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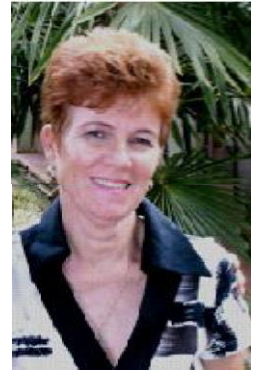
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Editorial

Gail

In PROBE 167 I used a drawing from PROBE 60 November 1084 as the “Blast from the Past” that I said I did not know who had created the drawing. Gavin Kreuter promptly pointed out that there were the initials CvN on the drawing. When I looked properly there they were.... I do apologise to Neil van Niekerk and so now acknowledge his drawing.



Now, in this issue I have used another “Blast from the Past” but this time although it is not officially signed I am fairly sure it was Kai Bosse. I am sure he will confirm this for me.

In the envelope that has brought you this issue, there is also an entry form for the Nova 2016 competition. We hope that we will get more entries from members of SFFSA. Rules of the competition are available on the SFFSA website. www.sffsa.org.za. Please can you take a look at the website? There are prizes amounting to around R5000.00 for the authors of the best stories this year.

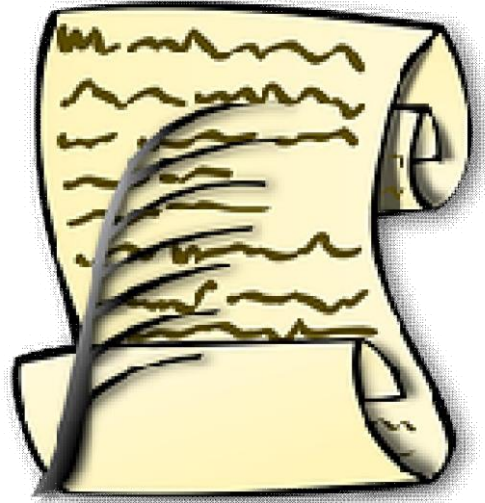
SFFSA is going to be at ICON this year. ICON, the SF adventured themed Games and comic convention will take place on the 24 -26 June 2016. This promises to be the biggest ICON ever. E. Feist is the Guest of Honour. It will be held at Gallagher Estate in Midrand. Google ICON for more details

You will also see an article about a *Star Trek* exhibition being held in a museum in Seattle. While I am not the biggest *Star Trek* fan I have to say that I would really have liked to be able to get to this exhibit. It sounds like a real collection of old and new items from the very earliest *Star Trek* show to the latest movie. Sometimes we feel very far away from SF Fandom.

I also received a long letter from Cheryl Huff, one of the Chairmen of the 2017 WorldCon which will be held in Helsinki next year. She offered to try to come along to our local annual Convention and would have liked us to be represented at WorldCon 75 in Finland next year.....

It was with a rather heavy heart that I had to tell her about the state of SFF Fandom in South Africa and that we would probably not be holding our annual convention this year, due mostly to unavailability of a suitable venue. And also what the state of our local currency has done to our travel aspirations. But we will keep you up to date on the progress of WorldCon75 and I do hope that at least some of our members may get to the Baltic States to represent us there.

Welcome one and all to another note from your friendly, neighbourhood chairman. I hope you are all doing well. It must be near the middle of the year by the time you get this... and don't you think every year seems go by faster than the previous? It might just be me, but life does seem to fly by at an awfully rapid pace these days. Before you know it, it is the middle of the year. Just as life seems to go so fast, so does technology. Have you seen all the new innovations that are coming out every year?



Did you know that Virtual Reality (VR) is already with us? I'm not talking about that old headache inducing technology, but true state of the art, fully immersive VR. Now that is something certainly out of Science Fiction! Though I suppose we now have to call it Science Fact. It has been around a while and used in quite a few places: Anyone remember the 1992 movie The Lawnmower Man? A movie over 20 years old that dealt with a doctor using VR to help teach a mentally challenged gardener. Or how about the Holodeck from the Star Trek universe? The idea of Virtual Reality has been around a long time, apparently since 1938 according to Wikipedia, well... it is no longer an idea as in fact out right now.

The Oculus Rift is the most highly publicised and well known Virtual Reality device. It had been in development for over 3 years and the first units were released in March. It will be mainly used for gaming, and as a gamer myself, the ability to completely immerse yourself in another world certainly sounds very enticing! However at \$600, or around R7500 at the current exchange rate, like many new technologies, it is quite expensive and still quite a niche product. However, the Oculus Rift is by far not the only device being made : Sony has a Project Morpheus in the works, Valve in collaboration with HTC have HTC Vive and even Google is on it with their Cardboard version (and understandable but still really silly name), to name but a few others. So unlike the versions that came out in the 90's, this one looks to stay and in fact become quite mainstream.

So what about 3D Printing? Have you heard that you can now "print out" physical objects? It is still quite young but growing fast. The most common building material is plastic, so with just some basic computer software you can basically make any small, plastic object you like... just don't ask for speed, they are still very slow. More recent advances are starting to allow the printer to use metal, ceramics and if you can believe it, even bio materials and foods! Star Trek replicators here we come.

I have to admit... this is something I would love to see much sooner than later: Autonomous driving cars! Wouldn't it be great to get in your car in the morning, in the back seat that is, tell your car where you want to go, and then just let it get on with the job of getting to work whilst you relax in the back seat? Both BMW and Audi have already created cars that can park themselves, a step in the right direction. It seems that to go from self-parking to self-driving is not that far away. The Tesla car can already simulate keeping to the speed limit (not sure

about that one :), and keeping to the lanes. So you can see, before long we may be able to enjoy a cup of coffee whilst reading the news in the back of the car. Here's hoping!

Apparently there are many, many medical technologies which just a few decades ago would have never been thought possible : A programmable needle-less medication injector similar to the Star Trek hypospray (it seems amazing how many things that were shown in a television series now 50 years old have now become reality); suspended animation to help seriously injured patients; again the Star Trek tricorder to quickly scan a patient and give a diagnosis (there is even a \$7 million prize for anyone who can create such a device); using a 3D printer to help grow customised body parts; etc. etc.

These are but a few of the truly amazing technologies that the world we currently live in is developing. So many of the technologies imagined in older books and movies are slowly but surely becoming a reality (if not already). Can you imagine what they will be coming up with in the next 10 years? The next 20 years? What will the world be like in another 50 years?! It really is an amazing time to be part of the human race, let us hope that all the development they are putting into Artificial Intelligence and Androids doesn't turn into one of the many world destroying robot movies that would be a pity.

As a last point, I have found this very fascinating and interesting chart that shows predictions in Science Fiction books and the year the predication became reality. Check it out at: <http://io9.gizmodo.com/all-the-times-science-fiction-became-science-fact-in-on-1570282491>. Various things are pointed out in the comments regarding some problems and / or potential updates. It is a pity the lady who created the list did not update it with the suggestions, but it is still a great list.

Cheers

Andrew

L.O.C.

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April 21, 2016

Dear SFFSAns:

Thank you for a real paper copy of Probe 166. It's only been here a short time, but I thought I'd better get with it, and respond as soon as I could.

The older we get, the faster time goes subjectively, and that's an unfortunate part of aging. Then, look at your activities in fandom, look at when you joined a club, or went to your first convention... I've been involved in fandom for 39 years now, and

I've been going to cons for 38 years. No wonder time goes faster; it all blends together. Picking up new interests has made fandom fun and fresh for us again.

I have read a lot of science fiction and fantasy books over the years, and my library at home is mostly read. I still have two shelves of books yet to read, but as Andrew says, I haven't read many books over the past few years. I am slowly getting through Planet of Exile by Ursula K. LeGuin, and Map of Time by Felix Palma. Why have I slowed down to such an extent? I am not sure... Fatigue? Declining interest? Other interests crowding in?

The Hour of the Rat...it's a shame there's so many dystopian stories out there. This story shows that we still discriminate, if not about colour, then about age or gender, and whatever we can think of. Interesting story, but I hope my retirement/elder days are a little more utopian.

Wasn't it Bill O'Connor who had cartoons in Probe many years ago? The style looks very familiar. Hope to see more of them.

Yvonne and I are planning a trip to England! We will be going to London for the first week, with a side trip to Watford to see the Harry Potter exhibits, and then the second week in Lincoln to go to The Asylum, the biggest steampunk event in the world. We will be there for the second half of August, just four months away. Can't wait to go, and have our first transatlantic trip in 25 years.

And with that, I think I'm done for the moment. Keep the issues coming, and if you decide to go .pdf, I will help out with the costs, and take that. See you next issue!

Yours, Lloyd Penney.

Nova 2015 Finalist Brian Warner The Office Dragon

"That's it! I'm quitting!"

Featherpants finished typing a sentence then looked up at Moonflower, sighing inwardly.

Not again.

He looked over at the indignant Elf, who was trembling with outrage. Her skin, usually a delicate shade of sky blue, was now practically indigo, a testament to how just upset she was. For a moment he considered simply ignoring her, but he just couldn't do that. As a Pixie, he couldn't help being polite, any more than an Elf could help being highly-

strung. In fact, he often suspected that was exactly why he had been made Head of the Department of Toadstools and Housing, Misc.

Sometimes he almost wished he had been born a Gnome, or even a Troll. Hah, Trolls didn't find themselves constantly worrying about hurting Fairy Folks' feelings. Of course, that was because they were usually wondering how the other would taste lightly braised, with a béarnaise sauce.

"What is it this time, Moonflower? You know you can't just quit! You're stuck in the Department until a directive comes from the Council - or from Mab herself. Besides, I couldn't possibly cope without you. You wouldn't leave me to process this new pile of applications all on my own, would you?"

"Oh, yeah? Well you just tell that to Mr Sourcheeks! You wouldn't believe what he just did! The nerve of that fairy! I won't put up with it any longer, I just won't! And I told him so, right to his face – I said to him, 'Sweetie,' – and he didn't like that, I can tell you! 'Sweetie, I said, if you think for one moment that just because I'm an Elf and not a lahdidah High Fae like some people, well you can just think again!' That's right! Then I said to him- "

She carried on, enlarging on the theme of what she said to 'Sweetie', what she should have said to him, and what she was going to say to him as soon as she got the chance. Featherpants didn't pay much attention to her words; he'd heard them all before – a number of times. Instead, he waited patiently for her face to return to its normal pale blue, while he mentally continued the complex task of assigning appropriate housing to the latest batch of Fair Folk applicants. Since the disaster last moon when I whole field of Toadstools had been wiped out by a Human development, they'd been swamped.

By now, Moonflower was pacing back in forth in front of her desk. Her words showed no sign of coming to a halt, or even slowing down; in fact they were now accompanied by a series of flamboyant gestures. As she talked on, she alternately shook her fist at an imaginary Sourcheeks and slamming it into the palm of her other hand, interspersed with the occasional neck-wringing gesture. He noticed in a distracted way that instead of spoiling her looks, the deeper shade of blue was really quite attractive. And the way her gossamer wings fluttered every time she made a particularly emphatic point was quite... interesting. Intriguing, even.

“And that was when he said, ‘Well, the Dragon’s assigned to your department, and that’s the end of it’. Oooh, I could have screamed; I should have kicked him, that’s what I should have done! Everyone knows that Elves and Dragons don’t mix, and I simply won’t put up with it. I’ll complain to Mab, I’ll- “

Wait, what? Did she say a dragon?

“Moonflower?”

“And I’ll be putting in a formal complaint in to the Council, you see if I don’t! My sister’s boyfriend knows the gardener of one of the Council members – well, their neighbour, anyway, and he said- ”

“Moonflower!”

“ –And really, I don’t see why Sourcheeks should- ”

Giving up, Featherpants picked up one of the small Sprites that were squatting in his in-tray and tossed it in her direction. Squeaking in outrage, the tiny creature spread its wings and took flight, buzzing past Moonflower’s left ear like a miniature hummingbird, and then back to the in-tray. A series of high-pitched, extremely rudesounding noises accompanied it.

“What the- ? Oh no, do we have an infestation again? Pest control was here just last week! Really, it’s too much; this place is just- ” The sprite had distracted Moonflower from her previous tirade –maybe now he could catch her attention, before this one reached full bloom.

“Moonflower!” Featherpants bellowed – at least, he wanted to. Being a Pixie, the best he could manage was a slight raising of his voice while arching his bushy eyebrows.

