

Verne's Heirs

Snapshots of French Science Fiction



InterNova

Vol. 4 • 2023

International Science Fiction

InterNOVA online
Volume 04 · 2023

This e-book is free for personal use only. It may be obtained via direct download from www.pmachinery.de/internova/online/in04.zip. It is not permitted to share this e-book via social media, peer to peer networks and the like. Unauthorized distribution might be persecuted as a copyright violation.
The copyright of all contributions remains with the respective writers.

© of this issue: June 2023
p.machinery Michael Haitel

Editor: Michael K. Iwoleit
Proofreading: Nicole Ashfield, Tasha Bajpal, Michael K. Iwoleit,
Adriana Kantcheva, Richard Kunzmann
Cover picture: 2234701 (Pixabay)
Layout & cover design: global:epropaganda
Production: global:epropaganda

Publisher: p.machinery Michael Haitel
Norderweg 31, DE-25887 Winnert
www.pmachinery.de
www.internova-sf.de

ISBN ePub: 978 3 95765 764 0
ISBN PDF: 978 3 95765 763 3



Editorial

MICHAEL SHREVE

Around fifteen years ago, after publishing a couple of translations of 18th century philosophy, I set to work on French fiction. See, I'd found a bunch of really interesting, weird literature that had never been translated and I figured that if there was no question of paying rights of translation, I would be able to find publishers for these distinctive, unconventional, often influential works. How wrong I was.

The first novel I chose was *Enemy Force* (*Force Ennemie*) by John Antoine Nau. Back in 1903 it had won the first Prix Goncourt, France's best known and most prestigious literary award. A poet mysteriously wakes up in a lunatic asylum, apparently checked in by a relative for his alcoholism or perhaps out of jealousy. He then becomes possessed by an „Alien Force“ from another planet, Kmôhoûn, whose voice is constantly screaming in his head. Soon he falls in love with a female inmate but she leaves, so he escapes to track her down, resulting in a series of wild adventures with the Enemy Force cohabiting his body. Philosophical ruminations, social commentaries, science fiction, thwarted love and madcap adventures, questionable reality and a postmodern ending before its time, it has it all – a visionary masterpiece. So why was it never translated into English?

Well, I tackled it. And I sent it to several publishers specialized in literary translations. Negative. I sent it to publishers of weird fiction. Negative. More mainstream fiction? Negative. Why? Here I first encountered responses that I would receive over and over again for years to come. It's too much science fiction for us, we do literature. It's too literary for us, we do

In his mundane Multiverse Michael Shreve has worked as an archivist, private bookseller, printer, locksmith, warehouseman, delivery driver, taxi driver, croupier and assistant mortician. He has also taught Classical Civilization, Greek, Latin, French, Spanish and English in universities and private schools in the US, Canada, Mexico, Malaysia, Lebanon, Iceland and France.

He has translated dozens of books for Black Coat Press and dozens of short stories for contemporary authors. He has also published non-fiction, such as Jean Meslier (with Michel Onfray) and Voltaire (with S. T. Joshi).

He currently lives in Antananarivo, Madagascar.

science fiction. It's too weird and violent. It's not weird enough, too tame. It just doesn't fit.

What I realized very quickly and have seen confirmed over and over again is that works of fiction that don't fit neatly into the defined genres of Anglo-American publishers will find it nearly impossible to get printed in English. Foreign fiction, by its very nature, doesn't fit into these notions of genre. Either the notion of the genre is different or pushing its limits, eclipsing it, liberating it, as it were, is a distinct goal. But isn't this difference the very thing that would be appealing to audiences? To get a glimpse of other visions and lose yourself in unfamiliar narratives, to experience other ways of thinking and seeing, isn't this part of the adventure of reading? It seems to me that Anglo-American publishers believe their readers or rather book-buyers (since commodity trumps culture) want familiar stories that won't challenge preconceived ideas. Are they right?

Personally, I don't think so, but I could be wrong. And I'm not a publisher. Today the bottom line is paramount – sales win out. Since foreign authors are considered hard to sell, tough to market, an uncertain investment, they don't be published. Risks are not being taken on translated books because profits must be sound. That's my feeling anyway.

Thus, we're left with the famous 3 percent. Of all books published in the USA and England, only 3 percent are translations. In comparison, Spain has roughly 35 percent, Italy 22 percent and France 15 percent. In most countries, the statistics I've seen show the number of translations has been increasing over recent years, except in English-speaking countries where it has remained stagnant. Now we have only a handful of small presses who are willing to take a chance on foreign authors and try to keep up that 3 percent. When it comes to science fiction, well, the situation is obviously worse. But there is hope.

For myself, beginning with *Enemy Force*, I was fortunate to discover Black Coat Press. Jean-Marc and Randy Lofficier are single-handedly (or double-handedly) saving French „genre“ fiction from falling into oblivion, as happens in too many other countries. They have set out to publish in English the

best of French science fiction, fantasy, horror and other pulp. „The purpose of Black Coat Press is to help remedy the state of affairs by providing a fairly comprehensive selection of the best and/or most representative works with proper introductions, bibliographies, etc.“ Thanks to their accomplishments, a whole history of imaginative fiction, from the 18th century up to the present day, is available to the daring English-language readers who want to expand their horizons beyond the conventional, the acceptable and the mainstream.

After publishing a few novels with Black Coat Press, I decided to try to break through the short market with some contemporary authors. Like any other writer I went to magazines and sites online and read carefully through their submission guidelines to make sure they would at least consider the story. My estimate (not statistically verified but anybody can look and see for themselves) is that the vast majority of the magazines are looking for the same thing. From the big „pro“ markets down to the „token payment“ sites, the editors could have cut and copied their requirements. They're all looking for something „different“ provided it is A, B or C (the admissible qualities and style) along the lines of X, Y and Z (the standardized authors of the canon). Nevertheless, I managed to find a very few brave editors who were actually enthusiastic about publishing a translation and was able to get authors like Jacques Barbéri, Pierre Pelot, Catherine Dufour and others published in English for the first time.

And this brings me to Michael Iwoleit's *InterNova – International Science Fiction*. This e-zine is not just a welcome addition but a much-needed channel for English-language readers to discover a whole world of new and alternative fiction that are breaking down the barriers erected by the restrictive, conservative, profit-driven markets of today.

Just some personal reflections.

Paralysis

CLAUDE ECKEN



*Science fiction writer Claude Ecken is also an occasional comic book scriptwriter, regular literary critic, sometimes anthologist, animator, reader, depending on the opportunities and cravings. He is twice winner of the Rosny aîné prize for short stories (2001 & 2004) and twice winner of the Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire (2006 & 2021), especially notable for his books *Le monde tous droits réservés* and *Au réveil il était midi*. He has also won the Masterton Price 2013 and received the Cyrano Prize in 2021, awarded to science fiction personalities for their lifework.*

Well, it's over, you're out now. You're safe. You scared me, you know. I don't know what got into you. It's like you have no clue what kind of world we live in. Definitely not one from those sci-fi novels you've always got your nose in — you know that, right? You're twelve, you should be a bit more aware of other people, society, everything around you. Don't think you're going to become a grown-up just like that, overnight, by snapping your fingers, just because you hit eighteen. It's a long road and you should already have started thinking about it. A long row to hoe, with as much to learn at school as on the streets ... and yes, at home, too. But if you ask me, you're a long way from even starting to realize we can't do whatever we want whenever we want, that we live in a society among other people we have to respect just like the surroundings we share with them. I said as much that time you were yelling to me from all the way down the street, like we were the only people there and everyone else — neighbors, pedestrians — had to put up with your noise. Looks like the lesson didn't take. It's just not smart, you know? You scare me, because I won't be around forever to get you out of trouble. Or you'll have landed us in trouble too, your mother and me.

I don't know what you were thinking, laughing that loud. I know, you've told me a thousand times, Karim told you a joke. He could've been more careful, too. If you ask me, you two are a bad influence on each other. I know, he's your friend, and you're both in the wrong. Look, I get it. It's good of you to keep hanging out with him when half your class froze him out ever since his parents had trouble renewing their visa. Talk

with an accent and people think you're refusing to fit in. You see how quickly these things change. But until they invent a universal translator so we can understand aliens, Karim has the same row to hoe as everyone else, that's just how it is. So do you. Sometimes you pick up slang from the projects, words from the streets that pigeonhole you right away as „at-risk“. And that's what you're turning into, you know, „at-risk youth“ — they say it like you can't have „youth“ without „risk“ — a *juvenile delinquent*. So watch it. The other day this TV documentary was talking about how at one point they made everybody speak one language. But it goes without saying, if they hadn't banned dialects at school, at work, in the government, you couldn't even get through to your neighbor; there'd be even more conflict, all over the country! No, you're right, it's not like pushing Karim away's going to improve his pronunciation, but you're here to help him, not get dragged down with him.

Honestly, you could've taken a quick look around before letting him launch into that joke. Sure, there's always lots of kids in the schoolyard at recess, lots of commotion — all the more reason! You think with that racket no one's paying attention, but when there's a crowd around — that's exactly when you have to be more careful. You shouldn't have laughed in front of that paraplegic. So you didn't see him till after, that's no excuse. Just like if you accidentally stepped on someone's foot in a bus. We pay attention to other people, that's all there is to it. Your epics about first contact with aliens — they always start with the little details. I don't care if the joke was funny. Karim, he has a good excuse. All you had to do was tell him to wait, just hold off a minute, or else shut him down. No, I don't even want to hear it. At least not here, not now. Wait till we get home, and I'm in a better mood. Which might not be so soon, with what I just had to go through for your sake.

They checked the files at the station, you know. To see if we had priors. And guess what they dug up? That website, the one brought up on disinformation charges, the one we banned you from because it was spreading rumors. They never proved the charges, and besides, they swiped their info from an official site — a government site, even, which denied everything after

the info they leaked. Yes, I mean the one you clicked on three years ago, you had no idea what you were doing, and got our house raided, our hard drives confiscated and combed over for the next three weeks. Normally it wouldn't have stayed on our record, there's a statute of limitations for that kind of thing, but apparently they can go further back whenever they need to dig up more on repeat offenders. It never gets deleted, just stashed somewhere. But even if they weren't allowed to hold on to records like that, how am I supposed to stop them? It's not like we have control over what they keep in their files to put us away with. I don't have to remind you about the other two offenses, do I? No, not the fine for not passing the smog test. No — your cell phone. You knew better than to let someone borrow that thing. Not even to help out a friend. Good thing that friend didn't know his uncle's phone was being tapped for mail order sales to foreign nationals from black-listed countries. Sure, they happened to just be *from* those places, but they hadn't lived in France long enough to be completely trustworthy. But you don't care about that either. In those books of yours, you're always amazed by how they communicate instantaneously between planets light years apart without ever wondering if it's sanctioned or unsecure. Your friend's family could've been under surveillance for far more serious reasons, and the fact that you lent your cell phone out to people who knew their lines were being tapped could've been construed as helping them secretly contact activists, making you an accomplice to who knows what. All of which is to say that once again, there's a file on us as long as my arm down at the station — nothing serious, of course, but it always feels weird when they look at you sideways in that place. One cop even seemed surprised I'd recently bought a new app for creating websites. Wanted to know what I was planning to do with it. Luckily, I have nothing to hide.

The officer did tell me you'd behaved yourself in the cell while awaiting your hearing. There's that at least. And the kid in the wheelchair's family didn't press charges. Don't go thinking just because you two see each other out in the schoolyard every day, or because their son didn't even hear you laugh,

that they wouldn't have sued. You know parents: the slightest whiff of discrimination, and they sue for damages with interest. I shouldn't say that, but sometimes it's true. Between the hypersensitive and the just plain greedy, there really aren't many understanding folks out there anymore. This time they had a chance handed to them on a silver platter: two officers on school patrol come up and ask you not to make fun of other people's disabilities. Whatever you do, remember this much at least: someone in a dark uniform comes over, billy club out or not, and starts asking questions, don't look him in the eye, got it? Just look down and don't talk back. Trying to justify your actions just makes them angry. Next time they think you're making fun of a paraplegic, apologize. Don't talk back. I don't feel like bailing you out of the hole just to take you to the hospital.

Yeah, I know, sometimes it's hard to come off as the asshole, to let yourself be accused when you're innocent, but what are you going to do? There are laws. Laws that must be obeyed. Sometimes appearances are against you, and you can't get anyone to believe the truth. When that happens, swallow your pride, wait for things to blow over. And above all, put out that defiant gleam in your eye — that's what screwed you over. That's exactly what they said down at the station. „Rebellious attitude. Flouts authority even when apprehended red-handed.“

What was it you told them again? That no matter what they said, you knew what you were laughing at? See, that's exactly the kind of thing you don't say. Even if it is true. Even if you've got a witness, or the whole thing's on tape. That's not too much to ask, is it? Keep your head down and slide on by, don't make any trouble, and you'll live to be twenty with your teeth intact. What is the point of staring down the authorities, I ask you? What could be worth ten hours in a holding cell, or getting worked over if you resist? You won't beat them; plus, you're a minor. Between us, I'm not thrilled with your buddy Karim for ditching you there while you were trying to explain things to the cops at school. Fine, he's got a little more reason than you to keep a low profile, I can't entirely blame him, but

maybe if he'd backed up your version of events, none of this would've ended with you in handcuffs and cooling your heels. They didn't pull too hard when they were dragging you around, did they? They could've roughed you up if you'd resisted, and then it would've been your punk-ass word against theirs if you'd tried to press charges.

Good thing you didn't try and get away, there's that at least. I heard they dragged the girl next door out of bed in the middle of the night — you know, the high schooler who takes piano lessons in the building across the street — because she slapped a boy in her class right in front of everyone else. He was asking for it, getting handsy with his dirty come-ons, but that slap really pissed him off; things went south from there until she took off running. He chased her for a good fifty yards! I guess musical talent wasn't the only thing she was packing in those hands of hers. But she's the one who started the whole misguided tiff in public. The slap's what counted. So the forces of law and order went to pick her up at her home. You did the right thing, not resisting. Still you really have to be more responsible in the future. Your future right here I mean, not in outer space! I know, you'll say that's not what those books are about, but sometimes I have my doubts.

You have to stop acting like a child. Come back to earth, unless you want to wind up in jail or some juvenile home. Where's it say we're headed for the stars? Not gonna happen. There's no profit in it, except over such a long term that no one'll ever invest. Every country on earth would have to pitch in just to get something like that off the ground. That's not happening, trust me — a world government with the same rights, the same laws for everyone, equality all around? Good thing idiotic stories like that are on their way out. Pipe dreams! Nice enough when everything else is going just fine. But we're living in reality here. Science fiction is dead. The present is more urgent than any future that'll never come to pass. The present fills our entire horizon. It's dangerous to look anywhere else. We'd lose balance. Our world is right here. It might not be very pretty; I wish I could show you something better, but it's all I've got. So take a good look and listen closely: can't

you feel reality all around you? Can't you feel how tangible it is, how concrete? Can't you feel it thrumming? Can't you feel its rhythm, its pulse? Tell me you can hear it, right — the sound of boots? Forget your dreams. This is your world now.

Team Spirit

CLAUDE ECKEN



*Science fiction writer Claude Ecken is also an occasional comic book scriptwriter, regular literary critic, sometimes anthologist, animator, reader, depending on the opportunities and cravings. He is twice winner of the Rosny aîné prize for short stories (2001 & 2004) and twice winner of the Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire (2006 & 2021), especially notable for his books *Le monde tous droits réservés* and *Au réveil il était midi*. He has also won the Masterton Price 2013 and received the Cyrano Prize in 2021, awarded to science fiction personalities for their lifework.*

It did him no good to run away to Boston, Brussels, Madrid, London or Paris, they inevitably picked up his trail. What had started out as a nice trip around the world ended up as a nightmare on the old continent.

The ravishing Balkan girl who was traveling with him was surprised to see him scamper off like a rabbit while they were window-shopping for some biological gadgets on a street in Neo-Nîmes. The girl was scandalized and sputtered when, at the other end of the crowded street, she saw the hunter who had caused the sudden flight (desertion, really!) of professor Sparteazar, whose double pushed her aside without even looking at her as he shoved his way through the crowd.

„Jerk!“ she yelled, still scandalized to see that she had got hooked up with a Crud. She was especially angry because the qualities of sensitivity and generosity that Leon Sparteazar possessed were obviously not present in the Oaf on the heels of his image. He did not even seem to recognize her, even though after fifteen days together some mental recalibrations had most likely taken place. She watched the dazzling middle-aged man pursue his prey and she decided to forget him, despite his prestige.

Leon Sparteazar took one turn after another and ended up in a dead-end alley. He did not know the city very well and his hesitations gave his pursuer time to eat up some of the distance that separated them. He turned around and stared with horror at his image, his own face, hell-bent and hard as nails, with a frightening glimmer in his eyes. He had never seen himself look so hideous.

Sweating and suffocating, Leon Spartezar entered a dive bar where the heavy odor of fried foods blended with the stinging tobacco smoke in the small room. Nobody saw him go into the restroom. He did not even have time to close the door when his double pushed him back against the wet, flaky wall. Leon Spartezar knew that he was not there to bring him back but kill him. Thus, he could measure the psychological distance that separated them from now on. He would never have been able to commit murder ... except in legitimate self-defense. He was already aiming his knife at the belly of the clone as it rushed him ...

Later, only one Leon Spartezar left the smoky bar, casually so as not to attract attention.

„... the clone that was found yesterday in the restroom of a bar in Neo-Nîmes. Let's remember that in terms of the law, we can't really talk about a crime since a clone is still not considered a human being, seeing that the entire physical and psychological make up of the individual is still concentrated in the original person. There is, however, moral damage for Professor Leon Spartezar, who has lost the recent personal experiences of part of himself. The investigation has not yet determined the identity of the murderer. In a strange twist of fate, it is the famous biogenetician himself who might be the object of legal proceedings. Indeed, everybody who has the means to clone themselves is responsible for the activities of their double, since it is the same mind and the same thought that is at work in each of their extensions. Provided, of course, that they go regularly to the recalibration sessions in any authorized center where the original and his copies can share their experiences. Now, the investigation would seem to show that Professor Spartezar might be guilty of neglect in losing one of his clones and especially in not informing the police within the authorized time. If, in the meantime, his clone had committed any unlawful acts, which might have led to a settling of scores, he would be held responsible. But there are other dark areas that investigators are pursuing. Leon Spartezar has still not shown up at home. The wide distribution of these images should compel him to get in touch with the police as soon as possible.“

Spartezar cut the power to the plasma screen just when the macabre image appeared. He could not stand to see himself dead, lying in a pool of blood.

He sighed, stretched, and lay down on the bed of the small hotel where he had found refuge. For a minute, the vision of his face, deformed by astonishment and pain, came back to haunt him. He thought about it and made a quick review of his conscience. It was really him, the O, the Original, the first Occupant. Or maybe, as they liked to say, the Oaf, and with respect to the clones, the CruDs, supposed to be given the hard jobs since only the well off had enough money on hand to be cloned, which exempted them from thankless jobs.

But if it was in good taste to let others believe that you were the original exemplar, if it was common to think that the Oaf was the first individual, none of the doubles were so sure of the matter. The clones could, if they did not have mental recalibrations every fifteen days or sooner, develop differently, with a new psychology, cut off from the original in creating a divergent personality and thus become a new individual with independent thoughts. Identical minds could also differ in physical details, over time or experience. Personally, Spartezar knew that one of his clones had a scar on his left shoulder.

The professor heard a click that made him sit up in bed. Someone was trying to force the door with a master key. Sweat started streaming down his forehead. It could only be one of the clones on his trail. For a week he had been given no respite. Leon Spartezar turned off the light and hid behind the door. He shuddered at the idea of fighting himself.

He had run away to make the most of life. He had abandoned everything, the recalibration sessions and the control of his doubles, in order to finally live alone, alone with himself, without tormenting himself all the time about what he did somewhere else, the projects that were so dear to him and that he delegated to his copies, and especially the orders that he had to give, the psychological flaws that he had to detect, the constant surveillance that he had to keep to avoid losing his place and status. He had come to live like those tyrants who

are unable to enjoy their position because they are too preoccupied with foiling attempted uprisings.

The one who was turning the doorknob right now was probably thinking the same thing. Every mental recalibration communicated the same torments to the clones. He, too, had enough of his doubles.

When Leon Spartezar entered the hotel room, the professor shoved him to the ground and ran down the hallway. He had time to see that his double was holding a biological micro-laser: a domestic appliance to sterilize a room by destroying the microorganisms without ruining the furniture that had been rigged to be one hundred times more powerful. The energy contained in the casing could disintegrate him down to his last cell.

„He who is gone too long cuts himself off from the others!“ the clone shouted. „You're no longer Leon Spartezar!“

The professor rushed up the stairs to the upper floors, avoiding the elevator that he figured was being watched.

Of course he was still Professor Spartezar! It was the clones that had stopped being him because he had deliberately pushed them aside. But how could he prove it? His doubles must have thought that they were running after an uncooperative copy.

Sometimes, he wondered if he were really himself, like it happened to his doubles to not know if they were Leon Spartezar the first or simply Cruds. The only time the ambiguity vanished was during the recalibration when the clones were motionless. Only the original could get up first after sharing his memories with all the bodies lying down. It was only during this crucial phase that he had time to delegate their next responsibilities and assign the role of each clone.

But once the session was finished, each copy was sure that he was free to do as he pleased. Each copy believed that he was the original. What a headache!

„You'll never measure up!“ his double yelled. „Your nervous system had to strong and resistant to become a cloned!“

Leon Spartezar refused to hear these painful words. He was thinking of nothing but escape. His double was always catch-

ing up to him, as if he had more physical energy than him. *Impossible*, he thought, *or else they they're a lot farther from me than I imagined*. At least if someone would show up, hearing all this racket. But no, if someone did hear, the doors would stay closed on purpose.

Spartezar ran into a metal door that led to the roof of the building. It was locked. He took out his knife, hoping for once to „measure up“.

As a youth, Leon Spartezar could do nothing but congratulate himself for having parents who were rich enough to clone him five times, which allowed him to go to several schools at the same time while having fun with his friends and having love affairs and taking time to relax. Back then he really had the impression of being one, everywhere he was, and of taking full advantage of the twenty-four hours in a day by multiplying the number of copies of himself that he put to work.

Then came the split: with adulthood and the difficulty of absorbing too many memories and the heap of problems he had to face. Spartezar had made the mistake of using his clones full-time and becoming overwhelmed.

When he found his job tedious, he wondered why he did not give it to one of his doubles. And his doubles asked themselves the same question.

When he remembered something nice, he wondered if he had really lived it. And his doubles wondered whether they had, for a single minute, ever been with beautiful Mary, laughed or cried with her, if all those wonderful moments had just been incorporated into their memory, imprinted there in exchange for some well-done job.

A real headache. A mental gap that grew bigger by five other minds meditating on the same problem. A psychological break multiplied by six. Suspicions passed on, amplified, sources of intolerable anguish. Schizophrenia projected out of body.

The problems had started a long time before, when he was around twenty, and had developed insidiously ever since, like a cancer.

The knife blade broke. The tip was stuck in the lock. Leon saw his double come up. Something in his manner disturbed him, made him feel more and more uneasy.

„We'll continue being ourselves without being burdened with a freak like you. You have to amputate sick limbs, oafs or not." So, the Leon Spartezar who was slowly climbing the last steps knew that he was the original. Was that a comfort? „Besides, too much time has gone by for a recalibration."

„But you can't!" the professor screamed, his whole body trembling. „How can you continue without the Original? Without me? Without recalibrations, you'll stop being a team. And if you show up at a center, they'll see right away that no individual is giving orders after the memory share!"

He jumped to the side just as a beam of energy hit the door. His double stepped into the roof light. Spartezar looked at his clone in amazement, seeing how different they were. His face was still his, but thirty years younger! He had before him a rejuvenated version of himself.

„Now do you get it?" the young Spartezar asked. „Being a biogenetician perfectly capable of producing a clone, I had no problem replicating myself and making the necessary corrections to become a double capable of doing the recalibrations. I have waited patiently for the moment to come out of hiding. You've done us enough harm with your twisted ideas, your desire to split your personality. Now, I'm taking control!"

Leon Spartezar looked for an escape, but by simply pressing a button, the clone of a clone cut him in two. He swept the disintegrator over the body until there was nothing left but a few fumes, which quickly evaporated into the atmosphere.

