Stories Short and Strange

Volume 1

Bill Drennan

Argotist Ebooks

Cover image by Peter Barker

Copyright © Bill Drennan 2010
All rights reserved
Argotist Ebooks

All the stories included in Volume 1 have appeared elsewhere; and they have all, without exception, been adapted and mutated in one way or another. *On Infinite Heaven* is lifted from the third section of *Nanopaths*, published in *Otoliths, Issue 9*. *The Blob's Escape* is an excerpt from *Escape from Dead City*, which appeared in *Otoliths 10* – and goes back to the early-90s. *Bacteria Man* first appeared in *Otoliths 12*. *Great Insect Invasion* is from *X-Sect*, published in *Otoliths 17* and a chapter from a future book. *Meltdown* was first published by (my own) Prosthetic Books in 2006 as a flash-animated PDF (a digital chapbook); this story also goes back to the mid-90s. Everything else is from my blog, *Hypoetics!* The hyperlinks on the impulsive and mostly unpolished blog entries have been removed. The text has been revised and refreshed.

Volume 2 will follow later this year.

Thanks to Jeffrey Side for publishing these strange fictions, and thanks also to Peter Barker for the wonderful artwork.

Stories Short and Strange

Contents:

Zombie Trial	7
The Blob Goes To Sea	10
Great Insect Invasion	11
I-Suck Robot	13
Bacteria Man	14
Dear Earth	17
On Infinite Heaven	18
Giants Vs Pollinators	19
Meltdown	21
The Blob's Escape	23

Dr Zee is suffering under the suffocating interrogative heat of the Zombie Trial, and the ongoing bias against Zombies of all generations is probably nowhere better illustrated than here. Dr Zee sits down and wishes he had a drink to calm his nerves. He feels awkward and out of place, as he always does in crowded arenas. He has an honorary doctorate in Post-Humanism, awarded by the Transglobal Institute for his outstanding work in aid of Zombiekind. But this has merely been encouraged as a kind of lip service: the cold pretence of caring for the long-suffering creatures creates the illusion that Zombies actually have the right to fight for their rights.

Because he is a First Life Zombie, Dr Zee needs to fix a telepathy chip behind his ear. This helps him to translate the legal jargon and stay tuned to the proceedings. The chip does not provide a perfect translation: a Zombie will get the gist of what has been said, but the exchange will be lacking in linguistic precision. It's only a Zombie, after all. Nevertheless, it is a useful device, since it permits telepathic communications between the older models, or First-Life Zombies. Without this device, Dr Zee would just drift into a kind of narcotic haze, as he is prone to do, dreaming and imagining his way through the mist of human commerce. Zombies were never made to be smart. That is what they say. Zombies don't have an imagination. Zombies can never possess a sharpness of intellect. Zombies need to be watched over, because they lack the commonsense faculty of superior humans. Zombies are trash. Zombies don't care about others. Zombies eat human flesh. It's Zombies this and Zombies that, and most of it is nonsense and lies to keep the monsters in place. Even First-Lifers like Dr Zee, who manages to find something useful in his reanimated brain, are looked upon with something that exceeds mere indifference. And Zombies, despised for manifesting its workings, appear to be the only ones with anything resembling an imagination. In addition to Dr Zee, there is a total of one First-Lifer and two younger Second-Lifers sitting quietly in the audience. The court officials are all human, naturally.

Although the legal jargon exchanged in court is incomprehensible, the outcome is more or less predictable: accusations leveled at 'defectives' have hit absurd depths and the Star Chamber has actually condemned all 'organ defectives' to a Third Life! This is, in part, because bureaucracy is held in far higher esteem than reanimated, post-biological life forms. But bureaucracy is not entirely to blame. The whole charade has been set in motion by the implementation of an untested fingerprint replacement procedure which has brought about incidents of club hand in Second Lifers. The fingerprint replacement company has been let off the hook. It is common knowledge that the judge, Lord Countsbury, has shares in the company responsible. It is also common knowledge that everyone and everything of alleged importance has been bought up by such corporations. Club-handed Zombies are no use to anyone. It is decided. As corporate property, they are to be made useful again, or made again useful, and that is that!

The ruling is that infected Zombies are to be deemed 'unfit for duty', their club hands stamped and numbered like hunks of butcher meat, and then they are to be frozen, repaired and reanimated into a Third Life. "It is better than the death sentence," was what Lord Countsbury was hinting at, in his habitually threatening and contemptuous kind of way, looking down his nose as if scared of it. When Zombies 'awake' to the Third Life, a death tax is imposed and they are forced to go to work on the 'blushing' dwarf planet, Pluto, to pay for this tax. Although they are accustomed to slumbering in the cryonics underworld at extreme zero temperatures, conditions are exceedingly harsh for them on Pluto. And what do they do there? They clean up after the mining

robots. They are no better than garbage collectors, groping though heaps of greedy rubbish and clambering over rubble. You'd think they (the humans) would at least have the commonsense and decency to programme the bots to clean up after themselves. "It's just too labour-intensive. It takes up too much battery-life." That's what they're saying. "When you sell out," the doctor thinks, "There's nothing left to say … even some of my own kind have sold out for a more comfortable existence …"

Dr Zee smells a rat. (It is said that in the cities you are never too far from one.) He suspects that the fingerprint manufacturers have a hand in this. Why did they have to change fingerprints on Second Lifers just because the biometric system had been upgraded? Apparently it the most cost-effective method. And 'mistakenly' grafting infected human fingerprints too! "Exploited even beyond the grave," he thinks. "Using the Undead to generate profits from garbage is not on …" But now it is his turn to defend the Second- and Third-Lifers and he is under far more pressure than the humans to bring clarity and coherence to the hearing. Zombies are renowned for their directness and honesty. Dr Zee must be honest and diplomatic at the same time. It is the Law that Zombies speak last, although they certainly do not have the last word. So he clears the nervousness from his throat and begins:

