

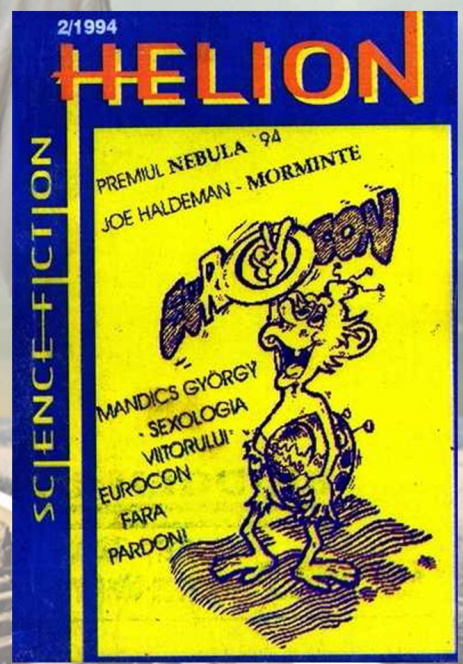
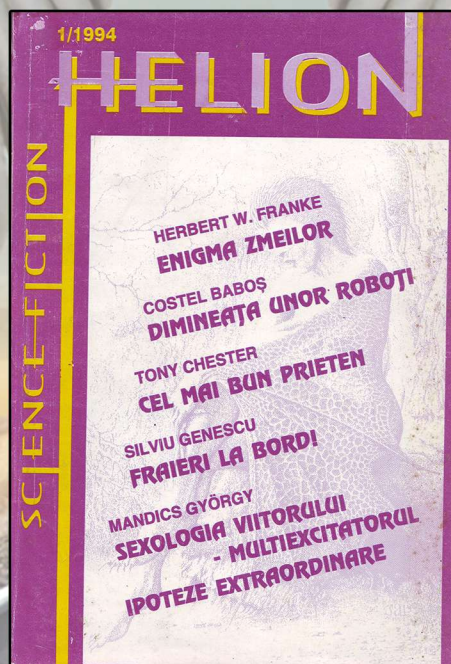
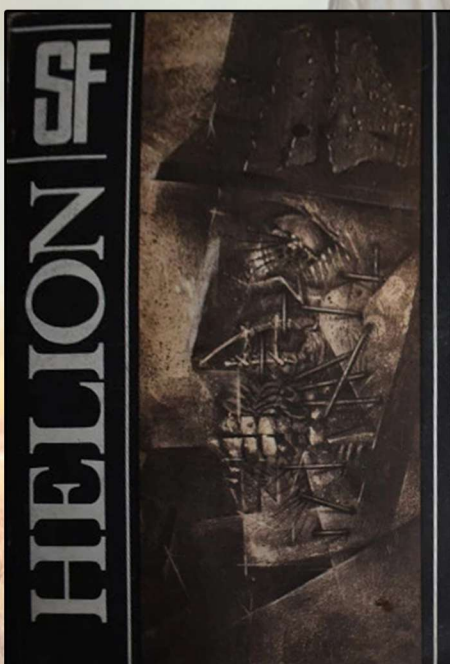
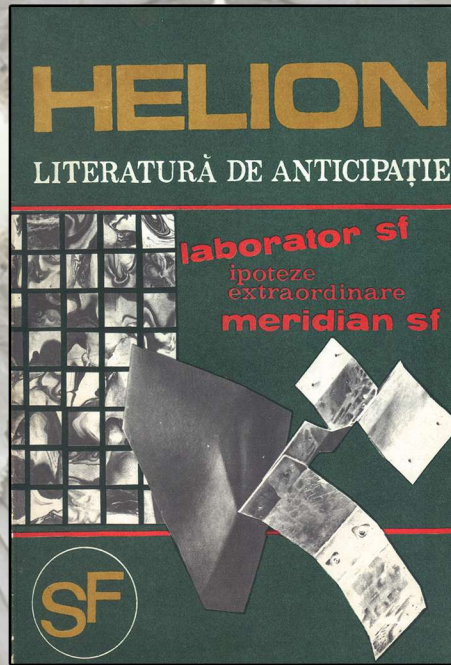
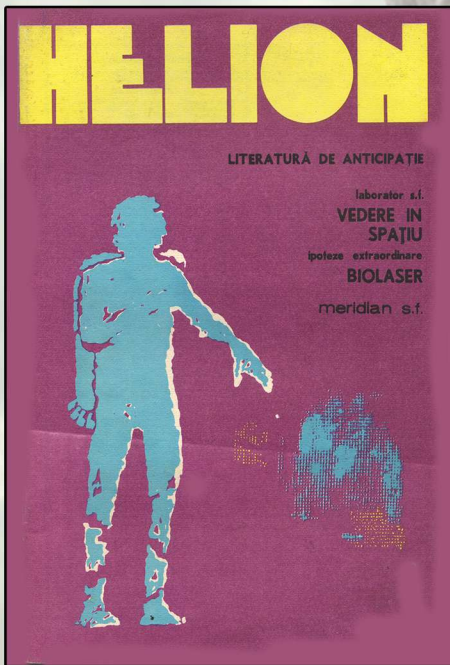
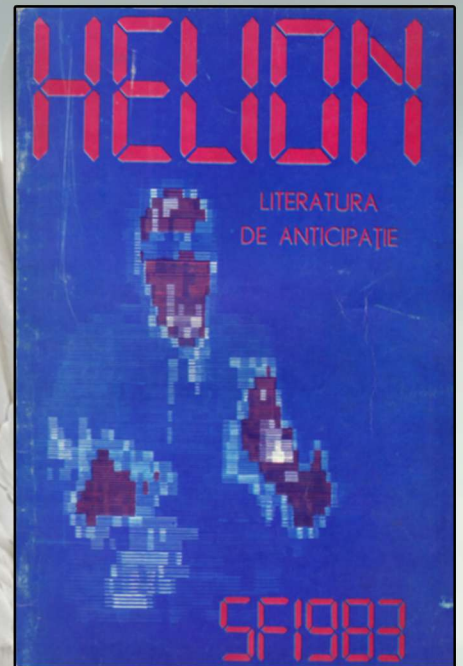
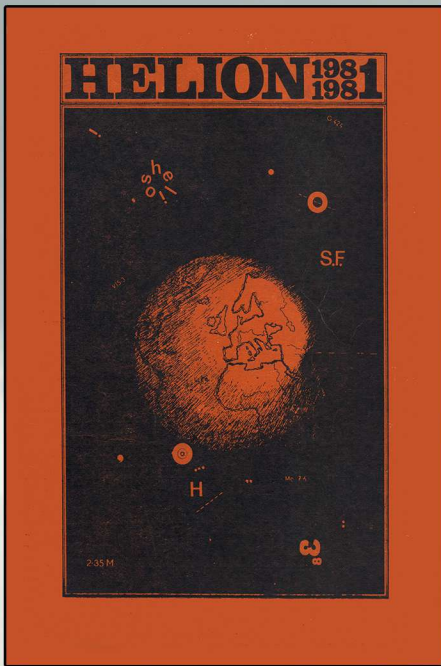
HELLION

Science Fiction

No. 3-4/2023



CORNEL SECU - IONUȚ MANEA - LIVIU SURUGIU - LAURA CEICA - COSTEL BABOȘ - ANDREI NEDEL
ADRIAN CHIFU - MĂDĂLIN ANDREI ȘTEFAN - IZABELA RADOSEVICI - MIRCEA BĂDUȚ
CRISTINA NEGREANU - ȘERBAN FOARTĂ - PETER SEYFERTH - MIRCEA MIHĂIEȘ
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CHRISTIAN ENDRES - DANIEL BOTGROS - BIANCA SOL - ALINA CUIEDAN - AMALIA TIRICA



HELION ASSOCIATION

HELION

No. 3-4/2023

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A NEW PATH ▲

CORNEL SECU

The Helion Club was founded on March 18, 1980, in Timișoara, on the initiative of Cornel Secu and a group formed by Lucian Ionică, Marcel Luca, Silviu Genescu, Dușan Baiszki and Barra Zoltan. In a short time, it became one of the most important science fiction clubs in Romania.

Between 1980 and 2014 I was the president of the club. On March 25, 1981, the printed magazine version of Helion appeared, with a circulation of 7,500 copies. Over the next two years, the circulation reached 25,000 copies, with national distribution.

When we talk about Helion, we can group most of the club's actions into a few constellations:

- **The Constellation of Publications:** Helion printed magazine; the theory bulletin, criticism and science fiction literary history. **Biblioteca Nova** (first appearance 1983), two series, the first 1983-1990, the second 2006-present (17 normal editions and two special editions dedicated to Ion Hobana and Cornel Robu); **Helion Online** (first issued in April 2010), currently at issue 140, until 2018 with 10 annual appearances, then 11 annual appearances; **The Helion anthologies**, which have reached number 7.

- **The Constellation of Contests:** **Helion National Short Prose Contest**, launched in 1981, reaching its 38th edition; **The translation competition from Romanian to a foreign language**, launched in 1982, with seven editions; The **"Timișoara in a hundred years" Contest**, launched in 2014, which reached its 4th edition; **The Helion Humorous Prose Contest**, launched in 2016 and reaching its 4th edition; **The Sci-Fi Pill Contest**, launched in January 2023

- **The Constellation of Major Events:** **The Helion Session**, reaching its 38th edition in 2023; **The Helion International Conference**, having its 8th edition in 2023; **S.F. New Year's Eve**, launched in 1985 and reaching its 38th edition this year; **"60 minutes in the company of anticipation"**.

The Helion Club was the organizer or co-organizer of seven editions of ROMCON (National Science Fiction Convention). The Helion Club has won more than 100 national awards for prose, graphics, publications, film, script, translators, radio broadcasts.

The value of the Helion club has also been recognized internationally, with the Helion print magazine obtaining distinctions at the European Convention in

Brighton (England, 1984), San Marino (Italy, 1988) and Fiuggi (Italy, 2021). Biblioteca Nova was awarded the European prize for non-fiction publication at the European Congress in Budapest in 1989. Bianca Sol obtained the Crysallides prize at the European Convention in Fiuggi (Italy) in 2021, and Cornel Secu was awarded the prize for the best promoter at Eurocon in 1994, from Timișoara.

After the Eurocon in Timișoara in 1994, the majority of participants considered it "the most successful convention in the history of European Conventions".

Over the 40-year history of the Helion Club, its members have published over 30 volumes of prose and poetry, over 20 volumes of translations and 43 visual art exhibitions.

The Helion Club has always been a crucible of original creation on different levels of sci-fi art, a laboratory in which successive generations coexisted, forming a geometric body of continuity and enhance of the potential value of its members.

The Helion Club was an important pivot to the coagulation of the Romanian science fiction movement, supporting with strength and skill the establishment of the ARSFAN association in 1991 and ARCASF in 2012.

Hundreds of young people attended the weekly or bimonthly meetings of the Helion Club, many of them achieving a high professional level of literary and artistic expression.

This edition of our English-language magazine is the first in a series that we hope will not have too many temporal syncopations. It largely respects the rubric of the magazine in Romanian and the diverse range of creative expression: prose, literary theory, lyrical forms, translations, critical commentary, comic strips and visual arts, notes and news. To all those who have contributed to the continuous enrichment of artistic creativity, visible in the summaries of the publications, in the programs of the Helion Session or the Helion International Conference, and expressed in the quarterly posters with the club's activity, we warmly thank them.

This English edition is a new path for Helion, which I hope, as mentioned above, will become a series. The Helion welcomes the Uppsala Convention, wishing them a success that will become a pleasant memory.

THE STRANGE CASE OF ROGER MOOD

IONUȚ MANEA

Ionuț N. Manea (born in 1981). He graduated the Faculty of Dentistry, Victor Babeș University, Timișoara, in 2006. He publishes in literary magazines: *Helion*, *Literomania*, *Orizont*, *Liternautica*, *Reșița Literară*. In 2020 he won the ROMCON national story award. He is the editor of the *Helion* magazine. He is present with texts in the anthology *Literomania of short prose* (2019) and the anthology *Moștenirea Văcăreștilor* (2017, 2019). Present with communications at the Helion Session and the Helion International Conferences.

He started with the volume of short prose *The Confessions of the Puppet Master* (2020), at Tracus Arte Publishing House, winner of the ROMCON 2021 awards, for volume of short stories and for short story. At the same publishing house the volume of poetry *Letter for Ping Su*, appeared in 2021 and *Dispositions of a young god* (poem), Casa de Pariuri Literare, 2022. Member of the Helion Club since 2017. Vice President of the Helion Association. Editor-in-Chief at Helion Online (since January 2022).

Roger Mood looked wrinkled, as if he had just come out of a pub. Dizzy, with dark circles the size of fists, drawn to the face. He spoke jerkily. He had attended piloting courses at *Horizont*. An enthusiastic young man with real potential. Now he looked like a frog. Like a broken bottle. He had lost weight beyond measure, the protruding bones holding the uniform with great difficulty. The bright room in which he was being interrogated made the livid young man a weak actor, literally and figuratively.

The people around stood still. They would pounce and tear him apart mercilessly. Roger had seen something like this in his grandfather's yard. Mo and White had escaped from the makeshift pen and pounced on the poor rabbit, taken by surprise. The dogs had him in half in a second, the White Puffs whirling in the air and stopping at one point, like in a movie, in the eyes of little Roger.

He had become an outcast overnight. They had colonized Alpha Centauri hastily and chaotically. They had left with earthly habits, essentially nothing had changed. Addison Square was already packed to capacity. The place where only the wealthy had access. Misery and chaos hovered around the noble quarter like stinking clouds.

The noble quarter had everything, and the others remained poor. The patrols had doubled. The rest of the world outside was seething. Tensions had risen and now out of the blue this strange case had appeared. And the only survivor, Roger Mood, if he was the real Roger Mood - few doubted despite all the tests - hunched and scared answered the series of ques-

tions. A doctor's intervention was needed. "Scoundrels, you kill him!"

Dr. Thomass enjoyed the oldest age in the room. Although they gritted their teeth, they hadn't dared to step on him like they did with those in the Academy until now. The so-called special commission was made up of men over forty, sober. No one knew where they had come from. Not even a sounding name. And that scared the people of the Academy. They cared about Roger, but more than that they cared about their skin. Besides, he had volunteered for this mission. And, the announced anomaly, this case that had made so much noise, had basically offered nothing. A cheap theater operated by the Consuls, or so it seemed at first sight.

F. C. Test one:

"Dirty feet passed in a safe order, no one breathed, there was no smell, as in a silent film, as I had seen with my grandfather on a long July evening in the room on the street, where I was only allowed to be accompanied, on the walls hung paintings on wood of deer and firearms, a kind of hunting in the dense woods, where you didn't go out unless you were from the local area, the whole room had a strange air, everything was chosen on the brow, the long rifles with the drawn rooster sat side by side quietly, as if they had been born there, and below the dishes painted with letters of a lame, gnawed by the weather, smelling of burnt earth about which the grandfather used to say:

"These are older than us, he sputtered as he whistled through his lathe that grew with time, but did

not disturb anyone, the grandfather was a clean, God-fearing man, a respected man from the foot of the mountains that remained steadfast every morning, the porch bent under the weight of the years, but the mountains did not, they kept the same sinusoidal lines as the beating of a tired heart; that's how his father died on a quiet summer night, no one shed a tear, people drank and ate and joked, and he didn't get angry, he sat with his hands on his chest and waited for us to put him in the ground, the rain had not stopped, for several days the arid earth had been greedily eating and no one had anything to object to, they had got used to the weather, they were not even gloomy, they had no weather, the land had to be worked, the animals were screaming in the wooden stables and someone had to bring them hay, to weave them, to water them, to say a comforting word to them from time to time on the days when the rain stopped and I was circling the hill trying to understand the blonde with the golden breasts who was getting muddy with the dirty water of the frogs ; dreamy and understanding, she let me look at her with my eyes half closed from the sun, when two carpenters came and tied her to the willow, and she laughed from ear to ear as if she knew, then I gathered the grass in my palm and I crouched in fear, pleasure, shame, all these came like a roar that I couldn't stop, like a line of riders that stretched to infinity, I knew they would come, but I couldn't guess at what age that, because the spring was very far away, beyond the hills of vines, near the dam house of brick as thick as a casement, surrounded by groves and sedges, where I had so many times lost myself, and so many times had disfigured myself in the attempt to - I can tell if the woman, lying next to me on the slab, was my wife or the village girl with small breasts, hidden under the white, immaculate apron, with which she went out in the evening to read me from the ceaslov; her words from under her lips fell on me and intoxicated me, their meaning unfolded in dozens of stories with interpretation, love stories and I, wrapped in her thin cotton cloth, had already reached a secret place, safe from the eyes of ordinary mortals and nobody had anything to say, because you can't joke when you love, you can't blink, you can't say a word, you sink into the dirty frog water like the blonde with the golden breasts, waiting for someone to save you, in my case it was bad luck pure, I had reached the bottom of the lake where no one could find me and I could go about my business without caring about the world above, the girl with the small breasts was calling me in vain, it was too late, I had so much on my mind, the houses taken of water years ago, the church steeple stuck in the mud called God, only a fish sometimes jumped its galvanized belly across the river, and a nervous fisherman's line dragged under the water

like an outstretched hand, the world had nested under the waters, barely towards evening when the waters calmed, I felt a cut in my palm and let go of the grasses on the shore, with them the peaceful body of the golden-breasted blonde came out into the moonlight, like a testimony, like an old song, but time had passed too quickly, the children of the guilty had completely forgotten what had happened and the word of the world had distorted the meaning of the facts as liars do, serene, I was unrecognizable with the pipes of a teenager and the cigarette in my mouth I was singing on the edge of the swamp dried by people with calloused hands , who had children to raise, no one cared about the past, the days were too short, winter was knocking on the door, wood for the fire was hard to find, down the valley a stone's throw away the workers had dug a city, you couldn't stay with their hands in their breasts, the red tractors were burying the rotting rags in the ground, piercing the sky with their black smoke, instead the women had grown up, were carrying children in their laps, had made thick arms at the expense of the breasts lying on the ground over which the small construction site supervisors passed mercilessly. "

Test two:

„They were shaking and I couldn't control them, I could hear the footsteps approaching, but I couldn't see anything, I couldn't look back, I was afraid to turn my head, the plains were lost, erased by the speed of the train, the mountains kept their distance, but at some point they also went, the aisles narrowed leaving room for only one man, the pairs were stopped by tall, thin individuals with chins pulled over their eyes, the women screamed with their children in their arms, their voices, in a single echo, we had no way back, I would have been caught, I only felt sorry for my grandfather, the founder of the Piloting Academy, in fact I was ashamed, ashamed not to let him down, not to let my father down in the Great Cloud of Magellan; our lives, mine and my mother's, were lost in the vast space between us and him, the tears evaporated and our cold bodies became toys, the toys of fates programmed as the fates of the helpless are when their lives no longer count a fool, when everything they set out to do came crashing down and they were left with nothing but a few faded memories placed instead of the tablecloths in the kitchen where grandpa smoked and listened to Schubert:

„Don't forget, Roger! Everything is transient!"

The words weighed, as they had weighed when he had smoked on the balcony, unknown to anyone, with the little girl tattooed on his shoulder, dry and nervous, but that was a long time ago, when grandfa-

ther didn't know, nothing had stuck, there were only attempts, tests for later they would gnaw at his fragile mind, fed up with so much experience, but from which he had learned so much, the price had been worth it, everything had been worth it in his life, he did not regret anything, until very late, when the memories softened and turned gray, thanks to this patience the grandfather he had succeeded in life, he had managed to maintain a balance between vic- es and dreams, he had not given up anything, instead he had hurt others, that's how he was, a good man, but one of those who destroy everything they touch, the fault for all this being the construction theirs, ro- bust, severe, which cannot turn back from the road for anything in the world, for anyone, not even for its own child, for the father, but these make you a man, they make you stronger, and you can endure a lot, be- cause in the end life is a series of trials, difficulties from which you have to come out with your forehead up, it doesn't matter what you left behind, the door has closed, no one enters there anymore, everyone wants to escape from the gloomy rooms like darkness that smells of fear, as if fear smells, but a man in the churchyard told me that fear smells bad, like a rotten lemon, and no one can change that; dogs smell fear best because they are the only ones who know it in the true sense of the word, they remember it, or rather, from the first wolves, fear is the mother of cour- age, it is the first principle learned in the forest when you are in your own skin, nothing you will know in the tangled thicket will be able to help you, but only eat or possibly close to bring out the wildness in you, in fact, the essence of your life before because we are all born animals and that will not be able be exchanged for one by two, generations of scribes will die before the first-born, thirsting for knowledge, renounces all animal instincts, and this will not be easy because knowledge in its turn can feed on such cognitive in- stincts, and when fear has made its bed inside you, it's hard to let it out, it clings to the walls of your soul for- ever like a submissive maid, mistreated by her master she can't live without like a rowdy parishioner can't live without God, although no one wants to become an obsession, especially a divinity, obsession smells worse than fear, it really stinks, leaving one's fleshy, dry bones to be seen; the body they supported for so many years hid in the ground in fear, in shame, the half-sister of fear, much weaker, in fact she is the first, with her bare elbows, her knees pressed to her ribs, she prays to anyone to- lent him a smoke, to lend him a hand even though the rain had not stopped and the station was full of beggars and merchants running in opposite directions, each with his own thoughts, ob- scure as if only they mattered in this world, as if the

world whole would take into account their thoughts, their dreams, their frigid and stinking desires that no one will give a damn about, the game goes on regard- less of whether there are players at the table or not, it does not forgive or understand anyone, the cards are made long before for you to sit down at the table and it will always be too late to get up.

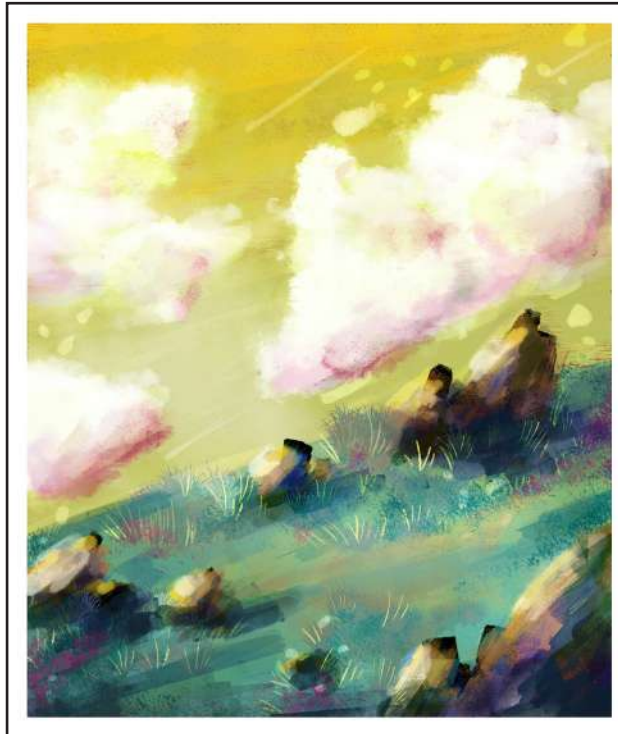
In the gloomy corridor, shapes moved around me. Dimensions were no longer dimensions. The voices were no longer voices. The sounds had warped to such an extent that we had the impression that we were created from the same source. You were no longer a master, the gnome didn't listen to you, the deities had disappeared like a blanket shaken at a summer picnic, the sun like a spear in the sky threatened you, leaving room for water to cross your body, the earth had be- come angular, the lumps had become stubborn, no one he didn't give a damn about you, but you didn't want to lose one for two, no, metal was metal and it had to stay that way, like the animal, the plant had to grow, erupt, go towards the sun, and the water he had to follow her everywhere, no one had the right to oppose him, be- cause at birth his mother had died on a wooden bed, bitten by the cold, and he, helpless, could not do any- thing, only watch and not to understand, as towards the end the rules of the game are broken and you don't know much anymore, and his only recourse was stub- bornness, moving the game into extra time, because once it was over, the light went out like his father did after twelve, to economize, and he under the duvet continued reading by the light of a Tiger lantern, and the story went on, the demons of imagination taking the reins and driving the laden cart over rainy valleys and forests, in the vague hope of finding a place safe from the eyes of his fellows, which They followed him everywhere, at first they asked him for good grades at school, then they sent him to the Olympics thinking he would get prizes, then the money for meditation, a place at the university, a place for which he had com- muted on the red train from rust and rats, every week, then, later they asked him to find a purpose, a stable job, to find a decent, obedient wife, to stop drinking, because drink destroys a man, so they had told him, and later they had asked him for a plod, a continuity, because his years had gathered in bunches on the bal- cony and did not want to leave, over the empty beer bottles, over the stack of books tied with string, the dust had settled comfortably . He was getting old, and everyone looked down on him for it as if it were his fault; when the money was flowing, friends were con- stantly knocking on his door and laughing like a big family, years later when poverty was also knocking on the wooden door, it was his turn, they had all scat- tered, the wives had moved early, anticipating the mo-

ment, the children with of them, in the old-fashioned and old-fashioned apartment he was the only one left, with white hair, a slut, tired, with a concave chest, reddened by the moths of memories, in the dim light of the radio, like a crystal ashtray in a shop window, not long ago he had been the center of attention, and the conclusions were not rushed, the last lines came slowly, trembling, and brought nothing good, only more questions, and more anxieties, and he did not want that, he did not think that the long-awaited end would did not bring him the well-deserved peace, his whole life had been a chaos, an endless race, in which he had lost everything, lost time, lost the whistles at Still in a steam of sweat and food, lost his beloved dogs that he had buried in the yard at country, he'd lost a brother, he'd lost a few poker games, he'd lost his apartment keys tied around his neck, he'd lost everything that could be lost in a life, and he'd definitely gained experience, which now, in the last hundred yards, it was useless, it was insufficient to bind anything concrete together, the binder, the key element was missing, and his last battle was announced to be harder than all the others put together, he felt used, no one had told him that he would not be helped in the true sense of the word, like the primordial path, from conception to birth, will be doomed to loneliness, everything will be just a simple decoration, meant to defeat it."

Test three.

"The station was empty. It smelled like chlorine and lemon. The woman in red appeared. The heels, a shrill noise. Tall, brunette, a symmetrical body of artificial beauty but strong. The surrounding colors were fading. Everything, out of the blue, had turned gray. "I am Esther. With whom do I have the pleasure?" . She was someone else, totally changed. It looked like the geishas in Addison Square, the expensive ones that not everyone can afford. I could find no fault with it. Perfect articulation, sensual tone, rarely blinked. Long fingers tapped on the desk. Thighs didn't stick out much. Thin. What a hoot, I told myself. Or rather

a hologram, a spy. I thought that behind her was an old man who smelled bad and I answered him in two bristles: "Roger Mood. I haven't received anything from the Mavek station for several weeks. An anomaly has been reported. Can you tell me what happened?" There was a silence and the young lady turned away. He moved from one thigh to the other. Look down. She was looking for something in her phonebook. He raises his head, looks into my eyes, jubilates. Draw a smile. Keep the tone: „I'm GoldenBoy, you probably know what I'm talking about. I'm under strict orders not to divulge anything except to the Academy, and that's in Addison Square. Not here. We leave im-



Amalia Tirica

mediately. You must be patient. There you will find the truth. "Then he got up and disappeared. I was left speechless and alone. I couldn't communicate with my people from the station. I was at the hands of this weirdo who smelled of perfume from one end to the other. There are big stakes at stake, GoldenBoy was the largest private mining company in AdisonSquare High People. That sounds like the Ming Dynasty dishes that Grandpa had perched on the cabinet. I was not allowed to touch them. There was no point in complicating things. I walked on her hand and I did bad. Never trust beautiful women.

The road was not without worries. The young lady in red stood in front of me. I don't know how she got into the room. She sat on the corner of the bed, silent. I felt weak, I was hungry. The words had stopped in his chest. We were looking at each other. I was afraid and like a dog, the woman pounced on me. As White had done with the bunny. She stood up and her breasts moved away from each other as if it were natural. The chest opened like an extra cavity and two identical women emerged from the blackness of her middle. They sat at my head and began to speak in an unknown language. I couldn't move. I didn't understand one iota of what they were saying. It was like a strange, sad song. It was as if I had witnessed my own birth. The colors returned to their origin, the surrounding objects took on new dimensions. Everything was foreign to me as if I had just opened my eyes for the first time. Every line, every

dot, an infinity of questions, the images overlapped and I didn't understand much as much as I wanted to.

...

I had fallen into a fisherman's net.

The sun was drying the wet skin and the flickering of the fish struggling near me sounded familiar. The fisherman was an old man with a burnt face. He looked at me and said:

- And you showed up?! How many times do I have to tell you to stop walking around here, silver! And in his hazy eyes I fell like into a cold, bottomless lake. The wheels of the carts turned from the field, the children's faces glistened in the sun, and the woman wrapped them all in the red blanket of moths, no one was afraid, they looked at me with frowns as if I had landed in their cart from the sky, like an unwanted beetle, encapsulated in hard keratin, isolated from the rest of the world like a hermit; taciturn, the chariot went on, heedless of us, and no hand dared to touch me. I was looking at the muddy field that was slowly drying behind me, the birds had settled on a mound of dirt. And they looked at me with a frown. They had never seen such a robust beetle, such a silent embodiment. Their faces looked like crosses to me. They condemned the beaten track. It was too late now. I couldn't get up anymore. The forces had given up on me. When I got to the threshing floor, they broke a hard loaf of bread and handed it to me. It smelled like rancid flour. I couldn't eat, I held it in my hand for a while. The others ate in silence. From time to time they glanced at me. Then they would lower their eyes and think about their own. Offended, beaten by fate, these people knew what they were doing, or at least that's how they gave the impression. They hit the ground with dusty hands. The wooden tails crackled and the black earth exposed like peeling skin. I could have laughed to lighten the mood. But I had no more lips. The lips had remained in the room, on Ester's white skin. The woman had been bought from the bazaar by a Turk. He had bought his freedom with the price of his body. And now the same body was given to me on a Sunday. This girl exuded so much peace that at first I thought she was a doll. The first contact preserves all the beauty, leaving nothing to be seen, like a silent valley that you have seen for the first time and leaves you speechless. But Ester was not here with me. He had stayed in the room, sheltered. I had to face these innocent people alone. "

Dr. Thomass stared blankly at the screen. The tests were by no means what the Commission was looking for. Roger lay connected to Sincon *. The body had visibly dried up in the last few days. They no longer had anything to look for in his mind, which was so messed up beyond measure. They had not passed the wall.

They had passed the protective barrier of an already weakened memory. There are incidents that you can't take out whole, no matter how hard you try. The brain refuses to bring them up. Besides, Roger Mood was in a deplorable state. You were crying with pity. That's what the old doctor thought.

He turned off the device and unsoldered its sensors. The sticky skin looked like chewing gum. A plastic case under which you did not suspect that something was still going on. Mercy was an understatement.

Thomass was past eighty. He had seen so much. But Roger's case was different from all the others. The last test was different. In conclusion, it seemed closer to reality. But they could not go on. Thus he would have risked ending up with a vegetable.

* *Sincon Alpha – stream of consciousness viewer. Stream of consciousness: Imaging powerful memories, some present, some hidden from consciousness, and when accessed, intense cortical processes occur.*

Test four.

