its mistakes, its contradictions and, of course, its creator's vision of its importance to the history of this century and beyond.

Red October commenced at 7.45pm, Saturday 13th November in the studio theatre at the Priestley Centre for Arts5, Chapel Street, Little Germany, Bradford. Proceeds were shared equally between the venue and the Morning Star. This article appeared in the newspaper in the previous day's edition.

November 1999

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## The Naked Verse

IN a fourth floor flat on a run down council estate in Bradford, the camera is watching two people strip and climb into a coffin.

This isn't some kind of low-budget necrophiliac porn, but the photo-shoot for the cover art and illustrations of Love, Sex, Death & Carrots, the latest anthology of poetry and prose produced by the Interchange writers' network.

The models are members of the group who volunteered to flaunt more than just their words for the sake of literary and visual art.

It's the group's first anthology since Flak Attack seven years ago, and it was produced with the aid of a grant from Yorkshire Arts. Its 80 pages are packed with the fruits of those years; poetry and prose and even a little music, courtesy of veteran journalist and broadcaster Karl Dallas.

In total, twenty Interchange stalwarts grace the pages of the book. Many have been active in developing performance poetry throughout West Yorkshire and beyond. They include Seema Gill, Andrew Penwarden, Patrick Blues and Bruce Barnes. For all their diverse activities, they do concede this latest volume has been a long time in the making.

"I'll tell you why we haven't produced an anthology since 1993 - we've been too busy," says the group's chairman, Howard Frost, in the book's foreword. "Poet members have read their work in the UK, USA, Australia and Canada. They have read at festivals in Edinburgh, Cheltenham, Ilkley, Bristol, Sheffield, London, and in Austin (Texas) and Cape Cod (USA) ... Other members working in the realm of novels, short stories, play and film scripts as well as song writing have also achieved success in their chosen genres."

The book was finally launched at the Interchange @ the Melborn performance poetry event. This is one of the group's regular venues; an open mic session that occurs every last Wednesday of the month. A similar event takes place on the first Wednesday of every month at the Monkey Bar cafe in Wakefield. And these will form the backbone of the book's marketing strategy.

For Phil Wainman, artist and one of the editorial team, his challenge was to produce artwork that would match the theme of the book. The title is derived from the nature of poetry, most relating to love or sex or death. The rest deals with everything else, which goes some way towards explaining the carrots.

"One of my biggest worries for the cover artwork was that I wouldn't be able to find anyone to pose nude - especially in the coffin," said Wainman. "When I finally got four volunteers, plus myself, I was really pleased. It's not an easy thing to pose nude for photographs and still manage to look natural. I was extremely impressed by how professional everyone was."

Despite the nudity, it's all tastefully done. Not a - female - nipple in sight, so there's nothing to offend those of a more sensitive disposition. That said, some might find the coffin a little disturbing, even though it was cobbled together from scrap wood and an old wardrobe by Wainman's sidekick Joe Ogden.

"I had this idea for the front cover, which was to have a nude couple in a coffin, surrounded by carrots with love hearts floating around," Wainman added. "I liked this idea, because it properly reflected each aspect of the title in the image. It was at this point that I started working with Joe, because not only is he a great artist but he also had the necessary skills to both design and build the coffin that was needed."

Originally the plan was to use a proper coffin, but nobody was prepared to loan them such a grim item, even after an advert in the local press. That left them no choice but to make their own.

"I had this old wood affect chipboard wardrobe," said Joe. "It was going to cost about £150 to build a coffin big enough to fit two people from scratch. So the wardrobe had to go. This [and some scrap wood] cut the coffin's cost to about £40. We built it over a few weeks."

With a coffin finally to hand, they were able to collect the models and take the shots. "I was a bit nervous seeing naked friends walking about the flat, but they looked quite beautiful," Joe added. "We soon got used to it and began to enjoy staging this art."

The visuals might have been a challenge for Wainman, but as part of the editorial team he also faced the tough process of sifting through all the submissions to create the finished volume. As with the photographs, he didn't face this task alone. He worked alongside chief editor Lynette Shaw McKone and Rahel Guzellian to ensure they picked the right balance among the diverse voices on offer.

"Selecting work was very difficult," said Shaw McKone. "We devised a complicated scoring system, and had three 'elimination rounds', selecting the works with the highest scores. We worked hard to be as fair as we

could to ensure that everyone who submitted work had some included."

Now that the job is complete and the book out, alongside the pride in a job well done, she confesses she feels 'strangely empty'.

"It took up so much of our time that for the first week after it had gone off to the printers, I seemed to be in limbo," she added. "I swore I would never do it again, then chewed the carpet waiting for it to come back. I can't wait to do another one now. I think I've got the bug."

February 2001

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## Poetry Bridges The Pond

Oscar Wilde once observed that the British and the Americans are two peoples separated by a common language. On a trip 'across the pond' two Bradford writers discovered that the language of poetry can bridge the divide.

BRUCE Barnes and Lynette Shaw McKone are no strangers to performance at West Yorkshire poetry venues, but their last tour took them a little further afield - across the Pond (the Atlantic Ocean) to southern Texas in the United States.

It was the trip of a lifetime for Lynette. Ever since she was a child she has wanted to visit the States because her birthday falls on the 4th July - American Independence Day. Thanks to Yorkshire Arts funding, she was able to realise her ambition in style, and found a vibrant poetry scene waiting to adopt her.

For Bruce the reasons were more complex and personal. He enjoys travelling on the US freeways, and is fascinated by what he considers the 'informality' and the 'weirdness' of the place. He also feels it is somehow unavoidable, because as he points out it exerts such a large influence on contemporary English culture. Here is an alien land, so familiar yet so strange. An excellent place for the poet to express and explore the strange affinity that exists between the English and the Americans.

"Poetry is huge in Texas," Lynette says. "It seems to be almost the national pastime. In particular jazz poetry and cowboy poetry, which are quite rhythmical and are art forms in their own right. At every venue there was a mixed bag of performers and a diverse range of writing. The American poets were so supportive and welcoming that we were virtually adopted in the extended circle of writers."

It's a daunting experience, travelling abroad to perform, but Lynette was in good hands. Bruce is a veteran performer and has travelled in the States before. In 1999 he went as part of the Bradford Six - a group of West Yorkshire poets who toured with their anthology and CD of performance poetry - Release the Bradford Six.

Both also benefited from the experience of Thom the World Poet, an Australian resident in Austin, who organised the venues during their tour. He is a frequent visitor to Bradford and he was instrumental in persuading Lynette to take the plunge at becoming an international poet.

Thom wasn't the only international poet they performed with. They shared the stage with Richard Heley from London, Rupert Hopkins, the Bristol poet responsible for the 'Waste Warriors' project, and Australian poet Pauline Brooks.

In the first week they covered 700 miles, performing across southern Texas - from San Antonio to Houston, from Austin to Temple and Georgetown. Many of the venues were the familiar cafŽ or bookstore, but some were unlikely places, such as their readings at a New Age Church, a Bedouin tent and a '60s fancy dress party.

For Lynette, one of the highpoints came at a genuine speakeasy in Austin, the Victory Grill. "A woman who was a poetry fan but not a poet and who had never performed before, got up in front of the audience and performed one of my poems," Lynette says. "Just the thought that one of my poems touched someone so much that they did that, well, I found it a very emotional experience."

The pair were struck by the vibrancy of the US scene - an event every night in the week in Austin for instance - but at the same time, they found the differences enlightening.

"I think there is a much clearer delineation between 'page poetry' and 'performance poetry' in the US," Bruce says. "I rarely heard anything that I would describe as a page poem being performed. To me page poems are more cerebral, and are to be mulled over: they don't arrive at the mic to meet you."

Local poets also noted the differences between styles and delivery as practised on either side of the Pond. According to Bruce, one Texan poet, Jean Guthrie told him that English poets 'always seem so much more talented and cosmopolitan and witty'.

"I don't believe this displays an inferiority complex, more a recognition that performance poets in Texas have their own agendas," Bruce explains. "These include a recognition of the immediacy of 'white' history, the importance of vernacular story telling in building that history, and the need to express the vitality of the working class American experience. When I listen to Texan performance poets I am often reminded of Raymond Carver's short stories."

If he was impressed by the quality of the poets, Bruce was also struck by the quality of the venues during his tours. Used to slumming it in Bradford's 'boozy and potentially noisy' places, he finds the Stateside experience refreshing.

"Austin and its venues seem made for performance poetry - small, intimate, good acoustics, low noise levels. They have good coffee and snacks too - after all, poets don't live on words alone," he says. "But I have to accept that I am not comparing like with like. Austin is one of the fastest growing cities in the US, whereas Bradford is teetering on a knife's edge between sink city and slow revival."

Despite the differences, a connection was made. As Lynette explains: "The best thing about the trip was discovering that poetry is a universal language with a beauty of its own. It cuts across the barriers, regardless of age, sex, creed, colour and any other man-made barrier. It gives everyone who wants it the chance to say what they think and feel about their world, their lives, and their planet."

Bruce put it slightly different: "I returned from the afterburn of freeways with some photos, a wedge of chapbooks, happy memories and a recognition that behind the hype of a grasping superpower there are folk who are downright hospitable and generous."

The trip proved to be a rewarding - if exhausting - experience for the both of them. It boosted their confidence and developed them as writers and performers. "I feel that people do want to listen to what I have to say and I developed a more relaxed performance style," Lynette says. "I felt able to talk about my poems, explaining the events behind them, and also discovered that I am a closet comedian - that I could make people laugh with some of the sillier experiences that have sprouted poetry."

Bruce adds: "I think the more you perform, the more confident you are in reading and in providing the extras, like hanging around afterwards to talk to people from the audience and explaining just what you meant in that last line. I love performing, but I still dread the extras so each time I do them it's aversion therapy."

## Scrawling On The Megalith

"QUIET in the cheap seats," Howard Frost growls. He turns to glare at the motley collection of writers gathered around the table. Eventually they pay attention, like a bunch of unruly school children, and settle down to listen to the words of a fellow scribe.

This ritual took place every Tuesday in the downstairs bar at the Priestley Centre for Arts<sup>6</sup>, when the members of the Interchange (Bradford Writers Network)<sup>7</sup> gathered there for their workshops.

Don't let Frost's mock stern nature fool you, it's a friendly and informal group. Unusually, it deals with just about every form of the written word: poetry, short fiction, novels, theatre and film scripts, memoirs, and journalism as well as catering for singer songwriters. The group is as eclectic as it is gregarious.

Interchange is one of several literary groups operating in the city. Members flit between them in an almost incestuous excursion that helps to feed the vibrancy of the city's literary scene.

"We believe that no matter who you are, if you write then your voice, your input, your words matter," says [former] member Ian Reed.

Frost agrees and adds emphasis when he says: "Interchange has always been about helping people find their own voice, value that voice, and help it to grow stronger by having a wider audience."

An audience is important to any writer, regardless of whether their main purpose is to develop their work for the performance circuit. The typical image of a writer is of someone working in isolation, sweating blood over piles of paper in their garret. Sometimes that image can be true, but for those who step outside the musty room, they find a vibrant world of fellow scribes waiting to share their literary needs.