"We are now at a point where one organ is interchangeable with any other. So we must be careful not to allow a situation to develop where every organ is against every other organ. Neither do we want to see an increase in rejection or any other loss of sovereignty during transplant procedures. You must remember that we Zombies do not necessarily have that freedom from the body attributed to us by modern bigotry. So we must somehow limit the out-of-body experiences of the organs. But more importantly: The practice of replacing diseased Zombie organs with the diseased organs of the living is one that is abhorrent to the reanimated community. The Star Chamber therefore ought to be more tactful with our populations. Remember that skin is an organ too and that live human fingerprints should never have been used on Second Lifers. My colleagues at the Institute of the Undead are warning of reprisals among Transglobal Unions if such unnecessary measures continue. It is regarded by our communities as nothing short of post-biological arrogance to adapt data-mining software for the sole purpose of tracking already exploited Zombies everywhere, especially on Pluto. It is also understood that many Second-Lifers intend to refuse any proposed amendments to their physical being. And as you are probably aware, my Lord, the club hand can cross-infect humans quite easily."

Dr Zee is exhausted. He is coldly thanked for his contribution and then excused by a wall of silence. It doesn't matter what he says, it has made no difference, and everybody knows this. The pre-judgemental human minds are already made up. He can feel the courtroom looking him up and down in snobbery, as if an invisible Law has been conjured into existence, one that he is simultaneously forced to comply with, but also barred from. The telepathy implant gives him access to the gist of their heavy jargon, but also, unknown to them, to some of their viler underlying thoughts: cold reptile feelings, human paranoid-schizophrenic-like incursions into the doctor's headspace. As if he needs reminding, the doctor listens in on the institutional courtroom bigotry: "Only Zombies should touch one another," echoes through his mind. And there are more nauseating opinions too: "Yuck! Whoever heard such nonsense!", "Transhuman is subhuman!", "Rotten meat recycled!" and "Send them packing to a leper colony and let them cannibalize each other's corrupt flesh!" "Ah! The bastards don't understand honesty! They harbour silly opinions," he thinks, "And this composes (or decomposes) their vile world around them. But it is only conditioning," he manages to persuades himself: "So I mustn't take it personally – as they

themselves tend to do." He does not take it *too* personally. He just wants to take himself and his anger out of there …

Now, on the subject of corrupt flesh: It is a well known fact that Zombies do not have sex. Nor is this a problem for them. Male Zombies quite simply cannot get it up. And females are just not interested. And supposing they did find a way to reproduce? Dr Zee is certain that it would not be permitted under any circumstances – except in the experiment laboratory of a cryo plant. But now we must return to the court proceedings to engage in an important and unexpected development.

The chaos begins with a loud cry of: "Pheromone!!!" The pheromone bomb is one of the Zombies' favourite weapons. It can get them out of all sorts of difficult situations. It is fast-acting and extremely potent. By the time a human recognizes that one has gone off, it is already too late. The other three Zombies in the audience stand up and quietly leave with big grins attached to their grey faces. Dr Zee says urbanely, a polite smile flashing his false teeth, "My Lord, I'd really love to join you, but I'm afraid I have a rather urgent appointment." His teeth nearly fall out. And with that he leaves them to their proceedings before they start behaving like common Yahoos: throwing shit and semen, howling, snapping at each other like dogs on a terrible heat. "It's a cold, loveless world," thinks Dr Zee as he leaves the courtroom and heads for his favourite bar, "That needs loved up a little …"

Bloom, another First-Lifer, is already drunk at the bar. Zombies get intoxicated very quickly, which is just another reason why humans look down on them as useless bums. Bloom is one of the Zombies who just evacuated the courtroom. Dr Zee usually drinks alone. Bloom picks up Dr Zee's signals as he walks down the street, listening in on his Zombie thoughts with the telepathy chip. The doctor stands next to him at the bar. He says to the doctor with something of a telepathic slur: "Maybe in a heartless world such as this, where Love is becoming more impossible by the minute, squeezed out of life like human turd, by hatred and schism, maybe you should join us … No doubt detractors of the Pheromone approach will dig their heels into obsolete isms rather than dig our good and sincere Love Zombie intentions. But all the good stuff that only mad humans *don't* want – harmony, peace, love, unity – all that good stuff doesn't fall from above, especially not from the ivory towers of hubristic insanity … The very same that has sponsored every revolt worthy of mention to this day ..." And he coughs the hollow dry cough of a Zombie, before continuing: "Maybe Love will be the final Revolt … Because as far as my drunken old Zombie eyeballs can discern, there is nothing else that will do the job. And neither you nor I nor Third-Lifers can eat human flesh, as you very well know … Nor are we designed to make aggressive assaults … So what is left, huh?" And he opens a fist to show Dr Zee a small spherical object about the size of a stink bomb. "This is Love crushed," he says, clenching his fist back around it and slipping it back into his jacket pocket: "Why don't you join us?" Dr Zee listens attentively with a deep frown, finishes his drink and is just about to make his departure when he shares a thought with Bloom: "I'm just an old-fashioned Inner Light Zombie, a Fractal Pneumatic who does what he can. I never was comfortable with groups. I just do what I can …" And he gets off.

The next morning, Dr Zee wakes up to the thud of heavy police boots. Along with the other three Zombies who attended court the afternoon before, he is arrested on 'love terrorism' charges.

The Blob has been zapped into some kind of loose, amorphous existence. It happened by accident when a mini-nuke was sent thousands of feet under the sea to repair a damaged pipe that was leaking state secrets. It's not clear where this pipe begins or where it ends. And the mini-nuke didn't actually block the gush of information either. It turns out that the breach in the pipeline is a reality-merging portal. And it's from this portal that the blob emerges. Originally a bulk of top secret information, it is transformed from mere intelligence into an intelligent life form on impact with the nuke. This is known in the trade as 'information morphing'.