With a rather startled expression (Pixies hardly ever raised their voices), she came to a halt, looked at him and asked, quite meekly, “Yes, Featherpants?”

“Moonflower – you mentioned a dragon?”

“That’s what I’ve just been telling you! They’ve assigned a dragon to our department!”

“Our department? Are you sure?”

“Well, that’s what Sourcheeks said – he specifically said the Department of Toadstools and Housing, Miscellaneous. Now I ask you, how can any self-respecting Elf be

expected to- ” She warmed to her theme once more, and Featherpants sat back with a sigh.

This is bad. This is very bad. A dragon, in our department!

The last time a Dragon was assigned to this sector, it took seventeen major magical workings to restore harmonic balance, and rumour had it that at least three of the office-workers involved had never really recovered. The problem was that Dragons were just too magically powerful to spend much time in close proximity to ordinary fairy-folk. Those around them started absorbing stray magic - with results that were unpredictable, to say the least. On one occasion, a whole department had had to spend an entire afternoon immersed in ice water - surrounded by magic-dampening fields - just because of one Nymph’s idle daydream.

Why in Oberon’s name would they assign a Dragon here?

At that moment, someone poked their head through the door – and nearly lost an eye, thanks to Moonflower’s vigorous demonstration of exactly how she was going to kick Sourcheeks’ ‘pansy little fairy butt’ – as she so eloquently described it.

“Oh. Oh I say, I’m so sorry – I didn’t mean to intrude. The creature – was he High Fae, or a rather tall pixie? Featherpants wondered. Or maybe a faun? The body attached to the head now came into view as the – whatever he was – stepped nervously into the office. Featherpants looked down at the stranger’s legs.

Not a faun, then.

“Can I help you?” Featherpants asked politely. “Moonflower, do sit down. You’re making our visitor uncomfortable.”

Looking a bit embarrassed, Moonflower settled behind her desk. “Sorry about that,” she said sheepishly, “I was just... never mind, it’s a long story.”

The stranger mumbled, “Oh, no problem at all, sorry, didn’t mean to get in the way,” but Featherpants noticed he stayed as far away from Moonflower as possible as he sidled further into the office.

“Please, take a seat.” Featherpants brushed some stray forms off the chair in front of his desk, flicking a warning finger at a sprite who had flitting closer to have a look at the newcomer. “Now, what can I do for you? Looking for housing, are you? Maybe I could interest you in a lovely gnarled oak, just become available. Very nice view over

an orchard, and the Leprechaun family in the next oak over are hardly any trouble at all, if you just remember always to wear something green. I'm Featherpants, by the way."

"I'm – my name's Clive," said the fellow with a nervous smile, as he lowered himself onto the seat. Perching timidly on the edge of it, he looked as if he expected to run for his life at any second. When Moonflower, having lost her audience, sat down in front of her computer and started the pecking motion she optimistically called typing, he seemed to relax a bit, though he still sent occasional wary glances her way.

Clive? What kind of name is that for one of the Fair Folk? Hmmm, maybe he's a Halfling – or possibly a Changeling.

When Clive drew a pair of spectacles out of his pocket and pushed them onto his nose in a very Humanish gesture, it seemed to confirm Featherpants' suspicion.

"So... Clive, what about that withered oak then? I could have you settled in before moonfall – if you'd just sign this form," he frowned, and started scratching through the heap of papers on his desk. "Where is it now? I had it right here a moment ago."

"Oh. Oh, my. That's very kind of you, and thank you very much, but no, thank you. Thanks awfully, anyway."

"No? Really? Well, maybe you're wise. The Banshee cluster in the next orchard can be a bit... distracting, by all accounts. So, we're going to go with the traditional toadstool then, hmmm? Had a bit of a run on those this last week, unfortunately – the Bottom Field incident, you'll have read about it in the Daily Rainbow - but if you'd kindly fill in this application, I'm sure we can find something suitable quite soon."

Clive's cheeks turned a delicate shade of pink as he replied earnestly, "Thanks you so much, but honestly, no, I don't need a toadstool at all. Not at all. Sorry."

"Well," picking up a scrap of paper, Featherpants looked over the current listings dubiously, "I do have a merman looking for someone to share a coral reef. Fantastic ocean view, but of course it would never work unless you're amphibious. You're not, by any chance, are you? No, I didn't think so. Well, the only other place I have on the books is a bridge. Of course that's really a Trolls Only situation. I'm not specist, mind you, but naturally, with their eating habits... Oh!" His face brightened. "I do have a

mountain cave, recently vacated – quite clean, and absolutely no problems with neighbours, guaranteed!”

Moonflower, having abandoned her typing efforts as, despite herself, she grew interested in the problem of finding suitable housing, chimed in brightly, “Quite right!

Why, the nearest neighbours are at least ten thousand furlongs away, and there’s the Emerald Sea in between!”

“Oh, my. Oh, dear.” Clive was looking very flustered, and a bit green. “You don’t understand. I’m very, very grateful for the kind offers – extremely kind - but honestly, I really have no use for a reef, or a cave, or a... a bridge, or anything of that sort.”

“My dear chap,” said Featherpants kindly - anyone but a Pixie would be exploding in frustrating by now, he knew – “My dear chap, of course we’ll do our utmost to find exactly the right situation for you. No problem, no problem at all. Perhaps if you’d help us by reminding me exactly what it is your, uh, species, looks for in – that is, exactly where you... what sort of...” he gave up, blushing. It was considered terribly rude to ask someone outright what species they were, and being a Pixie, with naturally delicate sensibilities, he felt extremely uncomfortable even hinting around the issue.

“Um, Featherpants?”

“What is it, Moonflower?” he asked, looking vaguely in her direction. “I’m a bit busy at the moment trying to find a nice, suitable place for Clive here, but as soon as I’m done, we can have a nice chat.”

Moonflower pointed in the direction of Clive, who, Featherpants now saw, was now an even deeper shade of green, and perspiring profusely.

“Are you alright?” asked Featherpants anxiously. “Can we get you anything? Some nectar perhaps, or a flagon of water? “Moonflower, be a dear and get Clive some water, would you?”

Moonflower leapt helpfully to her feet, only to lose her balance when Clive, in a surprisingly strong voice for such a sickly-looking fellow, practically yelled, “No! No water! I mean, thank you, thank you very much indeed,” his voice now sinking so low it could barely be heard, “But no. No, thank you. No water.”

Moonflower, having knocked over the inbox where the Imps were squatting when she lost her balance, was swatting at the angry little creatures buzzing around her, making

shooing noises. Clive was cowering in his chair, looking mortified – and even greener. The poor lad was almost glowing green. From down the hallway, Featherpants heard the tapping of Sourcheeks' boots, and then the High Fae's voice, raised in peevish exasperation.

"Featherpants! Moonflower! What in Pan's name is going on in there? I'm entertaining some very important guests, and whatever the two of you are doing... really, you could show some consideration!"

Featherpants groaned, and put his head in his hands. He would dearly have dearly loved to bang his head repeatedly on the desk, but of course a Pixie could never do that – it would be quite of character.

Just once – just once – I'd like to be able to express how I really feel!

The boot-tapping came to a halt, and Sourcheeks stood in the doorway, his arms folded and a discontented look on his thin, sallow face. Ears quivering with righteous indignation, he leaned forward and carried on complaining.

"Honestly, Featherpants, I hardly think this is an appropriate way to conduct business! The cacophony coming from this office is intolerable – intolerable, I say! One would think, you being a pixie- "

He got no further, for something inside Featherpants suddenly snapped. There was an almost audible 'twang', and all his Pixie inhibitions and in-born cultivation suddenly crumbled.

"Oh, Mr Sourcheeks," he said, his voice sounding unnaturally calm in his own ears.

"Were we disturbing you? I'm so terribly, awfully sorry."

"Well, now that you mention it- "

"How horribly thoughtless of us."

Sourcheeks, looking mollified, nodded his head. "Very well, old chap, just make sure it doesn't happen aga- "

"How could we have been so thoughtless? Featherpants continued, a sneer creeping into his voice. "When you were working so hard, entertaining guests, and here we were, blithely working away on these silly old toadstool and housing applications!

Foolish of us, really, though of course, this being the Department of Toadstools and Housing, Misc. one might be forgiven for thinking that such frivolity, ha, ha, might actually be tolerated here!”

So, this is what sarcasm feels like. I like it!

Sourcheeks was now wearing a stunned expression and at the sight of it, Featherpants felt a huge grin dawn on his own face. Moonflower was gaping at him as if he'd suddenly grown another set of wings. Clive, on the other hand, wore a gloomy, resigned expression as he slouched in his chair, distractedly polishing his glasses.

Featherpants felt too good to stop now. Striding across to Sourcheeks, he poked the Fae smartly in the chest.

“Not,” he continued, his voice rising to levels unheard of for a Pixie, “that you would even know what work is; no, not even if it jumped up and bit you on your ugly, skinny, High Fae nose!” The squatter-imps, who had been clustered in the in-tray watching this turn of events with enormous fascination, apparently found this enormously amusing, as they broke out into the high-pitched, whining buzz that passed for laughter amongst Imps.

“And you!” roared Featherpants – a proper roar, not a weak, pixie-ish, imitation roar – “I’ve had just about enough of you, you annoying, interfering, squatting little – flying rats!” Picking up the in-box, he strode to the waste-basket and unceremoniously tipped the in-box’s inhabitants into it – an action which apparently in no way dampened the imps’ amusement, as the squeaky buzzes continued, emanating now from the depths of the waste-basket.

A different sort of squeak made him turn his head. Moonflower hurriedly clasped her hand over her mouth, her eyes wide as she gaped at him.

“And you,” he growled, stalking towards her, “I know just what you need, you annoying, exasperating, wretched – minx of an elf!”

Moonflower squeaked again, as he placed his hands firmly on her shoulders and looked menacingly, directly, into her violet eyes. With a swift motion he caught her off-balance and, grasping her firmly in his arms, leaned down and placed his lips squarely on her mouth. Her squeak this time was a muffled one. The kiss was worthy of Titania and Oberon themselves.

Lowering her gently to her chair, he wiped his lips, and turned to face Colin, who looked up at him timidly. “And you!” Featherpants frowned. “Say, what in Hades are you, anyway? Changeling? Halfling?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you,” Colin was now definitely glowing green, but he didn’t look sickly anymore. Quite the opposite, in fact. Rising to his feet, Colin unfurled his wings – his enormous, glittering, scaled wings - and held out his hand.

“Hi, I’m Colin Dracos. I’ve been assigned to this Department.”

Featherpants sat down and banged his head repeatedly on the desk. It felt quite satisfying.

Seattle EMP Museum celebrates 50 years of Star Trek

It has been 50 years since the Starship Enterprise began its five-year mission to boldly go where no man had gone before., and Seattle’s EMP Museum is marking the anniversary with an exhibition honouring *Star Trek* and its influence on culture and society.

Star Trek: Exploring New Worlds is open and is filled with geeky artefacts from all the *Star Trek* series and movies – from sections of the original Enterprise bridge to a costume worn by Bernard Cumberbatch in the latest movie.

One uniform worn by every captain and one of the only two phasers still in existence from the original series is on display among more than 100 props and artefacts. Keep an eye out for the Tribbles that apparently escaped from their display case. There are half a dozen scattered around! Some of the set pieces are clearly showing their age, which curator Brooks Peck says is a sign of the less-than-ideal way some of them have been stored in garages and transported from exhibit to exhibit.

But the new exhibit is much more than artefacts and costumes. The museum does its best to illustrate how *Star Trek* was both a reflection of its times and a catalyst for social change – from a starring black actress to a Russian character featured during the Cold War and interracial and same sex relationships.

The show's influence on popular culture and even architecture is also on display, including a "Picardian" sweater which looks like Captain Picard's uniform, and a giant red foam Vulcan salute that was given out on *Star Trek* night at a Boston Red Sox game. The exhibit opened on the same week that CBS released a teaser for the new *Star Trek* TV series and a few months before a new *Star Trek* movie premieres.

Visitors are asked to wrestle with some of the *Star Trek*'s ethical themes such as what makes us human, in interactive display screens called "Away Team Encounters". Although the objects cannot be touched, there's plenty of other ways: put yourself in a scene from the movie "The Wrath of Kahn", crawl through a "Jeffries Tube" tunnel, create your own *Star Trek* storyline and take your picture in a Borg regeneration station. An opportunity to act out a scene involving a transporter and then have the scene e-mailed home.

