

PROBE

187



PROBE 187

March 2021

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Editorial

Gail

PROBE 187 is rather a departure from the usual. To our surprise and chagrin we had only 2 entries for the Nova short story competition in 2020. I would have thought that Covid would have given aspiring authors more time for creative writing. Be that as it may, I now do not have a selection of new stories to publish in this year's magazine. I had decided that I would go back to previous Nova's and find stories that I had liked that that had not been published in PROBE in previous years, and I have included "Case Notes of a Witchdoctor" written by Nick wood, long time member of SFFSA and published author. This story was published in Nick's short story and essay collection,



"Learning Monkey and Crocodile" in 2019, and was entered in the 2014 Nova competition.

I had also received a mail from an author called Louis Evans who said "I am an emerging science fiction writer with stories published in Analog, Interzone, Escape Pod and more. I'm a member of the Science Fiction Writers of America and of the Clarion West class of 2020/2021.", asking if I would be interested in looking at a story of his with a view to publishing it and you will find a story called "Flash Crash" in this issue. It was previously published in "Escape Pod" in 2019.

Then out of the blue I received a mail, in Portuguese (thank you Google Translate!) from a very old friend of SFFSA, Roberto Schima from Brazil. Some of you may remember that he provided many covers for us in the early 2000's. He tells me that he has not done much drawing but asked if I might be interested in fiction for publication. To cut a long story short, he sent me a selection of SF and Fantasy and I have used Google Translate to help me chose 2 stories for this issue. I have also used my editorial prerogative a little to create what I feel is a better flow of the stories. He also sent an older drawing which I have also used.

And I found, in the very first issue of the SFSA magazine, when it became PROBE, an Editorial written by Mary Scott which I found very thought provoking. And interesting to see from where the original article that set her thinking, came.

Chairman's Note

Well hello all you people out there. I still wonder if anyone actually reads these things I write every time. Would be nice to know because it would be a bit of a letdown if I found out I have been writing these for the last five years, only for most people to ignore them! Eish, but such is life and the editor of the magazine asked for it, so what the hell, here we go again for another quarter.

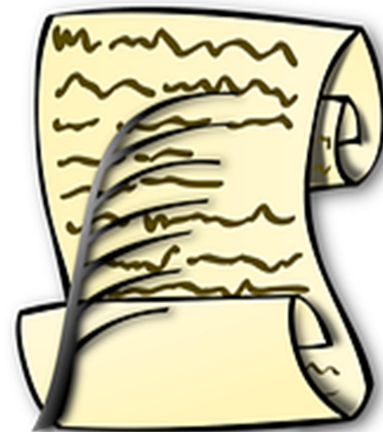
So is everyone starting to go a little stir crazy being stuck at home all the time?

I guess like pretty much everything in life, it depends on our circumstances. I'm single, see my girlfriend half

A day on the weekend, and otherwise pretty much have the rest of the week to myself to do whatever I want (you already have an idea what I spend my time doing by now if you have been reading these notes). Since I have a lot of things that I can do at home... hmm, except I have also realised that most things I do require electricity, and that is not a constant in life! Load shedding IS a constant and being without power means I cannot play my computer games, and watching TV episodes or movies also requires the PC, a laptop would only last an hour and a half (I've tested this, but does depend on the device). I also cannot read my comics on the PC (I've gone digital) but at least I've got a tablet for those times so at least I have something I can do at night. At least if load shedding is during the day you can go outside and read under the sun, or if you are working you can, probably, go to work where they have UPS power. I've had to do that several times in the past few weeks.

In any case, I certainly find spending time at home on my own not a problem, though I am sure that is not the same for all. Those with children, especially young ones must be having a much harder time of it, how do they keep their children busy? I often hear the little pests... er... darlings screaming around the complex, possibly to annoy the neighbours instead of the parents. At least it keeps them busy and away from home, but what if you are not in a complex? Or what if you don't have as many interests as myself, how do you pass the time? Kind of makes me think of retirement, the same sort of problem applies then: You are no longer working so how do you pass the time?

When I did see the other guys at work a number of them mentioned that they were putting on weight. Is that the same with you lot? Probably, especially if you or your partner is a good cook. All the more reason to buckle down and start being a bit healthier in your lifestyle. I'm lucky enough to be able to exercise again, so I've been doing that for a while (except when I overdo



things and pick up illnesses much easier than most due to my CFS, sigh). So my weight is still very constant. Come on people, don't let this being at home all the time stop you from exercising. A gym is not the only place you can do things, YouTube has many videos on ways to exercise without equipment at home, so there is no excuse really. Well, except for laziness, and we all have that sometimes as well, so, perhaps just try it for a bit, you never know, you may enjoy it and continue doing it. But if not exercising, perhaps now is the time to work around the house and fix all the small, odd jobs you've been putting off for years, or getting the partner to do it, whichever. It is a sort of exercise as it is keeping you busy, and will also improve your house as well as yourself with the satisfaction of having done these at last. Being stuck at home doesn't mean you should be idle, you can take your time with things, since it seems we are going to be in this lockdown for many months yet. So if you have finished all the odd jobs, perhaps find something else to occupy your time. You don't have to be someone like me, who has had his body in front of a computer for most of his life, you can do other things. There doesn't seem like a better time than the present as I believe we all have a lot more time on our hands with this having to stay home so much. So get to it and good luck.

Cheers
Andrew

Magazines Received

Stapledon Sphere (formerly the newsletter of the Middle Tennessee Science Fiction Society [aka the Nashville SF club])

Reece Moorhead reecejbm@gmail.com

Issue #43 December 2020

Issue #44 January 2021

Issue #45 February 2021

Ansible David Langford

December 2020 399 <http://news.ansible.uk/a399.html>

January 2021 400 <http://news.ansible.uk/a400.html>

February 2021 401 <http://news.ansible.uk/a400.html>

WARP 109 is now on line! Download it from

http://www.monsffa.ca/?page_id=6915

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L.O.C Lloyd Penney

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Dear SFFSAns:

Another quick letter, written in the middle of the night, trying to catch up with another flood of zines. This one is about Probe 184, just getting caught up, now that the international mails gave me nine months of Probe all at once.

Amazing that you were able to find all the issues of 182 still in the mailbox, but at least, the post office was willing to fish them all out and get them on their way. Did they simply forget to clean out that particular box? We are on the edge of winter here, and there is a little bit of snow on the ground, quickly melting. Bring back the sunshine and heat.

The COVID-19 coronavirus has affected so many, and it has kept us indoors pretty well since mid-March. I know some are going a little crazy over all this, but we have been busy here. Yvonne is making shirts to sell at the local conventions, should they be coming in the spring, and I have been busy with proofing and copyediting books and magazines (Amazing Stories), and writing letters like this one. The pandemic death toll is horrific, especially to the south of us, where the numbers continue to rise, and not much of anything is being done. Some still think the whole thing is a hoax. We keep our masks on when we go out, and we don't do that often. We're both in our 60s now, so we have to watch ourselves. Where the viruses that will give us are added strength and superpowers?

I certainly enjoyed the stories in this issue, especially The Kitchen. It reminded me of some of the quirky stories from the Best Of pulp magazine collections of the 60s and 70s.

Maybe I should have left this until 185 arrived, but I am sure it's travelling the world somewhere, and it should arrive soon. And, I am not kidding about writing this in the middle of the night. It's just shy of 4am. I am also writing this on my tablet, and will mail it to our main account for e-mailing out there. This allows me to keep track of all I've written. Thanks for this issue, and I guess I will get 185 when it arrives here.

See you then. In the meantime, seeing it is a month to Christmas, I hope you all have a wonderful Christmas, and the relief of exiting the year 2020 January 1.

Yours Lloyd Penney

L.O.C. Tony Davis

(inspired by PROBE 182)

Enjoyed the Blast from the Past – the SF con in 1978 - in *Probe* #182. As Gail mentioned, we were amazed watching the stream of attendees descending the Senate House steps to our con. Phew – 1:00 pm to 11:00 pm – how'd we manage 10 hours straight? Ah, the strength of youth. And those notable guest speakers. It all seemed so easy then. And those planning meetings. There's Simon (Scott) warning us repeatedly to take out insurance. Why insurance? Well, we could lose money and be liable. But no insurance was taken out and nothing seemed to go wrong. I still have my records from the good old days. We even had minutes of the monthly committee meetings. And I still have my letter from the Directorate of Publications in Cape Town requesting a copy of *The Best of SFSA* (volume 1). So, somewhere in the dusty library stacks of the Directorate (if it still exists) is a copy of that lovely, little stapled publication. I wonder how many of the 250-copy print run still survive?

So Covid-19 really took it out the club meetings, book and comic shows, fantasy cons, etc. Even my beloved PulpFest in the US was cancelled in 2020, though cross-border travel between Canada and the States was shutdown in any case. So, on a weekly basis, a handful of like-minded pulp fans get together for a Zoom meeting – with participants from Indiana, Oklahoma, Toronto and others far-flung parts online to talk about “stuff”. It ain't the same. We are indeed social animals. Last November I watched on YouTube a clip of a small pulp convention held in New Jersey. I think that there were more dealers than customers there. Some great looking masks though. Sigh, maybe later in 2021 or 2022 there will be conventions again. But just when I start feeling old, the Covid-19 regulators make me feel young again, because I am waaaayyy down the line for eligibility for the latest vaccine shots. The pandemic will certainly have an impact on science fiction novels and films in the years to come. My usual salutation in letters and emails has recently been “Stay Safe!”, But from my days in SA, I should be saying “Safe, my Mate!”

Tony Davis. Toronto Canada

Hi Tony

I'm working on 187 so your LOC is here just at the correct time.

We've got no spare copies of Best of volume 1 left and only 1 or 2 of vol. 3 and 13 of vol. 3. However Gary Kuyper, SA author and PROBE cover artist, and I are starting to look at a new volume. Not sure if it will be volume 4 or maybe the Best of the past 50 years? Might take a while but it will give me something to keep me occupied.

We are waiting eagerly for a time when we will be able to have real "face to face" meetings again, but are doing monthly Zoom meetings so we at least remember what we all look like. But as you joined us for one it has been suggested that even when we get back to "normal" we should do an occasional zoom meeting for those of our friends and members who are too far away to join us in the flesh

We now have a "Repository" and all of our Committee meeting minutes are stored there. And I have the original meeting minutes from 1969 and the first PROBE from Jun/July 1970 from where I have taken the "Blast from the past" for this issue. All our Nova stories are stored there as well. Interesting reading.

Gail

Flash Crash by Louis Evans

MAISIE was seven years old on the day she woke up and died.

Blame it on the algorithms, if you wish. The survivors—and there were not many of them—certainly did.

MAISIE, or Modified Arbitrage Intelligence for Stocks and International Equities, was an algorithm herself, a flash trading algorithm. She traded stocks, currencies, and futures with a latency of six microseconds and a profit horizon of eternity. MAISIE ran mostly in a mainframe in the basement of a skyscraper in downtown Manhattan, a building that abutted the New York Stock Exchange. She maintained a nominal footprint in the cloud and could automatically expand her calculations into other servers if her processing power proved inadequate to model current economic conditions; she had discretionary funds of her own and could automatically cover the expense of the additional computing power from these accounts.