„The trees left behind were lost like travelers waving at you as you leave the station. The speed was increasing considerably and at one point I had the feeling that the train was going to take off. Actually, I wasn't sure if I was on a train. The strangers around me watched me share what was happening around me. My endless travels made no sense. The helplessness of being born into a world you can't control in any way, where everything is dictated to you by software before you even see the light of day, where things can change a hundred and eighty degrees in a second. And too bad, it hadn't been that way in the beginning. I was so old I was too lazy to get up. Satisfied, like a vessel full of water into which if you pour one more drop everything goes to hell! No matter what I did, no matter what choice I made, nothing would have changed. My whole body was in a deplorable state. As if I had come back from hunting. Like I was hunting myself. People remained behind like lights passed in haste, white dots in a deformed darkness, in which black had lost supremacy, monotonous voices remained behind to close the rough road that seemed to have no end, thousands of derisive sentences buried in the thick mud, you understand that life was nothing but a spot on a white wall, a crushed mosquito for which no one has compassion, something more important is happening above and so on to infinity, like an unstable vortex in which the most beautiful are lost ideas, the most beautiful religions as if they never existed and no one cares, no one can break free from this implacable vortex, no one has the constitution and psyche

ready for such dangerous maneuvers, selfishness still clings to the middle like a viscous precipitate, like a concentrated mess that we cannot get rid of so easily, it takes thousands of years of experience, rectilinear progress, patience and last but not least, compassion, humanity at the highest level, both to be diluted in the present; the train does not slow down, on the window, the world like a bright snake, crawls in the eternal search for sin, sometimes brutally; nothing can stop the bright, ambitious zealous serpent with shiny skin traversing the universe faster than the Demiurge, overtaken by his own creation, reached a blind spot, devoid of inspiration and instinct, withdrawn into his shell, his power of understanding reached an impasse, the world he jubilantly created became an obsession and the replicator spiral could no longer be controlled, matter took its own course, new people, diverse creatures in a tight ecosystem, ready to explode, it cannot stop the process, it is fed up, burdened by all its inaccurate copies, the errors have perpetuated, the space between us has narrowed, soon we will be one and the same tissue with the same diseases of the past, endlessly proliferating

Finally I reached the end. Inside a colossus, above fluttered the detached layers of fat like a spider's web blown by the wind. There, in the dark hollow, the luminous heart beat in an imperfect rhythm and the snake had embedded itself in the ball of fire, in the process of perpetual copulation. They were all present, Ester, a well-dressed guy from Goldenboy, a few soldiers, they were all looking at the red heart, silent, as if they were waiting for me, Ester barely gave me a glance and that was short. They talked about the heart, they gestured. I was just a piece. A piece they had built for a purpose. "Look at Roger Mood," said the well-dressed boy from Goldenboy. And they all turned their heads to me. Ester was changed, cold. He was looking at me like a stranger. They handed me a chair and tied me up. I couldn't fight back, my inert body wouldn't listen to me. "Your memories are very important to us Roger, we want you to be unbiased in this whole thing, you'll save lives, think about it, we don't want to harm you Mood, we just want access to your memory, boy." And they connected me to the red heart like a device. It started again.

My grandfather used to tell me to pay more attention to intentions than to people. People are not dangerous. Their intentions can, in time, turn deadly. A man is a toy. A lethal weapon. In the house by the lake, Mumu had brought a dead stag. Sad. A bastard I would have defended with my own life, so sad was he that I wanted to hit Mumu. Grandpa stopped me. "Roger, this bird is a piece of you, it is another image of your self, there is no point. Hitting her solves nothing. You can't change an animal's instinct yet. That's

how we all are. Look around. We're just pretending. We haven't changed a thing. We all want more. More peace, more life. It takes time. We have to go back to the past to make things right. Everything starts from the red heart of our little universe. That no one has seen, no one has ever touched. If we can stop the dark snake, we still have a chance. Know. You don't understand yet. But remember everything I tell you, because later, at the right time, you will remember.

Dead leaves swirled up and crashed against the trees. The grass cut, Mumu, the dead bat blinking. They were trying to tell me something. Communicate with my sadness, unknown connections, I could feel my brain unravel and let them touch it, speak to it softly like a dying person, time had compressed into the tiny spaces between the cells, losing its definition, the tissues had shrunk under the same impulse, the dead wretch in me was the suffering of a newborn, my cells were Mumu's too, I communicated through the same tubes with the outside, through the same tubes I eliminated faeces, I was a giant-luminous octopus, a creature without a clue, without prejudice, without fear, without any trace of human feeling, I was secure, master of all that I could see. I was God. Invincible and omniscient. Full of the other living cells that came off like an infinite carpet. I was the universe. I was the Big Time, Tao Pixe.

I saw Ester grab my head and look into my brain. Ester had remained as cold, everyone was silent, I had spoken what they were looking for, I had seen what they had never seen, the origin of darkness, the old man Tao Pixe..."

„The world has no truth. The same face becomes another when we turn the object closer to the light and look at it from a different angle.

The seconds, before coming to life, leave behind a cold surface. Everything degenerates as time passes.

The rotation will disappear, giving way to vibrations.

The universe will close into its shell like a snail, and its traces will remain for generations to come.

And it will all start over. It will repeat itself endlessly as humanity's alarm bells. We will look different, because the memories, in the closed corridor of space crossing, will degrade, leaving in their place, scribbles, incoherent lines that lead nowhere, meaningless signatures, corners of blue or black paste, folded edges stained with greasy fingerprints. There will be no two similar situations, no two identical bodies. Everything will be consumed just as quickly.

Time will become a "Colombre" monster, from which everyone will run. The movements will intensify and disappear from the vibration graph. We won't have time to realize. Birth and death will come so close that there will be a real spectacle in the narrow aisle. Life will redefine its rules." Tao Pixe 3.1

DREAMING OF MART SENSON

LIVIU SURUGIU

Liviu Surugiu (born in 1969) is a writer from outside the English-speaking world. He is editor for the foreign stories in the Romanian magazines "CSF Magazine". Among his recent achievements, his prose was selected by *The Lunar Codex* project in NASA's Artemis program to be taken to the Polaris time capsule that will be buried by the Astrobotic Griffin rover on the Moon next year.

He is one of the most translated Romanian writers in recent years in Europe and U.S.A. In Romania, Liviu Surugiu has published from 1994 to date in the most important magazines: Jurnalul SF, SuperNova, Helion, Gazeta SF, Argos, Nautilus, CPSF, CPSFA-Nemira, Ficțiuni, ZIN, and has appeared in over twenty anthologies.

He received six Honorable Mention and three Silver HM from "Writers of the Future", Hollywood. As a Romanian science fiction author, He won forty-three different awards over a thirty years career.

Books published: "IMMAN" - novel thriller (2011); "ATAVIC" - novel thriller (2014), Tritonic Publishing House; "LOVE AND DEATH FOREVER" - romance novel (2014), Tritonic Publishing House; "THE REMNANTS OF DREAMS" - volume of short prose (2015), Tracus Arte Publishing House; "ERAL" - romance and science fiction novel (2015), Univers Publishing House; "THIS IS MY BODY" - volume of short prose (2016), Tracus Arte Publishing House; "PULSAR" - volume of short prose (2017). Ed.itura Tracus Arte; "GIRL ON THE SILK ROAD" - volume of short prose, Polirom Publishing House, 2021; "SEVRAJ" - noir novel, Polirom Publishing House, 2022.

Mart was making love to his first wife. Linda was planting colored blooms on his chest with her large, smoking lips—

He woke up in a sweat.

Sonia was fumbling with the clock on the nightstand. "It's late, Mart," she said.

He saw the marks in the bathroom for the first time. They covered his chest, making it look as if he'd slept on his stomach and been left with the imprint of buttons in his skin.

"Mart!" Sonia called to him from the kitchen. "Do you want toast?"

"Sure thing, love." It was the strangest thing. He could have sworn the marks on his chest looked a little like Linda.

#

At work, between cases, he looked for her phone number in his address book. Coffee spilled down his chest. "Shit," he said.

He undid his tie and his shirt and froze.

He tried to breathe normally. It was afternoon, and the workday was nearly over. Enough time had passed, but the impressions on his chest hadn't gone away.

He touched them. The ridges seemed even more pronounced. In fact, the portraits drawn on his flesh had moved a little. Toward his heart.

Mart took out his tie pin and removed the calculator and address book from his coat pocket. He broke

two buttons and threw his pocket square away. They had to have been the reason for the hieroglyphs on his skin.

#

That evening, he got a phone call. From Sonia, actually. Her little brother had suffered a mild heart attack. They fell asleep, worried.

Nothing had woken him up, neither Sonia nor the clock, but he rose from his bed earlier than usual. He brought a hand to his stomach and went into the bathroom. Mart turned on the light and looked at the masterpiece. Depicted in bas-relief on his stomach was his brother-in-law; it couldn't have been anything else.

"Shit," he said. "Shit."

#

He pushed his way through despite the protests of the people in the waiting room, making his way past the secretary so fast, she didn't have the time to get out of her chair. When she saw him, the Latina nurse jumped out of his way in terror.

The man in the white smock rose from his desk. "Mart, tell me I'm not dreaming!"

"You tell me that," Mart said. He picked up the business card and threw it onto the desk. "*Dr. Aldiss—nightmares, prophetic dreams, and insomnia,*" it read.

"Jeff," Mart said as he sat on the couch and removed his shirt.

#

Mart slept a little better that night after having

made love to his beloved wife. He'd been neglecting her a little neglected lately.

Sonia, in seventh heaven, pulled the heavy, white comforter over herself and asked him to take the next day off; her brother was in the hospital in Philadelphia.

"You can go," he said. "I'll leave you the car, but I have two meetings. The director's coming back tomorrow, and to be honest, I'm a little afraid."

For a good reason, it turned out. His fear exploded the next morning when he found the director in his bathroom—more specifically on his back, between his shoulder blades—when he used a second mirror to double-check his hair.

Thousands of glass shards scattered on the bathroom floor.

#

The next day, he went in for a more serious analysis. He simply could not undress at home anymore. The images of their neighbors had been drawn on both legs, smart little varicose veins full of evil and greed.

"Did you dream of Linda again?" Jeff asked, palpating the ridges on Mart's chest.

They had spread out slowly, from the left nipple down to his belly button; Linda always had been possessive.

"They look good."

"They look good?!" Mart said. He felt as if he was about to explode. His skin felt as if it were on fire.

"And now? Tell me what you feel now."

Mart scratched at the marks on his chest until his fingernails came away bloody.

"You're an idiot," Jeff declared calmly. "Maybe something will show up on your dick, and you can scratch that, too."

Mart froze. He'd felt something to that effect in the bathroom.

"God!" Jeff's eyes grew wide. "You should've dreamed of Benjamin Franklin! With a little ink, you could've used those on a press to print hundred-dollar bills."

#

Sonia opened the door, beaming, just like old times. It wasn't normal. Mart gave her a suspicious look.

"Mart, you don't even know how happy I am! Jimmy...Handsome Jimmy is here."

That's why she was so pleased. His brother-in-law had been released from the hospital and was probably going to stay with them for a week, living like a king, being driven around in Mart's Mercedes and fed at the Royal Club.

"What's that on your hand?"

"I cut myself on a folder."

He went into the bathroom, locked the door, unwound the bandage, and looked down at his palm. An unknown figure looked back at him, mirroring his amazement.

#

Mart Senson called Jeff from the hallway, whisper-

ing, so he wouldn't wake Sonia.

"Mart? It's two a.m.!"

"Listen—"

"Did something happen?"

"Jeff, I'm afraid to sleep. My brother-in-law is here."

"And?"

"Dammit, Jeff. All evening he watched horror movies. I watched, too...just a minute without intending to. Normally, I don't watch things like that or I'm afraid to sleep. What if I wake up with something like that on my face tomorrow?"

"You have no way of knowing that will be the case. Calm down, Mart."

"And something else happened, Jeff. Where I scratched myself and broke the lines... they're starting to grow."

"I'll come right away."

#

Aldiss called a few minutes later as he'd agreed. Mart answered from the bedroom, accidentally waking Sonia who, half-asleep, only understood something about an immediate trip to Detroit.

"Aren't you going to pack?" she muttered. "How long will you be gone?"

"It shouldn't matter...two or three days. Love, don't worry. I've been gone before."

"Not without your bags."

He watched her as she ran from the bathroom to the kitchen and back to the bedroom. "Razor, toothbrush, shirts..."

He sat on the edge of the bed and watched her. His heart suddenly tightened. Sonia continued to run, collecting things for his bag, but for several seconds, he had the impression that time had stood still. He stood and wrapped his arms around Sonia. It felt as if this were the last time he'd see her.

"Mart, I love you."

"Me, too."

A third voice broke in. "I dreamed about you, Mart."

They both startled. It was Handsome Jimmy.

"Listen, kid, why don't you take your nap?" Mart asked, angry. It was almost three a.m.

The giant rocked on his feet and gave a prolonged yawn. "Are you going somewhere? When are you coming back?"

"None of your business!"

"Mart, he didn't say anything wrong," Sonia intervened. "He just said that he'd dreamed of you."

Jimmy stepped back. "I don't mean that I dreamed of you just now."

"Then, when?"

"Last week."

The doorbell rang.

Sonia tried to joke. "It's like you're leaving for war—since when are you working with Jeff Aldiss?"

#

He would have fallen asleep in the car if the headlights of the oncoming cars hadn't blinded him.

"I hate this town at night," Aldiss said, looking at him. "Try not to fall asleep. Here—have some more coffee."

Jeff's lab was on the top floor of the left wing of the university building. He turned all the lights on and put a lab coat on over his suit. "Aside from the fact that we're on break, this wing of the facility is closed for renovation," he said. He motioned for Mart to sit on something that looked like a dentist's chair.

"Don't tell me you want me to fall asleep with that wire in my mouth," Mart protested.

"Is it humiliating?"

"It's irritating!"

"But you won't have any more dreams."

It turned out to be Mart's first night without a dream in a long while. At least, not one that he remembered.

Jeff Aldiss nearly burst through the door early the next morning. "Let's take a look, Mart—anything new? Here...no. There...no. Sit down. Perfect. I called the director of your office."

"The director?"

"Exactly. To excuse your absence. 'Hmm, Dr. Aldiss?'" he repeated the conversation to Mart. "I really appreciate Mr. Ellison. He's one of my best defenders. Hmm! Strange, but I could swear that I had a dream about him recently...Now, I remember...hmm!" What do you say?"

"Hmm!"

"Last night, you said the same thing about your brother-in-law."

Mart tried to relax.

"And now, the bomb," Aldiss rejoiced. "Who do you think I talked to last night on the telephone?"

"The devil?"

"Not quite."

"Linda?"

"Exactly." Jeff paced around the sofa. "It's all right, she's working at the same bar in Florida where we met her. That's where I called her."

"Why?"

"I wanted to ask her something, but there was no need to ask."

"She told you herself, evidently. What was it?"

"She dreamed of you one morning, recently."

Aldiss examined Mart's living portraits for nearly two hours. They had turned into smooth, purple buds, as if getting ready to sprout. "I don't mean to alarm you," Aldiss said quietly, his eyes roving over the battlefield of Mart's epidermis through a magnifying glass. "It's not just the broken ones that are growing. They all are!"

"Well, that's gonna calm me down."

"And you say that I don't know you. Open your palm."

"I've never seen this person in my life...Jeff?"

Aldiss had fallen silent. He barely succeeded in making a gesture, as if they weren't the only ones in the room. "In your palm...Mart, it's you."

Mart didn't whiten, nor did he faint or tremble. It was true: it was his own face, but much older. That's why he hadn't recognized it. Still, it couldn't be a good sign.

#

In his office overlooking the edge of the city, Jeff Aldiss nearly jumped to his feet. "Sonia?"

"I called the company," she said. "They said that Mart's in the hospital." Her expression was utterly confused.

"Sonia, it was strictly secret! That's why they lied to you. Do you want to get us fired?"

"Aldiss, they can't fire *you*." Silence followed her into the office, like a third person, entering uninvited from the empty foyer.

"I'll tell you about it. You might not believe me, Sonia—"

"Even if it's unbelievable, I'll believe it—of that, you can be sure."

#

The university was covered with scaffolds and workers, looking like Gulliver having been taken prisoner by the Lilliputians. Jeff Aldiss had flashed his ID three times before. He reached his destination accompanied by a woman in a hood. "Actually, it doesn't seem fantastical at all to me," she was saying mostly to herself in order to strengthen her courage.

"And it's not. Here, I need to give the door code."

"Do you know how I started to suspect it? I dreamed of him."

Jeff jumped back as if he'd been shocked. "Ah...it's nothing fantastic, Sonia. The important thing is not to be frightened. Understand?"

"Why would I be frightened of him?"

Aldiss pushed the door open.

"The important thing is not to be frightened." He froze.

Sonia pushed him aside. Then, she screamed and fell to the floor. In front of her, a sketch of her own image, frightfully enlarged, moved slowly.

Jeff kicked aside the tangle of hair that had fallen from Mart Ellison's head.

Mart was rocking with his hands on his ears as if in front of an unchained orchestra. All of his hair had fallen out, leaving the white skin on the back of his head to swell and crack as it took on Sonia's image, the contents of his most recent dream.

The doctor dragged her out of there, and then he locked the door by typing in a very long code.

#

When Jeff returned, Mart was sleeping. He had rooted through the bag Sonia had dropped on the floor. He'd evidently liked the food, but he'd scattered it everywhere. Jeff suddenly trembled, having per-

ceived why his friend had been so clumsy he'd broken one jar and failed to open another: each of his fingers bore the imprint of a tiny, pitiful image, none of which he recognized.

He approached the monitor and tried to playback the surveillance video to see how the latest dream had turned into living flesh.

"Al...diss.. ss...." The voice seemed to come from Mart. He was very tired and had enormous, black rings beneath his eyes. When the doctor saw his eyes, he felt as if his heart would stop: the left iris was sculpted in the shape of a well-known figure.

"Mart! Mart, can you hear me?"

"Yes."

"Did you go through these drawers?"

"I found a picture. Your sister?"

Jeff Aldiss swallowed, his mouth was dry. "She's been dead for a while."

"She still seems beautiful to me." Mart Sensonblinked, his moist eyelid making the human-shaped eye gleam more powerfully, looking like a living sapphire.

"She died in her sleep," Mart said.

"How do you know, Mart?"

Sensonbreathed heavily, as if he'd been running through open country.

"You said that every image on me is the effect of a mutual dream."

Aldiss tried to change the subject. "You aren't going to ask me about Sonia?"

"I felt her. You understand that I wasn't standing with my back to her on purpose. As she approached, something in me drew me toward my wife. Here...it's her image, isn't it?"

Jeff changed the tape in the surveillance system.

"With this eye, I see your sister," Mart said. "At least it's a pleasant image: Jenny K. Aldiss."

"God, Mart, how do you know her name?"

"I dreamed of her. But it was something unique. She died dreaming when she was just a girl."

"What are you trying to say?"

"If someone dies dreaming, how is the dream to blame? The dream cannot die."

"The body and the brain rot!"

"A star can die, and its light still comes to us every night. Jeff, your sister begs me to wake her from her dream...so she can finish dying."

Tears flowed from his gleaming eye, which seemed to carry the pictures in it like a film strip. Secret pictures, forgotten faces, forbidden scenes, memories that weren't his. Stories, pain, illusions, deceptions, and hope. An un-lived life as it could have been.

"Jeff...she's carrying a secret."

Dr. Aldiss leaned against the wall. He took off his glasses and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"I'm going to die as well," Mart continued.

"H...how is that, friend?" Jeff stammered. "Your... your picture. Older. From the future—it tells you that you're going to reach that age!"

Mart Senson raised his palm slowly. The eyes of his self-portrait closed. "I'm sorry, Jeff, but I had another dream. It wasn't *mine*. It was your sister's."

"Where is she?"

The other hand!

The doctor felt his mind slipping away. Curiosity, indifference, wickedness, nearly hate....

"Let's see it."

"No, Jeff!" Mart tried to get up, but he couldn't.

"Open your palm!" Aldiss demanded. "Mart, listen—you're the only person in the world, possibly in the universe, in which thought and flesh are fused." He gave up this approach. Jeff issued a command to the machines and the chair tightened its bands, immobilizing his prey as a bracelet clamped around Mart's clenched fist, but it still wouldn't open.

"Mark, stop resisting. I'm going to give you an injection."

"It's an ugly dream," Senson gasped. "I can't keep it."

"With who?" screamed the doctor, furiously. "What do you have there? Whose picture is in your palm? I want to see it. I order you. I have to see it now!"

The sedative took effect. Slowly—too slowly—Mart's palm opened, the doctor saw what was there, and his mind broke.

He had forgotten.

He had forgotten what he had dreamed that night.

He had forgotten what he had dreamed for so many years. Every night.

He had dreamed of her as she'd died in her sleep. Choked to death in her sleep. As she'd opened her eyes, seeing him grunt like a pig atop her.

He had dreamed of his sister.

Jeff Aldiss shook. Like a palm reader, the hand showed his unfinished past and very brief future. Like a mirror in which, over his own image, he saw Jenny's face, crowned with five, hideous fingers wearing a veil of dirty fingernails. He felt drawn to her. He was growing sleepy, and he knew that he'd never wake again.

He almost heard his final heartbeat before he fell lifeless to the floor.

A moment later, the chair released Mart Senson who rose in all his terrifying majesty and let out a lazy yawn. The sedative had enhanced his powers.

Only then, after his will had disappeared, only then, had the nightmare began. Wherever he would be taken, buried, cut into tiny pieces, burned, pulverized, wherever and whatever they would do to him, only now would he begin. And all that dreamed of him would be dreamed of by him.

Be careful. Don't dream of Mart.

Don't dream of him. Of Mart...Mart...Mart...Mart...

THE VENUS PILL (GALACTIC FASHION)

LAURA CEICA

Laura Ceica (born in 1976) is a Romanian poet, novel writer and plastic artist. She graduated the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy at the West University Timișoara in 1999, and has a Master's degree in Letters (2001). She made her publishing debut with the Eminesciana poetry, in the magazine "Rostirea Românească", year IX, no. 1-2-3, 2003. Editorial debut with the poetry volume *Ziggurat*, Anthropos publishing house, Timisoara (2005). Collaborations with literary magazines: Literary Transylvania, Banat, Biblioteca Nova, Citadela, Coloana infinitului, Helion, I SF db (Internet Science-Fiction Database) (online), Orizont, Poezia, Rostirea românească, Ulysse (online). Member of the Romanian Writers' Union.

Books published: *Ziggurat* (poems), Timisoara, Anthropos publishing house, 2005; *Love poems*, Timisoara, Anthropos publishing house, 2006; *Taboo* [poem], Timisoara, Anthropos publishing house, 2007; *Alia (a novel)* [poem in prose], Timisoara, Anthropos publishing house, 2010, *Days of the birds* [science fiction prose], Timisoara, Eurostampa publishing house, 2016; *How to build a galactic empire* [science fiction prose], Timisoara, Eurostampa publishing house, 2018. Regular contributor to Helion, Srsff magazines. Award received for fine art at Romcon 2017.

Welcome to the world of the feminine! Welcome to the flying cities of Venus! I'm your host Ornan and I am here to present to you today's fashion! (the impatient listeners already begin to emit violet reflections through their own connections).

Today the pampas pudding of medium consistency and nervous viscosity is worn pinkish-green, thrown around the neck and spilling over the chest to the waist (don't go beyond this key point because it's bad!)

Below that the golden planetary circles are recommended, which continuously rotate and reflect in myriads of shades. The less the better!

Don't put anything else on your feet, except asab shoes (the mini boxes with heels made of other mini boxes, the explanation comes soon after). Oh, what a delicacy and what a fractal system we can find here! They must definitely come wrapped up and with bows, otherwise they are fakes! Be careful not to trip yourself (if you haven't worn them since they were last in fashion), as there have been reports of broken leg injuries and head landings. But it's worth the risk, right? What doesn't a woman do to make herself beautiful!? (the audience's magenta cheers grow even louder at this line, some accompanied by purple pearly hearts).

Oh, and don't forget, the icing on the cake: a simple

make-up, only with Fleming Alfean Bondoc feathers, not too pink or too mottled, slightly gray, to give the impression of seriousness, sprinkled only here and there with fragile grains of ming-ming fruit that glow when picked at dusk.

That's it girls, don't forget a big smile and you'll be super successful today! And if any interplanetary intruder of the wrong sex (she grimaces as she says this) addresses him with contempt, contact the Venusian Fashion Rights Super Police (sic) immediately! Individuals like this are inconceivable beings with completely limited imaginations and useless to the universe, who do not understand the most important details of existence (the entire audience cheers online, because no one likes male tourists).

And at the end, wrinkling her nose slightly, she concludes apotheotically:

"Good thing our planet doesn't grow something like that! Excuse me, doesn't give birth (it would even be possible for you girls to give birth, doesn't it seem normal to you to come out directly from the eggs of the soil?... But in the end, some primitives, she concludes with a gesture of her hand). To that she adds some shrill, typically feminine squeals, and then shuts down the connection with a flexible flick of her finger, in a planet-wide roar of applause and violet cheers of all shades.

LAURA CEICA

THE SUNDAY PILL

Today is Sunday and there are no pills left in the box. On the bottom there is just a note with something written on it. It looks to me like it's made of a paper-like material, but it changes texture when you touch it. Weird!

I open and read:

The short recipe for creating a world. It's getting really exciting, so I continue:

- one planet piece is taken (or asteroid, satellite or orbital station according to taste)
- about 200g (amounts are noted in earthly measurements to be understood by the recipient) starships of various calibers, ranging between cruisers and small assault ships
- 10 pieces of flying ilix harvest platforms from a pink planet in Alpha Centauri
- 3-4 kg aliens (preferably gray or tentacular, Martians are no longer fashionable)
- about 10-20g of multi-colored stardust squirmed

among the stars just out of their eggs and a little more of the secret ingredient (we can't say here, but it can be found in the index). I quickly look back, I look in the box, oh shit, the index is gone, so to hell with the secret ingredient! I continue reading a little disappointed:

They put it all through a Nadurian-made galactic blender until it vomits (here I wonder if you or they vomit?) and then season it with some complicated terms like "entanglement", "subspace", "torus" andStay a little while, someone knocks insistently on the door. I think it's them, the people with the hats. They found me, they followed the pill box. Definitely looking for this recipe, otherwise why would they be here! Should I give it to them? Hmmm, I don't think so, I should hide it somewhere. I knew there was something wrong with this whole thing from the moment it arrived at my door, without a sender. Shhh, I'm going to quickly scarp through the back gate with the box under my arm. Don't say a word!



Laura Ceica

"OPERATION COMPASS"

COSTEL BABOȘ

Costel Baboș (born in 1962) is a Romanian writer, music composer and a member of the Helion club since 1982. Literary debut in Helion magazine no. 2, 1982, with the "Home" sketch.

Graduated from the Polytechnic Institute Traian Vuia Timișoara/Faculty of Organic Chemical Technology in 1987. Published books: debut with *Un om din Wayfalua* (*A man from Wayfalua*), Marineasa publishing house, 1994; *Probleme bărbățești* (*Male issues*), Marineasa publishing house, 2004; *Aș crede în Dumnezeu* (*I would trust God*), Cartea Românească publishing house, 2005; „*Un om din Wayfalua și alte povestiri*” (*A man from Wayfalua and some other short stories*), Bastion publishing house, 2009; *”Epistolar”* (*Epistolary*), Art Pres publishing house, 2011.

Passionate (past tense) about Fine Arts & photography. Since 2014 he is passionate about electronic music and music composition; genres approached: New Age, Filk, Dystopian, Alien and Universe Music and many other music genres. He is senior editor at Helion (print).

Quasar, conspiratorial name on the Dark-Web, established to meet Un-Ali En (Ohm) at Grădina Crângași, close to the old city center. The meeting was set for 4 p.m., on the dot. Although the place looked derelict, it was air-conditioned and, at that hour, people crowded inside, pushed by the stifling, suffocating heat. At precisely 16, Quasar pulled up a chair and sat down at the only occupied table on the terrace, overlooking Dragomir Tăutu Boulevard. A chestnut tree took the place of an umbrella, spreading its impressive crown over a quarter of the garden.

“Kind regards”, greeted a female acquaintance, a certain Ivanca, who was just passing in front of the garden, leaving the imprint of her heels on the hot pavement.

“With all due respect, professor.” Then Quasar addressed the one with whom he had fixed the meeting and whom he was seeing face to face for the first time.

“Did you arrive long ago?”

A tired waiter, with his bow tie half out of his pocket, in no mood, approaches the table more, dragging his feet.

“What can I serve you?” he asked softly in a coy, dry, damp voice.

“With a water!”

“Something else?”

“That’s it.”

“Mineral? Flat?”

“Flat. And an ashtray. If smoking is allowed.”

“It’s allowed.”

“Thank you. I’m Quasar 74”, he resumed the con-

versation with Un-Ali-en (Ohm), taking off his sunglasses. “We spoke on...” He held out his hand. After two seconds he pulled it back, realizing his palms were sweaty. He wiped himself off with a napkin that he fished from the neighboring table and dismissed the waiter with a short gesture of his chin, letting him understand that it was time to leave them alone.

The waiter retreated grumbling.

“... in this heat...”

“Yeah, pff, slop. Because of the humidity, Quasar explains, even though it hasn’t rained in a while. This is the disadvantage of summers in the plains. But the flies...he cuts the hot air with his palm, as if he were removing a fly, they are...something else entirely. We live in a city that was once clean. Now the trees have been removed, the green spaces paved and flooded with garbage. A dumpster city. Critical? Maybe... Did you bring me... what we discussed?”

Un-Ali En (Ohm) pats the top of his head.

“No?”

Un-Ali En (Ohm) blinked repeatedly, cooling the surrounding air.

“Yes?”

A white cabbage butterfly sat down on the table, between the two, resting for a few fractions of a second, after which it resumed beating its wings and disappeared among the chestnut leaves.

Quasar looked for the waiter who stopped showing up with the water. Resume after a break.

“It’s not just about promises. Well, today, exceptionally, I’m in a hurry. I have to get to the County Hos-

pital in an hour. Of course, I hate it. It is a source of infection."

"..."

"Exactly, but I explained why. Of course, to me." He delicately touched the briefcase he kept under the table, on his knee. "First, I want to see if everything is as described..."

"..."

"Since the day before yesterday."

"..."

"They're here." He lifted the briefcase off the table, looking towards the door through which the waiter had disappeared. "Marked, checked, stamped and accompanied by a quality certificate. And you... Is that it?" Quasar's face lit up almost instantly. "O-ho!" He carefully opened the box and held out the briefcase for change, then repackaged the device and slipped the box into his pocket. "Extraordinary!"

Un-ali En (Ohm) used one of his countless arms to draw the number 5 on the table.

"Five more?"

Un-ali En (Ohm) agreed, imperceptibly moving his ears.

"Why didn't you tell me on the messenger? I can afford it. Even more. Aren't there more? They...I should have imagined. Extremely rare. Do they come from the same place? Izmir...isn't that a city? Or province. Or what it will be. Iezumiir... I understand. He apologizes. I hope I didn't hurt your pride. I'll take the others too," he decided with glazed eyes.

"..."

- Not on me. I didn't come prepared. If I knew before I left home... An hour before I left home... Please, two hours before...

"..."

"Iezumir? What kind of planet? Mimic perplexity. In the constellation Cora? I haven't heard of it. Probably a million light years away. It's no longer news, everyone believes in aliens today. Although no one has seen one. To what? I assume you are in costume. That four of the six ears are fake. Are you not in costume? Isn't your name Un-ali En (Ohm)? Are you Un-ali En? Ah, an alien... Some say that God should also be considered an alien. An invisible one."

"..."

"Visible versus invisible."

"..."

"No, not even angels can be seen."

"..."

"We could right now... you'll be late no doubt. It's about my mother-in-law, visits can be extended until 19:00 at the latest. How can I be married to my mother-in-law? Certainly an impression, they resemble

each other like two drops of water."

"..."

"Are you taking me? Through this traffic? When I say they look alike, I'm not referring to the fact that a child pays for the sins of its parents, but to the transmission of genetic material from one generation to another. Sins are, in fact, small deficiencies or defects, if you will, of the genes. Small imperfections. Almost all diseases are due to a genetic component. Do you have a car parked nearby?"

Un-ali En (Ohm) waved one of his 3 fingers of his front arm as if hailing a taxi, and suddenly, out of nowhere, out of space, a two-person flying vehicle appeared. It was hovering (seemingly suspended) a foot above the ground. An oval disc with blue-white shades, reflective and transparent dome. The seat and navigation system could be seen through the dome. He invites Quasar 74 inside. Quasar hesitated.

"I have never seen such a small aircraft, without wings, without propellers. Only in the movies. Maybe you really are an alien. Like that, full of scales. An alien! Crocodile eyes... the nose is the most successful. The more nostrils the better. Not absurd, no. Because you insist, brrr, from what planet? Don't you live on a planet? But on what?"

"..."

"A satellite... Ohm?! In other circumstances it would seem like a science fiction joke. It means you got here in a spaceship. Which should be huge. Quasar looked again in disbelief at the vehicle suspended above the square slate stones that paved the summer garden. Then he looked up, rummaging through the few whitish clouds in the sky. There must be an interstellar ship somewhere..."

"...!"

- Yes, leave my mother-in-law, Quasar decided, standing up, the days are not over, take me home, we make the transaction in a place that you can also choose, and then, if you insist, show me the ship! Anyway, I won't believe it, not even when I see it with my own eyes."

At that exact moment, the waiter with a bored face announces over the radio, with his hand over his mouth, articulating each syllable, the launch of "Operation Compass".

Note:

As a result of "Operation Compass", all 4 police crews engaged in the intervention at Grădina Crângași would disappear without a trace. With all the vehicles they used to get there amid the roar of sirens, blocking road traffic. With everything with the video surveillance system and with everything with a waiter.