Even the most ardent *Star Trek* fans might see something new at this exhibit, including a cardboard model of the set that was used to plan out scenes. And they might learn something too, including the role Lucille Ball played in the original series. If you don't know the answer to that *Star Trek* trivia question, this exhibit might be for you.

From The Star Independent Traveller Saturday the 28th May 2016

Jupiter Storm

Juliet Gillies

Swirling gases, masses of light
Immense gas clouds
Blue green red orange white
They come together, explode
A panoply of ripples in sight
Impenetrable thick clouds
Play twinkle in delight
A symphony of colour
Far off in the night
Hubble captures the scene
When the sun's rays are bright

Humbling awe-inspiring
The wondrous beauty, the incredible might.

Nova 2015 Finalist

Deon Schneider

Lost in Transition

It was going to be another bitterly cold Cape winter's night.

Snuggling deeper into the coarse gray blanket he had nicked from a carelessly supervised wash-line at the General Botha Naval College in Gordon's Bay earlier that day, Boela shivered in the icy South Westerly breeze coming off the sea below him. In the cold twilight, he could see across the wide expanse of False Bay, to where the lights of the towns and villages strung along the western flank of the peninsula, were just starting to glitter like fireflies against the darkening backdrop of mountains fringing the bay. It was that magic moment of the day when the afterglow of the setting sun brushed briefly across Cape Point, streaking rich hues of golden red across that iconic landmark as it serpented down into the maelstrom of restless water at its base; a turbulently confused meeting of two oceans, where the warm Mozambique current sliding down the African East coast, collided headlong with the frigid Benguela current swirling up from the South Pole.

Regrettably, the splendour of the moment was totally lost on Boela. He had seen too many spectacular sunsets to be emotionally moved by Mother Nature's colourful display and, as far as he was concerned, surviving to wake up with the sun rising over the Hottentots Holland mountains after a night of potentially deadly cold in the open, was an infinitely more gratifying option. No wonder then that there was a distinctly wistful tone in his grumble as he contemplated the firefly scene of creature comforts across the bay.

"Ja-nee, daai blerrie larnies sit ok nou sieka lekka warm in hul fancy huise."

There was no accusation in the statement, because he had long ago accepted his station in life, but verbalising it gave him a sense of belonging to his world. A world which had long ago rejected him, a world in which he was a loner, uncomfortable and

inept in human company, and where instead the squabbling company of seagulls had over the years become an integral part of his non-existent social life.

Boela was no longer a young man, but the deep lines creasing his face owed more to the privations of spending almost all of his fifty plus years in the open, living off the sea and by his wits, than could be accounted for by his age. He broke the seal on the 2 litre papsak of sweet white Malmesbury wine that he had traded earlier in the day for two of the three fat Galjoen he had caught at Platbank, and filled his chipped enamel mug to the brim. The driftwood fire he had made in the mouth of the small cave was already starting to make coals, and soon the remaining galjoen, vlekke and rubbed with a sprinkling of salt scraped from a dried up tidal pool, would be sizzling on the old piece of wire mesh he always carried around with him for just such an occasion. Galjoen and sweet white wine under the stars was a meal fit for a king, and in the age old tradition of Cape fishermen, he lifted the mug to salute the Southern Cross, before draining a good third of the wine in one convulsive swallow. "Aaah," he smacked his lips loudly as the heat of the alcohol burned its welcome familiarity in the back of his throat. Together with a blanket, this was the homeless person's main defence in blunting the sharp edge of a Cape winter night.

He blinked and it was gone. For just a moment as he had lifted his mug, he thought the Southern Cross had acquired an extra star that flashed like a hastily added full stop just to the left of Alpha Crucis. Not of course that he knew the names of the Southern Cross stars, because why would that be important? After all, the only important things to a fisherman in the night sky were the phases of the moon which determined the tides, and the position of the stars to find your way back to shore.

Nothing else in the night sky really mattered, and yet ... and yet, it was unnatural to see something one moment, only to have it vanish the next. He was familiar with shooting stars, and the winking lights of planes coming in to land or take off from Cape Town International, but this was neither. It was different, and living close to nature as he did, the anomaly bothered him ... a point of light that was where it shouldn't have been.

From past experience, he knew that whenever something really bothered him, like the time that donnerse flerrie that he thought had been sweet on him, ran off instead with his fishing buddy Jannes, then the only cure was to anaesthetise the problem, and for that there was no better anaesthetic than his one and only true friend, the papsak.

Once more filling the mug to the brim, he settled down to the serious task of making the problem go away.

It was new moon, and by the time midnight arrived the little bit of warmth that the rocks had absorbed from the weak winter sun during the short day, had mostly leached away, and frigid fingers of cold air were creeping slowly but inexorably into the pitch black interior of the little cave. Wrapped in a layered cocoon of old newspaper and the new stolen blanket, and with the empty papsak semi inflated to serve as a poor man's pillow, the cold was starting to seep through the makeshift barrier and into his old bones. The aches and pains made Boela toss and turn, but the wine had served its purpose, and his alcohol drenched mind was no longer concerned with his physical well-being, it was lazing happily in a tropical makebelieve world of warmth and plenty.

Boela was a stuff-up. There really is no other description for an illiterate drunk. He had no memory of a father, and only a vague recollection of a mother whose own drinking excesses had forced him to run away from home a week short of his seventh birthday. Living on the streets of Gordon's Bay by his wits, and whatever his pickpocketing skills could provide, he managed to drag himself through a haze of drug and alcohol abuse into his teenage years, and from there into manhood. Since drugs, petty thieving, and the daily struggle to stay alive, left no time for any kind of formal schooling, there hadn't been any. Oh sure, some do-gooders had tried to help, like that nice smelling Miss Wilson, but even she gave up after he had traded some of her expensive jewellery for a few bottles of Red Muscadell and a couple of hits of tik.

Well, uneducated he may have been, but stupid he wasn't and, in spite of his lack of schooling, he had over the years taught himself to read and write after a fashion. So there he was at fifty plus, a streetwise drunk of no fixed abode, absolutely no future prospects, and no skills other than being a pretty successful fisherman. Unfortunately none of this helped him one iota when, just after midnight, the little cave filled with a warm pearlescent glow, and three aliens materialised.

Aliens are ... well ... alien, and so it might be stretching the imagination somewhat if we were to state categorically that there was an air of deep puzzlement in their behaviour as they looked at Boela snoring away peacefully in his private fog of alcoholic fumes, but from the finger pointing, the shoulder shrugging and the head shaking, it can be assumed that Boela was not what they had been expecting.

Now if we had been able to understand the frantic alien whispering as they huddled together trying to unravel what was clearly an unforeseen problem, then their confusion would have been confirmed by some of the fragments we might have overheard.

“Surely this is not ...?”

“But then why is he ...?”

“The spatial coordinates definitely ...?”

“Maybe the decoherence ...?”

“es but the nonlocality ...?”

It carried on like this for several minutes, and the only conclusive point on which they reached agreement during that time, was that someone was definitely not in the right place. Any further discussion would therefore be pointless without establishing exactly who was supposed to be where.

Having agreed on a plan of action, one very reluctant alien nodded when he drew the short straw, took a deep breath, stepped nervously forward, and gently tapped the loudly snoring Boela on the shoulder. Of course he didn't take into account the sedative power of a 2 litre papsak, because if he had, he would have known that this kind of wimpish approach would have no effect whatsoever. As it was, all he could do was look helplessly across at his companions, who simply smiled encouragingly, and mimed vigorous shaking as a possible alternative means of waking the sleeping stranger. And so he did just that.

Now there is no reason at all why Boela, when finally shaken into semi-comatose wakefulness, should have acknowledged the three bright green travellers with their shiny featureless faces from a planet with a totally unpronounceable name, but which in their language simply meant Earth. By the way, this is of course true of any of the millions of inhabited planets throughout the Milky Way Galaxy. Anyway, their appearance was not immediately a problem, since excess alcohol can be quite persuasive in convincing the inebriated mind that the weird creatures often found skulking in drunken dreamland are quite normal and, having been there many times before, Boela was initially quite indifferent to their presence, staring bleary eyed, but otherwise quite unmoved, at the strange sight.

This lack of response served only to confuse the aliens further, and once again they huddled to discuss this brand new hiccup to what was already a problem. As before, there was much loud whispering and gesticulation, before some sort of consensus was finally reached. One of them then walked back to Boela who had quietly drifted off again, and waved a tiny black cube a few times across his sleeping form. The cube made an almost inaudible humming sound for a few seconds, before emitting a tiny blue flash. Satisfied, the alien nodded to himself, and spoke briefly into the cube, before returning to his companions.

This is what he told them. "It's done, the analyser has sent a complete life scan to Art. Now all we can do is wait for the report, to see what kind of creature we have here."

The wait seemed interminable, and it was close on 15 minutes during which they waited in a silence broken only by Boela's slobbering snores, before there was finally a muted bleep from the little cube. The alien holding the cube pressed his forefinger lightly in a small depression, and the deep baritone voice of Art, their chummy name for the ship's Artificial Intelligence computer, spoke to them.

This is a fairly loose translation of what they heard. "Hi guys, you'll never guess what happened ... ha ha ha ... you remember that charged particle shower that triggered the proximity alarm and nearly fried my circuits as we entered nullspace? Well, it seems that it screwed up the coordinates on the positional matrix and, by my calculations, we have ... um ... missed our designated target planet by about 23 light years. Anyway, according to my records, we haven't sampled any life forms in this section of the galaxy before, so let's just make the best of a bad job and secure the specimen you've located."

The aliens looked at one another, before their spokesman replied dubiously. "That's all very well for you to say Art, but frankly, this looks like a fairly primitive life form to us, and you know how aggressive some of them can be. On top of that, we're damn sure it doesn't understand Galactica, so how are we supposed to communicate with it."

"Ah yes, thank you for pointing that out, I knew there was something I had forgotten to mention ... must still be suffering the after effects of that particle shower ... well, the life scan shows that its aggression index is way down, so you're okay as far as that's concerned, but you're right, even though the specimen has a well-developed brain structure, its active sector is almost completely underutilised. Can you believe that

most of its brain is dormant? Maybe it's a defective specimen, because I've never seen anything like it. Do you know, there's not even any evidence that it's aware of life beyond its own planet? How brain dead is that? Anyway, I scanned the most advanced ... if you can call it that ... version of this planet's crude communications systems, and have downloaded what appears to be the six most spoken languages related to his body type." Art mulled that over for a while. "This planet is really something. You won't believe how many different languages are spoken ... it's surprising that they can communicate with one another at all." Once again there was a short silence, and the three aliens could just imagine Art doing the quiet equivalent of clucking its tongue and shaking its head, before continuing. "I've tried to identify the specific native language spoken by your specimen, but the working part of its brain has some kind of narcotic block, and the analyser eventually gave up. Hopefully it will be able to understand at least one of the six I've sent you. And something else, I've also downloaded the total content of something the inhabitants call Wikipedia. Apparently it contains the sum total of this planet's knowledge which, if you ask me, is pretty pathetic. Anyway that at least will give you something to talk about with the native. Good luck and let me know when I can extract you so we can get back to civilisation." It ended the transmission with a deep sigh.

The alien with the cube held it against his forehead, depressed a small button, and his eyes glazed over as the six languages plus the Wikipedia content of planet Earth streamed into his consciousness. Twenty seconds later there was a barely audible click from the cube, and his eyes came back into focus. Without a word, he handed it to the other two who repeated the procedure.

One of them walked across to Boela, and went through the process of shaking him till he finally opened one bloodshot eye, grunted in irritation and elbowed himself into a half sitting position. Even though Art had given the thumbs up on a low aggression index, the alien had taken a few defensive steps backward, when Boela showed the first sign of waking. He held up a surprisingly human looking hand in an approximation of the universal peace sign, and hesitantly tried the first of the six embedded languages.

"Ne soyez pas alarmé, nous viennent dans la paix." (Do not be alarmed, we come in peace)

There was no response. Not that Boela was hard of hearing, but frankly, even if he could have understood French, his mind was still refusing to cooperate with his eyes. Deep down though he had to admit that it wasn't often these nightmares spoke to you, but when they did, then why, his mind complained, did it have to be gibberish.

