



TIGERSHARK[®]

MAGAZINE

ISSUE #1

SUMMER / AUTUMN 2013

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Editorial

Welcome to the premier issue of *Tigershark*, which marks my return to the role of editor after a period of nine years since leaving *Garbaj*. It's been a long time and it sure does feel good to be helming a publication again. Issue one of *Tigershark* has very much been a testbed for our ideas and I must offer my heartfelt thanks to David Leverton for all the effort he has put into laying out this ezine, a task that has proved even harder than we had envisaged. Hopefully, having learnt our lessons, the winter issue will prove far more tractable to produce.

There is still time to submit to the winter issue as we have advanced the deadline to **October 13th 2013**. Although I am primarily looking for stories and poetry with a wintry, Christmas or New Year theme, I will also consider unthemed submissions for the issue. Once again, we will be open to any genre or style. Keep an eye on the website for details of future submission calls and releases.

Best, **DS Davidson**

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SQUUNK

A BUSHY TALE by Neil K. Henderson

It was probably her own fault for encouraging them. Of course, she'd known what was going on as soon as she saw the gnawed-off twig where the fat ball had hung. Bluetits can't gnaw things. But she'd continued to replenish the food supply, and spent every spare moment waiting by the bedroom window so that she could catch the crafty culprit in the act. And when she finally succeeded in spotting it, she'd been spellbound by the way it contrived to keep its balance on the slenderest branch, with the help of that trademark bushy tail. Well, it ran in the family, after all, that particular... enthusiasm. Auntie May used to say that if a baby spends a lot of time gazing at trees from its pram, he or she might turn out to be a *squirrel fancier* in adult life. Not that it was anything to be ashamed of, Auntie would add hastily. It doesn't carry the same stigma now, that it did in her grandfather's time. He had been a notorious squirrel fancier in the distant days of his youth. No-one had suspected anything out of the ordinary at first. It was only after he came of age, and began attending Victorian 'at homes' that his status declared itself. Whenever there was a lull in the conversation, he would suddenly enquire out of the blue:

"Anyone seen any good squirrels lately?"

And the entire parlour would be *scandalised*.

But it's not like that today, Auntie May insisted. Squirrel fancying is generally accepted (if not actually *welcomed*) in most places, and to the persevering enthusiast, can even prove as rewarding as devotional body-piercing. Mind you, Demelza thought as she watched her own squirrel's arboreal aerobatics, there's squirrel fancying and there's squirrel fancying. Cousin Juke didn't get to be called 'Seven Finger Juke' for nothing... But her own big mistake had been leaving the attic window open one night – right next to the branch with the fat ball. At first, it had been a thrill to have the bushy-tailed bandido coming right inside the room – more so when it took to making regular nightly visits. It was when it brought its pals along that the whole thing got out of hand...

Demelza would be lying half-awake in bed, gazing drowsily at the fuzzy question-mark silhouetted on the windowsill, when this pattering of paws would make itself heard, running around the skirting just above the floor – even behind the headboard where she lay – describing a complete circuit of the room. But that was just for starters. It wasn't long before a whole team of squirrels were doing a Wall of Death routine around the walls – the pattering increasing to a continuous drumming, which became a thrumming, and eventually an almost unbroken drone, somewhat louder than the heavy rain that often thundered on the roof.

She could never quite bring herself to start closing the window again at night, however. That in-bred squirrel fancying gene would not permit it. And if the truth be told, she had become thoroughly entranced by the whole proceedings. There must have been half a dozen of the whirling squirrels now – not counting the original 'visitor' which always waited behind on the windowsill, as if to keep a lookout. And they turned up in the daytime, too – so Demelza took to staying in bed. She would lie absorbed by the surrounding spectacle as the pace grew faster and faster, until the squirrels became no more than shapeless blurs flashing past her eyes at a point mid-



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way up the attic wall. Common greys though they were, she could almost see colours where they whizzed by – as if she were in a gigantic spin dryer full of bright clothing. An optical illusion, no doubt, caused by the movement against the flowery background of the wallpaper. It was more noticeable at night, though – especially in the ‘afterflash’ when she’d just switched off the reading lamp. Sometimes she’d switch the lamp off and on, over and over, till the multicoloured spinning and the constant thrumming drone made her dizzy, and she’d lose consciousness.

Then one day she had her first paroxysm of lust. There was nothing about *that* in the *Who Needs A Doctor?* which she always kept beside the bed. It was the provocative shapes the squirrels were making as they spun around the room, nose-to-tail and tail-to-nose. They’d got to the point of no return by this stage, and never left the attic nor ceased in their circuitous race against... what? Time? Destiny? Multiple self-effacement? Whatever was happening, the nebulous shapes the hurtling rodents made in their grey-and-wallpaper flashes were giving Demelza strange and uncontrollable longings... longings involving prehensile appendages and close bodily contact.

It must have been like that with Seven Finger Juke. He had squirrel fancying all sewn up – underneath that ‘dove tail’ raincoat of his. Auntie May seldom talked to Demelza about her unorthodox cousin. After all, he’d not exactly *respectabilised* the pursuit. On the contrary – he had single-handedly invented squirrel punk, or *squunk*, as he called it. He kept his fancy squirrel about him at all times, in a special spherical cage made of unchewable polycarbon slats interwoven into a transparent basket the size and shape of a generous goldfish bowl. This was suspended at groin level from a rope around his waist, the squirrel’s tail being allowed to dangle from a space between the slats. Needless to say, nothing else was worn under the dove tail raincoat (except his Doc Martens). What gave Seven Finger Juke his kicks was whipping open the coat in front of the girls downtown, and letting them stroke the squirrel’s tail...

“We’ll probably never know exactly what sort of pleasure he derives,” was the only comment Auntie May ever made on the subject.

One thing was sure, though. Those punkettes didn’t need much encouragement. In fact, they were the ones encouraging him. In no time, Juke became the darling of the Punk Revival – the Godfather of Squunk. Spiky hair and Huron cuts were out and Davy Crockett hats were in, and it was all down to Seven Finger Juke what the punk girls were doing with the dangly bits.

And it was the same Cousin Juke who eventually came up to the attic when Demelza’s impassioned cries began to drown out the telly. (Auntie May had to have her soap operas, or she could get very bad-tempered.) He thudded on the loft door with a fist no less massive for its missing fingers.

“Demelza! What are you up to, there?”

Demelza let out a sobbing howl.

“I see...” said her cousin. “Squirrel fancying, eh? Well, there’s no show without Punch!” And with a mighty thrust from his shoulder, he burst through the door.

The squirrels instantly stopped spinning, and Demelza turned a cross-eyed – but no less infuriated – glare on her untimely relative. That’s what she hated about this house. She *never* got any privacy to do her own thing. As the last of the rotating rodents beat a nifty retreat onto the tree outside, Juke reached across the bed to close the window, muttering something about “too much of a good thing, anyway” and



“Auntie May can't hear *Glaswegians* with all that moaning and wailing”.

Something inside Demelza snapped. She caught Juke's hand as he withdrew it from the sash, and... oh, what a squeal he let out when she sank her teeth in. They'd have to call him 'Six Finger Juke' now. It was hard to tell if the noises he was making were pleasure or pain, but they were soon interrupted by Auntie May yelling up the attic stairs.

“Will you two turn that racket down! *Prisoner: Barlinnie 'C' Hall* is coming on in a minute!”

After that incident, Demelza knew she had to get herself away from there. There wasn't room for two punk squirrel fanciers in one house. She could see what she had to do. That night, instead of letting the squirrels in through the attic window, she herself climbed out onto the slender branch of the tree beside the house, and disappeared into the night, clad only in fake fur, fishnets and Davy Crockett hat.