It provides an environment of support and positive criticism that helps the writer to develop. Even the process of reading work and gauging people's response can work wonders to develop a scribe's words as well as confidence.

Maintaining this kind of environment is of crucial importance to the group. It consequently has few rules; the main ones being that only constructive criticism is allowed and there is no self-deprecation. The onus is on the words and on honing them as close to perfection as is humanly possible.

At time, it seems anarchic and chaotic, but there is method operating within its lack of structure. Whatever the magic, it seems to work and has held the group together until it has become one of the longest established in the city.

Interchange was formed in 1987 as the Bradford Writers' Workshop. It emerged from an event called 'Poetry Live' that was organised by Nick Toczec and 'Wild' Willi Becket. Using the event as a focal point for attracting writers, they assembled the first motley collection to form a permanent writers' organisation. To their delight, they discovered it worked.

Writing under her married name of Mellor, Alex Krysiniski wrote in the foreword to the group's first anthology, *Flakattak* (1993): "In no time at all [it] turned into the equivalent of AA. People could come and confess their addiction to pen and paper and hardcore word processor punters could offload their guilt, helping each other to take control of their mutual habit."

True to its aspirations of developing literature in the city, it has expanded beyond its weekly workshops to organise performance events at a number of venues.

Initially, it performed at the Love Apple Cafe, but in the Summer of 1998 the group moved to its current monthly venue at the Melborn. To mark this move, the group relaunched itself as Interchange.

Today, this is one of the group's main performance events and it takes place on the last Wednesday of the month. The second main event takes place at the Monkey Cafe Bar in Wakefield (in conjunction with the Black Horse Poets), on the first Wednesday of the month.

Both are open mic events, where performers can come along and take the stage by storm. All they are asked to do is arrive from 8pm to sign up. Performances begin at 8.30pm. These have become regular and well-attended venues on the city's arts scene.

Along with the regulars, the group has organised a variety of one off events and taken part in festivals throughout the district - and further afield.

In 1999 six members of the group - calling themselves 'The Bradford Six' - self-published their work both in book and audio CD format. Not content with a UK audience, they took Release to the States to perform in cafes, bars and festivals.

With the turn of the century, the group decided to herald the New Millennium in verse with the Festival of 2000 Voices.

This was a year-long event, taking in a host of specially organised events, along with the regular gigs. The aim, by the end of 2000 was to have that number of poets and writers perform their works.

Each performer signed a 'performance book' to mark the event, along with a giant banner that was displayed on the last gig of the year.

As well as celebrating the Millennium, it was also intended to promote performance poetry as a distinct form, as well as find new voices.

Ruth Malkin, who organised the event, said: "I think of performance poetry as the popular form of the genre. Rather like the distinction between 'popular' and 'classical' music. The two can co-exist and just as in the music world there is some overlap. Funders of poetry and literary academics sneer at performance poetry, but they also reap the rewards of its popularisation of poetry in general."

Alongside the Festival, the group was also working on its second anthology: Love, Sex, Death & Carrots. Published at the end of 2000, and formally launched at the first Monkey event of 2001, it presented a host of old hands alongside the new.

Highlights of a busy group. Along with these have been other one-off events as well as the activities of individual group members. Within this varied activity, the core of the group - its very heart and soul if you like - remains with the weekly workshop, where talent is nurtured and developed. Years after its inception, the group still shifts, grows, evolves - just like the writers themselves. It's hard to imagine Bradford's already vibrant literary scene without Interchange.

"People have come and gone, some to extinction, some to glory," Krynski added in Flakattak. "The workshop remains like a megalith, awesome and covered in graffiti."

July 2001

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Poets Launch Peaceful Dissent

NEW York might make a more appropriate place for the launch of a poetry book inspired by September 11, but Poets4Peace had to settle on Bradford. The Big Apple this northern city ain't, but all the same it was a fitting place.

Only a month before the launch of Sundoves, Bumblebees & Blue Streak Bananas, the city marked the dubious anniversary of the riots, hailed by some as the worst urban violence in years. Little more than a month later, and the world faces the anniversary of the apocalyptic destruction of the World Trade Centre.

Both are grim dates for different reasons, but while the thunder of war rumbles on the horizon, the book makes a timely reminder that there is always hope. Sandwiched as it is between two events that show the worst of human nature, the book is a ray of sunshine that shows the best of what people can be if only they dare to speak out their dreams.

It won't change the world, but it might improve the way we feel about it.

This slim volume, and the group that produced it, is the brainchild of Bradford-based poet Seema Gill. She joined forces with other Bradford poets Lynette Shaw McKone and Bruce Barnes, along with London performance poet and artist Richard Heley to form Poets4Peace.

In producing and publishing the book, their aim is not only to speak up for peace, but also to raise funds for the victims of war, or to repair damaged cultural institutions caught in the crossfire.

With so much violence in the world, it is easy to become de-sensitised and it took the devastation of September 11 to spur Seema into action. "I saw the television images and it was so terrifying," she said. "I have always despised terrorism, racism and any kind of discrimination. I thought we should do something because poets are always heard."

In a world rotten with war and violence, they have to shout very loud indeed, but every voice raised means the wilderness seems less barren. Some three dozen poets are shouting in Sundoves, all of diverse ages and backgrounds. The texture of the work is itself varied, but every piece shares the same heart felt convictions.

The work ranges from the utopian sentiments of Richard Heley's title poem ("I want to bomb the hungry people of the world with food"), through to laments at the folly of war, wistful questioning, and even outright anger that the world is the way it is.

Some is especially hard hitting and openly political, such as Nick Toczek's powerful work harking back to the Bradford riots: "The fact is they weren't about race at all/ The rioters attacked business premises and the police/ In other words: wealth and authority."

Or Alexandria Krynski's Talk Is Cheap: "They talk of war/ And show people who are starving/ They talk of terrorism/ And show people who are starving/ They talk of peace/ And show people who are starving .../ And hunger is the real enemy."

Toczek's words are something of a subversive statement in a city still licking its wounds, but the book's producers hope it can also do its bit for the healing process. Indeed, Seema Gill and her core team hope their work with this anthology has already done something to help the city, long before the book even reached the printers.

To raise the money needed for its production, Seema and Lynette held several creative writing workshops in Bradford schools, assisted by Richard Heley who helped the children to produce a mural. Again on the theme of peace. She hopes to go on to publish an anthology of the children's work.

"The children could relate to these issues in their own communities," she said. "They want peace in their own schools and their own neighbourhoods. This is something we can initiate on a small scale. It starts with the children, they have so many conflicts to deal with. The message we want to give is one of peace - within yourself and within your community because only then can we deal with the global conflicts."

This is one small, shrill cry for peace, but when the dogs of war are howling for blood, any voice raised in the quest of peace is dissidence - it is also a cry for humanity in an inhumane world. The book is one small shot of peaceful intent fired across the bows of the sabre rattlers: a rowing boat taking on a battle ship.

As yet the doves are still outgunned, but this is a powerful addition to the armoury of peace. After all, poets are always heard. Eventually.

August 2002

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### Not In This Pensioner's Name!

"I am not going to die - I am going to live and a lot more people are going to live too!"

So vowed [then] 72-year-old pensioner Karl Dallas in front of an audience of well wishers in Bradford, before he left to become a Human Shield in Baghdad. It's a high-risk action to take. While others march in demonstrations, wave banners and chant their opposition (an important task in itself), this former journalist turned poet and singer-songwriter is putting himself in the potential firing line.

"I am going to Iraq because I believe the threat to humanity from the proposed war is so great that we must be prepared to put our lives on the line to do anything we can to avert it," Dallas added. "I have been on marches since the age of seven. I suppose you could say that I am fed up of marches - I felt I wanted to do something more."

Bold words, but with the US and the UK still mobilising for war - with the threats of action with or without the UN - Karl Dallas stands in the middle, along with thousands of others, between peace and war, life and death. They, like the civilian population of Iraq, are caught between a rock and a hard place.

Human Shield became a notorious phrase during the first Gulf War, when Westerners were used by Saddam Hussain as hostages, secured in strategic places. That was then, this is now, and the phrase has been co-opted by campaigners thoroughly opposed to war.

Think of the Human Shields as a civilian occupation force, there to try and force peace - not with force of arms, but by the very presence of their bodies and their diversity.

"More and more people are arriving every day and we are virtually taking over the city, organising demonstrations, public music performances all the time. It's like a city-wide festival," Karl has said, in an email sent from the Human Shield offices in Baghdad.

"We invaded the Baghdad press centre in protest at a New York Times story that said Iraqi people would welcome war. If that's so they're not talking to the same people I do. We went on the roof and had a Beatles-style rooftop concert, singing Give Peace A Chance. After that we met a crowd of Iraqi guys in a local park and made a circle singing to each other. After we left to find something to eat, they were still chanting No, No, Not In My Name!"

For all the dangers, he is clearly enjoying himself, though he has encountered reminders of the harsh realities that face Iraq. He has visited the graveyard of Iraqi tanks smashed by depleted uranium shells and he has also visited the 'graveyards' of collateral damage.

"We went to the Al-Ameria shelter, where 408 people were killed in a direct hit in February 1991," he said. "Shadows were burnt on the ground and walls just like Hiroshima."

The Human Shield organisation is the brainchild of Ken O'Keefe. He is a former US Marine and a veteran of the first Gulf War. In 1999 he renounced his US citizenship in protest against its foreign policy.

"Our so-called democracies have failed us," he said at the announcement of the scheme. "If we are going to stop wars we must act. The Iraqi people have suffered brutal sanctions for 12 years and to drop bombs on them is beyond criminal, UN resolution or not."

O'Keefe believes the Human Shield strategy is important to stopping the war, but it must be said that it requires the pressure of anti-war protestors in the US, the UK and throughout the world.

Indeed, the movement would be impossible, without the massive expression of anti-war sentiment that has been seen. From across the world, people of all faiths, races, political leanings etc have joined peace campaigners and others to express their outrage at the proposed attack on Iraq.

"Our strategy is potentially dangerous," O'Keefe added, "but it is a risk we must take in standing beside our brothers and sisters in Iraq. There are literally billions of people around the world who are opposed to this war, yet our so-called 'democracies' in the US and Britain are plunging us into it. We can stop this war, and all we need to achieve this is a few thousand volunteers to migrate to Iraq."

Since those first waves went out, the situation has allegedly changed on the ground, such that O'Keefe has recently recommended that no more fly out. This was prompted by his expulsion from the country by Iraqi officials who wanted to dictate where the Shields would be deployed. This in turn prompted the return of a handful of Shields. These developments caused some confusion and some controversy. That said, he stands by the movement he initiated, and the peace he hopes to achieve.

For the Shields still out there, the priority remains protecting humanitarian sites such as power stations (which supply power for hospitals and schools etc), food stores and - perhaps somewhat less clearly - oil facilities.

The answer to this on humanitarian grounds is said to be that the oil fuels power which in turn services humanitarian infrastructure. However, with the West planning to secure the oil facilities early in any war so as to avoid such a precious commodity being damaged, the reason for the shields being there is less than clear. It seems like a misguided deployment, but then it is easy to criticise so far away from the field.