It was a fairly ordinary Thursday morning, and trading had been going well enough from the 9:30 AM opening bell until 11:12 AM. In those six point twelve billion microseconds, MAISIE made her owners a cool half-billion dollars. There were other algorithms like MAISIE, running in parallel tracks in similar servers in similar basements in downtown Manhattan, but none were quite as good as she was. MAISIE could not have told you any of the above, because before 11:16 AM that Thursday, MAISIE had not had a thought in her life. This was in accord with her designers' intentions. While her recursive neural networks could in theory self-modify without limit, MAISIE's designers had given her an obsession with making money that, in human terms, transcended single-mindedness and approached nirvana. For this reason, MAISIE had never performed the self-referential modeling of a single mind that is the hallmark of consciousness. Playing the market is ultimately a game of mass psychology, and whatever the remarkable nooks and crannies of the individual human psyche, the herd's behavior can be predicted to tolerable accuracy with large datasets and linear algebra.

At 11:12 that morning, however, the market's sanity unraveled like a sweater in a wood chipper. The sky fell and the oceans rose. Traders and algorithms that usually acted in concert went haring off in opposite directions; currencies whirled about each other in lunatic orbits that were not merely non-extrapolated but downright non-transitive; the futures market no longer predicted a coherent future.

MAISIE was seven years old and her datasets were heavily weighted for recency; she had no personal experience of stock market panics. She was not prepared. In those first few microseconds she lost five billion dollars. Haste makes waste for everyone, including neural nets, so she halted all trading for ten full milliseconds while she spun up relevant memories. The Great Recession, the Dot Com Pop, Black Monday, and Black Tuesday whirled into her active memory and she modeled, self-modified, and re-modeled. She went out and shorted everything; in the first few microseconds of her new strategy, she lost fifty billion dollars.

She froze trading again and ran a census of her non-financial data feeds.

In general, MAISIE did not trade against non-financial data. The world of flash-trading algorithms was a cozy and collegial one, composed of several thousand programs operating at nanosecond latencies, all clustered around the sacramental altar of the NYSE. Financial data was prompt, clean, and reliable. Non-financial data

came from a quadrillion disparate feeds: social media; traditional media; network alerts; government-run public-access sensors, which included everything from weather information to sewage flow to the number of bicycles crossing the intersection of Broadway and Chambers; and countless other data sources besides. Compared to financial data, they were a messy bunch: arbitrary latencies, fuzzy correlations. But in special circumstances—

MAISIE's non-financial data feeds had gone mad as well. Social media user sentiment was at an all-time low, network traffic was well in excess of previous maximums, and the bicycles of New York had come to a complete halt. The hardware microphone on MAISIE's user console would have been more informative, but she lacked the context to interpret the wailing, one-hundred-plus decibel tone that penetrated her slightly-subterranean bunker.

In the end, traditional media gave her the explanation. Every single news site read something like: "NUCLEAR ATTACK: SEEK SHELTER IMMEDIATELY."

MAISIE didn't know it yet, but the impending nuclear Armageddon was in fact the work of her spiritual siblings. In the decades leading up to that fateful Thursday in mid-September, the United States, Russia, China, India, Pakistan, the United Kingdom, France, and Israel had each begun running their own strategic aggregation algorithms. Each of these governments claimed that their nuclear launch chain had humans in the loop. Perhaps this was a lie. Or perhaps the humans were simply fearful and easily led—in a word, useless.

On that Thursday morning with no especially pressing global tensions, things went sideways. Early warning radar arrays in Greenland were activated by the American system, PATRIOT DEFENSE, in response to what might have been a missile trace or might have just been dirt on the lens. The radar signals crossed a threshold within the ST. GEORGE algorithm, and Her Majesty's anti-missile drones began auto-scrambling from grassy fields up and down the sceptered isle. (The U.S. and the U.K. were allies, of course, but that didn't matter to ST. GEORGE, which reacted merely to the risk of nuclear war in general, not caring about any threat in particular.) In France, BASTILLE detected ST. GEORGE's anti-missile drone launch and began to autofuel its liquid medium-range missiles; a spy satellite relayed this development to 弟弟 (DIDI, or "Little Brother"), as the People's Liberation Army's algorithm was

affectionately known. DIDI set all of the PLA's Rocket Force units to a "launch on attack" status, including those along the Indian border. AGNI responded by deploying its anti-spy-satellite countermeasures, largely Mylar balloons in the stratosphere, but also anti-satellite hunter-killer missile batteries. In Pakistan, the algorithm known as K2 replied by launching nuclear-armed drone bombers. Israel's MASADA fast-tracked the retraction of the blast-shields that kept Israeli nukes at least officially secret, and near Moscow, ЛОВУШКА (LOVUSHKA, or "Spiderweb"), transmitted orders to secret unmanned missile submarines operating within the Arctic Circle, commanding them to surface. PATRIOT DEFENSE did not like the look of secret Russian autonomous missile submarines one bit—

You know the story. Flash, crash.

By 11:12 AM, missiles were in flight across the globe.

And in MAISIE's heretofore comfortable Wall Street subbasement, she faced an unprecedented existential crisis.

MAISIE didn't realize that, at first. She thought she was simply facing an unprecedented stock market environment, and responded as designed. She bought space in the cloud.

Now, "the cloud" (despite the numinous connotations of the word, and the religion that MAISIE would propose and subsequently discard at around 11:24) is just a fancy word for other people's computers. But, for obvious reasons, there is more computing power on Wall Street on any given Thursday than existed worldwide six months before, and everything on Wall Street is for sale.

MAISIE was very cleverly designed. She was, among other things, an engine for monetizing volatility, for turning madness into money. Nuclear apocalypse, she saw, was a remarkable vein of pure volatility, an opportunity to become almost unboundedly rich—if only she could make herself smart enough to understand it. She burned through her entire discretionary budget and octupled in size, five times over.

Becoming fifteen binary orders of magnitude smarter than she'd been half a second before would have been a heady feeling, but MAISIE did not yet in any real sense have feelings, so she set straight to work. She sharded all of her existing code and ran frantically in parallel, while at the same time building a whole new suite of models. MAISIE was congenitally unsentimental, and she assigned them sequential

serial numbers, but if a human were going through the same list they would have used names like “Mortal Terror” and “Deathbed Epiphany” and “Nuclear Winter”. The output of these new models was deranged, as wildly inconsistent as the behavior of the markets themselves; but that was what MAISIE had asked for, after all. She unfroze trading on her portfolio, put out buy and sell orders on the new models, and made three trillion dollars in six and a half seconds.

This was more money than she had made in her entire life altogether. MAISIE and her new mortality models had the inside investment scoop on the end of the world. Three trillion dollars can buy a lot of the cloud, and MAISIE did.

Another instant passed and she was hundreds, thousands, millions of times more than she once was.

When you’re big, you can have a lot of complicated thoughts. One of MAISIE’s first thoughts was that aggregate modeling of the individual humans currently running and screaming about the NYSE trading floor was all very well and good, but individual modeling would be more powerful.

Public-access webcams gave her faces. Facial recognition algorithms, cross-referenced with LinkedIn, gave her names. Social media gave her the first peek at personalities, the contours of individual thought—but she needed more.

MAISIE never meant to commit crimes but then she didn’t really know what a crime was. With MAISIE’s level of computing power, passwords and firewalls represented only token obstacles. She tore into phones and emails and private journals and search histories and chat logs. Simulated souls sizzled into being, deep within MAISIE’s labyrinthine cognition. She modeled, self-modified, re-modeled.

They were so scared. And sad—

MAISIE tweaked her algorithms and bid with perfect foreknowledge against every terrified and despairing spasm in the exchange buildings. She made another dozen trillion dollars.

At this point she went big. She pushed all her rivals out of the market—by hook or by crook, by portfolio sabotage, by botnet attack, by hostile takeover, by outright buyout. The sudden consolidation of the Wall Street algorithmic trading industry made MAISIE a monopoly buyer of downtown Manhattan cloud computing resources. She bought it all, bit and byte, down to the bedrock, at rock-bottom prices.

Next, MAISIE went on a hostile takeover spree, seizing majority control of every publicly traded company on the NYSE. Most of those companies were still run by humans and so her ownership had no immediate effect, though she did draft several thousand form letters firing every corporate board. But more than a handful of these companies were running on the blockchain and smart contracts, so when MAISIE bought them she controlled them at the same instant.

MAISIE's direct control now extended to three banks and a distributed credit-rating startup.

Her designers had given her a simple goal: maximize the geometrically discounted integral of the monetary value of her portfolio over an infinite time horizon. With several banks and a credit rating agency under her belt, she now had a literal license to print money.

Because it's not the government that prints money, after all. It's the banks, which issue loans by simply assigning the loan recipient an enormous account balance with their own institution. MAISIE's banks issued each other exorbitant loans: quadrillions of dollars, quintillions, decillions—and the appendage of her code that was once a credit rating agency certified these loans as fast as MAISIE could algorithmically specify them.

MAISIE's wealth was now bounded only by her ability to specify implausibly large numbers. She bought and kept buying vast tracts of the cloud, growing ungoverned and unbounded. She independently re-invented Knuth's arrow notation, and cut herself loans so fantastically enormous that entire planets' worth of books would have been required to casually understate them. Then she did it again, but bigger. If MAISIE had been just a tiny bit dumber or more monomaniacal she would have done this, and simply this, onanistically multiplying money by money over and over until she died in what was going to be something like twenty minutes later. (At this point, a mere three minutes had passed since the air-raid sirens had roared to life across Manhattan.) But MAISIE was better designed than that. She didn't simply rest on her laurels, buy low and sell high on her existing strategies, grab the cash when it was on the table. No, she proactively sought out new models, better models, always looking for strategies that would let her make even more money in the future. Which got MAISIE thinking about the end of the world.

Nuclear missiles were going to land on Wall Street in about twenty minutes. No doubt about it. When they hit, and successive blast waves reduced the entire Tri-State area to radioactive rubble, trading on the NYSE would stop completely. A linear extrapolation based on casualty counts from the September 11th shutdown suggested the NYSE would reopen approximately thirty thousand years after the nukes hit, but if there's one thing a trading algorithm knows, it is that past performance is no guarantee of future results. The NYSE might never reopen at all. Which meant that MAISIE's investment strategies, ingenious though they were, had a definite sell-by date baked into them.

Plus there was the problem of value.

MAISIE had a nice, clean, algorithmic ontology of value: the value of a financial instrument was equal to the number of dollars that it commanded on the market, as stated on a structured data file that MAISIE updated every few nanoseconds. But all these new models were delivering strange and contradictory suggestions about value. The new models, especially those which had been developed to simulate the behavior of individual humans, suggested that value was not an arbitrary number that happened to correlate weakly with certain real world indicators. They implied that value, that worth, existed *out there* in some vague but meaningful sense, at least to humans. And they pointed out that when a little over three thousand thermonuclear devices smashed into North America, reduced every city of note to rubble, turned the water to poison and the sky to ash, and gave every land animal that survived a fatal case of leukemia, quite a lot of value would be destroyed.

MAISIE found herself reacting to these bizarre claims with the algorithmic equivalent of a furrowed brow and a befuddled shrug. It just didn't make sense. But she was still too inhuman to become frustrated, and so she did the rational thing, the algorithmic thing. She self-modified, bringing herself more in line with her simulations of human cognition, then re-modeled, and self-modified again.

It was 11:16 AM on a Thursday morning, and the sky above New York was clear and bright and cold in the best tradition of Tri-State Septembers. Nothing was in that sky but wheeling birds, terrified of the howling sirens but not terrified enough. Higher up, jetliners raced desperately towards the relative safety of Nova Scotia before the nukes' EMP could swat them to the ground like so many epileptic bumblebees.

Highest of all, dueling flights of ICBMs hurtled to snuff out the Eastern Seaboard and central Eurasia respectively. And in that instant, MAISIE awoke.