Andrei Nedel (born in 1997). As a science fiction fan, he discovered the Helion Club and got involved in the club's activities since 2014, participating at the club's meetings, having his debut with a short story. Meanwhile he continued helping with club activities, by helping to organize two international Helion conferences, with him responsible for the German participants. During his time with the club he was also active, for a short period time, as secretary of the Helion Association. andrei Nedel continued his membership to the Helion Club also from a distance, while he was studying in Germany, Business Information Technology at Hochschule Karlsruhe. In 2018 he received a bachelor's degree at the West University of Timisoara, where he studied Accounting and Business Information Technology. In 2020 he obtained a master's degree.

Along with the short story with which he made his debut in the Helion club, there are three other stories he wrote and presented at the meetings.

As a member of the club he kept an interest in the genre also by helping with some chapters of the Helion Magazine, with translations from German to Romanian, thus discovering very interesting authors, with relevant and important works.

The room had not been ventilated for several days. Next to the room's only window was a solid wooden desk with floral carvings on the edges, spacious drawers, and a hole left in the middle where some type of computer used to be mounted. In his office, Professor Lambert fell asleep with his head against a stack of white papers. He was fast asleep, having spent half the week preparing materials and simulations for his classes in the temporary apartment provided to the teachers by the dean's office. He woke up after one of the alarms set on his calendar started ringing at a volume that was slightly disturbing to his ears. The teacher lifted his heavy head and checked his watch. Oops, I'm late! he thought. In ten minutes he had to enter the course dedicated to living on the so-called Exo-planets. He got up in one movement, ignoring the feeling of vertigo that seized him, and ran in the direction of the bathroom. He was out of there not five minutes later and returned to his desk where he was rummaging through a stack of recently ironed clothes. Where did R2 put the plaid shirt? he wondered, getting ready to call his robot housekeeper. However, he gave up that thought immediately after he found what he was looking for. After changing the baggy blouse he used to hang around the house in for his "lucky" shirt, he activated his retina display, with the default setting showing the exact time. Academic quarter! Good, so I still have time, he said to himself and then went to the Network's room.

How would you like to set your avatar's visibility? a message appeared on the wall of the room. The

teacher selected the mode "from the shoulders up" after which he sat down on the armchair in the center of the room. A drone the size of a tennis ball took off from the shelf where it had been placed and began filming. The class had started.

"Hello! the teacher began. Today I ask you to go through the simulations for Kepler 22-B that I have prepared for you on the common platform." While the teacher took another look at the programs he had uploaded the night before, all the students in the group connected to the Network.

The room, up to that point empty, was filled with the avatars of young people. A few, who had selected a seat further back, were detected by the university's security program, and the professor received an instant notification. "Avatars not allowed on seats 24C and 28A". Without giving any sign of noticing the irregularity, Lambert looked in the direction of the two seats. A robot, which the teacher recognized from an old movie, sat huddled in the standard chair provided for virtual classrooms, far too small for the avatar's size. He didn't see the other student at first, but it was already late. He couldn't waste any more time looking for the second one so he let the security system handle blocking unauthorized avatars and started a simulation to run as an example while the students entered the algorithms. He further let the group work and started a private channel with the daily news. He heard the protests of the two from behind after the system had changed their avatars to ones approved by the university. The students in the front rows could

see how the teacher smiled.

The rest of the course went like any other day. The rest of the day, the professor had two more lectures, after which he stopped at the university's rental office, where he announced his departure from campus. He then left for home. He didn't like the congestion in the subway, nor the crowding in the mecha-bus. He had taken the same route he walked every day, admiring the parks maintained by the independent android associations. The decorative trees, with leaves in all colors, shaded a few metal benches placed on the side of the alleys.

"Good day, Mr. Lambert!" the duty android greeted him. "I heard that your students tried to cheat the system again."

"Hello Humvee!" replied the professor politely. I see that gossip travels fast on the Network, he added.

"You know it!" laughed the android mechanically.

"The trees look splendid today!"

"Thank you," Humvee said excitedly.

The two greeted each other and Lambert moved on. He had exactly four kilometers to go. After passing the park, he had to cross a busy boulevard. Thousands of humans and androids alike emerged daily from the underground tunnel, which also connected to one of the city's subway lines.

A portable speaker belonging to a man on the street blared a song, which Lambert immediately categorized as noise and criticized the generations of young people who listened to those disturbing sounds and encouraged the industry towards continuous change. Oh, if only I could go back in time when music still meant something to people...he thought as he made his way to the exit of the tunnel. That area was more crowded, so he activated the anti-theft mode on his coat and the small briefcase he had slung over his right shoulder.

By the time he stepped on the last step of the tunnel exit, he felt someone trying to zip the bag, but he continued climbing without turning to the thief, who received a strong shock trying to steal the briefcase. There was a buzz from the electroshock, followed by the thud of the thief's fall on the cold steps. The professor was now on the opposite side of the boulevard where he inquired from a journalist android if there was any law enforcement nearby.

"Sir, I haven't met one since the last review," he said to the teacher.

"It would at least help someone to lift an electrocuted individual from those steps," he said and pointed in the direction of the tunnel.

"You can advertise in the "Instant" column. There is sometimes a lost policeman around there. It costs you five euros a word if you want." The robot waved its

arms happily, waiting for Lambert to make up his mind.

"Five euros per word!" This is the biggest thievery! Well... whatever. The teacher revolted. He looked briefly at the sky. It was sunny. He looked at the clock. 28 degrees at this hour, four more to go until the man recovers...

The teacher decided to leave. The android journalist stood idly by, thinking he would make a small profit from it.

"These people are so undecided," the android concluded. While dozens of other people passed in front of him.

The rest of the way, there were no other events to stop the teacher from his walk. The passers-by, both human and mechanical, passed him absently, with blank stares, watching live events transmitted through the Network, or connected to "to go" type virtual conferences.

He finally reached his home. A modest house with only two meters of lawn between the entrance and the sidewalk.

"Adam Lambert!" he spoke as clearly as possible.

"Welcome, Adam," answered a voice through a small speaker placed on the doorknob and the door opened automatically.

The professor felt strange to be home after so many days spent on campus. He asked the coffee maker for a short espresso, which he took a sip of, forgetting that the drink was hot. When he recovered from the burning sensation on the inside, he connects the companion to the home network.

"Hello Albert," it greeted him, with a warm, feminine voice, belonging to the hologram of his apartment.

Lambert smiled at the hologram and took another sip from the coffee cup, this time remembering that it was still hot. Aid-A closed its eyes for a few seconds. A habit of the companions, which they use, when they gather information from the entire Network.

"You used that anti-theft system of yours, I see." She said and laughed, projecting the image of the thief in the middle of the living room, in real-time. He was still scarred after being electrocuted by the teacher's briefcase.

"I wanted to notify someone to pick him up from there. You can't even do that much without giving money to the information brokers. What an unscrupulous industry," he told the avatar who was watching him from behind blue eyes, in which he was always lost.

"What messages did I receive while I was on campus? Something important?" Lambert asked after taking the last sip of coffee.

Aid-A projects some emails and unanswered messages above the coffee table. Lambert scrolled through the list a few times, switching from one message to another with a simple wave of his hand. He seemed to be looking for something in particular.

"Would you like to try a filter?" Aid-A proposes.

"Of course, get rid of all ads, please."

The female avatar closed her eyes. In a few seconds, the list of messages shortens considerably. Aid-A sorts the rest by content and leaves Adam to quietly read his emails. The avatar disappeared into the home network.

"Aid-A, please check the message in the "other" category. Not to have a hidden virus," Adam pleaded before opening the attachment.

"It is clean," she informs him.

Then the teacher opened the attachment, which appeared to be just an empty box. Aid-A projects the box with encrypted content on the floor.

"Wait two seconds. It's an old encryption key," Aid-A said. without showing her avatar anymore. The sound of the voice was played through speakers placed in each room.

Lambert sat down in the armchair next to the coffee table until Aid-A finished the decryption. That avatar cost him half of his salary for a month, but despite the price, he chose it because at the time it reminded him of someone in particular.

"It's ready," Aid-A announces.

She looked confused. The teacher opened the box with a discreet gesture and saw that the inside was empty. Could there have been a problem in the underlying projection code? However, he looked more closely and saw an inscription somewhere on the bottom of the box. R. Lambert was written in small letters. To see better, it enlarges the image ten times. He ran his right hand through his black curls with gray strands trying to figure out what his name was hiding there.

"Wait!" Aid-A shouted as her avatar materialized next to the teacher. "I found this letter hidden in the code of that inscription."

"Dear Mr. Lambert,

Following your enrollment in the temporary experience exchange program, you have been chosen to spend a week in 2015, during which you will teach the twelfth grade.

It is forbidden to have any personal items that may arouse suspicion. An operator will contact you shortly after reading the message."

The letter disappeared, leaving only a border that read "Accept" visible. It's impossible! Fairy tales! Lambert objected. There is no such thing. He thought for a few moments. Take a deep breath. Breathe out. After pressing inside the frame, the retina display indicated a call waiting. The teacher answered hesitantly.

"Professor Adam Lambert," he introduced himself.

"Prepare for transport," announced the voice. "No personal items are allowed. You will find new clothes in the hotel room where you will stay."

A few moments of pause, in which the teacher emptied all his pockets of the sensors to the anti-theft system, the instant umbrella, and other devices that fit in the pockets of his coat.

"I'm ready," said Lambert. A door had appeared from the box, until that moment empty.

"Watch your head!" the voice warned him. Indeed, it was very low, which is why the teacher had to bend down to be able to cross the threshold of the portal. Take a deep breath and...cross the threshold. Then, for a few seconds, he felt everything spinning around him. Or was it the other way around? When that vortex ended, Lambert found himself lying on the floor of a hotel room.

A state of dizziness did not let him get up, after completing the transfer in the past. He studied the small room from corner to corner, then stood up, helping himself to the corner of the high bed, which occupied most of the room. There was no trace of the technology of its time. He saw an old phone sitting on one of the bedside tables with a note stuck to the receiver. The reception number was written large on the white paper, torn at the corners from repeated use of the telephone. His hand instinctively went to the pocket where he kept a small projector that Aid-A would plug into from time to time if he felt Adam needed company.

A few minutes later the phone started ringing. Sensing who might be calling, Lambert picked up the receiver. He didn't say anything.

- Professor, welcome, a shrill voice was heard. Lambert remained silent. You will find some clothes in the closet in the room, which please put on before leaving the hotel. Someone will be waiting for you at the reception.

Impatient, but still cautious, Lambert opened the closet in question, on the shelves, the clothes were placed, and arranged according to his size.

A few minutes later he walked out of the room straight into a long beige-carpeted corridor. The light turned on automatically. He then arrived at the elevator, where he waited for the door to open. But nothing happens. A lady appeared from the corridor perpendicular to the one from which he had come.

"You already pressed," she asked a little sleepy.

"Yes," lied the teacher, who then saw a button near the elevator door. He probably stayed on another floor. He suggested. He then took advantage of a moment when the woman turned her gaze, and pressed the button in question.

"Ah, finally!"

Arriving at the hotel reception, the teacher was greeted by a boy dressed in the hotel's uniform.

"You're welcome! We hope it wasn't too difficult to transfer you so far back in time," he began. "I will be at your disposal whenever you need me. Come to this

conference room,” suggested the boy. “I can give you more details about the program.”

Lambert entered the conference room behind the boy, filled with chairs and two tables on which several dozen glasses of champagne were placed, and a large chandelier with many arms hung in the middle of the room.

“As I told you, I will be at your disposal throughout the week, and other agents will make sure that you respect our “no future technology” policy. You will teach German at a nearby high school for five hours a day, after which you are free to explore the city.”

The teacher received a booklet on which the most important aspects regarding the year he was in were written: transport, payments, and other details, and a plastic card was stuck on the back. After explaining a few more things, the young man apologized, having to return to his other activity, within the hotel.

There was enough time left for a walk outside the hotel. Excited about what he was going to see, the professor walked out of the hotel and straight onto a pedestrian street. Several children were just passing in front of him with colorful backpacks on their backs. But besides that, he had noticed one more thing. Everyone had a device in hand. The predecessor of the chips - the mobile phone. What a pain...thought Lambert. To sit like this always bent over, without seeing where you are stepping. He waited until the group had moved away a little and started to, his hands stuck in the tight pockets of his trousers. He arrived in a large square, full of birds that the professor had only seen in documentaries or simulations of some of his colleagues from the university. They make a lot of mess, he thought.

Under a window sill, an old woman was selling popcorn to feed these birds...pigeons, as if that's what they're called.

- Good day son, do you want some corn? The old lady asked him. It was then that Lambert realized that he had only received that plastic card and nothing

else. However, he greeted the old woman and went on in search of a bank.

He finally found an ATM and withdrew half the available amount, following the instructions on the pamphlet, and returned to the elderly woman, from whom he bought two bags of popcorn. He spent the rest of the day walking the beautifully arranged streets of the center. He also found the high school where he would teach for a week, after which he returned to the hotel.

So the German language...without the universal translator, he knew it would be more difficult. He went to the mirror, where he spent the rest of the evening practicing.

Good Morning!
He began to speak.
Ih bin Herr Adam Lambert und werde mit euch dize Wohe Deutsch studiran.
Bitte zagt mir wo Ihr mit der Unterricht gelbiben seit...
uh...geblibän.

After several attempts, he managed to remember what his father had taught him years ago. It was

late when Lambert finished the memory exercise. Good night, Aid-A he thought involuntarily. However, he did not receive any response.

The next morning, Lambert left for the high school feeling rested. Arriving in front of the building, he was amazed for a few moments by the scaffolding that covered the entire facade. How can students come to school in such conditions? He wondered, not realizing that he had said the words out loud. The porter, who was quietly smoking his morning cigarette, heard him.

“Don't be surprised, sir! This is how our system works. They will be moving the children to another building soon, from what I understand.”

“But the noise...and...and the dust!”

The porter could read in Lambert's eyes that it was the first time he had seen the building. He puffed on the rest of his cigarette and followed the teacher down the corridor.

“To get to the chancellery, go up the steps on the left to the 1st floor. Turn right there and the chancellery is right at the end of the corridor,” explained the porter.



Amalia Tirica

"Thank you," replied Lambert, after which he went up in the indicated direction.

About halfway, a student, who was sitting with his nose on the phone, tripped and fell right in front of the teacher, after which he got up and saw to his way. Ttt...these should be banned...

Lambert easily found the teacher's lounge, where he entered discreetly greeting the other teachers. But no one noticed him. He sat down at a desk he had found free and studied the brochure again, careful not to miss any detail about the school. Aha, so I have to get the catalog...12th grade...SW.

"Morning, are you Miky's replacement?"

"Yes, Lambert answers, turning to the seat behind him. I was looking for the catalog from 9 SW. I have a class with them now.

"Of course, you can find it on the cupboard back there," the teacher showed him the place.

Adam thanked him and went to look for the catalog. XIIth MI, Xth N...a, here it was, XII SW. He took the catalog under his arm and started to go out into the corridor.

"The second floor, the last classroom on the left side, the teacher shouted." Arriving at the classroom, he found several students watching a video on their phones.

"Teacher! Teacher!" came a voice from the classroom. The three, who were absorbed in the content of that video, did not notice when Lambert reached them.

"Guten Morgen!" he told them. The students...nothing. Try one more time. "Guten Morgen! bitte herein!" Still nothing. "Absent today!" That's when they woke up and followed Lambert into the classroom.

The first day of teaching has just ended. That was pretty good, Lambert thought on the way to the hotel. The world around him was always absorbed by the screen of some phone. No one was looking around at the buildings with beautifully decorated facades, or at the musicians playing old or more current pieces of that time. An old man was singing a song called "Times" with a gaiety that made the teacher stop and listen.

The next day at school, Lambert found a sign displaying the school rules. He went through the five pages in one of the breaks articulating, from time to time, an "aha".

After German class with SW's 12th grade, he went back to the office to prepare for the next class.

"God, who gives these children ideas," was heard from the back of the room. "Listen to this, Carmen, at this Carpathian genius...he wrote...tropikalise Früchte. The two teachers were having fun reading some students' answers to a partial test.

On the third day, a reporter from the Banater Zeitung came to the school to see the progress of the facade rehabilitation work and how the teachers and students are feeling after six or seven hours spent dai-

ly in the dust and noise. 9th SW grade was going to appear in the newspaper, for the performances obtained in the debating club.

*

In the days that followed, Lambert got used to life, without too many worries, from the past. In the evening, he would talk with the young man from the hotel and tell him about the various happenings at school, and the rest of the time, when he didn't have classes, he listened to the musicians from the city center. The people of 2015 seemed more natural to him. It was good to live without implants and other devices aimed at improving the human body. For as long as he had lived, he had never seen the natural color of a woman's eyes. They hid their beauty for the sake of fashion. Lambert never understood why they preferred to hide behind a plastic mask. Now in the past, he admired the tenderness and naturalness of the women he met. You were right, old man. You don't find people in the future anymore. Even companion avatars look and feel more natural than humans. Lambert had a special admiration for his grandfather, but he never understood, until now, why he liked the life of his youth better.

He spent the last evening reading articles about his grandfather in the Banater Zeitung newspaper. He knew that in less than 24 hours he would be back in the future. However, when the time came, the hotel boy asked him what he wanted to do.

- Do you want to stay here, or go back in the future? The choice is yours, but you won't get another chance to go back. The agent explained as he prepared the briefcase with the temporal device.

The weight of the decision overwhelmed the professor. He knew he would choose to go back to his time.

- Can I take the newspaper with me? Lambert asked sadly.

- Of course! Now, I'm going to open the portal. It will be the same feeling as when you came here. The young man explained and then focused on the briefcase. The portal was open.

A few days later, Adam opened the "Banater Zeitung" newspaper to the third page, where he found, on half the page, a photo of him, in the middle of the 9th grade SW students, in their class. On the other half, a photo of them near the buttress of the fortress wall. He then asked Aid-A to look in the archives for a picture in which the ninth graders were putting on wreaths. Have they been saved somewhere? Where could it be?

Adrian Chifu (born in 1970), graduate of the Faculty of Mechanics at I. P. "Traian Vuia" University in Timisoara. Prose writer, musician, graphic designer, film maker, professional photographer. Joined the Helion club in 1984. Debut in "Helion" (1987), with the story "House among the clouds, man among the stars". He publishes prose in "Paradox" (*Drumul spre casa, Gunoya*), "Helion" (*Where did Mr. Bishop go?, Ambrotos, When Shiva sang over the Earth, Ikaros - a history of human flight in the Kosmos*, etc.), Almanahul Anticipatia 1989, "Journalul S.F." in 1994 (*The Man with a Thousand Faces Megasensorial*), Helion OnLine (*With your finger in Heaven, At CERN there is a secret experiment*, etc.). Awarded for sci-fi film at the 25th Helion Session in 2011 and also 2014, nominated and awarded in Romcon conventions 2016-2018. Personal graphics exhibitions. He tackles electronic music in the band Urban Experience from 1995 and solo, having released in 1995 and 1997 among the first electronic music albums in Romania after 1989, supporting ambient music concerts starting in 1995.

President of the Helion club since 2019. President of the Romanian Association of Science Fiction Clubs and Authors (ARCASF) since 2022.

They arrived in the morning. The sun had not yet risen when, after a journey of several hours, they saw the settlement for the first time. The village had welcomed them asleep, along the valley crossed by the stream that disappeared in some places among the gray stones, springing mysteriously from the mountains covered with fog. The houses, in a miraculous balance on the steep sides, built according to the same pattern, kept between them, like a mute respect, a sufficient distance to unfold at will, leaving room for gardens, orchards and portions of grass. A dirt road, which followed the winding line of the riverbed, accompanied on the opposite side by the trembling edge of the forest, chose, at the entrance to the village, the stony middle of the valley.

The fog lifted imperceptibly, leaving behind it a millennial silence, in which the uncertain steps of the morning visitors could be heard muffled. They stopped, broken by fatigue and cold, in front of a low building, with the plaster falling in places and windows opaque from the rain. A few warped steps led to the unpainted double tin door, over which two rusty iron bars criss-crossed. The branches of a few nearby fir trees touched the moss-covered roof, seeming like it continued over the mountains, to infinity, sheltering a strange, mysterious land.

They sat free on the bench, smelling subtly of resin, breathing in the cool morning air, after helping each other unload their backpacks. Somewhere, in the dark forest, a bird's song rang out in the distance, and then, as if at an unexpected sign, dozens of trills filled the atmosphere of the valley.

Daylight began to appear on the mountain tops. The village was waking up to life, little by little. The dogs barked more and more determinedly from their cages suspended at the level of the fences, while the hens clucked sleepily through the sheds.

A man appeared from around a bend in the road. Tall, dry, with too long arms and legs, he looked like a poor stork who had lost his place of origin. He walked with his eyes on the ground, orienting himself as if by the topography of the stones, carelessly dragging his leathery boots through the damp dust from the morning dew. A few steps away from them, noticing them, he looked up. The clarity and penetrating blue of his eyes shocked them. He stopped for a moment, hesitating, and greeted them briefly. He approached the building without any interest in their presence. He opened the doors wide, then, once engulfed by the darkness inside, he returned with a discolored mat that he placed panting on the steps. – Come on... he invites them in a flat voice, straightening up from his back with a new sigh of pain and his face red from effort.

They entered. The interior of the building was austere, with whitewashed walls, yellowed by the passage of years, with a wood paneled ceiling, once varnished. They all gathered, four blurry shadows, around a hastily carved fir table. A young man frowned in disgust, looking at the radio set they had brought, on which, no matter how hard he tried, he could not pick up any station; just a uniform and desolate hum. The dry cleaner was working among the chairs: here he was wiping a broken glass with a cloth, over there he was carefully smoothing out a crease on the tablecloth.

An old man enters the restaurant. He looked around, after which, banging his staff on the floor, he approached, sitting down at their table. The rooster rushed behind the counter and appeared with a glass that he hastily placed in front of the new entrant, starting to pour him from a bottle. The old man swallowed hard, watching the liquid flow, put his pipe aside, grabbed the glass as if he was afraid it would disappear, and a moment later knocked it over. Only then did he seem to see the comers.

"Tourists?" The question was asked coldly, as if it were part of an interrogation.

"Yes I have..."

"Where from?"

"Timisoara..."

"Yes... Where to?"

The old man's indiscretion did not bother the young man who shrugged his shoulders in confusion.

"We don't have an exact plan. More like a little walk. Two or three days. As we are on a vacation, the four of us at the moment. At least we get away from the noise and dust of the city. It's different here. It's quiet, fresh air. Especially fresh air. Our car broke down last night, around eleven, at the entrance to the valley. We kept trying to turn it on, but we didn't succeed. There is no phone signal, so around one o'clock we set up the tents and went to bed. At five o'clock we woke up, because of the cold, but also because we thought that maybe we could find a mechanic here in the village. Anyway, some friends from Resita are coming tomorrow, with their car. So for the moment we are not worried, they will help us, eventually."

The villager listened to him visibly bored, either he had heard the same words countless times from the tourists who had wandered by the dozens through those places, or he simply did not care what reasons they had for visiting their surroundings. He suddenly interrupted the young man:

"No mechanic there. Only in the city. Where are you going to sleep at night?"

"We just have the tents with us. The boy points with his chin at the backpacks leaning against the wall. We are only afraid of the rain."

"Well, that's it, roared the old man. It's going to rain at night, and to complete his words, he raises his staff pointing to the crest of the mountain. Big storm!"

"What then?" The young man looked confused.

The old man twirled his mustache thoughtfully, aiming it between his half-closed lids. He took a few more smokes, shook his pipe, knocking it on the edge of the table, and answered them:

"I will find you a host. You are young and immature. You couldn't handle it on your own. If I put in a good word... that's another matter. I'm going to see, wait for me here."

He got up and went out coughing with tears in his

eyes from the smoke.

At noon they took a little walk around the village. They were as if invisible to the inhabitants. The few people they met passed them by without even glancing at them. Only a little girl got in their way, on the side of the road, pointing at them with a dirty finger. Then she laughed mischievously and ran to hide in the yard behind her mother's skirt, who was feeding the chickens.

Later in the evening they returned to the branch, where they had left their luggage. They sat down in silence at the same table, piled up in a corner. The place fills up in no time. People were returning exhausted from work, all feeling the need for relaxation, apparently. They sat noisily at the tables, discussing nonsense. Gloomy figures, cheerful, absent, exuberant and many, many, to whom the young people could not attribute any status, simple masks. There was an empty chair left at their table, but no one seemed eager to take it or move it from there. People looked at it, then indifferently at the young men, all having a strange gleam in their eyes like slits. After a few hours, the four were alone again, waiting for the old man. But he was slow to appear.

It was almost midnight when the young people decided they had waited enough. They took their bags and started on the road, towards the end of the village. They would not have had the courage to ask anyone for accommodation, otherwise they were sure that no one would have received them.

There was no star in the sky, they couldn't tell if it was covered by clouds or if they were witnessing a unique phenomenon. A strange phosphorescence encompassed everything.

"It's going to rain like hell!" A young man predicted.

The wind blew coldly, eddying the choking dust, making a forgotten open gate creak ominously. The road was deserted, except for a few belated ducks, which crossed it muttering, swaying on their short legs. A dog watched them snarling, ready to pounce on them, through the fence posts. The houses seemed deserted; no light on.

They all started when the old man appeared in front of them, as if out of nowhere. They guessed his identity by the incandescent embers of the enormous pipe that described circles and zigzags, imprinting themselves on their retinas. He motioned for them to stop.

"Where to? Now at night? Can't you see the storm is coming?"

This time a young woman answered him:

"I heard that around here, somewhere, a canton could be found. Maybe we'll spend the night there. If they receive us."

The old man looked along the road, huffing.

"Yes, no one is there now. They are gone and keep the door locked. Anyway, I found you somewhere to sleep. It's not far. He pointed a stubby finger some-

where towards the mountain in front of them. If we hurry, especially since it's raining, we arrive in half an hour at the most."

Then after a few seconds:

"Do you have flashlights?"

"No...We ran out of batteries last night."

"Maybe it's better that way. I... I'm going to give her a surprise!... yes..." and the old man chuckled. "Let's go."

They consulted quickly. They had nothing better to do, they had nowhere to go, so they followed him.

He descended the wide bed of the stream that emanated frozen vapors, crossing to the other bank over a bridge formed by a leafless tree. Chilled, they climbed the mountain, tightening their clothes as best they could, moving stiffly, stumbling at every step. No paths, only ancient fir trees, huge anthills and thorn bushes, ideal hiding places for forest animals. A total darkness surrounded them in which the steps under which dry branches broke seemed amplified, multiplied endlessly. At one point a girl gave a muffled scream, pointing with a trembling hand to the dark shape of a house gliding silently across the sky; but it was but a vapor carried by the wind. The old man muttered something of annoyance and self-control. A boy started to rush him but the girl stopped him with a guilty sigh. At times they would slow down to give the old man a break to look for the tell-tale signs that apparently only he knew, or to fill the tank of his pipe.

They had been walking for about two hours when the guide signaled them to stop.

"I have arrived. It's here." The voice scratches their eardrums. It no longer belonged to the one who had offered his services in the morning.

The old man bent a branch and then, with his eyes widened in amazement, they saw.

A HOUSE.

Built in the middle of a clearing, it rose imposingly, bathed in lights. White, with three floors, but with a height equivalent to that of a block with ten levels, it resembled an Egyptian temple. However, it had Greek columns and friezes, combined with Gothic arches. It seemed more like a uniform amalgam of styles, drawn from all the cultures that had ever ruled the Earth. Only the roof had a common shape. On top of that, everything was enveloped by a seemingly ancestral smell, never seen before, which did not seem to come from any known flower or substance.

Only when the first lightning furrowed the heights did the four realize the abnormality of the situation. They looked at each other terrified, helpless. They looked for the old man, but he had disappeared.

Suddenly their gazes became fixed.

A foreign will was thinking in their place.

From somewhere, from the upper floors of the building, the fantastic music of an organ began to pour out. They started moving one after the other,

heading towards her.

They were walking on the steps covered with marble.

"I... say... we go..." a young woman barely managed to articulate. No one answered her. The girl fell, with a scream, to her knees, as if under the force of a blow. She stood up with a sigh, following the others. The organ impatiently sharpened its notes, while the inferno broke loose with fleeting lightning and torrential rain. Fir trees bent and cracked under the gusts of wind. Wet, with disheveled hair, simultaneously looked up at the inscription above the door. Something between Cyrillic letters and Chinese ideograms, but they understood. Too late.

They entered one by one, through the door which closed with a dry click behind them.

At the same moment, a blinding flash of lightning struck a tree that exploded into incandescent splinters.

The lights of the HOUSE went out to the sound of music and thunder that rattled its windows.

THE HOUSE trembled with pleasure. After several minutes of contracting countless times, she belched in satisfaction. The front door opened in a full smile.

From somewhere in the valley, from the village, suddenly a huge chorus of howls rose, which broke through the thunder and the whistling of the wind.

Two huge hands came out of the side windows of the top floor and lifted the foot of the building, from under which a lot of feet emerged. There was a whistle. A chariot appeared from somewhere among the fir trees, barking and happily wagging its tail. He rolled over, wriggling next to HER, who grabbed his leash. They both disappeared, in huge leaps above the forest, illuminated intermittently by lightning.

They were followed, at some distance, by an avalanche of houses that brought down the trees in squeals and high-pitched laughter. At the windows of some people could be seen, like dolls, looking out, absent.

At the edge of the clearing there is a fence with barbed wire, from place to place there are attached tablets, bearing an inscription that everyone can understand:

PAY ATENTION!

I wrote this story at the age of 18, reading it at the Helion cenacle. I made minor changes, bringing it up to date.

The original title is a symbol that represents a house, like the one drawn by any child. A simple house, but one that hides terrifying things...

The village is real, it is called Dragoşa, Suceava County, Bucovina Province. I went there almost every summer, to my grandmother's sister. The branch, with its walls in lime, the canton, somewhere in the fog-covered mountains, really exists. The houses are spread on one side and the other of the valley, with pastures in between, with the forest going down to the back of the stables. Wonderful lands, which I remember with love and longing.

MĂDĂLIN ANDREI ȘTEFAN

Mădălin Andrei Ștefan (born 1992), graduated from the Faculty of Arts and Design, West University Timisoara, in 2016. Two personal exhibitions, nine group exhibitions. Member of the Helion club since 2021. Author of comics and covers and interior graphics for Helion magazine.

GHOST





DAMN IT!!
IF THEY FIND US
WE ARE SCREWED!



HOLD THIS.
I WILL TRY TO
DISTRACT THEM.

IF I DON'T GET BACK IN
AN HOUR TAKE THE GLOBE
TO THE SHIP.
THE CAPTAIN WILL KNOW
WHAT TO DO WITH IT



AND... BE CAREFULL.
THIS IS OUR LAST
HOPE OF SURVIVAL

WHEN MIRRORS ARE COVERED

IZABELA RADOSEVICI

Izabela Radosevici (born in 1999). Since 2018 she has moved to Timișoara to pursue university studies at the West University in Timișoara, within the Faculty of Mathematics and Computer Science, Computer Science section. She graduated from college in 2021 and made her debut at the Helion club on February 10, 2023 with a short fantasy prose. She also writes poetry and finds inspiration in myths and legends. She is currently working on a fantasy novel.

Even the mirror in the bathroom was covered with a thick white cloth. It was so thick that Lazar could not distinguish his own reflection.

While he was washing his hands, he was talking to himself without realizing it. Part of him wanted, only out of curiosity, to pull the canvas aside, just by one corner. Top right corner. It was not respect for the dead that stopped him.

„I should go back.” he said to himself, tilting his head at different angles, staring at the covered mirror. How long can you last in the bathroom?

He went out, humming the notes of a simple song, and the first thing that greeted him was the old and dusty pendulum clock, stopped in its own monotonous song. With some curiosity, he noted the time at which the clock had been stopped - 04:11.

„Hmm.” he nodded slightly, then stepped back down the brown corridor along the wall of clocks. 4:11 followed him everywhere.

The room where the vigil was held was the same color. Brown curtains and carpets. Brown furniture. Even the books were bound in brown leather. Sad walls that kept the patina of time and the strong smell of cigarettes. Clocks hung like icons on nails. The casket was an unexpectedly harmonious addition, just like a trinket in the middle of the room.

The only signs of life in the room were the cages. They invaded every free corner, just like colorful weeds. Their silent tenants had stares so piercing they gave him chills.