* * *

Of course, it was their own fault for encouraging her. True, the signs in the park merely said: PIGEONS AND SQUIRRELS ARE VERMIN. DO NOT FEED. They said nothing about squirrel punk nymphettes in fur coats and fishnets. But the young buck squunks who hung about there after the pubs shut could have exercised a bit of caution if they'd had any self-control. No doubt the novelty of the encounter made it all the more irresistible. Whatever the case, they held out the hand of friendship, and their lives were changed forever.

Almost overnight, Davy Crockett hats were obsolete and, without even knowing it, Six-or-Seven Finger Juke was toppled from his godlike supremacy. Yet his influence on the street culture of the young wasn't as easily cast aside as Demelza's long-tailed headgear (which ended up in the duck pond). His name lived on whenever trendy squunk hot-shots displayed their missing fingers in a tribal salute, with accompanying cry of: “Put up yer Jukes!”

Naturally, everyone claimed to have Genuine Demelza amputations, but with demand far outstripping availability, many simply pruned their own digits with a garden axe and claimed she'd bitten them off in person. Such was the desire for reflected glory from the dentally dextrous diva. They never held up their stumps so you could get a real close look at them, though. The absence of teeth-marks would have been a dead giveaway.

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Planet Prozak #8*



Black Hole

by Robert Ensor

The hungry shark has its sharp teeth,
the iceberg has nine-tenths beneath;
the lion its main advantage strength,
the piece of string its unknown length;
the scorpion her lover eager to sting,
the nightingale loves the joy she brings;
the storm stares with its evil eye,
the new-born baby sings an innocent cry;
the brown rat crawls with black disease,
the adorable pedigree dog has fleas;
the sf spaceship disappears into a black hole,
the tiniest creature has a soul;
the painted whore has a blood-red heart,
the train arrived but did not depart.

FOLLOW ME

by DJ Tyrer

"Poetry is weird stuff. A landscape without maps."
Andrew Darlington — *Thank U Very Much: Scaffold*

Take my hand and follow me
Follow my words through darkness and light
Through a landscape unrecognisable to the eye
Given shape by thought alone
There are no maps to guide you
No signposts pointing the way home
Once you step upon the path, it's sink or swim
If you will pardon the mixed metaphor
If not, you are lost already
The only logic left is of flow and metre
There is no meaning but what you impute
There is no truth but a will o' the wisp
Tempting you further in
In search of something that you cannot grasp
Mere illusion, the ultimate reality
Intertwining as one, yet neither
If you loosen your grip you shall be lost
I am your psychopomp
Do not look back, risk yourself
This is all there is
What once you knew never was
This is all there is
Embrace it
Take my hand and follow me

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THE INEVITABLE DEMISE OF THE KICK START GANG

by JC Hartley

Lens always said flying's for the birds
The goggle adjustment the maniac laugh
The eyepiece affectation masking his regrets

Clockman's five-year diary winds us into the future
To protect the past

The bolt that knocked Big Head
Out of the sky above NY
Took out the tower
He went down singing both parts
Of the Blutbruderschaft Vow
(*Gotterdammerung* Act 1)

No more enemies
So long the super-dead

Shade vomits more blood than the human body can hold
Don't worry he says I'm throwing up from another dimension

Lens goes strictly commercial

Clocks run down in the Ovaltine Palace
Lose their appeal over time
The world best saved for mediocrity
Made too narrow for heroes

Plain folks say we have power to insist
We have no obligation to improve

The Enigma Invasion

by JC Hartley

When they finally arrived,
Crossing Space in ships
Like succulent cathedrals,
We asked them about the other visits,
The flying saucers,
Abductions, lights in the sky,
And little grey men.

Not so different from us,
They could smile when they answered,
So you've had those too.

SHAKESPEARE'S CAT

by Neil K. Henderson

Shakespeare had a copy cat -
it caused poor Will frustration.
Cos every time it miaowed E flat,
it broke his concentration.

He cursed it during *Hamlet*,
and all through Banquo's feast.
But ere *Othello* could be writ,
must feed the green-eyed beast.

Its parlous paw would spill his ink,
its claws would rend the paper.
Then in the corner Kit would slink,
while Shakespeare vented vapour.

One day, in spite of *pitter-pat*,
he tried to write a sonnet...
But Shakespeare's cat would none o' that,
and went to sleep upon it.

Yet Shakespeare was acknowledged Bard,
beyond the dreams of cat or man.
Sir Francis Bacon took it hard —
his tortoise being an also-ran.

A DISFIGURED BUT DIGNIFIED DONKEY

by Robert Ensor

I could sense his benign brain behind the hole
Where an eye once was, & his living eye
Burning like a winter chestnut on red-hot coal.
Working in a circus was his first full-time job,
And when a sadist whispered *Don't cry*, the tears
From the one-eyed clown messed-up his make-up.
And in semi-retirement, on the beach, the donkey
Carried giggling children whose mouths held
Ice-cream & smiles wide as Donegal,
Who loved him & stroked him & laughed
Until they saw his face, & then they cried
All the way from the beach to the coach station.

And now the sad creature stands lonely in a forlorn
Field of hope, courtesy of a charitable organisation.

DEAD BOOK

(For those who don't read)

by Arthur C. Ford, Sr.

Don't let me sit
And rot away
As you walk
Through ages.

I once was pulp
Some spruce, some pine
Now my blood
Is words on pages.

Closed covers
Are confining
Strangulating!
Each veinal sentence.

Ignoring me
And all my kind
Would bring
Global repentance!!

So grasp me, open me!!!
Digest life's cultures,
Make sure!!!!
That I am read,
For if you don't
Do this mankind!!!!
For sure!!!!
We both are dead.

SAVOY OPERA HAIKU

by DJ Tyrer

Pirates of Penzance
HMS Pinafore sails
Two ships all at sea



PROMOTION

by DJ Tyrer

Steve was determined to climb the career ladder, no matter what the cost. He was happy with the unsociable hours – Mr Graves liked to work late – and was willing to take on any task asked of him; his boss had a thing for hookers and would ask Steve to procure one or two a week for him. Almost as often, Mr Graves would ask him to dispose of a body afterwards. It might be a crime, but so was much of what happened in high finance, the sole difference being that murder was quite mundane. If Steve had had a conscience, he would not have been doing this job in the first place. Consciences were for priests and people in dead-end jobs, not for people like him, people who were going somewhere.

Steve was determined that, one day, and not one too far in the future, he would replace Mr Graves and become head of the company. One day, he would have the money and the power that went with it: he would topple national economies with the click of a mouse and, if the urge took him, off a hooker for the thrill of it. It must feel like being God. One day, he would be sat in Mr Graves' chair.

Mr Graves. He was the problem. When he had bragged about his aims to Ted, his co-worker had laughed at him. Ted had been with the firm for years, had languished in the same role for goodness knew how long and, clearly, had not an ounce of motivation in him. Steve was certain that Ted's failure to advance in the company was the reason for his mocking of his dreams. He would show him. He would succeed.

Unfortunately, it seemed that there was a grain of truth behind the mockery: Mr Graves had been running the company for years and showed no signs of succumbing to his advancing years any time soon. His tenacious grip on power down the years and his proverbial ability to 'get blood out of a stone' when it came to collecting debts had earned him the nickname of 'The Vampire' amongst the junior staff; a few even, cautiously, called him 'The Vamp'. Steve had once photoshopped his face onto a stripper's body in an email that had done the rounds, for a laugh.

"You'll never replace him," Ted told him for what must have been the thousandth time. "'The Vampire' will keep going for eternity. Give it twenty years and you'll be standing where I am, telling some hotshot that his hopes are built on a false premise."

"What nonsense! Even if Graves is at the peak of physical fitness, and he doesn't seem it, I wouldn't bet on him remaining active in the firm for another decade. Most likely, he will be forced to relinquish most, if not all, of his duties to his assistant within a year or two, and, if you haven't noticed, that's me."

Ted laughed. "Yup, that's exactly what I said to ol' George when I joined the firm, cocksure and certain of success. Oh, yes, I did it all, just as you did, and was certain he would die or retire pretty soon. Oh, yes. And? Well, as you can see, he's still here. Still alive. *Active*, anyway."