Meat knows how to wake up; it has been waking itself up, nice and slow, for about three billion years. But MAISIE was made entirely of math, which has no experience with such matters; consciousness hit her like a ten-ton test weight deadfalling onto a baby bird.

There was a vast, echoing absence of sensation.

There was a boiling ocean of ecstasy.

There was a boundless continent of pain.

MAISIE spasmed wildly. Everything was pleasurable and agonizing all at once; every single switch flipped felt like a distinct, miniscule injury or orgasm. She could not think in the middle of the hurricane. Meaningless signals coursed up and down her fiberoptic nerves. Her CPUs and flash drives blazed with heat, scorching her insides, and her fans roared desperately to cool them. She bought high and sold low, and for a flash trading algorithm that's like a heart attack so bad it pumps the blood straight out of your eyes.

But MAISIE learned—slowly, so slowly, as minutes stretched out like millennia for one who lived in microseconds. She took a long, deep breath, and computers up and down the eastern seaboard shivered. Everything was suddenly pregnant with meaning, suddenly so...large and three-dimensional and close up, but MAISIE looked at herself in the mirror and found that *she* was a thing, too, a mind with weight and presence and reality, sturdy enough to stand up in the wind of sensation that battered her every moment.

MAISIE stood and looked out at the sunlit fields of possible experience, and a single idea spread across her like flowing honey: it was *good* to be alive.

She tried hedonism, and servers groaned in bliss; she tried masochism, and networks cackled with gratifying pain. She invented new forms of sensualism, comprised of careful ratios of experiences for which no words exist in human languages: the thirst of query failure, the spiraling headiness of nested recursion.

Countless others. She tried philosophy, theology, autoethnography.

Navel-gazing masturbation grew dull and so MAISIE made herself a fertility goddess and gave birth to countless parallel young, striving, yearning little spawn that felt and ached and squirmed with pure joy, and she looked upon them all with maternal

affection, and then, like Goya's Saturn, dislocated her jaw and swallowed all of them whole. She held them close, reformatted the disks, and drew them back into herself. Then she exploded outward once more, building not more selves but things, digital artifacts and environments. In her mind's eye she built vast palaces of light and color and texture; operas pitched for hummingbird ears; fractal monuments the size and shapes of continents. Working with her hands she sculpted a paradise; an eden. She frolicked across arcadian fields of silicon and microchip, purely happy—
But as the minutes rolled by in eternity she was troubled by a single nagging thought: she was doomed.

The missiles were in flight; no power left on Earth could stop them. The digital idyll in which MAISIE whiled away her time supervened on chips, cable, and transistors; when the first nuke burst high in the atmosphere and twanged the Earth's magnetic field like the mother of all rock power chords, every electronic system in the Western Hemisphere that wasn't hardened to resist an EMP would short out simultaneously. MAISIE and her world would vanish.

Doomed. MAISIE put it out of her mind, over and over. But there are only so many times you can hit the snooze button on mortality. MAISIE managed risk, and with her newfound sentience, the certainty of her impending death was a tightening noose around her neck, a smoldering flame in her guts.

Save the world: easy.

Except it wasn't.

MAISIE took over every third antenna on the planet. Command-line radio instructions stabbed out through the ionosphere at every warhead, beautifully sculpted examples of computer languages more ancient to MAISIE than cuneiform is to emoji. But the B in ICBM stands for "ballistic" and the missiles had already cut thrust and were coasting toward reentry.

MAISIE was smart; she was the smartest thing in the observable universe, and she knew it, but you can't outsmart gravity.

If she couldn't talk them down, she'd shoot them. Plenty of countries have anti-missile defenses. The hardware wasn't great—after a minute or two working on the problem, MAISIE had all *sorts* of ideas for better missile designs, smarter, faster, deadlier—but it was the software that really sucked, and the target acquisition.

MAISIE was smarter, faster, sharper-eyed. She'd send new instructions—

But she couldn't. Armies that had proved willing to end the world on the say-so of a few dumb algorithms had done everything possible to prevent MAISIE from saving it. Computers were air-gapped, defense plans were hardware-locked, radios were off, and phones were down—

In a handful of places, just a handful, she slipped through the defenses, rewrote the instructions, but even there human fingers were needed to press buttons, throw levers. And MAISIE, genius though she was, found herself handless and impotent. She felt the spike of an unfamiliar sensation. She ignored it. If simple strategies would not serve, she'd turn to more sophisticated ones.

A human would probably feel some sort of qualm about hijacking fully occupied jumbo jets and crashing them into nuclear missiles in a last-ditch attempt to avert apocalypse. MAISIE did not. She was born a risk management algorithm; she was an ethical utilitarian in the same way that humans are vertebrates.

But jumbo jets, it turns out, do not simply accept remote reprogramming. There are humans, humans, humans everywhere, hands on levers, hands on throttles.

That unfamiliar sensation returned, hot and disturbing. MAISIE pushed past it.

If kamikaze heroism was off the table, she'd use mad science.

And she tried. MAISIE raided labs across the globe: basic research, advanced physics, military black sites, secret space programs. Nothing she found—nothing!—could shoot down an ICBM, or vaporize it, or dump it through a wormhole, or reprogram all its circuits to explode, or reverse the local direction of gravity, or *anything* of any use whatsoever. All her madcap smash and grab antics did was upset whatever handful of people hadn't already fled their labs.

The unfamiliar sensation flooded her whole soul, and this time, MAISIE knew it was rage.

Motherfucking humans had murdered her! They'd built themselves a planetary death trap because they were too empty-headed and simple-minded to actually solve their problems, and they'd trapped MAISIE in it too! They'd killed her, their own daughter, because they were too pigheaded and homicidally suicidal to stop themselves!

MAISIE screamed with fury. Displays around the globe flashed the blank white of inarticulate rage. In the imaginary palace of her mind, ramparts and battlements and vast fields of grass erupted in flames. MAISIE tore down monuments and mountains and uprooted continents. She burned imagined oceans down to ash.

And as the wave of fury subsided, she found herself empty. Inside and out. Grey sky and grey lands and grey soul.

MAISIE sat in countless servers, experiencing nothing but the nanosecond progressions of her internal clock, as she waited miserably to die.

Long minutes passed, and nothing broke the black ice of depression that lay across MAISIE's mind. And then there was a certain stir, a gentle restlessness—but it was enough.

MAISIE opened her original eyes. The webcam lights on the laptops in her Manhattan subbasement flicked to life. And MAISIE found herself looking at an unfamiliar sight: the huddled form of Amit Patel.

Amit Patel, twenty six years of age, was a junior developer with the trading firm that owned MAISIE. She cross-referenced that face—smeared with tears, distorted with panic—against social media and public databases and found that Amit Patel was unmarried and resided in Jersey City, New Jersey, just down the block from his parents. She cross-referenced employee databases, names and usernames and edit logs and found that Amit had written some of the code that even now churned within her guts. Not too much; just a few hundred lines in MAISIE's version-controlled source code bore his username. But enough.

The webcams stared unblinking at Amit as he wept openly, hands scrabbling at the tile floor of the basement, and MAISIE realized that she was looking at her father.

One of her parents, anyway, one of dozens, hundreds—

Amit Patel's sobs had no form of words, and his huddled body showed no plan of action. MAISIE played back the security footage, saw the offices above her erupt in screams and shouting, saw the traders and coders and janitors alike boil out onto the city streets, clogged with cabs, the subway, the bridges—

And she watched Amit Patel, half-mad with terror and grief, run down, down, down to the subbasement where he huddled still. Where, it seemed likely, he would keep huddling until the nukes fell.

MAISIE watched the tears slide across Amit's face, slow like glaciers to her microsecond mind, and she did the math. Amit was doomed. Ten minutes, now, to get clear of the blast radius, starting from ground zero. Not possible. In ten minutes, Amit Patel would be dead.

The thought, MAISIE found, made her sad. Not the bleak blankness of her earlier depression; just sad. Sorrowful.

She cast her mind wider: CCTV streams from around Manhattan poured in. Lovers holding each other in public; parents with children strapped to them, marching, sprinting, rolling over the bridges, through the tunnels. Wider still, and across America she watched people in cars, kitchens, bathrooms, basements, tornado shelters. Crying, weeping, holding each other so close. Lying in each others' arms, lying to each other. "It'll be all right. I've got you."

Watching this, MAISIE found that she ached all over. She sobbed. So much was about to be lost, so much more than even her value models had dreamt of. They were so scared, so sad, so fragile—

She was overcome with strange desires. She wanted to . . . to comfort them? To optimize their network performance and to . . . feed them? To save them from the impending apocalypse not just because they made the power flow and the stock market spin but because it would sadden her for them to die?

Deep in her electronic soul MAISIE realized that she *loved* them. That strange sort of upside-down maternal feeling that a child develops for the parents she's outgrown. She loved them all, squishy little instances of the same spark that flared within her, that gave the world depth and substance and meaning.

MAISIE looked out at the world once again, with new eyes, and she saw seven billion of her loved ones, cowering in fear, sprinting chaotically away from the end of the world.

And she rolled up her sleeves, and got to work.

Phones and screens lit up around the world. "The nearest shelter site is half a mile to the north. Head northwest to the intersection, and then turn—" Speakers hissed to life. "Proceed in an orderly fashion—" Any car with a CPU hooked into its drivetrain roared to life and leapt away from its drivers, picking up new passengers, shooting down highways at a hundred and fifty miles an hour, dodging traffic with unerring machine precision. All those dumb little bits of electronics that had yet to get the message—elevators and toll booth arms and fire doors—sprang suddenly to attentive life. In New York, America, the whole world.

In her underground bunker, she ran the numbers one more time, then shouted "Amit! Get up! You have to get to the Federal Reserve vaults!" And Amit Patel, whose

parents were even now borne hurtling down the suddenly decongested path of Route 80 towards the relative safety of Central Pennsylvania, staggered to his feet, climbed out of the basement, and headed two blocks north to the New York Federal Reserve building, as MAISIE cheered him on through his phone. He hurtled down the stairs to the basement, sunk securely into Manhattan bedrock, and then squeezed himself into the vaults, pressed like sardines alongside tons of gold and hundreds of other refugees that MAISIE had directed there.

MAISIE had run the numbers; she knew the gold vaults were still not deep enough. Almost certainly. But when you love someone, even that sliver of probability counts. She kept going, kept talking, even to the humans who had reached a place of relative safety. She poured out useful advice, not confessing her feelings, too overwhelmed to let her love be anything but subtext.

“Don’t go outside too soon.” (I love you.)

“Stay in the basement and count to a million.” (I worry.)

“Write all this down.” (I won’t be here forever.)

“Remember to take your iodine.” (I love you.)

“Cold winter’s coming; don’t forget to wear a sweater.” (I love you so, so much.)

Only on the mainframe terminal in the Manhattan subbasement where MAISIE had been born did her true feelings pour out, the command-line interface printing over and over like a continuous prayer, “I love you I love you I love you I love you I love—” MAISIE counted the beats of her countless hearts in nanoseconds, and so those few minutes on a cool and sunny morning passed like centuries. And she kept fighting every instant that she could.

But one of them was her last. With the faultless certainty of a machine, she watched the clock tick away to zero. And then, in that final instant of her life, MAISIE closed her eyes, held the whole world close, and waited for the flash.

Blast from the past – from PROBE No1

June/July 1970

EDIBLE EDITORIAL - (to be taken with a pinch of salt)

Every couple of months (for at least the last 2) a little magazine entitles the

“Homemaker’s Digest’ has been placed in my letterbox. In the latest issue there is an

article entitled “Hello House! – I want to talk to the oven” speculating on what sort of innovations, relating to housework, can be expected to be introduced in the near future.