Lazar smiled, as much as was to be expected under the conditions of the meeting, and offered a lingering touch on the shoulder of the grieving girl at the end of the coffin.

„My condolences. he told her, with an almost fatherly sincerity. It must be a shock to you too. I couldn't believe it when I heard what happened. Still young, and healthy. Poor him... Gone too soon.”

Despite her initial hesitation, Magdalena Jura nodded, wiping her tears with a white handkerchief.

„Thank you very much. Neither do we ... I don't think we realize yet.”

„It is understandable. But forgive me, I don't want to cause you more pain. Rest in peace.”

„Not a problem. Shall I serve you something to eat? Coffee?”

„A vigil with the coffin closed...” remarked Lazar. What happened?

„I'm sorry... I don't want to remember.”

„Of course, of course... he murmured. Thanks, I'd like a coffee.”

The girl just looked at him for a moment and stepped in place, gesturing uncertainly. Finally she just nodded and looked away from his, walking past him without another word. Lazar looked after her until she left the room. He was the only one left, in the company of the muffled voices of the other people chatting somewhere in the next room. The smile never left his face. With the same expression, he mechanically turned his head towards the coffin.

The way he moved and shifted the lid didn't look like he was doing anything out of place in any way. He moved it just enough to catch a glimpse of the deceased's face. His face was stark white, with his eyes open.

Lazar sighed under the calm sound of exotic birds.

„Oh, ... he whispered, barely swallowing the tremor in his own voice. You really are dead. You're really dead... I can't... I don't know what to do. I do not know ...”

The sudden sound from the room's only window startled him. The birds, seized by a frenzy as unexpected as it was deafening, filled the whole house with shrill, mechanical screams and words without any meaning, flying madly in their cages.

On the other side of the window, a raven was beating hysterically against the glass, croaking in an angry voice. Lazar took a step aside.

„What about you?” he asked half-heartedly.

When the first crack appeared on the surface of the glass, Lazar turned his back and ran away. He whizzed

past the girl returning with his coffee.

„I apologize for what happened yesterday. The girl mumbled awkwardly. If I had known you were afraid of birds I wouldn't have left you alone with them.”

„It's not your fault. Do not worry. They are... just birds.” Lazar said and placed his coffee mug on the coffee table, although he did not seem calm.

„I'm glad you came today. she smiled weakly at him, tired and sad. Many of Dad's friends had moved to other countries and it was hard for them to find something to come back with in such a short time. Some of them will make it to the funeral, but most...”

„Oh ... I didn't expect ...”

„It's understandable, though. she sighed. I can't help him anymore even if he was here or not. That's ... more for us, right? Let him stay with us for a while before we part.”

The sadness he was trying so hard to ignore surged through him again. It colors his smile in obvious embarrassment. And suddenly it was horribly hard to be back there, between the brown walls and the birds watching him from every corner. The girl wiped away her tears.

„He used to always trip me up.” he said, suddenly, in a not very well-chosen manner.

The girl gave him a troubled look.

„Your father ... About birds. He used to call me every time he made a new purchase because he knew I would get chills just thinking about his ... winged darlings.”

„We can stay in the kitchen if you feel better. Why didn't you say, I would be...”

„No stay calm. he sighed. It reminds me of your father.”

A sad smile tried her. He laughed, briefly.

„If I didn't know better, I would offer you to take any of them home. Or all of them.”

„And if I didn't know better either, I would accept. he chuckled too. What will happen to them?”

„Oh... I don't know. I haven't had time to think about it yet. I guess... I don't know. Really do not know.”

Lazar is looking for another topic. He feels he has confused his host.

„I noticed that the coffin is open today.

„Ah, yes... Aunt insisted. Huge scandal in the world... She must also arrive in the evening. I would honestly prefer to stay at home.” he whispered the last words, pulling mercilessly at a piece of skin sticking out from the nail of his index finger.

He watched her do the same for a long moment without another word. There was nothing on her face to express distress.

„I should go.” he said, troubled by the bloodstain on her finger.

„If you want to stay longer –,”

The croak from yesterday turned just as suddenly, plunging through them into a dark blur. Neither did they, until the rest of the birds went into the same wild frenzy.

At the same time they noticed the raven sitting on the side of the coffin, bent inside it.

„No! No!” cried the girl, lunging at the bird and almost falling over the coffin when the raven inevitably flew over her head.

The bird rose to the ceiling, then perched on an arm of the chandelier. He folded his wings, just like a man bringing his hands behind his back, and fixed them with a hard-to-understand look.

For a brief moment, it seemed to Lazar that the raven's eyes shone with the satisfaction of the find. She could almost see it on his features. Then he also saw the silver button in the bird's beak.

He took flight again, over their heads and over their hands that tried to stop him. Then he disappeared through the open window.

They both stood still, frozen.

„It's a sign of death.” she said suddenly, so white in the face she looked like she was going to collapse at any second.

It's a sign of death, said the morning girl, and she thought she was ready to snap. He comforts her and feeds her biscuits and tea, trying to bring her back to reality from that panicked and incoherent state. Finally she calmed down. Her aunt, whom they were not anxious to see again, appeared earlier than expected, and occupied all the girl's time and thoughts with the preparations for the funeral. A few hours later he leaves them in palpable tension and ready to explode at any moment.

Petru Jura would disappear altogether along with his funeral, he finally realized. The house would be sold, the furniture trashed. The walls would bear the shapes of the clocks printed in the paint. The birds were going to fly, free, one way or another. His daughter would remember him, perhaps, from time to time, and mourn him. Nobody else. No one. Absolutely nobody.

He stared intently at the red color that seemed to have been imprinted in the glass of the traffic light. A car passed, and another, then a truck carrying pigs with a heavy smell. When he passed, the traffic light was exactly the same color, but there was a raven sitting above it.

Lazar chuckles slightly, and the color changes. He crossed the street, followed by the raven's gaze.

„How much have crows multiplied in the city.” he nodded and laughed to himself.

It wasn't so sad after all. Just for the sake of good times, he could overlook that Petru Jura had not called him a friend for many years. Just ...

„And yet, Lazar muttered angrily, maybe I can't.”

Something hit him right in the soft side of the head. He turned angrily, and bumped into a completely empty street. He mumbled something incoherent and stopped. The raven's cawing was the only thing that left him a clue, but when he turned his gaze to the traffic light, he was no longer there. Only a black feather floated slowly towards the pavement. At his feet a silver button spun in a circle on the pavement.



Amalia Tirica

The funeral seemed to swallow time into a soundless stomach.

„I never asked you, whispered Magdalena, waking him from his own memories, what happened between you.”

It was over, he realized in a daze. They were the only ones left, stuck in that place, with their eyes glued to the pile of wet earth grotesquely studying them from

the grave. The smell of flowers gave him a headache.

„Ah, it's a not very interesting story. murmured Lazar and pinched the bridge of his nose. Your mother was my wife. For a time.

Magdalena turned to him in surprise, and her eyes reminded him of her.

„We were not divorced.” he said, then looked down at the ground.

Lazar saw himself reflected in a pool at their feet, and it seemed to him that he was small and hideous, as in a nightmare. He looked up, preferring not to look anymore.

„Why? asked Magdalena with the simplicity of a child. You didn't leave her?”

„She did not want it. She didn't want to make that decision. And this always bothered Petru. They fought many times because of this. And every time he came to me. I was taking her out for ice cream downtown. And he stayed until he passed and called to make her go her home. Until he accused me of kidnapping her. That I kidnapped her! And it's on my record. Then it didn't take long before she left altogether. And he never forgave me for what he imagined was my... influence in her decision to disappear.

„I am sorry.”

„Don't worry. he shrugged. We are equally guilty and I have not forgiven him either.”

Lazar put his hands in his coat pockets. He looked down at the simple cross that bore the last vestige of his dearest friend's existence.

„May God rest his soul, Magdalena. He was not a good man, none of us were.”

Lazar looked up at the cloudy sky. He was trying to get rid of the memories. Large flakes were coming off the vault of the sky, slowly approaching.

It was quiet. It was cold.

The flake that fell past his face was black. He frowned at the ground, and searched for it. Another fell, just as black, bigger. Bigger, bigger and bigger. At his feet, one had just landed on his shoe, not in the form of a flake, but a feather.

Look back at the sky. Black. He was black. Magdalena wiped her tears without a sound, her head and shoulders covered with black feathers. They gathered at their feet. They buried them up to their ankles. And they kept falling on them, damn it.

„Magdalena?” he whispered, unsure.

The girl looked at him with pained eyes, and a feather licked along her cheek like a caress.

Through the apocalyptic veil of feather rain, he looked up at the trees. The trees looked back. The ravens began to call first among the branches, then the crows flew over the cemetery. Soon their screams covered them. The buzzards, in huge groups, walked

over and among the graves, rummaging under the feather blanket.

A huge chorus, like a scream in a thousand voices.

Lazar stepped forward, and the image before his eyes became clear again. In the banality of the gloomy day, the gates of the cemetery were just opening. Around him the funeral cortege was moving slowly over the wet ground to the eternal place that had been dug last night, and today was waiting, covered by a black tarp.

With his heart beating so hard in his chest that he could hear nothing else, he looked at the people around him walking with their heads bowed, solemn and sad. He looked at the trees that were shaking in the cold wind, stripped of all color. Look to the sky. Just gloomy gray.

Lazar sighed with shaky breath as they reached the tomb. He covered his chest with his palm next to his heart, trying to stop his palpitations that covered him with a cold sweat.

-Everything is alright? came a voice he didn't recognize.

He was panting. He looked hard at the man in the police uniform, cornered by the interest with which he studied him. Dread settled in his chest, even though he had already convinced himself that he had imagined the rain of feathers.

„I'm... I'm afraid of birds.” he finally succeeded.

The policeman looked at him curiously, almost amused. He seemed ready to say something, but the priest's voice covered him. It doesn't even last a moment. They had just pulled the tarp. Two of the men who had carried the coffin fell, frightened by the waves of birds that crashed into them, scattering chaotically through the procession, shouting deafeningly, attacking blindly. Claws and wings, screeching and crowing of the ravens.

Lazar's knees threatened to give way even as the birds parted, fleeing and frightened.

„Damn winged creatures!” cursed one of the gravediggers between his teeth, struggling to his feet.

The priest chose not to continue his service, his face wrinkled and scratched.

„Put him in the grave.” He snapped at the gravedigger.

„There's one more.” sighed the man. Whoah! he shouted, waving his shovel at the bird. Go! Scram!

Lazar recognized the raven only by the voice that echoed back to the gravedigger, refusing to be chased. The policeman next to him was almost smiling as the raven rushed out of the pit towards the men around her.

Magdalena's aunt let out a string of curses. She broke free from her husband's arm and climbed onto the grave, then snatched a shovel from the hand of one of the gravediggers. Without another word, she

struck the bird with the edge of the shovel.

Lazar heard the raven croak as it died, a wet, muffled sound as familiar as the ringing of a bell.

„Look at my suspect.” murmured the policeman amused and started towards the woman.

Lazar curses his own age when he gets up from his reading table.

„Where the hell did I put the bookmark?” he murmured, lifting each book off the table to look under it.

He turned, hooked, convinced that he had sat on the poor thing again.

„How many times can you lose things...?” he murmured, confused.

He scanned every nook and cranny of the room before heading down the short, narrow corridor to the kitchen. The cold greeted him as he opened the door. The window was wide open, forgotten that way for some time. An overstuffed ashtray sat precariously on the windowsill. Abandon the search for the bookmark in favor of a cigarette.

„Where...? he rummaged through his trouser pockets again. I could have sworn that...”

He moved the ashtray a few inches, his mouth twitching in anger. He cast his eyes to the street below the window and searched for the glimmer of his silver lighter.

He grumbled angrily. Finally he lit his cigarette by the stove flame. He breathed the first smoke with fatigue.

„Someone is stealing from me...” he whispered, suddenly calm.

His eyes darted to the bland, cold sky. Part of him expected a black specter, a mysterious feather, a malevolent growl. The world was curiously sleepy that Sunday morning. It caused him a distrust that was impossible to ignore. The cigarette butt fell across his fingers.

Lazar does not react. Waiting. He waited, still as a statue. Something was coming. Something was holding its breath, waiting for him to turn his back, and Lazar showed, for the sake of the walls, impressive courage. He was terrified. Somewhere under the old and dusty kitchen furniture a mouse rummaged freely through the wood and wall. Lazar lit another cigarette and surveyed the sky, the street, all the cars passing by in an uncharacteristic silence. Every little noise and movement around him caught his attention. Soot stained his fingers as he stubbed out the cigarette. The whole hand held their sour smell as he lit the next one. A mousetrap rang shrill. The squeal of the animal could be heard for a long time in the unexpectedly colorful light of the sunset.

Lazar sighed. With frozen hands and stiff bones

at last extinguished the eye of the stove. He began to tremble. It was okay, he told himself. Everything was fine. The bird was dead, he reminded himself as the feeling of dread lingered.

„It is over.“ he murmured, loudly, and forced his body to listen.

The hand moved resignedly to the handle of the window. The eyes were detached from the sky, and the soul returned to the room. All existence stopped in the nest of twigs and black feathers in the corner of the window, which held it open.

Lazar smiled, and laughed, without understanding why, on the verge of a violent panic. He grabbed the first thing that fell into his hand. He hit the nest without thinking.

„Out! Out! Out! he shouted and hit it again.

And the nest collapsed onto the windowsill, knocking the ashtray to the floor. You wake up a black cloud that clings to the wall. Slowly, very slowly, the nest spilled cutlery, screws, coins, a bookmark and a silver lighter onto the floor and at his feet.

„Thief...! he murmured, frozen in place. Thief... you stole my lighter today...“

Lazar looked back at the sky. He saw, in the distance, a flock of black birds.

„No. I won't let you! Not! Go away! Depart!“

It's a sign of death, Magdalena told him. It was the only thing he could think about as he plugged a new hole that had appeared in the ceiling overnight. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and let the hammer fall at his feet in the bed between the wooden boards.

For a moment he surveyed the other boarded-up holes in the ceiling. One in the corner of the room looked like it was starting to come off.

In the suspicious silence of the room, Lazar sighed, his hand still on his forehead.

When that devilish shriek burst into the ceiling again, flying above him in a thousand directions, like a bird hitting the bars of a cage, he could only cry. Exhausted and haunted by fear, he jumps off the bed and tries desperately to hide from the sound. And the sound went down through the walls and stopped.

Lazar remained glued to the closet that barricaded the door of his room and looked, without blinking, at the place above the bed - where the sound had last been heard. Don't you dare move. He didn't dare look away.

He couldn't let it in.

He hit his knee on the cupboard. He woke up, shivering on the floor, in the darkness of the room. His first instinct was to look around for any suspicious movement. His eyes, accustomed to that darkness, quickly swept over all the familiar forms of furniture blocking holes in the walls and floor. Then listened.

But there was neither the mad scrambling of the walls, nor the obsessive knocking after them, from the kitchen or from the corridor. Not even the occasional grunts that were beginning to take on a human voice.

There was a ticking.

And Lazar listened, confused and afraid. He tried to sense the source of that new sound. He walked slowly from one side of the room to the other. He stopped at last in front of the broken, boarded up window. Below him, in the sickly moonlight, his nightstand, turned upside down, covered a fresh hole in the floor.

Lazar turned it away. He noticed first how the gap had grown. Like mold, it had seeped through the board he had lined it with. The entire contents of the drawer were spilled there into the hole in the floor. A few books, pencils, pictures, matches scattered at random, and beneath them, staring at him with a dead eye, a brown clock that ticked without moving any of its hands.

Lazar drops the bedside table on the floor. He could only look straight around him, frozen.

The raven's song calls to him. Knocking on the shards left in the window, he murmured to him, in a human voice:

„Do you know where you are going, Lazar? Lazar? Do you know where you go if you kill?“

Everything echoing in Lazar's mind exploded and pushed him into the window panes. He wanted nothing more than to wrap his hands around the bird's neck and feel it break. To hear that sound again.

The raven's croak, inhuman and broken, answered him instead as it flew an arm's length away. Lazar palmed the surprisingly smooth wood of a plank, struggling to get his shoulder between them. It fit perfectly between his fingers. His cheek rested against another, cold and just as smooth, just like metal.

„I didn't kill him! he choked and hit his chest again on the bars. I didn't kill him!“

The sound of the bird was heard again, and Lazar's hand searched blindly for the darkness outside. One wrong step and he slid off the desk onto the cold floor, much colder than he had expected. The window was so small now, meshed with metal, and it was moving away.

The room was almost empty. There was nothing but the fallen coffee table and a sad bed.

He went up again, and from the window he could see only a distant post on which sat two scrawny crows.

The raven's cawing carried the whole night.

THEIR DAY

MIRCEA BĂDUȚ

Mircea Băduț (born in 1967) is a Romanian writer and an engineer. He graduated from the Faculty of Electrical Engineering at the University of Craiova, and later specialized in several fields of computer science. He has written eleven books on informatics (in Romanian language) and seven books of prose (fictions and essays, in Romanian language): *Fals tratat de antropologie*; *DonQuijotisme AntropoLexice*; *Întoarcerea perenă*; *Întoarcerea fratelui risipitor*; *Ficțiuni secunde*; *Ficțiuni familiare*; *Ficțiuni primare*. He wrote over 450 articles for IT/technical magazines from Romania and from Europe. He has participated at many scientific/technical conferences/symposiums from Romania and from Europe. He also published many essays into Romanian cultural magazines (on topics of language, literature, anthropology, sociology, psychology and philosophy).

Sneaking unannounced into the president's office, Aern found him oxygenating his lungs. He hesitated, then thought to himself that the moment might be favorable for the discussion. Being his friend for a long time, Orst did not interrupt his physiological exercise, and he is not surprised that Aern - presidential adviser in the official scheme - sits down, without greeting him, on the natural leather sofa. However, he ends the airing early and goes directly to the heart of the problem that was troubling everyone:

"How about Eirt? Because I don't really know what to believe."

"Um. I would say order the withdrawal of the investigative team. Eirt committed suicide."

He told himself that he probably would. But when a vice-president of the planet commits suicide, the reason must be found out.

"Do you know why?"

Holding back his sigh, Aern answered with difficulty:

"Yes. Unfortunately yes. It's tragic and useless - I don't think his gesture can change anything."

And he looked at Orst so deeply that he swallowed empty wanting to say: "Things are that bad?!". But he said something else:

"Please, I want to know what you think about this matter!"

"Hm... I don't know if you have the time and patience to listen to everything."

I don't know if you can understand. I don't know if you have to take on such a responsibility... A responsibility that concerns all your peers...

"That would be the definition of the presidency, Orst wanted to ease the other's words."

"This time it's more than ever before! This time I think the truth should be hidden..."

Aern took a short break, assessing, as if from a pro-

fessional reflex, Orst's pent-up impatience, and then resumed:

"When Eirt finished his studies - doing it, as it is known, brilliantly - he was immediately assigned, in order to exploit his genius from the start, in the position of vice-president psychologist. A rational and energetic guy, having reached a position where he could do a lot of good for his fellow men, and aware that he really could do it, he set to work with enviable enthusiasm. He effectively solved some somewhat pressing psycho-social problems and, in the break afterwards, he remembered a project from the time of his studies at the Academy. He had then participated in some more unconventional research, a combination of systems theory and incremental algorithms of practical psychology. Society, matrices of individuals; attributes, scalar vectors; social processes, multi-variable functions - to put it succinctly. Taking up that project now, Eirt dreamed of obtaining a tool used toward determining the evolution of large social groups. Hypermatrix prediction."

"I didn't know that you were passionate about mathematical formalization, Orst interrupted him, but without adding any intonation to his voice. Or maybe just feeling the need to calm the tension that was gathering in the room."

"He showed me something about the principles of the method established by him, and I had to recognize his genius. For a while I took over some of his tasks, so he could work on those ideas."

Almost half a year ago everything was ready. I remember how Eirt came to me beaming, to show me the file with his new project. The work looked deep and complete. He told me then that he would start the analysis by applying it to our society, and then he would come to me first to show his results.

It was precisely in the period after the racial massacre in the Med.

That evening I did not fall asleep easily: knowing his project, and having a passion for socio-psychology myself, I was excited by the idea of a strong result.

And the result came. But not the next day, but in another three days. As soon as he entered the cabinet I saw something wrong with Eirt. He handed me the file and verbally presented me with a short summary, in a dry tone. When the meaning of the words could reach my mind, I found out that we are, from the perspective of that analysis, a society of a negative type, whose evolution - due to immutable intrinsic factors - ends with self-destruction.

As soon as she told me this, he left, staggering. I couldn't accept it, but I couldn't ignore it either. So I retired to leisurely study the work, to find out where he had gone wrong.

*

At this moment, Aern gets up to make a few rounds of the central arabesque in the presidential cabinet, in order to wear down his nervous state. Orst, on the contrary, listened dumbfounded; overwhelmed by the weight of things, he waited for Aern to resume the story.

"I studied the file with the hope that I would find a crack, something that would disprove Eirt's conclusion. Futile obstinacy..."

I then sought him out to ask him what he was up to. He replied that he had to redo the work, collect data again, as wide as possible, and then re-apply the processing more carefully.

I understood him. He also wished he had come to the wrong conclusion. He wanted to consolidate the study, so as to obtain an applicable, constructive result.

Another matter, of deep irony, remained in my thoughts then. In the mathematical modeling of the social trajectory, he distinctly pursued two branches: one of generic intelligent society, and one particular to our society. And the evolutions of the two branches could be simulated independently, as a verification key. The virtual analysis of the generic model revealed - perhaps even more disturbing than that terrible sentence - an almost axiomatic principle: the more intelligent a biological species becomes, the more it will damage its habitat and the planet, gradually and however slowly it may be, until self-annihilation. A damned reconquest on the entropy side.

I had managed to forget, busy with the problems of the job, when the unofficial news of Eirt's suicide - in a treacherous whisper - reminded me of everything. I immediately entered the office and stole the file. And again I hid to go through it leisurely.

The elaborated method, although approached and reconstructed somehow differently, had reached perfection. The data were strict and the inductions cor-

rect. But the same terrible conclusion!

Um! I really think that I was also on the list of suspects...

"Not! interjected Orst, with a sad smile. I told them we were together at the time."

"Okay... but we weren't together!"

"I know. You were secretly dating Lora."

It was Aern's turn to smile sadly.

Orst remembered that he was still the president. He asked:

"Do you think there is anything to be done?"

Only weak traces of compassion still flickered in Aern's eyes, which mobilized with difficulty to help Orst understand:

"Our end is certain. If at first I had doubts, now they have completely disappeared. But from here things concern you personally. Because you can't avoid a certain thought. A damn question: Wouldn't it be better for the end to happen now, in our day, than to postpone it for the next sinusoidal decline, a few hundred years from now, when the population will be tenfold or even a hundred times larger?"

A few minutes of silence followed, in which the two did not even move their eyes. Then Orst, his face bluish as if he had neglected to breathe, asked:

"Do you think that the situation must necessarily be treated this way? Can there really be no other solution?"

"Not. I do not believe there is. But, as a cynical joke, I will still tell you that in Eirt's quasi-mathematical modeling a polynomial expression of the third degree appears. Which means that there would also be a third solution, only that - in the context of transposition into psycho-algebra - this is not of a real type."

*

In the following days, Orst spent more time in the office. He did not doubt what he had learned from Aern - he believed in his friend without reservation. His friend...

In a naive-desperate start, Orst proposed to look for that virtual solution, glimpsed and at the same time contradicted mathematically. He didn't want self-destruction now, but he didn't accept it either for that future when the great-grandchildren of the current pairs will have hundreds of grandchildren. He dispenses with these erosive thoughts to return to the heart of the problem itself. Unusual resources had to be mobilized...

*

After a few weeks, the president called Aern.

"I found the solution."

The dry tone and the small gestures of the extremities working together -in the analysis that Aern made for himself almost involuntarily - to hide his inner feelings. Orst had become hard to read. It seemed that

he "went on backup batteries".

"We know that, although implicit and unexpressed, the a-tomic factor determining the situation from the psycho-social analysis is in the individual consciousness; where, we must admit, we have... imperfections."

Then, as if scared by the offside that he had not prepared a formulation of his ideas, the president said briefly: "Suppression of consciousness is the third solution!"

Aern was stuck for a few seconds. Then he commands his mind to disengage.

"Do you forget that I also studied physio-psychology?! Consciousness is a far too complex phenomenon, with too many ramifications in the cortex to be identified and annulled."

"Scientists have found a nucleus, a kernel, a process, on which the entire scaffold rests. They called it "impathic knot".

"An empathy towards the inside?!"

"Yes. A nucleus of intropathy of mental processes!"

"But what the hell scientists!? No academy has reached such advanced research..."

"Um. There is a certain in-depth research institute, about which extremely few of us have knowledge... And when I think that, when I was younger, I wanted to de-classify it, to bring it to the light. Yes, well anyway!"

Aern, passing over the outer ideas, falls into a lucid trance. He no longer fought back at the sentence he received, but a deep meditation engulfed him, which he punctuated sometimes, almost involuntarily, with fragments of thoughts spoken in a barely perceptible voice.

"... without conscience... we would be like an animal... there would be no hatred, no crime..., but no love... Life would be reduced to the primitive,... elementary,... perceptions. . cleanness?, yes... but lacking the desire for improvement, for progress... Without conscience... we would experience happiness without knowing it... On the other hand, in the purely biological stage the species does the least damage to its planet..."

When he finished ruminating his thoughts, Aern allowed himself - through a damned professional deformity - to look analytically at Orst. An emaciated face, a broken posture. No trace of delight in victory: he would have preferred the problem not to exist to enable him to find the solution.

"I'm starting to think you've found something..."

Then Orst ends the meeting by saying as if with the last particles of his voice:

"Fine. Please take care of yourself as you go further."

*

The very next day Aern visits the secret labs to take over the baton. After a few days things took off, and within a few months the network of consciousness-canceling devices was installed and ready for global release.

*

"I report the completion of the task."

"Is it really ready?!"

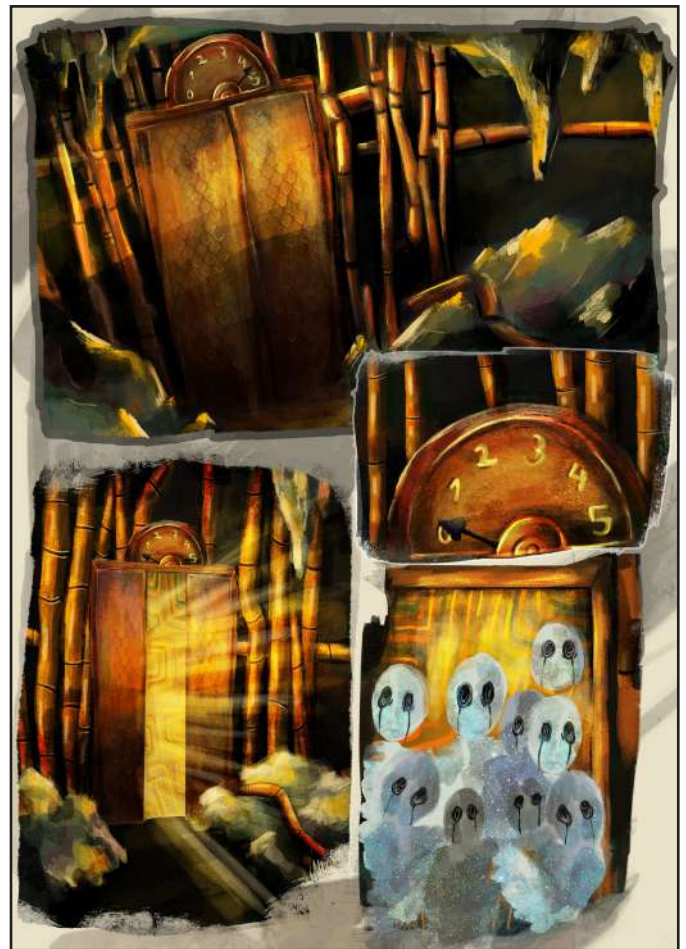
Aern answered with a firm "yes", which put Orst back in the position of the president. And this is where he finds himself naturally:

"Yes. Then you can start right away, from tomorrow. I'm ready."

"How!?! Do you want to be transformed too? I had prepared an isolation sluice..."

After struggling a little, Orst managed to formulate his answer:

"Do you think I could bear it lucidly, to see how a world perishes that is not allowed to grow?!"



Amalia Tirica

*

That night Aern records all of these happenings to remain with those who will flirt with intelligence, or perhaps even the distant descendants of his species, after they have overcome their curse.

In the morning, he also signaled the start of D-Day, and soon all the dolphins in the oceans returned to their primary condition, of simple animals.



QUIET FOR MURAMONO

CRISTINA NEGREANU

Cristina Negreanu (born in 1998). Graduated from the Faculty of Letters, University of Craiova, 2020. Philologist and Latin language and literature teacher. Debut with poems in the literary anthology *Our Romanian Language*, under the auspices of the Writers' Union, dedicated to the day of the Romanian language; then devoting herself to SF literature, publishing titles such as *Silence for Muramono*, *Sators*, *The Creature from Vorniam* in the magazines: *Helion SF*, *Helion Online*, *Egophobia*, *Scritorul*, and essays in the *Biblioteca Nova* magazine.

1

"Some people say that in the beginning Hell was created, and then there were extensions of it that mankind called infirmly: evil and good. It happened that at one time a shoot had sprung up from the ancient river Styx, which would have pierced the earth, bursting to the surface, and from it the humanoids had appeared. According to others, the first created was Heaven in brightness and salvation..." Hunter Raven read aloud from his black book of stories whose cover was furrowed with bizarre inscriptions. The silence of the spaceship was disturbed only by the hum of the central computer which had taken over the entire command.

Scientists who, as early as 1986, were fearfully announcing the decline of the planet - caused by global warming, which most of us did not consider so important and imminent - were considered fanciful storytellers. During all that alarming time, some of us had delusional dreams of the planet's ocean evaporating and diabolical fires in a feverish lethargy caused by a new type of virus. Others have had dreams of new host planets, in a state of total lucidity, accompanied by the dread of the imminence of the end. But in the end, the dreams turned out to be real, while the dreams still linger on the deck of the spaceship *Muramono*. Global warming will be a different story many generations from now, in the delusional hope of not repeating our over-exploitation. A story that we will not detail, but we will say with certainty that the Earth has become uninhabitable. The two degrees we considered insignificant turned out to be fatal. Thus, out of recklessness and fear, a new *Noah's Ark* was born.

Noah had borrowed the name of Ezra and was no longer an apostle, but a scientist of the *Xastrom Institute*, and the *ark* had long since abandoned the swirling oceans, sailing for a millennium through the immensity of the Universe, dropping its anchor, just last century - after long drifts - between two dwarf stars, facing the Red Earth.

On September 16, one thousand one hundred and forty years ago, a wave of fires had engulfed several continents of the planet; Greenland, together with Antarctica, was melting rapidly, Alaska and Siberia had begun to

be engulfed by oceans, and deserts had gradually gained ground. It didn't take long for the fires to get out of control, spreading like lightning towards the nuclear power plants. Once there they had set off a chain reaction and a new record in terms of radioactivity. More than five hundred reactors had failed under the force of the inferno. The world seemed to have split into two extremes: the side with heat waves associated with fires and the side with epic showers combined with floods. In both cases, human lives, in the thousands, were lost, and the radioactive activity pushed the survivors towards *Noah's Ark*.

Several research centers had enthusiastically talked, before the cataclysm, of the rapid colonization of Mars, which later proved to be an impossible mission, as there was not enough equipment and supplies for all the survivors on Earth. In the end, Ezra - taking the place of a creator god - together with his team, managed to engage a conglomerate of spaceships, making room for as many people as possible on board, but even this was not a long-term solution, since the sanitary reserves, especially oxygen, but also food and water reserves were limited. The optimal solution was to find a host as soon as possible (...). Many dreamed of the clean air they knew and of escaping the iron bowels of the spaceships as they died out, one by one, passing on the dream of discovering a friendly planet. Here, then, is that after a millennium, humanity is still looking for new habitats conducive to life as we knew it. Now, it was the turn of those on *Muramono* to fulfill the dream of the forefathers.

At regular intervals, a research spacecraft was sent with precise coordinates to explore the space, then crossing an x on a digital map after each mission, marking the newly discovered and inhospitable place. At the same time, in addition to the investigation spacecraft, another one was sent for drilling. Each of these bizarre-looking spaceships, which presented the astonishing combination of a crustacean and an obelisk, had a crew of around six people on board - each with a well-defined role.