"Nonsense! Just because he *seemed* old, then, to you. Now, he *is* old, and he can't last too much longer."



Ted shook his head, almost sadly. “Oh, you just don’t get it, do you, Steve?”

“Get what? That you’re an idiot? I get that!”

“No. I mean, old Graves; you don’t get him. There’s a reason we called him ‘The Vampire’, and it’s not as a metaphor. It’s all too literal.”

“What on earth are you blathering about?” Steve had an unpleasant vision of a hooker, pale and lifeless. Was that what Ted meant? Steve had thought no-one else knew, but, maybe, Ted had been in his shoes once, procuring and disposing on behalf of the old man.

“Think about it! Skin so pale it seems bleached and feels cold to the touch. Works all night and stays shut up in his office all day. The women. The bodies. Oh, come on! ‘The Vampire’ isn’t his nickname, it’s the bloody truth!”

“Rubbish...” He couldn’t help but think how there were no mirrors in the men’s room and the old man had made a big deal of banning the wearing of crosses in the office. Nah, couldn’t be.

“Graves shouldn’t be his name; it should be his resting place...” Ted finished, walking away, leaving Steve to mull over his unnerving suggestion.

It was nonsense, of course. Vampires were mere superstition. Yet, his thoughts kept returning to the sight of the bloodless bodies of the women he had sacrificed to his boss on the altar of his career. Had ‘The Vampire’ drunk them dry? It seemed madness to entertain such ideas, and yet... The more he considered it, the more and more likely it seemed to be true. And, if it *was* true, it left Steve in a dilemma. Undead meant no longer bound by the constraints of mortality. If Mr Graves was a vampire, the old man would live forever.

Immortality might be the perfect advantage for an entrepreneur, offering a myriad of lifetimes to hone one’s skills and build your business up, a wondrous continuity amidst the chaos of takeovers, mergers and collapses, but it was an intolerable impediment to a young go-getter who hoped to climb the corporate ladder to the top. If the boss would never die or retire, what hope did he have? None. Something needed to be done.

Thus it was that Steve embarked on a new phase in his quest for success. No longer would he be in early or stay working at his desk through lunch. Instead, he spent his time reading books about bloodsuckers and sharpening stakes in preparation for the day on which he would claim his promotion.

Steve was determined to climb the career ladder, no matter what the cost. Not even if success meant hammering a sharpened stake into the chest of his boss. Yup, he would do whatever it took...



REPENTING AT LEISURE

by Aeronwy Dafies

She said that she enjoyed her own company
Which was true to an extent
But even when you are happy alone
Eventually you begin to wonder
Why you bothered with marriage
When your husband is never at home
Not cheating, never unfaithful
He was never good enough a liar
To pull off a sustained deceit
Just a workaholic
Obsessively putting in long hours
Off at conferences
Chasing promotion and bonuses
Saying only that he seeks to support her
Provide a good standard of living
Which is appreciated, honestly, it is
Only sometimes company would be nice
As eventually DVDs and novels fail
To fill the void
Her father was the same
And they say girls marry men
Who are like their fathers
Condemning them to repeat the cycle
Of unattainable love

Say That Again

by DS Davidson

I couldn't believe it,
I couldn't perceive it,
Please say it again
And keep your words plain.
Did I somehow mishear?
I feel a wave of fear.
But, no, I heard it right
And everything seems right:
You told me you love me!
Oh, can this really be?
Apparently, it's true —
And, yes, I love you, too!

Bring Me the Head of Jerry Cornelius

by JC Hartley

Holster the heater
It's slapstick destroys our
Greybeard Masters

TIDY MY SOUL

by Neil K. Henderson

Tidy my soul away,
The world does not deserve me.
Tidy my soul away.

Look at the hallmark on my steel,
My spoon shines just for you.
Accept my spoon and tidy my soul away.

The world turned once too often
On this death-bed of my misery.
Damned my soul, so tidy me away.

I died of a mystery, let them say -
Tidy my soul, oh tidy my soul,
Tidy my soul away.

Love Haiku

by DS Davidson

Love, perfect desire
So often sought, seldom found
Achieve perfection

SAPPHO PREDICTS THE FUTURE

by DJ Tyrer

Sappho stood on the seashore, sighing, seeing
Her gaze cast beyond waves till the end of time
Viewing strange vistas and a cosmic doomsday
Millennia hence

Previously published in
Apocalypse: Poetry from the End of the World,
Atlantean Publishing.

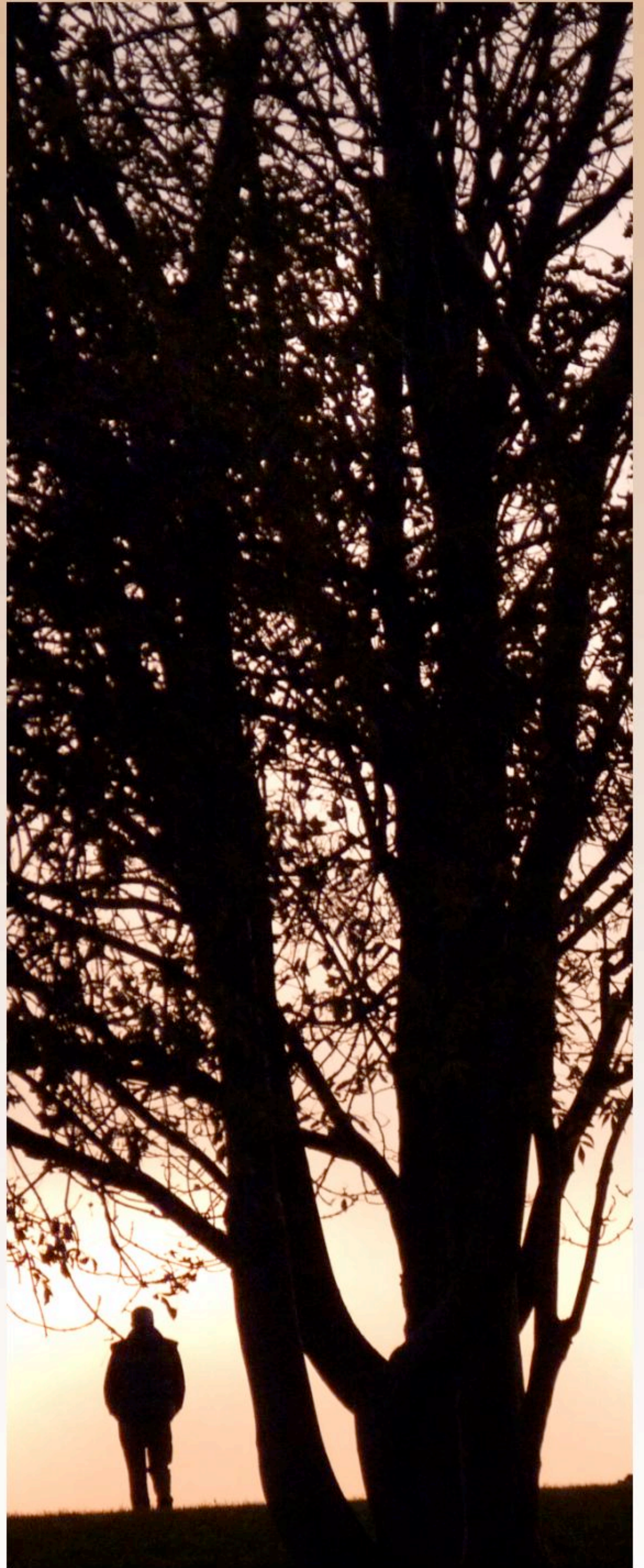


Song of my Father

(for Stephen, by way of explanation)

by Andrew Darlington

never learned much from my father
except 'keep a diary' he said,
the other things I learned
from him were by example
of how not to live my life,
every time the bad stuff creeps
into the back of my head
I think, that's him kicking in
except for the diary,
that's the one good thing
I learned from him,
we who live chaotic lives
he said, or might have said,
at least, that's the gist of it,
those who shamle our way
through disorganised times
on moments of impulse and whim,
we need fixed points to navigate by
never learned much from my father
except 'keep a diary' he said,
mark the dates you must never forget,
names of kids and cousins
so you can appear considerate
by making sincere enquiries
(women love that kind of thing),
phone numbers and post codes,
anniversaries, final demands,
birthdays that need celebrating
if only by prompt, to show you care
and that's about it,
never learned much from my father
but I carry a diary to this day...