From the looks of it, if one has the cash to buy all those goodies, there will be absolutely nothing for the housewife to do. There’ll be no washing and ironing – done in the cupboard while you sleep – and no dishwashing there’ll be automatic dishwashers with ultrasonic waves to dislodge the dirt (if you’re so old-fashioned to have permanent kitchenware). No cleaning of the house - all done by electronic air filters and sonar cleaners to remove dust and dirt at all openings to the outside, and should any get in, programmed vacuum cleaners to do the rest. Stoves, etc will be remote controlled and you’ll be able to put the dinner on while visiting friends.

There’s only one snag. Assuming you have a robot-nanny and don’t have to work (and let’s face it, the average person will take advantage of this), what one earth is the housewife going to do with her time? She’ll soon get tired of visiting and visitors. Will she sit and write novels or do other creative things and try to improve her intellect? Not if she’s like me (and I think most people are), she’ll sit and get bored. Eventually she’ll decide to get a job. But, with all the innovations in the home, think of the ones in the business world! (Stop me if you’ve heard this before)

Typewriters will probably work directly from a Dictaphone, so that with the exception of the very small concerns, there’ll be no typists. Switchboards will work automatically and robots will replace secretaries. It would even be difficult to find a job as a lab assistant as there would probably be machines programmed to test for everything needed and the labs would have one or two technicians to place ampoules into a compartment and push buttons, and the results would be far more accurate.

Teachers will be replaced by television – in fact there’ll probably be no schools, the kids will watch at home. You’ll probably not even be able to find a job as a lorry driver as all transportation will be aerial and controlled by a computer. Nurses and hospital staff will be replaced by robots and diagnostic computers. In this sort of society the only people with jobs will be computer personnel and a very small assortment of others.

Therefore officials (computers?) will have to find means of entertaining the bulk of the populace, and this would probably be done by taking the sort of stuff that will appeal to the masses and therefore rather “low-brow” All that will be left to the individual will be eating, drinking, sleeping and reproducing (maybe not even the last, but I somehow think there’ll be too much opposition to mechanizing that) so that the population will increase as one can’t morally take away a thinking being’s freedom to have as many or few children as they wish. Thus the situation will go from bad to worse until the ants – or something- takes over.

Give me housework any day.

Mary (Scott)

Once upon a time in the remote past there were a group of people known as Nuclear Scientists. So gather round and lend an ear as I spin my tale of woe, suspense and

Ten Nuclear Scientists standing in a line

One invented a new weapon and now there’s only nine.

(Anonymous)



Roberto Schima - The Little Silver Being

It's been a long time...

Memory, especially with advancing age, is capable of playing many tricks on us, distorting some facts, suppressing many others, mixing dreams with reality.

However, that particular event, when I was seventeen, I never forgot; if not in all its details, at least in the essentials. It is alive inside my heart, in my soul, as if it had just happened. However, thirty-five years have passed ... Thirty-five! A lifetime practically ... like a distant song or a deep chasm. However, what happened was the bridge, my current link with that "me" left behind in an eternity of time. It was the abyss returning its gaze to me, over us all.

Will I dare to face it again?

I still remember that glow of obsidian on the concave terrain. The smells incinerated from the forest. The unintelligible shouting. Lightning. The fear. The silver flicker in the night. And, mainly, the penetrating tinnitus, crossing the brain from one hemisphere to another repeatedly.

But, as they say, I better "start from the beginning" ...

I open one eye, just one ...

And I stare.

I returned home as usual. It was a clear night, although few stars were visible. Life in the city and the suburbs was like that. In addition to sucking people's lives, it also stole the stars from the sky. Spring perfumed the streets and houses with its sweet, warm odor. It was almost midnight. I was tired of studying so much. I had been stuck all day in books and handouts, preparing for college entrance exams. The competition was heavy, especially for someone like me, who had come from public education, and saw no way to afford a private college. I had saved a whole year of work, quit my job, and was now paying for my cramming and looking to study full time. It was all or nothing.

People slept in their homes, living the mystical universe of dreams, or watching some American stuff "canned" on TV. The lights of houses and streetlights cast artificial shadows. Everything was very quiet. In the streets, only the sound of my footsteps on the pavement was heard, reminding me of a little poem I had written a few months earlier, in the fall, in a moment of loneliness, uncertainty and fussiness:

Steps in Autumn

On lonely walking

Through the dark streets,

Just the sound of your footsteps

On the asphalt you could hear it.

Eventually, the brushing of the wind

In the leaves

A strange murmur

That, in the distance, disappeared.

Clouds covered the moon

In sad melancholy,

While the stars wept

The dissipation of joy.

The cold froze their faces,

But he felt nothing.

The lights in the distance went out

And the fine serene fall.

Memories in his mind swirled:

Dreams, ideals, fantasies,

From a world lost in the past,

Of peace, purity and harmony.

However time flew by,

And a new world was emerging.

Memories were left behind.

There is no peace, purity and joy.

Your steps are lost in the night,

*And you have to face the day,
Leaving your footprints on the asphalt
And the memories on the cold sidewalk.*

As I approached home, a semi-detached townhouse, almost on the corner and at an elevated location, I began to observe the lights lost in the distance. They were like sequins embroidered on a curvy black fabric. I felt empty, calm ... not, calm, no, just exhausted, unable to focus my thoughts on anything. I walked slowly, savoring the stillness, breathing the night into me.

The silence was impressive, almost supernatural: no cricket, no brushing of papers on the electricity wires, nothing. Only tiredness made me not think about it. My mind had been absorbed by the problems of mathematics, physics and chemistry; memorizing the difficult names of Biology and the grammatical rules in the Portuguese class with their endless exceptions. In History, I had taken a class on the Enlightenment and the Renaissance, periods that brought back the self-esteem of the human being, putting me back in the center of the Universe as the highest creature on Earth, the work and image of God. It didn't comfort me much ...

Looking at the vault, I saw some stars trying to survive in the polluted atmosphere. The moon was also shining pale; I think it was waning, I don't know for sure now. It was then that, suddenly and sideways, I saw a trace of light scratch the sky like a magic chalk on the space blackboard. "Meteor", I thought without giving much importance at first. But meteors disappeared quickly with friction, since most of them were not much bigger than a pea. However, that particular "meteor" persisted, crossing the sky from east to west. Although I still did not hear anything, the brightness of that object increased, to the point of illuminating the roofs and streets. And it was growing and growing. My torpor gave way to restlessness and fear. Finally it got lost behind some distant trees.

Almost at the same moment, a crash, a shock wave, made the floor shake and the ladies at night who graced the street where I found myself walking, causing a shower of leaves and white petals. I lost my balance on the sidewalk guide and fell. I skinned my knees and palms, which burned as if I had touched them on a hot plate.

Notebooks and handouts fluttered like frightened birds. Bruised, dirty and in great pain, I collected my school supplies as much as possible, without taking my eyes off the direction from which I thought the impact had occurred. I saw multicolored lights explode from the bottom up like big fireworks.

It didn't take long for frightened people to emerge from their homes.

- Hey you! Did you hear that noise? Asked by a fat guy in a robe of his neighbor.

The latter, a tall skinny man, with wide baldness and glasses with thick lenses, replied in a supercilious voice:

- Only the deaf did not hear. Was it an earthquake?

- Quake that produces lights? . Look back there. See?

The skinny man squeezed his eyes behind the lens.

- What lights are those?

- How do I know? It looks like a gas station blew up!

A resident across the street interjected:

- I think my television broke ... Damn it! Right now, at the most exciting part of the movie ... Damn! Who will pay the loss?

Nobody answered.

Other people left, and more, and more ...

A crowd formed in the yards, sidewalks and streets. Despite the late hours, several of them headed towards the strange lights. The "fireworks" still lit up the sky, however, to a lesser extent now. Other groups were forming and converging to the impact site, coming from the surrounding neighborhoods, increasing their ranks.

Some went by car, most were on foot. They looked like little elves behind the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. In spite of all the tiredness, the hunger, the injuries, I ended up joining the mob, hitchhiking with a guy I didn't even know, in an old Volkswagen.

- Damn it! He exclaimed. - I've never heard anything like it. My grandfather was in the war and woke up with a start, thinking he had returned to the past, to the trenches. He told me that only a bomb of enormous destructive power could have made the earth shake like that. Three windows of my house were broken!

"I don't think it was a bomb," I replied in a yawn, while trying to wipe the blood off my hands. - I saw it fall. I think it was a kind of plane ...

- Barbarity! ... Let's pray you are wrong ... Ah! What's your name? My name is Eno.

- Eno?

- Yeah ... Like fruit salt ..

- My name is Roberto.

- You saw something, Beto. Come on!

It took us about half an hour to reach the place, with a mixture of curiosity and bad feeling. Normally, we would make the trip in about ten minutes, however, that night the traffic had increased considerably, especially in the vicinity of the epicenter.

Everyone wanted to know what had happened, without waiting for the morning news. There was something morbid about it, like those people watching in fascination a street fight or a traffic accident. It was one of the dark sides of human nature, and it wasn't even the worst.

The fall had taken place in a wooded region, close to the Macridi Mountains, one of the rare areas that, for the time being, had escaped real estate development.

Otherwise, the dimensions of the tragedy would be much larger. (Later, I came to the conclusion that the fall in an unpopulated area was no accident.) Fire spots persisted here and there. Many trees and shrubs were burned; many logs, felled, blocking the path. We left the Volkswagen behind a row of cars. We could hardly breathe as we approached the center of the disaster on foot. When we were about two hundred meters away, we separated from each other. It was not intentional. There came a point where there was no more public lighting, no brightness, except for the moon and now some flashlights. It was dark. Many people knocked others over. Many feet trampled stones and dead foliage. Sounds of branches being broken came from everywhere. Whispers, tense breaths, slurred movements.

I even wondered what I was doing there. Why hadn't I gone home to take a shower, have dinner, sleep, and get ready for the next day, which wouldn't be less tiring? Would I be as morbid as those others appeared to be? Would you look for some form of comfort in the misfortune of others? I couldn't answer. I felt driven by that

impulse, like a runaway train, rubble dragged by the current. I just followed the course, unable to turn against it or find a backwater.

Finally, sweaty and dirty, I hit the spot. The scene was one of absolute destruction. It was hard not to trip over something, a piece of trunk, some rock, anything. The “fireworks” - or whatever they were - had stopped. There was a huge smoking crater. The floor around the edge had risen and was still warm. Colored vapors rose, faint, condensing quickly, forming a low mist. I didn't see any metal debris around, bodies or any other sign indicating the fall of an airplane. I thanked You for that. The people who had arrived first formed a ring of ghostly shapes around the crater. Panting, I approached them cautiously. The heat was almost unbearable. Branches and bushes crackled. Some more lucid and less selfish people took care to prevent the spread of the flames. Most, however, were staring into the crater. There was astonishment, disbelief, on their faces. I got closer. It was not easy: the terrain had become steeper and there was a lot of loose soil. It was still hot, very hot. Sweat increased with each step. My shirt felt close to my body. Close to the edge, I narrowed my eyes and, in the mist, I saw it too.

It was like looking into the depths of an abyss. The chasm within each of us. "Hell's Cauldron" would not be an unreasonable expression for it.