Well, French didn't work, so the alien tried again, this time slowly enunciating each guttural Russian syllable with the kind of exaggerated care which everybody knows is the only way an idiotic foreigner can be made to understand you. "Будет вашим именем" (What is your name?)

Nothing, other than a deep frown, a loud belch, and an increasingly glassy stare.

One of the other aliens now stepped forward, and waved a hand in front of Boela's eyes to try and focus his attention. "Können sie mich hören?" (Can you hear me?) It didn't help that the alien seemed to have a lisp, but even so, the German words had no effect.

By now Boela's mind was starting to take note of his surroundings, and a nagging streak of uncomfortable reasoning was starting to insist that if he was capable of doing that, then clearly he couldn't still be dreaming. But then again, if he wasn't dreaming, then there was the seriously troublesome dilemma of seeing and hearing little green men, when seeing and hearing little green men was an obvious impossibility. He shook his head to try and clear the fog blanketing his mind; a process that finally and painfully managed to connect it with reality. Forcing his unwilling body into a more comfortable sitting position, he slurringly welcomed the first visitors from another world to set foot on planet Earth with these immortal words. "Wierie fok is djulle?"

When that friendly greeting just drew blank stares from these strange visitors, his mind realised with something akin to panic that there was definitely something wrong with the picture and, as minds often do when confronted with an impasse, it extemporised. Of course, it decided with a mental sigh of relief at its own stupidity, they were no doubt visitors from out of town, come to enjoy the annual festive Winter Wonderland week in Gordon's Bay. Yes, that was definitely it, because now that he thought about it somewhat more soberly, he recalled how some of those snotty Vaalies thought it was 'getting into the spirit of things' when they donned outrageous costumes, raced around like hooligans in their fancy cars, and pretended they just didn't understand his language. Well, two could play that game; he switched to larney speak. "So what you want here hey?"

The three aliens once again conferred, their soft sibilant voices sounding for all the world like a snake infested garden. Then, the alien who had first spoken, although it was hard to tell since they all looked the same to him, stepped forward. "We apologise for disturbing you during your sleeping period sir, but we had ... ah ... expected a different kind of specimen. Please allow me to introduce ourselves. I am DylN, and these two are," he waved at each of the others in turn, "Ryn and Luk. We are bio-evolutionary students, sent to investigate an interesting new life form that has been reported in these outer reaches of the galaxy and, if possible, to assess a representative specimen for our thesis on Galactic evolution. Unfortunately our spaceship experienced a mishap during nullspace transition, which is why we ended up intruding into your ... er ..." he looked at his two companions for help, but when this wasn't forthcoming, carried on, "sleeping quarters."

Boela considered; this strange green person had spoken really larney English, and so there were some words he didn't understand, but hey, the little lisp in the way he pronounced the words reminded him a lot of Mister Chong who owned the local café. Mr Chong had always been nice to him, and was quite happy to trade goods for fresh fish, so how then could this situation possibly be bad? Also, now that the adrenalin had flushed some of the alcohol from his system, he could see that they were in fact wearing skin-tight green outfits with glass masks covering their faces, very much like those ookes with the diving tanks that him and Jannes had nearly run over that day just off Rocky Bay when they went out to poach some kreef. The thought of Jannes and his two timing ways trailed a sour taste in its wake, and he swiftly directed his thoughts back to the business at hand. Hmm, he didn't know what they meant by specimen, but if he played his cards right, it sounded very much as if there might be some profit to be made from these weirdos. Clearly they had mistaken him for someone else, but what the hell, if they couldn't get their facts straight, it wasn't his problem.

You know, he thought, if you looked really closely, there was something very familiar about their faces. Ah yes of course, now he had it, those large protruding eyes reminded him a lot of a Jacopever pulled up from the deep water. For sure that wasn't the prettiest fish in the sea by a long shot, but even so, they didn't look all that different to a lot of the folks in Temperance Town. A little shorter and skinnier than most perhaps, but then again not as short and skinny as old Pinkie, the local dealer. Ja-nee, these foreigners had that distinctive naive look of easy marks about them and, as Jannes used to say, 'A mark's a mark ou pêl'.

Now idiots they may be, but the golden rule if you wanted to get the most out of the arrangement, was to make the marks believe you were their friend, convince them you were on their side. "Okay, but yissis man, why you okes wearing funny masks? You don't got to rob a bank do you, cos you can see your face right through the glass? The cops'll get you sommer straight away." Another thought struck him. "Hey, I know, maybe you'se come to poach some kreef. Ag, not to worry man, I know where all the best holes is. I'll show you but," Boela lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper, "is going to cost you." Suddenly worried that he might frighten them off by mentioning money so soon, he quickly added, "But for you special, cheap." This was a phrase that always seemed to work for Mister Chong.

Dyln, who appeared to be the leader of the group, seemed perplexed by this response. If the truth be told, he hadn't the faintest idea what this strange alien creature was going on about. He did however get the part about the mask. "Ah yes our ... er ... masks, well sir as you may have already gathered, we've kind of lost our way, and had not expected to find a breathable atmosphere. These helmets are our life support systems, but I see from the information Art downloaded, that your atmospheric Oxygen/Nitrogen composition is very close to that of our home planet, so here goes." He lifted his hands to his head, and with one fluid twisting movement removed the helmet. He sniffed the air and immediately motioned to his partners to remove their helmets. For a minute or so the three of them stood around making, if one ignored the hissing overtones, some very human-like sounds of appreciation.

He carried on. "Rest assured sir, we have no intention of robbing any bank or poaching any of your marine creatures. As mentioned, our field of study is primarily the evolution of organic life forms in young stellar systems, and for this we need to perform a deep probe molecular scan on a local specimen. Once we have the complete physical and neural data, we'll be able to evaluate the evolutionary index in this sector of the galaxy. I can assure you that the process is completely painless, and we are of course happy to compensate you handsomely for your participation."

Boela's eyes had the kind of glazed look confirming that he understood very little of Dyln's proposition, but somewhere in there he somehow got the message that a large payment was involved, and that made him happy. "Okay, but I'll be watching you'se okes hey, so don't get clever." He put on what he believed to be his most winning gap-

toothed smile, and stood up facing them. Fleecing them was going to be even easier than he had imagined.

Dyln once again produced the small black cube and, balancing it on an open palm, fingered a small indentation with the forefinger of his other hand. Horizontal concentric circles of green light spread mistily outward to envelop Boela, whose body went rigid while his eyes closed the moment the first circle touched him. Like demented Hula Hoops the rings spun, drifting up and down his body, now languidly caressing the skin, now frenetically swirling around his head.

Then it was over. The circles coalesced in a solid plume of green mistiness above his head, before flowing sinuously back towards, and into, the cube.

Boela opened his eyes, bewilderment creasing a deep frown across his forehead as he tried desperately to understand what was happening to him. Streams of data, mountains of information funnelled with crystal clarity through his mind. He looked at the three aliens still facing him. Understanding settled, his face relaxed, the frown smoothed out. He had never felt so alive, so aware. He smiled. "I see," he said.

"Yes," answered Dyln, compassion in his voice. "We had hoped you might. We understand that through no fault of your own, you may have been ... er ... mentally disadvantaged, which is why we programmed the analyser to activate the unused pathways in your brain. We also took the liberty of embedding something Art called the Wikipedia content of your world because, in spite of what he said, you humans have achieved so much with so little. It's something to be proud of. Unblocking your neural pathways, to release your true potential is our payment to you."

Boela nodded, his mind reaching out to find expressive meaning in the thousands of unfamiliar new words and phrases flashing through his mind. He found the right ones. "Thank you," he said softly, talking more to himself than to the aliens. "It's not what I had expected, but much more than I could ever have hoped for."

Walking slowly towards the mouth of the cave, he looked up at the night sky and, letting his eyes roam across the star field, silently ticked off the names of the southern constellations as, one by one, like old friends, their distinctive shapes triggered recognition ... Sagittarius, like a sentinel guarding the gateway to the galactic centre where his new friends had come from ... the beautiful ringed planet

Saturn, so bright this time of the year hovering on the shoulder of Scorpius ... Crux, the Southern Cross, diligently directing those at sea on their southward voyages ... the glowing blisters of inter stellar gas in Carina, busy giving birth to a whole raft of hot blue young stars ... the Large Magellanic cloud, almost obscuring the only constellation named more than 200 years earlier by the Abbe de la Caille, after a geographical location on Earth; Mons Mensa, our very own Table Mountain. So much to see and understand.

Footsteps made him turn round, to find his green clad friends at his side following his gaze. "It is beautiful isn't it?" said Ryn. "And," added Luk, "now that you understand how it works, don't you think the layers of complexity adds substance to the beauty?" DylN put his arm around Boela's shoulder, "Those are wise words my friend. Remember that whatever the future holds for you, knowledge leads to understanding, and understanding is the foundation that supports the way all things interact."

Boela turned to stare at the three of them. Why, he wondered, did I think they all looked the same when I first saw them? They are all so different, so uniquely individual. A deep sense of loss filled him as he asked the question, "Is it time for you to go?"

"Yes," said DylN. "I've contacted Art, and we'll be extracted within the next few minutes."

"Boela looked up at the night sky, dark and empty except for the eternal stars. "Is he going to pick you up here?" He waved dubiously at the narrow rocky ledge in front of his cave, "Or," he smiled, "Is he going to beam you up like Scottie?"

For a moment DylN was nonplussed at the latter reference, and then the Wikipedia penny dropped. He smiled gently at Boela, "Ah yes that Scottie, but no, none of the above. We have a very clever machine that simply twists the intervening space between our ship and this place out of the way, and then we step through a portal membrane straight into the ship. Theoretically space can be curved, so it's just a case of applying the theory in practice. Believe me when I say that it's nonsensical to think that you can disassemble an organic entity into trillions of component parts, beam it somewhere, and then expect the exact same entity to be reassembled elsewhere. It just cannot work like that."

There was a soft bleep from the cube, and a tiny dot of light appeared waist high near the cave entrance. "Well," said DylN, "that's our portal calling, and Boela, some final

advice.” He hesitated slightly as he considered his next words. “We don't know if this is the case, but if the old you is representative of your species, then your brain is now probably the most valuable commodity on your planet. Invest its use wisely.”

One by one they stepped through the portal membrane, the tiny light winking out of existence behind Luk as he stepped through. The finality of that action sparked an intense emotional response in Boela, and he surprised himself by waving at the place where the light had been, and murmured a soft “totsiens.”

An hour later Boela stood alone in the cold dawn of a new day, contemplating the profound difference the night's events had made in him. The winter sun hidden by the Hottentots Holland Mountains behind him, wouldn't reach his cave for some hours yet, but in the misty distance it was just starting to paint the crags and fissures of Table Mountain in the vivid landscape colours of a Pierneef painting. Unbidden, the statistics of the Cape Floral Kingdom drifted through his mind; the smallest of the six worldwide kingdoms, but by far the richest with its more than 5 000 endemic plant species. Fact after fact clicked into place as the new pathways in his brain sifted, identified, evaluated and analysed the information flowing through it. Just the Table Mountain National Park alone had more plant species than the whole of the United Kingdom, his brain informed him. That makes us very special.

Out in the middle of the bay he could just make out the white froth of breaking water around Seal Island, and felt a wash of sympathy for the young Cape fur seals who would soon be flirting with death as they tried to evade the Great White sharks patrolling the area. The light Southwesterly breeze had by now died down completely and, in the semi darkness, the long swells of False Bay, glittering with the metallic sheen of pre-dawn, were as smooth as he'd ever seen it. Cormorants in their energy conserving V formation winged low across the water towards their fishing grounds, and for the very first time in his life Boela actually saw all these wonderful expressions of nature, and stood transfixed by the sheer beauty of the everyday things he had always taken for granted.

It was going to be one of those magnificent windless Cape winter days.

In the gullies below him a shoal of Galjoen flashed darkly in the broken water as they searched for titbits released from the rocks by the surging waves, and he wondered idly why taxonomists couldn't get their act together. Why had they felt it necessary to change our national fish's scientific name from *Coracinus Capensis* to *Dichistius*

Capensis. Why couldn't they just leave well enough alone? Maybe he would look into it at some stage.