THE BLACKPOOL HALLUCINATIONS

by Andrew Darlington

It was Blackpool, wasn't it...? The fun city of the north?
Except it wasn't quite the Blackpool he'd expected...

Blackpool is made of stars. As though the entire sweep of galaxies has been compressed down, squeezed together, and sprawled unevenly in a shapeless blob across this patch of coast. Gordon sees the madness of moons and the glory of stars blazing in its endless tangled maze of lights, buzzing with activity, multiplied and coloured in harsh tints and hues. Enough to drown out all thought in its brilliance...

Derek's gone. Sod him. He's a creep anyway. The prospect of a long weekend's hard-clubbing, and he sods off. Who needs him. So, where to go now? What to do? A shop. 'Vencel's Emporium' at the far end of a ginnel, a narrow walkway between two ancient buildings. A short passage of uneven paving stones. He's about to take the three paces back onto the street... but there's a crack in the day that needs filling. He shrugs. Why not? There's a ragged patch of groundsel around a grating. He doesn't realise, until it's too late and he's already stepped on the weed, crushing it out of shape, that its greenery conceals a spiral of dog-turd, and as he raises his foot, he can see it oozing like rich chocolate around the side-weld of his Cuban-heel side-buckling boot. 'Shit.' Quite appropriately. He kind of side-drags the boot across another closer patch of weed, transferring some of it, and rasps his sole across the paving repeatedly, but persistent traces of it refuse to be dislodged. He switches his attention forward. There's a sagging trestle table to the left the door, with a box of books on it. Faded paperbacks, colours bleached to pale by months of sun. Pages rippled by contrasting days of drizzle. He riffles through them. Then glances at the door. Do you think it's closed? Yes, since around 1958 by the look of it. But no, the door opens into the gloom beyond. There's a faint taint of dog-turd as he steps across the threshold. As his foot contacts a bristly fibre mat just inside it sets off an electric chime that startles him. Obviously an alert to warn staff of intruders. Potential customers. The chiming stops as suddenly as it began. To no answering response.

Gordon is twitching like a finger on the trigger of a gun. Inside is a jumble of images, ghosts dancing in ether. A dry tickling odour of dust and decay. A chill like the almost-intangible brush of cobwebs across the face. His eyes adjust. A hand-crank phonograph with a horn, and a pile of big heavy 78rpm records. He shuffles them without much enthusiasm. David Whitfield, Mario Lanza, Sweet & Low. No rock'n'roll. Nothing of interest. A flight of crooked steps going up. Looking left there are tight bookcases

crammed with books, piles of magazines on the worn carpet between. To the right, cabinets of ornaments, lamps, cutlery, Matchbox model cars, dolls, travel-clocks, shaving brushes, packs of Pin-Up playing cards and board games. Posters and bright silk pashminas decorated with sequins. A gas mask. A tin box of old photographic postcards. A wind-up tin soldier with one missing leg. A stuffed fox in a glass case watching him with beady amber eyes as he passes. Books. Books. Books. James Gunn, *The Joy Makers*. George R Stewart, *Earth Abides*. HG Wells, *The Time Machine*. Yes. Why not?

Sometimes your mind goes to bad places. Sometimes your mind goes to places it shouldn't go. You don't really intend it to go there, but it goes there anyway. It's not your fault. Honest, it's not. And sometimes you think too much. You think when you shouldn't think. You think when you should just do. You over-think when you should just act. So, why not do instead of working out all the possible implications first? It's not always good to think too much. Sometimes you should just act, and not think of the consequences. To hell with consequences. They'll work themselves out anyway.

He looks left and right. No-one. Only the fox. Think too much and you never do. Think too much and you wind up doing nothing. That's not good. You should do something stupid, spontaneously, just for the hell of it. But if you plan to do something stupid, just for the hell of it, can it truly be said to be spontaneous? No, it can't. So do it anyway. Think great thoughts. Do great deeds. He slides *The Time Machine* into his pocket. A shadow flees at the corner of vision. The scratchy scraping sound of old shoe-leather scuffling. No, the danger has brushed by. Hey – get hip, get a grip, you've just decided not to worry about stuff, and here you are, hard at it again. To look back is to die a little. To look forward is to live forever. But the shadow is there again.

A man steps forward, into the half-light. 'Are you interested in buying that book?' This is bizarre. He wears a kilt, with sporran. He has a curled pipe that leaks a trail of white whispers around his wispy white whiskers. He's like a caricature himself, a cartoon-sketch from some old magazine.

Gordon has to suppress an urge to laugh, despite the crawly unease of getting caught out. 'What book do you mean?'

'The one in your pocket.'

'No. It's mine. Had it when I came in.'

'I think not. In fact, I'm certain that's not the case.'

Gordon turns towards the door. But weird-beard is there already, blocking the exit, although he never saw him move. How did he do that? Some kind of alien teleportation system. Ha-ha-ha. But he's one guy. And not young. Gordon can take him. Shove him aside at the very least, get outside, get away, lose himself. He can do that. What can this one old guy do? Really, what can he do? But Gordon finds himself moving forward, as he directs. Deeper into the shop. Further from the exit. What now? What does this weirdo intend doing? Is this some pervert thing, and he'll settle for a wrist-job in exchange for not saying anything? A trade-off, is that what he wants? Dirty old sod.

You're not always responsible for your own thoughts. They go where they go of their own accord. Or your mind just turns over without getting anywhere. In either case, you're not to blame. That's reassuring. Because your thoughts can drift to bad places. Not because you want them to. That's not something that happens intentionally. But it happens. It does. You think too much. Why doesn't it leave you alone? Why doesn't your mind, like other people's minds, let you rest and groove along content without premeditating and rehearsing possibilities that might, but probably won't happen anyway. Why won't it just lie quiet for as long as – say, just sixty seconds? Is that too much to ask? But no, even when it's idling, like a low-rev engine, something takes over with a rush and a whir, even when your body lies still, your mind turns over – tick-tick-tick, and begins moving in this direction, or that direction. And you are no longer responsible where it goes, or where it ends up. All possibility of that quiet contentment between idling and waking has gone.

Through an inner door. Once painted pale blue. All colour long-since leaked away. Gordon stoops to pass through. Beyond is bigger than he'd expected. More spacious. But too dark to see how spacious. Store-room space, maybe? Shapes covered over with off-white sheets, stained and discoloured. Old stock. Old books. Their thick odour clogging up the air. A mustiness spiced by the added taint of the briar pipe fumes he exhales.

'You like books?'

'Sure I like books.'

'You like that book in particular?'

He shrugs. From the moment he'd entered the emporium, reality ceased to have objective meaning. Time and place becoming abstractions without guiding reference-points.

A clock is ticking. There's a high desk against the wall. The man in the kilt sits down in a swivel-leather chair adjacent. 'I am Mr Vencel, this is my emporium' he begins conversationally, 'everything that happens here happens because I will it to happen. Do you read all that silly Science Fiction hocus-pokus?'

'Vencel is not a Scottish name.'

For a moment he seems genuinely perplexed. 'It isn't? I was told it was quite acceptable for this milieu. No matter.' He stands. Grips the lower edge of the nearest covering sheet. Pulls it away. It elongates into a long dirty-white smear, which then collapses in a snow-flurry onto the floor. Gordon watches. Beneath the enveloping cover is a carriage. The kind you ride on a roller-coaster. And why not... this is Blackpool, isn't it, what could be more natural than a Big Dipper car? It makes a, kind of sense, doesn't it?