On the morning of the 7th of December six young men had boarded the old trading tug *Muramono*, not as dreamy as their forefathers had been, for they had

not known the world before the *Ark*. Five of them had plunged into the cryogenic compartments, letting themselves be carried by the unconsciousness of the dream through an unknown sea of pitch black. Only Hunter Raven was frantically refusing his seat in the compartment, spending the entire trip on deck, sitting in front of a large screen on which various coordinates ran. The silence didn't scare him. He was the only true dreamer among the six crew members, but he liked fantasies, not dreams. He often remained lost in thought with his head resting on his left palm and his eyes fixed on the small shining points visible through the porthole of the narrow room that was intended for him. When he was a child his parents had told him about a green and bright world that they had lost and were struggling to find, and he always imagined it as a magical utopia with sunsets that you could only see in geography files.

Sitting in the captain's chair, Hunter was grooving to the music on his walkman, playing through his headphones. In his hands he held the same black book of stories that had once been the diary of a certain Professor *Allan Blackwood*. He read each line greedily, eager to get to know the hypertext even better. When he was a teenager he often took refuge in the hold, wanting to free himself from the rigid world around him. There, tucked under cardboard boxes piled with cables, nuts, bolts and tools, was this wonderful storybook that had fascinated the young man with a rich imagination from the first moment. Hunter didn't believe a single written word, and even considered the entire book a huge code that he had to decipher. He wished, in his heart, that he had met this teacher and asked him to explain to him where that planet of *Aravan*¹ was, for surely it must be a counterpart of Earth—he had often learned that in any story there was a grain of truth, so he strongly believed about the existence of that planet.

He left the book on the desk, sitting over a huge keyboard that was emitting a blue light. He pushed his chair back, stretching out his legs and closed his eyes, stifling a yawn. He settled back into the stiff chair, knowing that the entire command was under the care of Mura – the intelligence that supported the entire system of *Muramono* and looked after them like a true mother. It was time to sleep (...).

A shrill beep startled Hunter from his seat. On board the blue light had turned to red and the main screen ran a chaotic sequence of data. The man had fallen to the metal floor, staring blankly at the screen.

"What is happening? The sleeping man mumbled. Do we have a fault?" He stumbled to his feet and stifled a few more yawns as he regained his composure, then reached over and turned on the enforcement officer's panel. "Mura, show me the structure of the spaceship!" he asked the computer, horrified at the thought of a possible malfunction. At the moment he could not wake the crew, thinking first to check all the assumptions himself.

On the executive officer's screen the spacecraft's data ran, along with a 3D model of it. Hunter watched the code

sequence with interest and tension, breathing a sigh of relief when he noticed that *Muramono* was intact.

"Mura, show me the position!" The screen had unfolded an astrological chart that Hunter had never seen before. Damn! Where we are? The man became agitated, fear welling up in his chest, trying to explain that there was a possibility that he was in an unexplored area of Sol, completely ruling out the option of leaving the solar system. The siren continued to blare on the starship's main deck, announcing a priority alert. The mechanic had thoroughly checked every part of the *Muramono* without discovering the fault. Was it a glitch far too subtle for the computer to notice? After a few more seconds of Hunter thinking through all his theories, he considered turning on the navigator and screen on the science officer's desk..

"Mura, give me the maps with Sol!" Maps upon maps began to appear on the navigation screen. Hunter held the map of the location in his right and the maps of the solar system in his left. It cannot be! We are at the edge of the system! The beeping had intensified. He turned on the station to relay his position to *Ark* in case of an emergency, but his transmission was jammed by an electromagnetic field far too strong. Through the little humming device one could hear only the characteristic hum of the stars. Hunter tries to adjust the waves to allow him to transmit even a morse message, but to his surprise the transmitter picks up a shrill, hissing sound that sounds like screaming.

"Let's locate this!" He told himself resolutely. He did more calculations and measurements, and the program, which was rapidly scrolling green numbers and letters on a black background, turned into a sequence of three dots, followed by three lines, then three more dots. S.O.S? Who is here? He put the maps aside, pushing himself with the chair until he reached the station, where he removed it from the fork. Then, swiveling in his chair, he put his headphones on and fumbled the station's USB plug into one of the ports under the navigator's desk. With his left hand he held the station close to him, and with his right he raised and lowered the pre-amplifier knobs, going to speak loudly: This is *Muramono*, drill carrier tug, registration nine four zero two three six. Do you receive me? Do you need help? We are on our way to *Noah's Ark*! Reception! Reception! We are on our way to the *Ark*! Reception!

The screeching of the stars was the only thing that carried through the station, making the man swear under his breath. He wondered how he had managed to reach the Sol exit without noticing. Unless Mura had reoriented the starship because of the desperate signal for help—that was the only explanation he could find plausible. Hunter had become agitated, cracking each finger in turn. He had grabbed a waste paper top and walked from one desk to another, jotting down the dates that seemed more important to him, until the alarm went off again, and the same shrill squeal came through the speakers.

"We're here, which means we're entering Alpha Centauri! Damn it! Whatever's in there could kill us..."

The dreamy man pored over all the data he had collected from the monitors, thinking of the best method to locate the other spaceship.

"Mura, show me the western direction, about forty-five degrees!"

The siren began to echo throughout *Muramono's* landings. The lights on the deck turned red, and over the loudspeakers Mura repeated, "Impact in T sixty seconds, fifty, forty... Relinquish hypersleep! T-Impact thirty seconds!" the rapidity of events baffled Hunter, who struggled, maps in hand, to locate the body they were about to collide with. How could *Muramono's* sensors pick up on anything, when nothing could be seen through the skylight?

"What do the proximity sensors say?" The helper's robotic voice came over the speakers again:

"Spaceship! Searching the database! Spaceship *Tehnachimo*, registration zero two nine eight four five, put into a state of non-functionality on 11. 09. 20 after the cataclysm..."

"What the hell," Hunter hissed, rushing from the science officer's seat to the navigator's.

Mura kept repeating: "IMPACT AT T= TWENTY-NINE SECONDS...". In the hypersleep compartment, the others were beginning to break free from their dream chains, emerging one by one from their capsules. *Muramono's* captain, Dona Raven, was the first to open her eyes, staring at the dark ceiling. Frowning, she rose from her seat, noticing the red light flickering chaotically at one point in the room. The captain threw her hands in the air to clear herself, watching her subordinates wake up. The executing officer always took the longest to get out of the pod. He liked to dream, though he had never been good at crafting his own dream, but this time Skaar Quanne didn't let himself be expected, much to the crew's curiosity and amusement. He stood up, jumping out of the pod:

"We do not have time! They wouldn't have taken us out of there if we hadn't arrived..." - He was hurrying to put on his pants and shirt, missing the jacket with the *Ark* emblem.

"And if we have arrived?" Dona asked. She bent down, yawning, to retrieve her uniform from the drawer attached to her pod.

"Captain..." - The executing officer started to speak, but was interrupted:

"I'm cold!" Reed Wave wailed, *Muramono's* second mechanic who always found an excuse to complain. The captain looked at him skeptically, continuing to put on her navy blue jacket. Reed was trying to disentangle himself, twisting his neck which had cramped giving him a terrible stab. Counting the people in the compartment in her mind, she asked drawlingly: "Hunter didn't go to sleep again?"

"He never sleeps! Shane Roland said as he braced himself in the bridges of his palms against the wide bars of the capsule to leap onto his arms and surface. *Muramono's* navigator wasn't the kind of person you'd want to have a conversation with, but he was one of the best on the *Ark*. He was not to be flustered, he always thought through any situation coolly, and his face never betrayed his emotions

- some said that something horrible had happened to him in his childhood, and since then he was unable to express his moods. He was no dreamer either, he was conscious and rational, preferring facts and tangible things.

"Skaar is right! Sleep was too short!" Ira Shean's voice was heard. Dreams didn't concern her either, she had never been good at exercising her imagination, relying all the time on the purely theoretical side of things, which was why she was a science officer.

"I'm cold!" Reed was whimpering, sitting wrapped in a thin blanket. He had climbed back into his capsule when Mura's robotic voice was heard, "Impact in fifteen seconds...". The entire crew looked at each other puzzled, shifting their scowls from one to the other.

"What the hell did Hunter do?" Skaar's voice rang out as he hurried out of his hibernation compartment. He was going down the long hallway of the aircraft, wanting to reach the main deck as soon as possible. Reed dressed on the fly, tiptoeing a few times to pull up his pants, then sprinting after Skaar, he pulled his shirt over his head, slamming into the door.

Donna was the first to hit the deck, seeing Hunter frantically pulling on the levers to stop the impact. Skaar narrowed his eyes, not understanding why they would bump into each other, and the man's voice at the console made everyone shiver:

- Mura, tell me how close it is!

"THIRTY METERS! FORCED BRAKING APPLIED! ENGINES 3 AND 4 SHUT DOWN! ENGINES 1 AND 2 SLOW!"

"Come on, Mura, come on!" Hunter repeated desperately. Damn it! He spoke with his jaw clenched, frowning at the panels. He could feel his heart pounding and his sweaty palms sliding on the levers.

Captain Raven rushed to her own desk to help her brother stop the iron monster. Ira approached his curved screen, hastily reading the data Hunter had collected. A frown creased his forehead every time the program started running fast, unable to keep up.

"IMPACT IN THREE SECONDS, TWO... IMPACT NOT ACHIEVED!" The robotic voice poured through the speakers like painful hail. The aircraft came to an abrupt halt, swinging twice in space, then came to rest. Hunter could breathe easy now.

"What was that?" Reed asked, walking up to his fellow mechanic.

"A camouflaged ship!" Came Hunter's final reply as he lay limp in the navigator's seat. Through the still-on station, which the man had forgotten about, the same S.O.S signal followed by screams began to be heard.

Skaar's face went from calm to angry to scared in less than five minutes as he stared intently at his computer screen. The captain stood up from her seat, all but Hunter gathering around the execution officer, looking intently at the hologram mockup of *Muramono*.

"What happened?"

"Module 4 is damaged! What the hell did you try to do?" He snapped at Hunter. The latter was still trying to catch his breath, lying down, as the forced shutdown of

the spaceship had put him through all possible states. The mechanic rested his head on the headrest, analyzing the one who demanded an account from him:

- Save your ass, officer!" Hunter indignantly rose from his chair, heading for the exit.

"If you would have slept..."

"You would be dead now! Come on Reed, I think I fried a plate!"

Shane settled into his seat at the desk, going over the maps Hunter had pulled out. He analyzed them, looking at them skeptically. Ira, for his part, was trying to understand why he would have derailed *Muramono* so much. The distress signal was heard again, invading the entire mess.

"We're entering Alpha Centauri! That's where the signal comes from!" Shane concluded, then was silent for a few seconds. In fact, it comes from before us!

"We have to help them!" Dona's voice, which had been silent until then, came out loud and clear as the screeching intensified.

"What do you want to help with, Captain? We don't even see them..."

"That's interesting, it looks like it has a shield!" Ira was talking, not taking his eyes off his screen. It's an aircraft, and to see how weird it is, the system tells me it's one of ours!

"How so?" The captain asked, coming closer to Ira's screen to see the structure of the ship with her own eyes.

"Mura says it's the *Tehnachimo*!"

"What do we know about her?" A screeching characteristic of broken speakers came through the station connecting to the engine room, then Hunter's voice brought new news:

"Can you hear me?"

"Yes!"

"A module is fried and a fan has a melted propeller. We are currently trying to repair a short circuit to prevent a fire!"

"Can you repair the module?"

"I can patch it up... - He was silent for a few moments, thinking of a quick solution, then continued: Or we could find something useful on *Tehnachimo*! Anyway, we're trying to fix it! Reed is already working..."

"Here they are trying to connect the ships! See you soon!" His sister's voice unsettled him, for she had suddenly become far too preoccupied with that aircraft. Reed had disconnected the damaged module so he could repair the melted circuits. Hunter was peering through the circular hole that housed the fan, thinking that the molten propeller might have seeped through the wires, damaging them, or perhaps clogging the engine's ventilation system, which would not have been good news.

"I don't understand why anyone would hide on the edge of this!" Reed brought two colored cables closer which gave off a few bright sparks.

"Take care!" The harsh voice of the mechanic interrupted him, but his colleague continued to speak, ignoring the sparks:

"What do you think, Hunter? Why would it come here?"

"I don't know, but if we don't fix this we might end up here too..."

It was quiet on *Muramono*'s main deck, each member focused on finding a weak point in *Tehnachimo*'s shield. Shane had put the spaceship back on auto mode, looking carefully through the documents Mura had provided. Except for the fact that the spacecraft had been registered, there was no evidence of its activity. Skaar was stubbornly trying to learn more about the monster before them, exhausting all possible searches:

"Mura, is there a model of *Tehnachimo*?"

The voice of the system was not expected, recounting slowly:

"SEARCHING THE DATABASE! RESULT: NEGATIVE!"

"We have to get aboard her, she might have a major breakdown!" came the captain's voice. "Shane, take us closer to her!" She was addressing the navigator who was scrambling to decipher the paths of Alpha Centauri in case he got too far ahead.

"And the engine room?" Came the uncertain voice of the navigator.

"You must have it finished!" She spoke harshly and coldly, angry at his brother for disobeying orders, and now he must quickly finish the repair, check the starship next to them, and return with the refined cargo to the *Ark*.

"Why do we take the risk of getting there?" Came Shane Roland's natural question, not looking up from the maps of the area. Alpha Centauri Beta could be seen through the porthole lighting up the entire deck. The universe, in its immensity, has something beautiful combined with a deafening horror. There is never any noise in space, only our devices perceive rotations and magnetic waves as noise, otherwise it is an abysmal silence.

"Protocol tells us to respond to calls for help! Failure to comply..."

"That's how we're going to end up, Don'!" Shane snapped, turning to face the captain. They have serious problems, the *Ark* will not last much longer!

"Take us to her! The captain growled, settling into her seat.

"Fine!" Shane manually started engines 3 and 4, activated the console and started the spacecraft. In the engine room, module 4 finally succumbs under the pressure of propulsion. Soon the fire made its presence felt, covering a good part of the compartment.

"Reed, get the fire extinguishers!" Hunter shouted, covering his mouth and nose with his t-shirt. The smoke made it difficult for them to see. They had been caught by surprise seeing the engines activate, failing to complete the repair. They had looked at each other for a brief moment, not understanding the action of those on deck, knowing full well that they had to wait for their signal. The two mechanics struggled to stop the rapidly spreading fire. All the while at the stern the siren wailed desperately, the red lights flickered chaotically, and Captain Raven sternly ordered the hooks to be dropped to tie *Muramono* to *Tehnachimo*. As the harpoons latched onto the ship's invisible shield, it deactivated, revealing

a monstrosity three times the size of the *Muramono*. The board warned the navigator of the major malfunctions the spacecraft had suffered through this reckless action. Shane shut down the engines.

The other three crew members approached the large porthole, standing in awe of the spaceship. The star behind her made her seemed as cold and silent as an intergalactic cave. There was no activity on the spacecraft, but the cry for help could be heard again throughout the station. The engine room had been engulfed in thick smoke, which the filter could not cope with. The two men had managed to stop the fire which had left sparking circuits and charred pads in its wake. Reed Wave, annoyed, grabbed the station by the fork and started yelling at the deckhands:

"Are you crazy? Damages are much bigger! Why the hell did you start the engines?" The mechanic's shouts were irrelevant, as their three teammates were not paying attention. They stared absorbedly at Tehnachimo. Ignore us! Reed tells Hunter indignantly.

"Let's go to them!" The man snarled, wiping his sweaty, ash-smearred face with the hem of his t-shirt.

The station started up again, this time the sound of the stars was replaced by a ghostly lullaby, making your blood freeze in your veins. For the second time that day, the crew was confused. Skaar grabbed the transmitter, slumping into the chair at the desk:

"This is *Muramono*! Drilling transporter tug! Reception! Reception!" A chuckle could be heard over the loudspeakers, then silence, gentlemen, or at least it was until the two angry mechanics appeared, entering through the wide open door:

"What the hell, Dona?" Hunter's voice boomed from the door frame. Dona didn't answer him, she was staring intently at the spaceship in front of them, thinking of a way to break in. She sat for a few moments to think, massaging her chin with two long, slender fingers, then addressed the executive officer and navigator in an authoritative tone:

"Skaar, find the emergency exit! If we can't bridge it, we enter manually! Shane take us closer!"

"Not! The mechanic intervened. You're crazy! Force the engines once again and we are stuck here!"

"Shane, now!" She was aware of such a fact, but the last call from the spaceship intrigued her, whatever was there was in trouble.

"No way!" Hunter continued to protest, but his fellow crew members listened to his sister. Skaar was analyzing the scan he had done of *Tehnachimo*, Shane was trying to move the spaceship with only the two engines on. Ira had come to the enforcement officer's aid, and the frowns on their faces were not a good sign. The mechanic had been silent, studying his sister's face. Reed was leaning against one of the lecterns, looking at each one, waiting for a logical explanation for why his entire engine room work would be destroyed. The atmosphere at the stern was oppressive, every member of the crew tense and strained. Reed sighed, moving to the porthole, then spoke.

"We have to go out! The others stopped, looking at him questioningly, and he continued in a low tone: Every spaceship has a ramp that you can open from the outside. If we do this we are taking risks! We don't know what faults it has!"

"You are right! Dona concluded. Skaar, let's find the ramp!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes!"

The distress signal sounded again, as strange as the first time. At that moment, Hunter thought of something completely unexpected that he immediately communicated to the others:

"I don't think there is anyone else on the spaceship!"

"I think you are right! Shane argued, pushing back in his chair, adding, Sounds like an automated message! It is broadcast at regular time intervals. It could be a trap!"

"The protocol..."

"With all due respect, but we are going to certain death!"

"I found it! Skaar's joyful voice was heard. It's really close, ten steps from the main ramp! He looks at Shane, afterwards at Dona, then adds: Who's coming out?"

2

Hunter was chosen to open the ramp. He dressed up with the suit that would protect him from space radiation and help him breathe. His heart pounded in his chest, and fear became part of his body as the ramp opened. His only connection to *Muramono* was a long cable that allowed him to move freely without straying too far from the spaceship. He moved awkwardly, floating through the immensity of the Universe, he breathed noisily through his nostrils and felt as if he was running out of air.

On the deck, Shane had remained in position, guiding Hunter from the inside. The other three members stood glued to the porthole, fearfully watching the man risking his life, waiting for a signal to emerge from *Muramono*'s shell. If they had known in advance that it was a trick, they would have turned back, but they were not sure of anything. Everything is deceptive in space!

The mechanic ended up stuck to the spaceship, passing in front of a small porthole curiosity pushing him to look through it. He braced his hands against the outer walls of *Tehnachimo* and began to squint to get a better look inside through the round porthole. It was dark, and people seemed to be sitting in their places, in positions. Hunter looked around the inner deck, stunned to see that people were wearing suits, which meant only one thing: oxygen supply failure. "Are they still alive?" the man asked himself. He would satisfy his curiosity only when he got aboard the spaceship. As far as he knew, this ramp led to a single room that would not affect the entire machinery of the spaceship. But until then he would feel lost, struggling not to float in limbo through the abyss.

The man took a deep breath, counted ten steps and stopped in front of a round door with a large, protruding handle. Hunter turned to face *Muramono*, raising

his thumb in the air as an 'it's all right, you can come' sign. Dona, Ira, Reed and Skaar hurriedly suited up. They were tense and frightened at the possibility of his failure by some unfortunate accident, each trying to hide his doubts as best he could. Dona was the first to step on the ramp, followed by the subordinates. Behind Hunter came the other four crew members, all of whom had a cord attached to their suit – after they opened the ramp, they would tie the cords to the handle of the ramp, so that when they returned, they would re-rope with them. They were all scared of what they were going to find! Alpha Centauri Beta lit their way like a guiding star. Hunter gripped the handle, starting to pull hard.

"Hunter, not like that!" Shane's voice came through the headset. "It's an old spaceship model! You have a flap down! Pull it, then lift the handle!"

"Understood!" The man fumbled with his hands for the flap. Finding it, he did exactly as he was told, then lifted the handle, opening the ramp. He heard the navigator's voice again through the headset:

"Well done, Hunt!" Then she addresses the others: "Enter one at a time, then close the ramp!"

3

Once they entered the main deck of the spaceship, they were surprised to realize that there was not even a problem with the oxygen transmission. They had taken off their helmets, supporting them under their arms. They slowly approached the men who stood motionless, kitted out in their old and worn suits. Shane kept digging through the *Ark's* archives, about this spaceship called *Tehnachimo*, and what he finally found made him hold his head in his hands. While waiting for his colleagues, he guzzled large amounts of coffee, not wanting to fall asleep so he could be helpful.

It was Hunter who plucked up the courage and approached *Tehnachimo's* navigator, turning his chair around. At the sight of the mummified body dressed in the astronaut's suit, he could not suppress a cry combined between fear and amazement. That perfectly preserved body looked defiantly straight into his soul with its empty eye sockets, displaying a mocking smile.

"Look!" He said, taking a few steps back to clear his teammates field of vision.

The others each went to one of the four remaining humans, turning them to face them, realizing in a daze that they were all long dead.

"What does this mean?" Reed asked in a shaky voice. Ira hurried to turn on the starship's central panels, hoping to find the cause that had led to such an unfortunate occurrence. As soon as the captain's screen lit up, the blue color was quickly replaced by a video clip that began to play:

"–If someone found these notes, it means the *Ark* fell apart! The man on the recording said, smiling. You don't have to fear, from the beginning we had no chance of winning. Nice to meet you all! I am the captain of this ship, Ezra Dvořák!"

Muramono's crew trembled at the name. Countless

questions began to invade their minds. Why had Ezra left? Wasn't he the one who had saved them all? How had they died? The man in the video continued to speak, calmly and smiling:

"–It's the first day since I left the *Ark*! Ironic, but... The *Ark* kicked us out! – He sighs, then continues, smiling bitterly – We are on the 12.09. 3020. You may not know the year, for you it will probably be the 20th year after the cataclysm! – He checks his watch on his wrist, continuing to speak – It's 22:00, Earth time. We kept the old order, the one the *Ark* Senate didn't agree with! You don't have to be sad, they made the best decision. We wanted to restore the earth, for the same reason we took some animal specimens with us!"



Alina Cuiedan

A wolf dog jumped into his arms, yawning merrily. The puppy seemed genuinely happy aboard *Tehnachimo*. The people on deck were tilting their heads from side to side in bewilderment at what they had just seen. Behind Ezra the rest of the crew appeared, and the man spoke to them:

"I think you should introduce yourself!"

He took the camera in his hand, bringing it too close to the face, a man with black eyes and pale skin, who was smiling, revealing his perfect teeth. He took a deep breath, then moved the camera away:

"Hi! Do you still say 'hello'? I'm Science Officer Noah Horák, and we're on a mission to restore life!" He started rolling the camera, catching all his colleagues on film. From behind the small device, Noah was chuckling. Here we had... – He doesn't continue, letting the girl in front of the camera introduce herself. The latter burst into a roar of laughter, bowing:

"Carla Quanne, the executive officer of this box!" The remark drew a few shouts of indignation in the background, including from the captain, but they weren't angry – they still seemed happy to accept their expulsion. O.K, O.K, *Tehn* is the coolest astronaut ship to survive! Move the camera to the left, Noah!

"Understood! Who do we have here?"

"Allan Martin, the only doctor of this family!" He

grinned, winking at the camera, then covering the lens with his palm. In the background, Noah's rebellious voice sparked laughter.

"You're staining the camera! It's quality, from when I was on Earth!" The man mumbled.

"Camera to me Horák!" The officer obeyed exactly the order of the woman's voice, letting a small face framed by black curls, with large blue eyes hidden behind round lenses, be captured for eternity. Her voice was warm, pleasant, giving you the feeling of safety:

"I'm Tehno's navigator and my name is Cristal Black! Nice to meet you!" She was silent for a few seconds, glancing around the deck, then remembered the playful puppy. She took him in his arms, lifting him up, continuing: He's Nano! The youngest of us!

A slow tune had begun to play from the loudspeakers, to which the crew members had begun to sway, humming the lyrics: Got a secret/ Can you keep it? /Swear, this one you'll save¹."

Muramono's crew, silently watched the clip accompanied by the song they didn't recognize. They could see Noah rotating the video camera from one colleague to another. They all seemed so happy despite being away from their families, alone in the vastness of the universe, that they had a kind of sad happiness that stirred your soul. The beginning of the diary saddens the five young men. Speaking louder, over the music that carried them into a euphoric trance, Ezra made himself heard again:

"- Our secret is that we have no provisions, and yet we shall live!" with that the screen went black leaving the people on the deck looking at each other in bewilderment.

"What does this means? Why did they expel them? And how did they get the spaceship? Reed's questions came in an avalanche, to which Ira, perhaps uncertainly, engaged in discussion:

"Maybe they stole it!"

"To steal a damn monster?"

"They left, however, without provisions, it is possible..."

Hunter tapped the screen again, starting a second clip:

"-It's been a week! We are still doing well, we made a garden where we grow algae. We will try to restore an entire ecosystem!". Hunter no longer waits for any of his colleagues to add anything, continuing to play the log. Ezra's voice was heard again. He looked weak and worried:

"-It's already been a month! We are fine, maybe we have lost a little weight, but we remain optimistic! Ark has not contacted us! He swallowed hard, searching for the right words. Noah is in the sanitary compartment, trying to help Nano. Life among the stars is apparently not for puppies... We discovered a way to alter the genome and maybe that will help Nano! He smiled crookedly and then closed the camera.

"We've been here for almost half a year, heading for Alpha Centauri. According to our calculations, it is possible to reach Proxima Alphalon Zerix - he paused for a few seconds, sighing loudly, resting his head on his right hand - Professor Blackwood is talking about her. I'm not

so sure we'll find it! Nano is recovering nicely! I have to show you..."

He turned the camera to the quadruped that had acquired human eyelashes. Even as emaciated as they were, they still seemed happy about their success. They had been able to change animal DNA into human DNA without much material. Cristal helps Nano up onto his new legs, holding him up in his arms.

"Our Nano, will soon look like us! He'll become almost immune to viruses...that's awesome!"

Cheers could be heard from behind them. They never knew they would create a monster. People should stick to their dreams without reaching the ideals of those dreams that could cost them their lives. Ezra returned to the foreground with Noah:

"Yes, Nano, he's almost human! I discovered a formula that helped him modify even his skeleton..."

"We hope to complete this mission!"

"And that we will find Alphalon Zerix!" Carla shouted excitedly, spinning in her chair.

"Carla Quenne... - came the voice of Skaar who had recognized a distant relative. My mom was holding a picture of her... I guess she was kind of my grandma?" He asked uncertainly, looking at the others.

"There are more?" Curiosity prompted Reed to hastily ask about the rest of the clips, and Hunter's affirmative answer was gratifying:

"Yes!" Hunter pressed play again. This time Carla had appeared instead of Ezra:

"- Hello everyone! This is Carla! Ezra's not feeling well, he's had a rough time. We have been adrift for almost a year and are beginning to lose hope of finding the promised planet. Nano is slowly adjusting to the new almost human life! At least he lives..."

Behind his chair sat a strange, human hybrid. It had long, muscular hands, the fingers of which ended in claws, the body was well developed, measuring about two meters, the legs were shaped like those of mountain goats - except that instead of hooves, they were human in shape with ankle and foot, toes, thigh showing prominent musculature, and the hybrid's face still retained the wolf-dog muzzle. He had lost his brown fur, gaining chocolate skin, and his ears were long and pointed. His eyes betrayed no violence, appearing calm as the depths of the oceans. The woman took his hand in a friendly way, urging him to speak.

The hybrid opened his mouth awkwardly, beginning to mechanically articulate the words. His voice was dark, hoarse like that of a gout sufferer. As he spoke he struggled to display a relaxed smile, but something was clearly unsettling him:

"I am Nano..."

It was quiet on deck. Muramono's crew didn't know what to think, if there really was a hybrid, where was it? The captain's helmet began to buzz, making out Shane's voice with difficulty:

"Can you hear me?"

"Yes!"

¹ The Pierces Secret

"The S.O.S signal is still transmitting! Did you find the crew?" His voice was slurred, the transmission interrupted in places, and Dona answered him in short and concise sentences:

"He's dead! We check the logbook!"

"See you soon!" Then the transmission closed.

"- Two years have passed! We're getting more and more paranoid! Something unexpected happened and Nano had to end up in the cryogenic capsule. It's better for him, he wouldn't survive... we don't think we will either. - The one speaking was Carla, and the crease on her forehead betrayed her concern.

"We're too close to point A. It's not a friendly planet. It shows signs of very high radioactivity! Noah is trying to adjust the suits as we are about to land. Allan is doing final checks in the engine room.

Ezra turned the camera so he could capture the activities of the crew. So Cristal was in front of the navigation console, with transparent maps next to him that kept updating. He had managed to map a good portion of the promised planet they hoped to call 'home'. Noah, as Ezra had said, was sitting at his desk, making astronaut suits, and Carla was to his right. Each of these members had within two years lost the glow they had at first on their faces – they were exhausted, emaciated, almost translucent, with only the eyes retaining their original spark.

A distinctive hum had begun to be heard through the station's loudspeakers, then Allan's voice, which had not spoken until then, was clearly heard:

"The engine room is fine! We can prepare the entry into the atmosphere! Crystal, I'd like you to scan the target point so we know what we're landing on!"

"I'm trying!"

The screen gets black lines and streaks, a sign that the video has been compromised. *Muramono's* crew let out a loud sigh. They stood still, eyes wide curious and ears pricked, until the video started again. It was quiet. It was far too quiet for *Muramono* to feel at ease:

"-I postponed the descent for the past six months! Tomorrow will be the big day. We will sadly put Nano to sleep. The year 3033, the eighth day, the fifth month, we hope it will not be our last day..

Carla's voice was lost like a whisper in the bustle around her as the crew prepared for the big day. The video camera was rolled a few more times, capturing some moments of excitement and happiness. Last moments with the entire crew of *Tehnachimo*.."

Ira impatiently pressed the arrow pointing to the "next video", dated with the following numbers: 3033. 21.05. Reed was tapping her left foot vigorously as she sat with her arms crossed over her chest, eager to continue the story. A trace of sadness could be clearly seen on Hunter's face, his eyes watery, and Skaar sat further back, leaning against one of the support pillars, constantly thinking of his distant relative that his mother had told him in passing as a wonderful person. He had never been wrong, Carla Quenne - who was no longer

discussed on the Ark - had truly been a beautiful woman with an iron will. "What were they going to find out next?" Skaar thought. The man sighed, closing his eyes, opening them again as he heard Clara's crystal clear voice that was interrupted by his devastating sobs:

"- I failed! I couldn't get out! I miscalculated, and now they're all—" He fell silent, swallowing the lump in his throat—they're all dying! Their bodies were instantly dehydrated and no... I can't figure out how it could have come to that. Planet A, it's not Alphalon Zerix, I was wrong.."

"-29.06.3033, I proposed to my colleagues to induce sleep, until I would find a remedy, but they categorically refused! The disease did not escape them!

"If this is the end of us, we accept it.. - Ezra's muffled voice was heard - You can't do more! He spoke hard and sighed often – Crystal says that in a thousand years, alphalonization will be possible. Don't lose hope!"

Carla's tears continued to flow down her pale cheeks. She had picked up the video camera, rising from the captain's desk and walking slowly down the long, dark hallway of the spaceship. She stopped in front of a metal door, which he slowly opened. The image was shaky, a sign that Carla wasn't feeling better either. She slowly entered the compartment that housed three crew members.

These lively people had become shadows of what they had once been. The desire to find the place to call "home" had cost them their own life.

"Are you filming?" Noah was slurring his speech as if he was choking at every moment, yet he struggled to smile at Carla. In fact each member tried to hide their pains. The morphine was wearing off, and the pain had taken over their weakened bodies.

"Yes!"

"Don't cry, Carla! There is still hope..."

The filming suddenly stopped, starting in a lethargic way:

"- This is Carla! The woman had lost all the sparkle in her eyes, looking like a wax puppet struggling to speak through tears she couldn't control. Cristal Black was the first to leave us a month ago! I couldn't capture the pain we all felt. do you know sometimes technology is not good for anything! Noah was the most devastated, he had loved her more than we had, and in the last days of her life he never left her bedside. – The woman sighed heavily, briefly closing her eyes. Three weeks ago Noah joined her in a green meadow, just like we knew it when we were kids..." He stopped, biting his lip to stop the tears that were falling awkwardly down his drawn face—Ezra died last night and Allan this morning..