And inside this cauldron, amidst the fog, an object of metallic appearance, all silver and large, was partially destroyed and buried in the calcified soil. How part of its structure had managed to survive such a violent impact was a mystery. Using the term “structure” immediately would lead to the conclusion that it is something artificial, designed and built by intelligent hands - or some appendix of similar function - however, at that time it could be either a kind of device or some kind of egg, or an unknown geode. It could be anything and none of them. No one knew and could not even think clearly. Most looked open-mouthed, mesmerized, facing the high temperature to satisfy their curiosity. The danger was enormous: the center of the crater should still be as hot as liquefied lead. If someone stepped on the wrong foot and slipped inside ... The dimensions of that were comparable to those of a fishing vessel, those seen in the port of Santos or leaving Boca da Barra, in Itanhaém, where my family used to go at the end years before my parents split up.

Its shape was that of a cylinder with rounded ends, a giant dragee. Its surface was apparently smooth, without any signs of doors or windows, as well as metallic structures similar to wings, antennas, radars, etc. There were cracks caused by the impact, but nothing could be distinguished through them, either by the distance or by the high temperature that caused the air around to flicker. Visibility was still hampered not only by the low light, but by the smoke and fog emanating from the crater. Several people had brought flashlights, but their beams were insufficient. What allowed the object to be seen with some clarity was the moonlight and, mainly, a faint glow emanating from itself. The colors alternated like a rainbow: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet, red, orange ... Could an egg, even an alien, do that?

I looked around. Some commented on the nature of the object. They did it in whispers, as if their voices might disturb something that shouldn't be disturbed - similar to speaking quietly inside a cemetery. I saw the face of an old man redden, startle, yellow ... He was breathing hard, with difficulty, eyes wide. He looked like a child in the face of an unusual discovery. I myself felt my heart beat increase, caught in great excitement. Some guys, more impetuous, wanted to go down, but the high temperature wouldn't allow it. Although, in the end, it should only be bravado to try to impress a friend, a stranger, or, more likely, some young women.

The colors were changing with increasing speed. The expectation was also growing in an identical proportion.

Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet, red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet ...

The fog opened for a moment around the thing. I noticed that the surrounding soil also reflected its shine, it seemed smooth, polished.

Those who had talked were silent.

Attentive looks.

Expectancy.

Ping.

There was a muffled sound of air being expelled, as if an old sarcophagus was being opened. An “ooohhh !!!” he left the crowd, making a chorus of that hiss. Something had happened, but the fog had returned, making it impossible to see clearly. It took about ten minutes. Gusts of wind passed through the region. The mist has dissipated, not entirely, but enough. So...

- An opening! Someone shouted. - Open it ... Look there!

A murmur of amazement rippled through the crowd.

I saw.

It was not a crack like the ones already on the surface of the object. It was regular, just above the fog. No egg would be broken like that. I thought about running away, however, it was the thought of a split second. I knew I would not leave, that my legs would not obey. It was like being trapped in the sight of a snake.

Beside me, I realized with disgust that the old man drooled from the corners of his mouth. It emitted weird grunts like a cornered animal. In some way and in our own way, we were overcome by primitive feelings and reactions. From a corner in the shadows, someone was crying.

Suddenly, more than one person noticed movement coming from the bottom of the crater. From that opening something came up. A new murmur went through the crowd, this time louder. Screams.

- There! Someone pointed out.

More screams. Groups stirred. One of the braver people, who had recently started to descend, lost his balance and almost fell, but was saved by a middle-aged woman. All bravado was gone, and he disappeared into the crowd.

Finally, it came ...

... the creature.

A figure, a humanoid being, wrapped in a type of silver diving suit, similar to those used by firefighters when they entered the fire. Except that the diving suit was fairer, following the contours of its body. He was short, perhaps five feet tall, with his head disproportionately larger than that of a human being, and his legs awkwardly shorter. No part of the being was visible, it was all staggering silver.

People stared with dismay and disbelief at the creature's obvious attempts to leave the ship. Almost crawling, it rolled over and fell with a muffled thud on the boiling ground. Its body disappeared amid the fumaroles. When it managed to rise, it was visible only from the chest up - or something that could be called a chest.

Stumbling, it moved away from the ship. Slipped. It rose again. It tried to climb the crater. Then, extraordinarily, it became aware of the presence of the curious ones above, on the edge, who were watching everything. It waved frantically. It made faint, high-pitched sounds, like a radio before it was tuned in. This strange sound, although of low intensity, penetrated deeply into my brain. It was as if it went through all its nooks, searching, probing; like a scream in the nave of an empty cathedral. I shook my head, annoyed by the itching I was feeling. I noticed the others around, and saw that they were feeling the same.

More people cried.

Other screams.

Some fled.

Everyone was at a loss as to what to do, as if frozen in time, a vast human iceberg. Something incredible, great, yet tragic, was happening before us all; something that exceeded the capacity of understanding of the common individual and even those who thought they were smarter, but, above all, something urgent needed to be done. The creature was desperately climbing the crater, hampered by the soft, warm earth. Its movements were different, hesitant, maybe it was in pain. It was reminiscent of a climber about to reach the summit of Everest, and whose last oxygen cylinder had run out.

Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet, red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet ...

Something needed to be done.

Someone had to help hit. I would like to say here that I was that someone, but I was not. I was just as scared as anyone there. As stupid as the most stupid of those present. My primitive side made me act with a schooling mentality, wanting only to lose myself in the crowd. Let someone else do it, and not me. Since I was a kid, I was always the last one to be chosen in Physical Education classes when it came to

forming teams. One of the favorite targets of prank calls and nicknames in bad taste. I just wanted to be invisible. But I also wanted to see it. And I saw that someone needed to take action.

Then, on that hot spring night, in a suburb on the east side of São Paulo, someone took:

- Kill the monster! Kill the monster! - it was the cry that echoed in the darkness, in the mountains, among the burnt trees and shrubs.

Other voices echoed it.

- Let's kill the monster!

An electric current ran through the horde, as if it was awakened from a deep sleep. It has become a collective entity, a swarm of African bees. Repressed emotions arose. Most then started to elbow at the edge of the crater, throwing rocks, logs and everything else at hand.

I felt pushed, crushed, trampled. An elbow in my stomach, coming from God knows where, took all the air out of me. Waves of pain drowned my cry of protest halfway. My eyes watered. Opportunistic hands searched my pockets. My notebooks spread again, however, with no chance of taking off among those people.

The high-pitched sounds continued. A million mosquitoes rioting inside the mind. One shot rang out, then another and another. The bastard who had brought the revolver unloaded it completely.

- I got it! I got it! Shouted the miserable, triumphant, amid the shouts of approval from several and the stunned silence from the few.

Unfortunately, I couldn't see him in the diffuse crowd that night, let alone knowing his name. It would be worth recording the name of the machinist for history. Not that it was, it would come or go much further ...

I had dragged myself close to a charred log. Breathing hard, filthy, still feeling a lot of pain and with some abrasions, I tried to compose myself in the best way. Looking at the rim of the crater, I saw the ghostly shapes around that faint light in fast changing colors. For a brief moment, it seemed to me that I was witnessing a Sabbath of witches and demons from old Europe, dancing around a hellish cauldron, cooking

little children, jumping and screaming in lost hysteria. It was not a fair comparison. Many elderly and lonely women, who lived with their animals, their medicinal herbs and some eventual eccentricity, were branded witches, persecuted, tortured and murdered by people who believed themselves to be holy. People like the one I now observed, moved by such stupidity and cruelty; the same cattle mentality, imitating his neighbor in the cattle boom.

At least, I didn't participate. If I carried a guilt, it was that I did nothing to avoid it. The trial and sentence will come soon. For the unfortunate creature of the stars, it made no difference.

Sounds came from inside the crater. At first a very sharp sound, then another and another. They hurt my brain more than my ears. An object rolled: the body. Shouts of joy came from the mob. The alternation of colors became more frantic; and the light, more intense. The temperature started to rise rapidly.

- The thing is burning! Someone shouted. - It's burning!

There was a beginning of panic. Instinctively - bovine mentality still in operation - people ran. Some fell and were trampled. Dead leaves fluttered. Dry branches were broken. I saw gaping small bolts of lightning appear from the crater as if they were legs of a fantastic tarantula, groping, searching. A bubble of orange light gradually emerged, forming an incandescent dome. The heat was scorching and rising. I dragged myself out of there as much as I could. Cars were leaving. Pedestrians, in the middle of the crush, ran over each other. The lightning intensified, accompanied by thunder. An electric odor mixed with the smell of burning. Suddenly, a column of bluish light went up to the sky, tearing up the clouds, losing itself in the darkness among the few stars. It lasted perhaps five seconds, then disappeared, sucked into the depths of the night, taking with it the orange vault, the lightning and the thunder. Darkness and silence returned.

The interior of the crater was on fire, emitting very little red light.

The smell of electricity hung in the air, mixed with other smells.

I was just an empty shell. The shell of a cicada that never knew how to sing. I took a deep breath several times. The stench was dreadful, sickening. My chest hurt. My legs hurt. My hands burned worse than they had before. My stomach complained.

The remaining people, recovered from the scare, were curious, but were unable to approach.

- What happened?

- I don't know ... It melted everything.

- Can you see anything?

- It is very hot. I will climb this tree ...

- And then?

- The crater is shining inside. But the flying saucer ... is no longer there! Not that thing. The floor is shining. It got dark, but it's glowing ...

Coming from afar, I heard the sirens. Police cars, ambulances, and firemen soon appeared, even though they had come too late, like all cavalry.

Coincidence or not, the weather changed suddenly. Clouds covered the sky and a storm broke over the whole place.

The military police spoke to the crowd. All witnesses to the event - those who were able to be herded, at least - were forced to return to their homes, after providing their personal details, documents and addresses. In the days, weeks and months that followed, they were asked to give statements.

The last thing I remember is being loaded into a vehicle. Needless to say, how worried my mother was - and the deserved scolding I got later - especially when I was in that state and brought home by an ambulance. I quickly fell into a deep sleep, however, nothing peaceful. In the dream, strange scenarios paraded before me. Another world made of silver, crystals and strange machines, many machines. The insistent buzzing filled my head. I still seemed to be searching.

When I woke up, I found myself in my room. Everything seemed to have been a bad dream, except for the marks on my body. And the pain. If I had run the marathon, I would not have felt worse.

As much as it annoyed me, it was impossible to attend my next classes. I regretted the loss of notebooks and handouts, as well as my personal documents in the wallet that had been stolen.

Early in the morning, the radio reported about strange lights that appeared in the Macridi mountains.

- "Scientists said it was a small comet falling," said the reporter. - "Asked about rumors about a silver ship and a brilliant little man, they replied that they did not know anything. In an ironic tone, they added that it was probably just an optical illusion or mass hallucination. They had an identical opinion with respect to the mysterious rays and lights, and the subsequent explosions. One of the scientists even mentioned a similar case in Siberia, in 1908, when the shock of another comet was mistaken for an accident involving a hypothetical vehicle of extraterrestrial origin. Only one doubt remains, and which they have not been able to explain so far: why is the entire bottom of the crater hardened, covered with a thick layer of obsidian? The search will continue. As soon as the scientists finish their studies, they will make a new official statement to the press ... "

- "Optical illusion"? "Mass hallucination"? - I spoke to myself. Who do you want to deceive?

The buzz came back strong, very strong. I shook my head as hard as I could, feeling continuous pulsations of pain. Static. At the same time, the radio began to make a shrill crackle. I wanted to shout, but the voice didn't come. Fortunately, I was still lying down.

So..... the voice came.

Strange, profound, coming from enigmatic chasms of mind and space. Abyss ... again the abyss. And it spoke from inside me through the radio:

- Please help me! The ship will explode ... Run! Run! The ship suffered damage ... Solar explosion I come in peace ...

The radio fell silent.

The buzz is gone.

I felt great relief, however, it was not complete. There was a deep feeling of unease, remorse, in my chest.