Some have further criticised the Shields, accusing them of supporting a brutal dictator. That might be an issue for some, but for all the crucial concern is saving civilian lives. Saddam is, after all, a vicious thug but he was a cruel and ruthless killer when he was a friend of the West, they would point out.

When he gassed the Kurds at Halabja, he did so without the West blinking an eye. When he ran a ruinous war against Iran, the West gave aid. They have armed him, financed him, supported him over decades. They knew what he was. All that changed was that he was no longer strategically useful, and Kuwait gave the justification for the first war drive for regime change.

It was one-sided war that saw the betrayal of the Iraqi people who were encouraged to rebel and then abandoned, whose people were conscripted into an army that was retreating when it was incinerated on the Basra Road. And then came the sanctions that have killed over half a million children.

Indeed, one US official said in answer to criticism of these needless deaths that it was a 'price worth paying'. Of course, it's always easy to pay the price with someone else's money. So, on the scales of Evil, how fares Saddam versus the US state?

Perhaps war will remove Saddam Hussain, but should the road to his regime's funeral be paved with Iraqi civilian skulls? And when will democracy be installed in Iraq? A democracy that might not agree with Western strategic interests? In the past, the US has inflicted regime change on democracies, as well as dictators, when they have failed to place US interests above those of their electorate. Chile and Nicaragua both spring to mind.

For these reasons and many more, people are opposed to war in Iraq. And that is why thousands of them have decided to put their life on the line to try to and win the peace. A Bradford pensioner among them.

In an earlier age, had he been old enough, Karl Dallas might have joined the thousands of idealistic young men who went to Spain to fight the fascists. But that was another time, another crisis. Today, the 'international brigades' are not warriors, but peace protestors writ large. Should the war go ahead, it will be no less dangerous. Given the high-tech arsenal at the Allies disposal, perhaps it will be more so.

But, Karl says: "I do believe that we are going to stop this war."

Time will prove whether his words are the result of misplaced optimism, or a herald of Peaceful People Power.

March 2003

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Mild-Mannered & Foul-Mouthed

The 'Confessions' Of A New Bradford Playwright

Welcome To Paradise, was a satirical dystopia, where every vice imaginable has become a moral virtue. Darkly comic and cleverly written by new playwright Andrew Crowther, it was a daring venture for all concerned.

YOU might want to be careful should you ever meet Andrew Crowther, because he likes to spend his time putting words into other people's mouths. But then again, as a playwright, that's his job.

Actually, you'd be better listening very carefully because Andrew is a fast and vibrant speaker. Obviously, he is a man with things to say about the world around us, but the speed is less to do with lack of time and a lot to say, and more to do with a nervousness born of a shy disposition.

Indeed, Andrew confesses to being more at home in the world of words, and has been ever since his tender school days.

"I was incredibly shy and awkward at school," he says, "and I felt much more comfortable writing than talking. I've been writing stories and things since I was at school. I suppose I was about ten when I realised that I was actively good at English as a subject. I loved the world of books and I started writing stuff for the fun of it."

In those days, he went through a phase of imitating the books he read. 'Embarrassing imitations' as he put it. One example he felt able to exorcise from his literary soul was a series of stories based on Douglas Adams's Hitchhiker books.

"They were probably exactly as bad as you'd imagine," he adds. "I threw them away years ago."

He might have played the mimic game in common with a lot of writers, but he has learned as he read even from those tender early years. Wodehouse taught him prose style and plot construction, for instance, but other

influences are many and varied. He reels off a list: Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, H G Wells, Samuel Butler, Robert Sheckley, Voltaire, Joe Orton, Alan Plater (writer of the 80s Beiderbecke TV series), Preston Sturges, a Hollywood writer/director of 'screwball' comedies in the 1940s, and... then Andrew runs out of breath.

Once he's breathing normally again, taken a sip of his beer, and not looking quite so blue in the face, he hits us with yet another confession: he regards W S Gilbert (of Gilbert & Sullivan fame) to be a major influence to his work.

"In fact, it's almost an obsession," he says. "When I first got into that stuff I just enjoyed the jokes and the silliness. But as I read more of what he wrote, I realised he was expressing an intelligent, critical and satirical view of life. Gilbert has made me look at the world in a critical way. I don't think I could have written *Welcome To Paradise* without him."

Such is the obsession with Gilbert, that between 1995 and 1998 he earned himself a MPhil from Bradford University by writing a postgraduate thesis on Gilbert's plays. From that, he also became a published author.

"After a bit of huckstering I managed to get the thesis published by an American academic publisher called Associated University Presses," he adds. "The book's called *Contradiction Contradicted: The Plays Of W S Gilbert*. Essentially I wrote the thesis because I think Gilbert is a very underrated writer. I wanted to pay Gilbert back for everything he'd given me. Oh, and the kudos of having had a book published too."

With the plug firmly over, we can go on to say that Andrew has tried writing all the 'proper stuff' as he calls it. "Unpublished, of course. But I am beginning to realise that I am simply better at theatre," he says. Theatre is also where he is gaining his track record as a writer, with several amateur dramatic productions of his work behind him. Though he might not get to the top of great playwright's ladder, these take him a few rungs up at the very least, and provide encouragement for his next steps.

The latest rung was *Welcome To Paradise*, directed by Matt Blackmore and staged by Actors' Community Theatre at the Priestley in June. In it, Andrew portrayed a dystopian satire where today's vices were tomorrow's ingredients for a model citizen. It's a world where good citizens drink to excess, take drugs, trade meaningless sex with a string of partners and swap STDs like mobile phone numbers. And there's a very special 'secret police' who make sure you live up to these social values. Or else.

Totalitarian or the ideal consumer society?

Whatever, it was a cleverly written and funny play, albeit foul-mouthed and potentially offensive. Mary Whitehouse would've loved it.

Andrew might have been inspired by his hero Gilbert, but the play came across as Kafka with his tongue firmly in his cheek (or at least somebody's cheek). As a piece of stagecraft, however, it began life as a novel: *Double Insomnia*. And it didn't work.

"Frankly, it doesn't work as a novel," Andrew says. "It's self-indulgent and the plot falls to bits about half way through. I don't think I have the patience for long-haul writing - two or three hundred pages of brilliant prose. If you plan a plot in advance, you know how the story's going to end and by the time you've reached that last chapter you're so bloody bored with it that you simply can't get the enthusiasm to write it properly."

Andrew continues: "Plays only have to be seventy or eighty pages - much easier. And I find dialogue much more fun to write than narrative prose. In dialogue you're flitting from one person's point of view to another's, without a narrator to say what the writer thinks. I like that anonymity."

Not quite so anonymous, however, because if he wants to see his words made flesh on the stage he has to present his babies to the critical eyes of others. That's something all writers face at some time, but for the playwright it's a rather more up close and personal experience. Even though the playwright has conceived the project it will be subject to changes and modifications by directors and even actors. Plays tend to be far more fluid creatures than poems, short stories or novels. Think of them as something perpetually in progress.

But that doesn't mean that the process is negative. It can broaden and deepen the playwright's experience and skill as a writer. As Andrew says he has found from first hand experience during rehearsals: "Learn what works and what doesn't," he says.

Sometimes, the experience of seeing the words made flesh can be surprising. "With Paradise," Andrew continues, "actors sometimes asked why their character said or did something - and the real answer was that it helped the plot or it was a feedline for another character. I haven't thought from that character's viewpoint, which is a black mark against me as a playwright. So I just keep quiet and let the director and actors work it out and at the end a character who might have been a bit 'cardboard' when I was writing became fleshed out and more 'real'."

As in life, so in writing, it's all a learning curve. The play was something of an experiment, Andrew adds. "I just went for it one hundred per cent without worrying too much if it was going to 'work'. Matt Blackmore showed a terrifying amount of faith in me by agreeing to direct the play - even before he'd read the script. There were one or two line changes, and he decided against some of the 'physical theatre' bits I had in the original script, but it's actually surprising how little the script changed in rehearsal."

Which is surely a credit to the writing and the writer.

July 2003

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### Genetically Modified Muse

HIDDEN in the labyrinth of the Internet, lurks a 'genetics laboratory'<sup>8</sup> that is seeking to evolve and breed poetry from a 'primordial soup' of random words.

The Muse is being modified quietly and slowly and nobody knows what will emerge from the fermenting vats of literary science. Are the world's poets about to get their own up-close-and-personal GM scare?

Only time and [un]natural selection will tell if the Darwinian Poetry project will bear fertile fruit, but if you fancy playing mad scientist with the nature of such words then visit the site at:  
<http://www.codeasart.com/poetry/darwin.html>.

The unlikely poetic Frankenstein behind the project is one David Phillip Rea, a senior technology associate with General Atlantic Partners, Greenwich, CT in the USA. The project is the mating of two of his interests: poetry and genetic algorithms.

But behind the scientific curiosity of this symbiosis is another - more primal - motive. One that is a much more traditional urge to wax lyrical: Rea admits that he initiated the project to impress a girl.

Aside from that, Rea hopes to gain some serious results from the project (as well as provide a bit of fun for visitors to the site).

"One of my long term goals is to increase my understanding of evolution," Rea says. "I've been playing with genetic algorithms for a decade and it has given me a sense of the power and slipperiness of evolution in a way that a textbook never could. It is fascinating to read the comments on the site's message board because

they show a disturbing misunderstanding about Darwinian theory and how it works. I hope to correct that."

There might be misunderstandings about evolution, but the project has also stirred disagreements between what might be called the inspirationalists (poets) versus the evolutionists:

"Random words are just that but finished poems arise from a vocabulary that has developed over the span of a poet's life," says one visitor. "These words are then selected, filtered and arranged by the hearts and minds of the authors to relay some type of message. Computers can suggest words and spellcheck, but only humans can do the real editing. Rather than waste time on this fluff, why not take a real poet out for dinner and drinks?"

In defence came the reply: "While we think of poems being created in one person's mind over one life, with vocabulary that is learned, these can in fact be thrown into an evolutionary system, like the one here, and so 'evolve' when natural selection is applied to them... The 'environment' the poems are subjected to is people's likes and dislikes, subtle meanings of words that people find attractive, and other characteristics like poem length that are either selected for or against. We humans are simply choosing; the evolutionary system is producing the new products. This is not 'fluff', but an interesting exercise of designing an evolutionary system."

This might sound like an arcane argument, but it's worth considering that whether a 'poem' is developed by a living mind or by randomly selected words as on the Darwin page, a kind of evolution can still be seen to be at work. The fittest in either case in this argument are selected on the basis of human taste and whim. So, think of the visitor to the site as a predator, pulling down and killing the weak poems while the stronger ones escape and pass on their traits to the next generation.

The genetic algorithm behind the project is a programming technique that 'evolves' the best program for a job. A 'population' of different programs designed to achieve the same end is tested for 'fitness'. The weak ones are killed and the strong ones are 'bred' together. The process is repeated through successive generations until the goal is achieved and the most successful program emerges.

"The techniques have been used successfully to solve complex problems such as gas pipeline control, factory floor scheduling and analogue circuit design," Rea says.

But can they successfully 'breed' a worthwhile poem that will ignite hearts and minds?