Now by some coincidence, skidding and scudding on the sea above the rupture, a Japanese vessel carries Captain Ahab and Zatoichi (the blind swordsman and masseur), who are quick to spot the Blob whilst hunting for sea monsters. The Blob thrashes around on the surface of the sea, like Proteus, trying to find a comfortable floating position and shape. On Ahab's and Zatoichi's vessel, all beards are banned and the faces of our antagonists are smoother than Moby Dick's hump – all the more so because they are so completely lacking in the remnants of viciously aimed projectiles. The bald illumination of a clean-shaven face, together with the lack of rough and ticklish bristles, are a necessary and ritual part of the monster-hunting process – it being a superstitious custom to show a creature of the deep an honestly unconcealed face before taking its life. It is not, after all, a game of poker. Zatoichi's swordsmanship and Ahab's bad temper together generate enough power to smash atoms. And together they have overcome the fear of antimatter. But the Blob is too slippery for them, and even has the good sense not to look them in the dangerously razor-clean faces. So they end up chasing it for several weeks until they reach the freezing perimeter of the Antarctic, where our poor Blob becomes suspended in ice. They find the creature and hoist it aboard like an irregular block of blubber.

Now the powers of our two antiheroes combined is, as I suggested, more than enough to defrost the cryogenised Blob, and a thorough defrosting would have ensued had Zatoichi not stepped forward to prevent it. Zatoichi is a gentle soul and decides to massage grumpy old Ahab into a laid-back state so that he (the masseur) can have his way, which is to proceed in all matters without resorting to the use of dangerous weapons – if at all possible. It takes Zatoichi a whole day to massage Ahab's knotted musculature, and about four weeks to give a full massage to the Blob, by which time the creature is warm and fluid again. Good Zatoichi whispers to the Blob as it slowly awakens from its cryogenic nap. Both grateful and relieved, the Blob goes rolling and plopping back into the sea. It has nothing to say, no secrets to spill. It returns home to the breach in the pipeline that is still gushing state secrets. And plugs it.

It is said that at the bottom of the sea, nobody knows anything.

From hidden lives in underground chambers situated deep in the earth, some twenty thousand species of insect were spewed to the surface. World Territory agencies reported 'unusual' seismic activity, claiming that tectonic shifts were responsible for the irruptions. The Forbidden Lands were the official source of the Great Insect Invasion. But the Forbidden Lands have always been out of bounds to all and everything except approved W.T. officials. The insects were therefore breaking the rules from the very start. There were unofficial theories too, such as those suggesting that scalar weaponry had been used; or that trans-dimensional portals had been coaxed open; that the twenty thousand species of unclassified insects, mainly coleopterans, had invaded the World Territory by a secretive government doorway. These dangerous insect creatures, more feared, no doubt, because they dared to entertain that enigmatic quality of unknownness, crawled from crevasses and cave systems, from of every available nook and cranny that served as an entry point. Certainly, it was as if they had been swept in from another dimension, although this wasn't how it was reported at the time, some fifty years ago. Of course, the threat may have been exaggerated, since it was also the case that most of the bugs were declared harmless by amateur (that is: unofficial) entomologists. These underground enthusiasts (who were to be dealt with later on – the new waves of insects having been given priority) suggested at the time that the arrival and settling-in of the insects would bring no drastic inconvenience to the human ecosphere. They said that most of the bugs weren't interested in humans or their World Territory. Naturally, they were accused by X-Sect of favouring insect invaders over human inconvenience and suffering. But that, as I said, was fifty years ago, when X-Sect was called into existence to deal with the insect threat, when X-Sect squads entered the Forbidden Lands to deal with the greatest threat since the near failure of the Last Revolution.

Where the number of classified insect species had been around a million, it would only have stepped up to one million and twenty thousand had the visitors been allowed to stay. Most of the bugs stayed at ground level and some moved in as guests lower down in the towers. It had been the bigger bugs that had caused most of the restless perturbation, hysteria and rigid trepidation. According to official reports, the human ecosphere was in danger of being destroyed by giant cockroaches. Contemporary entomologists, themselves something of a non-species involved in the underground, claim that the Giant Plasma Bug arrived from an extremely hot region where it was capable of swimming in magma; it is popularly believed to have been tectonically displaced from an unspeakable Hell or Inferno that only religionists could ever have dreamed up ('no religion, no hell' being a common, if not slightly old-fashioned, revolutionary aphorism); it was therefore quite easily demonized as a creature from flames fanned by the evil of dead religions. And everybody knows that evil cannot be buried for long. One entomologist is known to have touched the surface of a Giant Plasma Bug and survived to tell the tale. He came away unscathed, but was soon found out and summarily executed by an X-Sect squad.

Cities were overawed more by the strangeness of the insects than by their quantity. And only a very small percentage of these bugs ever caused any direct harm to the human population. The Glowing Skin Mite was the only bug known to taste human flesh and did so during the night in the same manner that bed bugs, lower down in the towers, still drink the blood of menial workers as they sleep. Those carnivorous bugs were slightly larger than their cousins and it would have taken perhaps years for the weakened host to die. But the itch of the luminescent scabbing

was so severe and the insect population regarded as such a threat that this species was very quickly dealt with. And in truth, it all happened so quickly, so indiscriminately, that most factual information relating to this episode in the planet's history might as well crawl back where it came from. Insects had, in any case, been a source of great inconvenience even before the Great Insect Invasion. And during the invasion, a great many more production hours were lost. Sick days were sometimes blamed on mosquitoes which had been 'modified' to keep their parasites to themselves, or cockroaches that left stinks so nasty it took days of airing and scrubbing after X-Sect had been called in to deal with the menaces. It was as if the facts had been taken into the soil with the insects who escaped these terrible death squads. Conditions dredged up by the waves of 'subterranean' insects, such as the strange dreams and hallucinatory trances that accompanied the attack of the Glowing Skin Mite, were never officially recognized.