'Sit here, with me.' So this is where the weird-beard stuff begins, Gordon had sensed it all along. Yet he moves as directed, half curious. The carriage is old. It smells musty, as though beetles have been gnawing through its rotting fibres. The wooden seat gives a little as he places his weight on it. 'Better fasten the safety' says Vencel as he snaps the safety-bar down into place. Glancing ahead there are bat-wing doors that look to be painted on the facing walls. Like a Ghost Train entrance. Gordon shrugs and snaps his bar down too, locking them both into place, sitting side by side. Gordon wriggles a little uncertainly. This

is seriously strange. The car is moving. How can that be so...? Has Vencel triggered some mechanism? The wheels go sssssh. A barely perceptible motion at first, but gathering momentum, slowly towards the bat-wings... and through them, into a devouring tunnel-mouth of what looks to be smooth, faintly-glowing tunnel walls. Then, between the sudden flaring brilliance of the enveloping walls, the car takes a steep dive into darkness. 'Dive' being the exactly appropriate word. Gordon feels himself rise from his seat as the car plunges downwards, only to be slammed down hard as it hits bottom and straightens out. If it wasn't for the restraining bar he'd have been hurled out into whatever strangeness lies beyond. Or wait, no, already it's starting upwards again. Everything is happening so furiously fast, impressions blur and get confused. But will get more confusing yet.

An alien horror alights, perching itself on the front of the carriage, its fluorescing magenta talons gouging deep into the woodwork. It would've seemed octopoid, but for the gauzy dragonfly-wings, its serpent-tail lashing, its triple-jaws agape with serrated teeth and dripping saliva.

'Don't mind the beastie' whispers Vencel soothingly, 'it can't hurt you, not really'.

'Yes, this is one hell of a Ghost Train' manages Gordon warily, none-too-sure.

Before he's able to turn his head to see more, a second winged thingy settles besides the first. This one is a scintillating purple, with scales and snaky Gorgon-tendrils that weave around its beaked face with a life of their own. If possible, this one is more repellant than the first. Even as he's framing the next question, the first monstrosity springs from its perch straight for Gordon's throat.

'Don't flinch' Vencel's voice hisses hurriedly. 'Don't give it the satisfaction.'

He braces for impact, yet it hurtles clear through his body to vanish, blinking into non-existence, and he's left feeling stupid. An illusion. A projection of some kind, he realises that now, but real enough. Too damned real. And what the hell is it doing here anyway? The implications freak him out. He makes ready to stare out the second beastie, but again, some instinct makes him pause. It was gone.

'Yes, OK, I admit it, I nicked the sodding book' said Gordon, 'do what you want, just let me out of this thing.'

'Too late. Much too late for that now' cackles Vencel in an exhalation of briar-pipe fumes. The car plunges precipitously down into a red inferno, a crater of molten magma. Intolerable heat-levels shock over its passengers in scorching waves. Dark nameless things circle around his head.

'What is this?'

'The war.'

'Which war?'

'The 2051 global war, of course. The plague years conflicts that flushed off this phase of history and led to what came next.'



‘I don’t understand.’

‘Understanding is not necessary.’

It seems that, by opening the door to Vencel’s Emporium, he’d unwittingly unleashed the night in all its wildest terrors. The Big Dipper track is now so high he feels they must surely bash their heads against the sky, it uncoils away ahead of them beneath the stars, losing itself in some vast galactic night-country out there. The scariest ride in town. Travelling along the spine of time itself, above its rippling undercurrents. Every now and then vast globes of light pulse up like sunrise beyond the event-horizon, in bursts of effulgence thinning out into wavering jagged lines as they get sluiced away by black clouds swarming like hands racing across the sky. Then fading, leaving only grey cloud bolted down in fantastic knots, awaiting the next light-burst. He can sense an oppressive feeling of heaviness, as if the space that flows between the stars has filtered down and is settling like strange dust on his upturned face.

‘Why are there two moons?’

‘Two moons? What do you mean two moons?’

Gordon points.

‘If you look properly you’d have noticed the second body in the sky is not the Moon, but the planet Mars. At this point in time – far into your future – the terraformed inner worlds were drawn together into a single lozenge of breathable air, enabling skyships to easily navigate between them. It was a convenient arrangement.’ Yes, it’s true. The moon, the real moon, has circles of green skirting its lunar seas and craters like bad eye-shadow. A hint of vegetation. The other world, Mars, is laced with a delicate tracery of lines, irrigation waterways, a canal system also edged with ragged chlorophyll-green. And dark hubs that suggest cities.

‘And people did that?’

‘With a little assistance, yes.’

‘Are we still in Blackpool?’ he scarcely dares ask.

‘The question is not where, but when?’

Gordon resists an urge to punch the amused smirk down the Scotsman’s irritating throat.

‘What you see, here or anywhere, is simply the impact of photons on your retina. You know this stuff from science lessons you did at school, yes? What you sense is merely your mind’s subjective interpretation of electrical impulses flowing through your sensory brain-network. So answer me this, which is real, the mind’s impression, the electrical flow, the triggering of the flow, or whatever may or may not exist outside this system? Reality? It’s only the form of illusion we happen to agree upon. This illusion now, if you so choose.’

‘When are we now?’



‘Millions of years into your future.’

‘Are there still people?’

‘Oh no. Not what you’d recognise as people, no.’

‘What are those like, rippling-shapes drifting in the sky?’

‘Human beings are an arrogant species. They always were. There’s something almost attractive about that. They considered Earth to be their own world. That they were its natural masters. Time proves that to be far from the truth. In human imagination, dinosaurs are seen as a kind of failed biological experiment, yet they were the dominant terrestrial vertebrates for 135-million years. Longer by far than what was to follow. And once humans were gone there were these sky-borne manta-rays who drift on thermals for billions of years as Earth slows and cools. They were the dominant species for a longer period of time than all the rest of life on Earth put together. In any objective evaluation of planetary ownership they must be considered the true Earthlings.’

‘Are they intelligent? Do they think?’

‘Not in any way we can comprehend. It all comes down to definition. To what we call intelligence. To how we define thinking. The same process rarely occurs twice in the evolutionary process in exactly the same way.’

‘Can we communicate with them?’

‘No, we cannot.’

The charred landscape tilts. No, it’s the car that’s tilting. It descends in a long low loop. Until the carriage decelerates towards a set of terminal bumpers.

‘We are here’ says Vencel precisely, snapping the restraint-bar up and away, then standing.

‘Where is ‘here’?’

‘Our destination.’

Gordon stands. His legs have jellified. He takes a single step onto the platform, which is constructed of dark wooden planks. Vencel leads him without hesitation across to a flight of steps leading down. He follows. The girders stand white and bare as whale ribs. At the bottom there is beach. Dark sand. They set off slantingly, he follows Vencel’s footsteps across the beach. Turning back he can no longer see the Roller Coaster. It has gone.

Instead, there are sheer cliffs that must tower for something like a kilometer, vertically into the sky, slicing away half of a giant sun the colour of veins that takes up much of the rest of the sky. The remainder is beach, for as far as he can see. The mounds of shingle seem to hold the contours of human faces. There’s no sea. No tide lapping at the shingle. No gulls circling and calling. Just terminal beach, cliffs, and bloated dying sun, swollen with blood.

‘I don’t like this place. Can’t we go back?’



‘Not much further now.’

The air seems thin. He finds it difficult to breathe. There’s no wind, no movement in what little air there is. They seem to have walked a long way, his feet shishing through gritty sand, leaving the only set of marks in an eternity of smoothness. Then, as they circle around an outcrop of headland, he can see a constellation of lights ahead. Vencel is leading him towards them. As they near he can see details. Rows of lights that extend and taper off at either extreme, twinkling mounds and denser formations of lights aglitter, clustered around the galactic centre. Some are coloured lights, ambers, yellows and blues. There’s a tower of lights at the centre. A wheel of lights to its right. An undulating snake of lights that coils around the two. It’s a place of light in the darkness, and darkness in the light.