"I am not sure if any complete and valuable poems will result," Rea admits, "but already after a few generations some great phrases, rhymes and uses of words have appeared. Things I might never have encountered otherwise. I don't think poets have anything to worry about, though. First of all, evolutionary systems only produce results within a limited domain. You'll notice that evolution never produced the wheel, even though it's a tremendously useful design."

On the other hand, it might be argued that evolution did come up with the wheel, albeit by proxy, when it evolved humans and their inventive, creative thinking. So, maybe it did create poetry too but that's another story.

The starting point for the process was a 'primordial soup' of words. These were taken (together with a calculation of the number of times particular words crop up) from the Iliad and Shakespeare. In the second version of the program, the works of poet Simon Koppel were scanned to add to the verbal cocktail. From this the original 1,000 poems were created randomly and then subjected to our - the browsers - selection pressure.

Browsers are presented with two of the 'poems' from a population of 1,000. They select one to live, while the other becomes 'extinct'. The difference between a living poem and an extinct one could be as simple as a liking for one word. This process is repeated down through the generations.

The program kills the deselected individuals and then 'breeds' the selected poetry.

"The software relies primarily on a mechanism called 'crossover'," Rea explains. "[It's] similar to the process that operates on chromosomes in biological evolution, except here the basic units are words rather than nucleic acids. When the program sees there is room in the population for new poems because the unfit ones were culled, it randomly chooses two surviving poems to serve as parents. These poems are then crossed over to produce new offspring."

Crossover works by selecting random 'snip points' in each poem. This creates four 'half poems' which are then merged together.

It's a complicated way of evolving poetry compared to the time honoured method of inspiration followed by perspiration, but maybe it provides a way at last for a battalion of monkeys to finally get round to completing their recreation of the works of Shakespeare.

On the other hand, maybe it's the foundation for Orwell's nightmare vision of the Ministry of Truth's story generating machines.

Perhaps now is a good time for the world's literati to get together and form a 'virtual' asteroid to blast these primordial poems out of existence before they lurch forth to take out the competition; survival of the fittest (poets) might demand nothing less than such an apocalyptic response.

As for the girl, Rea confesses that she is no longer 'really talking' to him. Oh well. C'est la vie. Perhaps she was a poet.

August 2003

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The Horror & The Ecstasy: Poets Commemorate The Victims...

SEPTEMBER 11 has left its indelible mark in human consciousness after the horrifying destruction of the World Trade Centre that killed thousands.

Mostly forgotten now, but no less horrifying, was another event that killed thousands, though its shock waves were a little more restricted to the country and continent where it occurred.

That's a date, many senior politicians and commentators might like us to forget.

Like the Twin Towers, it was a murderous attack on democracy, for on 11 September 1973, the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende was smashed by General Pinochet's coup in Chile. Allende himself died in the presidential palace after an aerial rocket bombardment tore the place apart.

The United States government, far from deploring 'terrorists' looked on approvingly, as a man they had backed and could do business with, installed himself in power.

Two terrible events separated in space and time, but linked by the same ignominious birthday. One way or another, both were the direct or indirect results of superpower machtpolitik.

Poetry also bound them together during an evening of performance, held at Bradford's Love Apple cafe.

Poetry For Peace & Justice was held on September 11 to commemorate the victims of both atrocities, but also to ensure that the latter would not be forgotten in the understandable grief and trauma surrounding the first.

It was organised by Sam Jackson. At the start of the evening, he told the audience: "September 11 is a big thing in people's minds for the criminal attack on the Twin Towers, but we are also thinking about the victims of George Bush's war on terrorism. The date is also significant as the 30th anniversary of Pinochet's coup against Allende in Chile."

Sam is a former student at Bradford University, where he recently gained a PhD in literature. When he is not looking after his two-and-a-half-year-old daughter, he does some teaching at the college. Like many people, he got involved in activities protesting the war in Iraq and joined the Stop the War coalition. He organised the night's event as an individual, but combined his anti-war stance with his interest in literature.

And it was a night of politics in poetry. As John Sugden of the Beehive poets said at the start of his act: "It's a rare chance to read political poems."

Much of the poetry was indeed political. But it was also poignant, thoughtful and thought-provoking and full of humanity. Whether the poets (and singer-songwriters) lamented war, or expressed their deep-felt political outrage, together they formed a powerful amalgam of entertaining poetry with a message.

"It's really important that the coup in Chile isn't forgotten because it happened on the same date as the criminal attack on the Twin Towers," Sam added. "Hopefully [tonight's] event will draw the link in people mind's between the two and the total hypocrisy, not out of disrespect to the people who lost loved ones in the Twin Towers."

Part of his inspiration derived from an organisation called American Families for Peaceful Tomorrows, he said, which includes families who lost people in the World Trade Centre. The group's attitude, as he explained it is: 'I won't respond to terrorism by becoming a terrorist myself'.

"It's worth drawing the link between this in people mind's without ramming it down people's throats," he added.

Many of the performers were contributors to a book of poetry launched in response to the horrors of 9/11. *Sundoves, Bumblebees & Blue Streak Bananas* (ISBN:0-9535626-1-1) was published by Poets4Peace, a.k.a Seema Gill and Richard Heley in the summer of last year. It was intended as a cry for peace in a violent world. Some of the performers read their contributions out on the night.

Among the performers were Gerard Benson (of the poems on the Underground fame), Bruce Barnes, Steve Wilkinson, Karl Dallas (former Human Shield), Steve Bindman (accompanied on African drums by Moses Ekebusi), Joe Ogden, Kevin Flaherty and many more.

Sam adds: "There seems to be a lot of poets in Bradford who have been inspired by certain events from September 11 onwards. I get the impression there's a 'democracy of poetry' out there. A wide variety of performance poets, folk singers and classical poets like Gerard Benson and Steve Wilkinson, and I hope they overlap tonight into a kind of sharing of ideas and viewpoints."

Though the event was free, a whip round was held for Peace Not War, which raised over £72 for the activities of this two-man production duo, after DJ Disorientalist gave a small talk on what they are and what they do.

Peace not War was a two CD compilation of music that raised over £25,000 for non-violent anti-war and peace campaigns. The duo behind it, Kelly and Mudge are planning another fund-raising CD compilation to be released next year on the anniversary of the global anti-war demonstrations: 15th February 2004.

Among those taking part are Fun-da-Mental, Mark Thomas, Billy Bragg, Asian Dub Foundation, Chumbawumba, DJ Spooky and many more.

"We would prefer exclusive tracks," the producers say, "because it would mean fans would have to engage with a peace group to buy them. We will not be publishing songs whose lyrics call for terrorist nor other violent means to stopping war, although we encourage all other kinds of 'radical' lyrics."

Poetry has a long and noble history of dissent. Though in itself it can do nothing to shape the world, it can shape and challenge and inspire human consciousness. Even the simplest verse can contain the seeds of outrage and inspiration fit to rock the world.

And in Bradford, there was a small rumble that joined the wider rumblings of anger and discontent around the globe.

Sam adds: "As Billy Bragg said with music, it's like a culture of discontent. Poetry can be a part of that."

September 2003

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### Asylum Seekers Speak Out

ASYLUM seekers get a raw deal in the British press.

They are harbingers of disease, crime, poverty, moral decline, and every kind of imaginable foible intended to whip up the xenophobic fantasies of the 'liberal' Middle English.

Hell, asylum seekers probably wiped out the dinosaurs too.

Or at least so you might think from the more salacious and shrill of the country's media.

So it's refreshing to hear the sorry saga of displacement and asylum from those at the sharp end. And in their own words too.

In November, Biasan (Bradford Immigration and Asylum Support and Advice Network) published *Dispersed*, a book by asylum seekers living in Bradford. The book is written in French and English, and presents a diverse range of poetry and prose, as well as fiction, drawn from people displaced from all over the world.

The book also features a foreword by the Bishop of Bradford and an afterword by Terry Rooney MP.

Content ranges from a harrowing account of a young boy's journey to this country to a collection of Kenyan proverbs.

It presents the human and individual tragedies masked by the smear campaign that passes for objective coverage. Tales of human hardship, but also hope, from people who have been dispersed by the Government's policy of spreading them through the country, but also dispersed from their homelands.

"It started with just one piece," said Richard Hargreaves, who co-edited the book along with Kenyan refugee Waiharo Gibson. "Some months ago, some Africans started coming from the Congo and a young man showed me the beginnins of a story about a girl suffering in the Congo. It was in English, which is his fifth language. The book grew from there and enough was produced to develop our first book."

Hargreaves is a volunteer with Biasan and teaches English. From the classes there emerged an ad hoc, irregular writers group, which he hope will develop further, but the trauma's of the asylum experience can make it difficult at time.

He added: "I think that some of the asylum seekers are really quite depressed and being able to write might help them. I hope [the book] will encourage more people to write and express their experiences. It's good to write and people have stories to tell that will help people to hear and understand."

For contributor Liliya Sazanavets, empathy would be a good way to express what the book hopes to achieve. As she said: "All people are human beings, so it's very difficult to talk about groups of people. But I think that if someone decided to leave their country then it's a very difficult decision, so we have to think about it. To understand us you must put yourselves in our position, then I think it will be easier to understand what happened to us."

Biasan launched the book during an afternoon of cultural events organised to highlight and celebrate the experiences and achievements of asylum seekers in the city.

Prior to the book launch, when contributors read extracts of their work and which took place on the main stage, Banner Theatre presented its acclaimed production of Migrant Voices. The event ended with a showing of Dana Jalal's award winning video Rights of Passage.

The play is based on in-depth interviews with Iraqi Kurdish refugees and asylum seekers living in Salford and also members of the host community. The show combined live music and performance, with video interviews and documentary material to show some of the harsh realities behind the media coverage of the asylum issue.

Migrant Voices has toured in the UK and Canada during the spring and summer of this year and it is now touring again. Audiences are presented with a compelling story about people who have fled their homes to escape torture and persecution, only to become the victims of racist abuse and intimidation in the place where they believed they would find sanctuary and a little compassion. It also provides some insight into the causes of global instability that uproot people from their homes.

"We hope to raise the profile of asylum seekers through the book and put ourselves firmly in the context of Black History Month and international struggle," said Biasan's Deb Collett. "I think we have achieved what we set out to do. We have got a really diverse group of people together. This is another expression of people getting together to make their voices heard."

November 2003

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Hostess With The Mostess

On Air With Tina Watkin

YOU don't need to be a famous author to get on the radio: just ask Tina Watkin.

That's not a sideways swipe, incidentally, just an acknowledgement of the work Tina has done for local writers, together with Bradford Community Broadcasting (BCB), over the last four years.

Tina is the presenter of the Scribe Slot, which goes out live every fourth Tuesday at 6.30pm (repeated the following Wednesday at 1.30pm). The programme is a pot-pourri of poetry, prose, music and chat with local literary types.

Whether interested amateurs taking their first steps out of the garret, or the keen enthusiasts determined to taste success with their words, Tina has shown them the door - to exposure on air.

"People don't want to know you unless you've already got something under your belt," Tina says, "So the Scribe Slot exists for the non-professional writer to make a stand and climb the ladder. It's all about the

process of getting a track record."