„Starting right now," he said, „we're forming a new team."

First Death

PIERRE PELOT

Pierre Pelot is a French author of around 200 novels. One of the great storytellers of our time, his multifaceted talent has traversed science fiction, thrillers, horror, fantasy and more. His works have been adapted to both the big and small screen and been awarded numerous prizes. His novels But What If the Butterflies Cheat? and The Child Who Walked on the Sky were published by Black Coat Press in 2012. He can be found on the web at pierre.pelot.pagesperso-orange.fr/

To die on such a beautiful morning.

I was wondering what he felt. Should I say what I felt? I would not like to. So ...

I did not like it, as far as I could tell what happened. What happened to me.

Such a beautiful morning. The sun high up already over the silver waves that spun out the long waves of the ocean as far as the eye could see. I could tell myself that the ocean belonged to me. To imagine it mine. I could easily play the master of the world, if I wanted. Yes, there is nothing strange in this. Nothing pathologically suspicious. It is a normal way of thinking for us, a completely safe reflex. I have been protected, since before my birth, against egomaniacal wanderings. Vaccinated.

Death had struck by surprise — there was, naturally, the three per cent risk: physical accidents, microbial attacks coming from the environmental improvisation phenotype modifier, etc. Three per cent. Accident. Risk probability: 0.07. And it happened. It feels like a calculated effort to weaken me and at the same time to attack SMECX, the politico-economic group in power ... This eventuality had been disproved by the security, the databanks and the night watch.

Jiul Meredith, with his face torn apart by the explosion of a pedestrian ramp light while returning home under the trusty protective eye of the bodyguard cameras ... Jiul Meredith had died from his wounds this morning, despite the efforts of the SMECX medical service.

Security had notified me. I thanked them in a flat voice while a ball of anxiety started growing in the pit of my stomach, squeezing me physically. And the others? How would they react? Would they also be told during the day?

It was the first time I died. The first time that we died, that they died. That he died.

Like an amputation? I could not know or even make the comparison — I had never been amputated. I was just a little dead. One sixth dead ...

And I was not sad. Worried, maybe. I don't know. Shocked, in a way. Aware of having definitely lost some of my odds. I would not live six hundred years, whatever they did.

I skimmed through the video mail that was addressed to me at the seaside hotel this morning. Nothing interesting (it was, naturally, mail selected for vacation since I was on vacation). Still, I engrammed it on a memory chip in case Jiul Meredith decided some day in the future, or even today, to look it over. I left the building. No, I was not sad.

I paddled around and swam for most of the morning. I really needed it — I mean, I was feeling ready to forget about business for months, years, oh yeah. I figured that I had sweated for long enough to run SMECX group as best as possible — it was crazy, but I wondered two or three times if, in truth, my fatigue and carelessness was not the real culprit of my death the night before. No, a crazy idea. I needed to rest, to roll around in the waves.

Before noon, Jiul Meredith got in touch with me. The group's medical security had brought him up-to-date. He knew about Jiul's death.

„Jiul, are you listening to me?“ the voice in the phone disk said.

I was listening, but I did not say anything. I was watching the guests come and go in the seaside bar. I was watching the convoluted decorations of paneling and mirrors behind the bar and the human waiters in costumes of the past century; I was watching and I was listening to the ambient commotion. Of course, I was listening to him.

„We're one sixth dead," he said. I was thinking the same thing. Of course. I would have said so in the same way, with the same distress in my voice, for sure, when pronouncing the word „we".

Jiul hung up. There was nothing else he could do. He was busy with a very difficult deal involving an important Japanese takeover — living crystal micro-Ps: it was huge! Jiul Meredith was battling with a network of Japanese commercial computers.

Jiul Meredith was Chairman of the Board of Directors of the American partners of the Chicago group.

Jiul Meredith was finishing up a social inspection tour in the buildings of the South African company and was not afraid to get involved with the worker-residents — he did his job with the utmost sincerity, of course. To the best of his abilities.

Jiul Meredith was with his legal spouse entering the grand hall of the Opera of Berlin E.O.

Jiul Meredith, on vacation, was sipping tequila in the bar of a quiet hotel on the blue shore of a calm sea in a resort, naturally reserved for nth-men.

Jiul Meredith was dead. The first of six. By accident.

I wondered how many of those coming and going around me were already partially dead.

I was not sad, but the afternoon was still hard to get through. Jiul from Berlin E.O. got hold of me on the phone. Paula was fine. We chatted a little.

In the evening I called London, the Center, the genecivic lab. I asked for Summer, that old friend, and they transferred me to his private home line. Summer smiled kindly, amiably, his wrinkles crumpled, his eye bluer than the sky here. Jiul from Chicago and Jiul from Berlin E.O. had already contacted him, briefly — me, I had time; I was on vacation.

„It's rather ... odd, Summer. Yes, odd."

„I know."

His sweet voice, peaceful and understanding. *I know*. How could he *know*? Of course Summer was not like any ordinary and unique man. He was the one who gave b ... brought me

into the world, multiplied in life. He was not the inventor of the process (there was no inventor of the cloning duplication process), he was one of the *specialists*. Summer was my genetic arch-father, if you want. He had drawn up my *contract*. All nth-men have a contract that they obviously have to respect as best they can. How could we do otherwise? How, seeing that we were born for it? Genetically fabricated for this goal. *Why* dream of doing otherwise?

Summer had brought into the world Jiul Meredith multiplied by six. Custom-made from SMECX programming in order to concentrate the results and effects of around six hundred years of effort and work it into a maximum of one hundred years of real time living, by each fraction of the individual – fraction and complete at the same time. I have always been an outstanding salesman. An important politician. Made for it.

I said, „I'm only thirty-seven years old, Summer.“

He smiled. „Of course. But that leaves you a few hundred years yet ... Believe me, Jiul ... Try to enjoy your vacation.“

That was my plan. Work would not suffer. Except for accidents ... I tried again to imagine what it felt like to die at thirty-seven, so stupidly, but I couldn't. Jiul from Berlin E.O. was certainly going to interrupt his cultural holiday with my legal spouse to take over the current business from the deceased.

Summer had told me again that with five I was just as effective, far above average.

The Way to Compostela

JEAN-LOUIS TRUDEL



A writer, translator, and historian of science fiction in Canada, Jean-Louis Trudel is a dual French and Canadian citizen, with degrees in physics, astronomy, and the history of science and technology. He has been writing science fiction since 1984, authoring over thirty books and more than a hundred short stories, either alone or with fellow Canadian writer Yves Meynard, under the name Laurent McAllister. While he writes most often in French, he has dabbled in writing short fiction and poetry in English. Recent publications include

The day before he left, Indrek Kelm met his patron for the first time. Should he thank her? He'd run scenarios where he did. In his head, the old-fashioned way. The problem was that he didn't know what to hope for. If he couldn't select the best approximation, trying again with fresh variations was pointless.

And so was his gratitude, it turned out.

„I've been outbid for your contract renewal," she announced. „Somebody thinks you're a genius."

How did she manage to make that sound like a snarl without raising her voice?

„Does that mean my stipend will be increased?"

She laughed. He looked up from his plate. Until then, he had been enjoying the meal in one of Moon's finest restaurants. The chef used only the best from the South Pole farms, shipping the restaurant's wastes in exchange for lunar rice, gene-wrought greens, live tilapia, and frozen pork. The mushrooms were local to Flag City, though.

Serafina Baker—an appropriate name for an angel investor—could afford the fare, even though she didn't look the part. It occurred to Indrek that she might have dressed down to attract less attention, not only to match his own lack of fashion sense. After all, she didn't need to spare the feelings of one of her charity cases.

„More time on the Sverdrup q-computer?" he ventured hopefully.

„No. It means your life is in danger," she said flatly.

„But... why?"

He ate faster, no longer savouring the risotto.

„There were other bidders. The winning bid for your future model runs is a logical one. Your latest results intrigued all the space-based industries. However...”

She appraised him coldly. No doubt she had weighed the value of her research asset as dispassionately as he assessed the variables in the starting configuration of a simulation. And yet, now that he was out of her league, there was the merest hint of new-found respect. What you can't have is worth having.

„Who's against improved interstellar flight?”

„You're smarter than that. We're not talking fanatics, just people willing to consider all the ways of improving the next quarterly earnings report.”

„Don't they realize that the long-term returns...”

„They're oblivious to the long run. They care about short-term losses.”

„What should I do?”

„That's better. The Moon is a dangerous place for a man like you. One puncture can void the air of an entire warren. Let alone that of a single apartment inhabited by a lonely dreamer. And a high-velocity bullet will tear through aggregate shielding as easily as a meteoroid from outer space.”

„Are you saying...”

„Leave the Moon. Tomorrow at the latest. I'll give you the contact info of the winning bidder. Diego Salazar, in Santiago, Chile. He's paying me to handle the transition and he will help you hide. Earth is a bigger place.”

„Bigger. And heavier. I came to the Moon to get away from that added weight. I'm not sure my heart can take it if I go back.”

„You were supposed to disclose all existing health conditions in your annual filings.”

„My endurance scores are in there. Nobody complained as long as I was delivering the goods. There's nothing wrong with me that regular exercise wouldn't fix, but who has the time?”

„Salazar can't protect you here. However, he did allow me to hire a professional shoulderwatcher to stay with you until you leave.”

*the story "The Many-Smiles Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics" in the Canadian magazine On Spec and the poem "Offerings to a Voiceless Star" in the Science Fiction and Fantasy Poetry Association's journal Star*Line. His blog (in French) is at culture-desfuturs.blogspot.com*

Shoulderwatcher. Indrek knew the term from the poorly translated holonovelas almost everybody watched in the warrens. Baker wasn't joking if she was ready to get her pet physicist an actual bodyguard.

„I can also pay for a hotel room until the next departure for Quito's Pail. With an anonymity guarantee. And a gym for your training program.“

„To be perfectly frank, I've never been able to stick to a training schedule.“

„How about a personal coach?“

„Nor do I react well to slave drivers. That's why I moved to the Moon. And why I work alone.“

„I guess I should be glad I got as much out of you as I did,“ she muttered, „well, you could chance it. Hardly anybody dies from ship acceleration stress nowadays.“

„I could also chance staying on the Moon.“

„Are you truly willing to risk your life just to keep working here?“

A fair question. He could say yes, get up, turn his back on a free meal, and walk out the door. He might be shot in the street or he might resume his research at home, trying to figure out what kind of universe would allow for artificial gravity.

„It's worked out so far.“

„Or I can buy you a ticket on the Carousel if you're that scared of Earth gravity.“

„That's the big centrifuge, right?“

Indrek almost took out his screen to check, in spite of the restaurant's prohibition on public interfacing.

„The Moon's largest. Technically, it's a high-speed train on a large circular track. Speed is ramped up over several days, tilting the local vertical and increasing the weight of everybody aboard. You'll be getting the exercise you need without even having to work out.“

„An unbalanced one, if I'm always walking at an angle.“

„Give the designers some credit. Trial and error isn't the key to everything. The train moves up an inclined track as well and the floor adjusts. The end result is a very convincing illusion: a long corridor lined with rooms, subjected to slowly rising gravity.“

„Must be expensive.“

„Salazar's treat.“

„How long would I be stuck inside?“

„The gravitope offers acclimatization to higher gravity that is slow and gradual over a total of fifteen days. If you so wish, you'll be able to make use of the offices for hire and isolation cubicles aboard the train.“

There would be no way to exit the train. Once inside, he would be sealed in for the full two weeks. Not only would he be living in a rabbit hutch, he would be at the mercy of any hunter dogged enough to search him out. With no way out, he would die like a whimpering bunny torn to shreds by a hound.

The day he boarded the Carousel, Indrek joined a party for the first time in years. The fun began as soon as the train started moving. Music blared, drowning out the announcements outlining safety procedures. An unforgiving rhythm began to shake the train's frame. Even muted to a deep rumble, the jackhammer aggression of Born Adamant sent a message.

For the Carousel riders, this was one last opportunity to enjoy their accustomed weight. Indrek strained to hear the final recommendations of the safety spiel as the train picked up speed.

He gave up in disgust. The disregard for the Moon's safety culture underlined that it was a one-way trip. The riders were investing two weeks of their life to get used to higher gravity. It only made sense for those with a medical need. And those contemplating a long, possibly permanent, stay on Earth.

It was a farewell to the Moon. Indrek decided that he wanted in. He chose the direction where the music seemed loudest.

The train was over a kilometer long. Several cars held only cabins like his own. Others included larger suites, cubicles for hire, old-fashioned *ubicadoras* for telepresence, and secluded nooks for socializing, with couches and a snack synthesizer close at hand. Every car included a heavy extruder designed to output towels, sponges, bathrobes, everyday clothes, and assorted toiletries.

How old was the place? Indrek hadn't looked up the history of the Carousel. While every surface was spotlessly clean, the

functional design recalled an earlier era, when human survival on the Moon was never taken for granted.

The dining car was crowded with executive types already sitting down for supper. Ice mines, helium-3 extraction start-ups, federal farms, and cargo ship launching were no doubt among the industries in the room. Indrek identified a few quasi-colleagues, observers attached to the far side telescopes hiding from the Earth's broad-spectrum glare. He knew them from the chattersphere, but he didn't care for astrophysics banter just then.

The music was already louder, though less focused on sheer obliteration. Instead of Born Adamant, *jazzzo nuevo*.

The entrance to the next car was labelled with an imperious *No thrill interfacing*, setting it aside for conversations free of unnecessary screen use.

It was empty, Indrek thought at first. The physicist only realized that he was being watched halfway through the maze of small tables ringed with sturdy chairs designed for Earth gravity. Ensconced in a chair backed into a corner, the Carousel rider's stillness had allowed him to escape Indrek's notice.

The man's long mane of blond hair was silky smooth, setting off his dark skin. Genetics? Exposure to Mercury-orbit sunlight? High-density melanocytes activated to provide additional UV protection?

The young physicist briefly contemplated a scenario where the stranger would shoot him and find a way off the train before it reached the gravitope's circular track. There would be no witnesses. And the man was sitting beneath one of the tiny fish-eye lenses set in every corner of every car. The only functioning one in the car, perhaps, and it would only show the top of the man's head.

When Indrek reached the door to the next car, he glimpsed a dancer through the window. Slivers of motion, flashes of human beauty. He forgot about the man reading in the corner. He forgot about Baker's warnings. His eyes never leaving the woman, he pushed through.

From the back, she could have been a boy. Slim and lithe, she wore her hair short and her dance suit was a dark green,

nearly military in its severity. The fabric clung to her body without seeming to move when she did, as if unaffected by her movements.

The car was devoid of any furniture, save a dance mat. The walls were lined with spectators, two or three deep, squeezing together to grant the woman as much as space as possible. Indrek stopped and watched as she danced to the music's breathless syncopation.

In the next car over, people were swaying and swinging to the very same music, but the woman danced alone. Who was she? A performer paid to keep the Carousel riders entertained? An artist returning to Earth and taking advantage one last time of the Moon's feeble grip?

Not a word escaped the lips of the spectators, only scattered gasps when the dancer rose so high that she had to bend backbreakingly to avoid smashing into the ceiling.

She flew at will, arms outstretched, feet arcing languidly between every plummet back to the train's floor. Each new cadenza launched her anew, her eyes scanning the audience as she rotated in mid-air.

When her gaze found Indrek, she blinked. Unbidden, another scenario gelled in the young man's head. This was the woman who would bed him, betray him, and smother him with her powerful thighs before the night was out. Or not.

Once the music stopped, the spectators filed out, perhaps to join a dance at once more carnal and more communal elsewhere. Indrek did not move. When the woman completed a final pirouette, she arranged to land and fall to her knees in front of him.

Indrek's first evening on the Carousel ended with a guided tour. Esteban was an Earther, every part of him bulging with sinewy muscle. Esteban's loose vest added bulk to his upper body, so much so that Indrek figured he could hide behind his guide in case of gunfire.

The hulking figure had introduced himself as Baker's hired bodyguard.

„I was expecting you to show up at the station.“

„The station police were keeping a close eye on you. I boarded as early as possible to get to know the train.“

„What's the verdict?“

„There are no large hiding places and lots of sensors. Any danger will come from the other people along for the ride. What did Valory tell you?“

„Who?“

„Valory Jamal. Former star of the Schauspielhaus Berlin. She's an exile now, surviving on the returns of an investment portfolio.“

„Oh, the dancer. She didn't introduce herself, but she seemed to know something of my work.“

„And what is it you do?“

„I dream.“

The man looked unsure they were speaking the same language.

„Is that a line of work where you come from?“

„I dream up better worlds. Usually, we're called virtual physicists.“

„Or simulationists, right?“

„Or explorers of parameter space, if you prefer the spin of the media releases. Others might call me a teleologist.“

„And this dancer knew that?“

„Should I worry?“

„It's suspicious, but I wouldn't rate her a major risk.“

„Señor Kelm?“

He turned, noting the way minute Coriolis forces tugged at his inner ear as he did so. A younger woman, wearing a colourful uniform of neon green, fuchsia, and lime yellow, bowed in the old Japanese manner, though she didn't look the part.

„I'm Damia Salgado, the conductor.“

„Are you taking tickets? Or driving the train?“

Two nonsensical questions, but Indrek couldn't figure out what the woman did. And his brain hurt from processing visual input. That uniform!

„I'm the social conductor. People are going to live side by side for the next two weeks, shut inside narrow cars. My job is to create unusual conversations and rewarding encounters

during that time, to make them forget their aching muscles and heavy hearts. I see you're a simulationist. Can I put you down for our hard science node?"

„What would it imply?"

„That you'll meet, when convenient, with passengers to talk about physics and reality over coffee or tea."

„Seems harmless en..."

Indrek stopped to glance at Esteban's scowling face, but the bodyguard nodded his assent.

„I'm in."

„Wonderful. Everybody has a part to play in the performance I'm putting together."

'We're just travelling to improve our muscle tone,' he retorted drily.

„Sure. Whatever. Me, I'm conducting a symphony of sociability."

She walked away and Indrek turned to Esteban.

„She's not wrong. The goal of a job should not be confused with its content."

„What's your endgame, *señor Kelm*?"

„Controlling gravity so completely that neither centrifuges nor gravitopes like the Carousel will ever be needed again."

„Ambitious. Mine is to make enough money to pay for a ticket to another solar system."

„Tau Ceti?"

„Depends how much I net by keeping you alive."

„I'll do what I can to help you achieve that goal."

„Good. Let's start with orientation. You're on a train to nowhere, going around in circles. And that's great because it means no windows, no scenery, no exit and no ingress. A closed train following a closed loop."

„Beware paradoxes."

Esteban cocked a quizzical brow at his charge.

„An old physics joke."

The first day Indrek awoke aboard the Carousel, Valory joined him for breakfast. He was lounging in a private nook, with a breakfast ordered from a synthesizer.

The pineapple juice truly tasted as if it were spit out by a machine. Indrek was on the verge of giving up on his food when the dancer showed up.

„Good morning. It didn't take you long to find me.“

„I'm a regular. I know the Carousel like the balls of my feet.“

Her self-deprecating smile sparked a sudden warmth inside Indrek.

„You have a lot of business on Earth?“ he asked.

„Actually, I never leave the Moon. I just like taking this train. Aboard, I can dance as if I were back on Earth.“

„Why not make the trip? On Earth, you could dance to your heart's content.“

„It's not so simple. My old bones are too brittle for Earth gravity. A few days in the gravitope are all I can tolerate. The anti-train, I call it. Because it always takes me back to my starting point.“

Her face was unlined, but stern enough to lend credence to her claim. Even with the best treatments, a long stay on the Moon resulted in dramatic bone loss. Bone mass could be recreated on Earth, but only as long as it was possible to travel there.

„I'm from Earth as well,“ he put in. „Originally.“

„Not that long ago. You're going back.“

In one scenario, she was only interested in him because she wanted something from him. In another, she was the killer set after him. If he didn't care for those alternatives, he had to nurture the one slim, hopeful shoot entwined with so many branchings, either useless or deadly.

The one where Valory Jamal was interested in him because she still treasured a man able to surprise her.

„Try the bread,“ he suggested as she turned to face the synthesizer. „The garlic butter is a decent fake.“

She joined him with a single plate.

„Thanks for the recommendation.“

„Last night, you never told me why you were so eager to keep me company.“

„The answer is simple. I follow gravity research like a hawk. I recognized you.“

„I'm a star?"

„Are you kidding? Everybody's buzzing about the hints you dropped. Yesterday, you gave me hope."

„Just because my next model runs will probe new ways to manipulate gravity?"

„That's not how you put it. It sounded more like poetry. Variable-gravity dancing as a role reversal for dancers, who would be pulling the strings of gravity instead of being its puppets."

„I was drunk."

„You're allowed when you're going home. Yes, you're big news, *señor* Kelm. All the gravity research forums have linked to your statement."

He frowned.

„I don't do the heavy lifting. I'm just the one pointing the way to the q-computer running my software. Trying to find the best route to my desired destination. I can never be sure that my model runs will yield something useful."

„But you're there to pick up hints along the way. Did I tell you why I love trains? Years ago, I took one in Spain, out of Compostela. Night fell and I watched hillsides burn. The July heat had turned the Galician woods into tinder for the flames snaking up and down the slopes. Like Christmas ornaments come to life, writhing and sparking. Except that instead of silvery tinsel, they were an angry orange, burning hot and deadly."

„I don't believe you."

„Why?"

„Nothing has grown in these hills for centuries. Even less a forest."

„It's been a long time, more than a century in fact, but you're exaggerating a bit."

How old was she? The Global War had ravaged the planet's population over a century earlier. Among the survivors were a handful of viable mutants. The bearers of lethal mutations had been culled by the war, leaving just the lucky ones with a few extras, including longer life. It wasn't that different from his own pruning, except that he didn't deal with vanishingly rare possibilities made flesh.

„But climate change...”

„The land was already turning into desert, though none of us aboard that train understood what we were seeing.”

„The beginning of doom?”

„The promise of salvation. Because we would have to leave that burning planet. When it became possible, I took the hint and I departed for the Moon. Life here has been kind to me, letting me outlive everybody else.”

So, perhaps she wasn't a mutant. Just a very fortunate old woman.

„I've been happy here,” he confessed. „Though I didn't expect to become a celebrity.”

„You're famous for the right reasons.”

„I don't know what happens next.”

„Well, my little *señorito*, me, I'm hoping that breakthrough leads to application. I'm not the only one on the Moon with brittle bones. The gravitope is an expensive tubular prison and a time-consuming remedy. An easier way of generating gravity would make it easier to adapt again to higher gravity. Or to move on to other, more distant worlds.”

Indrek sipped the hot coffee he'd kept for last.

„Believe a sob story and you're a chump. Disbelieve a sob story and you're a jerk. That's why people like me hate to let emotions get to them.”

„You can't win.”

„There is no best path, is how I'd phrase it.”

„One solution is well-adjusted sociopathy.”

„I couldn't be a sociopath. I care.”

„For?”

He fell silent, letting her decide. Letting her choose between Kelm, the cold-hearted physicist who cared only for an easier way to reach the stars, and Indrek, the out-of-shape loner who might open his soul to a woman willing to listen.

She glanced at the djinn strapped to her wrist, flashing blue.

„Time for my workout. I'd love to tell my mates on the forum that we've met. Can I buy you lunch in the Beak?”

He did care for the physics of space travel. But not only. He nodded in agreement.

Riding an anti-train to nowhere proved restful as long as Indrek forgot why Esteban shadowed him everywhere.

By the third day, the simulationist had settled into a routine. He worked alone in his cabin, rewarded himself with a proper noontime meal in the dining car, and burned it all off in the exercise car, walking ten kilometres on a treadmill, surrounded by virtual greenery, recorded birdsongs, and his favourite soundtracks.

That left evenings for fun, but he never missed Valory's daily performance. At first, she was as quick and graceful as the day of their departure. Her muscles mocked the Moon's puny pull, even augmented by the tug of the train's acceleration. By the fifth day, she was less nimble—or perhaps she feared landings more.

Indrek watched her intently, looking for the moves she altered from one day to the next. Travellers leaving the Moon were so eager for a talk with her that the physicist didn't get another chance to invite her before the Carousel was attacked.

It happened on the sixth day. Indrek had gone back to his room with a coffee, nursing a counter-intuitive strategy for channeling dark matter to increase felt gravity.