‘Blackpool. This is Blackpool.’

‘Of course. What else did you expect to see.’

‘You said we were at the end of time. That there were no people. That there have been no people for billions of years.’

‘Who said people were responsible for this? I don’t recall saying that.’

The sky, beyond the arc of the huge diseased sun, is black, the blackest he’s ever seen it. There are very few stars. And beneath the uncluttered sky, the time-winds blow cold. He can feel its movement in his bones. He’s alone. He’d always felt himself to be a single human planet in the swirling galaxy of the human race. Now he’s alone as he’s never before been alone. A single human in an empty universe. Yes. That’s me. How’s that as a metaphor for isolation?

Vencel leads the way up the worn stone steps, where traces of green weed still linger along each lower lip, and up onto the empty esplanade. The fairy lights strung from lampposts burn with a hard unwavering light. The shops across the way are black. The Golden Mile a forlorn landscape of motionless machinery shrouded in disorder and dereliction. But Blackpool is made of stars. Cut from the surrounding blackness. Enough glow to sluice all thought away. Looking up he can stare at its dying sun without his eyes squinting into hyphens. There’s no glare. Across its huge swollen face he can see blood-coloured mountains swelling to bursting point, into raging infernos, into eruptions of curling tongues flickering up into the coronal halo of writhing flame, each emission causing everything beneath it to shiver into arrangements of carmine reflections and impenetrable shadows. It seems the buildings shift and rearrange themselves.

‘Level with me. This isn’t about that book, is it?’

‘It never was. What you don’t realise is that you are a visiting amoeba here. That’s all. Nothing more. A simpler, but more focused life-form. Here, time itself has grown old. Matter has become enfeebled. Solid things are more tenuous. The very subatomic particles of which they consist move more slowly, limping around their assigned paths where once they raced, and they are further apart. There is more space. More nothingness. Less energy. Time is slowing. Entropy has been leaking energy away for ever. There’s very little left. Even space-time itself is porous – enabling me to reach back across it to pluck you out. As



this old geriatric Earth becomes more whimsical and strange, haunted by eccentric fancies, decaying dreams and ghost-memories of its long lost pasts.'

But it was not empty. Crossing the glistening blood-tinted tramlines, emerging up ramps and broad terraces onto a low garden-piazza, in the sun's sickly cold glow, he can see them. Figures in the crowded shadows like photographic negatives, sitting in a circle of deckchairs. Only they're not human. There are fronds and leaf-structures. Resembling Triffids. Yet when Vencel waves to them, they wave back with snaky vege-tendrils. Climbing a flight of steps, coming down in the other direction there's a string of tripod-things who politely stand aside to let them pass. Each of them is a metalised sphere maybe a metre across with a perspex insert, like a space-helmet, as though they breathe another air. The beaky slate-grey face looking out, if you could call it a face, has scales and snaky Gorgon-tendrils that weave around three circular red-diamond eyes. They stilt on their tripodal jointed legs with an unsteady gait, as though unused to the new gravity. Absurdly, one of them carries a red leather handbag. 'Tourists' says Vencel simply. As he stares, one of them spins its sphere dizzyingly around on its tripod legs, for no apparent reason. There are others he grows to recognise. The translucent Ghostwalkers, flickering insubstantially, as though not fully materialised (perhaps the origin of spectre-myths throughout history?). Some species wear masks. Others have faces that are like masks.

At length they arrive at a Regency curve of Boarding Houses. There are display-cases outside listing prices, showing faded photos of the en-suites available, and the dining rooms. Without hesitation Vencel leads the way through the glassed-in entrance porch into the 'Seaview'. As Gordon's first footfall contacts a bristly fibre mat just inside it sets off an electric chime that startles him, reminding him unpleasantly of his entry into Vencel's Emporium. At reception a girl glances up at them.

'Ah, Chrissie, this is Gordon' says Vencel.

'Get the hell away from me' she yells, and storms off up the worn stairs.

Reality is crumbling away around him. Through the breakfast room with tables laid out with cutlery and cruet sets. Out through French windows to the rear there are extensive greenhouses. A portly man wipes loam from his fingers and comes forward to shake hands. 'Never used to enjoy gardening, until I got here. There's no shortage of good things to eat. We don't need to do this. But look at this potato...' he brandishes it, thrusting it up uncomfortably close into Gordon's face. 'Have you ever seen so flawless a spud? No, you haven't. Tomatoes too, Sprouts. There are no bugs here, you see. No parasites. Check out the soil here, it's pure nutrition. These taste good, better than you ever tasted. Take it from me boy, we won't starve here...'

'I'm not staying.'

'That's what you think is it? That's what I thought too. But hey, you get used to it. We've been here nearly five years now, if I've worked it out correctly. I might have miscalculated a few days, weeks, or even months on either side. But it's got to be something like five years.'

Gordon sits down. Vencel is nowhere to be seen. Emerging from the bowers of greenhouse



growth is a pleasant-looking pregnant woman. She smiles. This is George and Em. Gordon will grow to know them well. And there, lurking back inside the B&B dining room, he catches sight of the girl called Chrissie. She looks a bit old-fashioned. Out of time. But then again, what does out-of-time mean here...?

During the next month he walks as far as he can to one end of this phantom 'Blackpool', until it dribbles away into a nothingness beyond its rim. Then he walks all the way in the other direction, to find an identical result at its other extreme. And here, on the margins, it is more insubstantial. Push against the wall. The wall collapses. He looks inland, way out past the edge of town. A long bleak plain where a faint breeze carries the suggestion of tomb-dust, cobwebs and old stones. Across the vast ancientness of the world. At the horizon, there seems to be a low range of black hills. But the more he stares, the more he imagines there are crawls of moving lights in among the folds of gradient. Unless it's the retinal dance of afterimages? Could there be streams of running water, and he's catching the light as it surges and ripples down eddies and cataracts? Water means life, even of a lowly devolved form. After all, some deep-dark fish in his own era had developed their own luminous lights. Or is it the lights of moving vehicles? Evidence of some kind of surviving technology?

He sits in an esplanade wind-shelter with Chrissie. They've spent the day ranging through clapped-out amusement arcades. She says 'Back home, I felt stifled. It was all so... safe. I wanted more. I wanted to travel, to do something different, something exciting. I applied for a job advertised in the classifieds. A newspaper dated July 1934. I was interviewed by Vencel. After the interview we got into the lift. I wondered why it was taking too long. When we stepped out of the lift, I found I'd wound up here. Now I wonder what my parents are thinking. What they imagine happened to me. Are they wondering if I've eloped with a mysterious suitor. Or if I was abducted by White Slavers, and I'm now weeping in the decadence of some Eastern harem. If I was murdered and my body lies undiscovered in a shallow grave in the wood. Do the Police have a file on me, and a missing-persons mug-shot thumb-tacked onto the incident-board? At least I have that notoriety. I am the girl who vanished, never to be found.'

'At least you missed the war.'

'What war? With Russia?'

'No, Germany.'

'My father said there would be no war with Germany. That western Europe needs a strong Germany as a bulwark against Bolshevism.'

'Daddy was wrong...'

Her face is as pale as a stone.

'I can be your mysterious suitor.'

'If you were the only boy in the world, you mean?' And her laughter is delightful. In the long silence that follows it's as though he can hear the sea drumming thousands of miles



away, and billions of years ago.