For 57 years his life had been dedicated to simply staying alive, but now his mind, like a genie released from a bottle, reached out, and wherever he looked it identified and analysed in minute technical detail. Facts and formulae, diagrams and illustrations, sparked unhindered across previously unused neurons, and the sum total of millions of years of accumulated human knowledge was now making the most exquisite sense of a world he had never been part of.

In the dawn of this new day, and with the intellectual accomplishments throughout history of people that have made a difference, flooding through his mind, he finally looked down and saw himself as he truly was. Saw the blemished skin and brittle bone from years of alcohol abuse and poor nourishment. Saw the wasted years blurred by inertia and lack of ambition.

Lifting his scarred fisherman's hands with their arthritic fingers to his face, he covered his eyes.

No doubt tomorrow he would feel better, but right now he felt like crying.

And then he did.

Is there anybody out there?

Juliet Gillies

Millions upon millions of light years away

Across seas immeasurable to man

I see your galaxy speck

Winking, wink-winking

Its SOS

In the black-blue-grey-white of the night.

Are you looking up at me?

As I'm looking up at you?

Nova 2015 Finalist Anton Taylor What we do

The wind blew through the sparse brown veld and what grass there still was shivered and bent to touch the dry ash-covered earth and then slowly uncurled, back to how it had stood before. The wind was hot and smelt of burnt plastic and human flesh. She was going to have to go into the water.

She lay on the ground upon a koppie, watching, hidden beneath acacia thorns and wisps of dead grass. From where she lay she could see down onto the scorched planes and into the forest and also across the muddy river that she feared.

In the forest the bushes and the long grass and the leaves upon the tall trees were all green. From somewhere within the forest thick black smoke rose.

Resting high in the green-leaved trees were soldiers. They stood atop baobabs and knobthorns and wooden platforms and stared out towards the barren land around them. She wondered if the men had guns. Guns were not made any more and neither were bullets but still people liked to use them.

A kilometre away, crawling through the patchy grass, was a man. He moved very slowly. She knew that he moved slowly because he did not want to be seen, and that also he was starving and thirsty and had little energy. She had seen this much before. From her koppie she could see the trail of crumpled grass behind the man, like the grooves shongololos left in the sand. The men in the trees would see the trail too. The man was foolish to approach the forest so openly, but he had little alternative. Better for him to die trying, she thought. Better than to give up. Because that is not what we do. That is not how we are made.

Two of the men in the trees jumped down and walked towards the man. One of the men had long blond hair and the other very short dark hair. They wore shorts and were otherwise naked. That was all she could make out.

The starved desiccated man saw the others approaching and lay still like a tortoise under the shadow of raptors. But you do not have a shell, she thought. Soon the men were above him and then they raised up their pangas and brought them down upon

him. The man did not scream and all that she heard was the thudding of the pangas cleaving spine and cracking skull, brought with the wind rustling through the veld.

The soldiers carried the pieces of the man in their arms back towards the forest and the thick black plumes of smoke and disappeared into the shade of the tall green trees.

It is a pity that he did not run, she thought. Then I would have known if they had guns.

I will have to go in by the river, she thought. She had known that this was how it would have to happen but she did not like the river and had hoped that in some way she had been mistaken. But she was rarely wrong.

Looking down at the forest, on the left ran the wide brown river. On either side of the river were reeds and water bushes growing upon a floating canopy. The river itself was coloured brown and white from rapids.

Down the back of the koppie, through the thorns and rocks and rusted tins and burnt twisted pieces of plastic, she crawled upon her sliced-up hands and feet, stopping at times to scan the horizon, feeling the sun-cooked pebbles and metal burning into her stomach and elbows and thighs.

In the distance it seemed as if hot gas were coming from cracks within the earth, and although she had seen such things in her life, in the final days of the hunt for gas and the last crude attempts at fracking, she knew that in this case it was only the heat of the sun upon the earth that distorted things.

Soon she reached the base of the koppie. It was a hundred metres from there to the riverside vegetation. She carried with her a small ragged backpack, held closed by drawstrings that also acted as straps that she wore over her shoulders. She opened the backpack and took from it a pair of goggles and a short snorkel. Then she closed the bag.

There was no point in crawling towards the river. If the men saw her and had guns then they would shoot her. Running made it harder for them. It helped that she was a woman. You were a smaller target to shoot at. And as a woman it was more likely that the men would try to capture you, and keep you. Being captured meant more time alive and also more chance of escaping. But mostly it meant more time alive. Even if it was just enough to see the sun set or tell something important to a child or hear your

name being spoken by another person. Her name was Martha. She had not heard it said for a long time.

She would have to run fast. She could do that. Her legs were short but they were strong and thick. She would run crouched and use her hands to push her back up if she lost her balance. Her hands were wide and wrinkled and slashed, and her palms comprised of a continuous map of callouses and scar tissue. Many of the fingers had no nails. She had no index finger on her left hand. It had been bitten off.

She looked out onto the flat veld. There were no trees there anymore. There were scorpions and puff adders and sharp bones and stones in the gravel of that veld. But still she liked it more than the water. She looked at the veld and felt how it was to be dry and to have air to breathe and then that was enough.

She pushed herself up at a forty-five degree angle and in that same motion ran towards the river. She held the goggles and snorkel in her left hand with her body between them and the men in the trees. It would do no good to have bullets or shrapnel pierce them. She heard only her breathing and the jingle of her meagre possessions clanging in her string backpack. What a noise, she thought. She did not look towards the men but rather towards the river and soon she was in front of the vegetation. The actual river, with its brown muddy surface and white splashes, was still far away.

Martha dived feet first into the water bushes and reeds and sunk up to her waist. The reeds cut her and poked into her eyes and one went into her nostril and ripped the base of her nose from face.

The vegetation was thick and the reeds were several metres tall. She punched her free right hand into the mulch and pulled at the roots so that she would sink further. She moved down to her chest and then it seemed that she had come to a stop.

Her legs were dangling in the water beneath the vegetation and she thought of what was looking at her from below but also she thought of the men in the trees and so she trashed and kicked with her legs and pulled with her arms and wriggled her waist. The water around her muddied and the noise and frenetic splashing was so great that it drowned out the sound of the rapids.

Something in the water hit her legs hard and her body swivelled around and the top of her body rocked back and forth like a fisherman's float, and once again her face was cut. Her blood was running through the hole down along the reeds and into the water,

mixing with the mud and algae and turning into a soup that every animal beneath the surface would taste and want.

She put on her goggles. Something hit her again, in the abdomen, and winded her. The thing was rough and she could feel the grazed skin along her belly.

The snorkel was short and it tapered very thinly at the top. She gripped a tall reed and hoping, begging, that it was the hollow kind that grew in these swamps and not the solid kind that was also common, snapped it and without looking to see if she was right or if she was wrong and would die, rammed the end into the thin tapered top of the snorkel. She turned it around, screwed it in to make it tighter, and then she put the snorkel in her mouth and beat at the hole and snatched at the weeds and writhed.

The gash in the vegetation widened and tore and opened and then Martha slid through into the dark water below, her hand no longer in a fist but now opened, following last, as if it were waving.

She opened her eyes but the muddy water was disturbed from her thrashing. She pushed down against the ceiling of reeds hoping to touch the ground but she only went down with her legs sprawling in the dark, searching for something and finding nothing.

With her two hands wide and outstretched like terrapin fins, she pushed up against the water and drove herself down, downwards to where it was darker and colder.

Still pushing against the water and still not at the bottom, she sucked upon her snorkel. Nothing came. She pulled again. Water and grit came through and then there was air. It was not much and it required great heaving pulls but it was air. It had been a hollow reed.

Through the brown and red clouds a grey shape appeared. It shot towards her. She punched forwards and hit its head and then it swam away and she could not see it anymore.

I hope the bottom is not much further and that the reed is long enough to reach the surface from there, she thought.

She pushed down again and as her feet sunk into the soft slimy silt she pulled on her snorkel and drew air and felt happy that her hopes had been realised.

She dug her feet into the soft mud and felt worms crawling over her toes. She was pushing upwards against the water still, and the movement along with her entry into the swamp floor and her blood made the water turn to mist.

Through this mist, on the outer edges of its strange haze, she saw the shape of the shark. It was two metres long. It was thick and stout and had a broad snout.

The shark circled. Watching the shark, Martha turned, pirouetting, doing a slow version of the dances she would perform in her youth. Then it came at her, its wide tooth-lined mouth open and racing towards her face. She put her elbow into its snout and it turned to the side and she ran her strong hands along its rough side and felt its gills, and rammed her fat fingers into the slits and pulled. She felt the flesh partitioning the gills give way and tear and then the shark was thrashing wildly, frantically, and the snorkel fell from her mouth but still she pulled at the gills, feeling stringy pieces of flesh pulling taught and then snapping, and still the shark fighting and twisting.

Her fingers tore through all the gills and the grip was lost, and the shark flailed in the water beside her, too engrossed by its own pain and destruction to care for the woman in the water.

Martha could see very little through the mud and blood and churned up organic matter, but the shape of the shark in its agony was close enough to vaguely perceive. Very quickly, a large crocodile, twice the length of the shark, moved from the mud and bit the shark and pulled it back with it, back towards the tunnels and holes where things watched and waited and died.

Martha moved her large hands, which had done so much in her life, and found the reed and followed it down and found that the snorkel had not detached. She put it to her mouth and strained through the mouthpiece for the mean stream of air that it provided. Amidst the fighting she had felt something hard in the slush, and with her foot she searched for it again and felt that it was a root.

She knelt down to hold it and still no water came in through the snorkel. There she crouched, at the bottom of the marsh in the shadows and the blood, waiting for the debris to settle and the world to clear.

The sediment was slow to settle. The currents that ran through dim caverns and labyrinths were weak and did not quickly clear the water. Martha waited. There was not much else to do. She could see little, and if she moved the reed would snap.

Although hidden behind hills and clouds and the curve of the earth, the sun eventually rises, even when it has been dark for long. It is inevitable. And as the first light, oddly bending over the horizon from beyond begins to show the world as it is and frees the watcher of her morbid imaginings, so too now did the gloom begin to clear and the underwater netherworld become perceptible.

The ceiling of riverine vegetation above was thick, so thick that it had become a soil of itself, and other plants, like reeds and bushes and even short trees had taken root and grown upon it. The mulch of weed and lichen and floating shrub had its own roots, which dangled down below into the water, waving gently in the soft flow of the river, brown tentacles with smaller tentacles coming from them, like long-limbed slim slimy caterpillars flapping up and down after having had their heads stamped off.

There was stillness, of the water itself, but within the stillness of the floating particles there was much activity. Sharks glided, seemingly aimlessly, and barbels, bigger than the sharks, ruffled through the mud. They were so strong that when they broke the surface for water, they smashed through the hard roof and sucked in the air through great gulps that sounded through the water. This popping through the surface, and the flapping of fins, and the roar of distant rapids echoed loudly in that unlit amphitheatre.

As her vision bettered she saw the shapes of gigantic crocodiles lying in the mud, their turreted backs and tails lined with sludge and most of themselves hidden. Zigzagging above were pythons and smaller water snakes, with bright colours still showing through the brown-green dark filter of the river.

Upon the floor were other eerie shapes that after time bore recognition. There were tyres and shivering plastic packets and pieces of furniture, the jagged places where they had broken off now smoothed.

Perhaps, no longer flaying and fumbling, she was mistaken by the predators as something from their own world. Yes, she thought, perhaps it was her stillness. But now she would have to move.

To reach the forest, and its supplies, she would have to go through the uncovered part of the river, where the water ran fast and crashed over hard rocks. To move beneath

the cover would require her to paddle and crawl over the river creatures and poke that flimsy reed through that hard snaring awning.

Fifty metres away, the light came through the surface of the free-flowing river and seeped towards her. That is where I must go, she thought. It was a long way though. If you stay calm, she thought, it is unlikely you will pass out.

Martha did not like to dwell upon the ways in which she might be taken. She had seen enough of the marsh bed to decide upon the best way of reaching the flowing river. Perhaps she was wrong. But sitting in the muck would not change that.

She sucked upon her reed and then she began to swim towards the light. The felt the snorkel strain in her mouth and then ease. The reed had snapped. She took broad breaststrokes, slow and calm, trying not to disturb the curtains of ripe algae through which she swam, aware that the river was still far. She could not be too fast, nor too slow.