The whole train shuddered. *Emergency braking.*

The second word shaped by the cabin's wallscreen smashed into Indrek's coffee bottle. Inertia also kept him moving at a fraction of his original speed. Though he'd started to jerk away, the bulkhead crashed into him as well.

Rock fall.

The Carousel accelerated again within minutes. Indrek had researched the train's safety features. Any stones strewn across the track would have been whisked away at superhuman speeds by robots emerging from the maintenance niches in the tunnel's walls.

Esteban was waiting outside the cabin when Indrek crawled out, favouring his right arm.

„How are you?“ the bodyguard asked.

„Did someone just try to destroy the Carousel to kill me?“

„I have no idea. How are you?“

„I'm in need of...“

The walls flashed another message. *Full acceleration resuming. Half Earth normal. Brace.* Esteban reached out in time to scoop up Indrek as he toppled over.

Later, in the dinner lounge, Indrek watched Valory head for their table. She was moving more slowly. He didn't blame her. The afternoon's emergency had reminded him of the sheer thuggishness of Earth's gravity. Mistakes hurt.

The train's doctor had enveloped his broken arm in an active cast, to repair and stimulate regrowth. It would come off in a couple of days, replaced by an inert model intended only for protection. He was not the only traveller hobbled by a cast. The light-haired man he'd spotted the first day was sitting at a nearby table, his outstretched right leg sporting a bulky knee brace. Damia Salgado had been luckier, and she was working her way across the room, the social conductor finding a word of comfort for each of the injured.

„Indrek," Valory said, reaching their table before Salgado.

He looked into her eyes. She had used his given name for the first time.

„What is it?"

„I was worried that..."

She sat down abruptly, without waiting for an invitation or paying any attention to Esteban's glowering bulk.

„I'm all right. The Carousel's builders took into account many contingencies."

„Isn't that what you do?"

„Rather the reverse. I want to eliminate them."

He took out his screen to order, flashing towards Valory the teaser put together by Salgado, to advertise his availability:

Science was the first crowdsourced app. But federal science has recently been adding to the crowd. It's no longer a game reserved for inquisitive gentlefolk or obsessive craftsmen. Science is taking advantage of creative dreamers, whose intuitions guide quantum computers able to blunder into a billion blind alleys before hitting upon the one true path. We have one of the inner system's top simulationist and he is definitely one of the Carousel's great meets this year!

Valory smiled.

„Any bites?“

„A few nibbles. I'm beginning to think that people just don't like to hear that our reality is underdetermined.“

„I thought physics had a theory of everything.“

„The problem is that *everything* includes our whole universe as a mere speck lost in a scattering of myriads. And we don't know which speck is the right one.“

„Which is where you come in?“

Her face shone with a groupie's ecstatic admiration. And a touch of personal hope.

He wanted to demur. All he did was sift through motes. And yet, knowing the constraints on a speck's possibilities translated into more control over its future. Humanity's future.

He resorted to a comparison he'd used before.

„Imagine if you could bring down the great cathedral of Santiago de Compostela by taking out one stone. In our world, no single block would suffice. But alter one of reality's basic parameters and the entire edifice might float away like a leaf. Change another parameter and its mass could go critical. Modify yet another and the whole structure might just turn into a black hole.“

„What we call reality is, if you come right down to it, a lucky guess. By whatever you want to call the entity throwing dice. It's easier to be unlucky than lucky if you approach it randomly. But modern science does not rely on randomness.“

„It relies on you.“

There it was again. The light in her eyes. Reminding him that Valory was less entranced by the man than by his work. Yet, since she couldn't fall in love with a q-computer...

„Modern science depends on all of the world's simulationists, supported by wealthy patrons who wish to advertise their good works. Not me alone.“

„If I make it back to Earth thanks to you, I won't waste my gratitude on your sponsor.“

„You could. I'm certainly grateful for her money.“

Esteban grunted. Indrek assumed his *shoulderwatcher* was just as grateful. Just as much, but no more.

„In that case, I'll spare a kind thought for your backers.“

„That said, Valory, please don't get your hopes up. I'm not sure virtual singularities can form near massive bodies. I may end up being able to play with gravity within spaceships in deep space, and no more."

„You don't speak like a beaten man."

„I've changed goals. Have you heard of Urwaldt's work?"

„The modern Einstein?"

„He pointed the way to faster-than-light travel, but his theory is hard to apply and leaves out things that we know should fit... I've been working to design realities that make it easier to achieve practical FTL."

„Isn't reality, well, real?"

„Of course. But what we know of it is incomplete. Lots of dim corners are left. How long do protons last if it isn't forever? How many flavours of dark matter are streaming through us right now? How much energy does the vacuum store up? You don't know, I don't know, nobody knows."

„But if it's real, how can you change it?"

„It's not so much a matter of changing it as of finding a path. My task is to come up with a destination worth travelling to. Like Compostela. But it has to get two things right. First, it must match all known observations. Second, it must be compatible with practical FTL travel."

„A new theory of everything?"

„That was the old approach. The original Einstein battered his head to a pulp trying to do that, just like everybody else. No, I set a q-computer to run through endless iterations that are constrained by my dream of Compostela. The q-computer will run up blind alleys, follow paths that lead nowhere, but it will end up, from time to time, with a model of the universe that comes closest to my ultimate goal. And one that can be tested."

„The way to Compostela."

„And easier space travel."

„But no artificial gravity?"

Indrek tried to soften the blow the only way he knew how. With an explanation.

„Next month, on Earth, picking up my screen, I'll be fighting, with my Moon-weakened arm, the force exerted by the

whole planet. And I'll beat that force with one hand tied behind my back. Which is why artificial gravity is hard. It requires duplicating the effect of a planetary mass."

"Which is also why dance is a thing of beauty."

He gladly agreed. She forgot dessert to tell him more about dance than he'd ever expected to know. Her hands darted and dived to show him that her body's movements needed to be as precise as his thoughts. She explored a space of her own when she moved her body, aware of every quirk of the Carousel's merry-go-round physics.

The train's acceleration forced her to adjust to the daily increase of felt gravity. The Coriolis effect tried to bend her and, often, she twisted preventively to make it seem like she was unaffected by it. Sometimes, she yielded instead, delivering seemingly out-of-balance leaps that would have been impossible in a different reference frame.

Indrek discarded impossibilities, but she revelled in beating them. If he hadn't been so bone-tired, he would have suggested a more physical meeting of opposites. But Esteban was still playing the chaperone, and Indrek was young enough to let embarrassment overcome lust.

With every passing day, the train sped around the track ever faster, chasing its own tail. Indrek fought with fatigue, ate less, and strolled the length of the train four times a day. Yet, he managed to work. Deeply buried reserves from his days on Earth were surfacing. The simulationist even dared to think that he would not just crumple into a heap when the Earth shuttle blasted off.

If he no longer feared the trip back, leaving the Carousel was another matter. It would mean never seeing Valory again. He no longer thought of the age difference, if he had ever cared that she was older than his grandparents. All he knew was that she could match his passion with her own.

Back in the Beak, two days before the end of their Carousel ride, they hogged a table as close as possible to the forward bay. A missing wall, so transparent that a glance was enough to feel sucked in by the tunnel on the other side, the lights ahead endlessly rushing to meet the train.

He avoided her gaze, intent on his soup. Now that fresh ingredients were running low, the fare was saltier and spicier, to hide the reheated blandness of the menu.

„Next week, I'll be back on Earth.“

„Will you come back up to visit?“

„It's a long trip. And what keeps me from staying would keep me from returning, even for a visit.“

„What would it take for you to stay?“

He looked up, possible answers running through his mind. Courage. A death wish. Unreasoning love. A higher bid. A rival simulationist forestalling his own discoveries to come. Or an even unlikelier turn of events.

„I'd have to know it's the way to Compostela.“

„Sometimes, you have to walk a path all the way to the end to know it was the right one.“

That evening, he was among the few to follow her to the far end of the train as she danced from car to car. She struggled in the narrower hallways, but it underscored the boundless freedom she had lost.

She had soared at will, the first time. Her feet had teased the floor like a lover's fingers running along a beloved companion's smooth skin. Her outstretched arms had reached for the stars beyond the metal ceiling.

She had spun, whirled in mid-air, floated, held positions impossible to prolong on Earth. She had flown and flitted like a butterfly wandering from one bloom to the next.

Now, she was dancing in chains. The grip of gravity dragged her down, slowed her leaps, and caught her again before she could rise.

And it was heartbreakingly beautiful. She was dancing for every survivor weighed down by guilt, every traveller going home with shattered dreams, every older and wiser head regretting the wasted opportunities of youth.

She was gravity's captive, now, and she danced for the riders of the Carousel who would soon be falling back to Earth, broken-winged.

Indrek was reminded, as intended, that grace under pressure could move an audience, perhaps even more than effortless

charm. Afterwards, she was carried away, exhausted, and he was left alone.

The last day brought him his first invitation for a sit-down talk with a physics groupie. On the last day? It was odd, but Indrek surmised one of the astronomers from the Farside might be looking for a like-minded researcher to get into the right frame of mind before resuming their research on Earth. The name wasn't familiar, but then, observational astrophysics wasn't his specialty.

Still, enough discrepancies had piled up that Indrek was not entirely surprised when he entered the boardroom and faced a weapon pointed at his midsection.

The needlegun was trained on him by Damia Salgado. Which was slightly more surprising.

„How are you going to get rid of the gun?“ he asked once she relieved him of his screen.

„Always thinking ahead, right? Simple. Nobody is going to look for one.“

„Aren't you going to shoot me?“

„Only if you force me to. Don't try. I'll earn extra because it will make things harder for me. I'd rather do it the easy way.“

Indrek considered. He wasn't as cool and calculating as she thought. Mostly incredulous.

„Esteban assured me there were no guns aboard. Just the security tasers.“

„I had it printed by an extruder after the rock fall, using my authority as conductor to override the failsafes since I had reasonable cause.“

The gun's manufacturing would have been recorded, but no suspicion would attach to Salgado as long as the gun wasn't used.

„So that's why a rock fall was triggered. Or was it?“

„Save your breath. You're going to need it.“

That light-headed feeling... Indrek had assumed he was scared, but he realized he could hear a faint hissing. As he did so, Salgado took out an oxygen mask.

„What did you do?“

„I made a hole,“ she answered, her voice muffled.

„During the rock fall.“

„Nobody noticed the blast. I needed a small one to puncture the outer skin. It's pretty tough, but I was able to patch the hole until today.“

„Seems very roundabout.“

„It's going to be a locked room mystery. More precisely, an unlocked room since I can't lock you in. The door's sensors are too smart to allow that when the air pressure is low and somebody's inside.“

Salgado was leaning against the door, holding the needlegun with one hand and the handle with the other. It was all becoming painfully clear. She was going to watch Indrek suffocate and then leave. The door would swing open, the draft would trigger an alarm, and his lifeless body would be found inside a room leaking air but with no indication as to why he hadn't just left.

„Nobody is going to believe I killed myself," he argued.

„Nobody is going to be able to trace the explosive. I was able to smuggle in a small wad past the train's security systems. Inside me. No bigger than an apricot pit. I had to be able to pass it off as an undigested piece of gum. Still enough to blow your brains out if I could have stuck it to the back of your neck. But managing that would have been tricky given the cameras watching us all, not to mention Esteban. Whereas it was my job to inspect these small boardrooms.“

Indrek guessed that she'd holed the train's side, patched the puncture, and probably sabotaged the air pressure sensors all at the same time. Her presence in the corridor would have been recorded at the time, but only as one of many suspects as long as she had booked other groups in the same room afterwards.

He had to assume she'd done something more drastic to the hallway surveillance before entering to wait for him. A maintenance check? A software fault? Hands-on demolition?

„I have nothing to lose," he countered. „I'll force you to shoot.“

How badly did she want to avoid using the needlegun? He couldn't think through the possibilities anymore. Though heav-

ier than he'd been in years, he felt unsteady, ready to fall from the slightest push, let alone a needlegun burst.

„And why do they want to kill me?“

„I'm not sure, but I'm being paid a significant amount to get the job done.“

„They're quite mistaken. What one person knows can be discovered by another.“

„Secrets are real. I managed to surprise your muscle-man, and I'm pretty sure you never suspected me. If I'm the only surviving witness to what happens in this room, the truth will remain a secret.“

„Too late,“ he gasped, „No more secrets.“

Her eyes narrowed, a question sticking in her throat. *What do you mean?*

She never got the chance to ask it. Behind her, somebody knocked and tried to come in.

Indrek had expected as much. When he made his move, Salgado shot and the needle volley pincushioned the wall-screen behind him.

Off-balance from the door opening, the conductor didn't get off a second shot. The younger man wrestled the gun away before she could recover.

Valory stumbled in as Salgado released the door suddenly and the conductor leaped out, stepping with all her weight on the back of the dancer's leg. Bone snapped with a sickening crack.

Indrek blanched. Still dizzy from the lack of air, he didn't try to give chase. He helped Valory up. She winced, but the weight off her shattered leg granted her a moment's grace. Or perhaps it was adrenaline.

The dancer stared at the ceramic cones embedded in the screen.

„How did she miss?“

„She assumed I would correct for the Coriolis effect. I didn't.“

„You got that from me, didn't you?“

„In effect, you saved me twice.“

Indrek peered out. Valory hadn't gotten far. The light-haired man was standing over Salgado's inanimate body. It looked like she'd run into his fists, hard.

„Are you all right?" the man asked, „You're bleeding."

Indrek realized that the muffled ache in his arm centered on a gaping hole, bleeding in spurts. He hadn't dodged all of the needles after all.

„I could use..."

Pain throbbed suddenly as if waiting only to be noticed, and he never finished his sentence.

It was only later, in the train's infirmary, after a generous dosing of painkillers, that Indrek returned to consciousness.

Valory was sitting by his bedside, her lower leg encased in a chunk of medical gear. The blond man was standing behind her and the physicist decided that it was time to ask the question.

„Who are you?"

„Eduardo Tench Carstairs. Señora Jamal's bodyguard."

Indrek looked then at the dancer.

„You bid for me, but you were outbid."

She nodded, confirming his guess, but she had a question of her own.

„Why?"

„Why did I release all of my preliminary work this morning?"

Was it even the same day? Indrek decided it was. The Carousel's acceleration weighed him down still, so their ride wasn't over. Valory leaned over.

„I broke down that door to ask you, yes. Saved your life and had my leg broken like a stick. But I still want to know. Are you crazy? That's surely forbidden by your contract."

„My non-disclosure agreement only applies to actual results. I've thrown away my head start, that's all. Everybody will be starting from the same point."

„Your sponsor is going to drop you."

„That's the point. I needed to know if you would still like me to stay on the Moon once I wasn't anybody special anymore."

„Your value has dropped by 82% in the last hours."

„Killing me has just become uneconomic."

„And I might now have the means to buy your contract. How did you guess I'd be able to? My net worth is a closely guarded secret."

„I didn't guess. Once I knew where I wanted to be, I eliminated all the paths that led elsewhere.”

„You don't control everything.”

„I don't control anything, Valory. It's a ride, a wild ride.”

He grinned, slightly manic, waving at her leg and his arm.

„Point taken,” she conceded.

„A ride with no way of knowing if I'll get anywhere. But I could choose the places where I would be vulnerable. And discover if you would be part of my own private Compostela.”

„You very nearly failed, but we all fail in the end. I won't hold it against you.”

He did not speak, waiting for more. Waiting to know if she needed him.

She waved Eduardo out of the room.

„You risked a lot, my *señorito*. And you've been lucky. You're alive, I'm alive, and even Salazar's hireling will make a full recovery. Though his pride may not.” Her gaze appraised him with unexpected warmth. „Other bidders will play the odds and think you won't get so lucky again. I don't think like that, Indrek. Luck only runs out if you're willing to use it up. That's what I'm looking for on the road. The willingness to get to the end. I love this reality where you turned out to be a risk-taker and we'll go to Compostela together.”

Paranamanco

JEAN-CLAUDE DUNYACH
TRANSLATED BY SHERYL CURTIS



Jean-Claude Dunyach (born 1957) has been writing science fiction since the beginning of the 1980s and has published nine novels and ten short story collections. He received the French Science-Fiction award in 1983 and the Prix Rosny-Aîné Awards in 1992, as well as the Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire and the Prix Ozone in 1997. His short story "Déchiffrer la Trame" ("Unravelling the Thread") won both the Prix de l'Imaginaire and the Rosny Award in 1998, and

When Paranamanco broke out of her mooring lines and flew off into the night, I was hardly surprised. I remembered the words of the old navigator I'd interviewed a few months earlier, shortly after the animalcity project had been abandoned. I took the recording cube of our conversation out of a drawer and played it, wondering if I'd have the time to listen to it until the end ...

„An entire herd? Can you imagine it? Twenty or so wild animalcities floating like medusas in space. The smallest could have served as the capital of any empire; the largest ... No doubt you observed Paranamanco while orbiting in the transit satellite before landing here. You flew over it for several hours, skimming over the outgrowths we incorrectly call dwellings; maybe you even strolled along her avenues, with their disorderly striations carved by meteor dust. You may believe that you've seen her, but she continues to elude you as a result of her size, her topography with its folds and strangeness. There are entire neighborhoods which no one has penetrated yet, alleys that are not shown on any map, buildings of flesh waiting to be explored.“

The old man stopped to finish his glass. On a corner of my desk, the cube reader wove the image of a tavern, purring busily. I don't like mute objects. We created things to fill our solitude with their omnipresent company, not for them to fall silent and echo the waves of our own silence back at us, amplified.

„If you've got the heart for it," the old man said, „buy a recent plan and then have them drop you off anywhere in the city. You know the rule: when you find a street that hasn't been identified, you can name it as you see fit and register it with the land titles office. There's a bonus for each discovery, but it will hardly cover the cost of purchasing the 160 micro-filmed volumes of the plan. Yet, how many people do you think are wandering about like that, shoulders bent under the weight of the microfilms and the viewer? Several thousand?"

He shook his head and glumly contemplated his empty glass, which was starting to crackle and release an unpleasant odor. After the last swallow, the glass walls, deprived of humidity, decompose rather quickly, obliging drinkers to order another round immediately.

The strident ring of the communicator shrilled through the apartment. I cut it off and went back to listening.

„You have your own opinion of Paranamanco. It's undoubtedly incorrect, but mine is no better. It was a living organism before we decided to make it a city. A creature like that never really totally dies. Certain outlying neighborhoods rise and fall like respiration that is barely perceptible; the hollow filaments that we plan on using as transportation tunnels or sewer mains are sometimes animated by nervous shudders, like the axons of a failed brain.

„No, Paranamanco isn't completely dead; I've known her far too long to be wrong about that. Before I landed on her surface, I observed her in the middle of the herd, in deep space. Then I explored her for months, looking for the control points of her nervous system. I planted thousands of needles randomly in her flesh before discovering her pleasure centers and mounting her like an elephant driver, armed with the whip of my electrical discharges. I forced her to follow me here, by trial and error. Once in orbit, I moored her, practically all on my own.

„You should have been there when we landed! Paralyzed by the cloud of tugs hooked to her circumference, she deployed her corolla of multicolored filaments and whipped the air, trying to trap the metal birds that flew within reach. She was

was voted Best Story of the Year by the readers of the magazine Interzone. His novel Etoiles Mourantes (Dying Stars), written in collaboration with the French author Ayer-dhal, won the prestigious Eiffel Tower Award in 1999 as well as the Prix Ozone. Works of Dunyach have been translated into English, Bulgarian, Croatian, Danish, Hungarian, German, Italian, Russian and Spanish. He also writes lyrics for several French singers, which served as an inspiration for one of his novels about a rock and roll singer touring in Antarctica with a zombie philharmonic orchestra.

magnificent and dangerous, a real carnivorous flower. No one could have forced her to obey if I'd dropped the reins.

„Of course, those who supervised the project had taken their precautions. Paranamanco was the first animalcity that we'd moored and, to date, she's still the only one; the others are parked between the asteroids, waiting for the authorities to reach a decision. The idea of using a life form like this as an inhabitable zone on the surface of a colonized world is interesting, but it's not to everyone's liking. Many colonists would prefer us to build them something more conventional. Some categorically refuse to settle in a dwelling whose walls are made of living organic tissue.

„We all make the mistake of judging the animalcities by their appearance. A city is just a city, the imbeciles say, nothing surprising about that. That's stupid, even dangerous. These creatures have nothing other than the most superficial points in common with the human species. Their architecture, their existence depends on rules beyond our knowledge, even though it does appear easy to apply our own rules to them. We can use them, but we can never understand them. Take heed: this is important!

„Everyone was walking on eggs at that time. The head honchos came here to supervise the operations and prevent any possible problems from causing too many waves.

„Finally they gave the explorers the go-ahead. That's when the problems started...”

With a sigh, I pour him another drink. I've learned to recognize those points when stories wind down if they're not fuelled – with alcohol, compliments or, occasionally, forgiveness. It all depends on the storyteller. The old man wasn't looking for absolution; he just wanted to drink.

„I went there too,” I said.

He gazed at his glass in the light of a mood lamp and noisily drained a good half of it.

„I wasn't looking to make my fortune. Capturing Paranamanco had already made me rich and, in any case, I'd never believed those tales of treasure buried in the animalcities' entrails. No, I was bored. Setting out to hunt in deep space didn't

thrill me anymore. Any prey would have appeared minuscule to me after that catch.

„I'd started drinking, seriously drinking if you know what I mean. I set out on a whim one morning. I think that I was even getting tired of the alcohol and I was afraid of what would come next.

„I chose to explore the eighteenth sector, starting out from the base camp established in the heart of the city. The instructions provided for a spiral exploration of the neighboring streets, followed by satellite reconnaissance of the outlying neighborhoods. At that rate, it would have taken ten years to map the main arteries. Paranamanco wouldn't have been inhabitable for a century.

„It's impossible to realize just how vast she is if you haven't tried to cross her alone. She's brimming with optical illusions, fake terraces and underground arteries. The guide satellites are no use at all. Animalcity skin is impervious to radio waves; even the remote controlled units get lost. To bring her back to more human proportions, she had to be marked out with beacons filled with signs, and pointers; the chaos of her alleys had to be corrected, the still wild neighborhoods had to be domesticated.

„So, I set out to identify the most direct route possible to the edge of the city. If everyone else had done the same, we could have completed the map in two years and taken charge of the terrain.

„It's a game, you see. Draw a map and you control the territory. The more accurate your map is, the more efficient your control is.

„Do you know how a new world is opened up for colonization? There are the mechanical caterpillars that lay kilometers and kilometers of fiber optic cables in a few hours. Release thousands of those machines on the surface of any planet and they lay out a grid of high-capacity lines and communication nodes, while sterilising the surface. It doesn't matter how long it takes, you can rest assured that, after they've finished their job, there isn't a single nook or cranny that hasn't been explored. There's always a telephone booth on the horizon. At any given time, you're a 30-minute shuttle ride from civilization.

„I took one of those caterpillars with me ...

„I don't know why, but those caterpillars had no success with Paranamanco. They would either get lost or go completely crazy. They built closed lines that held them prisoner or wove electrified webs in which they hid, waiting for their prey. Apparently, some have even been found enveloped in a veritable cocoon, a prelude to an impossible metamorphosis. I'm only repeating what I've heard, but you know as well as I do that where there's smoke there's usually a fire.

„So, I headed off in the direction of the periphery with that caterpillar purring as it laid its wire. My belongings sat at the peak of its central ring, firmly moored to magnetic clamps. I walked ahead, hands in my pockets, as carefree as a Stanley who didn't give a rat's ass about Livingstone, while she crawled along behind me.

„About every ten kilometers, she'd stop to lay a new communication node, wrapped in placental tissue. It's a curious sight, but you get tired of it quickly. After a day, I stopped paying attention. Besides, people say you shouldn't get too close to those machines at such times. Now and then, their maternal love makes them dangerous. I made the most of these stops to stroll about the narrow alleys in the vicinity or I'd drink a glass to Paranamanco's health. My supplies were supposed to last two months. That's the main reason I'd brought the caterpillar along. With all the bottles, my luggage was too heavy for my old shoulders.

„After two days, we were navigating by sight between the constructions erected like pustules on the city's bituminous skin. Most were empty and naked, with a faint smell of dried sweat. Others, encumbered by cartilage partitions or blood red drapes, would have driven an interior decorator mad. I didn't have time to visit them all, so I settled for glancing inside the closest ones, so I could map those I considered inhabitable.