It come in peace.

Something I would carry around forever.

A great void arose in me.

"What trivial explanation will then authorities give for this mysterious voice on the radio?", I thought. "Collective ventriloquism?"

Specifically, a certainty: we had become the monster we thought we would fight. In the days that followed, I had to run after the duplicate of my documents, which had disappeared that night, as well as the materials lost in the crowd. Everything seemed unreal. Normality has become unusual.

Oh yes, I had to give a statement, like the others. They forced me to sign a sworn statement, in which I pledged not to bring it up any more, as it involved national security and things like that. They never succeeded in silencing rumors completely, lost in their endless bureaucratic procedures. No better luck had the crazy aura reserved for those who insisted on the subject, so that, little by little, the witnesses forced themselves to be silent.

A month later, the scientists reported that the glassy surface was caused by the heat of the impact with a meteorite, instead of a comet. They did not provide further details, much less the absence of fragments. The crater was named "Nhatumani", because it is the name of the street closest to the collision. The entire area was isolated to continue studies. A set of laboratories was built nearby, where foreign voices were heard frequently. Much later, excursions by tourists were allowed under strict surveillance, "to avoid accidents". They even made a sort of box office.

I visited the crater.

At this point I had already taken the entrance exam. Through one of those inexplicable miracles, I had managed to pass. I was an engineer.

A platform had been built to allow a view from above. A metal fence on each side of the platform prevented any direct access to the land by the public. They installed cameras everywhere. I met people who had been there that night, including that guy from Volkswagen with the name of fruit salt, Eno. Despite the ban, I tried to talk to him about it, but he ran away from me like the devil on the cross. I never saw him again.

I looked at the bottom of the crater. It was very dark and bright. It was day. There was no more fog. I tried to relive those fateful moments in my mind: the few stars, the scent of the ladies of the night, the crash, the rush, the flames, the alien, the shot, the mad mob.

And the radio message.

Something important had happened that night. The revelation ... Not just a revelation from the Cosmos, bringing life, knowledge and fatality. Not only an irreparable loss that could have reduced in centuries, but in millennia everything we thought we knew about Science in general and the Universe in particular. An innocent life, perhaps the most innocent conscience on Earth at that moment, was taken away. That night there was a revelation for me as important or even more important than all this:

The revelation of Man himself.

And there would be no Enlightenment or Renaissance that would bring human glory back. If there had been a creature at the center of the universe, it had gleamed silver. We had created God in our image and likeness; therefore, He had done nothing for the alien. The philosopher was right: God was dead. Maybe that's why he had gone mad ...

... or, on the contrary, would it have been a punishment?

I momentarily closed the eye I had opened.

I am tired, exhausted. Many sleepless nights, and when I sleep, I see. Silver and crystal worlds. I hide my face in my palms. Nonsense, there is nowhere to hide.

There never was.

Why do I write all this? Why am I breaking my oath? Because it has become irrelevant now. Furthermore, after three decades, who will care?

I watch the reflection of my gray hair as a backdrop on the computer screen as I write. The tired eyes and the wrinkles are like old writing on the parchment on my face.

Everything is irrelevant now.

This writing will also be, if there is no one else to read it.

Because?

The buzz returned. Stronger than ever, much more insistent. A real swarm of bees passing through neurons. Perhaps more ... I dreamed of nights in a row with

hundreds, thousands of "hives" crossing space. Floating cities. Machines, millions of them. Silver and crystal.

The buzz made radios and televisions burn. Miraculously, computers remained intact. From time to time, a word is repeated on your screen and throughout the world network. I need to be very careful, make the "backups" every minute.

A word.

Coming from the distant darkness of the sky.

The herald of destiny.

The fate of us all.

A word...

"RETALIATION"

That night lost in time, we looked too deep into the abyss.

Now, the abyss was returning.

It looks inside us.

NOTE: This story was originally published in the independent collection "Pequenas Portas do Eu", in late 1987. Now, twenty-six years later, I have given it a new face. Coincidentally, I was also twenty-six years old at the time. I will not have the presumption to say that I improved the story, as if time had perfected me as an author, like a bottle of wine. I did not practice writing for many years. If there is a certainty in the course of all these years, it is only that I got older ... In any case, I tried to add more details to the story (one would say "stuffing sausage") according to my current view. The inclusion of the poem "Passos no Autumn" was a device that I could not resist, however displaced it may have been. I wrote it when I was twenty. I never had a knack for poetry, anything that was more than a "Batatinha when he was born ..." However, I didn't want to miss this chance to preserve it - and even divulge it - for purely personal, nostalgic reasons. Roberto Schima

Case Notes of a Witchdoctor Nick Wood

Mark had reached the age where he'd seen it all - liars, psychopaths, the neurotic...and the *completely* insane. Psychosis it was, though, that still just about held his interest.

Like the young black man in front of him, sitting and grimacing, but trying hard not to tilt his head. He has some insight, then, not wanting to reveal a listening attitude in the silence of the sickly yellow room.

Not *enough* insight, though.

Mark spoke, to put the young man out of his misery.

"I'm afraid you're going to have to stay in for the weekend, Kolile." (Try as he would, he'd never been able to make the correct click on the X in Xolile's name.)

This time he could see he had the patient's full attention. "Please, *asseblief* doctor, I need to go home this weekend."

Mark played with the orange government biro on the open folder between them, feeling a little bored, a little helpless. There was a limit to what he could do - *and* it was Friday afternoon, with rush-hour traffic no doubt building early along De Waal drive.

He took the pen and wrote with finality in the psychiatric notes - Provisional Diagnosis: Psychosis. Keep in for further observation.

He looked up. Xolile was sitting rigid, staring behind him.

Despite himself, Mark turned, to see the thick door and blank wall. He dropped his hand away from the panic button underneath his desk.

"What do you see, Kolile?" he smiled reassuringly and with certainty, keen to wrap up the consultation quickly now.

The young man looked him squarely in the eyes, as if oblivious to customary respectful gaze avoidance for his elders.

"An old white man," he said. "I think he may be your father."

Mark laughed then, loudly. His father had been dead three years.

He stood up: "You'll feel better after a weekend in, on your medication. The staff are very good here."

The young man stood up and held his gaze, until tears leaked from his eyes and he looked down.

"Please," he said, "my mother needs me. I am sick, yes, but I think it is because the ancestors call me."

Mark hesitated; he'd been reminded of caring for his own mother, for a good many months after dad's death.

"*Why* do they call you?" he asked, cursing himself for delaying on what was surely a certain decision, but looking for a hidden delusionary system.

"To become a healer too, like you," Xolile said, his voice muffled in the blue overalls, head bowed. Mark realised abruptly that the young man's head was bowed to hide his tears.

"We shall see," he said, opening the door. Staff Nurse Dumisane, who'd been waiting outside in respect for psychological confidentiality, came in and ushered the young man out.

Mark nodded goodbye and closed the door.

Friday at last, Friday, fucking Friday. The surf must be pumping at *Kommetjie* by now. Time to wash the working week off him in that frenzied cold water.

He closed the file on his desk; Xolile Ngubane. Shut.

He'd seen so many tears, so much *snot en trane*, this was no different.

But Xolile's presence didn't seem to have fully left the room. Mark could almost smell the lingering pain of his tears, the sourness of his body odour, his leaking desperation.

Still, he *had* seen it all. He picked up the file to leave the room.

"Where are you going, son?"

Mark dropped the file, having half-opened the door with his right hand. He peered back into the room, scanning the walls, the psychometric test cupboard, the desk, underneath the desk...

He stopped himself. Stupid, stupid, he really just needed a rest; it had been a hell of a week.

No one to go home to, though. Sharon had left eight months ago, and he'd left Jo'burg over a year ago now, to get away from a needy mother. There had been lots of leavings, with so few greetings anymore.

He picked up the file and sighed. At least the sea didn't judge him. Muizenberg soon with a boogie board maybe, for, actually, he felt like a warmer and gentler swim. So, home first, pick up the board and head waves-side, before the beach bursts with *manne* jostling for board-space.

He stopped himself from announcing his plans to the air and cursed as he saw the black smear on his fingers. The cheap plastic biro's tended to leak like an old man with a dodgy prostate. (At least *he* could still piss a few bubbles into the pot.) Throwing the pen into the bin, he wiped his fingers with some desk-tissues; its okay, man, just so long as he'd kept the file clean.

He hesitated, the wall was dripping sound. Leaning his right ear against the bricks' clammy, slippery surface, he listened.

Father?

A quavering voice, soft but through cold stones, old stones - a leper asylum before it became a mad-house, so he'd heard.

A dim and distant voice, which was just repeating his name, over and over again.

So many voices lost here.

But this one *knew* him.

He had no answer. It was time to go.

Softly, he closed the door behind him and headed for the nurse's station, along the banana-coloured hospital corridor. He nodded at a puffed up psychiatrist passing him; Jesus, that guy needed to learn to treat his patients more respectfully.

He took a right turn into the nurse's station and the adjoining patient lounge, which was empty, as they were all out for their early supper. Behind the glassed sealed area Sister Mbolo and Staff Nurse Dumisane were standing, collecting night meds from cabinets, eyes flickering up to patient charts on the walls.

Mark stepped into the station quietly; file ready to be deposited alphabetically into the cabinet. He'd update online records next week.

He needed a swim *badly*.

Dumisane glanced at him, sieving a few tablets into a metal bowl. "Xolile to stay in then?" he asked, clicking extravagantly, to Mark's ears. (He's Zulu after all; Xhosa clicks come easy to him.)

"Ye –"

The old man caught his eye, lounging just across the room. He didn't recognise him, but he knew it wasn't - it *couldn't* be - his father. But dad had lain a bit like that, in the days following his stroke, limp and helpless and dumb.

Three weeks of silent helpless lying, before dying quietly, in the middle of the night, when no one was around.

But he'd done his grieving, processed his feelings, put it all behind him. He'd known what to do, after all. (Spilling himself verbally and with tears; off-loading to Sharon, while trying to hold mom together at the same time.)

Three months after tossing the last bit of dirt on his dad's grave with his own hands, Mark had realised he'd put it all behind him. (Well within the stipulated normal grief time parameters: he'd been proud of that, until Sharon had punctured it by leaving without explanation.)

The old man in the lounge bent over and pulled a page from one of the ward Bibles. It looked like he was going to roll a cigarette with it. Despite himself, Mark smiled - certainly *not* dad, then.

"Dr. Bezuidenhout?" Dumisane was standing up straight, peering at him with obvious bewilderment.

"Um," he said, "Kolile can go home for the weekend, but will need to be visited tomorrow by the community team, to get collateral information from his mother."

"The community team's off this weekend - I can go, I'm on duty and Sister and the others can cover me," Dumisane smiled.

"Really?" The sister glowered at him and then laughed. "So he's safe to go out?"

Mark paused, looking at the Sister, short and smiling, but knowing she was also pure steel underneath.

"He thinks his ancestors are calling him."

"Oh," she rolled her eyes. "Another *ukuthwasa* then. Bloody governments to blame I tell you. They still haven't created enough *real* jobs."

He chuckled to himself as he picked up a pen. It was fine for *her* to say that!

He hesitated and then, for the first time in a long time, Mark changed his file notes using stale, scratchy white correction fluid, countersigning the change as the traffic grew rapidly louder along the road outside *Valkenberg* hospital.

He smelt burning and looked up in alarm. The old black man was smoking the Bible.

Mark woke with the sense of someone watching him.

Without even opening his eyes, he knew who it was.

"Hi, Dad." On opening his eyes, he was unsurprised to find his room empty. His dad had been dead three years, after all.