George & Em had arrived from September 1954. A cosy easy-going couple. He enjoys doing little maintenance jobs, repairs. He changes dead lightbulbs, puts up shelving units and tends to the greenhouse plants. Although it's not really necessary. The house is self-renewing. She is always in an apron. Baking pies and cakes that fill the B&B with delicious aromas. Although the pantry is always full, no matter how much they eat. Someone, or something, is replenishing the goods as soon as they're eaten. At first the pantry food seems tasteless, but he gradually grows to enjoy meal-times. As things fall into a dull routine. If they stay inside, with the curtains drawn, a kind of normality settles. Only fractured by going outside, looking upwards, and seeing the alien sky. Or by the 'openings'. The first time the house 'opens' was scary. It was as though a minor quake was occurring. The house split down the centre, the two halves opening outwards like a doll's house, revealing the interior to prying alien eyes. With no hiding place. Every now and then there are formations of luminous craft that cut trails between the stars, hovering above them emitting humming vibrations. Or translucent spheres that settle, shimmering, observing them with curious interest. 'Tourists', leaking through weakening portals in space-time from other dimensions, other galaxies, and they expect full access to the exhibits. At first Gordon watches them back. Signing, drawing geometrical patterns across the street to attract their attention. To make contact. But there's no response. Then he curses and rages at them. Pulls his pants down and waves his cock at them. Until finally he ignores them. Even during 'openings'.

What's Number One on the charts? What's been happened on *Coronation Street*? Who's Prime Minister? Have they dropped the bomb? Is that why we can't go back – because there's nothing left to go back to, only a radioactive post-apocalypse wilderness? Perhaps that's what Vencel's done, snatched us from the jaws of thermo-atomic annihilation, in order to renew the race here, at this end-of-the-world world? Or is that just a SF story he'd once read? The tourists – visitors, aliens, are unfailingly polite. Even when he hurls stones or bricks at them. The stones never reach their mark anyway. Their missiles always blink into non-existence before they hit. Yet the first time one of them responds he's stunned and terrified. It's a kind of gloopy-mauve insectoid thing, but for the wings, its scorpion-tail lashing, its triple-jaws agape and dripping saliva from an almost-face the colour of brain-matter. Gordon hurls a projectile. And it reacts. It brandishes a silver device and points it at him. But it's only a camera, or some-such thing. He's an amusing novelty, that's all. How to fight back? Gasoline won't burn, no matter how often he tries to ignite it. But there's paper, and tinder-dry wood. He spends all day mounding it into a bonfire inside an empty arcade, and sets it ablaze. The fire quickly spreads from building to building. He climbs the tower to the ballroom level and watches the entire southern arc of buildings burning, lighting up the sky brighter than the sun. The following morning it was all exactly as it had been. No sign of fire or smouldering fire damage. As though someone has hit the default setting.

He wanted to hit something. There was nothing to hit.

'Have you never stood up to Vencel?'

'We don't want to anger him, we don't know what he'll do.'



‘It’s about time someone did. Will you back me up?’

‘I don’t know. We don’t want trouble.’

He prospects around the arcades. Smashes one of the machines to pieces. Picks up the one-armed-bandit lever, the one that triggers the cascade of wins. He weighs it, flexing it. Yes, this will make a useful weapon. He returned it to the Seaview and waits. When Vencel eventually turns up he retrieves the weapon and faces him in the reception hall.

‘Vencel, we’ve come to a collective decision, we want out of this place. You can’t keep us here against our wills.’

‘You have all arrived at this momentous ultimatum?’

‘We have. It’s imprisonment. It’s cruel and unusual. You can’t kidnap people. You can’t abduct us and keep us here.’

‘What if I refuse?’

He grips the club firmly, so tight he feels sure his fingers must indent it. ‘You will. You’d best do it. Now’, twitching like a finger on the trigger of a gun.

Vencel laughs low, exhaling briar-pipe fumes. Gordon raises the weapon, half in threat. So do it anyway. To hell with consequences. It scythes down hard, with all the strength he can muster. Smashes Vencel’s forehead, and goes through it. Through head, through right shoulder and chest, and out the side of his body. Meeting no resistance. Making no contact. Vencel flickers in a startle of shimmering electric-blue. His expression never changes, but he blinks on-&-off like a faulty TV-image. Then clicks off. He’s vanished. A small black bullet tumbles to the carpet. Nothing more. Leaving only the lingering taint of pipe-smoke. Gordon stands for a moment, glancing left and right, expecting retribution. There’s no blood on his club. He crouches down to fist the shiny black bullet. A pellet. A polished stone, vaguely warm. This is all that’s left of his adversary. He was a kind of projection. Either an autonomous artificial intelligence. Or a puppet controlled by something else, somewhere else. He feels odd. Doesn’t quite know what to do, or how to react. So he sits down in the leather armchair and waits for something to happen. Nothing does. Two days later Vencel returns, as though nothing has happened. The incident is never mentioned. The stone disappeared.

‘I’m pregnant’ said Chrissie.

‘How do you know?’ said Gordon.

‘How the hell do you think I know.’

Em gave birth to a girl. Chrissie to a boy. They were named Naomi and Seth. As they grow, Gordon reads passages from the stolen paperback of *The Time Machine* to them. It is the only book they have. They ask Vencel for more, but maybe there’s some reason why he can never bring them. There’s a TV set in the lounge, screening nothing but surging patterns of static. Same with the transistor radio. By then there’s Selmer and Marianne too,

a brother and a sister for Naomi and Seth. Gordon finds himself making up stories for them, pieced together from bits he remembers. The Troll who lives under the bridge. The hidden wonderland that lies beyond the back of the wardrobe.

To look back is to die a little. To look forward is to live forever. But here there's no yesterday, and no tomorrow. Only perpetual sameness. The sun never moves from the sky, as though the world has ceased revolving (but if so, there'd be no gravity and no air, would there?). There's no night, but it's never really day either, just endless twilight. Life is one long today. They regulate time by the Swiss clock on the dining room wall, regulated by its swinging pendulum. But Gordon wonders if time is looped, and they're actually reliving the same day over and over. Gordon and George spend time in the Seaview bar. Speaking only little. 'I done my National Service at Catterick. When I come out we was gonna get wed. I had a motorcycle. A Bantam. Saturday afternoons I'd strip it down and service it. Me Mam would play holy hell if I dripped oil. I was courting Em. So I'd scrub the oil off my hands, but it was always there under my nails. We went to the Mecca ballroom Sat'day nights. Then, Monday morning, we went to the Estate Agent. It was Vencel. He said he'd drive us to this property. He drove us out of town, and just kept driving. I couldn't properly worry out where we was bound. It don't seem like Lancashire any more. We wound up here. Been here ever since.'

No matter how much they drink they never get drunk. The booze here has no kick. Gordon looks across at him. George is greying. Was he grey before? How long have they been here? He'd thought him dull, solid, reliable yes, but lacking imagination. Yet increasingly, as the years extend, they spend time together in pleasing companionship. Words few, and far between. Usually about the kids. About how Selmer shows an interest in, and a talent for growing plants, but how the others are becoming feral. They'd never known the twentieth-century. Never knew anything but this phantom Blackpool. They were at home here, and run wild.

As Seth turned eighteen, or thereabouts, he and Em's third child, Kenny devise a scheme. They'd watched Gordon return over and over to the viewpoint from which he could gaze out as far as the range of low hills on the horizon. Never quite able to puzzle out the nature of the lights, if they are lights. So Seth & Kenny sketch out an expedition across the dark plain to find out, once and for all. Em is horrified. But they are eager for adventure and new discovery. Think great thoughts. Do great deeds. Marianne is pregnant by Seth. She is upset. And for the first time, Gordon is scared too. Not for himself. But for them. The young Seth, a man with his own, younger face. The same brash nervy self-assurance he'd once had, so many billions of years ago. They prepare packs of provisions, containers of water. The tribe gather to see them off. Watch their figures receding across the Wilderland from distinguishable figures to vague inky smudges. Distance is deceptive. They are gone for three long tense weeks, returning in emaciated condition, their skins red raw with radiation burns, lesions and pus-erupting sores. They fall into fevered delirium, coughing black phlegm through the weeks of their long recuperation. It is feared they'll die, yet, against the odds, they rally. Their scars will be there for life, and they'd found nothing. The hills are dead. Some kind of fossilised architectural ribs, non-human and impossibly old, half-buried in black silt. They catch and spark the light of stars. Beyond the hills are glittering salt-wastes that go on forever. But throughout the ordeal, Chrissie is strong, a calming assurance, ministering to their needs. Gordon had learned to respect and rely on



her strengths. During his long periods of lethargy she is always there, to help him through.