„The road we were following sloped down gently before branching out into narrower and narrower catwalks that led to the peaks of the buildings. Often, a building would be superimposed over the main artery and we'd move ahead into a

dark tunnel, out of the range of the observation satellites. In such cases, our progress would be jerkier, the caterpillar's headlights hesitantly sweeping away the dark. I'd keep my hand on its head ring, to reassure it.

„The farther we proceeded into the invisible levels of the city, the more uncontrollable my caterpillar's reactions became. Her dilated sphincters released bunches of embryonic booths, most irreversibly deformed, exuding machine oil. I'd kick their protective envelope into bits, to alleviate their agony and prevent the development of interference in the communication network. When we got back to the surface, the caterpillar returned to normal. I stopped in a clearing so she could recharge her solar batteries.

„It was during one of these breaks that I realized we were no longer alone.

„Our trail was easy to follow; all they had to do was keep sight of the wires. Yet, I'd never have thought that someone would have bothered to tail us, the machine and me. We weren't carrying anything valuable, apart from my booze, and I'd have willingly shared a bottle. And don't for a minute think that we were surrounded by unknown creatures drawn from the depths of the city. Our trackers were human and they weren't making much of an effort to hide.

„I could have set a trap for them, ambushed them in any alleyway. They'd had a dozen opportunities to do the same earlier, so ... I stopped the caterpillar and waited for them, a bottle of alcohol in my hand. I know the rules.

„They, on the other hand, didn't. They took so long to show their faces that I was three-quarters drunk by the time they arrived. I no longer clearly remember what they told me that evening; the next morning, all my bottles were broken and my skull was buzzing. Luckily, the girl made good coffee.

„There were two of them. A guy and a girl. About your age. I had him pegged right off: taciturn, with the long, slender fingers of a pianist. She was something completely different. A china doll, skin and bones, the type who has never turned anyone away and has decided that it was time for things to change. Apart from that, she was as silent as he was.

„After a few cups of java, I felt up to chewing them out for the loss of my bottles prior to hearing their side of this. They let me shout out my drunkenness before speaking with me. Good idea! I was too angry to do anything but vent my spleen. Plus, yelling almost drowned out the buzzing in my skull.

„They had a map to show me. Not a buried treasure map, that wasn't their style, or one of those esoteric diagrams that the so-called Paranamanco fortune-tellers specialize in. They're supposed to be able to read your future in the topographical maps of the city, you know, and show the future colonists the best places to settle. If necessary, they find the settlers a neighborhood where the layout of the streets corresponds to the lines on their hands. Utter stupidity.

„My two followers were a different sort of bright spark than I'd possibly come across before. They both worked in the department that tracked the data transmitted by the orbital satellites. The computer had highlighted anomalies in the aerial photos taken of Paranamanco, inconsistencies in the routes taken by certain streets, the type of detail that neither you nor I would have noticed but which the machines regularly set their sights on. They'd each been looking on their own for months, without joining forces, then they decided to pool their observations. They found the solution almost immediately.

„A fragment on the map of the city was repeated identically 44 times. A single fragment, but because of this duplicated element, the computer crashed every time it tried to reconstitute the Paranamanco jigsaw. Discouraged, the girl had drawn a map indicating the locations of the famous fragment.

„Once the coffee had its effect, they rolled their map out to show me. Forty-four spots were spread over the disk of the city, with no apparent symmetry or regularity. Yet, their pattern looked familiar to me. I got out my own map, the one showing the animal's nerve centers, which I'd drawn during my deep space exploration. Mine was cruder, but there was nothing haphazard about the resemblance. Strangely, mine was offset one hundred and ninety degrees from theirs; a semi-circle, as if the two phenomena were of equal importance, but opposite in meaning.

„The route taken by the caterpillar was heading straight towards the closest spot, which is why they had decided to follow me. I believe they suspected my intentions were the same as theirs. As the first one to explore the creature, I was supposed to know more about her than anyone else. They thought I already had an inkling as to what the identical sectors hid, that the government had some secret goal when it had Paranamanco land and that it was exploring her through me. I didn't disabuse them. They wouldn't have believed me anyway.

„When we set out again, the caterpillar was carrying three packs instead of one, which didn't seem to affect her all that much, and I had an audience to whom I could recount my memories of deep space. They knew how to listen, that much I can say for them, a bit like you, but then you're paid to listen so it doesn't count. The guy, Geoff, never said more than a few words at a time, and settled for moving ahead at his own pace. From time to time, he'd look back to see if the girl was still following. I've forgotten her name, but it will certainly come back as I talk.

„We were a good day's walk from the interesting zone, which gave us time to review a fair number of hypotheses and invent a few new ones. The most curious thing was that, seen from the satellite, there was nothing particular about the duplicated fragment: three or four streets, completely ordinary outgrowths for buildings. Same old, same old. I could have walked through them without noticing a thing. Geoff thought it was some sort of visual illusion and that we should expect something else, underground tunnels maybe, or vast rooms filled with strange machinery. He fixated on that idea: the animalcities were once used as spacecraft by a humanoid race and had outlived their creators. This made for a good story, completely valid, when you have twelve hours of walk ahead of you and nothing else to do than survey the streets and christen them as you see fit.

„In any case, no one knew anything at all about the animalcities at the time, and we've learned precious little since. The colonization of Paranamanco was interrupted and it won't start up again anytime soon. As for the rest of the herd, it's

wandering carefree about the asteroids. If we knew how to kill a wild city, our problems would be resolved for the most part, but I doubt we'll ever reach that point. I'm starting to think that the entire operation is plain old stupidity, but no one's asked me for my opinion in a long time.

„So, there we were, walking ahead of the caterpillar, because of the exhaust fumes, without even taking the time to visit the structures that surrounded us. We had the entire city to ourselves and the only thing that interested us was a block of three streets, which didn't even have the excuse of being unique. At the time, that didn't strike us. The idea only came to me on our way back.

„Imagine: today, there are almost one million colonists on Paranamanco, there's noise, electricity, eleven official religions, an entire microcosm of the human species gathered on the surface of a flat organism that had the good sense to be inhabitable. I know that it will take at least half a billion people for the place to even start looking settled, but at the time that the three of us were walking along unexplored avenues there was no one within a 200 km radius. Not a soul! I don't think that an ocean or a desert could give such an impression of solitude. Weirdly it wasn't until the other two arrived that I even noticed.

„Then the wind started to blow down the empty streets and we stopped for shelter on a porch. Evening fell slowly. The buildings created unusual shadows, stretching in unexpected directions. I hadn't had a drop to drink since the previous night, yet my usual hallucinations settled over the facades of the neighboring buildings. They were remodelling the scene that surrounded us. I desperately needed a drink and felt my nightmares swirling in around me, waiting for night to torment me. I didn't have the strength to resist.

„We were approaching our goal. I suppose it was the first symptoms of Paranamanco's influence, although the base doctor has talked to me about delirium tremens with a knowing smile. People like that always have a better explanation than yours and there's no way to make them change their minds.

„The next day the others decided, without consulting me, to leave me there for the entire day while they went out to do

some reconnaissance. I'd have refused if I'd known, but that double dose of sleeping pills in the coffee would have put anyone out like a light. When I opened my eyes, I was trapped in an unbreakable cocoon of cables and the caterpillar, which had been reprogrammed, was vigilantly standing guard over me.

„I'd wanted to warn the base that a couple of loonies were holding me prisoner so that someone would come and get me. It seemed easy; I was surrounded by communication booths. The caterpillar had woven a delicious little concentration camp for one where transmission cables replaced the barbed wire and booths replaced watchtowers. The only problem was that I didn't have enough tokens.

„Before I even reached the base operator, my supply had run out. I was stupid enough to try to kick the box apart to collect its contents. My first mistake was choosing a freshly hatched booth; my second was forgetting the caterpillar's maternal instinct.

„Possibly her reflexes should have been altered by the reprogramming, but that didn't stop her from charging at me with the full speed of her segments, tearing her way through the cables she'd woven. We played a deadly game of tag, in which the neutral zones were the booths. Bit by bit, I was trying to draw her away from the breach she'd made in the network of wires that held me prisoner. When I thought it was a good time, I raced off towards the closest building, expecting to be caught and pulverized at any time. I've rarely been afraid, but I was that day.

„Once safe, I caught my breath before glancing behind me. The caterpillar hadn't followed me at all; she stood motionless in the middle of her cocoon. On her back, the girl was waving in my direction.

„I turned about slowly, savoring my anger as it swept over me. I was preparing myself for one of those explosions that make novas look minor. In two days these two clueless young people had deprived me of my bottles, drugged me and forced me into a rodeo with a thirty-ton caterpillar. I had enough insults in mind to turn the air blue. Then I saw the tears rolling

down the girl's cheeks and I fell silent ... What else could I have done?

„We broke camp in ten minutes. I cut the cable ahead of the anarchic section and made a splice directly on the machine's hindquarters, short-circuiting the delirious skin that had imprisoned me. One more puzzle for the archeologists of the future. I allowed myself the luxury of using an iron bar to pulverize the booth that held my tokens and recovered them. I'm the first official vandal on Paranamanco. Don't forget to mention that in your article.“

„Why were you in such a rush to leave?“

My voice rises out of the cube reader with an irritating fidelity, asking the right question at the right time.

In front of me, on the back wall of my office, the red warning light flashes in vain. I don't feel like answering any call, especially right now.

„Geoff had disappeared in the unknown sector. The girl, Evalane (I knew her name would come back to me, Geoff called her Evie), well the girl had been afraid to continue their research on her own and had come back to release me so I could help her. Ten seconds later and she'd probably have found the caterpillar nibbling on a pancake-shaped cadaver. Bio-machines can be quite strange at times. My caterpillar would've probably laid flesh pink booths, with dial pads incrustated with eyes rather than keys. Just the thought of dialling a number under those conditions, fingers in eyes ... Evie acknowledged that it was lucky for me that Geoff had chosen that particular moment to evaporate. How was I supposed to respond to that? I grumbled that luck had been smiling on me ever since they'd arrived, but the girl was insensitive to sarcasm.

„She had stopped crying, well almost. I hadn't realized that she had a thing for him. When you live alone in space, you lose track of that sort of phenomenon. I had no idea just how important that was going to be later.

„Evie said there was nothing particular about the area where Geoff had disappeared. It looked like so many other neighborhoods that they'd walked through before. They had to

backtrack and ask for a satellite location in order to find it. Geoff was disappointed and furious. He raced up and down the three streets, looking for a secret passageway, a hidden opening, without success. Then he started to explore the outgrowths one after another, coming back out a little more annoyed each time. Finally, she saw him go into a porch and he never came back out.

„According to the girl, there was nothing particular about the interior of the building either: a labyrinth of cartilage partitions, a rough floor, made of folds of dead skin. Since no one answered when she called out, she hadn't dared to venture too far in and preferred to return to camp, taking care to spray-paint her initials on the porch.

„We approached cautiously. Nothing moved, no sound filtered out to us, no trace of Geoff. I picked up the caterpillar's remote control as I pulled Evie away from the porch.

„'We could get lost in that maze,' I explained to her. 'I'll send the beast in to explore for us.'"

„'Good idea!' she said. 'Then we can simply follow its wire to make our way back out without getting trapped by those damn partitions.'"

„'After she's done a tour inside, there won't actually be many partitions intact,' I replied.

„She blushed, which didn't look good on her, and fell silent. The caterpillar rolled over to the entrance. Her segments proceeded into the building, one by one. We could hear the sound of fabric tearing, followed by irregular periods of silence. I glanced inside: the floor was strewn with cartilage debris and booths that had been laid all askew, imprisoned in their placental pouches. Just the place for a large-scale communication centre. I noted its location on the map, out of reflex, before carefully following in the caterpillar's footsteps, accompanied by Evie.

„We made our way through the building diagonally, stumbling over the waste. A cloud of bone dust powered our clothing. We avoided coughing, for fear of giving birth to an echo we wouldn't have recognized. I twisted my ankle and Evie fell in a pile of debris, from which she emerged looking like a

ghost, bits of membrane hanging from her shoulders and hair like a transparent shroud.

„The caterpillar had stopped at the entrance to an immense multi-sided room that had remained intact. Evie slid past her body and almost immediately cried out. When I reached her, she was kneeling next to Geoff who lay unconscious, feverish, lips clenched, fingernails dug into bloody palms.

„We didn't see the fountain right away. We were busy trying to revive our lost team member and didn't have the time to study the surroundings closely. 'It was only when Geoff opened his eyes and pointed at it that I realised it was there. He hoarsely asked us to get him something to drink.

„Evie gave him a shot and poured the contents of her canteen between his lips. I stood up to disconnect the caterpillar. On my way, I glanced about, without noticing anything special: a murmur came from the thin ribbon of water that welled up from the ground and filled a cavity. It hadn't rained in a week and I recall wondering where the water was coming from. But I didn't think it was all that important.

„As soon as Geoff could stand up and before we could stop him, he rushed over to the fountain to drink. The water didn't appear to have any particular effect on him. He offered me some, but I don't really have an affinity for that type of liqueur at zero degrees.

„When we asked him why he'd fainted, he replied that he'd knocked himself out against a partition. The explanation was so stupid that we believed it and considered the matter closed. Evie apologized for dragging me into all this for nothing. Geoff received his share of insults from me for leaving me with the caterpillar, but my heart wasn't in it, so I left it alone.

„We followed the wire back out. None of us tried to get away from the sector; we even decided to set up our camp at the intersection of two neighboring streets. Evie made some coffee. Without a word, Geoff held out her canteen so that she could go and fill it.

„I gave him a mild sedative so that he could rest for the remainder of the day and went out to explore the neighboring buildings, to form my own opinion.

„Evie was telling the truth; there was absolutely nothing to see in that sector. It was so similar to all the others I'd travelled through before that things were starting to look suspicious. I was caught up in the game, obstinately searching for something I didn't know what it should look like. I palpated the city's thick skin in hopes of detecting some sort of revealing pulse; I scratched esoteric maps in an old notepad, tearing the pages out as I finished them. In short, I behaved like an imbecile. Evie, who was watching over Geoff, called out to me from time to time, asking if I'd found anything and seemed to take no notice of my increasingly brief answers.

„The dark gradually chased me from the shadowy streets, in which it would be all too easy to lose my way. I gave up and sat down next to the electric hot plate where our evening rations were heating, along with an entire pot of coffee. Evie and Geoff glanced at me, but refrained from making a comment. Just as well. I couldn't forgive them for breaking the pleasant monotony of my trip through the city. For the first time, Paranamanco had disappointed me and it was all their fault.

„I rolled up in my bedroll, as far from the caterpillar and them as possible, and tried to fall asleep. I'd had too much coffee for sleep to come easily but, with the help of the silence, I gradually felt myself doze off with the hope that the place would get rid of my two pests.

„That night I dreamt the same thing over and over again. I was hitting my head against the reality of the city like a moth blinded by light. When I woke up, Geoff had disappeared once more and the entire neighborhood seemed to have gone mad ...

„Heavy bunches of colored light bulbs hung overhead, large drops of luminous sap dripping down. A vine of telephone cables climbed up the outgrowths, rolling in abundant, baroque spirals along the streets, in an unnatural embrace. Neon orchids with electrifying scents surged from the slightest chink in the walls, shooting lightning that bounced off Paranamanco's skin. In a few hours, the neighborhood had been transformed into a virgin forest.

„Next to the dead hot plate and the caterpillar, which had been definitively disconnected, Evie lay plunged in a sleep evidently filled with nightmares. The ground around her was spiked by long, transparent spears, shimmering with violet sparks. I had to kick them to bits to get closer to her.

„Geoff had made her swallow the rest of the sleeping pills and had pinned a laconic note to her sleeping bag before heading off. I knew what it said before reading and re-reading it. Then I woke Evie.

„All around us, the neighbourhood was coming to life. The sun was already high and the dense fiber-optic jungle shimmered in the bright light. I almost expected Geoff to appear wearing a simple loincloth, leaping from vine to vine, hunting prey. But I knew that we'd never see him again. And, deep down, Evie did too.

„She refused to believe it, however, and wanted to look for him in that verdant growth, despite the evidence that surrounded us, despite Geoff's note. She denied the facts. Hey, you try to convince a woman that her lover is capable of leaving her for a living organism that measures 600 km in diameter, a creature he had shared his dreams with ...

„I had a lot of difficulty convincing her to listen to me. I'd known what was really going on with Paranamanco since the previous night, in part because of Evie. The water she'd used to make her coffee came from the fountain. Some of its power remained, despite the boiling, just enough that I knew what kind of trap Geoff fell into. Merely thinking that I could have suffered the same fate made me shiver. It would have taken so little. I must be one of the few people whose life has been saved by alcohol.

„I told Evie that the liquid had slowly poisoned Geoff, that the first time we'd found him, unconscious, he'd most certainly just drunk from the fountain and that, feeling that he was about to die, he preferred to distance himself from the camp, to spare us the spectacle of his agony. The note he had left her was the fruit of a brain that was already damaged; she shouldn't pay it any attention. Of course, she didn't believe a word of

what I said, but it was the best lie I could come up with given the time available.

„She insisted that I tell the truth. I was stupid enough to do so...”

A long line of vehicles, sirens shrieking, is heading my way. Judging by the sound, they're still far away enough for me to listen to the last surface of the cube, the most important one.

„The animalcities are incomplete organisms," the old man murmurs, eyes staring at a horizon beyond my reach. „To successfully face the space that separates galaxies, they need symbiotic companions, gardeners capable of caring for them and maintaining them throughout the voyage. In exchange, they offer access to the entire universe, as well as the means to survive in the void of space.

„When I landed on Paranamanco's surface for the first time, she understood that her race and mankind could get along. She flavored the water with her dreams accordingly. After tasting it, Geoff was able to give birth to the neon garden that surrounded us of his own accord. No doubt he was wandering about the adjacent neighborhoods, impatient to put his new powers to the test. I imagined the winding streets filled with hardy brambles, leaves flashing with lightning, tree street-lights, electric foliage stretching over the city's squares, avenues illuminated by the flamboyant chalices of glass tulips. I realized that Geoff had not only shared Paranamanco's dreams, but had also, in a certain manner, transmitted his own. She dreamed of looking like the cities on Earth, with their adornment of multicolored lights enshrined in metal and stone. All she needed was a little help.

„At the beginning, Evie refused to believe me, convinced that I was making the whole thing up for some totally obscure reason, that I didn't know any more than she did. So, I placed my hands on the warm soil. A tiny neon flower sprang up and spat out its fire before expiring.

„She finally understood that we couldn't do any more for Geoff. Only an expedition organized by the base would be able

to find him, if it wasn't already too late. The caterpillar was dead, we had no more water. Well, at least, I preferred not to try the water in our canteens, in case Geoff had filled them at the fountain. I left Evie, deeply wounded by my words, and set out, following the wire, to search for a booth that was working.

„I had no idea what my colleague on the other end of the line thought about my story and I didn't care. Once I was certain that someone would come to get us immediately, I headed back to camp, and found it empty.

„Evie had carried off one of the canteens when she left. In a letter scribbled while I was away, she said that she was ready to join Geoff, to take her turn at serving the city. I castigated myself for not having seen that coming and I cried out her name until the echoes rebounded around me. I never saw her again.

„The most horrible part is that there was no chance for her project to succeed. Paranamanco was only interested in men. There was a sexual component between her gardeners and her that was essential for her survival. Evie was incapable of providing that and I suppose that the animalcities can occasionally get jealous...

„That evening, a shuttle came to pick me up, guided by the dead caterpillar's beacon. When the pilot saw the scene, he called for reinforcements. A security cordon surrounded the site. But it was too late. We never found anyone.

„I don't know how the information could have leaked out, but hundreds of colonists set out to look for Paranamanco's secret wells. Those in charge implemented a news blackout, partly because they didn't believe me. I'm an old wino, you know. It was fine and dandy for me to tell them over and over that it was the alcohol that had saved my life, but they remained sceptical. I can see their point of view and I would never have imagined that someone would come and interview me about all this.

„And you, do you believe me? If I weren't half drunk, I'd string up a garland of lights to convince you, but Paranamanco doesn't like alcohol and I believe I lost my power over

her a long time ago. She doesn't want me anymore. I had my chance and I blew it."

Someone is banging brusquely at my door; the recording is over. My article has been rejected everywhere, without explanation. I've been under constant surveillance, but that doesn't matter now. The city found her pilot; she was able to take off with her crew of dreamers and adventurers, whose hands will bring flowers back to the dead streets. No doubt, they're far away already.

I have a minute or two before those who are looking for me break down the door. I grab the flask of the city's dreams that the old explorer gave to me, before heading off into the streets with their sadly conventional signs and disappearing for good. Maybe I'll have the time to uncork and drink it, but Paranamanco has flown off and I'm no longer certain that I can find her.

Translated by Sheryl Curtis

Copyright © 1987 by Jean-Claude Dunyach

First published in French in Imagine... n°45, éditions l'Atalante

The Soul of Scanners

JACQUES BARBÉRI

Translated by Michael Shreve



Jacques Barbéri is a French author of more than fifteen novels and numerous short stories. He has been writing his radical visions on the literary edge of France since the 80s. Thrillers, science fiction, fantasy or the fringes of literature, nothing is off limits to his perpetually mutating imagination. He is also a musician (with the group Palo Alto), screenplay writer and translator. A dozen of his short stories have been translated into English, including one in

For Cordwainer Smith, the Great Interstellar Helmsman.

*Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?
Can you bind the beautiful Pleiades?
Can you loose the chains of Orion?
Can you bring forth the constellations in their Seasons,
Or lead out the Bear with its cubs?*

– The Book of Job

It looks like a meta-beast – half stick insect, half human, all scrag and angles. But it is fully human. An eighth generation spacer who has never set foot on a planet. Without an anti-g stabilizer Kaliandra would crush his bones to dust, but the dermal nano-stabilizers allow him to go without even a helmet. He struggles a little and then ends up offering the toothless old man facing him the semblance of a smile. The air of Kaliandra is a real blessing. Its electrifying contact makes him shiver with joy. His long, fragile fingers trace the arabesques that decorate the cover of the notebook that the old man has just given him. He sits on the ledge letting his feet dangle in space. Vertigo is only a word to him, but the luxuriant forest that spreads out in every direction as far as the eye can see distorts his perspective and the valley that extends a few thousand feet below seems only a few feet away. He sways and the old man grabs him by the shoulder, in turn offering a smile. A long sigh and he opens the notebook with a trembling hand. His eyes sweep across the signs, catching the fragments of a

story that he already knows and that is both a surprise and a relief to rediscover in these pages...

The Big Book of Science Fiction (ed. Ann and Jeff VanderMeer)

(...) The other scanners take me for a lunatic. They can hardly tell the difference between the Oekumen's Grand Armada and an exploration platform, between the Radiant Church of Christ Resurrected and Teratek Inc. It must be remembered that the man in black of the galaxy's biggest holding company has become the man in black of the New Church. The CEO has metamorphosed into the Prophet and has had no trouble recruiting the best scanners to his company, enrolling them rather, under the thorny banner of Christ the Redeemer. States of mind are bought like everything else and Elric P. Mandelstrom has plenty of money to spare... Until today I haven't complained, but now I'm beginning to regret that. I'm just realizing how dangerous this man really is. And I'm looking forward to only one thing: finishing this contract...

(...) The Kynosos Marcusbi II is one of the most impressive vessels of the Armada. The Octo-pilot is assisted by fifteen co-pilots: two psychomachines and thirteen meta-beasts. Lisandra is a meta-dog. She's magnificent. I think I've fallen in love with her. She loves me a little, too. Probably because I'm a scanner and she dreams of becoming one. She hasn't come to the crew's mess for three days. I'm beginning to get seriously worried.

(...) Lisandra has just been sentenced for heresy. The meta-beasts can't get over it, the psychomachines can't figure it out and the scanners act like nothing's happened, but in the vessel, everything has changed!

The platform smelled of urine and burnt oil.

Kougar Khan marked his arrival with a perilous leap that landed him almost perfectly into his launch shell. In soft gravity, it was not much of an accomplishment and the old drifters at the station did not bat an eye.

The little novice was in the shell next to his. Kougar had shown off for her.