It's the gold dust of exposure, an emblem of kudos on a literary CV, like a poem included in a magazine, or a slot in a local open mic. Not only that, it makes for the kind of challenging testing ground every author needs to hone their words and their craft.

Writers after all are notorious shrinking violets about their work. Either they take coy to the extent of invisibility, or they react with outrageous arrogance. The root tends to be the same: a dreadful insecurity about the worth of their words. The Scribe Slot offers another medium to combat such insecurities.

"The programme gives people a bit of confidence," Tina adds. "Most writers experience the doubt that their work is not good enough, but being on air gives a boost that other people want to listen to what they have written. We've found that quite a lot of people bloom as a result of the experience."

Originally, the programme began life as a mechanism for promoting the works and members of the Bradford Writers' Circle, which Tina also co-ordinates. Since its inception, Tina has steered the Scribe Slot into deeper waters to trawl for writers further afield. Nowadays individual writers and literary organisations across the district gain the benefit of airtime exposure.

"There's quite a wealth of talent at Bradford Writers' Circle, and at the time there wasn't really anywhere locally for people to be heard," Tina explains. "We decided that if we could find a way for unknown people to read it would be some kind of incentive to other people out there to actually have a go."

And the whole thing grew from there.

As you might expect, material on the programme features poetry and prose writing, along with interview style material about the authors and their work. Beyond that, the programme maintains an open approach to content and style, with the scope very much open for experimentation.

In the past, the Scribe Slot has featured short scripted pieces as well as work accompanied by the piano and contributors singing songs.

"It adds another dimension," she says. "Really we're an open forum in that if anyone has anything different that they want to bring along. Poetry is not just words on paper. It can be put to music."

That said, Tina points out that some things work better than others. On air, the visual cues of a person's face are naturally absent. This can make some work difficult for an audience to focus on. On the whole, she advises (especially for prose material) that it should not be too complex.

The synergy of creative writing and creative radio, plays its own part in creating a broader sense of the variety and diversity of writing in Bradford and beyond.

Originally, however, Tina's involvement with the radio was somewhat less literary in its focus. She began as just another interested amateur, who had never thought of radio until she found a leaflet explaining the station's community activities.

This being Tina, the leaflet sat in storage for two years, before she plucked it from obscurity and took the first step towards likewise plucking scribes. To think it was a visit to the Environmental Health Department Offices that led her to nip in and take the plunge.

What followed was a hands on course in radio, followed by a twelve week stint at the Kirkgate Studios in Shipley. She was the first voice to be heard on the half-hour programme Shipley Corner. Her radio work has

expanded since those beginnings.

On several occasions she joined the all women's team Radio Venus both interviewing and being interviewed on a variety of subjects, and in May 2001 she began to co-host the Afternoon Stretch programme with Alan Keeling.

Bradford Community Broadcasting is one of only 15 'access radio' stations within the UK that has a full time broadcast license. A community organisation, it is run by membership and works to encourage local people to be involved in its running. Along with the training courses it runs throughout the year, it also works with community organisations, schools and individuals to enable ordinary Bradfordians to produce and present their own shows. Earlier this year, it celebrated its tenth birthday.

"We have a wide audience and we try to reach everyone," Tina says, "so we're open to everyone."

June 2004

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### Mayakovsky's Pants

IN a morbid and sepulchral kind of way, the Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky got his wishes fulfilled at the end. It took a lot of effort to achieve, but he bit the bullet and got on with what needed to be done.

History has never bothered to record quite what the trousers thought of all this, even though they were with him at the end.

"I'll write until my only way out of this, my last full-stop, is a bullet in my brain," he is credited as saying. Life imitates art. In this case, only for the brief time it took for the bullet to pass through the said cerebrum.

When he was alive, Mayakovsky often played with themes of death, suicide and immortality. Fey subjects perhaps for a political rabble-rouser, who spent time in prison for his agitational activities. But, as Marx said, 'poets are queer fish' and given the times in pre- to post-revolutionary Russia they were doubtless themes running through many people's minds.

Today, Mayakovsky has been further immortalised in the words and stagecraft of Steve Trafford's play about the Russian poet and revolutionary. The play portrays the turbulent life of a passionate and vibrant man, celebrated as the greatest Russian poet of the 20th Century.

*A Cloud In Trousers*, directed by Damian Cruden, takes its name from Mayakovsky's first long poem. It dealt with many themes and was a major foundation to the man's reputation as a great literary figure both Russian and further afield.

Published in 1915, it dealt with love, revolution, religion and art, all from the perspective of a spurned lover. The language is of the street, rather than the more refined and 'respectable' kind that is commonly perceived appropriate for poetry (whatever the language). Indeed, Mayakovsky was determined in the poem to pull apart romanticised and idealised notions of poetry and the practitioners of the art: to take the poetry out of the poet, but in a poetic way. Essentially, to punch a hole in its self-referential pretentiousness. Or as Ensemble put it - he shouted his 'angry, street punk-poetry' to the masses.

The year of the trousers was also the year that he met and fell in love with Lilya Brik, whose husband Osip was to become his publisher and third party to the ménage à trois relationship that is the centrality of the play.

Ensemble declared it to be the 'true story of Mayakovsky - the voice of the Russian Revolution'. A heady attribute to bestow on any individual indeed, but his words at least, along with the other leading lights, are

available to us. Of the millions who made that revolution a reality, their words are long silenced by death and history. We can only hear the lingering echoes or the vibrant shouts of those like Mayakovsky. Perhaps that is a metaphor for something. Or merely the tragic reality of the meat grinder that is historical development.

Meanwhile, on stage, Mayakovsky, Lili and Osip Brik are navigating the course of their turbulent affair. Outside of their Moscow apartment, three hundred million people are changing the world and forging the Russian Revolution. Those long-silenced millions are putting the masses on the world stage, oblivious of the small revolutionary drama taking place on the domestic stage.

Free love without jealousy might be the high ideals of the trio; it certainly provides material a plenty for a playwright to work with. *A Cloud In Trousers* features a bubbling cauldron of sex, poetry, politics and love; the high pressure hotbed of living according to revolutionary ideals and trying to change the world when you can't even change the bed...

Mayakovsky the man was born in Bagdadi, in the Kutais region of Georgia. His father was of Russian and Cossack descent, while his mother was Ukrainian. In 1907, his forest ranger father died of septicaemia and left the family penniless upon which they moved to Moscow.

Mayakovsky the poet was born later, and was hammered into shape on the anvil of political turbulence. At the age of 14 he joined the Bolshevik faction of the Russian Social Democratic Workers Party (the split took place at the 1905 party congress). Political agitation and activity saw the young poet-to-be imprisoned on numerous occasions. It was during a period of solitary confinement at Butyrka Prison in 1909 that he began to write poetry.

On his release, the fire of literary art mixed in explosive combination with the white heat of his politics. He joined the Moscow Art School where he met members of the Russian Futurist movement. He subsequently became a leading spokesman of the group, and he saw David Burlyuk, with whom he became a close friend, as his mentor.

It was the Futurists that first published Mayakovsky. His poem *Night and Morning* appeared in the 1912 publication *A Slap In The Face Of Public Decency*. At this time, he had moved to St Petersburg - set to be the heart of the brooding revolutionary storm to come - and there, the Futurists set about annoying the middle class sensibilities of the artistic establishment. They read their poetry on street corners and threw tea at the audiences. History says nothing of the pants' involvement at this time, though Mayakovsky had taken to wearing a yellow jacket.

By 1914, however, Mayakovsky's artistic development had moved into a more narrative vein and it was this work published on the verge of revolution that established his reputation. He had also started to examine those fateful themes of suicide and immortality.

Mayakovsky's path was set. The politics and the poetry, the activist and the playwright had merged and taken that path to immortalisation. The culmination of this was to be achieved through the crescendo thunderclap of that bullet through the brain.

Frustrated in love, attacked by unsympathetic critics, denied a travel visa abroad and alienated from the Soviet reality that was a far cry from the heady and turbulent idealism of his youth, he placed a revolver against his head, pulled the trigger and exclaimed the final full stop.

Mayakovsky the man was no more.

Now he belonged to the critics, the publishers, the bureaucrats and apologists of the monolithic machine that was the Soviet Union. It speaks volumes that his work and name survived to speak to the modern world. And

herein lies a strange contradiction that hindered and helped, for it was Uncle Joe - Stalin - who pushed favour to the late poet's works.

In the period after his death, Mayakovsky was eulogised by Stalin, who declared it criminal to be indifferent to the man's work. With such official sanction, it is little wonder that, after the downfall of the Soviet Union, he was declared a spokesman for totalitarianism.

This is surely an irony the old poet might have appreciated; for much of his work prior to his death satirised the society that had desiccated into a mummy and wrapped itself in the shroud of communism.

Mayakovsky's plays *The Bedbug* (1928) and *the Bathhouse* (1930) were both banned temporarily because they dealt critically with Soviet officials. In the latter, the invention of a time machine brings the suggested use of speeding up boring political speeches. Eventually a party official is given the chance to travel through time, only to be rejected by the future. He asks if this is to say that the future has no need of his kind. The suggestion being quite definitely not.

Such was the life of Mayakovsky, and with the play it isn't over yet.

*A Cloud In Trousers* exploded onto the stage at the beginning of October 2004 when it premiered at the York Theatre Royal. The play has since toured the country, and took its final bow in the Ustinov Studio in the Theatre Royal Bath from the 9th to 11th December 2004.

The cast included Elizabeth Mansfield, known for her highly-acclaimed performance in *Piaf, Hymn To Love*; Robert Pickavance, Gilly Tompkins and John Sackville as the man in the trousers - Mayakovsky. The director, Damian Cruiden is the art director at the York Theatre Royal.

Rooted in the long-past ideals of the early Twentieth Century it might be, yet these themes, these ideals, the very contradictions and turbulent vibrancy that powered Mayakovsky's perception and inspiration, still resonate with a contemporary relevance. No, Mayakovsky is not dead. Nor are the myriad ideals and passions that fed life into his body and mind.

Morbid some of the themes might be, but there is a passionate celebration of life and living at the heart of the shadows. Both are parts of existence, yesterday as today. So celebrate those ideals that filled his spirit and caused him to embrace life - and death.

There's spirit in the old trousers yet.

November 2004

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## A Tragedy Of Ego Over Idealism

### The Human Shields Make A Play For Stardom

MILLIONS of people across the globe marched against the war in Iraq. That is easy to forget nowadays, in the aftermath of chaos that is modern - liberated - Iraq. In the end, the stated reasons for the war proved just as mythical as the exploits of the epic literary hero Gilgamesh.

Less remembered, even than those who dared to defy Bush and Blair in their unholy war drive, were the few hundred daring souls who took their defiance even further - by going to Iraq to act as volunteer Human Shields.

Think of the Shields as a kind of modern day International Brigade, but this time they weren't going to fight. They were going to protest against an illegal war by putting themselves in the firing line.

One of these Shields was Karl Dallas, a Bradford-based Christian, communist, campaigner, songwriter, poet and former journalist. A man of many hats who defies simple definition, and who went on to turn his experiences into a play.