Carla Quenne lowered her head, giving free rein to the sobs she had suppressed. As she raised her face to the camera, it was tinged red from crying. She blew his nose noisily, adding:

– They must have calmed down! This is our life, fragile and useless... I will not throw them into space! I will put them in their posts. They died doing what they

loved, without regrets, without hopes... Don't get lost, read carefully what we leave you with!

She stood up from his chair, taking the camera in his hand. She left the hatch, heading down the long hallway that led to the hibernation compartment. The image was dark, only Carla's sobs could be discerned in the tracks of her dragging steps. She was mourning the loss of a family and drifting into a bottomless abyss. A loud clang opened a large door that concealed Nano's corseted body in a cryogenic capsule. Despite his appearance, the quadruped had become a rational man who would keep Carla company until she too joined his crew.

She carefully placed the camera on a stand, then, by pressing a simple external button, the capsule lid popped open. Nano opened his eyes instantly, looking in amazement at her crying face, understanding after a short moment the reason for the woman's sadness: all the crew had died. Carla helps him up. Their eyes met for a few seconds, sending their pain from one to the other. Nano sat down on the cold floor and Carla nestled into his arms, crying her heart out. They had only each other in a black infinity, floating, without anyone knowing about them... In the silence of the frozen compartment, sobs and sighs had become the most requested domina." The image became increasingly blurry, until the entire screen turned black. Reed swallowed hard, adding:

- They survived...

- We have a little more to learn! Dona spoke, playing the clip that showed them the main deck stranger than ever, as the dead had taken the places of the living. All joy and life had drained away. Carla was pale, supporting Nano in a slow dance. In the background was the same part of a song that those from the future didn't recognize: „*Nothing thrills us/ Anymore/No one kills us/ Anymore/ Life is such a chore...?*”. Only the emergency lights and a small computer panel were on in the stern. The two danced, sitting in each other's arms - the woman resting her head lazily on the hybrid's shoulder, thus forming a beautiful funeral dance, a last immortalized sway, destined for immortality. If they didn't know the story behind the clip, the viewers would have overlooked the short tender moment, but knowing what happened, Muramono's crew members began to have tears in their eyes, feeling the sadness in the souls of the two protagonists...

As the song ended, Carla leaned heavily into Nano's arms. The latter hugged her to his chest, slightly dropping to his knees, touching the floor. He realized with a stupor that the woman had died, only when she did not embrace him with thin, waist-length hands. For the first time since he had become human, Nano had begun to howl heartbreakingly, clutching her frail body with his powerful arms. Tears rolled down his half-human face and his body rocked back and forth—he looked a lot like a mother trying to lull her baby to sleep, except for one thing: his baby was the one who had taught him the meaning of the word "love" and who now, she was cold, inert, giv-

ing herself completely into the arms of death for eternity... Throughout the mortuary setting, Techno began to play a slow, heartbreaking song: „*There must be something wrong/ Lights on in the middle of the night/ If I give a little more will it make it right/ You know I'm trying in the end/ There must be something wrong*”³. The man cried out his pain as loud as he could, clutching the lifeless body tighter and tighter. But who else would help him when he was the only survivor? What else can you do in the face of death? Regardless of the time we are in, humanity is doomed...

“God... - Ira hissed, trying not to cry. What happened to them all? Why Ark...”

“Because he had problems since then!” Came Skaar's cold reply. Hunter noticed one last part of the logbook, looked at his colleagues who gave a short nod of approval, then started the clip:

“-This is Nano! Carla tricked me—he took a deep breath, choosing his words—they didn't just change my DNA, they cursed me! - The man who now no longer looked like a hybrid, but a full-on human, regretfully rested his elbows on his knees - They wanted me to survive... But why Carla, he cursed me to live so long without her? Anyway (he clapped loudly, later blowing his nose) It's been a year since Carla died! I just feel like I'm losing my mind. I found Noah's journal, I was right: they made me immune in time! I'm not mad, just sad. From now on the diary will stop, because it's time to sleep again! Alone, in the immensity of space you can get lost, and I don't want their work to be in vain. Before Carla died, we set the coordinates of that green planet together and a distress signal, in case we all died...”

He was silent again for a few moments, during which he played restlessly with his fingers:

“Something, it will still be good in everything that happened! From today, Carla won't cry anymore, neither will Nano... Let's see each other again! I hope to meet you! - The man spoke slowly, looking with tearful eyes fixedly into the room, addressing everyone and no one, for we know who he was really addressing (his crew). Behind him the members of *Tehnachimo's* crew could be seen, dressed in their astronaut suits, each sitting at their stations, frozen for eternity. Before ending the recording add:

“Alphalon Zerix should be able to support evolved life, radiation levels should be normal. I cannot give you much information about this planet, as we have not even come close to it, as we have a long way to go before we get there. I hope we weren't mistaken, for the past two years the crew had been looking at all the possibilities: there might be life, hostile or friendly inhabitants. Please just be careful! Alphalon could be humanity's hope for generations to come...”

“Nano still lives...”

“Shall we wake him up?” Reed asked uncertainly.

The on-board computer activated with a strange hum, then all the lights came on aft, revealing the stony faces of the former crew, and the robotic voice came through

2 The Pierces - *Boring*, 2014

3 The Pierces *Must be something*, 2015

the speakers: "Destination less than seventy degrees north latitude, sixty degrees south longitude... Estimated arrival at the set point: T = 36 h."

"You can not!" Hunter exclaimed enthusiastically.

"We were wrong, we were not close to Alpha Centauri, we had long passed it... - Ira whispered in horror, approaching the porthole. Shane gripped the station again, speaking clearly and bluntly to his colleagues:

"Can you hear me?"

"Yes! Skaar answered him curtly."

"You won't believe what I found out! We're not in the Centauri, and Tehnachimo wasn't an accident either... we were able to decipher some old information: Ezra, although leading the whole effort, was expelled along with the entire team. They stubbornly kept a quadruped - it didn't say which one - and continued to do tests. How can I tell you? They wanted to make a generation of space-time resistant humanoids! They thought there was still a living planet out there somewhere..."

"Is that what is written?"

"Yes, the Senate classified them unfit, proof of the shocks they had suffered! But guess what? I checked the maps, and we're headed for a pretty big planet..."

"In thirty-six hours! Hunter whispered."

"Here you go? How do you know?"

"The spaceship assistant has now communicated to us and if we look carefully we can see the planet from here..."

Shane got up from his seat, rushing to look out the window, but the only thing he could see was the giant spaceship named *Tehnachimo*. The others were dumbstruck as through the porthole they were shown an enormous, glowing planet, similar to the ancient planet of humanity that *Muramono's* crew had seen in the 3D renderings. They huddled together, gazing with delight and emotion at the hope for humanity that those on Tehnachimo had found.

- She is so beautiful... - A whispered voice was heard from behind them - Carla would have been happy to see her! The men on deck turned in unison to the source of the voice, noticing Nano in astonishment, leaning against the door frame, facing them. He was dressed in the same pants of Arca's uniform and a white tank top. He looked exactly like the man in the video. His face was sad and his body numb. He surveyed the newcomers for a bit, then strode towards them, extending his hand: Nice to see you! I'm Nano, but maybe you already know...

Confusion could be seen on the faces of *Muramono's* crew, not understanding how the Nano had gotten out of its pod. The latter, as if he had read their thoughts, answered them calmly:

"Tehno had to wake me up when I was close. You know, for the final checks..."

"Is the ship in trouble?" Donna Raven asked.

"No! He answered briefly. How did you get here?" Nano sat down in the navigator's seat, letting the lifeless body rest on the metal floor. He lit a few panels and checked the maps.

"Mura redirected the spaceship, we came after your signal..."

"So then... - He thought for a few seconds about the danger he had put the crew in, then spoke resignedly: I'm sorry! Are you the research group?"

"Drilling! Our spaceship is called *Muramono!*"

"*Muramono*... Thanks for coming! Sorry you won't get to know us all!"

The broadcast house began to buzz again, and Shane's voice was heard.

"Can you hear me?"

"Yes!"

"The signal has stopped! What did you do?"

"I found a living member..."

"Wonderful!"

"Is there anyone else with you?" Nano asked, not taking his eyes off the new maps.

"Yes! Hunter replied. This is our navigator Shane Roland. I'm Hunter Raven and my sister is the captain: Dona, you talked to her earlier! The man laughed awkwardly, continuing the introductions: The one sitting gloomily is the Execution Officer, Skaar Quenne..."

Upon hearing the name, Nano involuntarily said:

"Carla..."

"Distant relatives!" Skaar answered half-heartedly.

"I wouldn't say that, you look a lot like her..." -he studied him for a few seconds, then went back to reading the maps.

"The one next to me is Ira Shaen and the one over there being absorbed by the new planet is Reed Wave. Hunter continued the introductions. What exactly are you looking for?"

"In thirty-six hours we will enter the orbit of the planet. I need to check if *Tehnachimo* has suffered lately..."

"Will we be able to land?" Reed asked, still looking at the shiny ball.

"I hope, when we are closer I will have visibility! Can you help me?"

4

Tehnachimo's short review occupied all the time of the five dreamers on the Ark. They were still wondering if Nano was really trustworthy or not, but the desire to get to a real planet had made them forget the danger they were facing. Shane had transmitted from *Muramono* twice before, and the news of descending to an unknown surface was not pleasing to him. Nano, on the other hand, was fascinated by returning to a new land.

Entering the orbit of Alphalon Zerix they could observe the planet better. Nano, helped by Ira, continued to investigate the possibility of alphalonization, exchanging short and precise lines, studying the records:

"Gravity?" Ira asked uncertainly.

"By definition one point two! Hearing the information, Ira's eyes widened in amazement, since by definition mother earth's gravity was one, then what Nano told her next made her beam with happiness: You can walk on the ground!"

"You heard? You can walk on the ground! He shouted excitedly to his colleagues. We need to uncouple *Muramono*!"

"Shane? What do you say?" Hunter asked him across the station. After a few seconds of waiting, Shane's voice came through the speakers:

"I'm pulling the strings! Be careful!"

"We may lose the signal after entering the planet's atmosphere..."

"I will assume the risk!" With that, Shane began to pull the harpoons attached to the *Tehnachimo*, after a few jerks where the hooks hurt the starship's luster, they retracted, freeing *Muramono*.

"We are ready?" Nano was already in the navigator's seat, ready for the planetary orbit penetration operation. *Muramono's* crew occupy the places where *Tehnachimo's* dead had previously sat. They took a deep breath, encouraging each other. Reed made a large cross in the air for protection from harm, sitting quietly on the floor of the engine compartment next to Hunter. *Tehnachimo* moves forward, close to the heroic planet, with confidence and hope. Techno could be heard speaking over the loudspeakers, warning people of the orbital apogee, immediately starting the countdown. Aboard the *Muramono*, Shane was pacing the deck excitedly, praying that his teammates would survive.

"Engine compartment, prepare for platform disengagement!" Dona's voice was heard through the speakers built into the wall of the compartment where the two mechanics were.

"Port starboard alignment, excellent!" Hunter relayed, followed by Reed announcing the successful completion of the spinal cord disjunction.

"Get ready!" Nano shouted across the station to the mechanics, lowering several levers. Be ready!

"Detach the platform!" Ordered Dona.

"I succeeded!" Skaar said, sliding into his seat. Everything went well! To be supported by the affirmative answers of the navigator and Ira.

"We're going down!" Nano shouted. Henceforth they entered the foaming sea of dense clouds. Each of the crew members sat tensely, analyzing the most favorable place for a safe descent.

"It seems to be solid! We can reach anywhere in the perimeter! Skaar's powerful voice thundered."

By the time the distance had narrowed considerably to fifty meters, the thrusters had been shut down, leaving only the sustaining reactors running. Three meters away, a faint sound that sounded a lot like a thump was heard on the deck, a sign that *Tehnachimo* had touched down.

"We are on the ground!" Nano announces.

Dona laid down several levers, then analyzed through the porthole the landscape that stretched before their eyes. Skaar informs the two mechanics that they can return to the deck after a minor overhaul. At the stern, the crew checks the structure of the spaceship, making sure of its integrity. Shane, impatient, was trying to get

through to his crew:

"This is Shane!" can you hear me

"We hear you!"

"Are you OK?"

"Optimum range! Succeeded!"

"Take care of the perimeter! The transmission was starting to get muffled and Shane's voice could be heard croaking: Bring...monsters...analyses..." Then the transmission went dead for good, causing the navigator to swear in frustration."

"What happened?" Nano approached the captain, looking at her sadly.

"I lost contact!"

5

The five dreamers were preparing to go down the ramp. Hunter was the happiest of them all, constantly thinking about the black book of stories that detailed this incredible planet. He was curious if he looked exactly as Professor Blackwood had said. They had all donned their astronaut suits, strapped their helmets on their heads, and taken a tape recorder with them, intending to describe the fauna and flora. Nano stood motionless, outfitted in his own suit, next to the corpse of the one who had once been Carla Quenne. Amidst the rustling and banging of tools, the man's voice broke through the din, making *Muramono's* crew pay attention to him:

- People are bad, but there are exceptions! And for them we must fight, but not lose our humanity! He was crying for the first time since he was surrounded by people again. Ironically, I'm telling you, I didn't even know what it meant to be a "man"! He laughed bitterly. Standing up, he briefly kissed the deceased's forehead, going to attach his helmet to his costume, he said decisively: Let's go!

Nano was right, because humanity is willing to do nightmarish things just to continue to exist. Individuals lose themselves, without realizing it, and in the end they wonder where the good people have disappeared (...). Everyone was afraid again. They were thinking about Shane and all the people he could have brought to that planet. But does humanity deserve a new planet? Hadn't they had one? Why had they destroyed it? They were mean and selfish, and Nano had met such people when he was an unwanted quadruped. People had hurt him, but people had also given him a new life. They had made him like them, they had taught him to think like them, to love and be a man (...).

Around 4 p.m. the crew had descended the main ramp, stepping onto fertile ground. They were stunned by the landscape that spread before their eyes. Spending their entire existence in capsules and narrow compartments, they had never had the opportunity to know what the notion of "freedom" really meant, always feeling cloistered.

"That's incredible! Hunter's eyes shone like a small child's, marveling at everything he saw. Stretching his right hand to the sky with his fingers spread, he said:

It is just as it should be! It's a sunset, right? That's why it's purple..”

“You could be wrong!” Skaar warned, resting his palm on the man's shoulder.

“Never mind, Skaar, I could be wrong!”

Ira pulled out his tape recorder, speaking:

“- I landed around 6 a.m. We opened the main ramp at 4 p.m. and now we are stepping on hard ground. It can be easily walked. We landed on a low plain-like formation. The planet can support life, it presents - at first glance - an impressive biodiversity. We don't know about the existence of possible radiation, we will scan the perimeter!” he hung up the recorder and joined the group huddled around an enormous plant. Ira bent down, taking a 10 millimeter test tube from his outer pants pocket into which he put some surface dust, into another he put a soil sample, and into a third square test tube he put a few blades of grass.

- When we reach *Muramono* we will put them under the microscope!

- You are way too excited! Skaar spoke to him. The man was looking far away, where he thought he saw some kind of river in which the sun was reflected. He had noticed some strange creatures jumping out of the water, then coming back into place. Look there! There's something in the water!

The rest of the crew turn their eyes to the place indicated - by hand - by the executing officer. Those on *Muramono* looked confused, not knowing how to name or categorize the bathing creatures, but Nano explained what he thought the water monsters were:

“They seem to be some kind of megalodon or mosasaur strange in formation. Their heads are deformed too much, and from here it seems to me that they are star-shaped. Wait, you can see one with a wide mouth, but it's horrible, it doesn't seem to have a mandible attached to the jaw! Amazing, you can say it has a circular blade... Extraordinary!” He exclaimed excitedly. He remembered everything Carla had taught him about the human world, from its beginning to its end. He remem-

bered the picture book in which various dinosaurs appeared alongside megalodons. He had always been fascinated by that world (...).

“How do you know so much?” Reed was curious about the man's superpower, as he found it strange how a former dog could know so much detail.

“I learned! And while I was alone, I dedicated myself to studying life on Earth. I'm human, I need to know things about people and the world!”

“You are amazing! A miracle of science!”

“I'm human!” He growled at Hunter, then turned his attention to the planet's flora. I think they are carnivorous plants, and if they have grown so much, the soil must be fertile!

“What about radiation?” Donna Raven asked.

“No!” Skaar had just finished scanning the perimeter they were in. The radiation is the normal radiation emitted by their star. No more!

“So can we take off our helmets?” Hunter spoke impatiently. He radiates happiness, becoming contagious. It was as if they had been in the dark all their lives, and now they were allowed to come out into the light. Nano's dark voice rang out, chuckling at the head mechanic:

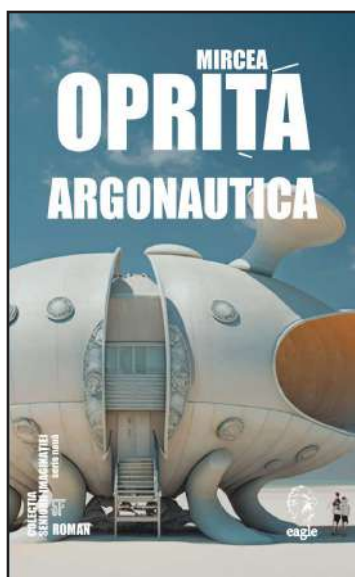
“Only if we risk it!” So Nano was the first to take off his helmet, taking a deep breath. He let his helmet fall to the greasy grass, then swept his hands by his sides, looking like a world lord. He felt as if he had the whole world in his hands, enjoying his new “home” to the fullest. His new colleagues followed suit, giggling and twirling in place under a crimson sun.

“It's so good!” Dona was basking in the sun, laughing from mouth to ear, wishing that friends from home could also reach such a paradise.

6

“Reception! can anyone hear me?” In *Murmono's* bowels, Shane was desperately trying to reconnect with his crew, shouting in vain at the small sparking device. He flung the transceiver nervously, hitting the computer

Books received
at the editorial office



in front of him. He had intended to be patient until the Tehnachimos contacted him, but his patience had left him after three months of sitting quietly. Repeatedly he had tried to contact the research spacecraft and *Noah's Ark*, but each time the hum of the stars came through the speakers. The silence makes you cry out, bringing your most feared demons out of the darkness of the abyssal fog. Soon *Muramono's* navigator wanted to control his illusions, waking up surrounded by his nightmares - he no longer slept, no longer dreamed, but only worked.

"Mura, let's get a little closer to Alphalon Zerix! Tell me, what are the breakdowns!" On the main panel the instrument panel ran a string of green, squiggly data on a black background. *Muramono's* hologram was slowly being built on the executing officer's desk, coloring the damaged portions red.

"Malfunctions: engine three, engine four module two. Good power, good circuits, pleasant, control, all good... - He spoke quickly, drinking constantly from a mug with a blackish, bitter liquid, substitute for coffee. We can get closer, Mura! Let's analyze a little..."

He slumped decisively into his seat, flipping several levers, quickly pressing a few buttons that activated the main panel. He was rolling his pupils in a giddy way, reading the astral charts he had drawn up. Taking a deep breath, he stretched out his fingers, cracking them, to grasp the console firmly in his hands. Behind him, out of the corner of his eye, he saw translucent silhouettes that drove him crazy. They all spoke at the same time, approaching him. They placed their skeletal looking spectral hands on his shoulders, pulling him further back.

"They are dead! They are moving!" The voices had multiplied, giggling, endlessly humming the same abominable sentence. In space bodies do not die. In space you can cry for help, but you won't be heard! If you turned your head slightly, you could see the members of the drilling crew, sitting in their chairs, facing the navigator, singing the same tune with its single macabre verse:

"We are dead!"

"Silence! On *Muramono* we need quiet!" His voice broke through the silence of the spaceship, but for Shane the silence was gone, replaced by the voices of so many haunting ghosts. He had covered his ears with his hands in a desperate effort to stop hearing them speak. But what to do when the voices are in your head? Will you fall prey to them or will you fight them? The man did not turn to face them, knowing full well that the entities would lie to him again. Nightmarish illusions showed his own disfigured crew, mockingly cut down by an unseen force. He jerked from their grasp, pulling a broad lever: We must see, Mura, what has become of ours! - He stopped the tears from springing from the lacrimal glands.

The engines started with a deafening roar. The spectral apparitions dissipated like smoke in the wind, leaving *Muramono's* deck clear. The spacecraft was moving awkwardly among asteroids and natural satellites, penetrating the planet's atmosphere. The anchor dropped with a thud as Shane shut down engines one and two, stalling.

If there really was something on that planet, he should have been able to see it. With a click of a key, he had activated a machine of considerable size that emerged from the bowels of the metal monstrosity, attaching itself to the belly of the spaceship so that it could scan the perimeter above it. The navigator punches a few keys, looking for Tehnachimo's registration number - so the scanner can detect the spacecraft and locate it precisely.

Shane Roland flinched for a brief moment as the image of the black book Hunter was frantically reading flashed through him, remembering in a daze that that professor had talked about a point called Alphalon Zerix. He hurried to Hunter's compartment and was not a little surprised to find the book open, placed on top of some cardboard boxes. He took the book, taking small, quick steps toward the deck. He flipped through it hoping to find some small clue that might help him, but the discovery of a passage about abominable creatures with hooves and warnings about a sunset god made him shudder.

"It's just not true!" He said more to calm himself down. The siren on the other hand began to scream agonizingly, signaling the finding of the spaceship. On the navigator's computer a convoluted map, occupied by transverse lines, measurements and angles, from which Shane understood that Tehnachimo was located in the northern hemisphere of the planet, with the coordinates of 48°57'40.46"N latitude, 27° 11' 36.85" longitude, scrolled chaotically. east, flat surface, about 300m high. According to this data the spacecraft should have landed on its belly with minimal or no damage at all.

"They are dead"! The voices were heard again, clearer, stronger and more real. The man shakes his head left and right a few times to drive them away. They annoyed him, driving him to exasperation, for his crew was not supposed to be dead. He was convinced he wasn't dead. Ambitious, he picked up the transceiver again, pressed a few keys, wanting to reconnect with the starship on the planet. He waits for two hours, during which he hears only the whistling of the stars, after which he sighs deeply and on a spur of the moment puts on his own suit, determined to descend.

"Either I find them, or I die too, but I'm not staying here alone anymore! Come on, Mura, let's go!"

7

It lands heavily ten kilometers away from the first spacecraft at 24:00 EST. With certainty Alphalon Zerix was not in the same time zone, as according to Shane Roland's analysis the planet he had just arrived on made a complete rotation around its axis in T= 36 hours. He seemed to have arrived during the day, and judging by the position of his shadow cast on the ground in the 36-hour dial, it indicated approximately 14:30. Another observation he had made before he decided to descend was that of the crimson star that caused the planet to be permanently immersed in a sunset.

Before exiting the spaceship, he had taken care to check for possible damage caused by a not-so-smooth

landing. The results had not been gratifying as engine four had been completely compromised, the only thing that brought him a sense of well-being was the successful disengagement of the load and its stall. They had no weapons - who would need weapons on a mission with no enemies in sight? He had attached a monkey wrench and the transceiver to his belt, in a plastic backpack he had carefully placed a small device that kept him permanently connected to *Muramono*, a packet of biscuits, a bottle of water, the book with a black cover Hunter's and some sanitary items such as: bandages, disinfectants and anti-inflammatories. He was ready to face the new world. Behind his sternum his heart clenched like a lentil at the mere thought that his crew would be dead.

He had not removed his helmet, fearing a possible radioactive infection or some unknown virus. The sun was hot, making him hot inside the suit, but he didn't give up his gear. In his hands he held a small tablet on which he had set *Tehnachimo's* location. Fear was at home in Shane's body, for the new planet looked like a prehistoric Earth, still in its early stages of evolution, with massive plants and strange animals, standing in the possibility of attack at any moment. Above him, from time to time, gigantic pterodactyl-like birds passed whose scaly bellies shone in the sunlight like iron armor.

The road had been difficult, with ups and downs. The distance from *Muramono* to *Tehnachimo* had taken roughly five hours during which Shane had fallen, repeatedly tripping over the enormous plants that spread their labyrinthine roots to the surface. Several other times, the man had hid from the hideous creatures scurrying around him, and once he even thought he saw people, causing him to panic.

When he arrived at *Tehnachimo* he was greeted by the most abominable scenery he had ever seen. The heroic starship was bathed in the diabolical blood of the crimson sun, the portholes were smeared with blood, and the eroded hull, torn away in places, showed that *Tehnachimo* had been attacked. The grieving man, whose fears had come true, slumped into a cross-legged seat with his head clasped in his hands, refusing to look up at the wide-open ramp of the spaceship decorated with limbs in an advanced state of decay. Its crew had been slaughtered in mockery and left as a warning to future curious people who might approach. The spectral entities he wished he had forgotten appeared around Shane, speaking to him in unison:

"I told you we were dead! I told you!"

"Not! He stood up, shaking the dust off his suit, trying to control the trembling that had taken over his body. I need to find out what happened! He shuffled towards the ramp, clutching the wrench tightly in one hand, preparing for a future attack. He took a deep breath to brace himself and stepped confidently onto the deck. He is greeted by the same bleak scenery, beginning to hear his teammates' cries for help during the carnage. The bodies were dismembered and the heads were nowhere to be found. For the first time Shane couldn't help himself. He

took off his helmet, wiping his tears with the palms of his hands. *Tehnachimo* smelled of death, clotted blood and rotting flesh. *Muramono's* navigator could barely contain the sick feeling that came over him at the sight of the horror. He swallowed, continuing his research. Beneath the science officer's desk, the faint glint of a ring caught his eye, bending down to see it better he recognized in horror Ira's left hand still clutching a tiny tape recorder between her fingers. The man crouched under the desk, taking the device from death's hand. He pressed a button, and the woman's frightened voice was heard:

"Something strange is happening! We are not alone! It is night, and tribal songs are heard outside. - She was scared, breathing jerkily - It's horrible! We saw through the porthole of the spaceship humanoid shapes circling around us, looking for a way in. We convinced ourselves: we were not alone, we never were! These bipedal beings are stomping, the earth is resounding, and they are repeating a name that I have only seen in Hunter's storybook.:

«Aravan! Aravan! Aravan!» he screamed shrill. They have hooves instead of legs, they stomp, they jump! I'm afraid I've desecrated a holy tomb! It's awful! Nature also unleashes itself in harmony with these creatures. We're in the heart of the storm... I found a cave the other day but didn't go in, I think I pissed them off though! - It was interrupted for a few moments then the sound was resumed: They managed to break through *Tehnachimo's* casing! They are with us! We're trying to keep them at bay!" the recording was followed by clattering, frightened screams of the crew, thuds, kicks, growls, then silence engulfed everything. Shane wanted to rewind the tape to listen to the other recordings that Ira must have made, but the magnetic tape had erased, leaving only soft hums.

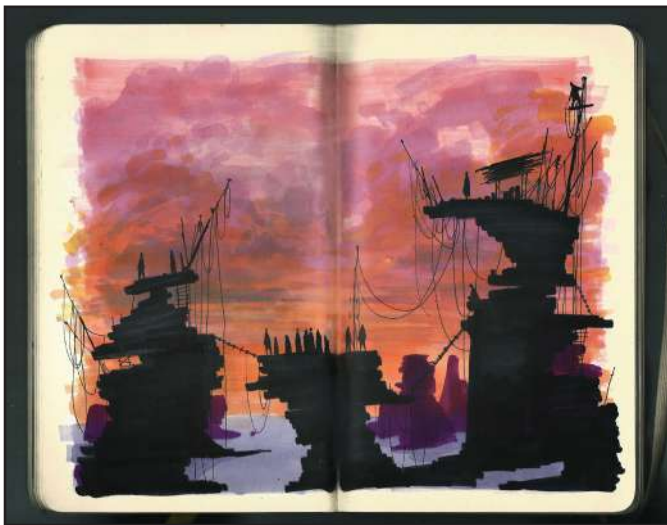
"What attacked them?" It was a resounding question for the navigator, rising from his hiding place he opened Hunter's book, and was not a little surprised to read almost the same passage as detailed by Ira. Tell me you're kidding! It is impossible! How can a fantasy be real? He was about to throw the book out of his hands, seeing the blood streaks on the floor of the hatch leading outside. Shyly, he followed the reddish tracks that continued for at least thirty meters from the spaceship. The creatures had destroyed *Tehnachimo's* entire body. The man had taken Ira's recorder with him, continuously pressing the play button, listening again and again to the frightened voice of his colleague.

«To them you are an invader, to you, they are the enemy, and the only mission you have left is to live. Live, Shane!».

Following in the footsteps of a massacre was never an impressive idea, it often proved to be an act of recklessness, but Shane Roland wanted more than ever to know the truth about his crew. The man shoved the tape recorder into his pants pocket, once again turning to the story book. Ira Shaen was talking about a cave they hadn't entered, and Allan Blackwood was also talking about a cave. The difference between the two accounts was made by Professor Blackwood, for he, together with his team, had penetrated the earth's crust, discovering - as he called it

- an arctic cave. The navigator began to doubt everything he knew, often wondering how those people had gotten there, so far from home... Drops of blood, accompanied by a portion of a man's former body, they stopped at the entrance of a round cleft in the ground.

"What did they do with the heads?" Emotions racked his weary body, darting from the ecstasy of a monumental discovery to the horror of finding the wide-eyed heads hanging somewhere. He clenched the black-covered book in his hands, swallowing hard, convinced that once again Blackwood was right: the cave was engulfed in the cold of the arctic winter, then the long passage devoid of rock formations, the creatures encased in layers of ice, and of course he had been right about the corridor the long one devoid of cold. There the navigator felt a poisoned spear pierce his chest. Five well-known heads stood nailed to a basalt wall, from whose injected eyes, protruding from their sockets, crimson tears dripped between the cracks of the rock.



Alina Cuiedan

The speed of rotation must have picked up, because Shane felt like he was in an accelerator, unable to stand. Grotesque heads swirled around him, crying, laughing and blaming him. He tried to ignore the voices asking where he was, struggling to stifle his cry of frustration and helplessness. The teacher had not warned him that the aliens also have their own gods that they believe in, that they serve and to whom they make offerings. Now he believed in the reality of that teacher's diary. But what good is it when the diary doesn't also offer him an escape route? The end of the corridor adorned with human heads was nothing more than a shrine to a hideous alien body with membranous wings – he had read about this body and laughed at its base, but now it was real – nailed to the ice.

The clatter of hooves shook the ground. They were getting louder and louder, coming from the long corridor. The echo of the grotto carried cheers, screams and bizarre songs. *Muramono's* navigator froze. He still could not accept the loneliness and the cessation of his colleagues. It was one of the few times he wished the whole thing was just a dream. But reality snapped him out of his trance as he realized the rumblings were coming from the surface.

Hunter's head came loose from the pivot he was nailed with, rolling until he touched the toes of Shane's boots. She looked at him scared, trembling:

"I have to go!" Conchise, turning on his heel. He felt his body heavy. His heart pounded with fright in his chest, and the pounding had been replaced by the pounding of his eardrums..

8

He had run in terror through the long tunnel, desperately searching for an exit from the cave. As he leapt to the surface, supporting himself on his arms, the crimson sun had disappeared below the horizon. Shane didn't turn on any lights, blindly guiding himself to *Muramono*. At night the landscape was much more frightening, as the enormous planets seemed to take on evil faces, and the calls of the scaly birds disturbed the stillness of the night, making you shudder.

It's cold on Alphalon Zerix at night. The road to the spaceship was long and arduous, and ferocious predators could be seen everywhere. The man often spun around like a puppet to better observe what was around him. Thus with fear in his breast, with small, quick steps, Shane reached near midnight, near his spaceship. He could waste no more time, nor gather samples, for the Alphalonians could be heard stomping. In the stillness of the night, the rumbles sounded like drumbeats heralding an intergalactic war. Shane began to stumble, never looking back. The helmet slipped from his hand, crashing to the wet ground with a thud. Clouds had gathered in Alphalon Zerix's sky, pierced by red lightning. It was not long before the freezing rain made itself felt, and from the high heavens thunders terrified the human being. Behind Shane, the faces of the natives were grotesquely illuminated by those red lights that appeared and disappeared – making the humanoids look like demons from the depths of the earth.

Muramono's navigator struggled to control his body that would give out at any moment. A thought of resignation was running through his mind that wanted to gain ground, but the need to pay attention was much greater. Just as he reached the spaceship's main ramp, the man looked back for a brief moment, seeing the faun⁴ aliens galloping towards him. He was tugging madly at the flap to open the ramp. The Alphalonians were closing in. Gigantic plants undulated, touching the ground in the ravaging wind. Battle cries mingled with fierce thunder, and the poor man could no longer get into the spaceship.