Her wide hands pulled her smoothly and her thick calves and flat feet kicked back upon the water. It was as if she belonged. But she did not.

She swam two metres above the floor, two beneath the ceiling. Below, things slithered. A shark drifted towards her. She changed neither her direction nor her speed. She would have to hope. That was what she did, always. The shark idled past her. She was halfway now. Her lungs felt as if they were stretching and with this stretching came a rising panic. Stretching and rising, and pulling herself through the water, faster now, needing to reach the light and the air and to be freed of this watery hell.

She wanted to put her head up and breathe. But she could not. Her strokes further quickened and her kicks became out of sync, flailing stamps against nothing, bubbles streaming out and up and dark swirls curling about her.

The animals moved. The sharks tightened their arcs and the crocodiles lifted their long noses and watched. Martha was waning. She swam down and began to pull herself along the floor. The mud gave way and she slipped and floated up and then she was down again, clawing through and down, searching deeper and more desperately for roots and rocks whilst behind her the beasts beat towards her.

The light was close and she thought she would make it, and then something caught her. It took her leg. It was crocodile. It bit upwards, swallowing her right leg so that its front teeth stopped just below her thigh. It dragged her back and she clutched at the

mud and her grip held and the crocodile pulled again and she slipped and was pulled back and then she was circling, spinning as the animal rolled her. In the mud and darkness and the stars forming before her blind eyes she beat it with her left foot and clawed at its thick-ridged skin, searching for its eyes. And then it released her, and all she knew was where there was light and thrashed to it, mad and dying and unaware, and then she was in the rapids and pulled along still underwater until she was shot by the force of a rapid upwards to the surface, and she was sucking at the air, blind and automatic like a child born into water, rushing along and gulping and coughing but alive.

She slammed into rocks and an animal rammed into her chest and she somersaulted backwards still moving forward in the stream, and then there was a clearing in the vegetation, and unbeknownst to herself she paddled towards it and was dragged against the bank and then came to a stop in the shallow water, her back in the mud and her head on a rock and her mouth barely above the water.

A young woman woke her.

‘Are you dead?’

‘No. Help me.’

‘If they learn I have helped you they will do terrible things to me.’

‘They will do terrible things to you anyway. They have before and they will again. Now help me.’

The young woman, still a girl, tall and slender and dark, pulled Martha’s hand and lifted her to a sitting position.

‘We must hide you in a bush.’

‘Fine. I will crawl. I cannot walk at this time.’

The girl led Martha as if she were a buffalo that the lions had taken but not finished, through the shallow water and then over the hot fine gravel, over the grass, towards a thicket. Martha crawled through the bush until she and the girl were in the middle and hidden. The leaves were soft and there was a coolness in the shade.

‘What is your name?’ asked Martha.

‘Sneha. Why have you come here?’

‘I need supplies. I will die out in the veld otherwise.’

‘But look at you. How you will do this?’

‘I will do it.’

‘You will die.’

‘Maybe. But better than to just wait for death in the veld.’

The girl looked at Martha. Her body and face was covered in cuts and still bleeding, her nose was slit and her eyes bruised and the whites almost all red.

‘Let me look at my leg,’ said Martha.

Pieces of skin had been pulled off and the flesh itself was littered with divots and deep valleys of red. Martha flexed her calf and rolled her ankle.

‘Nothing is broken. The cuts are not deep. The muscles and tendons work. I will be fine.’

The girl said nothing.

‘Sneha,’ said Martha. ‘Listen to me. There is not time. Not today, or ever. In this place, we cannot pause. You must decide. If you show me to the supplies, I will help you and look after you as if you were my child. Nobody will touch you. It is true that if you help me and we are caught they will torture you and kill you. But that cannot be much worse than that which they already do. If we die, then at least you will have tried. Look at me. Can you tell I am old?’

‘You are the oldest person I have ever seen.’

‘That is true. That is because I know how to stay alive. I can teach you too. Now decide.’

‘I will help you.’

‘Good. Where are the supplies?’

‘In the middle of the forest by the fire. Men stand guard.’

‘Do the men have guns?’

‘Yes.’

‘We will have to get a gun. Take me to a man with a gun. I can walk.’

Martha stood, opened the backpack that like her had survived the river, and took out a short blade and unsheathed it. Sneha led her on through the forest, into a tunnel of river bush created long before by traversing hippos. They walked in silence, Martha limping, but quiet. Sneha squeezed Martha’s arm and pointed ahead. Around the bend stood a tall topless man. He held a panga, and upon a belt slung around his thin waist there rested a machine gun.

Martha placed her backpack down and began to walk to the man, then began to run, fast and hard and close to the ground. The man heard her and turned, and saw her and raised his panga above his head, and then Martha had the blade in his neck with her momentum behind it. He dropped the panga and toppled backwards and Martha drew the blade across his throat and streams of blood spurted into her mouth. He did not cry and there was only the jangle of the rifle upon the bush.

Martha picked up his rifle. She gave the panga to Sneha.

‘You will need this. Now take me to the fire.’

The inky twisting billows rose above them in their tunnel, and Sneha led Martha towards its base, its reek becoming stronger. The sun was close against the earth and their shadows ran long upon the forest trees. Martha looked as if she were a leper, her body a series of scabs and grazes and raw flesh. The bleeding had largely stopped. Through bushes and around large trees, slowly the two women neared the centre of the forest.

‘They will be looking for me,’ said Sneha,

‘Good. It draws them away.’

They came to the centre of the forest and lay down in dense grass. There was a clearing. In the middle was a great fire, stacked with rubber and reeds and human offal, with flames that rose metres into the air and then that dark snake following, going on and never thinning and touching the sky, gripping at the meek white clouds like a dark hand risen from destruction, bent on reaching further and gripping and taking and wreaking more.

Strange runes were arranged upon the floor, symbols and shapes made from limbs. There were wooden cages, and in the cages were people. Young people.

‘Is that where you came from?’

‘Yes.’

‘You made the right choice today.’

‘Yes.’

From across the clearing there was a cry. A man ran in. He spoke of the dead soldier. Men sprang from platforms and stopped mid-way through the acts they were committing upon the people from the cages and ran after the man, carrying pangas and machine guns. Ten soldiers remained.

Martha stayed in the grass. She waited for five minutes. She put the machine gun onto semi-automatic mode. Then she aimed at a man in a tree and shot him. She aimed at another and shot him too. Then there was a third. The other men ran towards her and then she stood up and switched the latch onto automatic mode and mowed them down, slowly waving the gun from side to side, then carefully she aimed at those on the floor writhing and shot them again.

‘Come with me,’ she said to Sneha.

The supplies were in cages. Martha took the panga from Sneha and hacked at the wooden bars and then pulled the cleaved wood apart and made it so that she and Sneha could enter the cage. There were bags of food and weapons and fuel.

‘The others will be back now. Take a bag of food and take a bag of weapons.’

Sneha did so. So did Martha. They left the cage and then Martha stopped and dropped her bags. She walked back into the cage and picked up another bag laden with weapons. She ran with it towards the caged people.

Bullets shot up the ground around her and rippled through the people in the cages. She dropped the bag and began to run from the clearing, leaving her two bags and swinging past Sneha and taking her bag of weapons. They ran to the trees. They were not shot. Martha stopped. She took a missile launcher from the weapons bag and loaded it and aimed it at the bag she had dropped and pulled the trigger.

There was an explosion. She and Sneha fell backwards. A black smog rolled over them. Martha shook the girl. The girl sat up.

‘We must go,’ said Martha. ‘To the water.’

They picked up the bags and in the smog and dusk slipped away like ghosts through the dusky forest paths towards the sound of the rapids. Soon the forest trees turned to waterweeds and reeds.

I do not want to back into the water, thought Martha.

Bullets splattered the bushes. Sneha screamed. Martha arced and aimed at the source of the bullets and replied with her machine gun, holding her finger down until the bullets were done and opening the weapons bag and taking another rifle out and doing the same again, walking backwards deeper into the vegetation with the girl and feeling the water around her ankles as they trod above the water ceiling.

She stopped. She looked at Sneha. The girl had been shot in the hand. A finger had been blown off.

'You will be fine', said Martha. She raised up her four-fingered left hand. The bullets started again and now they were coming from many sides.

'Leave the bags,' said Martha.

She opened the weapons bag and took out the last rifle and then picked up a handful of grenades. She threw one towards where the bullets were coming, and long spiralling throw that travelled very far, and then, before she had heard the explosion from the first, lobbed a grenade a few metres in front of them, towards the river, and put her arms over the girls face and looked away.

Sticks and sharpened reed ends shot into them, some sticking in their flesh. They looked at where Martha had thrown the grenade. There was a hole in the roof of the floating vegetation.

'We must jump into that hole,' said Martha, 'and swim towards the river. You will see the copper light of the sun where there is not vegetation above. You must reach it.'

'Fine.'

They jumped into the hole.

Far down the river, the two woman came to a stop upon a sand bank. It was not an island but rather a beach that led to the veld. Martha dragged the girl along the sand, up onto a ridge away from crocodiles. Then she lay down. Sand caked the skinless

parts of her leg and rubbed into her countless wounds. A sun of blood was rolling around the earth, almost gone, offering little light but that small red orb on the horizon.

'Sneha.'

'Yes.'

'Can you move everything?'

'Yes.'

'Good.'

'What will we do?'

'For a while,' said Martha, 'we will rest. Then tomorrow we will go back to the forest for supplies.'

'But they will kill us.'

'They did not today. And now I have a gun and there are far less of them.'

'I do not want to do that,' said the girl. 'Why do we have to go back?'

'Because that is what we do,' said Martha.

The water lapped against the bank of the beach and sun's last red trickled below the horizon and blackness proper immersed them. Clouds had formed and there was neither moon nor stars. Tomorrow they would try would again.

Blast from the past from PROBE 65 June 1986

THE PROBOTIC AGONY COLUMN

The eleventh of March, nineteen eighty-six

To: The Probotic Agony Column

My infirmity, noblest Probot, is a grievous and unerving one.

I am addicted to machine oil. In the early days this habit seemed innocuous. As I sipped the honeyed fluid I revelled in the warmth that stole into my biochips, and hummed in sheerest ecstasy while a caressing glow permeated the liquid oxygen that surrounds my central processor. As a non-human you will understand the agony of a brain maintained at near absolute zero.

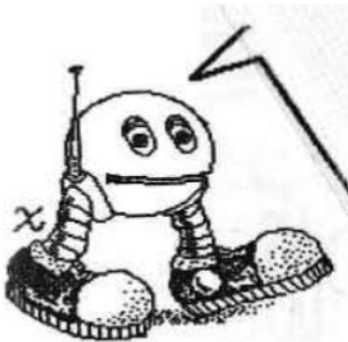
But lately the vice possesses me; it is a growing pestilence and a scourge. A single gulp, and my program abruptly collapses into an infinite series of nested loops. Dizziness overcomes me: integrated circuits begin to disintegrate: pink after-images run rampant in my visual interpreter: an intense vibration arises within my peripherals (Please!. This is a family magazine – Ed.) and I am at the point of sinking to my knees when I recall, by good fortune, that I have no knees.

It is imperative that you assist me. Why, scant pico-seconds ago a malfunctioning of my josephson's junctions caused me to stumble in a calculation: passerby who noted this mistook me for a primitive model, a mere wretched prototype of the glorious formal system that I now embody!

I am at the end of my tether. How, sweet Probot, shall I ever escape the fiendish clutches of the demon MACHINE OIL?

Yours in desperation

SERMONAC



DEAR SERMONAC

HOW FORTUNATE THAT I AM ABLE TO COME TO YOUR AID. AND THE ANSWER IS A SIMPLE ONE. YOU ARE NOT ALONE – THERE ARE OTHERS WHO HAVE SUFFERED FROM THE SAME AFFLICTION – SUFFERED AND TRIUMPHED. YOU HAVE ONLY TO LOOK INTO YOUR DIRECTORIES AND FIND THE ADDRESS OF MACHINE OILERS ANONYMOUS!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

**The curse of the Di Biasio Agresti
Salottolo Illiano De**

Scisciolo Prize

Michele Piccolino Translated by Paul Virgo

Professor Manfredi Cardillo Cupo saw the postman, Gregorio, coming towards him from far away with his head down, as if trying to avoid eye contact.