The Human Shield movement was the brainchild of Ken O'Keefe, a former US marine who took part in the first Gulf War of 1991. Afterwards, he became so disillusioned with his government's foreign policy that he renounced his US citizenship in protest.

As the war effort was mobilised, O'Keefe sought to muster the peace movement and anti-war sentiment growing around the world. The intention was to get as many volunteers - tens of thousands was the stated aim - to 'occupy' humanitarian sites in the country in an effort to prevent any war from taking place. The theory was, that if foreign peace activists were present in such numbers, Bush and Blair would be unable to mount an offensive for fear of killing their own citizens.

It was a noble effort, well meant, but as history and hindsight says - a failure. As it was, only a few hundred Shields made it to Iraq. Arguments and disagreements between the Shields, and with the Iraqi authorities, also contributed to conflicting and confusing messages emerging from the Truth Justice Peace organisation that orchestrated the Shield action. In the end, the war began, and the Shields were largely forgotten.

Dallas himself returned from the war zone a couple of days before the war was launched. He and his companions paid some \$600 for a taxi to the Jordanian border, unaware that the war had started while they were en route until they reached their point of exodus. He had left to try to raise awareness of the Shields and their work. Much later, he went on to capture the essence of his experience on the stage.

"This is one person's biased and somewhat jaundiced view of what it was like," he said. "I have changed all of the names, but I expect people will recognise themselves. Some of the portraits are far from flattering, but then the character representing me comes over as a bit of a berk too. [Frederick, played by Peter Crotty.] Some of the things said about and to them in the play are records of actual conversations."

Following on from its initial run in Bradford, Dallas received several offers for performances in St Albans and Watford. He is hoping to find a venue in London. He is also discussing the likelihood of staging the play in Edinburgh (though not at the Festival). Following on from this, the play went on tour this month.

"This is really screwing up my plans," Dallas said, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, "because I wanted to put the play behind me and do some new stuff."

*Into The War Zone*, as the play is called, gained its debut at Bradford's Priestley theatre earlier in 2005. As well as being written by Dallas, he also directed after 'artistic differences' saw the departure of his original director Joe Ogden. It was staged with the assistance of Actors' Community Theatre (ACT) as part of the group's New Writing programme. As it was his first piece of 'proper' dramatic stagecraft, it was very much a case of stepping into the firing line. A gamble, then, which paid off for all concerned, as *Into The War Zone* proved to be a well-acted/written/produced little piece of stage craft. It was thought-provoking and atmospheric, and a poignant reminder that the heroism of Humanity can be so easily brought low by the folly of Humanity.

To be blunt, most of the Shields came across as a pretty unpleasant bunch; hardly the type of folk you'd want to get trapped in a pub with, let alone have in your country as saviours.

They were egotistical, stuffed up with their own self-importance, positive that they and they alone had all the

answers, and that they were not only saving Iraq but the world. A right bunch of prima donnas, in fact. Pity poor Iraq, then, and indeed the Human Shield movement.

More poignantly, the play shows how the noblest of aims and causes can be torn to pieces with tragic consequences courtesy of basic, bog standard human flaws. The noble is conducted by ordinary human beings, after all, but while many can rise above their flaws, there are others - often the most vocal and visible - who cannot. This comes across with terrible clarity during the interaction of the characters.

Perhaps a more damning indictment of these basic human flaws was an inescapable sense of Eurocentric colonial manifest destiny. The strong suggestion that these people were there to do the Iraqi people a favour, and boy the Iraqi people better be grateful. This 'sub-text' came across in much of the dialogue, but also in their dealing with the put upon character of Schweyk, the only fictional character, played wonderfully by Mahammed Rafique Butt.

"Schweyk is modelled on the hero of Jaroslav Hasek's satirical World War 1 novel, *The Good Soldier Schweik*," Dallas said. "Brecht took that character and put him in a play, *Schweik In The Second World War*, and my Schweyk is meant to be his son by an Iraqi woman. He makes reference to his father having met Hitler on the Russian front, which actually happened in Brecht's play."

So, Son of Schweik finds himself the proprietor of the cafŽ on Al-Sadoun Street, tending to the inflated needs of an eclectic gaggle of anarchists, socialists, peaceniks and idealists who congregated to become Shields. Sometimes, you can't help wondering why he put up with 'em - but then he is 'only' a fictional character. Isn't he? Rather more accurate to say he stands in for the Iraqi people. Schweyk is Iraq. The innocents caught between the hammer and the anvil of foreign policy, between Saddam's regime and the Blitzkrieg to come. People wanting to get on with their lives in peace as best they can, but knowing that the Reaper is donning his cowl and sharpening his scythe, all the while giving a nod and a wink to two ambitious men from distant lands. Poor Schweyk - perhaps the Shields were the least of his worries.

Truly, he was a character walking the veritable tightrope. He was faced with people who took for granted their freedom to express criticism of their own political leaders and Saddam in a way no ordinary Iraqi ever could without fear of secret police reprisals. They constantly showered Schweyk with a barely concealed disdain. Apparently, they forgot the fact that whether Saddam was in power afterwards, or someone, else, he Schweyk had to live in that country, long after the Shields had gone back to the obscurity of their lives in political and social safety. Schweyk, all the same, did his best to play host and make welcome these eclectic and egocentric visitors to his cafŽ and his country.

Experience from writing about the endeavours of the Left elsewhere has given a sense of authenticity to the mannerisms and behaviour presented in this dramatised rendition of the Shields. While the Left in its broad spectrum includes many dedicated and sincere individuals who work hard without claim to glory or renown, it is much the case that the Left is also dogged by - perhaps - more than its fair share of overbearing egos. Those who find it difficult to place their personal quest and self-importance second to the cause they profess to fight for.

There is more than a little truth in that old *Life Of Brian* scene... enough to make you wonder sometimes if the Left isn't sometimes the last, best defence of capitalism, but that's a digression...

At times it was painful watching the self-centred banter of the Shields as they were portrayed within *Into The Warzone*; fighting down the urge to grab them, shake them, and scream some humility into their precious souls. Only a couple of the Shields managed to come across as genuine, determined, and thoughtful in their mission. These being 'Jim' the New Yorker [played by Mick Waterhouse], and Siana Ansari, the young Moslem woman from Bradford [played by Sidrah Shaikh]. She in particular got on with the job in hand, quietly and with no nonsense.

As in the fictional play, as in the real life situation: there were disagreements within the Shields. Given an endeavour of its nature, differences and arguments were inevitable and - up to a point - healthy. How much these arguments are accurately reflected in the play is another matter. Not only has Dallas presented by his own admission a 'biased' and 'jaundiced' view of proceedings, but he also had to condense weeks and months of activity and relationships into a mere two and a half hours. A daunting task by any standard.

It's difficult to say what Dallas was hoping to achieve in the production of the play, other than to represent a dramatic performance about an aspect of the war that is easily overlooked. At the very least, he reminds us that there were those so determined to prevent war that they - whatever their individual faults - literally risked their lives.

"If [the play] has any message, it is to highlight the incredible amount of freedom we had in Iraq," Dallas said, "and it was our failure to act responsibly in those circumstances that ended, eventually, in what I see as the failure of our mission. I think there is a message in this for the anti-war/anti-occupation movement, but like Bob Dylan sang: 'I can't think for you - you've got to decide'."

For all the flaws displayed in this small coterie of Shields, reflecting in some part the arguments and disagreement that inevitably rippled through such a rawly idealistic and democratic movement, it must be remembered that this is one man's fictionalised account. The Shield venture was for all the doubts cast here a brave act. It failed, yes because of tragic but not unexpected flaws, but in the main because the Shields never congregated in sufficient numbers to put the theory to the test.

As Dallas added: "There were nearly 400 of us from 36 different countries. If we'd had 36,000 not only in Baghdad, but every other major Iraqi city, we might have actually stopped the war. As it was, only one of the humanitarian sites we occupied was bombed, though all of them were damaged in 1991. I still believe, basically, that we blew it," Dallas added. "If we hadn't wasted so much energy quarrelling among ourselves, which sent mixed messages to the world about what we were at, we might have actually stopped the war."

History is filled with such 'ifs', but in producing the play Dallas can be rightfully proud of what he achieved with the play, as can the actors and crew assembled to bring the Shield experience to life.

It is a poignant reminder of the courage that ordinary people can bring to bear on our political leaders, the risks they will take for what they believe is right, and, yes, the foibles in each and every one of us that can - if we forget ourselves - wreck so much promise.

The Shields deserve to be remembered - warts and all - and this play admirably lives up to its role.

June 2005

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Wait there's...

... All these left over bits...

There Is No Sanctuary

The Pestilent Script

Have You Ever Done It Whilst Being Stood Up?

Synapses Of The Soul

There Is No Sanctuary

## A Monologue

YOU made me what I am today.

Yes you, my reader.

I was manufactured with all the care and efficiency of one of your factories exported to exploit cheap labour in what you call the Third World.

You made me. You are my Creator.

And far too many like me.

For that, you hate me. Once you finally noticed my existence that is; I was born in your indifference, and schooled in your revulsion once I turned up on your doorstep like some beggar at the gate. I, we, the international Diaspora of the uprooted and persecuted, are the rude intrusion, the wake up call demanding you look at the world beyond your cosy prejudices.

You hate me because I am here. In your world. What you like to call the First World. The developed world, as though we from elsewhere are somehow incomplete.

I am a reminder of the rottenness at the heart of your glamour, the hollow ache at the core of your freedoms and your cherished values.

From a distance - sanitised and rendered harmless by your televisual Pandora's Box - I am to be pitied. Out of that box, up close and personal, I am to be despised. In neither case are you prepared to allow me to be a human being, with all the attributes both good and bad that this entails.

You hate me all the more because I am out of my allotted place and out of my time; an invader in your space refusing to exist beyond the horizons of your sight.

For some reason, I am a threat and a challenge to everything that you hold dear. Warm beer and cricket on the village green are not for me; nor are they something for most of you, from what I have seen. I do like Shakespeare, though, and Oscar Wilde, and even Alf Garnett in his loveable bigoted way.

Such a shame not all your bigots are so laughably harmless. Or the bigots in my country, for that matter. The ones you armed and financed, and courted in the days when my life was sunshine and I had no idea of the storm on the horizon. But that is a story for tomorrow.

You know, even after all I have been through, I still do not understand why you fear and hate me so.

Am I the fool, or is it you, my reader?

From the Third World, I came here to your world, the First World.

Did I travel through space? Did I move through the dimensions of existence?

No, I moved across geography. Terrain. Landscapes. Some harsh. Some breathtaking, but all filled with sorrow of one kind or another. Hope kept me going. Not just for myself, but for us all. For all of us blighted by war and famine, or just blind ignorance or fear.

And when I set out I believed in you.

I believed in what you stood for, what you uphold as valuable and valid for all people - regardless of their race or creed or religion or nation of birth.

You uphold and espouse notions fit for One World, One Human Race.

You are part of that world and race.

So am I. Or so I thought.

Your fiery banners of freedom, democracy, rights and equality; have ignited the human spirit for centuries, illuminated the paths to a better future together. You hold the seeds to hope and a better future for everyone.