Say goodbye to Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics! Not that there is anything wrong with them, you understand. It's just that they cannot fully take account the arrival of the latest in robot gadgetry: the I-Suck robot! Not as obscene as it sounds, this model is programmed with SLOP software, enabling it to suck doors open and enter rooms with the atomic silence of a deadly Kung Fu master. In domestic assistant mode it can suck everything and anything up its prehensile vacuum-cleaner-like snout, including your sticky sodden bed linen and stinking socks; it can drink dirty television and microwave radiation through its Dalek-like egg-scrambler. But most astounding of all, is the I-Suck's ability to suck open doors to the afterlife! Tomb insurance companies are ecstatic about this particular function and predict healthy profits from gloomy old Death.

"Death has never looked so good. We pride ourselves on our excellence of service to the Corpse, even after it's long gone ... You see, once you have everything you need in life, and you have your Life Assurance policy sorted out, the next logical step is to get yourself insured for the Afterlife. We pamper the Dead like there's no tomorrow! We make every corpse beautiful in no time and each and every mummy continues to glow under our watchful apparatus. We monitor all remains through 101 *per cent* speed-of-light Tachymatic cameras, which catch glimpses of future decay events. And our I-Nvestigate nanobots observe every single movement in every single mummified cell, cytoplasm and all. So, you're always in good company in the Afterlife. Now, you might very well ask what exactly it is that you're insuring yourself against. Well, just say your remains happen to meet with an accident, just for the sake of argument – for occurrences such as these will be extremely rare. Say, for example, that some knife-wielding tomb-robbing criminal breaks into your crypt: before this event occurs – and I can not stress this enough – *before* you can flutter those finely enhanced eyelashes we have already sent in a rapid response I-Suck Robot to preemptively liquidate the criminal. That's the beauty of technology: to live forever safe in the lush and glorious vanity of the afterlife!"

After the coup the male population was reduced and men were displaced and given over to inferior positions in the grand scheme of things. Breeding and schooling programmes were introduced to prevent them from entering places of power. Once everything came to be under the control of the Lysistrata Party a unity of sorts was eased into place, one which gradually replaced all those nasty little masculine schisms and schemes, idiotic wars, and manipulative power-games. For, whether it is true or not, these were held to be masculine traits. Men, then, became subject to a rigorous and effective apartheid-like separation from the females. And things were about to take even more of a dive. For, just as everything was settling down and prosperity began to flow more equally than had ever been known among the female population, an accidental discovery was made on a space station in orbit around the planet. It was a discovery that would change everything.

It turned out that the waves of offensive bugs which had assaulted the planet for millennia were born as men on a distant galaxy. The originating star system of these creatures is not only unknown, but also forgotten by the men who know very little about anything else – let alone their origins. Indeed, the men's genetic memory of their metamorphosis would probably be more useful stranded somewhere in deep space, or as space junk in orbit – which is more or less what they have become now anyway, as you will soon find out.

It was suggested by a scientist many years ago that these creatures – these bacteria men – were spewed from a super massive black hole. This had occurred, or so it was later suggested, with all the backwardness assigned to men by the Lysistrata Party. Had these creatures arrived from a local planet or from the Great Asteroid Belt itself, the source of the bugs would surely have exhausted itself in a kind of ejaculatory burst. The Wormhole theory seemed the most probable, and it succeeded in flattering the Party's sense of humour. Added to this theory were others that further fuelled the crazy mythology. None of the theories have yet been proven.

The accepted lore goes something like this: once men, these creatures learned to transport themselves through space by making profound advances in epigenetic engineering. They managed to cure themselves of the need for a body, as we understand it; and though they had been foolish enough to regard the body as a prison of involuntary urges, they had also been smart enough to devise ways of shedding themselves of its weight. With no necessary functions – such as eating, shitting and breathing – to weigh them down, they could simply float off into space … And as these modified beings traveled through space, they underwent a reverse-evolutionary metamorphosis – a process that reversed the effects of mortality, in as much as it extended the lifespan of their mutating selves. Very gradually, over Gaia-know-how-many light years, they were eventually stripped of all unnecessary and superfluous flesh. They lived on light and crystallized from the outside-in. So naturally the skin dropped off first; and the other parts, the protein bulk, gradually evolved its way *off* the body and floated away with no gravity to hold any of it together. There are still scraps of dead crystalline flesh floating around somewhere in the heavens, like non-reanimated zombie space junk. The remaining flesh (the still living and intact stuff) has become reduced to twinkling crystal homunculi-like bacteria, and they soar like tiny stars. But then these entities had the masculine audacity to come bursting out of the arse-end of the Wormhole, an endless supply of small, impertinent bacteria men with pseudo-immortal qualities.

And it turns out that the creatures are almost pure masculine spirit – traveling in a microscopic, crystal-like bacteriological vehicle. But they have become starved of the flesh that

once gave them the security to assert and satisfy their natural sexual urges. This they are said to remember in the genetic sense, and so it follows that their frustrations with space travel – the sexual loneliness, the lack of a body to struggle with – all this has come to overcast the men as they now are: with a sense of imprisonment that has not at all given them the enlightened sense of liberation that was once pursued through scientific investigation all those light years ago. Such then is the source of male aggression and frustration. Since it was by these strange bacteria that half the females of the planet became possessed, it was agreed that only men could be usefully employed in warding off the assaulting bacteria; that men should finish what they began.

These days, if you look through the window of the Café Lysistrata in the city centre of Helena, you will still see members of the provisional government talking about that ancient victory over those deranged upstarts who long ago threatened the planet with mass strike action. The upstarts in question were rebelling against the news that they were to be sent into orbit to fight the originating bacterial menace. The government today is made up only of 'full-bloods', and under no circumstances will an alien genetic male anomaly gain access to this society. The children are separated from the mother at birth, and the boys and girls separated from each other. A girl is brought up with the sound understanding of her superiority as part of an indigenous species and expects to be appointed to a position in the global hierarchy which suitably reflects both her intellect and her temperament. The boy-alien, typically, will be held captive in a camp and trained as a soldier until he reaches puberty. Most of the boys will be sent to the front line in orbit around the planet, and those who are allowed to remain on the planet's surface are used for other menial tasks, such as breeding, cleaning and factory-work.