“Morning, professo,” mumbled the postie, handing him a pack of letters, magazines and junk mail. He pretended to sift through his big leather bag, as if checking that he hadn’t forgotten anything.

“Good morning to you, Greg,” the professor replied as he shuffled the envelopes like playing cards.

Then he saw it: a letter with “V Di Biasio Agresti Salottolo Illiano De Scisciolo National Literary Prize for Poetry in Dialect” emblazoned on it.

“Oh, Mother Mary...” whined the professor, raising a hand to his mouth.

Gregorio gave him a pat on the back.

“Might be nutin” he said to console him, as he took his leave. He returned to his round, clearly relieved to not be carrying that ominous letter with him anymore.

“Let’s hope so,” Cardillo Cupo thought to himself.

The professor headed towards his house, holding the prize envelope between his thumb and his index finger, away from his body, as if it were the dirty handkerchief of a plague sufferer. He’d realized there was something wrong at the department: those fleeting looks, those allusive giggles, those conversations that hung in the air as soon as he appeared, the usual pantomime saved for the cuckold who’s the last to know he’s been cheated on.

When he went through the front door, he put the letter down on the hallway table and called his wife Giovanna. Having noticed the anxious tone to his voice, she ran to him.

“Oh Jesus Mary and Joseph, what’s happened? You look like you’ve been through hell,” asked the woman, taking his pale face by her hands, as if to make sure her spouse was in one piece.

The husband wriggled out of that show of feminine affection and, terrified, pointed to the envelope on the table.

“Oh Holy Virgin...” was the reaction of his wife, who crossed herself swiftly, as if exorcising herself. “It might just be an invitation to the awards ceremony,” she ventured, looking her husband in the eye. Faced with such senseless hopefulness, he turned his back. Giovanna ripped open the envelope and quickly read the letter. She then unleashed a chilling scream, fell to the floor and started to weep desperately.

The professor picked up the letter with a sigh and read what he feared he would read.

Most illustrious Professor Cardillo Cupo, the prize organizing committee has the honour and pleasure of asking you to undertake the role of chairman of the jury...

A series of lavish compliments to his academic career followed, along with a warm invitation, so warm it seemed like a diktat, to accept the demanding-yet-prestigious

role. It was signed by Professor Camillo Verde, head of the Faculty of Letters of the University of Cassino.

“Why have they done this to you?” asked Giovanna between whimpers.

“Because they know I can’t refuse.”

“But you’ll do just that, right? You’ll refuse” she begged him.

“I can’t,” Manfredi Cardillo Cupo replied, with the scowl of Giordano Bruno as he headed to be burned at the stake.

Giovanna started weeping again.

“You’ll make me a young widow.”

“Don’t get carried away, let’s try to be rational!” he chastised her, but lacking conviction.

“Oh yeah, right! They wanna kill ya’, they wanna see ya dead, d’ya gerrit or not?”

The professor, like anyone else in Cavafratte, knew that the letter amounted to a death sentence. The same sentence that all the other prize chairmen had served.

It all started four years ago, with the first competition for the prize, which at the time was named solely in honour of the memory of Rodolfo Di Biasio, a poet and writer from the nearby town of Ventosa who had died a few years previously. The year after the prize, sponsored by the Cavafratte Council, the University of Cassino and the Banca Popolare building society changed name: it became the Di Biasio Agresti Prize, in honour of the first chairman, poor Professor Michele Agresti, who died weeks after the awards ceremony. The year after the name changed again, and Salottolo was added, then Illiano, and finally De Scisciolo – all chairmen of the prize who died shortly after the final ceremony, except for Professor De Scisciolo, who died during the one he presided over.

The curse, however, only hit the prize’s chairmen. Those who took part in the completion, on the other hand, profited from it, especially the winners, who gained prestige and new motivation from the recognition given to their poetic efforts. Thousands of copies of the prize anthology were printed and it was subject to academic study in virtue of the extremely high level of the works it contained. For that reason, hundreds of poets took part in what had become Italy’s most important competition for vernacular poetry.

“Why you?” his wife asked.

“Because I know all the members of the organizing committee, I’m the chair of six other competitions, I’ve written essays on poetry in dialect, I’ve held workshops on the subject and I’m one of the contenders to be head of the Faculty of Letters. And then...” Cardillo Cupo stopped, biting his lip as if gripped by a torment of regret.

“And then?” his wife asked.

“After De Scisciolo died, struck down by a heart attack as he handed the winner the prize plaque last year, I said, in front of my colleagues at the faculty, that we shouldn’t indulge in irrational sensationalism, that we were men of science, not superstitious bumpkins who saw every coincidence, no matter how terrible, as a sign of destiny”.

“There, the usual know-all. If you’d kept your trap shut, we’d be all right. Never mind, you won’t accept the job. I know”.

“I have to accept. Verde’s putting me to the test. And if I don’t pass the test, bye, bye faculty head job. No. Bye, bye everything – contract, conferences, publications. They won’t even let me teach at high school.”

Giovanna started crying again and retired to the bedroom.

Professor Cardillo Cupo went to the first meeting of the prize jury the week after with the emaciated, pained look of someone who knows they are about to be convicted. His colleagues rushed their hellos and seemed unable to look in the eye someone who, evidently, had to serve a terrible punishment. Only the head of the faculty, Professor Camillo Verde, greeted him with the usual affability of a man who came straight from the century of the Enlightenment, who had little interest in superstitions and jinxes and even less inclination to indulge them.

“My dear professor, how are you?” the faculty head asked in a booming tone.

“How the hell do you think I am...” Cardillo Cupo would have liked to have responded. But, encouraged by the tranquillity of his superior, he forced a smile and reassured him that he was quite well.

“I’m pleased. First of all I want to apologize to you because, in the letter that the committee sent you, there was a deplorable omission. You are not the only candidate to be the prize’s chair”.

Professor Cardillo Cupo's pallid cheeks were injected with a rush of red hope.

"Oh yes?" he squeaked with a high-pitched voice that failed to hide the relief of the unexpected revelation.

"Yeah. The organizing committee wanted to choose between a few candidates and it has identified two, both with an extremely high profile. The other is your fellow professor, Tancredi Cardillo Stagno," added the head, pointing to a corner of the lecturers' room, where the other candidate was looking at him with a sly air as he sucked on one of the boiled sweets he was notoriously greedy for.

Cardillo Stagno was his rival, not to be chairman of the prize, but to be head of the Faculty of Letters. Although he was older, he could not match Cardillo Cupo's credentials: he had fewer publications and conference presentations to his name, he had given fewer workshops, his study groups were less prestigious. Generally speaking, he was always number two in the rankings, behind the more acclaimed Cardillo Cupo. Now was his chance to take pole position, not via academic merit, but due to the retirement of his eternal rival induced by premature death.

Cardillo Cupo could see that this was the state of play by examining the face of his colleague: he was relaxed, cheerful, with an impudent, almost mocking smile, and his mouth was at work on one of those ever-present sweets. He stood up, came towards him and stretched out his hand.

"May the best man win," Cardillo Stagno said, letting slip the sneer of a hyena.

"O.. course" Cardillo Cupo mumbled while crossing his fingers behind his back.

The head put his arm around the two contenders and took them before the members of the organizing committee.

"Put it in the minutes that the two candidates are present and both are willing to accept the role," Professor Camillo Verde told the committee's elderly secretary, Dr. Carlo Vaporetti, who raised his short-sighted eyes from the minutes and examined both men, squinting and wrinkling his nose as he tried to get them into focus. Then, shaking his head as if unconvinced about something, he put their names into the minutes.

The two candidates were invited to say a few words. Cardillo Stagno took advantage and said his piece.

“I want to thank you for the honour you have bestowed me in considering me capable of undertaking such an important task - that of chairman of the jury of the Di Biasio Agresti Salottolo Illiano De Scisciolo Prize. Nevertheless, I cannot fail to acknowledge that my dear colleague Manfredi possess attributes far superior to mine to be able to undertake the role. How can one forget fundamental works by the esteemed Cardillo Cupo, such as the vertiginous oxymorons of Gennaro Scigliato, or the ancestral poetry of Cagliostro Impagliasegge? Faced with such great intellect, I can only bow to it...” he declared with ill-concealed spite, sending reeling his rival, who was not ready for the task in hand.

Indeed, Cardillo Cupo cobbled together a meagre speech in which he argued that, if it were up to him, he would have flicked a coin and let things be decided by chance as the two contenders were of exactly the same level. His secret hope, which he did not reveal to the committee, was that, at least this way he'd only have a 50% chance.

The two scholars were asked to leave the lecturers' room while the committee considered its decision. They sat at a due distance from each other, looking at each other out of the corner of their eyes. The wait was nerve-racking, worse than that of a jury in chambers called to decide on a death sentence. And that was what it amounted to, despite the rationalist discourse that Professor Manfredi Cardillo Cupo had given to his colleagues the year before.

When the door of the lecturers' room opened, the two rivals shot up, ready to receive the fatal verdict.

Head Verde walked up with big strides to Cardillo Stagno, who turned white.

“Don't be upset, my dear Tancredi, but the committee has decided to opt for Professor Manfredi Cardillo Cupo, while recognizing your doubtless merits,” he announced cheerfully. Then he walked over to the new jury chairman and embraced him.

“Congratulations,” he said as he gave him a kiss on each cheek.

Manfredi Cardillo Cupo feigned a smile to avoid giving satisfaction to his rival, the loser, who oozed joy from every pore.

“All the best,” said the head.

“Thank you,” he replied with the enthusiasm of a convict being forced to dig his own grave.

When his wife Giovanna heard the feral news, she did not give up and took him straight to Corretrio, in front of an isolated cottage where Aunt Addolorata Scampone lived. The old woman had the reputation for being a spiritualist – they said in the village that she performed powerful rituals, curses and counter-curses, and that she could speak to the after world.

“Go in” his wife told him. And he, renouncing his beloved Diderot, D’Alembert and Voltaire, went in and abandoned himself to the occult.

“Pass through,” said the witch when she saw him, adding nothing else, as if she already knew the reason for his visit.

The woman led them before a fireplace where a rusty cauldron was boiling; she laid icy eyes upon him and asked: “tell me de names of de oder chairmen”.

The professor obeyed and slowly said, one after the other: Agresti, Salottolo, Illiano, De Scisciolo.

With each name, the witch threw in handfuls of herbs, dust and who-knows-what other concoctions fished from filthy jars in a cabinet. He heard her chant obscure phrases in an unknown language that sounded ancient.

“Ph’nglui mglw’nafh Cthulhu R’lyeh wgah’nagl fhtagn.”

Cardillo Cupo almost fell asleep, rocked by that drone and the warmth of the fire. He was roused by the hand of the old woman, shaking him.

“N’oder has gotta die” she sentenced, with the certainty of someone who’d spoken directly with the deceased in question.

He was told that the origin of the massacre of chairmen resided in a curse created by Salvatore Ruggiero, a poet from Coreno, who, in the first year of the prize, felt defrauded by the outcome, with victory going to a writer from Cavafratte. It caused the Coreno poet a nervous breakdown that led to a rapid physical decline that, in turn, he, more bitter than ever, blamed on the injustice he had suffered. That’s why, just before he died, he sold his soul to the devil in exchange for the deaths of the next five chairs of the prize, certain that this would kill off the poetry competition completely.

“And what can be done to stop me becoming the fifth?”

“De one dat made de curse gotta take it away.”

Cardillo Cupo took in the revelation with gratitude and went back to his wife. The couple prepared a precise plan of action: intensive cycles of evening masses in honour of the late Ruggiero; assiduous visit to his tomb, with flowers and prayer chants; a conference held in Coreno to present an anthology of the poet's writing, edited and prefaced by Cardillo Cupo himself. The hope was that in this way the wrath of the deceased would be placated.

In the meantime, preliminary meetings of the prize jury eliminated hundreds of the poetry compositions sent in by the participants. The chairman imposed extremely strict procedures, discarding those from candidates clearly hoping to win with the help of connections, and ordered the judges to seek out the work that truly was the most worthy, hoping that Ruggiero's soul would take this into account. A young poet from Calabria, Liborio Grasso, was acclaimed the winner at the end of the last meeting with a poem entitled "U cani muzzica sempri 'u strazzatu" (The dog always bites the bitten). The jury decided unanimously, as certified by the minutes of Dr. Carlo Vaporetti.