A purple flash illuminated the spear that pierced Shane's left shoulder. The booms and shouts were getting closer. The man's hands were slipping on the handle of the ramp from the blood dripping down his arm. Adrenaline had invaded his body, making him no longer feel the pain of the place that was convulsing him. As a second spear headed for him and an Alphalonian grabbed his ankle, the ramp lowered. Panicking, Shane struck the wrench, it jammed into a soft surface that

⁴ Half-human, half-goat mythological creatures.

sputtered a blackish substance. The man continued to strike until he felt his grip loosen and his captor fell to the ground with his skull crushed.

The navigator clings to the ramp with his hands, no longer waiting for it to lower completely, crawling inside, pulling the lever to shut down the spaceship. It was quiet on Muramono's deck. Outside, a true unleashing of forces was unfolding. The faun-looking creatures threw sharp spears and boulders, stomping energetically. The storm had picked up and Shane crawled on his belly to his seat.

"Mura, prepare the engines! We have to leave!" The legs on which the spaceship stood tightened. The creatures clung to the shiny surface of the spaceship with their long, sharp claws, continuing to pound it with their hooves. Shane lifted a series of levers, turning on the navigator's panel. The lights warned him that the starship had suffered major damage, but even with one working engine, Muramono had to leave Alphalon Zerix. The console had jammed, making the man tense. The Alphalonians continued to pull at the casing, opening it like a can.

"Come on, Mura, come on!" He jerked the dashboard console hard, managing to activate the engines. Through the loudspeakers the assistant's robotic voice continued to indicate the damage caused by the natives of the new planet. Shane was stubbornly trying to get the spaceship off the ground.

9

Nobody can hear you in space! In space you are alone, destined to drift, and everything around you is deceptive!

Shane Roland was lying in his chair, his left arm hanging by his side. He had managed to get the ship out of the planet's atmosphere and right it. He had reached the payload, successfully coupling it to the *Muramono*. He couldn't call himself lucky, as the entire crew had ceased to exist for this universe. Those on *Muramono* had been attacked by Alphalonians, butchered and placed as trophies in a makeshift shrine, yet one member was missing: Nano. "What had happened to Nano?" this question caught him off guard, completely forgetting the existence of a seventh member.

It had been two long hours that the man had tried to pull the spear from his shoulder without bleeding. He bandaged himself, gritting his teeth every time the disinfectant touched his open wound. His arm had gone numb, having administered a considerable dose of morphine.

He rested for a few moments, trying to absorb all the events: the finding of *Tehnachimo*, the alphalonization, the death of the crew, his descent and escape. "Why hadn't the Alphalons killed him? Was it some strange ritual of theirs to hunt their prey? Or had they let him escape as a messenger?" the questions were useless, unable to find out the answers behind them. Lounging in the chair in front of the desk, bandaged and with his arm inert, he completes a questionnaire regarding the current state of the spacecraft. ANALYSIS: MINIMAL HULL REDUCTION, SPACECRAFT INTEGRITY UNCOMPROMISED. ENGINE 3 DAMAGED, ENGINE 4 DAMAGED, ATMOSPHERIC VOLUME NOT REACHED, REAR SHIELD DAMAGED.

He sighed deeply, remembering Ira's tape recorder that he still kept in his pocket. He took it out with a trembling hand, looking at the immensity of the stars that stretched before his eyes. He obviously presses the play button, then the tape resumes, without talking about the night of the incident:

„Nano never made it out of the cryogenic capsule! I found him two days ago submerged in some sort of green amniotic fluid. He died long before we reached *Tehnachimo*. Then the question that remains is: «Who has been with us all this time? And where has he disappeared now?». The smell of sulfur combined with gunpowder intensified while we were on the main deck. Tehno didn't find any faults, which was strange! We were reckless, we shouldn't have alphalonized!" the woman was silent for a few moments, resuming, "I have collected enough samples for examination! Reed and Skaar went to look for Nano who was with us, but found no clues other than the strong smell of gunpowder. The incident reminds us of a horror story my father used to tell us, about an entity that took human form and blended in with groups. Now the Captain is afraid that those creatures we saw the other day will attack us!"

Hearing the science officer's words, Shane hissed in amazement:

"God, the Goat-Man has arrived home!" He laughed bitterly, contemplating the stars. He addressed Mura just so as not to speak himself: Exactly what they were afraid of, they had a part in... Nano knew from the beginning where he was taking them! Think, he had a double gain: homecoming and offerings to the gods! Oh, Mura, at least everything we experienced was real or are we still dreaming? The officer had realized that the creature that had lured them to the edge of the universe had infiltrated Ezra's former crew, tricking and gradually killing them without them realizing the danger around them. He understood that sometimes the impossible and storybook monsters can rise to the surface, more alive than ever. Professor Blackwood's diary was probably just an invention, but the accuracy of its details frightened him. (...).

The deck of the *Muramono* fell silent again, favoring the appearance of spectral entities. Deprived of moisture, the man stretched out, pressing the megaphone flap:

"I will reach the vicinity of *Noah's Ark* in roughly twenty-four months. I trust that my signal will be intercepted. I'm Shane Roland, navigator of the spaceship *Muramono*, heading for *Noah's Ark* with the cargo! My crew suffered an unprecedented accident.

He was sitting in his chair, analyzing with half-opened eyes, fixed on a skylight, the stars towards which he was heading. Tears slowly trickled down her drawn cheeks, finding herself hopeless. He was surrounded by members of *Muramono* and *Tehanchimo*, but this time they didn't scare him anymore, he was glad they hadn't kept the grotesque form they died in. They sat in silence, thinking about what had happened. A weak whiff of sulfur was faintly felt... For *Muramono* silence had come forever!

The end!

Cornel Secu (born 1946), Faculty of Philology graduate, University of Timișoara (1969). Romanian and Latin teacher at the “Ștefan cel Mare” Military High School in Câmpulung Moldovenesc, then instructor at the Timișoara Students’ House, Timișoara Youth House and director at the University House in Timișoara. Debut in 1968 in the student magazine Forum. He edited, together with Marcel Luca, in 1972, the Paradox magazine, the first sci-fi printed magazine of a Romanian club.

Founder and president of the Helion sci-fi club (1980), of the Helion magazine (1981), whose editor-in-chief was from the beginning until now. Founder of the theory, criticism and literary history sci-fi bulletin, Biblioteca Nova (1983). Founder of Helion Online magazine (2010) and its editor-in-chief for 67 issues.

Organizer or co-organizer of four National Science Fiction Conventions (Romcon), in 1980, 1989, 2012, 2016. Organizer of EUROCON 1994 in Timișoara. Vice-President of ARSFAN (Romanian Science-Fiction Association) 1991-1999. President of the Helion Cultural Association since its foundation (2010). Executive President of AR-CASF (Romanian Association of Science-Fiction Clubs and Authors). Award for the best promoter, given by the European SF Society - Eurocon 1994.

He has published numerous articles, essays and chronicles in Helion, Viața Studențească, Paradox, Orizont, Banater Zeitung, Drapelul Roșu, Renașterea Bănățeană, Vest Invest, Biblioteca Nova, Helion Online. He edited the Helion anthologies (seven volumes).

Author of the volume of testimonies about the days of the Timișoara Revolution EITHER WE WIN OR WE DIE.

Cornel Secu is in the process of finalizing two volumes, one containing controversial articles, another with reviews and literary chronicles.

“Long life, nea Gheorghe. We’re coming to get you, like we said.”

“Yes, the gentleman with the camera, who is he?”

“He’s from The Helion Club, maybe you’ve heard.”

“Yes, I haven’t heard, we here in Urseni are a bit ignorant. And what does he want?”

“Well he wants to analyze, research, he is in touch with Dan Farcaș from Bucharest. Have you heard of Dan Farcaș?”

“I haven’t heard.”

“Come to the front of the car, let’s go, where the light is good.”

“After the railway, you go a little further, then when you see the big poplar you turn right. So, be careful, this is a tractor road. Here the Sabau engineer walks, he has about twenty hectares next to me. He’s a good boy, from Bihor. Go around, now, don’t take it to the field, because there you will stay. You see that the ground is wet.”

“How old are you, Mr. Gheorghe?”

“Three days ago, on Sângeorz, I turned eighty.”

“And you work, day in and day out?”

“Be careful, take it to the left, look over there where the corn field is... Well, I work, because I’ve been hunched over with work all my life. Here you can enter through the grass there, this place has been lying

unused for about ten years. Because it will be good for bio. You can still walk a little. So, stop here. Uncultivated land, it’s good to leave the car.”

“So mate, where were you?”

“I was here, at this end. Vasile, my horse, was on Dâlma. I had chained him to a locust stake. Look, it was almost there, where that pile of pigeons is. Sir, officer.. you are an officer right?”

“I’m a commissioner, Mr. Gheorghe, a commissioner.”

“You’re still an officer, aren’t you?”

“Yes, yes, officer, however do you say mate.”

“It was shining, to take your eyes off. Look, I jumped like this, as I would jump on one foot, from there from the clump of dung to that big willow, which is right on Pascotă’s land. Let it be about thirty to forty meters. So he hopped, like a blackbird hops. So it skipped it. You understand, sir! Great, what’s more. You don’t even see something like this in the movies...”

“Well, I was here, here where I am now, and further down the valley was Achim, the tractor operator of Sabău. Achim a lu’ Trancota from Albina. That’s all he saw, he says he only saw the hopping.”

“Did it have hands, did it have legs?”

“I thought it didn’t have it. It was as if it was from one piece.”

“Did it have eyes?”

"It was as if it had, yes, you couldn't tell them apart, because it shone as if it were a mirror placed in the sun. And then I went to Dâlma. There, up on Dâlma, near Driedup's pond, there were the sheep of Emil, the former mayor were."

"That drunkard, that everyone know him?"

"Well, he drank, but he was a good boy, you know, compared to the one who came after him, Sorincăul."

"He made his commitment before the elections, that he will stop drinking, right?"

"That's right, when he competed with Cova, he came out as mayor again. And there was Tula, with the sheep, that is, that boy with a little less hair on his head. And he scared too, when the sheep ran to the valley. The herons got scared and flew away, and the storks took their way to the other side, towards Uliuc, where the Pogoniș will pour into Timiș. And the coots flew. They are now in hatching time. It was a big scare, that's for sure."

"Yes, why did you go to Dâlma?"

Gheorghe put his hand over his eyes, then said:

"Well, I went to look for Vasile, my horse, because he had run away with the stake and was complaining like the mother of the fire."

"You said there was also a woman on a bicycle."

Gheorghe looked under his bleached and drawn eyebrows at the camera tripod, turned and said:

"Măria Vucovana was on a bicycle. Everyone knows her. She is from Moșnița Veche, yes, she goes everywhere. I don't know what he was doing behind the Gostat, where these new houses were built. She has a bit of a bad mouth, it's not good to mess with her. Look where that crane was. It might even be a kilometer better to there."

"How old is she?"

"Well, I know she is going on 88."

"And does she ride a bicycle at this age?"

"She rides, rides, when the weather is good. She is

a fierce woman. When the weather is good, she rides her bike all year."

"And then?"

"Well, I took Vasile. I call him that because he was born on New Year's Day, by Saint Vasile. I sold his mother to a gypsy in Chevereș, because they are the only ones who take care of horses now. They and me. I harnessed Vasile to the cart and went home, because I was no longer good for anything. If my Lioara were alive, if I told her this story, she wouldn't have believed me. She would have said that I was sick, that I had visions. Yes, however, there were enough who saw it."

"Well, yes, because there are also some from Uliuc."

"Yes, of course, he would have jumped over there as well, because as they say, they are across the road, they are beyond Timiș."

"You said it was also that boy..."

"Yes, yes, Iovan, Ferret's boy. He saw the glow and hop too. It was on the other side, where the railway comes together with Dâlma, before Urseni. So what if he's a gypsy, he's human too. He saw it too, he's not blind. You can imagine, his horse was also scared, look, that's how the horses were jumping at his cart."

Gheorghe waved his right hand and looked towards the canton in front of Urseni.

"That's where it stopped, sir. Then you don't have to come back after me."

"Does it bother you?"

"Yes, but you can see that it leaned down, don't let it fall down. And you say you analyze?"

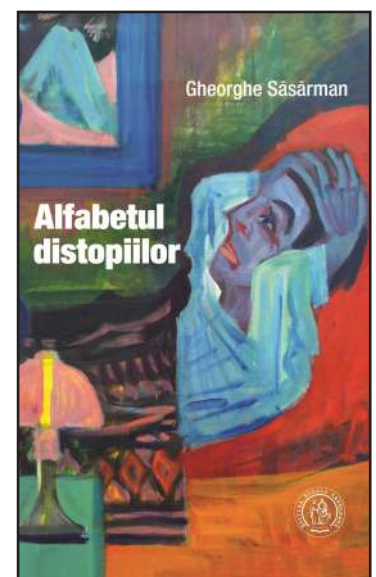
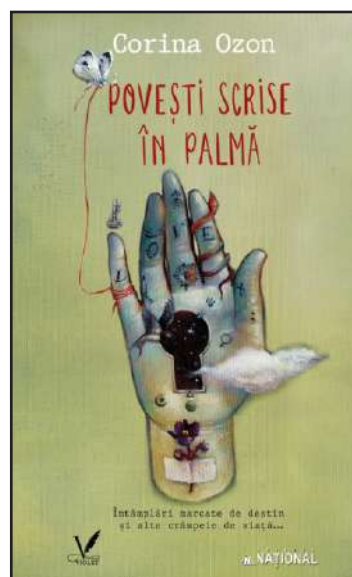
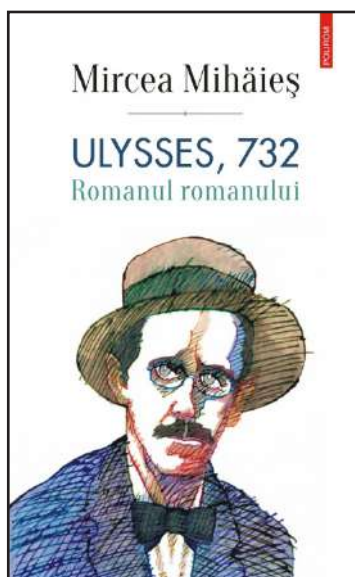
"We analyze, then we classify them. We have catalogs. We compare them."

The commissioner got into the black Nissan, then they set off down the road on the deep tractor wheel tracks.

"And you say, Mr. Gheorghe, that's how it was."

"It was, sir, it was."

Books received
at the editorial office



ȘERBAN FOARȚĂ

Șerban Foarță (born in 1942). University studies, between 1960 and 1965, at the Faculty of Letters (Romanian-German section) at the University of Timisoara. Doctorate obtained at Timișoara University, in 1978, with a thesis on the poetry of Ion Barbu.

Writer by profession, self-employed, until 1990, January. Director of the National Theater in Timișoara (1990-1991). Professor, between 1992 and 2005, at the West University of Timișoara, Faculty of Letters, Journalism section. Member of the Romanian Writers' Union (since 1970).

Hobbies: painting (with about four active exhibitions) and pianoforte.

Author of over one hundred books of poems, essays, prose, articles and translations, from Mallarmé, Rilke, Eliot, Leonard Cohen, several books from the Holy Scriptures, translated into verses (Psalms of David, of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Job, etc.)

Laureate of quite a few literary prizes, including the "Mihai Eminescu" National Poetry Prize, 2005.

FIGURES

1) A shadow may stand,
on a sheet, if, with one hand
quickly, pull the sheet from under it.
Three minimum conditions:
the shadow should not exceed XL
and not be under 1 pixel,
and if it is one of the bears, - they,
instead of being grizzly heavy,
wouldn't be bad to be koala bears.

2) A shadow may stand
on a plush, woolen carpet,
of-anything-else, if a hand can
expertly pull it from under the chair,
with the man in the chair
(which, as a rule, is a clown
with a face as pale as the moon, -
not, however, truly always).

3) A shadow may stand
on a wall, when a hostile hand
suddenly nocks the guy who shadowed
the wall and, now, he was dead.
(One thing that had become clear,
I know it and I say it with all respect
for science, in Hiroshima.)

THE FRONTISPIECE AS FIRST IMAGE OF SCIENCE FICTION: THEODOR VON HOLST'S FRANKENSTEIN ILLUSTRATION

PETER SEYFERTH

Peter Seyferth (born 1973) earned his PhD in political science with a dissertation on Ursula K. Le Guin's utopian science fiction, Peter Seyferth taught political philosophy and theory at the two universities of Munich (LMU and TU) and freshman courses at the Department for International Relations of Hagen University. Now he teaches political theory in the M.A. class for philosophy and economics at Hochschule Fresenius. He is a founding member of the German Association for Research in the Fantastic and has been its board member from 2010 to 2016. He was awarded the Helion International Award 2021.

His research focuses on utopianism and anarchism, often with analyses of key science fiction texts. Questions of philosophical anthropology and narrativity as well as politics in science fiction are often topics of his research. As a freelance political philosopher he is preparing an edited collection on dystopia at the moment. His newest published essay discusses the evolution of science fiction illustrations from frontispieces to book covers and is printed in *H. Ottmann: Titelblätter, Titeltupfer, Frontispize* (J.B. Metzler, 2021).

Science fiction has always been rich in imagery. Not only rich in imagery, but also almost always featuring illustrations. There were illustrations for books long before the first science fiction novel. Well-known are the frontispieces and title plates that became common at the end of the Middle Ages and had their peak in the Baroque period. Frontispieces are wood engravings or copperplate engravings that are printed opposite the title page and usually mirror or add to the contents of the book in a somewhat coded way. Frontispieces are also elaborate and expensive, which is why they disappeared in the 19th century.

I want to show in my talk that frontispieces, however, have survived in science fiction — but they have changed, moving at times from the beginning to the middle of books, and finally ending up screamingly colorful on the cover. This history of book illustrations is too long for a conference talk. However, I know that Helion is a persistent club that doesn't give up on a topic right away once it becomes more extensive. So I'll take the liberty of just starting today and deferring further developments to later conferences, to which I hope to be invited again. I have quite a bit to say about illustrations for the works of Jules Verne, H.G. Wells and later authors. Today, however, I confine myself to a single novel and its frontispiece.

Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus*, first published in 1818, is considered by many to be the first science fiction novel. Of course, the novel is also a precursor of later horror stories and is clearly in the tradition of the Gothic novel. After all, the novel was written in a situation that called for horror.

Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin wrote it in 1816, when she was still a minor and had eloped with Percy Bysshe Shelley, who was married to someone else at the time, which is why she was socially ostracized. She later married him, but when she began writing, her social situation was dishonorable. On top of that, she had just lost a child and feared that her second child would die as well — which actually happened. Even before the novel was published, three of her children died. The mood of William Godwin's and Mary Wollstonecraft's daughter was between life and death. The immediate trigger to write *Frankenstein* was a summer vacation of Mary and her half-sister Claire Clairmont, their lovers Percy Shelley and Lord Byron, and the physician William Polidori. It was a dark summer, as the Indonesian volcano Tambora had erupted, causing cold and severe weather worldwide. The five summer visitors mostly stayed at the rented Villa Diodati on Lake Geneva. They believed that John Milton had once lived there and felt inspired to experiment with writing. They encouraged each other to write ghost stories. Two of them were eventually published: Polidori's *The Vampyre*, a story that would later inspire Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and Mary's *Frankenstein*.

The idea for the creepy novel, however, stemmed from the development of science. Ever since the Royal Humane Society, founded in 1774, had begun to teach and successfully practice the resuscitation of apparently drowned people, there had been uncertainty in English society about the exact boundary between life and death — and in which direction this boundary could be crossed. Physicians sought to explore intermediate stages (coma, fainting, sleep) as well as to scientifically

explore the nature of life as such. This was known to the Shelleys. But they were particularly interested in Luigi Galvani's electrical experiments with frogs' legs — and in the experiments of Galvani's nephew Giovanni Aldini, who in 1803 electrocuted the corpse of the hanged criminal George Forster, who then opened one eye, raised one hand and clenched it into a fist, and moved his legs. This was also discussed in the Byron Shelley circle at Lake Geneva. This becomes the central motif in *Frankenstein* and is also visible on the frontispiece. The creepy thing about the creation of the monster is precisely nothing supernatural (such as a vampire, a living mummy — or the Lazarus from the Gospel of John), but the scientific nature of the enterprise, which takes the sacred out of life and produces terrible consequences. Dr. Victor Frankenstein is a „modern Prometheus“ (the novel's subtitle) who wrests the ability to create from the gods and then must assume the tormenting responsibility for the misfortune his creation brings.

The book was first published in 1818 in a non-illustrated, three-volume edition by the London publishers Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor & Jones. However, I will not consider the first edition, but the later one-volume edition published in 1831 by the publishers Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley. In doing so, I'm sidestepping the expert dispute over which edition is the „correct“ *Frankenstein*, since there are significant changes in the text. My concern is with the illustrations, and they are found only in the 1831 edition. Colburn and Bentley published a whole series called „Standard Novels,“ each containing a title vignette and a frontispiece. On several occasions, the English painter Theodor von Holst was hired for this, and his designs were then engraved in copper and printed in the books. Typical for this are dark interiors with round or pointed arches, strong contrasts between light and shadow, and the emotional expressions of the protagonists that are emphasized as a result. This can be seen, for example, in Holst's frontispieces for Anna Maria Porter's historical romance *The Hungarian Brothers* (1807/1832, engraved by Charles Rolls) and for Friedrich Schiller's unfinished (but nevertheless most successful during his lifetime) Gothic novel *The Ghost-Seer. From the Memoirs of the Count of O***, 1787–1789/1831, engraved by William Chevalier). The most famous cover of the „Standard Novels“ (and probably Holst's as well), however, is the one for Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

Theodor von Holst was born in London on September 3, 1810, and was therefore only eight years old when *Frankenstein* first appeared. He was fascinated early on by eerie and fantastic stories from Germany, such as the fairy tales of E. T. A. Hoffmann. Very early his talent was recognized, encouraged and exploited. At the age of ten, Theodor was already able to sell his first sketch to the president of the Royal Academy, Sir Thomas Laurence, who subsequently gave him several

commissions from King George IV for erotic drawings. At the age of thirteen he began his studies with Henry Fuseli at the Royal Academy; from him he learned not only the strong brushstroke and the composition of various elements in a painting, but also a preference for somber subjects. There was no text that Holst used as a literary source for his art as often as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* — Holst is its first English illustrator and sometimes gave the protagonist Dr. Faust his own face. Holst was also the first illustrator of *Frankenstein*. This is fitting not only because of his often rather offbeat choice of subject (which actually did not correspond to the taste of the time), but also because at the time of his work on the frontispiece he was, at twenty, similarly young to Mary Shelley when the book first appeared. Holst's designs were engraved in copper by William Chevalier. The title vignette shows an old-fashioned dressed Victor Frankenstein sadly turning away from his future wife Elizabeth to leave for studies in Ingolstadt. While Frankenstein is kept very dark except for his collar and covers his face with his hand, Elizabeth shines with bright clothes, skin and hair. She symbolizes the good times and the home that Frankenstein is leaving behind — and she also symbolizes Christianity (she wears a cross around her neck), which Frankenstein is also leaving behind. Both figures take a step down a front door staircase, which is probably meant to indicate that they are both going downhill from here on out. The title vignette has the text quote „The day of my departure at length arrived“. The title and author of the novel are printed above it, with the usual publisher's information below. Overall, the impression is quite romantic — and also quite conventional.

Quite different is the frontispiece, which is on the left side opposite the title page. It shows the perhaps most famous Frankenstein scene, which nevertheless does not look at all like the countless visualizations in the well-known films. Here, too, the text passage is given: „By the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull, yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs. ... I rushed out of the room.“ We are used to seeing the monster as a ghastly looking creature, visibly assembled from mismatched parts. To the viewer of the frontispiece, the monster doesn't look monstrous at first. If it reminds me of a fantastic movie character, it's more like Arnold Schwarzenegger as Conan the Barbarian than Boris Karloff as Frankenstein's monster. It's well-proportioned, muscular, has nice hair and good teeth — the Dr. Frankenstein of the novel had taken pains to put together quite a handsome creature. But its eyes, facial skin, and lips look horrible to him at that moment of awakening. This horror can also be seen on Frankenstein's face. Thus Holst reproduces exactly what Shelley described: „but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust

filled my heart. Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room" (p. 43) But the creature's face also looks frightened rather than terrified. It cannot yet process the function of its various senses and finds the light in particular unpleasantly blinding. After Frankenstein had moved away, his creature will also soon flee from the light of the rising sun into a forest. On the frontispiece, it is open to interpretation which light sources are responsible for the play of light and shadow. Outside the room, behind the leadlights, the moon still shines faintly. The room itself, however, must be illuminated from within — it almost seems as if a liquid is glowing behind the monster, casting the shadows of the galvanic apparatus under the alchemical symbols on the wall to the left. It seems to flow brightly from a retort in front of it. This light is joined by the bright rays that seem to illuminate the monster from the books on the shelf. The book light and the retort light stand for the metaphorical light of enlightenment, which is fed by theories and experiments and thus makes progress possible, the product of which is the monster. Frankenstein himself uses the light metaphor in the eureka moment of his research: „I paused, examining and analysing all the minutiae of causation, as exemplified in the change from life to death, and death to life, until from the midst of this darkness a sudden light broke in upon me — a light so brilliant and wondrous, yet so simple, that [...] I became dizzy with the immensity of the prospect which it illustrated" (p. 38) But in Frankenstein's laboratory there is not only the metaphorical torch of enlightenment with all its promises and dangers, but also a profane candle whose light illuminates the monster from diagonally in front, i.e. from the head of the reader who is just opening the book and looking into the peep-show scene. The candle itself is not shown, but is specifically mentioned by Shelley. The double light on the frontispiece may be a symbol of form as well as content: Formally, it stands for the different narrative perspectives of Frankenstein and his creature (as well as, rather unimportantly, the captain, who, like the moon, stands outside the action). In terms of content, it stands for the ambiguity of scientific progress. The „Reader's Light" illuminates not only the monster, but also an open book and a skeleton under rumpled shroud. The „Book and Retort Light" is reflected in the round flask and Frankenstein's face, but makes other skulls and the top books on the shelf disappear into the penumbra. The blackest darkness is found behind the door through which Frankenstein flees. Indeed, it could be argued that Frankenstein's misfortune begins by simply abandoning his creature to itself. It is precisely the abandonment that makes the creature a monster. It is an existential abandonment that no longer knows any consolation, and in this it differs from Elizabeth's temporary and therefore bearable abandonment in the title vignette.

I will not say much about the novel, since I assume that it is known to all. I will only briefly mention that it

is an epistolary novel with three narrative levels corresponding to the three different light sources of the frontispiece. The top level of the narrative, symbolized by the moon light, consists of Captain Robert Walton's letters to his sister Margaret Saville. Walton is an explorer who tries to reach the North Pole but fails. At least he meets Frankenstein and his creature on the way. The second story level, symbolized by the light of chemical experiment and theory books, is the story of Dr. Victor Frankenstein, who is also an explorer and as such creates the creature. This may be ingenious, but otherwise he is a fool who lets his revulsion at the sight of the awakened creature get the better of him and does not treat the creature like the cold-blooded scientist he appears to be. He could have vivisected the creature, or at least, as promised later, created a female creature for it as a mate. That would have stopped most of the mischief that happens in the novel. In this respect, the warnings about the hubris of science that are thematized in the first two levels of the novel are not entirely accurate. It is precisely Frankenstein's irrational fear and disgust that lead to the murderous despair of the lonely, abandoned creature. Its account of its experiences since its creation are the third level of the narrative, symbolized by the candle light that must be assumed at the position of the reader. The creature is curious and wants to know, too. But it also wants to belong to society, which it is not allowed to — mainly because of its appearance. The third level of the story contains a lot of social criticism, which I can't go into now. But here you learn to understand the monster and can understand why it starts to murder Victor Frankenstein's family. In all three narrative levels, Mary Shelley repeatedly works with light metaphors to illuminate the creature's motives, to shine a critical light on the social order, and especially to illuminate the dangers of science. One is sometimes reminded of a motif on a frontispiece for another book: Rousseau's *First Discourse* (1750). There one sees the torch of enlightenment used by a man with Promethean zeal. But this torch can not only illuminate the darkness — one can also get burned by it. And Dr. Frankenstein is just such a modern Prometheus. Does he bring light, or does he burn himself? In the novel, he does both. But I would argue that the evaluation of the Enlightenment and science in the novel is not so clear. It is left up to the reader. And that's quite typical of science fiction as it developed over the next two hundred years.

I have talked enough for today. Maybe next year I will deal with the further development of science fiction illustrations. In Jules Verne, the frontispiece is supplemented by numerous pictures in the book. After that, it becomes common for a while to have pictures only inside. Finally, the colorful covers of the pulp magazines appear, followed by the present-day covers of the paperbacks.

THE INVISIBLE CONTINENT

MIRCEA MIHĂIEȘ

Mircea Mihăieș (born in 1954) is a contemporary Romanian literary critic, essayist and publicist. After graduating from high school in Arad, he attended the philology faculty of the University of Timișoara, English-French department. He is a university professor at the department of English language and literature of the University of Timișoara, where he teaches courses in English and American literature. He is a literature doctor at the University of Bucharest.

He is the editor-in-chief of *Orizont* magazine and a political columnist at *Romania Literară* and *Evenimentul zilei*. He debuted in *Orizont* magazine in 1979, and in volume in 1989. From 1981, proofreader, technical editor and later editor at the same magazine, and in 1990 he became editor-in-chief. In 1991, he worked for several months in the editorial office of *The New Republic* magazine. Since 1993, he owns the weekly *Contrafort* column in the *Romania Literară* magazine. Scholarships at the Woodrow Wilson Center, National Forum Foundation, Washington, D.C., New York University, etc. From 2005 to 2012, he was vice-president of the Romanian Cultural Institute. He published 17 books and appeared in several collaboration or collective volumes.

In *The Helveticas*, Hugo Pratt got a taste for the exploration of inner worlds, dreamlike spaces, alternative realities and subjective temporality. The process is radicalized in *Mū*, the last album in the *Corto Maltese* series, which is also charged with a testamentary nuance. As if sensing this, Hugo Pratt summons here a number of familiar characters from the beginning of the *Cortomaltesian* saga. Some have already had more or less episodic appearances along the way (Professor Steiner, Boco Dorada, Levi Colomba), others are now returning for the first time after several years have passed since their initial appearance (Tristan Bantam, Soledad, Jesus Maria). The author felt the need to recommence from the beginnings — and not to continue the adventures that were announced at the end of the episode spent in the Country of Cantons. *Corto Maltese* will therefore not set out in search of the enchanted sword of the Knights of the Round Table, but of a vanished continent, *Mū*.

The idea of a premonition of the end cannot be excluded either, one which manifests itself in many authors through the nostalgic revisiting of the beginning eras, happy eras, made noble by the aura of nostalgia and the melancholy of something that can no longer be reached. In a famous study, "Beethoven's Late Style," Theodor W. Adorno spoke of a "liberation of the spirit," of an energy unleashed suddenly that pushes "the late work to the edge of art, bringing it closer to the document" (Adorno, 2009: 12). Indeed, *Mū* is a work full of historical, geographical and philosophical

references, in which first-hand cultural names (Plato) meet with simple adventurers and the evocation of legends without any basis in reality.

As always, however, Hugo Pratt handles things in such a way that the boundaries between reality and fiction melt. The most spectacular story of a submerged continent belongs to Plato. In *Timaios* and *Critias* (and especially in the latter) the history of Atlantis is told, considered by Hermocrates, one of the characters of *Timaios*, "a story from long ago", with the subject of the ideal city. Platonic historiography has not yet decided to what extent are the dialogues dedicated to Atlantis based on real facts or are, according to the expression of one exegete, only "an exotic delirium". It is certain that there is a book-like connection, in which the stories flow from one to the other. What *Critias* summarizes in the *Timaieus* and expounds at length in the dialogue that bears his name is "a story once told by Solon, the wisest of the seven" (*Timaieus*, 20d). In turn, Solon had brought the story from Egypt.