There is no way that those assigned the task of warding off bacteria in orbit will ever to return to the planet. Lifespans are massively decreased in any case. Soldiers become hardened by exposure to the assaulting bacteria, and this exposure crystallizes their skin and muscle tissue, restricting already unnecessary movements. Although they have the technology to 'fire' aggressive psychic energy at the twinkling microscopic enemy, they are exposed to the bacteria for very long shifts. On top of this, they are too busy to think about escape and too well monitored and sedated when not thinking about it. With the exception of the odd exploding testicle – which sends a warm splatter of crystalline liquid and blood all over the good clean equipment, squirming with critters, or kreosperm – the war is a successful and more or less bloodless space defence programme. Now that most men have long since migrated to the thousands of orbital stations to ward off invading bugs, women can look upwards safe in the knowledge that the heavens are studded with the lights of protective orbital capsules.

Women grudge any reliance on the male alien, especially for reproductive purposes, but enjoy the experience – and often revert to illicit 'smear-sex' if they don't want to bear children, or if they have busy careers to attend to. According to history, women were once self-reliantly parthenogenic. But the arrival of the bacterial disease signaled the end of this Golden Age. Infected girls became men at puberty, yet not all girls became infected – roughly half of the population. Though it has never been satisfactorily determined exactly how the parthenogenesis was brought to a halt, it has been said that those who didn't mutate into men were also genetically altered by the bug, so that they could no longer self-reproduce. No vaccine has yet been developed to reverse this process, but genderisation issues are very well regulated by the Lysistrata Party. In the early days of the alliance, both species developed a physiological reliance on one another, until they became like an old married couple … Incompatible, for the most part … Hating the sight of each other … Getting used to it … Exploding again … Blah! … What's the use! Added to this the monstrous wars

initiated and perpetuated by male aggressors. There had been no such nonsense in the Golden age! It was a divorce on a monumental scale, where the female population took charge of the planet as they would a child produced by the fruits of a marriage turned loveless and bitter. So much, then, for those apparently incompatible, accidental creatures, whose respective genitalia are a match made in heaven. It is indeed a shame that their minds do not think as their genitalia do.

Despite of being locked up, the breeders are well guarded and well looked after. They are all tall, strong and good-looking. Even though they are selected by intelligence level, they are so heavily dumbed-down as to be rendered useless for anything but reproduction. None of them can speak to women, or as much as cough in the presence of a true-blood. Nor are there any other means of producing offspring without the sperm of men. Anyway, the 'bulls' are not permitted as much as the dignity of a grunt during copulation – which is generally, in any case, a very noisy affair. If the vow to silence is broken, they are sent to the front line. Such then, are the uses of healthy male sperm.

But there is also an ugly side to the contents of the testicles. Another of the by-products of the orbital defence mission is kreosperm. Like the fathering species, kreosperm are very aggressive, but are too young to know how and when to keep quiet. Once unleashed, they creep around wailing and gnashing as if hungry for meat. They are easily captured with food traps and taken to the lab for experiments. The technical capabilities do not yet exist whereby they might be used for reproductive purposes, though this is not from a lack of trying and, Gaia knows, scientists have tried. It is far easier to control the men folk than it is to handle the unfettered noise of the kreosperm from testicular explosions in the military capsules. Any attempt by scientists to mute kreosperm has resulted in a rapid decay followed by a rather sloppy death.

Most crucial to the liberated existence of women, then, is their reliance on the generation and control of the bull and soldier breeds. There are, quite simply, no other means at the planet's disposal to ward off the threat of endless invasion, the ceaseless supply of bacteria men.

I'm sorry to say that this holiday by the Martian sea has been nothing but a holiday from hell! We have been stranded here now for fifty six days and don't know when we will be coming home. I have attached some pictures, which by no means capture the whole of the disaster. The beaches are littered with sticky seaweed and oil crabs; other beached anomalies of all shapes and sizes lie frying without suntan lotion in the heat of the sun. We sport gas masks to protect us from toxic fumes that are carried in with the surf. And not only fumes: a big black bird-like creature, unrecognizable and as yet unclassified, struggled for flight on its way to the beach yesterday. Looking something between a nazgul and a pelican, it wasn't at all edible. The horizon is a kind of red tar colour, and from it gloves covered with alien gunk come floating towards us, the middle fingers inviting us to go for a swim with them. It looks like their palms have been greased with cooking oil. And I think they're dead too! The kids got scared after one of them slipped in a pool containing globs of antimatter. They don't bite or sting. When we get hungry, we trap larger, edible globs in Bacteria Bay. The globs are attracted to Martian sewage, so they need to be well cleaned and well cooked. And after all that trouble, they are really quite bland. Naturally, the glob plumes are subject to the pull of the planet's gravity. Or should I say: to the neurotoxic gravy in which Martian Death Skates are systematically killed for sport by oligarchs who build floating castles in the hunting 'grounds', huge ramshackle vertical structures, some kind of bad hierarchitectural panopticons to overlook all oceanic life. There's forever that feeling of being watched. And talk about being dragged through the shit! There are times when we feel that we're on the set of some hideous scat movie, which might very well be preferable to a 'holiday' such as this. Certainly, the way our vacation is going down the pan we might well be fucked anyway, unable to see 'normality' for quite some time. Please send some love hormone pills soon! It now seems that it was always the intentions of the Slik Travel Company to exploit tourists on Mars by detaining us here as debt prisoners. It is strange how the flights home are forever cancelled due to toxic cloud cover. Others have been here longer than us, which is perverse considering that tour companies usually want to clear you out (or should I say 'clean you out') as soon as the holiday is over. The resort is constructed of some kind of Martian paper and our drinking water is streaked with rainbows. There's no adequate oxygen supply here either, which has us wheezing all the more. The locals have it that when the Slik Travel Company arrived here, they screwed everything in sight, including the locals, the natural water supplies and atmosphere. So they set business up here with a complete lack of credibility, which has continued to this day. Because nothing of this seems to be known back on Earth, it is just possible that this message will not reach you! If we stay here any longer we will have to find work to stay alive. Wish we were there!!