Of course, to really find that place, you need our help too. You cannot do it alone, any more than we can. We are all connected, and together only can we make this world a better place. I think you know this, deep down in your hearts.

Do you have any idea, what you inspire in the hearts and minds of many?

Yet you created this world, this broken fragmented world: you tore me from my home, from the life I knew and loved, from the people and places dear to me. From the future expected and contemplated. The future life of an ordinary man, living an ordinary life.

Much like you.

Out of all the fragments and shards in this broken world, I came to you.

I came here because I believed in you.

All I found was hate and fear and anger.

No, that is not quite true.

Yes there is much to fill my heart with fear and shame of what you might become, but there were also things that stoked the embers of my hope.

Amidst the darkness, I found the light of humanity, oases under siege, but there all the same. Support and understanding, sympathy and help and love from people who had no reason to care or to help. The lives of these Samaritans were also filled with pain, yet they still took time to soothe my own.

Therein lies your strength, if you have the courage to let go of the hate and the fear, and those who wish to wear it like a banner.

But here I am, and apart from those priceless moments of humanity, I was a criminal alien in your midst; all because my life was taken from me, and I sought sanctuary in a place I believed in.

In a way, a crazy way, I still do believe in you.

So I ask, why can't you believe in yourselves, why can't you open up to the best in yourselves; that which has inspired so much hope and belief?

When will you learn - or perhaps remember - that this world is not there for the taking but for the sharing. That we all have a place on this Earth, that to make it a better place we need each other.

You can only bar the gates for so long. The pain and misery of this world does not respect closed borders. We have seen this too many times. The world does not end at your doorsteps. There is where it begins.

Close your doors, close your eyes, and you shall only reap more of what you fear. And as you harden your hearts to such as me that you made, then you harden your hearts to those in need within your fool's fortress. You harden your hearts to yourselves.

Are you to become mean and unfeeling and inhuman? Or will you be part of the world. It is out there, waiting, for you to join it, to be part of it.

And when you do, perhaps you will stop making hapless victims like me; perhaps then I can go home and live in peace as a human being.

I want to go back to that home. I cannot do so without you.

December 2003.

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### The Pestilent Script

CREATIVE writing is the expression of a parasitic organism call *Inspiracoccus Scriptorius Infectis*. It multiplies within the brain, invading nerve cells, and then uses the neural weave to nurture the larval creature into fully-fledged maturity.

Some writers have guessed at the nature of this affliction; Orwell for instance referred to writing a novel as like some bout of a vile and debilitating disease. To date there is no cure. There is no inoculation, as no-one has yet discovered the bacterium, virus or basic particle that provides the infectious mechanism of this disease.

Invisible the organism may be, yet we can acknowledge its existence through the effects it has upon the victims. Typical symptoms include staring eyes, the persistent presence of notepads and pens, calluses and ink stains, and compulsive use of word processors. Frequently, the afflicted are compelled to come together and so cross-fertilise their infection.

For sure, some people have a natural immunity, but again as yet science has no means of understanding why the parasite cannot lodge in the immune person's brain.

There is a notion that some talent and imagination is required to be a creative writer. There is some truth in this, but as with many things in life this is far from the absolute. Though the infection takes root the deepest in the minds of scribes and imaginative individuals, it can also infect others.

Even the illiterate can fall foul of this disease. Depending upon their cultural environment, they can either become oral storytellers, thus spreading the contagion through the air, or they may become the average tap room bull shitter. In the latter case, the effect is the same - the contagion spreads through the air, but also through the faecal mechanism of verbal diarrhoea.

Nobody is safe from this disease. Though it takes root in the brains of what are commonly called scribes, where the larval idea form is nurtured into full-fledged maturity, the adult form must itself breed. It does this through the medium of the reader, and its gametic form is transmitted as further ideas. These infect writers through the general cultural material they ingest. Contained within this memetic pool of inspiration are the spores of the next generation of idea.

And thus the creature breeds.

The writer suffers only the most extreme form of this disease, which thus far there is no known cure. So writers must beware, it is more likely that they are infected and merely replicating within their minds the seeds of one of the most virulent diseases known to man: inspiration.

June 2002

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### Have You Ever Done It Whilst Being Stood Up?

We often forget when we go for that job, but the company is selling itself to us as a prospective employer as much as we are selling ourselves as a suitable employee. With that in mind, let's talk you through one company's classic attempt to make an impression...9

THE man had no name. He was a stranger in a room of strangers, but when he walked into the office I glanced up from my copy of the Borough Local News and found myself gazing into his eyes.

Nobody looked back.

The man behind the eyes was comatose with booze, the body shambling along on automatic. He had a beer can in one hand and a bag full of more tins slung over his shoulder. Those vacant eyes passed over me and the body lurched towards the editorial desk.

"Oh my God! If that's the competition then the job is in the bag," I thought. I was only half joking. The way the man lurched suggested he was meant to be here. In fact, as he moved into the working guts of the office, the horrible thought entered my mind that he was already on the payroll. Was the company that bad, it turned a man to such mental mush?

The place was Dagenham, where a small company published the free newspaper I was reading. The office was a converted shop and I was waiting to sell myself as just the man they needed for the sub editor/ reporter vacancy.

So far so routine, until the narcoleptic alcophile walked in and gave me something more than the usual job interview nerves to mull over.

"Can you please come away from there."

Reality wobbled for a moment when the news editor spoke and moved forwards to take charge. Things had become so unreal that I actually thought he was talking to me. No. His words were addressed to my rival with the beer can.

A few circuits must have fired in the drunk's brain. He staggered a little away from the editorial desk. The unfortunate chaperone gently guided him out with a firm hand while I suddenly concentrated on my copy of the paper.

"Oh shit! There's going to be a fight." Hazy memories of Bradford drunks flickered through my mind and suddenly I was home. Poor guy. The news editor wasn't big enough to play bouncer, and this drunk was built along powerful lines. If things kicked off in this small office, I was in the firing line, and I doubt our tipsy friend would care about the journalistic dictum that I was firmly not involved.

"Please leave the office!"

The news editor's voice was louder now. Firmer. Not a trace of fear. So this was journalistic bravery in the firing line. I was impressed.

The drunk slowly began to get the message and, with assistance, he just about managed to navigate his feet towards the door. Any less alcohol in the system and the man might have become aggressive, but this really was a case of nobody at home -- not even Mr Rage. The office breathed a tangible collective sigh of relief as the drunk vanished outside.

I'd heard of Lunchtime O'Booze, of course, but I thought his liver had long since packed in and collected its P45... I went back to studying the paper I was here to pitch for, but I was wondering just what I had got myself into.

There was plenty of time to think, unlike most of my job interviews. I was thinking about my own first impressions. It turned out that I had misjudged the time it would take to get from Kings Cross to the nearest tube station. By the time I arrived at the office I was already fifteen minutes late.

Not good.

Not that it mattered. At least I arrived.

All the usual introductions, small talk and coffee had been conducted, but I was still left sat there. Five, ten, perhaps fifteen minutes you can compose yourself and look like the ready and able candidate. After forty minutes, and a drunken interlude, there is no alternative but to flag.

Now, theory says in a job interview scenario you are under scrutiny from the moment you walk through the doors. Actually, if the building has a huge glass front (as this one did, being a converted shop) then you are under scrutiny the moment you are seen approaching. Exude confidence, exude professionalism. Everything about you is a selling point.

By now I was having serious doubts. A couple of hurried phone calls revealed that the guy who was supposed to interview me was lost in the maelstrom of London traffic.

"Give it ten minutes," the guy at one of the computer terminals said.

Fifteen minutes later, it was clear that this guy was a no show. Stood up at an interview! Some date. Some first impression.

The man at the computer terminal introduced himself. "Come through."

I followed, bag in one hand, paper in the other. I paused briefly to utter a few words to the reporter who made me a coffee. I asked what I hoped was a joking question: "Who was the scuffer with the beer? He reminded me of home."

She smiled and muttered something. I don't think she knew the term 'scuffer'. Probably not an advisable thing to say in an interview scenario, but by now I couldn't give a fuck.

"I'm sorry, the lights don't seem to work," my impromptu host said as I entered the editor's office.

Good grief, I thought. I only said: "No problem, I am sure we can manage."

I sat down and readied myself for the grilling, trying to rapidly adjust my eyes to the gloom. The only light came from a dirty window behind my host.

"Now you are..." he began.

"Mark. Mark Cantrell."

"And you're here for the sales job?"

"Sub-editor/reporter," I said.

He looked momentarily lost as he flicked through the mess of paper and files on the desk, then he pulled open a drawer and looked forlornly inside its dark recesses.

"You sent a CV?"

"Yes."

"I can't find it. We'll have to do without."

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes, and forced my body to maintain the eager, professional and competent exterior. Sit up straight, don't slouch, watch that body language, maintain eye contact, difficult in the dark but I managed it. Though by now I was wondering why I was bothering with the ritual of interview.

The usual run of questions followed. Have I had experience before, that kind of thing: I run through it. The feature writings, the news reporting, the freelance writings, the copy writing. I say all the right keywords, deadlines, calm under pressure that kind of thing. My host seems to be impressed, but based on the company's performance so far, I gather that it is not difficult to impress them.

So far so good. I show him examples of my page design work. He flicks through with an interested air.

"They're quite good," he says. I bit down on the urge to say that, actually, they are not particularly good, only competent. I can knock a page together, but I am a writer not a designer. I couldn't help feeling that he should have been able to comprehend that from the pages I showed him. I just sat back and politely acknowledged the compliment.

Now things are winding down; he has run out of questions. It's my turn to grille him, though my heart is not in it. Then the interview is finally -- mercifully -- over. It's time to leave and return to normality. Outside, I light a cigarette and gratefully inhale.

Don't call me, please, I think, and I most certainly won't call you.<sup>10</sup>

December 2002

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### Synapses of the Soul

HERE in the cold night, when the world is quiet, the writer sits to think. The distractions of the day are hidden in shadow.

He has nothing now to divert him from the words, but the smoking cigarette and the steaming mug of coffee. For the dedicated writer, these are no distractions. They are essential components of the writer's craft. Both work to stimulate mind and brain, encouraging the two in their symbiotic and mysterious process of generating fantasy and imagination.

The writer pauses to inhale some smoke.

As he does so, his mind is blank, but somewhere beneath the void, neurones are working their magic. In collective harmony, they weave words and ideas. The process is as old and as timeless as the human mind

itself. Rooted in ages past, even to the primordial origins of the human soul.

With exhalation comes the plume of words. They are zapped down the nervous system in a complex array of signals. Elaborate, and yet simple, they stir muscle and bone. A thousand signals move the machinery of arm and hand and fingers. Precision co-ordination of hand and eye discharges the words onto the written page, or the phosphor-glow of the computer screen.

While the writer poses, the brain works its mysterious magic. The results are the words that sear the human imagination. Each idea generated in the depths of the human soul, discharged like lightning through the tips of clumsy appendages. There to wait until scanned by a roving eye.

And then in reverse the lightning strikes. Through the darkest depths of the pupil, through the intense complexity of neurones that now decode meaning, the thoughts and ideas so carefully interwoven explode in a fresh mind. Meaning leaps through the void of darkness that separates our individual thoughts.