She had landed the day before. Her *needle* had pierced the carcass of the station with a nerve-shattering screech; the re-

ceiving cells needed a good greasing. For that matter, the whole platform deserved a little facelift, but Teratek had long ago crossed out the word „comfort“ from its vocabulary. By an astonishing legal spin, only the scanners' astrophysics were under contract. The techs of the platform were psychomachines and the navigator a meta-beast. Officially there were no humans on board. So, the comfort... the Company didn't give a rat's ass!

Her name was Isadora Palimpsest of the Solar Rayonnance. A little high-flown, but with a father who was the Ambassador of Eurotoile on Madder – the jewel of Teratek with respect to planetary engineering – and a mother who was a scion princess of the Grand Rayonnance of Ampelos, she was handling it rather well.

„Are you still ready to try the Great Leap?“

„You take me for a metabiote in an incubator, don't you Kougar? You think that my father pulled some strings to satisfy the whims of a spoiled child?“

„The Sarfatti oscillator assigned you a particularly high decorporation rating. You have the required capacities to make an excellent scanner. But I think your psychological maturity may not be – for the time being – worthy of your talent.“

Isadora shrugged her shoulders and then slumped into the launch shell. She looked at the rust streaks absent-mindedly.

„So, you do take me for a spoiled child!“

Strange moods lined her face. Little sulky folds, irritated arches, sad collapse... For an instant, Kougar experienced a curious attraction. A moon and its planet. A fragile point of equilibrium between collision and repulsion.

„No, but for a metabiote in an incubator, for sure. And don't forget... it's your last training session. So, if you have any questions, it's now or never...“

Isadora screwed up her face. The fingers of her left hand tapped the empty air and the cryostatic sheath clung lovingly to her skin.

Kougar sighed and then he, too, tapped some silent notes before savoring the incomparable embrace of his traveling skin.

(...) There are 1,110 souls on board the Kynos Marcusbi. Although the word „soul“ is not very appropriate. Do the soldiers of Christ have one? They all wear the robe with Oekumen colors – a yellow cross on a red background – thoracic armor in synth-marble and tall, oblong headgear topped by the cross of Peter III with the slanted cross bar. They number 666 like in every Astral Galleon. To combat the beast, supposedly. I know now that they're the flanks of the ship that shelters them. Likewise, there are 333 civilians ready to colonize Paradise and 111 navigation officers. All that's left is to calculate the square root of God!

Legs together, arms along his sides, Kougar was staring at the cabin ceiling, smiling. Next to him, Isadora was playing with his genitals and he was starting to get another erection.

„What exactly did you mean by now or never?“

„I didn't think you were interested in me or that we'd spend the night together.“

„Who's not interested in you on this platform?“

Kougar looked irritated and sucked his lip. „Touché,“ he finally blurted out. „But it's my nature. I can't do anything about it...“

„What do you mean?“

„I'm a playboy and I like it.“

„That doesn't bother me either,“ Isadora murmured while kissing him half-heartedly, „but I'm still a little disappointed.“

„Thanks...“

She threw herself on Kougar, smiling. „I didn't mean you. I was thinking of the station. I was expecting something more...“

„Appropriate to your social standing, perhaps?“

Isadora pulled back abruptly. „Are you sure that you're always trying to seduce?“

„Sorry... I've never made love to the daughter of an Ambassador and...“

„Forget about the Ambassador, would you! You have a scanner in front of you.“

„That remains to be seen. You haven't tried the Great Leap yet!“

„Exactly. I've only tried the great creep.“

Kougar dropped the ball. By the time he had deciphered the joke, Isadora had already pulled on her uniform. Canvas overalls that she slipped into without underwear. „This is what I was talking about... this mechanic's gear and this rickety station, everything oozing rust. And all these hicks who keep it running!“

Kougar broke out laughing. „What were you expecting? To find a gathering of aristocrats farting around in silk and shiny metal? Well-modeled buildings in sparkling white, plastic and chrome, with panoramic views on every floor?“

„Certainly not. But a little more... class! These guys all look like... workers.“ Kougar pulled on his overalls just as Isadora was taking hers off. „Workers... And why not little deer like you! Don't play around too much with words. It only widens the gulf that divides your world from mine. Here, there are only employees handsomely paid by Teratek. All of them, men, women or trans, work their nasty butts off hoping to hit the jackpot, to discover the miracle planet, to pocket the bonus of all bonuses and retire to the countryside for the rest of their lives.“

„That's not true... A scanner never hangs it up!“

Kougar snickered. „What do you know about it?“

Isadora let out a tense laugh. She was beautiful and fragile again. „I know it. That's all.“

„You were sent here for training, not to spout philosophy on the soul of scanners...“

„Precisely... I thought that the training at least started with some courses on how the Kinsokaine and the flight shells work.“

„That wouldn't do any good. The mechanics of astrophysical travel are really too complex. They have to do with quantum decoherence and hyper-brane strings. To explain this would be long, tiresome and, in the end, pointless. We're all riddled with nano crap, but no one really knows how it works. The Octopilot is certainly capable of getting this platform out of a black hole for you, but he doesn't give a damn about the workings of a plasma motor. Only talent counts, imagination, original

ideas, image, concept, pure invention... The rest is just math, pure science for the hardheads. You don't need to know how the nanodronic swarm of astrophasic strings works in order to rush among the stars... You only need your talent and imagination... It's up to you to prove to us that you have some."

(...) Lisandra thinks that the God of the Bible is evil, that he conceived the world as an impostor. That the true god is elsewhere and doesn't care any more about us than about an ant lost in the desert or about a drifting neutrino. That the theory of the incarnation of God is only a phantasm. Besides, what's left of the divine creation except the vague nostalgia of a lost paradise? The divine principle, the soul, is in each of us and Jesus understood that; he was not the incarnation of God, of the evil god who created our universe. But he knew how to make his soul sing. Like all scanners know how to do. The exact opposite of what the Gospel of the Oekumen teaches...

(...) In the enclosed space of the ship, thousands of parsecs from any inhabited center, the Oekumen, last avatar of Christianity, last sect to have succeeded, has just revealed its true face and at the same time that of its creator, the billionaire Elric P. Mandelstrom, self-baptized Peter III, prophet of the New Reformed Church. His revelation draws blithely from the Bible, the Torah and the Koran. Texts open to interpretation, just the opposite of the Final Gospel that curls its pages up around a frozen, irrevocable vision of the word of God, „for, whoever violates even the least of His commandments and who teaches men to violate them will be looked upon in the Kingdom of Heaven as a heretic and chased unto Hell with no hope for redemption!"

Kougar flopped into a meat shell and Psimac immediately handed him a cocktail of stars. The psycho-tapster knew him as a creature of habit and the strange attractor that agglomerated its neural molasses was going all out. The scanners' mess was quiet. Cassandra slid over to him, casually stretched out on a raft-bar. Their test tubes clinked against each other

and the white dwarves spluttered at the bottom of the blue liquid. Cassandra kissed him half-heartedly.

„If you're bored, I'd like to spend some time with you.“

Cassandra was a splendid Chimera, mainly feline, but with slight touches of predatory bird and insect casting her onto the edge of mystery.

Kougar merely smiled. Cassandra growled, cracked her joints and rustled her down. „I see... How does an Ambassador's daughter kiss?“

„Rather well... And afterward, she sleeps!“

Cassandra giggled and then licked her chops.

The scanners were there to explore the depths of space, to discover planets that could be terraformed cheaply and to pocket the bonus. They did not have time to waste in the arms of Morpheus. Curled up in the cryostatic sheaths, freed of the weight of thought, the astrophysical ballads did them a lot more good than any night of sleep. The body rested and the soul got rid of the psychic stains. A few hours of sleep a week were enough to avoid any risk of oneiric intoxication. Kougar never slept. He was too scared of death. He used a nightmare sucker and that was perfect.

„And you're in charge of deflowering her of the umbiplasm! That's hilarious, isn't it?“

„Ask the Octopus. He's the one who dropped her at my feet.“

„Pilots are crazy. They don't even know if planets exist anymore.“

Kougar laughed. „And you... Do you know? The meta-beasts have a sixth sense. They live in a bubble of the heightened present and are never wrong.“

„Bullshit! The mysticism of freaked out...“

Kougar suddenly grabbed her by the wrist. „Look...“

He presented the mess hall with a wide sweep of his free hand and then, twitching, he swung it like a pendulum. As if to say „this metal raft floating in deep space, populated by humans, meta-beasts, chimeras and psycho-machines is not a simple scanning platform, but an exploration vessel in the tradition of the Great Navigators of the Middle Ages on Earth“ and he began:

„We can no longer leave this tub because it's the only port for elsewhere. We're all hoping, one day or another, to discover the secret door to the Great Mother of the matrix who gave birth to our universe in a silent quantum belch...”

Cassandra broke away from him. „Sometimes you almost scare me, Kougar. I understand why the Octopus gave you the girl. It seems that she had first figured on joining the convent of The Seven Sisters of the Cosmic Sponge, lost in the confines of the constellation of Taurus, before opting for our floating island. Your protégé is a repressed nun, Kougar. And you would be better off joining the Brotherhood of Thinker-Monks in Betelgeuse...”

Kougar could not help smiling. „Maybe... But she chose to come here. Like me, you and everyone else here on our frail, interstellar skiff. You should meditate on that for a minute.”

He swallowed the last drops of his cocktail of stars and then let the test tube float an instant in front of her face, still shocked by his last words.

Psimac, always on the lookout, shot out one of his appendages and snatched the vial before it crashed onto the red tile. Kougar unhooked the suctar from his neck. „You deserve a little tip.” He flattened it against Psimac's strange attractor. The dream-pump emptied its oneiric pouch into the neural molasses of the psycho-machine who wriggled around like a rutting Octopus – Praised be our amazing Pilot!

(...) Sankirst and I have just discovered a type A planet. I understood right away why they always make scanners work in pairs. If I'd been alone, I wouldn't have said anything. A green ball studded with blue. Never seen anything so... paradisiacal. But Sankirst's astrophysicist was with the angels. We were going to pocket the bonus. The jackpot. Become billionaires. I did not see things this way at all. Lisandra had been put in quarantine and we never should have accepted that. No member of the crew should have tolerated such an abuse of power. She had even undergone interrogation, like in the Middle Ages, but hadn't repented. The pilot and co-pilots have no way to mutiny. Given the size of the ship, the slightest failure can cause

an irreversible kynsotronic crash. The loss of Lisandra is already hard enough for them to deal with. The dreamers who feed the thirteen kynsomotors are barely aware of the events. As for the scanners, they have no weight to put in the balance now that Paradise has just been found...

„You just dreamed, didn't you?"

Isadora nodded, dripping with sweat. Kougar kissed her and then told her that the hour had come to gather the dream. The real one. The dope of all dope. The psychedelic orgasm of astral degavitation.

Kougar was short of the truth. No words could ever describe the sensations that a scanner felt during the first Great Leap. No human, no chimera, no living being was capable of expressing the emotional flood that smashed the astrophasm. The entire universe transformed into an orgasmachine and ejaculated into the plasmic imprint of the scanner ...

Isadora slid into the launch shell, naked and still dripping with sweat. Kougar gently sponged her, then he put on his suit and took his place in the shell next to hers. They simultaneously tapped the empty air. The cryostatic sheaths gently molded their bodies, and the astrophasms hyperluminated in a drift of sparks.

There were pillars of nebula and globular drifts, the crackling of quarks and the roar of antiquarks, warm spiral matrices, cosmic dust, fountains of stars, galactic blaze, silence throbbing with phantom suns, lactescent cataracts, gravitational wells spurting blood-red.

In the launch shell, Isadora's lips were trembling. But in space, no sound escaped from her astrophasm's mouth of light. Kougar's had just pressed up against hers. Electric contact.

„Calm down... Channel your thoughts... Have you already forgotten everything I taught you?"

„No, but it's so beautiful... It's so..."

„Really?"

„More than that... I feel like we have the same essence... I mean... The galaxies... The constellations... We..."

„You're right... The stars are our ancestors. And the astrophasm is there for us to show it..."

„My noble mother, princess of the Grand Rayonnance, would certainly see the proof of the existence of the soul here.“

Kougar's astrophasm „shrugged its shoulders“ and then slowed down. Space was still only a well of silence, but there was suddenly a strange vibration like a dull sound, impossible, as if a giant were leaping from one sun to another...

The universe needs myths and legends and that of Kougar and Isadora should begin here. In the heart of space... A few thousand parsecs from the Station, from their bodies in cryostasis... And even farther from Earth, which they had never seen and probably never would see.

„What's going on, Kougar?“

„I don't know... But whatever you do, don't panic. The umbioplasm is still stuffed with Kinsokaine and can support an extremely strong traction.“

Hell broke loose in a blast, transforming them into ghosts of light, prisoners of a centrifuge... Ridiculous will-o'-the-wisps sucked up by a gigantic stellar maelstrom.

„It's wonderful!“

„In fifteen years of practice, I've never seen a magnetic storm the likes of this. For your first deep-space outing you're spoiled...“

„Is it dangerous?“

„I'll tell you if we get out of it unharmed...“

„Why not turn back right now?“

„Can't do... The umbioplasm might burst. But if we ride the currents, we have a chance...“

„To pull through?“

„Are you scared?“

„A little... But it's fascinating.“

Kougar's astrophasm smiled, but the storm changed his face of light into a grotesque mask. „Maybe you really have the soul of a scanner after all...“

It was Isadora's turn to smile, and her face was not deformed like Kougar's, for the plain and simple reason that the storm had suddenly stopped.

They let themselves be cradled for a moment by the „silence“.

„It's weird. Whatever I do, I'm always drawn in the same direction...“

„Me too. It's hard to believe... Though we're not far from a solar system...”

Isadora watched the dazzling sun that Kougar pointed out to her, but she could see nothing else. „I don't see any planets...”

„Normal. A planet is a paltry celestial body on the scale of the universe. But I know it's there, I sense it... It was one in a billion chance that the storm left us in such a place. The only problem...”

„Is finding the way back to the station.”

„No, our umbiplasms are unharmed. No worries about that... But an astroplasm is not very sensitive to gravitational attraction... Only a black hole is able to attract it...”

„And so?”

„So, I would like to know who, or what is laying this trap for us.”

A microsecond later, a planet filled their whole „field of vision”, decked out in brown, blue, green and white. They watched it at the heart of their astroplasms' time, say a second of subjective time, 10-28 seconds of real time, and then they saw nothing but green tinged with brown. A forest? And a face. Huge. Another second. A face all hairy and lumpy, a mix of cat and polar bear. Then they saw nothing. They detected a kind of warmth and something like the smell of sludge. Sensations, however, unfamiliar to any astroplasm.

Then they saw again and it took them a little while to understand what they were seeing, especially „through what” they were seeing.

„Hello, souls. Awful weather, isn't it? Space has been screwy ever since the Damned started putting holes in it everywhere...”

„What the...”

„Young souls as I see... Tell... Tell me about your exploits... Your loves and your pains and take a rest... Then I'll tell you why I'm so glad to see you... So glad that you're young... And so glad that you're not damned...”

(...) For Cardinal Longkwist, Supreme Representative of the Oekumen on board the Kynsos Marcusbi II, there is not a

shadow of a doubt: The soldiers of Christ the Redeemer have finally reached Paradise. The description that the all-powerful Lord gives of it in His Voyage Beyond the Heavens appears wondrously before the dumbfounded eyes of the freshly disembarked voyagers...

„And I saw mountains and valleys covered with forests. And the birds live on the heights and the bees and butterflies gather nectar and pollen on myriads of flowers and animals of all sizes, adorned with the grace and freshness of innocence, live in the undergrowth and big, slender bears inhabit the foliage where they build their dens of straw and dried mud. This Paradise from where you were chased will once again be granted you. And it is in the heart of the stars that my chosen people will find it.“

And I saw this as well. Forests, lakes, birds, insects and mammals of all kinds. And the big dens of straw and dried mud. But they were not inhabited by slender bears. They were humanoids, and one of them spoke to me. They are covered with hair from head to toe but are much more „human“ than we are. They have a spoken language, but they are equally telepathic and can make their souls sing. Their vocabulary is very rich, but they have no word for technology or war or genocide or machine. They live in harmony with their Planet, which they call Kaliandra, which the „telepathic analogy“ dubs with the sweet name of Cradlemoon.

The Oekumen wants to impose Paradise on them and is going to open wide all the doors of hell.

The vegetation covered the sheer reliefs like a green and russet skin. It extended in every direction, pierced by myriad lakes glinting blue. Little Station That Smiles in the Stars was sitting on the edge of a ridge next to Angel Donatello. Her long, hairy legs bumped against the side of the cliff. She was sad. Her face had some cat and bear, panda and koala, otter and dog. It was splendid. Covered with golden hair embraced by the sun. Kougar and Isadora smelled through her nose, saw through her eyes, and heard through her ears. The colors, scents and sounds of Kaliandra were intoxicating, but Little Station did not let

them enjoy the drunkenness. She had total mastery over her body and relegated them to the status of passive observers. She was sad because she was not sheltering souls as she thought. Donatello had explained to her that Isadora and Kougar were only astrophasic projections... That their bodies were thousands of light years away, curled up in their cryostatic sheaths. They were scanners, like him, and their lives were hanging by a thread. They could not be allowed to run the slightest risk.

Below in the heart of the immense valley that stretched out for a few hundred miles, the Cathedral erected by the soldiers of the Oekumen cast its spires and minarets of pink marble above the tallest trees of the Kaliandran jungle over the vegetal jellyfish, floating parasols, umbelliferae on the summits. The Cathedral was like a stone wart, a mineral cancer that ate away at the vegetation with jets of acid and tongues of fire. And it was easy to imagine the metastases that spread their poisoned network over the surface of the planet, unto the antipodes, to squeeze out from the soil the pale pink buds of the new murderous buildings.

The Oekumen had launched an armada into the stars to discover *Paradise*. One hundred and fifty spaceships with kin-sotronic propulsion, piloted by the best meta-beasts of the galaxy, each guided by a team of scanners who transformed the vessels into stellar squid with umbiplasmic tentacles. Angel Donatello had discovered Paradise and offered Hell to the Kaliandrans. Now, he wanted to atone for his wrongs...

„If I had to do it over again, I wouldn't, of course. But unfortunately, I don't have a time machine within easy reach and our days are numbered.“

He waved a white booklet in front of Little Station. „You know about this book, I suppose?“

Isadora and Kougar read the slim, gilt letters engraved on the cover: THE FINAL GOSPEL.

Little Station had made a little room for them and they could express themselves via her throat, mouth, tongue and lungs. The strangest thing was not to be using a foreign body, but to be doing it as a pair. They expressed themselves in a sin-

gle voice and wondered how that was possible. As if the neurophysiologic substratum of Little Station's body, the neurons, dendrites and other axons found a synaptic compromise with the mental impulses of their guests.

„We know this book very well... At least, a part of us knows it... Isadora, more precisely. Kougar, for whom religion is nothing but a bunch of nonsense, is going to give her room to talk more freely.“

Little Station started smiling. Unless it was Isadora. Or Kougar. Or all three at the same time.

„An Ambassador's daughter ought to know the philosophical and religious principles that dominate the galaxy. I have, of course, studied the Torah, the Bible, and the Koran... But the monotheist religions of old Earth turned out to be rather soluble in space. Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Mohammed missed the flight. To set off again on God's adventure, they needed a new prophet.“

„Legend tells that Elric Mandelstrom was on a retreat in Saturn's rings when Christ appeared to him,“ Donatello continued.

„He was as tall as a mountain and leapt from ring to ring. His voice was as loud as a rushing torrent and His gaze flashed pale pink lightning,“ Isadora-Little Station quoted.

Donatello was young, thirty at most, but recent events had wrought havoc on him. He wanted to laugh, but he could not get the wrinkles out of his worried face. Nevertheless, a furtive smile pulled at his lips.

„The legend forgets to say that Mandelstrom was detoxing. Before his 'retreat', he'd been drinking a little too much scotch-benzedrine, and the lack of it was making him sail on the shores of delirium tremens.“

„Hallucination or apparition, it doesn't really matter... Jesus Christ revealed to him the physical existence of Paradise. Adam and Eve had been chased from it, but a second chance was offered to the potential elect...“

„That's not exactly right. On Saturn, Jesus revealed to him the location of a 'journal' that relates the strange days lived by the Messiah and His apostles between the resurrection and the

ascension. Christ was appearing and disappearing and never looked the same. He was, in fact, trying to prove its existence. No apostle could understand what it really was. Jesus himself didn't really quite grasp it. And it was only on discovering Kaliandra that I glimpsed the truth..."

„Jesus had really seen this planet," Little Station let out.

Kougar was in on it again.

„Exactly. Jesus didn't really die on the cross. And He was still not dead when they put Him in the tomb. He was cataleptic and His astrophysicist was wandering in space. Jesus was a scanner. Maybe the first involuntary scanner of humankind and He discovered Paradise."

„Are you as delirious as Mandelstrom?"

„Possibly. But I really think that Christ went to visit the stars and Elric Mandelstrom used His 'report' – about which the apostles understood nothing – to compose his Final Gospel."

„Maybe he invented the whole thing..."

„Impossible. The 'journal' has been authenticated. It really was written in the first century of our era. Where Mandelstrom cheated a little was in the chronology of events. He certainly found the sacred text first, and then he invented the apparition of the giant Christ to establish his status as a prophet, in order that it raise no controversy. And it still caught on, as we can see now that the Oekumen has several million faithful and an army counting six thousand six hundred and six soldiers of Christ."

„And the prophecy was fulfilled..."

Little Station gently pushed Kougar and Isadora into a corner of her being and took the floor, then the thought.

„They do not love the souls, they, like dead matter, heavy, they cannot fly, cannot sing, cannot listen to living music, make death useless, movement sterile, only their sick thought can name them Damned, they are Damned and the souls weep at their coming..."

(...) The Kaliandrans are frugivores and insectivores. They're incapable of harming any living species apart from the insects and plants on which they feed. They know neither war nor murder. They're telepathic and some of them accommodate

souls. Souls have consciousness but no memory of a prior life. Souls don't have much to do with any other form of life. Souls are maybe a fully formed species that plow through the cosmos and yearn to rest in some cozy brain. Souls are maybe mental parasites that pass from one body to another. For Cardinal Longkwist, Supreme Representative of the Oekumen on board the Kynos Marcusbi II, souls are emissaries of the Devil come to corrupt Paradise. And the primitive natives (as he calls them out of the corner of his mouth so as not to dirty his tongue) who harbor them should be exorcised...

(...) The robots have finished assembling the Cathedral, but well before the last stone had been set, the inquisitors began officiating in their cellars. And the cries and screams of the 'natives' glide over the marble and gilding, making the curtains tremble and the windows rattle.

(...) They've let Lisandra go. Just like that. For no apparent reason. Just as they were exhibiting a fiercer and fiercer fundamentalism. As if they wanted to make us believe that they opted in fine for tolerance. I don't believe it for a second. I've tried to discuss it with the other scanners, but they still think I'm a lunatic. Despite the screams, despite the howls, despite the heralded genocide. The co-pilots and the dreamers haven't listened to me either. How can the human soul be such a ridiculous simpleton? Only the Octo-pilot believes I speak the truth and that the soldiers of Christ are preparing a treacherous blow for us. But he can't shirk his duties. He alone can bring the ship back safe and sound, and he has to start from the principle that this is what they will allow him to do and what he will do.

(...) A planning meeting for the return trip has just been set. Paradise has to be earned and the crew has certainly not earned it. A psycho-machine and two co-pilots have, however, asked to be baptized. Little by little the army of God is forming its own crew. It'll be slightly more difficult with the scanners. They're not always the cleverest, but they don't rally around any cause. Space is infinite and worthy of their freedom. They won't give it up at any price. I simply hope that it won't cost them their lives.

(...) I've made my decision. And Lisandra is coming with me. I run the risk of no longer being able to shoot out into the four corners of space in an astrophasm of light. Love makes my choice easy. I love Lisandra and she loves me. That's what we are going to preserve first.

(...) Little Station Who Smiles in the Clouds is a Relay, a key you might say, in the Kaliandran organization. She is hyper-telepathic and therefore capable of harboring souls. She's opened the doors of her familial den to us. Seen from the ground it's not very awe-inspiring, but it's huge. Little Station extends over a dozen trees. A veritable vegetal palace...