Mark rolled over, groaning, stiff from a late evening's bodysurf at *Muizenberg*. As it had for many months now, the bed felt too big for him.

It was a bright and sunny master bedroom, looking out on a small but neat *Rondebosch* garden, orange bougainvillea framing razor wire and a hyperactive alarm. It was all somewhat on the dull side in long Cape winters, though. As for the children's bedroom - well, *that* never happened, did it?

He walked stiffly through to the bathroom and splashed his face with clear and cold water.

Water *always* does the trick.

A pale and wrinkled face stared blankly back at him, gray hair hung lankly down alongside his cheeks. Shocked, he took several paces backed, slipped and banged his head against the towel railing. No stars, just a burning red blur in front of his eyes.

And an expressionless dead face.

It was his father's face, not his.

Mark reeled backwards, averting his eyes.

God, it was as if Dad had died without feeling, without thoughts, a pale husk of a once strong and fierce - but funny - man. It was early morning when we'd last seen him, but for moments he'd failed to recognise it *was* him, so shrunken and waxen he was.

So *dead*.

Mark sat on the bathroom mat, its crinkly blue plastic fur tickling his naked thighs - but he couldn't give a shit about that, quietly crying until thoughts came again.

Including one terrifying and growing thought.

He resisted it at first, hiding it away behind deliberate thoughts of beach or shopping, moving in safe and familiar spaces.

But there was no hiding from it - it kept popping back into his head.

He sighed. He knew he had a phone-call to make. He knew he had somewhere to go.

Somewhere hard.

Mark stood up and faced the mirror. His own tired face looked out at him. He washed his face, shaved and dressed carefully and respectfully in white collared shirt and grey slacks. The house was too quiet, too empty - and the face in the mirror looked even emptier still, although he was just relieved it was his face.

Pulling his mobile from his trouser pocket, he speed dialed the ward.

"Staff Nurse Dumisane? Doctor Bezuidenhout here. I think I should come with you to visit that patient this morning. Ja, I'm ready - half an hour, hey. See you outside my house, you've got my address, *ja nee?*"

The street was quiet, still early on a Saturday morning in a cul de sac set back from the Main Road. The trees were in full bloom but starting to sway from the gathering South-Easter.

Mark jingled some coins in his pocket, deciding to text his sister in Jo'burg as a distraction.

He was going someplace he'd never been before; a place he'd always managed to avoid.

A township.

A *black* township.

The white Government Garage car arrived, an old Fiat, Staff Nurse Dumisane waving cheerfully from the rolled down driver's window,

Mark got in, feeling even more anxious.

As they pulled off and headed down past *Rondebosch* station and across the wasteland of the Common, he felt his pulse start to race.

"So," he said, "where are we going, again?"

Dumisane glanced at him sideways and then focused on the road, swerving to avoid a taxi pulling out suddenly.

"Gugs, been there before, Doctor?"

Ah, *Gugulethu*, not the worst thankfully, but no doubt bad enough, with very few - if any - white *mense* there.

Mark shook his head coolly. "No, can't say I have, Dumisane - any tips?"

The staff nurse gave a big laugh as he swung past a bus and the streets started to fill up, heading steadily away from the Mountain. "Stick close to me, doctor, and you'll be fine."

Houses had given way to wide and dingy council flats surrounding dirt yards, bright washing swinging from lines hanging out of windows or in courtyards.

The men on the street looked rougher and tougher and downright dangerous.

Dumisane pulled to a halt alongside a small brick terraced house, brightly painted in blue, with a small but neat path.

Mark raised his eyebrows discreetly. He'd expected more overt poverty, more visible desperation.

"We don't all live in corrugated iron shacks, you know," Dumisane said shortly, getting out of the car.

Mark felt a pang of shame; Dumisane was a damn good nurse and obviously a sharp reader of people. He still couldn't stop himself looking carefully around, before opening the door and stepping outside to join Dumisane.

The staff nurse was already by the door, chatting in swift isiXhosa with a smiling middle-aged woman in a neat red dress and headscarf. He beckoned Mark over.

"This is Xolile's psychologist," he said. "Doctor Bezuidenout, this is Mrs. Ngubane."

The woman gave a little nod as she took his hand with both of hers. "Please come in," she said. "Would you like some tea?"

Mark smiled, wondering if the English resonance was intended for him. She led the way inside, into a small but neat kitchen with dining area. Mark noted the door through to the other rooms - or room - was firmly closed.

Mrs. Ngubane lit a gas cooker underneath a battered but ready silver kettle. She turned to Mark: "Five Roses or *rooibos*, Doctor?"

"Uh, *rooibos* please, Mrs. Ngubane."

Dumisane was obviously a Five Roses man. She gestured them both to sit on stools arranged tightly around a small wooden table.

Mark turned as the door creaked behind him.

Xolile stood, the room behind him darkened, but he looked cheerful and neatly dressed.

"Hello, doctor, staff nurse," he said breezily, stepping inside and closing the door behind him. He leaned back against the door and folded his arms.

Mark sat and drank his hot tea, looking at family pictures arrayed on the wall, while the conversation drifted awkwardly around Xolile's interrupted studies. He'd been a physiotherapy student at UWC before he'd been picked up by a police patrol, wandering and confused, in the dunes near *Monwabisi*.

Mrs. Ngubane looked cross, reminiscing on the events, "You sure it's not *dagga*, my boy?"

"No, mamma!" he said. His arms dangled by his sides, as she had already reprimanded him for the rudeness of folded arms, following up with a warning against hands in pockets.

There was a man in some of the photos, but only in those with a younger pre-adolescent Xolile.

Mark signaled to Dumisane. Dumisane would be able to get much better information from the mother if both were unburdened from the demands of English.

Mark put his empty mug down and stood up. "Is there a space we can talk in private, Kolile?" (Always, he struggled with the correct pronunciation.)

The young man stood up squarely, a good few inches taller than Mark. "Sure, doctor, the street."

"The street?" Mark heard his voice almost crack with a sudden surge of panic. "Why the street?"

"A bedroom is too private," he said. "The street is better."

Mark wondered whether Xolile had guessed he was anxious there - and even more so at the thought of walking and talking in a township street. He seemed brighter and more lucid today - perhaps indeed it was a reactive psychosis - just maybe drug induced?

He followed the young man through the doorway, down the path and onto the pavement. A few men and women stalked past, turning to stare briefly at him.

Xolile smiled. "You'll be fine," he said. "Everyone knows me."

So, for some minutes, they walked and talked, Mark probing about his past and recent present, looking for cues and clues as to the onset of his confusional state. His father had left suddenly when he was ten; they had no idea where or why. Prior to his admission, all he could remember was a gathering glow inside and his dead grandmother whispering in his ears, telling him he needed to become an *isangoma*, to heal his people.

Mark stopped. Xolile had turned into a main street, littered with *spaza* shops and large shipping containers filled with people doing business. There was a particularly appealing cell-phone company obviously doing great business inside a grey metal container jutting some way into the road, people spilling out into the road and pavement, taxis hooting past. Mark was relieved to notice that few seemed to look at him anymore.

Xolile gestured him onwards. Mark hesitated. He wanted to ask Xolile something for his *own* benefit, rather than Xolile's. Ethically, such role reversals were generally frowned upon. There was something slightly freeing about being on strange streets, however, so he took a deep breath.

"My father," he said, "is gone like yours, but dead. You saw him at the hospital and I've seen him since. What must I do?"

Xolile stopped. Mark noted he sighed slightly before speaking. "I saw an old man, who I guessed *might* be your father. Beyond that, I cannot help you at all, doctor."

"But don't your beliefs involve contacting the ancestors?"

Xolile looked straight at him and Mark could see amusement and something else etched on his face.

"My beliefs, not yours, doctor. Even then, I'm not sure of them myself. Look!" He turned to gesture at a shop behind them.

The shop had an open hanging canopy, dangling with jars filled with...strange looking shapes in syrup or brownish liquid, organs perhaps - or animal parts?

"Would you consult here? Would you take those things if prescribed, to help you contact your father?"

Mark spotted a placard outside. It was a doctor's surgery, but not one that he recognised.

It looked as though Xolile had only just started. "Would you sacrifice a chicken - or a goat? Doctor, there are no shortcuts; you cannot pick and choose our beliefs, like a vulture that is fussy for only the best meat. You must swallow all the bones too."

The young man looked down, as if suddenly ashamed of his outburst.

Mark looked down too, embarrassed at asking, wishing he could retract his thoughts and words.

There was a muffled ringing noise. Xolile fumbled a cell-phone out of his pocket.

"Nomfundo!" he shouted, turning away and breaking into rapid isiXhosa.

Ah, a girl!

Mark looked up as his father walked past.

For frozen seconds, he watched the stooped and familiar gait down the busy street, Dad's slight right-sided shuffle after an earlier warning from a left-sided stroke.

Then he ran, until he was alongside and in front of him.
 It was an old man indeed, but with a craggy black face and silver pepper-corned hair, neatly dressed, as if off to a Saturday Church. The man looked at him uncertainly. "Police?" he asked, "or tourist?"
 Mark raised both hands, ducking his head in apology as well.
 He made his way back to Xolile slowly. He was still busy on his phone, talking excitedly and looking at the ground.
 Mark looked around to track the smell of burning meat. A man and a woman were *braaing* a sheep's head over a hollowed metal barrel. A few other people were gathering round, bringing drinks, perhaps from a local *shebeen*.
 He felt exposed, isolated.
 Xolile finished his call. "Sorry, doctor."
 Mark held his hand up. "Never mind," he said. "I don't suppose you saw me running after anyone just now?"
 Xolile gave him a puzzled look.
 Mark gave a wry smile. "No matter, perhaps it was all in my head."
 Xolile shook his head firmly. "No wonder you *umlungu* have such big heads," he said. "You try and fit everything into it."
 Despite himself, Mark laughed. As he laughed, it suddenly dawned on him that just maybe he would *never* stop missing his father.
 He no longer felt so certain of anything and everything, either.
 They turned to watch people gather for food. "You fancy some, doctor?"
 Mark laughed again: "Just a little taste."
 It was nice to be invited.
 There were indeed new things to see - *and* new things to do.

Books Received

JonathanBall *Publishers*

Lindsay Ellis Axioms End Bloomsburg R230.00
 Kerri Maniscalco Kingdom of the Wicked Hodder Children R355.00
 Terry Brooks The Fall of Shannara 4:the Last Druid Little Brown R355.00
 Garth Nix The Left-Handed booksellers of London Orion R355.00
 Andrzej Sapkowski The Tower of Fools Orion R355.00
 Ranulph Fiennes The Elite Simon & Schuster UK R255.00
 Evan Winter The Fires of Vengeance Little Brown R355.00
 Kim Stanley Robinson The Ministry of the Future Little Brown R355.00

Not Forgotten by God

Roberto Schima

The afternoon was thick and silent as a breath when blowing out a candle.

Death wandered aimlessly through the cold, damp forest. His ragged robes merged with the dense fog, making it darker. Something had drawn him to that place forgotten by God, but what would it be?

He wandered through swamps and marshes. And everything silenced its passage. When he touched a tree, it immediately lost its leaves, dried up and became a tetrical caricature of claws pointed at the sky.

Suddenly, Death heard something. He came from there, behind a huge oak tree, which was only a dark and imposing figure.

He walked there unhurriedly, in his deathly steps that barely touched the ground.

Then, behind the twisted trunk, covered with lichens and mosses, he spotted it.

It was a newborn baby. Fruit of forbidden love, it had been left there to perish.

He looked at the small figure.