They have been told that this is what happens to dead soldiers. A vacation gives them a taste of things to come. They have leave to loosen themselves up a little with a drunken orgy on Infinite Heaven. They are willing to die for this honour – like the legendary Assassins of Alamut. They come from a stone cold climate of perpetual conflict to suspended duties in the heat – rather, *on heat* – on Infinite Heaven. In the heat of this abandoned small planet, they find the comfort that is missing from the activities to which they are accustomed. On Infinite Heaven, the only coldness to be found is in the remains of the ancient concrete that can still be seen keeping cool in its own scarce shadows under the magnificent riot of vegetation, which has become a kind of skin to protect it from the double sun. Too abundant in variety to be adopted by the grey uniformity of any old dystopia, Infinite Heaven flourishes in the tranquil yet sordid heat of sticky pollen and insects, flowers to leave your eyes gasping for enough light to encode the strangeness and variety of their colours. And like a secret island, Infinite Heaven's coordinates are unmapped, its whereabouts known only to rumour. So then, there are no tourists to worry about!

The march of the bugs sends many heavy-booted vibrations echoing across the valleys. It is this collective clumsiness that scares off the wildlife and brings mechanical trembles to the gentle flora. You would think that they would have learned how to march in silence by now. In mystical silence. But these are no Kafka bugs. They are far too insensitive for that. They operate with a clumsy gang consciousness and are programmed as a blind and cliquey collective; blind, that is, even to the illusion of individuality. They are under the impression that they are not the borgsect that they really are. Even in battle, the body parts of their maimed colleagues do not betray this fact. Self-assembling nano-machines are so incredibly small that even the compound eyes of the soldier bugs – real insect eyes with enhanced vision – are unable to detect this collection of durable yet not infallible small parts.

There is good intelligence that many groups of large, wholesome Pinks still live here. Maybe they are some kind of angels. They are said to seek shelter here under the ancient concrete, in cool bunkers. Maybe there is a whiff of Pink. But the bugs are temporarily relieved of their duties and have not come here to hunt. Anyway, Infinite Heaven is so well irradiated that the soldier bugs are promised a foretaste of intoxication as soon as the pollen enters their spiracles.

Having permission to engage in breeding rituals, the switches flick open to release reproductive organs (which do not have any actual reproductive capacity), and the bugs orgy for several turns of the suns, basking in, breaking into, one another's electric warmth. They capture images of their sexual frenzy with a multiform accuracy of vision, producing a regression of orgy upon orgy, something like a one-thousand-night orgy to the power of twenty one. This is how the soldier bugs re-energize their Protino core processors before going back to some remote galactic zone. With all images of Infinite Heaven erased, they are left with just a flicker of a feeling that something is missing. Maybe, as with an addiction, they need more Heaven. But the promise of Infinite Heaven will be delivered again and again. They are checked for missing parts before they return to their duties.

The year is 2023. A 'gift' of post-GM organisms has gone up in smoke, scorching farmland all over the West. The conflagration has been blamed on angry farmers. "These huge quantities of seeds all contained lethal pesticides almost as toxic as the distributing company's manufacturing bases. They're trying to monopolize seeding and pollination with these post-mutational mutations. It's quite clearly insane! The Giants of the Contra Nature Company have set up a biological modification hoax designed to fool Nature and keep themselves in business with the help of unnecessary and unnatural complications."

"Nature is dead," said the director of the Contra Nature Company, sucking on a post-GM cigar, and spluttering a little on the smoke with a booming artificial croak: "Both the ungrateful farmers and the peasant Pollinators – the Little People – are getting angry over improvements to an already corrupt and modified Nature, so it's a bit late to complain." And as he coughs, clouds of smoke go billowing from his lungs and black out parts of Western Europe. "Anyway, the Little People present themselves as dangerous competition against the proud cleanliness of our operations to modify the modified natural world. They'd like to stamp us out of existence, for sure. But, we have the whole of Nature to run and it isn't easy ..." And he splutters to a halt, raining phlegm all over good farmland.

But the Pollinators are not angry for long. One snort of post-modified pollen and they collapse: "The Giants are actually competing with Nature. Their heads are held higher than the artificial clouds that they cough up. They are the only species who make a mess of Nature in the name of progress and they are so high on their own agenda that Pollinators are disappearing off the face of the planet in obscene puffs ... Just farted away in the silent deadly stink of their pesticidal mania. Then they send in drones to finish off what they started. We know that orders to come from above, way on up there, to get our populations acclimatized to disaster. So that when the artificial smoke and cloud starts to descend on Dead Nature … Weeeell, it's just another day's news and destruction …"

In a demonstration of solidarity with the Pollinators, post-modification activists have been arrested and imprisoned for throwing robot flowers at hovering drones. The drones have been accused by activists of competing with bees for airspace, and of 'decommissioning' Nature. The Contra Nature Company has been accused of destroying its own 'Frankenstein Pollinators' to make way for 'dangerous drones'. Now, it is well known that the Contra Nature Company's drones have been making deep incursions into the so-called 'developing world', a world, according to the director, "that gratefully awaits the arrival of our technological brilliance to rid it of all unnatural mutants." And he coughs up some radioactive dust from a processing plant lodged somewhere in an alveolar tumour. "This is no game. It's a virtual war between self-modifying Pollinators and good old-fashioned Nature. We know that Pollinator mutants are using flight simulation techniques to pull soft death over the eyes of the public, as well as the eyes of myopic old Nature herself – God bless her. But, let's get this in perspective: Pollinators are much more dangerous than drones. So what we do is for the public's own good as well as for the good of Nature. And it's our job to deal with these dangers." And he coughs, spraying black and red specks of phlegm and blood all over America, before continuing with a wheeze: "So what do we do to help us achieve targets? Well, first we unzip the double helix of the Pollinator and then we insert a live culture of our own making, which sends the helix rotating in the *other* direction. Our culture takes over the

cell command system, and the result is that unnatural cells, whose DNA is spinning in the wrong direction anyway, go into revolt. The long and short of it is that these unnatural airborne pollinating infiltrators end up stinging themselves to death. So it's one Suicide Sting and they're out. The Single Sting of Death only works on the species we … uh … [splutter] altered last time round, so the phonies are easy to identify. When you see one drop, you know there's a damn good chance that it's a terrorist Pollinator gone into self-destruct mode." And he coughs and bellows, contaminating half of the planet with flashes of unspeakable noise.