(...) The shots lasted all morning. Little Station tried to give us an account of the „meeting“, but she doesn't have the words to describe the horror of carnage, the violence of the massacre. She doesn't understand the exorcisms that mutilate her peers. She understands even less the religious cannibalism that makes species kill each other. Little by little she's discovering evil and I suddenly realize that Kaliandra really is Paradise, and that it should remain so.

(...) There isn't one survivor. The team has been entirely decimated. They hounded the last dreamers and the last co-pilots into the heart of the jungle. All this had been planned from the beginning. Paradise is reserved for the elect and all those who refuse to be baptized under the sign of Christ the Redeemer have no right to it. The chosen people will be pure or will not exist. Everything is perfect now. The council of wise men presided over by Cardinal Longkwist has just formalized the discovery of Paradise. I wasn't able to hear his speech, but I can easily imagine it: „The concordance with the sacred texts is amazing. Only the 'big bears' pose some problems while serving as 'receptacles' for demonic forces that oppose the creation of a new Eden. But the Inquisition has got its old breath back and is going to take care of eradicating the phenomenon. The settlers are going to be led to a place propitious for building the first paradisiacal city and a quantonaut is going to be dispatched to Earth to inform the Prophet... Praise be to him!“ My God! – the true one who commands nothing, orders nothing, demands nothing, doesn't want to be

worshipped, is not jealous, is not a warrior, designates no people as elect, takes no sides for good or evil, the one who leaves us in peace – How have we come to this point? How could I have contributed to so much ignominy?... I can't imagine a single second of my time not dedicated to finding a way to put a stop to this massacre...

The Kaliandrans were incapable of fighting, incapable of harming a fly unless they needed to eat it. The souls, however, were capable of everything; the souls were pranksters and they loved the Kaliandrans. To take control of their hosts to play at toy soldiers was a picnic for them.

Donatello's plan was simple and brilliant. The soldiers of the Oekumen had absolutely no fear of these „big bears“ who were ready to let themselves be killed without lifting a finger. The Kynsos Marcusbi II was only being watched by two guards and inside there were only a handful of soldiers controlling the performance of the quantonaut.

„A dozen Kaliandrans guided by good souls can take the vessel by surprise,“ Donatello offered, his eyes sparkling with suppressed rage.

„And for what? With no pilot, no co-pilots and no dreamers we'll barely be able to get it off the ground!“ That was Kougar who monopolized the conservation. Little Station and Isadora were gabbing in their corner.

„That's good. That's even perfect. Get it off the ground... That's all I ask.“ Donatello was a bit excited and could not stand still.

Lisandra stood behind him to massage his neck. „Angel's plan is simple and deadly, but it's all we have. This planet has to be saved, you know. We have no choice.“

Donatello kissed Lisandra and then turned toward Kougar-Little Station. He took them by the shoulder and led them to the den's opening.

At the bottom of the valley, the Cathedral seemed hardly bigger than a tennis ball and next to it, the Kynsos Marcusbi II was the size of a golf ball.

„The Kynsos Marcusbi II gets a few hundred meters off the ground and then we cut the motors. It crashes into the Cathe-

dral and there you go. No more soldiers, no more settlers. Finished. Kaliandra will be able to be cradled by the Moon again."

Kougar automatically lifted his head to contemplate the huge reddish satellite that floated overhead.

"I had some trouble making Little Station understand that it was going to be necessary to 'eliminate' living beings to return everything to order," Donatello pointed out.

"I don't like that expression."

"Excuse me?"

"That 'return everything to order'... I kind of think that order is on the side of the Oekumen. Order is the opposite of freedom. This planet is free. At least for the moment. Free to evolve as it desires. And no monstrous religious dictator like Elric P. Mandelstrom is going to prevent that."

Isadora had taken over the vocal cords and she was in arms. Her private conversation with Little Station had apparently stirred her up.

Donatello flaunted a surprising smile. "I think we're finally on the same wavelength."

"That remains to be seen. Who'll make up your famous team of rebel souls?" That was Kougar again.

"It's already set. Little Station is in charge. You know, telepathy makes things a lot easier. Those Who Harbor Souls are rare, but she has located a dozen in the surrounding area. They're ready to join us at once. And their souls are angels."

One of Little Station's guests made her smile.

"And who's going to take care of the spaceship? Even in normal space to make such an engine take-off requires a certain knowledge of piloting!"

For the first time, Donatello seemed concerned. "I think that the souls can get by."

"You think that..." Little Station's face turned indefinable. There and then the neurophysiologic consensus went awry. Isadora again took the floor and cut short the whole polemic.

"I have a pilot's license."

"Who's speaking?" Donatello was wide-eyed. The excitement was making his nostrils flare. He looked like a bull about to charge.

„It's me, Isadora. The little aristocrat is barely smarter than a metabiote in an incubator. I got my license on the sly. My father couldn't really tell the difference between a pilot and a driver. When I crashed a Thunderbird during the Great Belt Race the bill was pretty steep and my father found out that a spaceship pilot could cost a lot more than a simple shuttle driver. But our status wasn't really affected. I did other races. With his blessing, of course.”

„Why didn't you ever tell me that?”

„Because a daddy's girl, and a gifted one, seemed a little unwarranted among a bunch of hicks...”

„A bunch of...”

Little Station gently pushed her guests into a corner of her mind to quell the nascent argument.

„Yes, the souls are going to eliminate the damned gesticulators and I'll Isadora will guide the dreamers' bird over the big cut stone then I'll Isadora will make it fall onto the stone, and the Damned will disappear from Cradlemoon.”

„Little Station is going to die.”

„She knows it... We have already spoken of that.”

„I'll Isadora will do what is necessary for Cradlemoon to be free.”

„And we... The umbiplasms are already a little tired... The explosion could be fatal to them...”

„You don't have to stay. Little Station is not holding you back. I can pilot the ship alone.”

„I've never heard anything so stupid. Without me, you couldn't return to your body. The umbiplasm is not going to retract by magic. We're far, maybe very far away and only an experienced scanner can bring us back.”

„So you're staying?”

„I really think I have no choice.”

„Who are you doing this for?”

„Kougar loves Isadora like a roveler loves its bowerlet. He cannot lose her.”

„I think you have your answer...” Kougar had spoken without really realizing it.

„What answer?” asked Donatello.

„We're going to knock these tin soldiers down," Kougar sighed out.

(...) The quantonaut has not yet split in the wormhole to spread the good word to the other big, fat, filthy, oozing worm. The settlers have not yet swarmed into the four corners of the planet... But all this can't be long in coming. In less than a day, maybe an hour. And by then it'll be too late. But they've just left. Twelve Kaliandrans stuffed with souls ready to cross swords on the order of Little Station's astroplasm. With such a team we can't fail!

Kougar knew absolutely nothing about what souls really were, but they proved to be formidably effective. The soldiers of the Oekumen were quickly liquidated. Throats slit in a flash or even cleanly decapitated. There was not a single shot fired, not the least alarm set off. True professionalism. Maybe they were the emanation of eternal warriors who changed bodies at will and from time to time came to take a break on Kaliandra. But this was no time to ramble. Little Station's body was entirely at Isadora's orders and he had to admit that she was doing quite well. Little Station was right. He was in love. It seemed totally unlikely to him, but he could not stop thinking about her. He wanted to see her again there, right away, take her in his arms, hold her tight and make love to her.

The ship's ventral nozzles were belching out. In the cockpit they heard only a low humming, but outside was a tornado beginning to roar. The cockpit was a transparent semi-sphere stuck to the front end of the immense space vessel, a wart on a giant's chin, and they could observe the commotion that infected the Cathedral. Lights went on, others went off, soldiers beginning to bustle on the walkways and sloped roofs; others set up arms in the inner courtyards and enclosed gardens. A few volleys were fired and then the silhouettes grew inordinately bigger. The Cathedral shot up toward them. Kougar and Isadora hugged each other around Little Station's thought, and then the world exploded.

Kougar regained consciousness in a mediblock. He opened his eyes and saw Cassandra's face. Her deep green eyes. He smiled at her, just before realizing that they were murky green, and bluish, like the Chimera showed when she was sad.

He leapt up, tearing out some probes in the process.

„Isadora!"

Cassandra sat down gently beside him. „There's been a problem... Her umbilic broke... She didn't come back. And you were cataleptic..."

Kougar took shelter against the silky hair of Cassandra's belly. He wept long, then gently pushed the Chimera away and tore out the last probes that connected him to the mediblock.

„You shouldn't do that, Kougar. You're still very weak. But tell me what happened."

Kougar reeled a little, then found his balance. „Later... First I have to go find her."

From that day on, he did not stop traveling. What the company at the beginning took as an excess of zeal was only a pretext for going on a quest for Isadora's astrophysiology. When Teratek realized this, it fired him on the spot. The story that he told Cassandra spread across the Galaxy in a few months. Isadora and Kougar became a mythic couple for scanners. And the idea that they were practicing not only a job, but also an art, and that this art was not just a juicy source of income but also a way to bring the secrets of the universe to light slowly caught on.

A few years later, the son of Kougar and Isadora would crown this development by creating the Guild of Scanners. But for the moment, he was still only a bunch of cells in his mother's belly. In Isadora's belly, beautiful and radiant in her cryostatic tank.

The two scanners had made love only once and it was at that moment that Isadora's hormonal regulator had decided to break down. That goes to show that nature is not the only thing that can do a great deal of things greatly. Chance proved it again when the quantonaut who was supposed to inform Elric Mandelstrom arrived in a phase of quantum decoherence at

the very moment when the Kynos Marcusbi II was crashing into the Cathedral. It dragged in its wake a few blocks of stone and scrap iron. On the other end of the quantum well, the whole of it tore apart the residence of Elric P. Mandelstrom and crushed its principal occupant, Peter III to his friends.

But nothing could relieve Kougar's grief.

Fifteen years of good and faithful service on the orders of Teratek had allowed him to save up a pretty penny. He bought Isadora's body, cryostasic tank and all, the latest generation traveling skin and a quart of Kinsokaine, enough to travel through the universe and its environs for a hundred years.

And he was ready to sign up for a second century if it was necessary...

(...) I think that good and evil are archaic terms. The souls have a warrior spirit and the peaceful Kaliandrans are their hosts. But they're free on both sides. Free to evolve as they desire and not according to a prefabricated doctrine...

(...) The astropasms of some scanners have come to visit me. They've created a guild and are free now... them too... Free to explore the cosmos in search of their Grail. I love Kaliandra; I love Lisandra; I'm happy to have lived and still be living on this planet, but I'm a scanner and the stars are constantly calling me. Nothing can ever replace the stars' embrace.

His name is Kougar Khalan, like his father, and tears stream down his emaciated face. He closes the notebook with a trembling hand, holds it out to the old man sitting next to him and then stares at the bottom of the valley.

„The Cathedral was standing there, wasn't it?

„Yes. If you want, I'll take you there. You can still see some stones and scraps of iron covered with vegetation."

„No. Thank you, but I don't think I'll be staying here long. I just wanted to..."

„Verify that it was not just a myth. That your mother and father really were heroes?" offered Donatello affectionately and completely free of cynicism.

Kougar Khalan Jr. pursed his lips, pouted amusedly and then nodded his head. „Yes... That's it exactly. I wanted to verify that the myth wasn't born out of a simple rumor. That my father hadn't been the victim of a delirious hallucination.”

„I understand... That's human. And how do you feel?”

„I'm proud. Really. I'm proud.”

Donatello smiled. „The strange thing is that I never saw them. I lived through a marvelous adventure with them and I don't even know what they look like.”

Kougar Jr. took out a little black sphere from his pouch. „Take it. It's a virtex of my parents' wedding. My mother is a little stiff in her tank, but she's beautiful with her round belly. It was a week before my birth. I thought you might like it.”

Donatello took the black sphere from the trembling hand. He was clearly touched.

Kougar Jr. made as if to close his pouch and then reopened it. „Ah, I forgot...”

He took out a vial of Kinsokaine and a traveling skin still wrapped up. „In case you ever want to get a little air. No matter how pleasant a planet may be, it always ends up weighing down on you...”

Donatello had tears in his eyes. He tilted his head back and the stars exploded inside his skull.

The City in the Abyss

JOSÉ MOSELLI

Translated by Michael Shreve

José Moselli, born Joseph Théophile Maurice Moselli in Paris on August 28, 1882 and died of cancer in Cannet on July 21, 1941, was a prolific writer of science fiction, crime fiction and adventure stories for French pulps. Called „the writer without a book“ he was one of the most popular feuilletonistes (serial writers) in the early 20th century, publishing in pulp magazines like Science et voyages or L'Épatant, L'Intrépide, Cri-Cri, Le Petit Illustré from Editions Offenstadt where he was considered their „bestselling“ author alongside George Frenval. Born into a well-to-do family but hungering for adventure, he ran away from home at the age of 13 to get hired as a cabin boy aboard a sailing ship. Though bullied and abused, the

There are many cases, controlled cases, of collective hallucinations. But everything leads us to believe that what happened on board the cargo ship *Ariadne* (out of Bordeaux) is real.

Captain Mercier is a calm, thoughtful man known for his self-control. Lieutenant Mauris was top of his class when he became Master Mariner. The chief engineer of the *Ariadne*, Gerard Fouque, is an even-tempered fifty-year-old veteran. The chief officer, Jacques Michel, is known for certain astronomical studies that earned him honors from the Academy of Sciences.

They all agree. They saw. They heard. Moreover, the logbook, Captain Mercier's report, signed by two crew members, attests that it was a real, unquestionable fact—but no one will believe it.

It was five in the evening. The *Ariadne*, a cargo ship hauling six thousand tons of rice from Saigon to Nantes, was sailing in the Gulf of Aden. Two hours after rounding the ominous Cape Guardafui — where so many ships have been lost — Lieutenant Mauris, who was on watch, informed Captain Mercier that he had just spotted a floating mine!

A floating mine in the Gulf of Aden?

Captain Mercier believed that his subordinate was mistaken. He joined him on deck and could see to the west, straight ahead on their route, a red sphere that was bobbing up and down in the choppy water.

A mine or some harbor buoy gone adrift?

Captain Mercier brought his ship closer to the strange object and saw that it did indeed look like a floating mine: an old

naval mine whose „horns“ were mostly broken off and that was red from all the rust eating away its surface.

How had it not sunk? A mystery!

Whatever the case, it was a terrible danger to navigation. Captain Mercier, out of his sailor's altruism, ordered Lieutenant Mauris to try to sink the contraption with a firearm. Mauris was twenty-five, a Parisian, fresh out of the Maritime Academy, and a good shot. With the *Ariadne* barely five hundred meters from the mysterious sphere, he fired off a few bullets in close succession without missing. Four in all.

To everyone's amazement, the first three smashed against the object and kicked up white clouds of dust. Was the buoy or mine really made of iron? From a distance, it looked like plaster!

The fourth produced an even more unexpected result: they heard a sharp crack, like a pot split open, and the buoy or whatever it was flew into pieces, *but without exploding!*

The sailors who had gathered on the ship's forecastle to watch the action whooped and hollered. *But the buoy was hollow and it contained a human being ...*

Everyone could see him for a brief second: dressed in rags and putting his hands over his bloody head. And the sea abruptly buried him along with the wreckage of the weird device.

„The dinghy!“ Captain Mercier ordered at the same time as he sent a message to the engine room to stop the ship, then put it in reverse.

A maneuver was never executed so fast!

In less than two minutes, the dinghy with the chief officer Jacques Michel on board between four hearty sailors was put to sea before the cargo ship had completely stopped, and it cruised off in the general direction where the red sphere had disappeared with the man inside.

A gentle eddy laced with a rim of foam still indicated the spot.

„There, there!“ the sailors shouted from on board the *Ariadne*. Being higher up than those in the dinghy, they had a wider field of vision.

boy did his duty as he traveled the seven seas. The hard life, the exploits and experiences he had, the people and places he encountered would serve him well in his future writings. Despite his wanderlust, however, he missed boarding the ship in South America, making a deserter out of him as he went on to explore the islands and native girls in the South Seas. Eventually he returned to France where he turned himself over to a disciplinary hearing of the Merchant Marines. The judges were lenient and recommended the boy be trained as an officer. His adventures continued as a navigator but ultimately wore thin, so he accepted a job in Paris as a journalist in charge of a maritime news column. At the same time, he started writing stories and got in contact with Editions Offenstadt where he wrote countless serials for various magazines and journals and was soon considered a veritable „house writer“ for them. One of, if not the first, was „W... Vert“ published in L'Intrepide in 1910. Thus began his writing career, at almost 30 years old, but it was

interrupted by the Great War, in which he served at sea again, transporting troops this time, but he returned to France for good afterward. Dozens upon dozens of serials followed, spread out over hundreds of episodes for years to come until he finally retired to the South of France in 1939, dying in Le Cannet in 1941. None of his work was published as a book in his lifetime. It was not until 1970 that his serial stories, the science fiction at least, started to be published in book form. The rest, the crime fiction and exotic adventure stories, are disappearing with the paper they were originally printed on. And although he has become a cult writer for pulp aficionados, only *Illa's End* (arguably his masterpiece) and *The Planetary Messenger* have so far been translated into English (by Brian Stableford for Black Coat Press). „*The City in the Abyss*“ („*La cite du gouffre*“) was first printed in *L'Almanach Pittoresque* in 1926. This is the first English translation.
Michael Shreve

„On your left. That's it!"

The light craft, pushed on by the rowers, sliced through the rough waves as if it were in a race. In the back, standing up, working the rudder with his ankles, Jacques Michel headed for a black point that had just appeared only to vanish right away: the head of the stranger, no doubt ...

He was not mistaken.

Almost right away, the man bobbed up again, flapping his arms spasmodically only to disappear again—and probably for good!—when one of the sailors in the dinghy managed to grab him by the hair.

The man, who was oblivious, tried to struggle. The sea dog slapped him hard across the face, calmed him down and, with the help of his shipmates, lifted him up and put him in the boat.

The poor man was dressed in rags that looked corroded by some acid. His pants and shirt, his only clothes, were in shreds and had lost any distinct color. They were different shades of gray and black with a little dark green and brownish red mixed in.

The stranger was covered in bruises. Black scabs stuck to his ears, eyes, and the corners of his mouth. The bath he had just taken was not long enough to wash them off.

The chief officer moved the sailors aside and leaned over the mysterious individual. „He's alive. That's the main thing. Lay him down in the back... there. Help me! Okay, and now everyone back to the oars and let's start swimming!"

All excited, the sailors obeyed.

Jacques Michel, sitting next to the motionless body of the strange castaway, piloted the dinghy back to the *Ariadne*, half a mile away, a short kilometer, which the boat crossed in record time.

Captain Mercier, the chief engineer Fouque, the cook, the stokers, and the sailors, who had all crowded together at the top of the ladder, waited and whispered comments. Lieutenant Mauris was also watching from the deck...

Two of the men from the dinghy carried the stranger and laid him on the hatch of the rear hold. Captain Mercier, who

was a little bit of a doctor (a very little bit!), was instantly leaning over him, opening his shirt and listening to his chest. Dead silence all around.

„He's alive," the captain muttered as he straightened up. „But his heartbeat's really irregular... like a hoist losing pressure. Monsieur Michel, get the ship back en route, please, and bring it round four or five degrees north... the currents are treacherous here and I have no desire to hit a reef."

The chief officer, duly ordered, mumbled a hollow „aye cap'n" and headed for the bridge. He was furious because he wanted to stay and hear what the castaway had to say.

Captain Mercier had the stranger brought into the small deckhouse built on the poop deck that served as the owner's cabin when he traveled on board. The man was laid on the brass bed. The black steward, Capron, undressed him, washed his face and put on him a new shirt.

After this, Captain Mercier tried to bring him around. It was not easy. First, he put a flask of ether, then some smelling salts under his nose. Next, he dropped some cheap rum (bought in Singapore and more corrosive than acid) down his throat. In vain!

Capron, an athletic man, rubbed, massaged and finally shook him to no avail.

The man, however, was not dead. And yet, his heart seemed to stop at times. Mercier could not hear it. A second later, the organ would start beating again, stronger than ever, rattling the poor guy's chest, but he remained leaden on the bed.

Captain Mercier (from Nantes way back in his family) had many fine qualities but gentleness and sensitivity were not among them. Neither was patience. „Deckhand!" he called. „Fetch me some cotton and the bottle of wine spirits in my cabin!"

The deckhand rushed off to follow orders and came back presently with the requested objects.

Mercier took a clump of cotton, put it in the stranger's left hand, which he balled up with a bit of rope. Then, after pouring a half-glass of alcohol on the cotton wadding, he set it on fire. The cotton flamed up and the castaway's skin crackled.

The man jumped up. He opened his eyes and let out a furious, „Hellfire and damnation!"

„Ah, he talks! All right," Mercier wrapped the flaming fingers in his big hand and put out the fire.

The man was trembling violently. Agape and agog, his face expressed a nameless dread. He looked around as if he could barely grasp reality and mumbled, „It was a dream."

„What was a dream?" Mercier asked, surprised by the odd remark.

The man did not answer. His brow furrowed. A deep wrinkle grooved into his forehead showing that he was thinking hard.

Mercier took the opportunity to examine him. He looked to be in his forties. His beard and moustache, which must have been shaved regularly, were around a centimeter long. His thin hair was graying. He had a high forehead and deep-set eyes under arching eyebrows. His nose, a little big, was veined with red. His mouth was fixed in a cynical, world-weary smirk. All in all, an intelligent but not very friendly face.

You, my friend, should love this alcohol, Mercier thought as he held out the flask to the mysterious castaway.

The man looked at it, took it and, after a moment of uncertainty, he gulped it all down.

„Feeling better?" Mercier asked.

The stranger furrowed his brow again. „You're French?" came out in a hoarse voice.

„As you see, my boy. And you?" the captain of the *Ariadne* shot back. „Are you going to tell us what you were doing in that mine... in that buoy?"

„What buoy?"

„The float, the bobbing ball you were using as a shell."

„The float?"

„Yeah, the red sphere we thought was a floating mine. The one we shot with a rifle and destroyed... you were inside."

Again, the man did not respond. His body shook. His eyes started swimming in their sockets. He stared at Mercier, then at the chief officer Jacques Michel, who had just come in, then at the deckhand. „So... it wasn't a dream," he muttered.

„A dream?“ Mercier questioned. „Look, you have to explain it to us. You want another drink? Or something to eat? You want to rest a little? When you feel better, you can tell us everything. You're safe here so you can relax.“

The man did not answer. His heart started beating spasmodically; so violently that they could see the organ pulsing in his ribcage. His throat tensed, and his Adam's apple rose up. „Drink!“ he croaked.

Mercier filled a glass and held it out. The man downed it greedily. His cheeks turned red. The cynical crease of his mouth darkened. „So, you found me in a ball... a float?“

„Exactly!“ Mercier said. He gave a brief account of what had happened after Lieutenant Mauris spotted the mysterious device.

The man nodded. He tried to control his throbbing heart and stammered, „I can... might as well tell you everything... I'm done for! Any minute now, the machine'll crack! Anyway, it's better like this. We only die once and life isn't worth the trouble of regretting it.“

The stranger paused. He was panting.

„My name's Philippe Raquier... engineer. Top of my class at... but what do you care? Life is a matter of good luck and bad luck... A stroll that starts at birth and ends in death. You're happy when things are going good but miserable when things turn sour.

„Me, I was lucky at first. I studied hard and became an engineer. I liked the good life. I went out and got a place on the rails in Ethiopia, then in South America... but you don't care about all that. Anyway, I started drinking. Why? Because I like alcohol! Some people like peas, others oysters... No telling why!

„But alcohol is a wicked friend. To get the little high I wanted, I had to drink more and more... It showed even though I did my job without a hitch. Still, I dropped one job after another... lower and lower down the ladder... But you're wondering what all this has to do with you fishing me out of the water? I'm getting there.

„So, I told you I was losing work. I ended up hustling plumbing fixtures in Glasgow. But one day, I got drunk and missed a delivery. Just like that, I was back on the street. And I hit rock bottom. I was sleeping in shelters... when there was room. When you don't have a home and you've got no decent clothes, it's impossible to pull yourself out of the hole!

„So as not to die of poverty, I was more than happy to find a job as greaser in the engine room of an English steamer. But in Melbourne, I binged on my first shore leave. They kicked me off.