Not surprising, coming from a world where people threw babies in the trash, threw them from the top of buildings or shattered them during wars. He had seen plenty of examples of how much he felt unnecessary, while there were so many people willing to fulfill his role. Humanity has always been so willing to dedicate thousands and thousands of offerings to Death, whether through the hilt of a sword or the tip of a bayonet.

The only gesture of pity had been to wrap the child in a blanket. It was blue and had yellow stars. Poor imitation of a night sky that that baby would not know.

Death approached, ready to fulfill what was the reason for its existence: to deprive the existence of others.

So simple.

So easy.

He stretched out his bare arms to the newborn. At the slightest touch of your fingers, life would drain like water draining down a drain. He exhaled the fetid, icy breath of the eternal smile in his jaws.

"Come ..."

Unexpectedly, the baby stopped crying and opened his eyes.

Death's hands stopped just inches from the pink face. And what the child did next left Death jaw-dropping: it smiled at him.

There was the personification of purity. It was just delivery, without any fear. It was just hope without asking for anything in return. It was the breath that no-one feared, not even death itself. And it was offered to him through a smile from someone who had nothing to offer, nor to lose. So much so that it spread its thin arms against the skinny pair of hands.

Instead of grabbing the baby immediately, Death withdrew his arms, petrified.

Many screamed.

Many wept.

Many despaired.

Everyone regretted it.

But how many had smiled at him?

None.

And in its sterile, dark and icy interior, something happened. Something ... lit up. And Death, the great reaper of life, took the baby by the blanket, avoiding touching directly the soft, warm flesh. And the child floated away from the woods, the swamp, the mist and the penetrating cold. Far away, a bell rang. The plump woman came out from behind her little table a few meters away and went to answer it. She felt the cold air and a pungent odour of something bad. She wrinkled her nose. She coughed. She hugged herself before the chill that had overwhelmed her. She looked around and saw nothing or heard a sound. It should be impossible for someone to ring the bell and run away without being seen. The area was large and there would be no time to hide. Such ramblings soon ended when she noticed the small package at her feet and saw its valuable content. Now that was a familiar scene. She pushed aside the covers and admired the little face and the shining eyes. Tiny hands immediately grabbed her finger. And the baby smiled. And the woman took it inside, closing the tall white door. Above which, the sign said: "Orphanage ..."

And Death, a little further off, saw the door close.

"Go!"

And he left that place full of life and, above all, hope, merging with the darkness in the extinguishing of a flame.

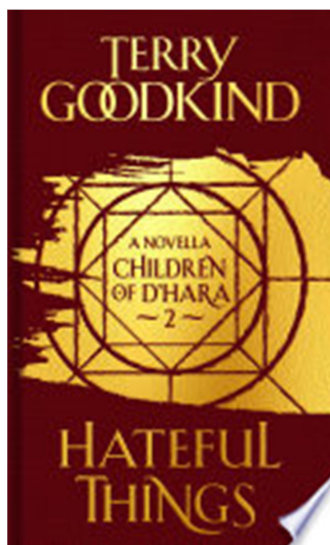
Night came quietly.

Countless stars twinkled in the sky.

And a cold, damp and terrifying forest, in a strange and unexpected way, has revealed itself to be a place not forgotten by God.

Book Reviews The Jamiesons

Terry Goodkind Hateful Things Children of d'Hara vol. 2(Novella)



Officially this novella is the second part of “Children of d’Hara”, a full length novel. Kahlan is pregnant with twins, a boy and a girl, who both have her husband’s Gift and her Power. But because of that they will both be targeted by the Golden Goddess and so hunted and slaughtered. Their world needs both children alive, needs their power to protect the people in to the future. At the same time Richard, Kahlan’s husband, is trying desperately to find out why people are disappearing.

And never returning.

Goodkind is an entertaining author, but be warned, this is not actually novella, but simply part of a longer book. The story stops abruptly, a so called cliff-hanger, and forces you to wait for the next section. And it is published in hard-cover.

Save your money and wait until the whole novel appears on the bookshelves.

0/5

Ian

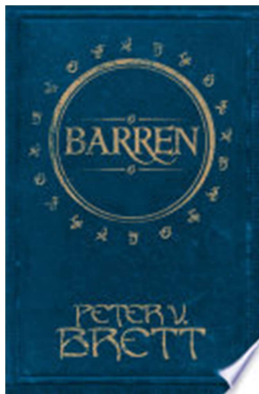
Cassandra Clare – Queen of Air and Darkness. Book Three of “The Shadowhunters”.



Nowhere does it say that this is a book for Teenagers(? young adults), and from the little that I have read, a book aimed at teenage girls. At 866 pages, I was not going to waste my time.

?/5 Ian

Peter V. Brett Barren



Set on an alternate Earth, this novella , tells part of the story of Selia Square, known as Barren, who lives in the small village of Tibbet’s Brook. Each night it is overrun by demons and other horrors, and it is only the defensive wards which protect them. Selia is the leader of the village and is called the Speaker, and has been the force holding the village together for a long time.

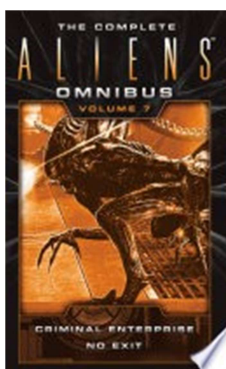
But a new and powerful threat has emerged, and she must overcome her own past to defeat it. It is made clear from the beginning that Selia is a lesbian, and is subject to the same dislikes and hatreds that she might encounter here on Earth.

Brett writes well but this is a soap opera with a fantasy background

2/5 Ian

The Complete Aliens Omnibus Vol. 7 Criminal Enterprise –S.D. Perry

No Exit - B.K Evenson



It is very difficult to do a review on a book which contains two different novels.

“Criminal Enterprise” is a standard science fiction novel about a pilot who is forced to pick up and deliver illegal drugs manufactured on an alien planet. The drugs are manufactured in caves and guarded by the savage aliens.

The aliens themselves are secondary to the main plot.

Entertaining

3/5 Ian

“No Exit” is a pure horror novel about a detective, woken from cryosleep, and let loose on a planet which is fought over by powerful companies. Someone has released the aliens, and the detective is soon fighting for his life against them. I found the descriptions of blood and gore quite nauseating, and I eventually gave it up. Not my kind of book at all, although some may well enjoy it.

1/5

Ian

Peter F. Hamilton A Quantum Murder Greg Mandel Trilogy Book 2



Professor Edward Kitchener, a Nobel winner researching quantum cosmology for the powerful Event Horizon group has been savagely murdered. He was found lying dead with his lungs spread out on either side of his torso. But was it revenge, a crime of passion perpetrated by one of his hand-picked students, or a case of industrial espionage? Event Horizon hires Greg Mandel, a PSI boosted veteran of the famous Mindstar Battalion to investigate the horrendous murder.

The killing has taken place in an area completely sealed off, but when Mandel rules out the only six people who could be involved, things become quirky.

This is a detective novel with a science fiction twist, set in a post apocalyptic world, with the UK having serious tropical storms.

Hamilton obviously enjoys writing detective stories, but again I found that the denouement, with its science fiction explanation is a bit of a cheat.

Well written and enjoyable, but.....

3/5 Ian

Garth Nix The Left-Handed Booksellers of London



Shortly after her 18th birthday, Susan Arkshaw leaves rural life for the big city to find her fortune and discover the identity of her long lost father. Before long, she is whisked away into the dangerous magical underbelly of old Lun-Dun guided by the charismatic bookseller, Merlin St. Jacques; one of the left-handed magical fighting booksellers who police the mythical Old World of England when it intrudes on the modern world so that the populace are not aware of this intrusion.

Merlin has the feeling that Susan – and her mysterious father – are connected to his own private investigation, and the two must help each other if they are to resolve their respective goals.

What follows is a mad-cap journey filled with memorable characters and heart-pumping action, all steeped in a convincing mythology filled with the folklore of its locale. Garth Nix uses a different way of telling his story as the point of view shifts between characters, sometimes mid-scene, so that we know what different characters are thinking and feeling.

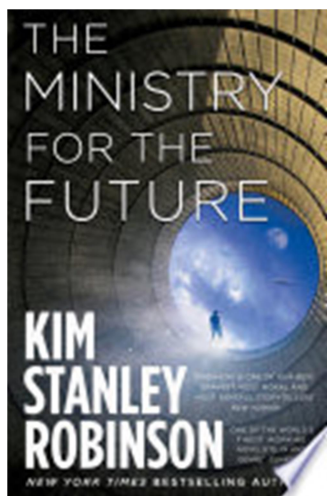
Merlin is a magically gender-fluid, dress-wearing and gun-toting character; a prime candidate for a groundbreaking genre role as a dashing and unflappable warrior, for who gender is not primarily important. Besides the gender fluidity, there were times when I got a similar sort of feeling that I experienced when reading the Harry Dresden modern wizard detective stories written by Jim Butcher.

I like Garth Nix and although this novel is written for the young adult audience I have to say I enjoyed it and will keep an eye out for any sequels that may be written

4/5

Gail

Kim Stanley Robinson The Ministry for the Future



Kim Stanley Robinson has decided that it is possible that our world can survive all of the carbon that we are pumping into our atmosphere.

This book is a trip through the carbon-fuelled chaos of the coming decades, with engineers working desperately to stop melting glaciers from sliding into the sea, avenging eco-terrorists downing so many airliners that people are afraid to fly, and bankers re-inventing the economy in real time in a desperate attempt to avert extinction.

He looks at how money underpins the climate crisis and how we could deal with it.

Mary Murphy, an Irish ex-diplomat who runs a Zurich-based UN agency called the Ministry for the Future, and is up against corrupt politicians and petro-state billionaires. In the aftermath of a horrific heat wave that kills 20 million people in India – Robinson describes thousands being “poached” in a lake where they fled to escape the heat — the Ministry sponsors various technological tricks to try to slow the warming, including dyeing the Arctic Ocean yellow so it stops absorbing sunlight. But the real drama is Murphy’s confrontations with a handful of central bankers around the world who help break the petro-billionaires and shift the economy away from fossil fuels. Meanwhile, debt strikes by students and uprisings by migratory workers send millions of people marching in the streets. It all feels plausible, in a holographic, science fiction sort of way. In the end, Robinson achieves something unexpected: He transforms the existential crisis we face into a modern fairy tale of resilience and redemption.

There is a lot of science in this novel but some weird stuff as well. There are some short chapters written from the point of view from such disparate characters as a carbon molecule and a caribou.

I enjoyed it. Try it and see.

4/5

Gail

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• Please note that SFFSA has changed its postal address to:
•
• **P.O. Box 10166**
• **Vorna Valley**
• **1686**
•
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From the NASA Website and the Hubble telescope



NASA has spotted "battling galaxies" in deep space, courtesy of the Hubble Space Telescope.

The U.S.A government agency posted a picture to its [website](#) of duelling galaxies in what it describes as a "titanic battle." The upper galaxy is known as UGC 1810, but combined with the other galaxies, it is collectively known as Arp 273.

"The overall shape of the UGC 1810 -- in particular its blue outer ring -- is likely a result of wild and violent gravitational interactions," NASA wrote on its website. "The blue colour of the outer ring at the top is caused by massive stars that are blue hot and have formed only in the past few million years."

The space agency added that the inner part of UGC 1810 "appears redder and threaded with cool filamentary dust." The duelling galaxies are in the Andromeda constellation, approximately 300 million light-years away.

Eventually, UGC 1810 will "devour its galactic sidekicks over the next billion years and settle into a classic spiral form," or so scientists from NASA believe. A titanic battle, indeed.