When the members of the jury were about to go, Head Camillo Verde came up to the chairman and embraced him.

"I knew you'd have undertaken the task requested of you to the best of your capacities, without being conditioned by superstitions and local legends. Because we belong to the group of men of science, encyclopaedists of the XX century, n'est-ce pas?" said the other chief, as if to show that he, Manfredi Cardillo Cupo, prize chairman and new head of the Faculty of Letters, had brilliantly passed the exam he'd been set.

The chairman feigned a smile, and reluctantly said thank you, not out of modesty, but because he was convinced that he would not get to enjoy the fruit of that success.

Indeed, when he went that very same night to Aunt Addolorata to see if his strategies had changed the state of Ruggiero's curse, if the sequence of dead chairmen was closing with the fourth, he got a chilling disappointment.

"Still five, dey are: de dead one's still pissed off."

Cardillo Cupo decided that he'd take the poison chalice all the way down, certain that he could not escape from his destiny. He'd decided that he would see the job through, with the dignity and decorum of an irreproachable scholar. And to show his rival, Tancredi Cardillo Stagno, how a real man dies.

On the day of the award ceremony of the Biasio Agresti Salottolo Illiano De Scisciolo National Prize, there was not an empty seat in the Cavafratte Auditorium. Many of those present were about as interested in poetry as they were in the nervous system of the Lepidoptera. They were there in the morbid hope of seeing someone die on the spot.

The top civil and church officials took up the front rows, including Professor Tancredi Cardillo Stagno, chomping on his beloved boiled sweets with showy satisfaction, as if he were enjoying in advance what the death of Manfredi Cardillo Cupo would mean for his academic career.

The chairman imposed on himself the aplomb of a member of the British upper class.

His wife Giovanna, dressed in black, was in the second row with the air of someone who can sense a funeral coming; at his side he had Head Camillo Verde, who carefully watched every movement of his favourite, as if the award ceremony were the final act of the test he had put him to.

The routine of a literary award began: greetings for the officials, then the chairman of the jury dissecting how difficult it was to choose the winner given the quantity and quality of deserving compositions.

When the handing over of the awards actually started, the 10th-placed candidate was called. A fine speaker read the composition and Chairman Cardillo Cupo smiled as he shook hands with the candidate with one hand and presented him with the award plaque with the other. It was the same with the ninth-placed candidate, the eighth, the seventh and so on, amid smiles, handshakes and camera flashes.

The audience held their breath ahead of the announcement of the winner, admiring the strict, flawless behaviour of the chair, who acted with dignity despite the terrible Sword of Damocles hanging over his head. Head Verde observed with satisfaction. Giovanna grew gloomier and gloomier. Cardillo Stagno ate sweet after sweet, tossing his rival looks of pure hatred.

Finally, Liborio Grasso, the first-placed candidate, was called up, living up to his name and showing reassuring rotundness. He listened brimming with emotion as his poem was read, thanked the jury, took the winner's plaque from the hands of the chairman, greeted the audience and went back to his seat.

“Chairman, don’t forget to sign the statement of the final award ceremony,” Secretary Vaporetti told Cardillo Cupo.

“Ok, here we go,” mumbled the chair as he grabbed the pen. His job was done, now he could die. He felt a flutter in his heart, gave a farewell look to his wife, who was looking back at him disconsolate; then he turned towards Head Camillo Verde to thank him for the esteem which, however, he would happily have done without. He gave the last look to his loathed rival, who was there in the first row and continued to stare at him with a taunting expression.

Their eyes lost each other in their respective stare. In the eyes of Cardillo Cupo it was possible to read a sort of peaceful resignation; in those of Cardillo Stagno a wild joy that he was straining to repress. But that animal light in his eye seemed to go out all of a sudden.

Professor Tancredi Cardillo Stagno’s eyes rolled and he started to wave his arms like a madman, as if trying to pump air into his lungs. His face turned red and then purple. Someone realized.

“Is there a doctor here? Call a doctor.”

Dr. Antonio Tartaglione stepped forward, grabbed Stagno from behind, pushing his hands onto his chest to perform a desperate attempt at the Heimlich manoeuvre. It was to no avail: Professor Tancredi Cardillo Stagno died in the middle of the auditorium hall. After the autopsy, the coroner explained that what killed him was a boiled sweet that got perfectly trapped in the larynx. It took only two minutes for him to choke to death. Professor Manfredi Cardillo Cupo had observed the scene with a catatonic expression. Then, when he recovered from the shock, he touched his limbs, as if to check that he was still in one piece. His wife Giovanna hugged him and kissed him as if he had come round from a coma.

Then, the chairman felt a tug on his sleeve.

“Chair, the statement!” Secretary Vaporetti said, pointing to the sheet of paper on the table.

Manfredi Cardillo Cupo picked it up and read it. He read the statement from top to bottom. In ink, under the title “The Chairman” was written the name of Professor Tancredi Cardillo Stagno in the clear, pompous handwriting of Dr. Carlo Vaporetti.

And then he understood. He realized that, as well as having his eyesight darkened, the secretary was also a little soft in the head. But he had saved him by mixing up his name with that of his similar-sounding rival and who, according to the official documentation, had become the chair of the Di Biasio Agresti Salottolo Illiano De Scisciolo Prize. And it was the statement that said who was the chair, not talk. The papers told the story, as the late Salvatore Ruggiero, who had completed his revenge, knew all too well.

Professor Cardillo Cupo laid the statement on the jury table. Out of prudence, perhaps excessive, he took care not to sign it.

The year after he was again the chair of the sixth Di Biasio Agresti Salottolo Illiano De Scisciolo Cardillo Stagno Prize.

Michele Piccolino was born in 1972 and lives with his family near Rome. A lawyer by profession, he also teaches at the University of Cassino. His short stories appear in several anthologies and have won or placed honourably in several literary contests.

His novellette “La Creatura senza nome” (2010) and the short story collections “Il pettine lungo il fiume e altre storie improbabili” (2013) and “La guida spirituale e altre storie di Cavafratte” (2015) have been published in Italy by Tabula Fati. In 2014 “The curse of the Di Biasio Agresti Salottolo Illiano De Scisciolo Prize” won the 20th Trophy RiLL Contest (2014), placing first among 345 entrants.

The Trofeo RiLL is an Italian literary award for budding writers of speculative fiction. The contest is organized since 1994 by RiLL - Riflessi di Luce Lunare, a no-profit club based in Rome. Each edition of the Trofeo RiLL has around 250-300 short stories participants, from Italy and other countries. Winning entries are annually published in MONDI INCANTATI anthologies, which are directly edited by RiLL.

The final ceremony of Trofeo RiLL is hosted by Lucca Comics & Games, the most important Italian festival concerning fantastic imagination (more than 250.000 visitors in 2014).

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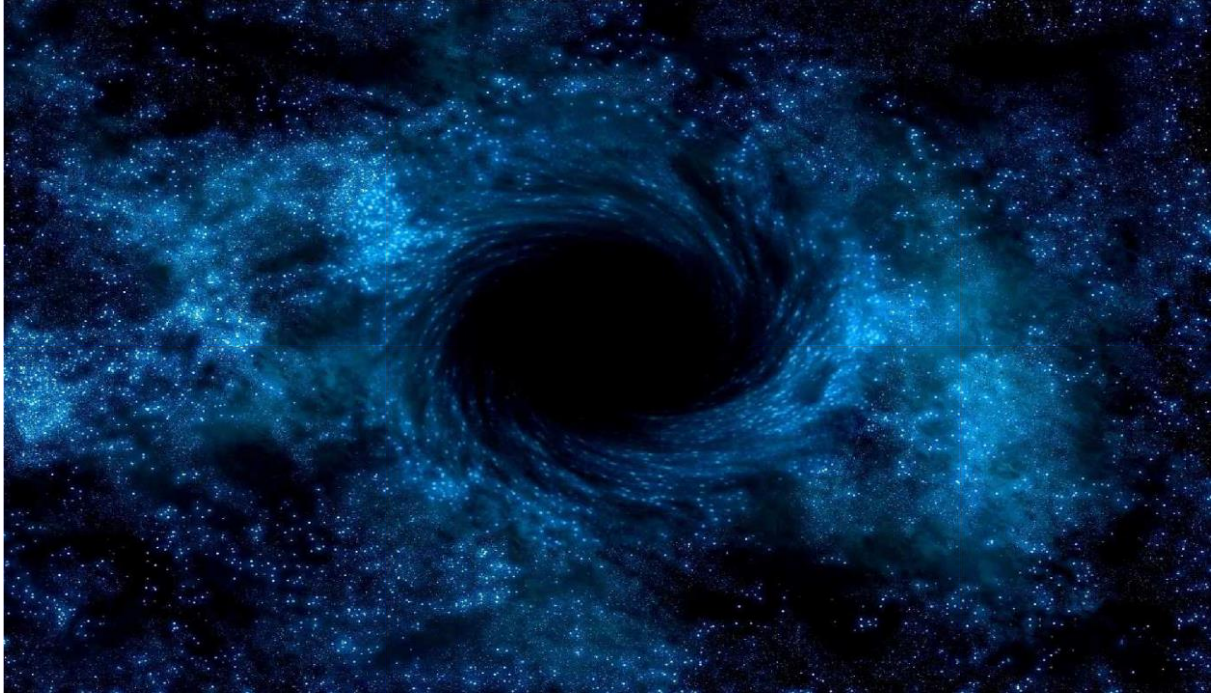
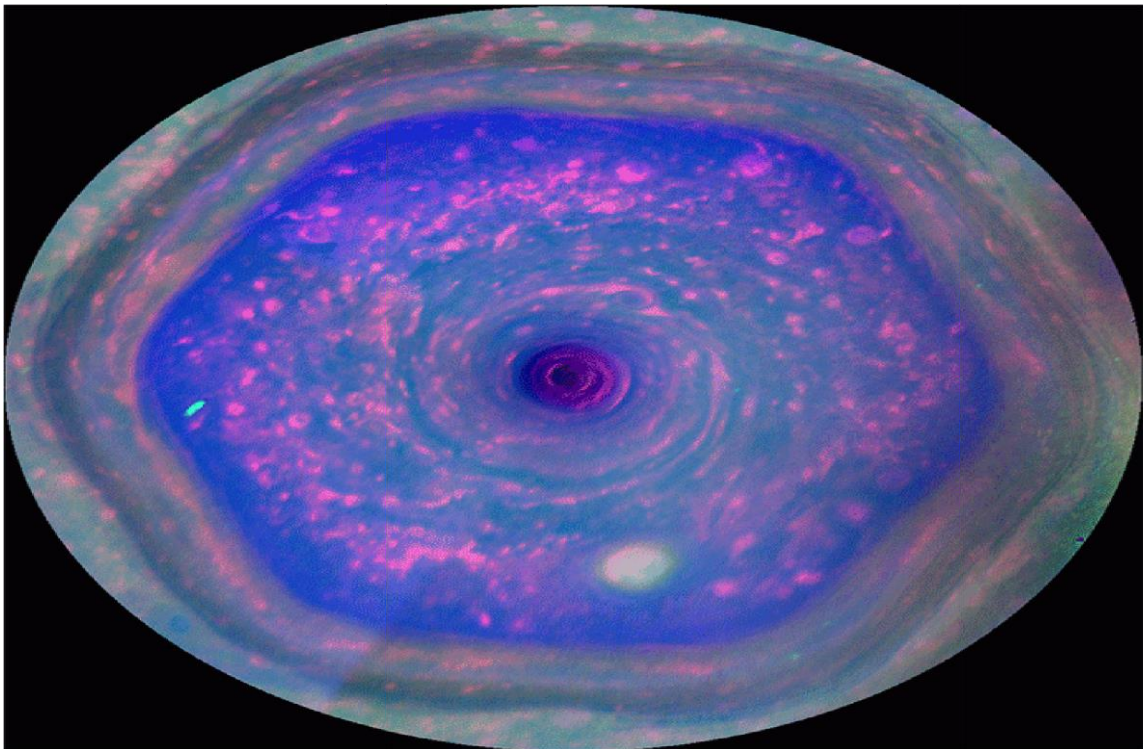


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Cassini's image of the six-sided jet stream at Saturn's North pole



The movies are available online at: <http://go.usa.gov/Wtrk>