„I was lucky! They were building a railroad between Saint Kilda and Buxton through the malaria-infested plains. The engineers were dropping like flies. And they couldn't find replacements. I showed my credentials and was hired at fifty pounds a month. A windfall!

„I did my duty for seven months until a Syrian came and set up a canteen along the tracks. He sold this cheap whisky that poisoned the workers. But for me, he got real cognac, like I hadn't tasted for months. I closed my eyes to his bootlegging and satisfied my passion for alcohol. An inspector from the company came by one day. I was drunk. I was sent back to Melbourne where I found myself back on the street with three hundred pounds in my pocket but also with a reputation that barred me from working anywhere in Australia.“

Philippe Raquier stopped talking. His voice had grown weak and hoarse. At times, his heart leapt in his chest. His face hardened — a sign of the terrible willpower required for him to speak. He continued:

„In a bar on Pitt Street, I met an Irishman, James O'Baldy, drunk like me. I'd met him in line at a shelter in Glasgow... We drank together. We talked together. To make a long story short, O'Baldy told me he was an assistant, an assistant purser, handling the money on board an English ocean liner, the *Thames*, which was leaving the next day for Europe. O'Baldy and I were two of a kind. That's why he confided in me without hemming and hawing over trust: The *Thames* was carrying a bunch of cases of rubies and opals worth more than 200,000 pounds sterling!

„The precious stones had been loaded on the *Thames* in secret the night before and were locked in the safe – basically a closet with armored walls whose only access was through the purser's cabin. 200,000 pounds worth of stones! O'Baldy went pale just thinking about it. If he had a partner, someone he could count on... He was sure he could snatch the fortune... But he needed help, someone to crack the safe if need be...

„I should also tell you, gentlemen, that during my stint of poverty in England, me and O'Baldy had done a few robberies together... that never netted me much.

„I knew what O'Baldy was saying. It sounded like an interesting proposal. After a few questions, which the Irishman answered plainly, I realized that the job was feasible and I could easily hide the booty... For this I'd have to get on board. Which is exactly what I did.

„I got some new clothes and a few indispensable tools: a manganese steel crowbar, skeleton keys, blank keys, and even a little oxyhydrogen blowtorch. Then I bought a first class ticket to Suez. Suez seemed like the easiest place to get off and disappear once the job was done.

„The *Thames* left... I had two pounds sterling and four shillings left in my pocket. The two pounds earned me the good graces of my cabin boy when I gave it to him on embarking.

„But it was bad sailing. All the way from Melbourne to Colombo, the weather was appalling. Between Colombo and Aden, the southwesterly monsoon kept us shaking for three days, then it calmed down so the passengers could eat a full meal for the first time on the trip... The purser, with the captain's approval, decided that it was the perfect time to give the traditional benefit party for the line's widows. O'Baldy and I had been waiting for this chance.

„The purser was going to be busy during the party so we could take advantage of it to 'work'!

„The party took place two days before the estimated arrival in Aden. At eleven in the evening, O'Baldy snuck me into the purser's cabin. On deck, an orchestra of horns and reeds accompanied by accordions was raging. I guess they were dancing a jig...

„After going through the purser’s small office, then his cabin, we stood before a narrow, metal door that accessed the safe. O’Baldy opened one of the closets where I was supposed to hide in case the purser came back for one reason or another. Then he went to keep watch in the corridor close to the cabin door. He would alert me by dropping a sugar bowl if the purser showed up.

„The door of the safe was fitted with three tumbler locks. I only had to break one. Figuring out how to open the other two was easy. I pulled the door open, turned on the flashlight I had brought, and stepped into the safe.

„It was a square closet, two and a half meters on each side, whose walls were made of steel; basically, just an extension of the purser’s cabin. The armored walls were thick, braced by steel buttresses riveted to the deckbeam. A solid iron cross protected the porthole.

„On the shelves before me, I saw little wooden boxes with red wax seals. There were thirteen in all, each as big as a box of dominoes, lying next to them were cases full of jewelry and money that prudent passengers had trusted to the purser.

„I reached out for the boxes. Behind me, I heard a thump. It was the door closing! I tried to open it. I heard two sharp knocks against the steel. At least I thought I heard... I figured—I’ll never know if I was right or not—that it was O’Baldy shutting the door when he saw the purser come. But maybe it was from the lurch of the ship, which I had just felt.

„Whatever it was, it gave me the willies. Picture yourself in my situation: I was facing hard labor for life.”

After a short pause, Philippe Raquier said, „Drink!”

Captain Mercier poured him a glass of rum. He downed it in one gulp.

„I was trying to study my situation calmly, yes, when a big jolt threw me to the metal floor. After a minute, because the shock had knocked me senseless, I tried to get up *and I felt the floor tipping over more than forty-five degrees!* The *Thames* was almost on its side!

„I could stand up, however, and I felt the floor dropping under my feet — like an elevator going down. The *Thames* was

sinking! It was zigzagging down in rolling waves, sliding from side to side, tilting up, then dipping its nose...

„All around me, I heard muffled blows that made the steel walls vibrate. I heard rumbling and gurgling...

„I was clear-headed again. When you've pictured hard labor for life, you can picture death!

„Knowing that, if I stayed in the safe, I was going to die slowly of suffocation or I'd drown, I thought of opening the door to get out, to get back up to the surface. But I stayed put. I realized that it was already too late. The purser's cabin and office, the corridor that I'd have to pass through before reaching the deck were already flooded. No way out.

„Beads of sweat ran down my spine...

„The ship kept going down. At each rocking, the jewel boxes and other cases slid over the floor and slapped against the walls. But I'd already forgotten all about them!

„The flashlight that I'd dropped was still on. I picked it up and went to the porthole. I could see bands of pale foam passing by the dark shadows... I knew, without any possible doubt, that the ship was plunging into the abyss. I was a goner. No power could save me. And yet, here I was...

„I'm a practical man. Yes, practical, when I'm not drinking... I hadn't drunk all night! So, knowing that I was a goner, gone for good, I sat down, or rather I reclined on the floor swaying under me...

„The rumbling continued. Any minute now, the steel walls were going to split apart, burst open under the heavy pressure. And that would be the end for me. I turned off the flashlight, put it in my pocket and waited.

„In spite of myself, I stared out the porthole as I stretched out before it. I saw weird, glowing shapes pass by and bubbles... I heard cavernous eruptions: different parts of the ship breaking apart under the great pressure of water...

„I must have been the sole survivor. Me, the thief, the safe cracker... Right? And what an agonizing death I was going to have! If only I had a gun! Oh, I envied the others who were already dead.

„At times, when the sinking ship pitched a little stronger, I felt the little sealed boxes with rubies and opals bang against me. Madness! When the *moment* came, this huge fortune wouldn't help my life last one second longer. And I had boarded the Thames to steal it!

„I felt a very slight, almost imperceptible bump, and the ship stopped moving. It had reached the bottom of the sea where it would rest until the end of days. The floor of the safe was pretty much horizontal now. I stood up. I had a little headache, but that was all. I turned on my flashlight. It looked to me like the walls of the safe were slightly warped, but they had held strong. For the moment, I wouldn't have to risk death by drowning. But there was still suffocation...

„I turned off the flashlight. I wanted to save the batteries. To die in darkness was a sickening thought.

„Understand that I was very lucid. To the point that I automatically tried to calculate the depth by analyzing the warp of the walls according to their thickness and the resistance of the steel... A completely inaccurate calculation, given that I didn't know their exact thickness or the degree of resistance... I figured I'd be better off trying to get some sleep.

„I turned around to lie down on the floor and found myself looking out the porthole. The surprise froze me to the spot. Through the thick window barred with a steel cross, I saw a reddish brown glow, red like hot iron. Infrared even. For a moment, I imagined some kind of phosphorescent phenomenon. But I saw shadows moving around! Probably fish? I watched, both intrigued and frightened at the idea that these fish, or whatever they were, were going to feed on my body when the walls of the safe finally gave in...

„I watched... It looked like the shadows – those blurry shadows – were slowly changing color, going from dark green to brownish red, then black and vanishing.

„My eyes were gradually adjusting to the semi-darkness. Little by little, I could make out odd cylindrical structures, full of spikes and spurs as big as scythes, and between them had been bored horizontal funnels. Over these cylinders, gigantic gate-like structures rose up in dark green shadows.

„I thought I was the victim of an illusion. What I was seeing was algae, no doubt, and coral. I looked harder. I forced myself to stay calm and objective.

„No! It was not coral and algae! They were artificial buildings, constructed by beings who could think. The cylinders and gates were proportioned; the funnels were made in staggered rows. The gates were set up, I would have sworn to it, at forty-five degree angles to one another.

„Any doubts I may have still had vanished when I saw what was between the cylinders and towers: oblong frames ending in spindles, and on top of them were sitting weird machines that looked like enormous accordions fitted with toothed gears! You heard me, toothed gears! And there were groups of the most extraordinary beings bustling around these machines...

„Beings! Three meters tall... maybe less (the porthole window was a little warped by the water pressure). These beings were made of a white bulb with vertical, dark green stripes, and three rows of round, cherry-red eyes set around it. Under the bulb, which might've been around fifty centimeters high by forty in diameter, there were seven (I counted them) tentacles waving around, like an octopus' but of different lengths. Some of the tentacles (three to be exact) ended in sharp points that looked like they were made of metal.

„The head (I mean the weird bulb) of these beings was encircled by a ring of metal over the three rows of eyes. And on top of the bulb, a white jet squirted out, sometimes thick, sometimes thin, sometimes almost impossible to see.

„The beings were surrounding one of the accordion-machines, apparently trying to push it or drag it...

„Behind them were other similar creatures, but smaller, who had only one row of eyes. They were coming forward. Their bulb was not crowned with any jet or fitted with a metal ring. They did not have spikes at the end of their tentacles. Slaves, workers, probably—I mean like entomologists use the word when talking about worker bees and ants.

„I don't know why... I couldn't help it: I took my flashlight and spontaneously, instinctively, unconsciously you might say, I raised it up to the window and turned it on.

„Right away, I saw one of the beings around the accordion-machine approach the porthole while the jet spurting out of the bulb grew bigger and stronger. It plastered itself, so to speak, against the window. I saw its countless red eyes, the green-black stripes of its bulb. A hideous creature but endowed with intelligence! The three rows of red eyes glowed like molten metal. The stripes on the bulb seemed to come alive, to twist and twirl.

„I myself, gentlemen, was perfectly calm. I was thinking of my own hide. These beings, whatever they were, could (maybe) save me. Anyone sentenced to death will hang onto any hope, even the craziest.

„I waved my flashlight. I saw the stripes intertwine, spread apart, wriggle and writhe... Obviously it was trying to make me understand something?

„It went away. Then a few of the smaller beings who were following the accordion-machine broke away and came up to the porthole, entwining their tentacles and producing a bright red glow that lit up almost the whole safe room.

„That's not what I wanted! I wanted to get out! To get back to the surface!

„I danced around! I didn't know what I was doing. I tried to make them understand, to communicate with these beings who had nothing in common with me, who must have been as ignorant of humans as humans were of them, who didn't know what air was or sunlight... Beings as different from us as Martians would be, if there were any!

„I was starting to feel the lack of air... and it was getting desperately cold—a real freezer. I was shivering as much from the cold as from fear.

„When the ship had hit the bottom of the sea, I had accepted the sacrifice of my life. And now, here was a new hope to give me courage... It was hard for me to surrender a second time to the great voyage beyond...

„I called on all my reasoning power, all my knowledge... I attempted the impossible.

„I went up to the porthole, almost touching it, opened my mouth and pretended to gasp for air, trying to make them un-

derstand that I was suffocating. But they certainly knew nothing about our bodies.

„Some of them stayed huddled around the window, watching. I observed that, at times, their eyes changed color and went from dark red to bright red. What were they thinking? Who knows?

„All of a sudden, they went away. And without figuring out how it moved, I saw a kind of cage come up, which looked pretty much like a spindle standing on end. In the middle of this spindle, two cones with their tips facing each other were shooting two red rays that bounced off the bars of the cage — bars that looked like they were made of jade. The double scarlet ray got rapidly brighter. Any second it was going to be bright enough to light up the safe room, which was now bathed in the rays...

„...of light! That wasn't what I wanted! I needed air! I was suffocating... How long had it been since the *Thames* had sunk? How many minutes? Hours? I was so wrapped up in what I was seeing that I'd lost track of time... But my lungs were crying for air.

„I slowly realized that the chill in the room was edging off. The weird spindle was not only radiating light but warmth as well. I felt better. I wasn't shivering. I could see the drops of condensation on the walls disappearing one by one. But I heard two or three dull cracks, which told me that the walls of the safe were starting (like me) to show signs of fatigue... I started trembling again just thinking about the death awaiting me! Dying now would be dying twice. After what I'd seen, what I'd just seen, I wanted to live, to tell the world about my extraordinary discovery!

„But I knew salvation was impossible...

„If I stayed in the safe, I'd suffocate to death, as long as the walls held up. Leaving it meant being crushed to death, drowned.

„I was jumping around madly, convulsively, frantically. Air! I needed air! I pointed to my throat. I pretended to choke.

„The beings just watched. Their three rows of eyes changing color and their stripes wriggling on their bulbs showed me that

they were thinking, reasoning... maybe they were emotionally moved? No doubt they'd seen other men, but dead men! By extraordinary luck, I was here alive! The god of thieves maybe..."

Philippe Raquier smirked cynically. His voice grew weak. But the men listening were so absorbed that they did not think of suggesting that he rest. He waited a few seconds for his heart to calm down. Then he spoke again in a barely audible voice:

„The beings scattered. I thought they'd abandoned me. I saw others pass by, the small ones, the ones I called 'slaves'. They were pushing hemispheres that glided easily and were piled with all kinds of objects—I recognized the wreckage of the Thames: mangled davits, angled sections, boiler plates, etc.

„An intuitive thought crossed my mind: what if these beings had caused the shipwreck to plunder it?

„A little later, I heard a grinding noise that made me shiver. I wondered if the walls of the safe were giving way. I thought I smelled sulfur... And all of a sudden, I was breathing more easily. My head felt lighter. I felt reassured and relieved. I tried to figure it out. I analyzed the sensations. And I understood! Yes, I understood! The beings were sending me oxygen, pure oxygen!

„I saw them once again approach the porthole to watch me. Me, I was panting. I was breathing frantically. I was feeling strangely excited... overexcited, like I was drunk! I think I said a bunch of incoherent things then. I was shouting at the beings... The effects of the oxygen. I did all I could to calm down a little.

„I was breathing. That was the upshot. But I couldn't kid myself—the walls were bulging more and more. At any minute now, they were going to burst.

„I don't know why, but I became raging mad. I picked up some of the boxes with opals and rubies and with all my strength I threw them at the walls. They shattered into pieces. The floor became littered with precious stones that sparkled in the scarlet light of the double ray emitted by the spindle-shaped cage.

„I noticed that the beings showed no emotion, no reaction at the sight of these human riches.

„My heart was beating harder and faster. I felt my arteries boiling. A devastating thirst dried my throat, burned my palate. My tongue, little by little, became hard... I knew it was the end.

„Like an idiot, I started waving my arms again. I wanted to get out, to get back to the surface, to see the sun, to live, just for an hour if I could... But to see bright light, real light, daylight: the light of men!

„Motionless, the beings watched me. The jet of steam shot out of their bulbs, and, behind them, I could make out a chaotic swarm of... I was no longer calm enough to analyze. I was panting like a dog. My dry, hard tongue was darting in and out of my mouth...

„The temperature in the safe was still mild, warm, but water was again seeping through the walls.

„Abruptly, I resigned myself. Do you get it? I accepted the inevitable!

„One last time I looked at the strange beings who could do nothing but prolong my agony. Then I lay down on the steel floor, feeling it wet under me. Carbon dioxide, which is heavier than oxygen, was sitting in the lower part of the room and suffocating me. I thought I heard banging and creaking... I thought I was being shaken... And then nothing. I passed out."

Philippe Raquier stopped talking. Captain Mercier and Jacques Michel, leaning over the man, had barely heard the end of his story. Believing that the castaway wanted to regain some strength before continuing, they waited.

After a little while, Mercier asked, „And after?"

„What after?" the engineer mumbled, looking at them. „After, sir, I don't know anything. Yes... According to what you told me, I was obviously put into that ball you found me in... The beings of the abyss took pity on me and sent me to the surface... Give me a drink, please."

The bottle of rum was empty. Mercier looked at the man, then turned to the chief officer and sent him to get another bottle.

„Drink and try to get some rest," he told Raquier, holding out a half-full glass.

The shipwreck victim drank without saying a word. He laid his head on the pillow and closed his eyes.

Mercier motioned to his second-in-command to follow him, and they left the deckhouse. „What do you think?“ he asked when they were outside. „A phony or a fool?“

„But who put him in that sphere? It couldn't have been made of metal since it only took a couple of bullets to crack it open,“ Jacques Michel objected.

„We'll see. Tomorrow, after a good sleep, we'll question him in detail so we can get to the truth. Let's eat. It's after eight, and poor Mauris is probably getting bored on the bridge.

The next morning, Captain Mercier went to see the castaway and found him dead.

His rags held no papers or identification. He was sewed up in a canvas sheet and buried at sea later that morning.

In the evening, the *Ariadne* dropped anchor in the port of Djibouti, where Captain Mercier immediately submitted his ship's log in which he reported how he had found the extraordinary castaway.

He learned that the Thames, a mail boat from Australia, really did exist and was eagerly awaited in Aden after four days missing.

The *Ariadne* left Djibouti the following day. A week later, after crossing the Suez Canal, it arrived in Port Saïd, where Captain Mercier found out that the Thames had sunk in the waters around Cape Guardafui, but nobody knew how or why. Some Arab fishermen, however, who had picked up and brought back to Aden some wreckage from the unfortunate ship, maintained that the weather was particularly beautiful around Guardafui at the time of the accident. Two other ships, the *Ophir* out of London and the *General Errazuriz* from Callao, which were sailing off Guardafui on the night of the Thames shipwreck, confirmed their statement.

When Captain Mercier got into Nantes with Philippe Raquier's tale haunting his mind, he did some research and quickly learned that, in Melbourne, the *Thames* had taken on

board a large quantity of rubies and opals on its final voyage. Philippe Raquier had told the truth...

Are there beings, therefore, at the bottom of the sea who know about us, but whom we do not know about? Beings who have developed an advanced civilization? And who maybe cause shipwrecks to appropriate certain materials?

One fact is undeniable: off the Cape Guardafui, more than a hundred ships are lost every year—the *Ghodoc*, the *Renard*, the *Amiral Gueydon* sailed their last... along with many others..

The currents are to blame, of course, but they are not the only guilty parties.

Them!

MAURICE RENARD

Translated by Michael Shreve

*Maurice Renard was born on February 28, 1875 in Châlons-sur-Marne and died on November 18, 1939 in Rochefort-sur-Mer. He was a French writer specialized in science fiction or what he called „Scientific Marvel Fiction“. He came from a family of high magistrates but rather than opt for a career in law, he launched his writing career at the age of 22 and achieved rapid critical success with his science and „fantastique“ fiction. His first collection of short stories was published in 1905, *Fantômes et Fantoches*, revealing the strong influence of Poe and earning the author the respect of Parisian literary circles. His first novel in 1908, *Le Docteur Lerne*, inspired by H. G. Wells'*

They had a really nice set-up in Passy.

Florine crossed the small, well-kept yard whose neat lawn and hydrangea separated the little house from the laboratory pavilion. It had just turned noon. Philippe's two assistants were leaving the pavilion. They greeted Mrs. Chambrun excitedly and with respect, obviously amazed at the familiar but unlikely sight of so much grace and elegance. She gave them a nice, friendly smile and headed for the stairs in the shade.

At the top of the stairs, a door opened onto a huge room. It used to be a painter's workshop, but now, with its rows of chemical tanks and its array of electrical devices, it was a place of science — daunting, of course.

„Hey!“ she said. „You changed the door. Was it because of the draft? This one certainly...“ She swung the door back and forth on its rubber weather striping, and it shut tight, hermetically sealed.

Philippe Chambrun started laughing. He was just like the newspapers sometimes showed him: tall and bony with bright eyes and a large forehead, topped by crazy hair that flew off wildly in every direction. All kinds of colors spotted his white coat. He was pouring a blue liquid into a glass ball that he lifted up to get a better look.

Still laughing, he put down his glass, took off his glorious stains, and went up to his wife. He put his hands on her shoulders and looked into her eyes before hugging her. She was ex-

actly twenty-three years old and he was forty. They had been married for eighteen months.

Florine sulked and grumbled, „I know very well that it's not because of the draft."

„Well, what's it for, then?" he asked, titling his head mischievously to one side.

And suddenly — which had not happened before — his wife acted up. Florine threw a fit. She pulled away, choking. „You're making fun of me... Stop! Leave me alone! Why won't you tell me what you're doing here? Do you think I can't understand?"

„Oh, Florine!" he scolded.

„Or are you keeping a secret?"

He was baffled and stared at her, trying to figure out a way to explain. „Come on! Florine, it's nothing serious. What's got into you?"

There are days when the most reasonable women in the world turn into temperamental little girls. Usually so thoughtful and calm, they suddenly start crying. Someone other than Philippe — less of a scholar maybe — would have understood what kind of tantrum causes tears. He did not see that she was crying over herself because she was thinking she was stupid, hateful and pathetic. He believed in words because you could not take them back. It shattered him to see his little Florine so strangely unhappy.

He thought about it. His face became terribly serious and pensive. „Okay. I'll tell you. Are you happy?"

„Yes," she smiled exquisitely and dried her eyes. „And I swear I'll keep your secret. Because it is a secret, isn't it?"

„A secret, yes, really, a strange secret," he murmured. And he started walking back and forth, looking confused, not knowing what to say.

„So..." she pointed out all the equipment, „all of this..."

But just when he was about to answer, he became scared. „Not here! Not here! It would be better, certainly..."

It was Florine's turn to look baffled. „Look, Philippe, we're alone. Your assistants have left... Aren't we alone, Philippe?"

„Do we ever really know?" he answered in a strange voice.

The Island of Doctor Moreau, mixed a crime thriller with horror and eroticism, a literary science fiction born of a learned imagination. Along with his fiction, he also tried to popularize and legitimize the genre of „scientific-marvel fiction“ as more than puerile entertainment or vulgar decadence, depending on who you talked to. Using Poe and Wells as models, he theorized and promoted imaginative literature in articles throughout his life. His foundational article on the history and theory of science fiction was in 1909, „Scientific Marvel Fiction and Its Effects on the Consciousness of Progress“, a veritable manifesto for the literary value of the genre. Later he would prefer the term „parascientific“ and still later „roman d'hypothèse“ or speculative novel. In 1911 he published Le Pêril Bleu, his second novel and generally considered his masterpiece, later to become a classic with its unique, non-anthropomorphic aliens of superior intelligence.

Unfortunately, after the First World War, in which he served as a cavalry officer, his financial situation deteriorated to the point where his only income came from his writing. He therefore entered into more mainstream fiction (crime and historical, even romance and adventure stories) with serials in newspapers and magazines to support his fantastic fiction. These also included numerous „contes de presse“, what might today be considered flash fiction, a genre that disappeared with Second World War. Although he managed to become an important representative in the literary life in Paris between the wars, his critical acceptance took long to translate into popular success. His 18 novels and hundreds of short stories were mainly published in newspapers like L'Intransigeant and Le Petit Parisien, then after 1928 exclusively in Le Matin for his stories, which provided his main source of revenue in the 1930s. Despite regular republications of some of his novels in the 20th century and a number

Worry gripped Florine. She no longer felt safe in the laboratory – and she was stunned by it.

„Let's go,“ Philippe continued more calmly. „Didn't you come to get me for lunch?“

„Yes...“

During the meal, she didn't even try to ask him any questions. And he kept quiet. He was lost in thought, furrowing his brow, sometimes narrowing his eyes as if to follow the imaginary course of his thoughts in space. Then he looked at Florine again and relaxed and smiled, but he was still distracted.

Once, while the maid was out of the room, he said, „My assistants... they know nothing. I haven't told them anything about it yet. I haven't told anyone. And you see that I've been working in peace, which proves, it seems... it seems...“

„What?“ she asked.

„Nothing!“ he frowned.

She had the feeling again that he was afraid someone was listening to them. She trembled uncomfortably and proposed, „Let's speak in English!“

He shrugged his shoulders and fell back into silence.