The stars sit motionless at the iron-cold end of the night. Below them, not much movement can be detected. It is as if everything has been whipped into existence by a gargantuan hand and then left to set on the withdrawal of the icy limb. Maybe it was not a hand. But whatever it was, it withdrew, like a spent deistic member, and left cold white life everywhere, so that the snow would make a luminous blue event of all space-time except for the night-ravaged shadows that spook the landscape while everybody sleeps.

The snowman is awake. He sits motionless but is uneasy, almost shaking and locked in a tortured monologue. He has insomnia again. He wakes up in a cold sweat every night, and makes an uneasy passage into waking consciousness. He wants to understand more than his flesh can tell him: "What is the point in worrying about something that is beyond my control? – Atchooo! – Oh deary me, this confounded cold! … Look at it this way: If I were to cut away a piece of my crisp white flesh, would I not, in essence, be just the same being? Or if I were to melt with a blast of spring air, wherever I end up – Aaaatchooo! – Damn! – Would I not feel the same way that I now feel? Oh but then wouldn't my essential life force not flow and adapt to the new surroundings with precisely this restlessness that wakes me up every morning before the crack of dawn? Ah! Ah! Tchooo! – Blast and damn!!"

His futile and childish paroxysm of fear and self-pity is interrupted by a fluttering behind him, which brings his thoughts back to his surroundings. He looks as peripherally as he can with his big button-eyes, sees nothing, and continues: "AAAAAAA – Oh damn this AAAAAA – Co – Col – TCHOOO! – Would a quick meltdown be any less painful than a slow, gradual one? Would I feel pain at all? Is my flesh anaesthetized by its cold nature, and would the anaesthetic wear off naturally as I melted? – AAAtchoo! – Damn! – Oh God! What if I was lapped up by a vicious beast?" There seemed to be no end to the snowman's torture, though by a stroke of good fortune – for even the stars are sick listening to him – his dull thoughts are interrupted by a flutter of snow from the branch of a tree which is just out of the range of his limited vision. A big black crow is perched behind the snowman. An oily rainbow slips from the crow's black feathers onto the snow and teases the ascent of the sun. Agitated by the trickle of warmth, the dark predator flutters his wings and drifts towards a nearby tree. The branches of the tree shudder and shed their snow.

The crow is attracted the negative materialistic thoughts of the snowman. Taking advantage of the silence as much as of the snowman's shallow torture, he caws as he cascades from the branch, circling the snowman and moving in a closing orbit until he is perched quite casually upon one of the white shoulders.

"Excuse me," says the snowman: "But I think you'll find that this shoulder is taken! And I don't think it's a good idea for you to perch here – AAAtchOOO! – You see I'm feeling a bit delicate at the moment. And anyway, it's rude of you to interrupt my investigations!" The crow caws and takes a peck at the shoulder.

"Oh please! – You'll find no – no – AAAtchooo! – No worms here! – Tchooo!"

The crow shudders with the sneeze and makes a face as if disgusted. Then, to prevent himself losing balance, he digs his claws deeper into the snowman's white flesh, which causes a fair amount of shoulder to crumble. Feeling no pain, but aware of his disintegrating shoulder, the snowman is irked and says, almost shouting: "Now look what you've gone and done! Leave me alone! Get off!"

The crow caws what sounds like a "Piss off!" This flabbergasts the snowman, who is a polite soul. It brings on a sneezing fit which has the bird tighten his grip all the more, causing the shoulder to crumble and disintegrate almost completely.

"Did you say something?"

"I said there's far more to you than you think, you pail of glorified water! And unlike the leaking bucket of an existence you call 'not dying', the wave function of the cosmic mind does not decay, not ever. That is the nature of the Infinite!" and so saying the crow abandons the snowman and circles him in a streaking whirlwind, cawing and croaking and fluttering as if in a turbulent fit of self-congratulation.

"You said something! You, a bird! You spoke! Say that again!"

"I said, I think your shoulder's gone," and saying this the crow lands on the other shoulder.

"AATCHOOO! – AAAAATCHOOO!!" The sneezing fits are becoming worse. "Please stop that," says the snowman: "I feel expo – exposed – AAAAAA – TCHOOO!"

"You should have wrapped yourself up in warm clothes then."

"But – I mean – Atchoo! – Atchoo!"

"Why don't you shut up you solidified lump of acid rain, you pile of useless drizzle! – Can't you see I'm doing you a favour – I'm putting you out of you're misery. Follow your shoulder. That will prevent you getting completely lost up your own glittering backside! You are the projection of another universe, a mere snowflake of the infinite contours of the smallest and largest patterns – all of which amounts, naturally enough, to the same thing – a fusion of some greater kaleidoscopic fractality …" And he laughs and caws and showers the other shoulder with a golden stream of piss. "You stupid, dull two-dimensional …CAAW CAAW!"

Soon the snowman is reduced to a shivering fit of the sneezes. The sun is getting strong and quite rapidly his body crumbles and melts until only his head is left. The crow says: "At last, you're brought down to earth!" He laughs and caws, but does not peck any more. He totters up to the dying snowman and looks him in the big button eyes, which are loosening with tears of self-pity, and then adds with a squawk: "Your time is up, my friend. Don't you understand that you will travel now – across tundra, fjords, mountains, edging out into the stellar plains and beyond – into the scattered drift of a new logic. You are information and that is all! Your present inner space is stifled, frigid … Like a castle made of crystal and ready to crumble into useless fragile bits … Why don't you do yourself a favour and let it all go!?"