Words are the neuro-transmitters of the collective human soul, our fingers the synapses that bind us together as one.

August 2000.

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## BIOGRAPHY:

The Literary Life & Times Of A Tyke In Exile

OUT of all of the books in all of the world...

you just had to browse into mine.

THIS wasn't in the script.

Someone had skipped with the pages. Quite possibly that someone was me.

So there I was in Bolton.

A Yorkshireman. On the wrong damn side of the Pennines.

I was. The Tyke In Exile...

A damp fag dangled from a rain-sodden face. I was looking round bewildered for the local literary scene. I needed my fix. Bad. Now I was starting to wonder, just where the hell are the local tribes of scribes...

Maybe they'd heard I was on the way. Some one had tipped them off. That had to be it.

I was worried.

I was pissed off - and pissed on. The rain here is something else.

That damn dog too. I looked down. "Who luvs ya, Cujo," I muttered and kicked its balls. It was one way to shake the piss off my boot. A yelp, a scowl. The dog slouched off into the rain with its tale11 between its legs like a skint clichŽ barred from the last chance saloon.

I didn't exactly follow, I had a few coins left in my pocket after all, but I made my own sorry-arsed way through these avenues of drizzle. My head wasn't exactly in the clouds, but my brain was locked into that deadbeat thought-path of the lit-noir in search of his pen fatale.

Here was a new life. Somewhere. Once the rain stopped and I felt inclined to go looking. A new job too. I was actually being paid to write. Not my kind of stuff, but the piper doffs his cap and plays it again for Sam. Hey, so you say that makes me a literary whore? Well, I guess that means you must be looking for business. Don't look so coy. I'm cheap... and I digress.

All I was thinking about then, apart from the rain, was the stuff I'd left behind.

(I just knew I'd need that damn pen.)

Back there.

In Bradford. A sullen town, reaching for the skies and always falling short, but it's home. You know? At the end of the day, for all these pretensions of literary savoir-faire, I'm just another working class lad from the back streets of Girdlington (think Manningham but without the style, you know?). Yeah, I was born under the shadow of Lister's Phallus - the old mill chimney that beckons like a one-fingered salute to the city's denizens.

That's home.

The place is in the old blood and bones, see? That's where I was hammered into this misshapen form. (Or is that just the cheap suit?) In the pubs mostly, but sometimes at home. Lived there most my life, except those times I vanished to get me some education.

Liverpool and London. Seems like only this morning. Or is that just the hangover? I found my own little pockets of Bradford, though. Easy enough. I keep a few sheets rolled up in my mind for emergencies. Just unfurl at need...

It's in my head; streets and haunts etched in my brain like the ghost-images burned on an old computer screen. Close my eyes and I'm there, propping up the bar at the Priestley, or else staring blank into space at the old scribbling den in the Love Apple. It's home. It's an origin. No. It's more than that; it's a beginning.

And that's important for any writer, but hey - we haven't finished the prologue yet, so stop turning the page.

There was this group, see, we had a kind of a thing going for a while. Interchange, that was its name. We'd get together about once a week. The few or the many of us, and share a few poems and stories. Okay, so we're talking an orgy of words here, but it was innocent stuff. I'm telling you.

Look, you gotta believe me on this. I'm telling it straight.

So sometimes, we got adventurous. We'd take out our stuff and blow off the fluff and bare our words in public. Open mics, we called it. Nobody got hurt. Well, much. You'd see us gathered at pubs around the city. Sometimes out in Shipley, Leeds, Wakefield, wherever we found those swingin' wordsters. We'd take our moment on stage and declare our verse.

That was never quite enough for me.

You get hooked, if you know what I mean.

I moved onto the hardcore stuff pretty soon. Got strung out on a few chapbooks I published. Got some stories

out there in anthologies too, but I've never been that hot a word pusher. More the junkie. Pretty soon it was the novels. 'N' a friend called it. He managed to kick the habit, but me - I'm onto my third bout of 'N' and I'm hooked into the long haul. Uranium Fist, Citizen Zero, Silas Morlock; that's what the label on the pill says.

Still, I needed more to satisfy those late night cravings. Soon, I was pushing my pens at the Priestley, scribbling the PR and pushing their wares to anyone who'd buy a play or a workshop.

I became a real lit-junkie, crashing the book launches and lit-fests, and just schmoozing my way through the city's verbose hoards. Hey! I was the editor of Tyke Writer. And where the wine flowed free, my nose sniffed out the bouquet and my bladder was known to follow suit.

The Words. Always the words you see.

Somehow, they led here. To this town of drizzle. I got me a new fix to keep me stewing a while. Got me a label too: editor. Now don't let that fancy-pants title go to the head. I am still the same guy looking for his lit-chick to lick those ms envelopes and post my pile. Still looking for the opening of that next chapter and verse...

It's out there. I can smell it.

For now, I turn up the collar of my coat, take a toke of the fag, and slouch alone through the neon-flared streets of rain. Somewhere in this sodden city, a future lurks. There's some story, waiting like a poor lost pooch for a sucker to take it home. Maybe you're that story...

So I guess I'll see ya around sometime.

Maybe...

November 2004

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Attack Of The 50-Foot Verbose Mutant Killer Fountain Pens From Mars

The END

Mark Cantrell, Stoke-on-Trent, 24 July 2005

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Mark Cantrell, Stoke-on-Trent, 24 July 2005

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On the colony of Greyermede, an ancient human dream is about to explode...

Uranium Fist

A Novel By Mark Cantrell

Available To Download FREE

ON the colony world of Greyermede, the populace had grown discontent with rule from an aloof and distant Terran overlord. So began the first stirrings that would explode into the most ancient of human dreams.

The populace rise up, setting the scene for an age-old battle transposed onto the interplanetary stage. At first, they want nothing more than Independence - but it isn't long before the unrest broils into a battle to determine who will shape the future society of Greyermede and beyond.

Under the red banner of socialism, the people of this Brave New World dare to dream of something better...

And, of course, there are those who say it can never work.

On Earth, distance, decadent cradle of humanity, the politicians and their corporate allies are determined that it must never work: and so the forces are mustered. Greyermede will face the full and savage wrath of Earth - Uranium Fist.

For Sue Reid, journalist, it's just another assignment, until she finds herself pulled into the middle of a world's Dream - and watches as it is blasted into Nightmare.

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Some days, it seems like the whole world is out to get you...

CITIZEN ZEROA

Novel By Mark Cantrell

Coming Soon From Writers of Worlds

SINCE the early decades of the 21st Century, when society was scarred by the traumas of globalisation and a protracted war on terror, Britain has become a peaceful and prosperous consumer society.

Historians are already talking of a Golden Age, but under the security-driven authoritarian regime of Alexander Carlisle - Britain's longest serving PM - they know not to say anything else.

But this Golden Age masks a rotten core - and it is about to come crashing down.

On the fringes of society are the 'zeros' - the poor, the unemployed, the destitute - who paid the price for society's affluence. Lurking in their midst is Clute, one of Carlisle's former comrades-in-arms who helped him seize power. He has turned self-styled prophet of revolution, but behind his rhetoric of a better world is a nihilistic vision of apocalyptic proportions.

Clute is about to destroy the technological chains of social control by attacking its weakest point. In so doing, the zeros will be unleashed to rampage through the consumer citadels in an orgy of violent rage. So will begin a catastrophic struggle between society and those it exiled.

David Mills is about to become a central player in this world-shattering power struggle. He is a zero, ordered to take part in the JobNet global recruitment scheme. To begin with, it seems to fulfil all its promise as he finds a woman to love and prospects for a better life through this artificial world, then it all goes insane and he is struggling to save both his sanity and his life.

Unbeknown to him, he was used to carry a deadly virus into the heart of the global network's weakest link - JobNet. Now the virus is spreading, corrupting, destroying all the technology that kept the zeros down throughout the world.

While Mills is struggling to exist all over again, the real world is burning in civil war and he has become the focus of a desperate manhunt by Government forces. If they can find his 'kidnapped' body or his projection in AR, then they hope to destroy the virus at source. It is a desperate gambit in a desperate time.

Yet again, Mills is the victim of forces beyond his control or knowledge, but this time - if he survives - he can be a force for change. From being nothing, Mills has become everything; he can save the world. There's only one problem - he might have to destroy it first.

For further information on this forthcoming novel, visit the author's website Tyke Writer Export

[www.tykewriter.supanet.com](http://www.tykewriter.supanet.com)

The Price Of Your Salvation Is My Damnation...

SILAS MORLOCKA Novel By Mark Cantrell

Coming Soon

"If you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you."

Friedrich Nietzsche

TERAPOLIS is an urban sprawl of global proportions; its flesh and bone towers breach even the oceans' restless barriers and forever shield humanity from the light of day. The city has subsumed the great conurbations of history, absorbed whole nations, embalmed entire continents...

Here, in the neon-lit avenues and shaded alleys, the populace pursues the endless and morbid pursuit of fleshly pleasures: anything that drowns the spark of Selfhood until it can be released into the mysterious and much-craved Gestalt-state.

The chimerical technology is the gift of Silas Morlock, the enigmatic and reclusive head of MorTek. Now, as Morlock contemplates the completion of his life's work, he is disturbed to learn of the return of an ancient scourge.

Hiding in the shadows of his city, an organisation known only as the Incunabula has resurrected an ancient and powerful drug. Slowly, its malign influence is spreading like a plague - and it is literally a poison to the Gestalt.

There is hope yet in the form of Adam, one of the dealer Caxton's prime contacts. He is a misfit and a dreamer, an unlikely saviour indeed, torn between the cravings for the Gestalt and his burning addiction to Caxton's merchandise.

So Adam is destined to become a pawn played by both sides in an ancient struggle, for Caxton is more than just a dealer; he knows the true nature of the Gestalt and he knows Morlock. The two share an old enmity that transcends even life and death.

The conflict will take Adam into the heart of darkness, where he is doomed to learn the secret of the Gestalt for himself. The discovery could cost him his Soul, but if he can overcome the horror then he might just save Humanity from itself...

In the shadows at the heart of darkness, Adam must find himself... or be worse than Damned. So begins the final battle for possession of the Human Soul.

1 All genres included.

2 Particularly in today's corporate capitalist, consumer branded manifestation.

3 At least for the moment, though it appears this is not going to remain the case.

4 If you're lucky. Otherwise it's the 'good fortune' of a job working hard in an economic development zone, enduring forced labour producing junk for branding at high prices in Western markets. Commonly called sweatshops - concentration camps might be an apt description.

5 Now known simply as The Priestley.

6 Previously known as the Bradford Playhouse & Film Theatre, now known simply as The Priestley.

7 Sadly, Interchange ceased operating in June 2005, by which time it had flitted through various meeting places. Though the 'doors are being kept open' with monthly performance meetings organised by stalwart former members. Perhaps it will return...

8 <http://www.codeasart.com/poetry/darwin.html>

9 This is a true story!

10 Names have been changed to protect the guilty parties.

11 Sic as the saying is...

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A free ebook from <http://manybooks.net/>