A little later, he gave her a worried look and continued. „... To modify the atmosphere of the laboratory. There you go. To transform it from the point of view of...“ He stopped. He put his finger to his mouth and looked around suspiciously.

„I don't get you,“ she confessed.

„I know. You can't understand like that! Listen, we're going to... Keep your comments to yourself... We're going to take the car and go for a drive, a long drive. We'll come back tonight... late“

„Okay,“ she said.

She had already told herself several times that it would certainly be better to forget about knowing Philippe's secret research, but she did nothing to stop it. It was not that she wanted to push things even further to know if she should suspect some kind of madness in his wonderful intelligence – she had that passing thought for only a second – but she was in the grip of a burning curiosity that had to be satisfied.

The car cruised smoothly along at high speed. By five o'clock, Mr. and Mrs. Chambrun were sitting under a tree on the banks of the Loire for their tea.

"150 miles," Philippe said, "that's a ways. But maybe it's totally useless to take such precautions. Well, after all, it's no doubt better for me to share the secret. If it has to do with justifying or approving my work, at least the thing is certain."

But he looked as worried as he did in Paris about what would result from his explanation.

"I'll try to make you understand as quickly as possible. Without too many words. Don't talk. Stay quiet and listen to me. Act just like we were sure that we were being spied on."

Then he sat there for a few minutes preoccupied, trying to decide, and finally he took out of his pocket one of those little portable slates that you can erase in the blink of an eye after writing a little. And that's how he wrote, little by little, what Florine read under his screening hand:

"No sense. Weak. Very few. Can only make us perceive a tiny part of nature. It would be absurd to think that only the things and beings that we see and feel exist. Good bet we live in the midst of a multitude of invisible, intangible beings. If they exist, what are they? Mystery. Maybe they're unaware of our existence. But on the other hand, maybe they have all kinds of influence on us. We can even imagine (the worst) that they control us without us knowing. We owe it to them what sometimes (or always) happens to us, even sickness. And when we die, it's them who kill us."

Florine turned pale, opened her mouth. "Shh!" he stopped her with a quick, sharp sign of his hand. And he started writing again:

"I don't think they can read our thoughts because... because, then, I think they would have stopped my work. But... But if they exist and if they're intelligent, do they hear and understand our words? Do they read our writing?"

He very quickly, instinctively, erased the last sentence, looked at Florine and continued:

"In a few days I think I'll succeed. Goal: fill the laboratory with some entities. Change the air in such a way that the in-

of film adaptations of Les Mains d'Orlac, he remains a little-known figure to the public, even as his „scientific-marvel“ is recognized as an important pioneer in science fiction. Not only is he neglected by literary scholars for writing science fiction, but also by science fiction specialists for his peculiar mix of genres, his atypical approach that dissolves the borders between horror, fantasy, science fiction, detective fiction and just plain weird.

Furthermore, he has never really been recognized in the English-speaking world, perhaps due to the lack of translations. Hopefully, this will change now that Black Coat Press and Brian Stableford have recently published translations of all his novels and science fiction short stories.

The present story (translated before I was aware of this project), published in August 1934 in La Revue des Vivants, bears analogy to H. P. Lovecraft's „From Beyond“ (1920) in its attempt to pierce the invisible world through scientific means.

Michael Shreve

visible will become visible. What the world hides will appear. So that we can study them or at least observe them, photograph them. If they exist. As I believe."

„They don't exist!" Florine revolted. „No! It's not possible!"

„Be quiet now," Philippe ordered. „Not a word. I promise I'll call for you when I've got some results."

„But... What do you think *they* are like? What do you think *they* look like?"

„You can imagine anything you want..."

She felt unbearably nervous. „No! No!" she repeated, disturbed and anxious. „A thing like that!"

„We'll see... We'll see!" he concluded with a smile. „And now, we can go back."

They took a short walk in the country to give the car a rest. The landscape was charming in the beautiful summer evening. A very gentle, caressing breeze blew along the river.

„The wind scares me right now," Florine said. „It's like someone brushing against you and you can't see it."

Philippe cheered up. „Like that it's kind of nice."

„I don't think so." She widened her eyes, grim, and scrutinized her surroundings, like someone groping along in darkness.

They went back to the car. The tank was filled up and Philippe got behind the wheel. They did not talk at first, but, after a few miles, she thought out loud. „It's so far... Was it really necessary?"

„I don't know, really. I don't know anything. Wow! The night is falling fast. What time is it?" He turned on the headlights.

„What are you doing?" she asked.

Her tone of voice surprised him. He stopped the car. „What?" he asked worriedly.

„It's still light out and you just turned on the headlights."

„Ah! Ah!" he was oddly serious. „I also thought that they were shining... that they were shining badly..."

He turned off the lights and rubbed his eyes.

„I don't understand what I... A shadow. I feel like it's nighttime. It'll pass... probably..."

„You're working too much. Your nerves are shot. Your eyes..."

„Hmf! Yes, maybe.“

„What do you think it is?“ she was suddenly disturbed by his attitude.

The idea — the harrowing idea — was making his heart beat fast and hard.

„You drive,“ he said brusquely. „Take the wheel. Tonight I... I don't trust myself. I'm afraid I might blackout.“

And thus, they got back to Paris, very late at night.

When they were home, she hugged him and asked, „How do you feel? Are you in pain?“

„Not at all. There's just a shadow around things... always.“

She waited a minute and then, „More?“

„... no ...“ he lied, and she knew it.

„I'll go see the eye doctor tomorrow.“ He was pretending to be calm.

„Of course,“ she said. „First thing in the morning.“

Neither of them slept. In the morning, Florine asked, „Are you okay?“

He admitted that he was surrounded by a thicker fog. His mother had bad eyes. One of his great grandfathers had gone blind. „Besides, like you said last night, it's fatigue, isn't it?“

Lost in thought, she listened to him trying to find the source of his troubles in everyday causes to reassure himself and keep up appearances. All things considered, she told herself, it's an incredible coincidence.

Florine called the eye doctor, but he wanted to go alone. She did not insist on going along. An hour later, he came back cheered up and in good spirits. „Healed! Healed, my love! It was nothing at all. A few eye drops, a treatment of electricity, and I'm as good as new.“

„But what was it, Philippe? What's the diagnosis?“

„It's vague, very vague. I have the feeling he just gave me any old treatment. What does it matter! I'm all better; that's what counts.“

„The doctor didn't advise you to stop working so much?“

„Yes...“ Philippe confessed. „But that won't keep me from continuing what you know about. Weren't we stupid last night? Admit it. We were both thinking that...“

„What do you think? I still believe it.“

„Come on!“ he scoffed. „The best proof of our mistake is that a human doctor has just cleanly wiped out the darkening.“

She said slowly, „Are you sure of that? Are you really sure it was the doctor?“

That threw him for a loop.

„But...” He was half-unsure, half-teasing, „It seems so to me!“

„We’ll never know,” Florine answered in the same slow, quiet voice.

„But look! Did I give up my project? Did I swear to abandon my work? No, so the invisibles have no reason to thank me!“

„You did nothing of the sort. But me... you have to forgive me, Philippe, because I love you so much, because, you see, all the discoveries in the world and all the glory doesn't matter to me, but regarding your health, your life...”

„My life is not at stake,” he cut in. „Explain to me...”

„Your life is not at stake? That's a question. Suppose... Do me the favor of supposing, just for a minute, that what happened can be attributed to *them*, that *they* wanted it like this... *Them* ...“

„But, Florine...”

„Let me finish. Couldn't it be a *warning*? A *first warning*?”

„Be reasonable. In that case, we would have to admit — I'll say it again — that *they* think my transgression is over.“

„It is, Philippe.“

„How's that?”

„I smashed everything in the laboratory while you were gone.“

Silence. Philippe was biting his lip. „Ah! Ah!” he said at last. „Ah! Ah!”

„Do you forgive me?”

„Good God, my dear,” he said distractedly, „how could I not forgive you!”

He hugged her tightly. But she saw his face turned painful, pale, and tense. „I'm going to go see,” he said.

„Do you want me to go with you?”

He hugged her again. „Don't bother. Besides, it's almost noon. There's time for me to check it out, and then I'll come back.”

He turned around in the doorway and blew her a tender, friendly kiss, and smiled at her most affectionately.

„Thank you,” Florine said.

The two appalled assistants were picking up the wreckage in the middle of what looked like a war zone. He helped them without saying a word, and at noon when they left, he continued — alone, mechanically — to clean up. He was daydreaming while slaving away. In his imagination, the air was peopled by marvelous creatures, gliding and sailing like creatures at the bottom of the sea. The forms were translucent. There were all shapes and sizes. Tiny. Huge, too big for the laboratory to contain them whole. But they passed through, cloudy and aerial, because neither the walls nor any other material object was an obstacle to them. They went through everything like electromagnetic waves, as if their substance were composed of waves. Except, they were only visible in the cube of air in the laboratory which had been scientifically prepared for this very thing.

It was an enchanting dream. And the scientist's eyes sparkled. „And what? Whoever takes no risks...”

He looked at what he was holding in hands: a switch that Florine's hammer had torn the dynamo off. Philippe found the dynamo in the pile. But the damaged piece could not be fitted back on. He worked it out, whispering to himself. „Six months and a hundred thousand francs. This time, however, not a word. Florine will never know.”

Florine climbed the stairs, worried about what was keeping him so long. She found him lying stretched out on the ground, not moving.

The doctor could not bring him back. He attributed the cause of death to a stroke, caused by overwork, and said that the vision troubles of the previous night were a serious symptom that the eye doctor, unfortunately, had underestimated.

That proved absolutely nothing.

The Hitch-Hiker's Guide To French Science Fiction

JEAN-CLAUDE DUNYACH

French SF has a glorious past (remember Jules Verne?) and, hopefully, a bright future. But the present situation is a little more contrasted and difficult to decode. Especially when you try to evaluate it on the same scale than US SF – or Anglo-American SF. The definition of the word SF is not exactly the same on both sides of the Atlantic. It is often confused with Sci-Fi in the US (*Star Trek* juvenile, lite fantasy series or shared universes to name a few commercial examples) while most French authors claim that it is 'literature at its best'. Disney versus 'The Louvre' if you catch my meaning. Of course, both formulations are too narrow to be entirely true but they're not entirely false, either. Let's see why.

1) The Cultural Background

First, one has to understand that France – and most of Europe, in fact – has a distinct cultural background and that SF does not play the same role than in the English-speaking world. French TV, for example, is not really interested in SF. French mini-series are often based on novels from the 18th or 19th century (not as boring as you might think but rather short on special effects and light sabres – and Depardieu is often playing one of the main parts). Famous TV series like *Star Trek*, *Babylon 5*, *Millenium* or *Doctor Who* are almost ignored in France, except by the usual nerd fanbase (I'm one of them).

The X-Files was a huge success although we were one year behind the US, which means that several details from *The X-Files* – *The Movie* were not understandable to most of us at the time.

Neither do we have the equivalent of comics books. No *Batman*, *X-Men* or *Spider-Man*. No shared universes where *Judge Dredd* meets the *Punisher* to fight against the villains. No *Marvel Universe*, even if French Superheroes existed before World War II... No equivalent of *Sandman* – which is bad. But we have tons of SF 'bandes dessinées', with plenty of famous artists from Druillet, Moebius to Caza, Bilal, Bourgeon or Mézières (who worked with Besson and was an inspiration to many US series like *Babylon 5*) and lots of brilliant newcomers. Scenarios are often elaborate and quite complex and they are considered as acceptable cultural objects. But an album of 'bandes dessinées' is often priced over \$20 US. Parents can buy it. Not kids.

Japanese Mangas, however, changed a bit the situation since they were affordable and fun. So, there is a real manga subculture here – and of course the various Marvel/DC films are very popular among millennials. So did the *Star Wars* in my youth. But, if you're a famous French filmmaker who wants to shoot a SF movie (Luc Besson, for example, or Jeunet), you're almost forced to work with Hollywood. It seems that there's no money available for SF projects in the French cinema, even if the situation may change in the near future.

So, what we call SF in France is mainly 'written SF' with a distinct flavour of graphic covers. The cultural gap between French SF books and the visual equivalent coming from the other side of the Atlantic is quite large.

2) A Brief Journey in History

French Science-Fiction was almost killed by the 1st World War and started only its resurrection as a movement in the late fifties. A few Anticipation books were published in the meantime but without any SF label on it – take for example *Monkey*

Planet (aka *Planet of the Apes*) by Pierre Boulle or *The Imprudent Traveller* by René Barjavel.

During the sixties and the beginning of the seventies, several important authors from the USA or Great Britain were published regularly in France. Many different imprints – from deluxe hardcovers to paperbacks – were almost entirely devoted to foreign SF. In parallel, a popular imprint entitled Fleuve Noir Anticipation specialized in short novels – French equivalent of pulps – from local authors. At that time, the public considered that French authors were only pale copies of their Anglo-American competitors. And SF as a whole was labelled as „sub-par literature“.

This situation evolved a little in the mid-seventies when a few French authors – Michel Jeury, Philippe Curval, Jean-Pierre Andrevon, Pierre Pelot – were published by famous imprints like Ailleurs & Demain ('Elsewhere & Tomorrow'). These books were not only excellent in the traditional Anglo-Saxon SF sense, they were different. Inspired by literary experiments like the Nouveau Roman, they could be considered as the French equivalent of the British New Wave.

In the meantime, a younger generation of angry young men was using Science-Fiction as a means to question the French society as it was. They wished to use SF as a political medium. One of the imprints created at that time was called Ici & Maintenant (Here & Now), in answer to the well-established Ailleurs & Demain. It is interesting to note that good authors like Jeury, Andrevon or Curval were published by both imprints.

Unfortunately, even though the messages expressed by this French political SF were interesting, too many books – or short stories – from that period were considered by the public as poorly written. In reaction, a brief but intense neo-formalist movement called Limite emerged in the beginning of the eighties, featuring new authors like Emmanuel Jouanne, Francis Berthelot and Antoine Volodine. They considered Science-Fiction as a medium for literary experimentation and adopted a post-modern attitude toward writing. Several novels and short stories were published independently by the authors but their first common anthology was also the last ...

It has to be noted that French Science-Fiction was not really interested in space even if a few westerns in space were published regularly. The space opera genre was mostly something associated with Anglo-Saxon SF.

At that time – the mid-eighties – many new authors had appeared and French SF boasted more than forty professional writers. A monthly magazine – *Fiction* – published one or more short stories by French authors in every issue, with eight to ten 'new authors' every year. Regular anthologies were open to French stories and a special one-shot anthology entitled *Futurs au Présent* was entirely devoted to new, not-yet-professional, authors. *Futurs au Présent* revealed Serge Brussolo and Jean-Marc Ligny – two major French SF authors – and was followed by *Superfuturs* a few years later. In the meantime, the Editions Fleuve Noir was publishing nearly sixty French books each year. The young authors were slowly replacing their elders.

But, unhappily, the end of the eighties and the beginning of the nineties were characterized by a major editorial crisis.

At that time, *Fiction*, our monthly professional magazine, disappeared, along with the annual anthology *Univers*. Many SF publishers reduced their activities and most of them stopped publishing new French authors. The only major exception was Fleuve Noir Anticipation – but they only put out thirty French SF books a year while making several unsuccessful attempts at publishing *Star Trek* novels or lite fantasy series. Fleuve Noir revealed almost all the new authors of the early nineties like Ayerdhal and Serge Lehman – not to mention the Belgian Alain le Bussy, the Swiss Wildy Petoud and the Canadian Jean-Louis Trudel. The only exception was Pierre Bordage, a brilliant novelist who was discovered by a regional press and climbed his way to fame in a year or so!

The situation remained more or less the same until 1995, when three SF magazines were launched almost simultaneously. The first one was *CyberDreams*, which wanted to be the French equivalent of *Interzone*. It played a major role in revealing the new generation of British authors and in publishing several French stories.

CyberDreams was soon followed by *Bifrost* and *Galaxies* (<http://www.galaxies-sf.com>), which came out the same month and contributed to open some space to new authors. Each magazine (except *CyberDreams* that folded after a handful of issues) published more than 80 issues or so, as of today.

In the meantime, two French short story anthologies edited by famous French authors were released: *Genèses* in 1996, edited by Ayerdhal, with the major French Publisher J'ai lu, and *Escales sur l'Horizon*, edited by Serge Lehman in 1998 (it was followed by *Escales 2000*, which I was in charge of, and *Escales 2001* has been released in 2001. Another collection edited by Serge Lehman *Retour sous l'Horizon* was issued in 2009).

Escales sur l'Horizon was a huge book with 16 short stories and novellas from sixteen French and Canadian authors. It also contained a very important preface by Serge Lehman, which might be considered as the French SF Manifesto of the end of the century. These two collections were well received by the public – both won prizes – and the press referred to us as the new 'French SF wonderboys'. Don't laugh!

In fact, even if the situation was growing better at the time – each major French publisher was creating or revamping its own Science-Fiction/Fantasy/Gothic line and the public seemed to be interested in what the future would look like – the only way for French SF to survive was to cross the borders and to find readers outside Europe.

And then, we went back to space – where it all started.

A good example of authors in that trend is Laurent Genéfort. He is one of our wunderkind (at that time he was thirty with almost as many books behind him) and he is famous for his creation of alien environments and strange planets. He wrote a series of independent novels that take place in the galaxy, but a galaxy that has been once populated by a very ancient race called the Vangk. The Vangk disappeared but left behind a fantastic collection of artefacts – from doors that allows to travel between distant stars to an entire territory, Omale, shaped like a Dyson sphere where humans as well as other creatures have been transferred en masse for some kind

of experiment (there's four books and a handful of short stories taking place in Omale). This is something that you can find also in books from other Europeans – Alastair Reynolds with the *Revelation* space come to mind or Juan Miguel Aguilera.

But, even if many French authors are well aware of the cultural icons and trends of Anglo-American Science Fiction, our books have a distinct flavour. You should try our wine, too ...

3) Typical French Themes: Art, Flesh and Irony.

It is somewhat difficult to point out the specificity of French SF – assuming that it is specific, which I believe. Surrealism was probably a major influence in the eighties, as well as the Nouveau Roman and other literary experiments, but this concerns mainly the way we write our stories, not their subjects. And, here in Europe, Surrealism is so 'air du temps' – part of the background – that it is hard not to be influenced by it.

I think that the two main specific themes in French SF since the end of the seventies to the end of the nineties were artists and museums of the future – one of the latest collections of young French authors at the end of the century also explored that theme – and the relationship with the body – flesh considered as an experimental territory.

Art in the future was a central theme in the eighties and it is making a serious comeback. It is interesting to note that the so-called art defined in the future is either a terrorist way to change society – art as a means to move the masses and to control them – or the ultimate expression of freedom versus totalitarian states. In the collection *Musées, Des Mondes Énigmatiques* (*Museums, Enigmatic Worlds*) most stories describe fugitives from the outside world seeking refuge in a museum. Some of them are trapped and destroyed, some find help from other refugees. Almost no character is interested in art for art's sake. As a possible metaphor of actual French SF, this is quite frightening.

As for the 'experimental territory of the flesh', the theme is probably linked to Surrealism – Dali, for one, is famous for his

statue of the Venus de Milo with drawers. Since Science-Fiction is often considered as a literature of metamorphosis, toying with the idea of artistically rebuilding your body is a natural trend! One must notice that this body-rebuilding is quite often done for artistic reasons and without the use of biotechnologies or scientific gizmos.

I must add that most French SF writers are usually neither scientists – I'm one of the few exceptions – nor particularly interested in science (at least hard science). However, French SF often has a sociological dimension. Many books published since the last twenty years are focused on new ways to build a society or a rebellion against the „old world“ ways of doing things. In that respect, one of the most successful writers of today is Alain Damasio, who only published half a dozen of books in fifteen years but each of them was a major success.

And, just for the fun, I would like to mention a recent French SF anthology (2014) whose subject was „Describe a society in 2074 where luxury plays a major role“. The corresponding eBook in various languages – including English – can be downloaded freely from the major eBook stores (including the one starting with an A).

4) A few personal trajectories

With the exception of the well-identified literary movements mentioned above, whose impact was limited, French SF is composed mainly of individualists whose trajectories are quite different.

Serge Brussolo appeared in the early eighties and started producing four to five novels every year in a very surrealistic style. He became quite popular and diversified to historical novels and thrillers, using various pseudonyms. In his books, you find albinos cats sold with a set of washable colours so you can paint them the way you want, oceans replaced by hundreds of millions of dwarfs that live in the mud, hands up and carry boats in exchange for food. Of course, every now and then, they reproduce and you get a tidal wave of dwarfs

who want to conquer new territories. But the coast guards have machine guns ...

As for the nineties, let's mention:

Ayerdhal – a pseudonym – is most famous for his political space operas with complex intrigues and interesting feminine characters – his death in 2015 was a shock. Serge Lehman, a stylist with a remarkable sense of wonder, started his epic *History of the Future* in the early nineties and has become one of the most important writers of essays on the genre. Pierre Bordage is our sweeping sagas specialist and a best-seller since his first trilogy – he is really a must-read. Richard Canal, who lives in Africa, was trying to merge mainstream and SF in a future dominated by African-like societies (he is a precursor of Afrofuturism and he is making a comeback after nearly fifteen years of silence). Roland C. Wagner, who appeared early in the eighties, find his inspiration in rock'n roll and humorous descriptions of extra-terrestrial societies – he won most of the French SF Prizes in 1999 and again in 2011. His latest huge book – an uchrony settled during an alternate Algerian independence war, in the sixties, is a masterpiece. He died unexpectedly in car accident in 2012 and is deeply regretted by all.

And a new generation of authors merging SF, Fantasy, Steampunk is now firmly installed: Sabrina Calvo – whose books are somewhere between Peter Pan and the lunatic fringe –, Fabrice Colin, Laurent Kloetzer, Xavier Mauméjean, Catherine Dufour (who won in 2006 all the major French SF Prizes for her novel *Le goût de l'immortalité* – *The Taste of Immortality*) and many, many others. And a couple of years ago, a serious novelist, Norbert Merjagnan, just came out of nowhere with a first novel widely acclaimed (*Les Tours de Samarante*). A few years ago, the editions l'Atalante published a very large novel in three sections (*Le Melkine* by Olivier Paquet) that is one of the most remarkable space operas that I've read in years. There's hope for the future, I would say.

An important trend to notice is the massive apparition of female authors. Until the end of the 90's, French SF authors were mostly males, even if Joelle Wintrebert, Sylvie Denis and Sylvie Lainé (the best short-stories writer of the genre in my

opinion) were crucial contributors to the genre. But for more than ten years, the best YA books are equally shared between both genders and many new female authors are taking over the genre. Emilie Querbalec, Estelle Faye, Claire Duvivier or Floriane Soulas, to name a few, were nominated or won many of the recent major French SF literary prizes.

5) Judge us by our covers ...

I mentioned earlier the crucial importance of illustrations and art in our work – surrealism was of course a major trend but one can also insist on the influence of what is called „fantastic hyperrealism“ (Wojtek Siudmak being the central figure of this movement) and of „Bande Dessinée“. Many famous artists did both (Moebius, Caza, Mézière, Druillet, to name a few) and they contributed to give a distinct flavour to our genre. While mainstream books were generally not illustrated, ours were flashy, trendy, and easily recognizable. Since the seventies, the osmosis with graphic illustrators and painters was crucial for our evolution!

6) Newcomers from mainstream: osmosis and mimicry

A final trend: it seems that Science-Fiction is slowly becoming socially acceptable, at least for some members of the mainstream fiction community. During the last five years, a handful of SF-related novels have been released by major publishers and some of them ranked highly on the best-seller list! Today, most of the French editing companies have a line dedicated to science-fiction or are publishing SF books with no particular label.

Two examples come to mind: *L'Anomalie* (*The Anomaly*) by Hervé Le Tellier that won the Prix Goncourt in 2020 and, before that, in 1998, *Les Particules Élémentaires* (*Elementary Particles*) a novel from Michel Houellebecq that was a huge success (Prix Goncourt too) and an equally huge scandal, partly

due to explicit sexual scenes. But most of the journalists who interviewed him were unable to understand that its book was science fiction and he had to explain SF to them. In detail.

I'm glad he wasn't forced to do the same for the sexual scenes ...

(c) 2004 by Jean-Claude Dunyach, revised edition 2022, all rights reserved