"But my inner space, as you call it, is all I have – you nasty, evil bird! – AAAATCHOOO!!! – Unlike you, I can't fly. I can't even move – AAAAATCHOOO!!! – I can just about shudder!" And he shudders as if to prove the point.

"But you still have your head," said the crow. "Why don't you do something useful with it by letting go of it? CAW! CAW! It's not as simple as black versus white versus day versus night versus dark matter versus the visible universe CAW! CAW! Where you are going, all that nonsense is lost! And I'm pretty sure it's lost here too!"

Like a man buried in the desert sand, the snowman is left exposed to the rising sun. The sun rises in silence, nudging the stars into the morning light. The crow caws and flies off towards the fading morning star, leaving the remains of the snowman's head to itself. The snowman soon produces his last limp sneeze and, after a while, the head melts altogether.

Although the actual mechanism of the Blob's escape is not fully understood, this is probably less important than the consequences of his flight. But one thing is for sure: able to think more clearly than the average Spirit Event, the Blob, like others who develop a high pain threshold, has become more sensible and, strangely enough, more sensitive – as if having established a firm and very earthy understanding of those deeply *un*earthly sensations. This is what happens to our escapee after he slips out of that rather grim prospect of reality-affirming tortures to swallow one or two of the wardens: he is looking for the Office of the Chief Executive, and he rolls and rumbles down there, as if he knows exactly where to go, through a labyrinthine network of dimly-lit corridors. Two of the Torture Clerks, who are alert enough to notice the "rumbling fat bastard", are not alert enough to avoid being consumed by our good Blob. His digestive system has mutated according to the principles of evolutionary survival, and this has been inadvertently brought about by the disease injected down in the Deformitory. The disease tricks the genetic code, putting it into overdrive, and sending it into Accelerated Evolution Mode (A.E.M.). Even strands of virtual excrement in A.E.M. can find it in themselves to mutate in such a manner. In the case of our good Blob, a kind of cleansing gel forms around his quickly mutating aura. There are deposits of this gunk trailing down the corridors, and any fiend who follows our Blob will be effectively incapacitated. Yes, it *is* a simple case of Good Gunk *versus* Evil Fiends. And the Blob is not ashamed of this.

The Blob makes his way to the Office of the Chief Executive with revenge rumbling in the folding hollows of its translucent bulk. Does he use the stairs? Mannerless Blob, he does not! He slithers up the wall. Once he has eventually smudged his way up a level to the Office of the Chief Executive, leaving a trail of Good Gunk, he does not even wipe his feet! Horrors! Can the monster not read? WIPE YOUR HOOVES is printed clear and unfaded on the doormat and is perfectly legible in accordance with relevant Industry Standards. Perhaps our escapee thinks to himself: "But I have no hooves!" and he would of course be quite right.

Other than the odd freak of a genetically modified fly in the yellowed net curtain, the Office of the Chief Executive is empty. 'THE BOSS IS OUT JERKS!' notice isn't even hung on the doorknob and the door is left unlocked! The Blob moves swiftly in. Suddenly, just as he wobbles the door closed, he hears howling and screaming and yelping ...

"There it is! – Stop it!"... He can hear the lashing of whips and the buzzflashing of ancient laser whips amid scurrying, bouncing, clattering hoovesteps …

"Blubbered fuck ... You won't be slinking off like that again ..."

"We'll fucking molecate you ya rumbling bastard!"

But the Blob does not have time to be offended by the fiends referring to him as 'it'. This is no time for torturing oneself with badly aimed insults. He seals the door with Good Gunk and even has the good sense to plug the keyhole with some. His assailants are beginning to scream up the stairs.

But, Oh dear! Something must have gone wrong with the Good Gunk. Maybe it has a quick decay-time. Knowing this bunch and their hideous disease-making habits, the Good Gunk has turned on itself in a frenzy of self-incapacitation and fizzled out altogether …

Ah! But there's no time to speculate! The Blob is strong. He thinks fast. He sucks open the filing cabinet drawers and begins to devour the contents. He does it in alphabetical order, to help with the digestion process. Suddenly, he hears thumping and banging on the door of the Office of the Chief Executive. The wiping of hooves roughing up the doormat …

"Let us in, you heap of steaming turd!"

"You pile of jellied jizz!!"

The door rattles and shakes. The creature finds his own records in the alphabetically ordered filing cabinets … They are most detailed and very hard to swallow … The door bursts off its hinges. A shower of fiends falls over itself in the general direction of the Blob. But the poor Blob cannot cope with so many at once. He has indigestion after quickly swallowing so many of his own musty files. He spews and belches. He rolls and grumbles and sizzles and spews and divides in molten malformation. The fiends thrust stabilising-gel-tipped skewers into the beast – like a hail of arrows – in order to put a stop to the devious mutations. He becomes less translucent, more fleshly, like a heap of jelly beans trying to assert themselves as individuals. The Blob eventually solidifies onto many skewers like large globules of sticky porridge and is lifted away in many pieces by the laughing fiends. Maybe they will get a promotion out of it.

Nevertheless, the Blob now has what he came here for. He has digested the records which provide details of fiendish experiments. And now, officially speaking, the Blob is a non-entity – having devoured the bureaucratic version of his own soul. Fortunately, there are no carbon copies. He is sent back to join the queue under the directive which prohibits the torture of souls whose records are lost or do not exist. Strangely enough, the others whose records have been devoured are not so lucky. Their files may have been lost, but they are still 'in the system', stranded and neglected there. There are many Blobs now, mannerless replicants waiting patiently in the queue for their time to run riot in Hell and chew up its inexhaustible supply of obsolete paperwork. Maybe next time they will release the others too.