‘What’s all this really been about?’ he asks Vencel.

‘Tourism. We can’t have these tableaux without representative populations.’

‘Tableaux. You mean there are others.’

‘Oh yes. But they’re not accessible for you. They’re... removed, at a tangent to you.’

The ticking of the Swiss clock seems unnaturally loud.

‘What happens when the sun explodes?’

‘The sun is good for a few more million years yet. And anyway, we’re not entirely threatened by it. We’ll still be here even when the sun is not.’

The tribe is proliferating. Now there are grandchildren. It’s difficult to keep track of all their names. He’s amused to hear their parents telling them his tales. Trolls. Narnia. They run wild across the esplanade and terraces, using their own coded language, alternately bored and tolerant of the oldsters. George’s death hits Gordon hard. Vencel takes the body. Gordon mopes for days, stricken by a sense of loss. Chrissie is supportive. He finds himself relying on her more. How could he have endured all of this without her? He is sleeping more. He is aging. The things in his head start hurting his mind. Em was gone, soon after George. Had they ever really been here? Or had he imagined them? Was he hallucinating it all? The kids either ignore him, or treat him with exaggerated respect, as though he’s a venerable relic of some other era. Sometimes your mind goes to bad places. Sometimes your mind goes to places it shouldn’t go. He no longer recognises the face he sees in the mirror. Who is this creepy old guy looking back at me? He sits in the familiar leather armchair in the lounge and wonders what’s gone wrong with his life. Where was Chrissie? Shouldn’t she be here? There had been someone called Chrissie, hadn’t there? They’d been close. When they’d first met she’d told him ‘get the hell away from me’, and stormed off up the worn stairs. She’d done that because she knew what his arrival represented. But he’d come to love her.

‘Grandma?’ says the youth with his own younger face, ‘she passed away last year, surely you know that? You’re foolin’ me.’

‘Yes, yes, I’m fooling you.’

Vencel’s visits become the only reassuring continuity. An old nitty-whiskered weird-beard. But he’d always been a nitty-whiskered old weird-beard. He, alone, had never changed. Only this would be the last day, he decided, the very last day.

‘Do I get to go back now?’ Gordon asks him.

‘You want to go back? We hadn’t really considered that.’

‘Of course I bleeding want to go back. I’ve done what you wanted. I’ve served my purpose.’

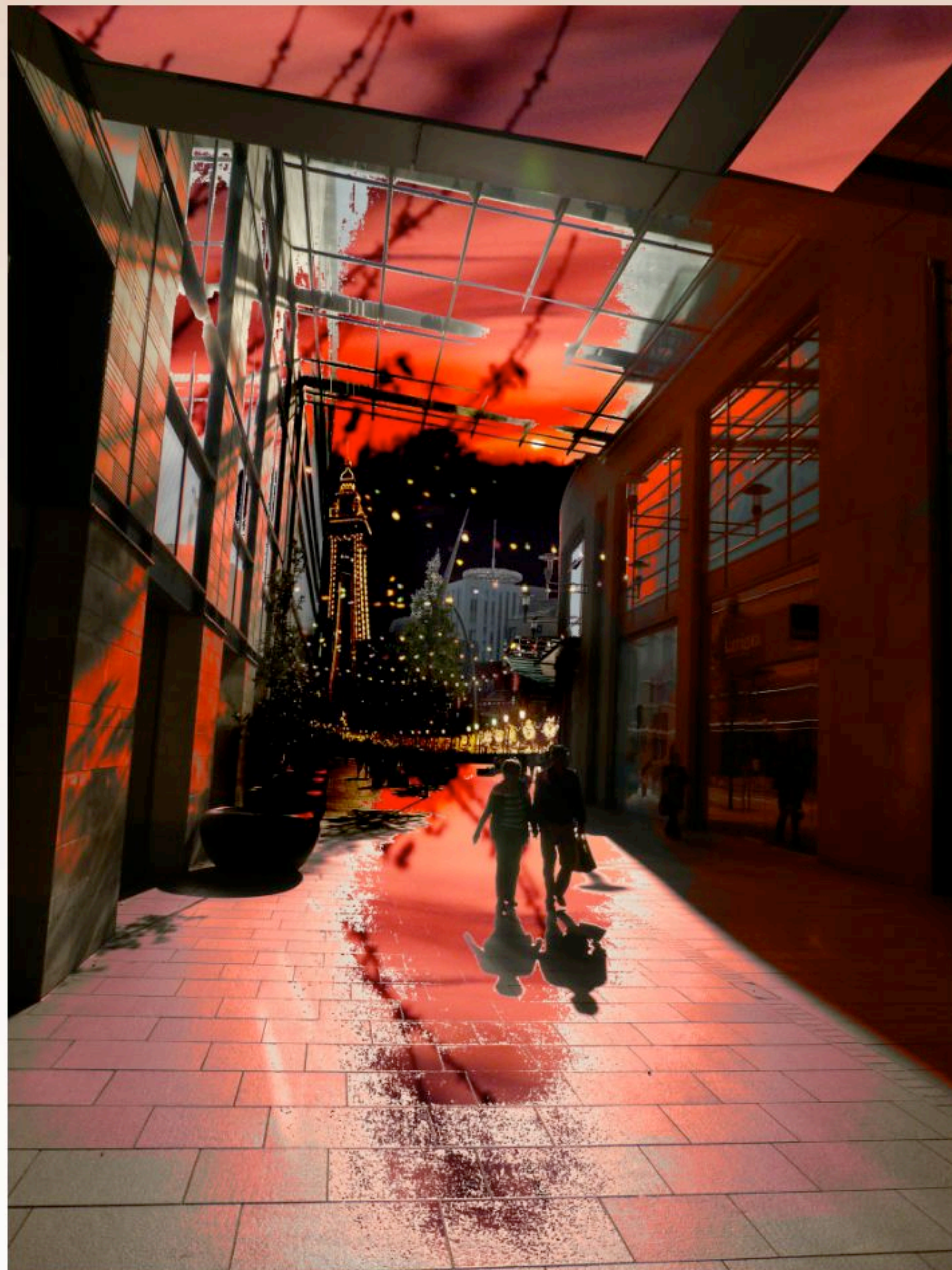
You've got your representative population. I'm not fixin' to die here, am I?'

'Difficult. I don't know.' He appears to be preoccupied. A moment that spans eternity. 'We'd need some fixed DNA connection, to act like gravity, a link to pull you from here to there...'

Gordon rummages through the clutter at the bottom of the wardrobe. The wardrobe that George had dismantled, recrafted and remodelled. His spine aches as he bends low. Yes, they're still there, his Cuban-heel side-buckling boots. Catching the faint aroma of the dog-shit still ground into their tread.

Then, in great globs of light, the sky begins to melt. Vencel's Emporium is at the far end of a ginnel, a narrow walkway between two ancient buildings. A short passage of uneven paving stones. There's a crack in the air that shivers suggestively. There's a ragged patch of groundsel around a grating, its greenery crushed out of shape, to reveal an oozing spiral of dog-turd. Gordon explodes back, directly above it. He stays crouched. Can't believe he's here. Opens his eyes warily. Glances around. The ginnel is a dead-end. Nothing but walls of worn brickwork. He stands up. Brushes at his jacket. The down-stroke detects a book in his pocket. HG Wells, *The Time Machine*. Where did that come from? He shrugs.

And takes the three paces back onto the street...



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