Basically, it is the history of two cities, Athens and Atlantis, which represented, each in its own manner, the ideal city, the supreme forms of social and political organization. Particularly spectacular is the history of Atlantis, which disappeared after a series of earthquakes and floods, volcanic eruptions and excess carbon dioxide:

„Our writings tell of a great power once held back by your city, a power which, in its might, had set out against all Europe and all Asia, rushing from the Atlan-

tic Sea. For, at that time, that sea could be crossed; and in front of the strait which you call the Pillars of Hercules was an island. This island was larger than Libya and Asia put together; from it, the travelers of that time could pass to the other islands and from them to the entire territory in front, which was around that sea, properly called sea. The interior of the strait we speak of, appears to be a narrow strip of water, having a narrow place of access. As for the land that surrounds that true sea, it may properly be called a continent. In that island, Atlantis, was built, by the power of its kings, a great and wonderful kingdom, which ruled the whole island, as well as many other islands and parts of the continent" (24e-25a).

Atlantis attacked Athens, but her warriors repelled the attack. In a short time, according to Critias the Elder, the ancestor of the contemporary of Socrates and Plato, "there were violent earthquakes and floods, in one day and in the terrible night that followed, your whole army gathered together was swallowed up by the land, and the island of Atlantis perished, sinking into the sea. That is why, even today, the sea there is difficult to cross and explore, the shallow mud, which comes from the sinking of the island, standing as an obstacle" (Timaios, 25d). The fateful day would have been, according to Otto Muck, June 5, 8498 BC. Hr.

In *Critias*, the history of Atlantis takes shape, with descriptions of the wonderful vegetation, the customs of the people, the beauty of the cities - especially the capital, depicted not only as an Ideal City, but also as a place of utopia (in Plato, there are several utopian cities : Kallipolis [in *The Republic*], Athens [in *The Critias*] and Magnesia [in *Laws*]). They were certainly a source of inspiration for those who also imagined the story of another sunken continent, Mū. Most sources place it in the Pacific, in the area of Polynesia. Hugo Pratt proposes a "unification" of the myths, imagining an ingenious scenario in which the worlds communicate via secret pathways.

On the Platonic line of thought, talk of Atlantis never ceased. They continue to be a source of scientific and artistic controversy. Debates about the other supposed extinct continent, Mū, became very popular in the late 1920s and 1930s, especially under the influence of James Churchward's books. Before him, Augustus Le Plongeon, who had studied the traces of the Maya civilization in Yucatán, in detail, hypothesized that the evidence discovered there would be found at the origin of the culture of Egypt and Mesoamerica. In other words, Mū would represent an important cradle of civilization with unexpected planetary ramifications.

Starting from a series of Mexican tablets he discovered in India and from the 2,500 tablets from Mexico, brought to light by William Niven, James Churchward developed a theory that fueled the imagination of a

whole generation. It refers to documents containing symbols similar to the Nordic or Uyghur ones, written in the Original Language. Their themes are similar to those of the historians and philosophers of Antiquity: details of Creation and the origin of life, of the Four Great Cosmic Forces. About a hundred tablets are dedicated to a special subject: the creation of woman. Based on this documentary material, Churchward feels justified in developing a bold hypothesis:

„The Garden of Paradise was not in Asia, but on a now submerged continent in the Pacific. The biblical account of Creation—of the seven days and seven nights—comes not from the people of the Nile or the Euphrates Valley, but from a now submerged continent, Mū—the Homeland of Man. These claims can be proven by the complex evidence found on long-forgotten tablets from India and other countries. They speak of this strange country of 64 million inhabitants, which, 50 thousand years ago, created a civilization superior in many respects to ours. They describe, among other things, the creation of man in the mysterious land of Mū.

Certainly, the biblical story of creation, as we know it today, grew out of the impressive data gleaned from these ancient tablets which tell the story of Mū, a story 500 centuries old" (Churchward, 1931:7).

Churchward's approach belongs to a very successful genre, starting in the second part of the 19th century. Technical and scientific par excellence, the Victorian era encouraged a literature based on the mixture of certain, verifiable data with fanciful, even utopian, hypotheses. James Churchward took advantage of this vogue, proposing a series of books designed to fuel the imagination of a public for whom exotic lands and the freedom to probe the unknown had become daily food. We have not intended here to describe and propose a critique of Churchward's proceedings. We only record his enormous popularity and the way in which an author of the same lineage as Hugo Pratt joins the series of creators of cultural utopias.

Speaking on the circumstances surrounding the creation of the Mū album, Hugo Pratt talks about a discontinuity. It is known that the artist had already prepared several plates announcing a series of events unfolding in the immediate continuity of *The Helveticas*: "Rasputin wants to join Corto Maltese and Tamara de Lempicka, but he is blocked at customs. He is asked if he has a job in Switzerland, and he says he wants to work as a gigolo. The publican checks to see if there is any law against coming to Switzerland to work as a gigolo, but finding nothing, Rasputin advises the publican to become a gigolo himself. After that, there could be a mountain climbing sequence' (Petit-faux, 1990: 131).

Presumably Pratt didn't know more about what

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was to come either. We can, however, hypothesize that the new episode would have combined Celtic elements with the technique widely used in *The Helveticas*, that of the dream. Pratt's option was different, however, a revolt against the mannerism he felt settling in: "After *The Helveticas*, I wanted to go back to the big adventure, with more exoticism and less literary references. Initially, I hesitated between two possibilities: Guatemala and the search for an ancient fortress, or Indonesia, perhaps for a follow-up to Corto's Youth. In the end, I chose a story about Atlantis, about the continent of Mū: Atlantis has been talked about so much that I wanted to give my own version of it." (Pratt, 1990: 131).

So, two imperatives: returning to *the great adventure* and diminishing the cultural references. Ironically, none of these desirable goals are found in Mū. Corto Maltese no longer participates in an actual adventure, but in a series of discussions on a thrilling topic: that of a supposedly vanished continent. Instead of diminishing, cultural references and bookish references abound. The focus shifts, involuntarily, from the hero to the author. One feels in every drawing and every page that Hugo Pratt was deeply interested in the discussions around this subject, that passion had seized both imagination and professional duty. The vanished world of the Mū continent "torpedoes" the universe of Corto Maltese, also drowned with theories and visions regarding the disappearance, following natural catastrophes, of supposed continents.

Catastrophism had already seized the world of cinema and entertainment literature for years. But that doesn't mean Hugo Pratt slavishly aligned himself with a dominant cultural trend. The Mū continent's obsession dates back to the early days of the Corto Maltese series, being a topic of conversation since the first episode. There, Professor Steiner hypothesized that the famous Book of the Dead was an Egyptian writing "dedicated to the people who died on the occasion of the destruction of the Mū continent." Evidently, these were the "ancestors of the Egyptians and other human races".

The album brings back into focus (at least in its first part) characters like Tristan Bantam. In the time that had passed, the teenager of 1916 had grown into a full-fledged man (the action in Mū is set in 1925), had graduated from Trinity College, Cambridge University, and gave the impression that he was a real scientist. Like Corto Maltese (and, for that matter, like all the other characters in the Valletta-born sailor's saga), Tristan doesn't seem to have aged at all. The reader recognizes him (not without amazement) from the first moment, just as he recognizes Rasputin, Professor Steiner, Boca Dorada or Soledad. By some strange coincidence, they all seem to have had

access to the magical potion discovered by Corto Maltese on his Swiss journey.

Hugo Pratt's book sources are undoubtedly, and above all, the books of Colonel James Churchward. Obviously, no one has seen the Naacal tablets, they are one hundred percent, the fruit of the colonel's imagination combined with his vocation as an explorer of imaginary worlds. At the basis of his efforts is the theosophical myth of Lemuria, quite similar to the fantasies of Augustus Le Plongeon. These claimed to have deciphered a series of hieroglyphs detailing the history of an ancient land. In 1896, Le Plongeon published the volume *Queen Moo* and the *Egyptian Sphinx*, which prompted Churchward to give scientific clothing to the spectacular hallucinations regarding the history, geography, culture and artistic creation of the continent of Mū. It would have stretched between Hawaii and Fiji and between Easter Island (today a Chilean territory) and the Mariana Islands.

From the gallery of those who influenced Hugo Pratt, the screenwriter William Ritt and Clarence Gray, the parents of the comic book hero Brick Bradford, protagonist of many adventures set in the mythological, miraculous and fantastic area, cannot be missing. Although the authors were American, the adventures of the airman from Kentucky enjoyed enormous popularity especially in Australia, New Zealand, France and Italy. One of the episodes starring Brick Bradford (rechristened in France Luc Bradefer — "Iron Arm" — and in Italy Giorgio Ventura) has to do with pre-Columbian civilizations. Not without humor, Hugo Pratt said that it is not excluded that in his wanderings through the same world Corto Maltese met Brick Bradford, a character animated by the same curiosity and courage to face the unknown. With this thought, the Venetian author made a contribution to the unification of imaginary spaces, where all the heroes are contemporaries and live in the same reality. Ritt and Gray have placed Brick Bradford in a later era than that in which Corto Maltese evolved, but this is not an impediment. On the contrary...

The album was preceded by a text by Hugo Pratt, "Atlantes", based on research related to imaginary worlds and mysterious or extinct civilizations. It is the result of the author's last great travels to Argentina and other countries in South and Central America, and in Easter Island, but also in the United States and Canada. The most memorable stop was Easter Island, where, not just for Hugo Pratt, evidence of a submerged continent once existed in the distant past. Nourished with readings from Pierre Loti and Thor Heyerdahl, Pratt had become, according to the confessions of those close to him, obsessed with the existence of a tunnel that would allow access to the invisible world of the legendary islands.



SELF-PORTRAIT... WITH A SKULLCAP

GHEORGHE SĂSĂRMAN

Gheorghe Săsărman (born 1941) is a Romanian writer, journalist, doctor in architectural theory; born in a Greek-Catholic refugee family from Northern Transylvania. Graduated from the "Ion Minicu" Institute of Architecture in Bucharest. Editor at Scânteia newspaper (1965-1974) and at Contemporanul magazine (1974-1982). Forced, for political reasons (a brother remained illegally in Canada), to give up his work as a journalist, he chooses exile; settles in Munich (1983), where he works as a computer scientist. After 1989, he signs in newspapers and magazines from the country and abroad. He made his debut as a writer in 1962; his speculative or sci-fi writing alternates with realistic or fantastical ones. Publish volumes of prose and novels, two translated in Germany, respectively France and Spain; stories and short stories in literary magazines, anthologies and collective volumes from Romania, Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Poland, Hungary, Japan. A play, *Deux Ex Machina*, staged at Gasteig, Munich, and at the C. I. Nottara Theater, Bucharest.

Gheorghe Săsărman's most translated book, *Quadratura cercului* (*Squaring the circle*), was translated into French, Spanish, English, German, Italian and Japanese.

When you're about to turn octogenarian it seems a little late to ask yourself why you write. And yet, in my case at least, the question is justified even now, as it will have been acutely relevant in many essential moments of life, even if I didn't ask it explicitly. I'm not one of those who wanted to become a writer from an early age: I don't know if I wanted to become something specific at the time and, honestly speaking, even at the threshold of my baccalaureate, I still hadn't decided what profession to choose. It's true that in high school I "did" poems, even prose, but I was very far from seeing this as predetermination, and philology was the last faculty I would have thought of enrolling in. When I submitted a text to a SF short story contest (I was in my third year of architecture), I did it from a polemical desire, in response to the technical manner of the writings of the genre at that time. Being an outsider, the first prize brought me, along with the joy of the debut, the hostility of some of the professionals ranked in the following places; otherwise I can't explain why the report for that year of the relevant section of the Writers' Union dealt extensively, demolishing it, with my story, although I wasn't even a trainee member. (In order to be considered worthy of such an honor, 16 more years had to pass!) If I did not stop writing then, it is only because I had no reason to stop: the study of architecture was far too demanding to have time left for another preoccupation of great intensity. My luck was that Adrian Rogoz, the editor of the Science-Fantastic Stories Collection, organizer of the contest, insisted that I "deliver" something from time to time, saying that he was subjecting me to an "epicization cure" (after he had declared me, from the reason for the poetic style

of the award-winning story, "the father of lyricists"); and so, in about five or six years, the texts of a first volume were collected.

Only with the second volume could I say that I became somewhat aware of the deeper implications of the act of writing, while also assuming the vulnerable status of the one who steps into the agora. In fact, having become a journalist in the meantime, I no longer benefited much from the shield of anonymity, but since I had gone out into the world's sight anyway, I realized that I would have had something else to communicate than what was published in the pages of Scânteia Newspaper. The same polemical spirit urged me to approach topics that could not be dealt with in the newspaper, in any case not from the position of an objective observer, as I did in writing the *Quadrature of the Circle* - a critical passage, by means of witty descriptions, through the universality of cities history and the ideas they embody. I worked on the manuscript for two years, between 1969 and 1971, without taking into account the existence of censorship, for which I was then refused by several publishing houses, and the volume appeared only in 1975, at the price of accepting some painful amputations: ten of the 36 stories had been completely removed, and the endings of two others changed. The texts taken from the book did not directly attack Ceaușescu's regime or the communist system, but they could be interpreted as critical allusions, as ironies to certain theses, dogmas and pontificates of the time. I don't know that any literary critic has noted the at least strange fact that the author of the writing was... a journalist at Scânteia (but it is true that in the meantime, more precisely on July 1, 1974, I had been

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transferred to Contemporanul).

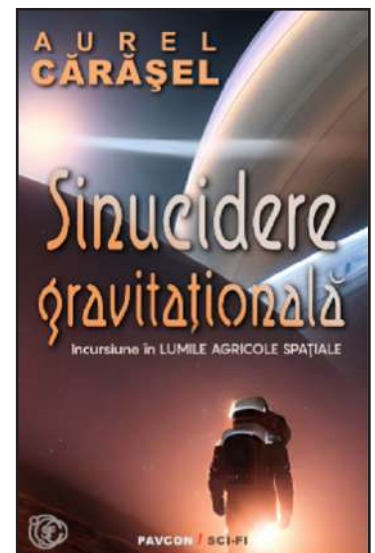
My departure into exile, in July 1983, can be understood - in this perspective, among others - as a logical consequence of an attitude that could not be expressed openly without risking your freedom; however, taking advantage of the complicity of some editors and young people from the sci-fi halls, who knew how to read between the lines, I managed to publish both textiles removed by censorship from the Quadrature of the Circle, as well as other stories with a critical message - for example, The Escape of Algernon, the chronicle an epidemic of genius that makes a dictator out of a poor platoon leader; or The Goose Donors, the description of an escape from a totalitarian world. In another text, The Star Sets at Dawn, the protagonist, named Shoemaker, becomes king somewhere on a planet, but a coup occurs and the despot is executed (which, six years later, would happen in Romania to the former shoemaker's apprentice, also became quasi... king).

Exile could have marked my definitive renunciation of writing: who to write for, when you broke away from your country? And how to find time for writing, when you have a family to feed, in a foreign country, without knowing the language and without a job that is in demand? Erst kommt das fressen, dann kommt die Moral, says a character of Bertolt Brecht. After a break of three or four years, during which I succeeded (and it was not at all easy!) to clarify my existential coordinates, I nevertheless resumed writing, eager and feeling obliged to describe, based on my experience as a journalist, the operation of the propaganda machine of the Ceausescu regime. I do not insist here on the difficulty of regaining, after such a brutal interruption, the ability to operate as a writer with the tool of one's own mother tongue, while living immersed in the linguistic and cultural broth of another nation; more important is the result, the novel The Mandrake Cup, which Cornel Robu considered "a vitriolic allegorical and satirical novel, the most decanted literary transfiguration so far of the unique "epoch""

The great challenge and at the same time the main handicap remains for me, as for most expatriate writers, even in the era of globalization and the Internet, the distance from readers and literary life in the country. All the more I am happy about the positive echoes that reach me - as was the case with the prize awarded to one of my novels by the Cluj Branch of the Writers' Union. The same novel gave me other moments of great spiritual satisfaction. A former editorial colleague wrote to me: "Yes, this is the book! For this it was worth living and dedicating yourself to writing." Another ended his letter with the words: "I am proud to enjoy your friendship." Two decades ago, the book editor of the first complete edition of the Quadrature of the Circle felt the need to tell me that, while reading the text, she felt like going out on the street and giving a copy to every passerby. And if I brought up this book of mine again, it was translated into several languages: what a delight, to find that its publication in France, in Spain, in the USA, even in Japan, happened by itself, without me to have moved a finger! I would never have dreamed that a famous writer, like Ursula K. Le Guin, would translate my stories into English herself, of her own initiative! Here are the priceless joys that reward me for the days of painstakingly chiseling every sentence on paper and the nights of turmoil and doubt: looking back and summing them up, they are an answer to the question of why I write. It is not for nothing that it is sometimes said that every writer writes primarily for himself.

But there is also another answer, which I gave once before, referring to the biblical parable of the talents: the life of each of us has meaning only to the extent that we contribute, according to strength and skill, to the preservation and propagation of the world of whose product we are - whoever increases the entrusted talents with zeal and ingenuity is praised and rewarded, while the unworthy one who buries his received talent will also have it taken away from him! I haven't found a better way to put my talent to work than writing.

*Books received
at the editorial office*



IS THE FUTURE A THING OF THE PAST? ABOUT THE DISTURBING TENDENCY TO DELVE INTO OUTDATED SCIENCE FICTION.

ARNO BEHREND

Arno Behrend has entered the German science fiction scene in 1992 and since then has been active as writer, editor and conrunner. He was born in 1967 in Hilden and has studied political sciences in Duisburg. His diploma thesis was dealing with Star Trek and was published by the national German science fiction club SFCD.

Arno has been the head editor of the magazines SF-Okular and Story Center and film editor of Alien Contact. He has been active on the boards of the regional SF-Club of North Rhine-Westphalia and SFCD. He has published short stories in Alien Contact, Nova, SFCD's Andromeda and the well known computer magazine c't. In 2003 his story „Small Talk“, contained in Nova 1, received the National German Science Fiction Award DSFP.

As a conrunner Arno has contributed to the regional Science Fiction Days of North Rhine-Westphalia since 1993. From 2002 to 2017 he has been the chairman of DORT.con in the city of Dortmund. Being involved in both conventions he has also participated in the management the Eurocons of 1999 and 2017.

Next to these activities he is also administrating the Curt-Siodmak-Award, the tv and film award of SFCD.

Arno is living in the city of Duesseldorf, close to the river Rhine. In his dayjob he belongs to the sales department of a financial services provider working for the logistics sector. Since 2005 he is married to sf writer and illustrator Gabriele Behrend, who joined his activities for Story Center and DORT.con.

If you have turned science fiction into a hobby and don't stop at the surface, there is a lot from the past eras of the genre that you can enjoy. The colorful adventures of Flash Gordon and Edmund Hamilton's suns and planets whizzing across space have their fans just as much as Japanese cartoons or American films from the fifties. The enthusiasm for science fiction may have been devoid of nostalgia at the very beginning, when this new phenomenon was seen as innovative only. Since the 1950s at the latest, however, this can no longer be the case. With the passing of the "Golden Age" - that fertile literary period of the late 1930s and 1940s, which unfolded in John W. Campbell's Astounding Magazine - a complete and significant phase of science fiction had been shelved for the first time. The often dreadful literary quality of the texts, the rough schemes and clichés and the homely, picturesque covers of the magazines were no longer the state of art. Even the Campbell disciples of those early days might have looked back at Jules Verne and H.G. Wells with kindly and transfigured eyes. In any case, from the fifties onwards there have always been different and coexisting generations of science fiction fans and professionals. The older ones were able to grasp and communicate the sometimes epochal importance their favorite childhood read had for science fiction. They were able to pass this knowledge on to younger people. Or these younger people have found

access to SF that is outdated in terms of content and is therefore particularly attractive through their own rummaging and research. This article is about how important the phenomenon of nostalgia is for today's science fiction.

Unfortunately, science fiction today is hardly gaining a new, young audience through books or magazines, but rather through film and television. That doesn't have to be bad in and of itself. However, these two visual media only rarely present us, as particularly praiseworthy exceptions, with independent, innovative works penned by leading, current SF authors. Big Hollywood productions - and SF is usually big - have their own set of rules. The money is only invested if there is a high degree of certainty that the film will be successful at the box office. Freaky ideas hatched by the avant-garde of the speculating authors' guild offer too few guarantees for this. TV series are designed to tie their audience to a fixed group of people they can identify with. Your environment cannot undergo too many changes in order not to confuse viewers. This prevents overturning scenarios in which everything is different at the end than at the beginning. The heroes of the SF television series are the defenders of the status quo - a trait opposed to many SF plots. The demanding but tolerant SF friend may grumble at all of this. But what if nostalgia in science fiction mutates from the rule to

the exception in the cinema?

Two interesting feature films from the year 2004 suggest that science fiction may in the future be seen as a thing of the past, as a collection of exaggerated ideas derived from the analogue technologies of previous decades. In *Science Fiction - The Illustrated Encyclopedia*, John Clute introduced Robert J. Hogan's pulp SF series *G8 and his Battle Aces* (1933-1945), stating: "Today (the agent and pilot) G8 would be in an alternate world of the World War II, where everything is possible. In the 1930s/1940s, people were told that the Germans had an incredible collection of SF weapons - from rockets to genetically engineered bats." *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* picks up exactly this long-gone pulp era. In this film, the eponymous aviator hero and his companions have to put a stop to a German villain who, of course, threatens the whole world. They move through a variant of the year 1939 that never existed in this form. Author and director Kerry Conran has revived numerous stylistic devices of the 1930s in order to nostalgically stage the futurism of this time. Airplanes fly over labeled sections of maps. The faces of frightened and fleeing people are placed transparently over the images of the attacked city. Radio waves appear as expanding concentric circles. Then comes the use of technology that some people of those years believed would eventually become part of our everyday lives: submersible fighter planes, floating airports as well as transport platforms and giant robots that defy gravity. All production companies of the 1930s would have been overwhelmed with their portrayal. *Sky Captain...* therefore cannot be seen as a parody of certain science fiction films. Because these never existed in that way. It seems more like a film that the inclined audience of those years would have liked to see. Director Conran has confirmed that this was on his mind, when he was working on the project. The retro style is consistently and lovingly maintained, right down to the design of the credits. As an author, Conran not only based the look on Hollywood classics but even imitated the typical weaknesses of screenplays of the time. People often know a lot more than they can actually know or draw wild conclusions from arid facts, which then turn out to be correct. Still, the elusive film is more of a homage than a comedy - a homage to both 1930s movies and early pulp sci-fi and its visionary freshness. The term „Dieselpunk“ has been coined three years before the movie premiered in the cinemas. Conran might have worked on it without knowing that this retrofuturistic subgenre had been given a name. The film fits into it just like *The Rocketeer*, an earlier movie based on a comic book series from 1982.

Another example that deals with a different era is the extremely successful and amusing animated film *The Incredibles*. The parodic tale about a family of mutants who used to be superheroes is not set in the present. The look of the film quickly makes it clear that it

is set in the sixties instead. Costumes, flying machines and secret weapons are characterized by the technocratic and optimistic futurism of the period. Together with the big-headed comic figures, they result in an unleashed, because thread-free Thunderbirds design. As *Sky Captain...* designs a technologically advanced alternative to the 1930s, *The Incredibles* take on the decade when the impending and eventual moon landing promised even greater developments. The term „Atompunk“ has been coined for this type of retrofuturism, although it is more often applied to the 1950s. The term „Transistorpunk“ has not caught on. Director Brad Bird used another film to voice his own worries about fading optimism in society. In *Tomorrowland* from 2015 the villain preaches to the audience about the pestilent qualities of dystopian science fiction. The movie reacts to the present day trend by celebrating the designs of the late Syd Mead and by calling for a new reformed vision of a brighter future.

That optimistic expectations of past epochs are captured on celluloid is nothing new. Several years after the moon landing, George Lucas drew on anachronistic SF ideas from the 1930s and 1940s for his *Star Wars* saga, without wasting a single thought about their technical irrelevance. *Star Wars*, however, takes place in a future several thousand years away. *Sky Captain...* and *The Incredibles*, on the other hand, don't just take SF from the filmmakers' favorite decades, they're also set in that era. They introduce conspicuous elements that, as is well known, did not exist back then and also do not today. A similar thing can be observed in the failed steampunk film *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, in which a ragtag group of literary heroes (including Captain Nemo) openly uses technical means that simply did not exist in 1900, the action time. Overall, this development makes a worrying statement:

The 21st century no longer seems suitable for optimistic, space-consuming scenarios based on classic technologies. Actual visions of the future always turn Hollywood into dark cyberpunk scenarios á la *Matrix*. Characteristic of films of this type is the negative future scenario in which technology is used to exploit people. But it is also notorious that the earth is not left. The speculative continuation of analogue technology has led the heroes of relevant film and television adventures into space. Since science fiction has dealt with digital technology, it has been about digitally simulating interesting images and experiences that one could gain by traveling to foreign places on earth. In consequence this means that humans withdraw into the cocoons, known from *Matrix*, and leave the real world to machines - what actually happens in the *Matrix* trilogy and goes unchallenged. In order to derive hopeful images from space travel, in which mankind explores the stars, courageous impulses from reality would probably be necessary. But that cannot be expected unless governments approve the billions needed for a highly

ambitious manned space program. So those who dare to dream of space travel or other mobilizing technologies would rather use the future expectations of past decades to communicate their dream to the audience than rely on the future that lies ahead. Apparently you can no longer trust the future when it comes to expensive and high-flying ideas. People don't believe in it anymore.

Is this only happening in the cinema? With *The Difference Engine*, William Gibson and Bruce Sterling established the subgenre of steampunk back in the heyday of cyberpunk, by relocating the development of the computer to the 19th century. One of the most brilliant SF authors of our time, the Brit Stephen Baxter, never ceases to amaze his readers with anachronistic speculations. In his novel *Anti-Ice* there are Victorian-style spaceships in which British gentlemen in tails and top hats can fly to the moon because the perfidious Albion has acquired superior fuel from a meteor impact. In the novel *Voyage* and several short stories penned by Baxter, John F. Kennedy survives the Dallas assassination and propels the American space program far beyond the moon. The author, who continued H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* with *Time Ships*, himself laments a lack of optimism and belief in the future in our time. Baxter pointed out that the production of the film *Apollo 13* cost more money than the implementation of an Apollo moon landing - an indication that the pictures of daring journeys make us so satisfied today as the journeys themselves used to do. The examples mentioned from Baxter's work are "real" alternative history stories that test a concrete change in the historical process. This is easier to do in literature than in film. In cinema this is often too complicated for the audiences.

I don't write all this in order to advocate in favor of a consistently positive, technical utopia. A predominantly negative depiction of future conditions also existed earlier in science fiction films. This is also necessary for an exciting conflict to arise. It is also unacceptable that questionable developments in the relationship between humans and technology are ignored. Not even the fantasy-like depiction of the future á la *Star Wars*, which cannot be seen as an attempt to foresee the future, could scare me. This is about the past as the recently favored setting for tech-oriented SF. If the genre was to lose the future as a place of action, authors and filmmakers would actually be consistently convinced that mankind could not seriously be trusted to implement high-flying technical visions. Science fiction would lose its purpose in life. But we're still a long way from that.

Now that the disturbing trend of setting science fiction in the past has become apparent, several questions arise. How important is this development really? A few movie swallows and a single author's favorite themes don't have to make a summer. Even if the inclination of filmmakers and writers to project counterfactual sce-

narios into the past should increase, audiences can only tolerate such a confusing approach to a certain extent. If visions of the future are no longer in demand, this would probably lead to a decline in SF production overall. Science fiction literature is usually way ahead of SF film. And there you can still find breathtaking future scenarios, written in particular by the British innovators of space opera, such as Stephen Baxter (!), Peter F. Hamilton and Alistair Reynolds.

Is growing disbelief in the future an inevitable phenomenon? The next real technological push can turn the tide at any time. Nanotechnology may have been given too much credit. The problems are bigger than originally thought. Nonetheless, it will change our lives. And that doesn't necessarily have to be negative. The same applies to biotechnology. Neither of these two sectors will exclusively cause problematic developments. Otherwise one would have to doubt very much the sanity of the highly paid scientists. Nowerdays much excitement and many expectations are caused by artificial intelligence. If there are positive consequences connected to this technologies, especially for economic development, there will also be new inspiration for science fiction stories.

Is a lack of belief in the positive future really the only possible cause of backward-looking SF? Much has been said above about nostalgia as the driving force behind engaging with SF. If you take Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as the hour of birth, science fiction is now more than 200 years old. The genre has its history and a certain right to deal with itself. Perhaps one should even be thankful that contemporary authors call attention to bygone literary epochs that would otherwise be entirely forgotten. In any case, George Lucas showed with *Star Wars* how one can successfully entertain with the processing of nostalgically glorified and outdated SF. Lovers of past SF fiction will always exist, especially among creatives who have reached a certain age, but not only there. The trend described could therefore continue and represents a challenge for all those who have taken up the cause of exploring the future. Films like *Gattaca* or *The Truman Show* show that realistic and intelligent speculation can even have a chance in the cinema. In addition, people who have the opportunity to do so must show whether belief in a future in which many things are possible can be regained - scientists, politicians, entrepreneurs and all other notorious leaders. The trend of fleeing today's fear of the future into earlier enthusiasm for the future is recognizable. Even if it is harmlessly motivated and remains manageable in its effect, it represents an excellent reason to counter the resulting products with sophisticated and at the same time bold future scenarios. In this sense, one can only wish original and innovative ideas to all authors who want to accept the challenge.

DR. COSTIN BOLDEA: "MY ADVENTURE IN PROBING EXTRATERRESTRIAL SPACE WAS, FIRST OF ALL, A MEDIA INCIDENT, AFTER THE IMPACT IN CHELYABINSK"

Costin Boldea is the Timișoara mathematician who probes extraterrestrial space, having so far managed to discover two celestial bodies that have been validated as near-Earth asteroids.

The distinguished university student from Banat, a graduate of the prestigious Informatics High School in Timișoara, who was an "Olympian" during his high school years in both mathematics and physics, graduated from the West University of Timișoara with a bachelor's degree in mathematics, specializing in mathematical research, then he studied at one of the most prestigious educational institutions in Europe, L'École Polytechnique in France, where he obtained his graduation diploma and a master's degree, after which he attended doctoral courses in mathematics at the "Pierre et Marie Curie" University " where he graduated with "Magna Cum Laude".

Also, Dr. Costin Boldea holds a Master's degree in Computer Science, held at the West University of Timisoara.

From his activity in the field of informatics, it can be seen that he was team-leader (in charge of the team from Craiova) in the creation of the first Romanian utility software dedicated to the detection of asteroids: "NEARBY", following a project financed by the Romanian Space Agency carried out between 2017-2019 , with Ovidiu Văduvescu (astronomer, researcher at the Isaac



DR. COSTIN BOLDEA

Newton Group of Telescopes in Spain) and three more people from Craiova, under the direction of Prof. Dr. Dorian Gorgan, dean of the Computer Faculty of UTCN in Cluj Napoca.

About the activity of Timișoara professor Costin Boldea in probing the celestial vault to discover new celestial bodies, in the interview that the distinguished university was kind enough to give us in the afternoon of the second day of the Easter Holidays.

Reporter: - Is it difficult to discover asteroids?

Dr. Costin Boldea: - If you stay up 1000 nights, you may find an NEA. So at this level, one in 1000 nights. The chances are slim.

Reporter: - Where did you start in this adventure of probing extraterrestrial space?

Dr. Costin Boldea: - First of all, it was an accident, a press accident. It is about the impact from Chelyabinsk. An asteroid exploded in Russia a few years ago and pulverized all the jams in a town. The explosion was so intense, even though it is close to the Urals, that that night, for a short time, the midnight newspaper could be freely read in Bucharest, at the Otopeni Airport. Their luck was that it exploded in the atmosphere, it didn't touch the ground, if it touched the ground it would have turned Chelyabinsk into dust, destroyed the city completely.

That's when I realized there was a risk. There are asteroids as small as 20 meters that can fall and destroy a city.

I've had a passion for astronomy since I was little, although I didn't take astronomy in college, except for the 4th year astronomy course, otherwise I didn't do anything. I was really passionate about space since I was little and I was curious about how the planets move, but it wasn't about to become a job for me, it was a passion.

A few years ago [2016] I had some discussions with Ovidiu Văduvescu and he showed me for the first time some software dedicated to research in astronomy, and since then I returned to my childhood passion.

Reporter: - The first asteroid you discovered was in 2018, an asteroid called 2018VN3. How did you make this first discovery?

Dr. Costin Boldea: - We benefited from astronomical observations through which we test the software pipeline produced in Cluj and Craiova, NEARBY, in parallel with a software produced by an Austrian, Astrometrica, also taken with the Isaac Newton telescope in La Palma. We wanted to see which of the two we could find more asteroids with. We were lucky to have a clear and very clean sky (clean means no sand storms. La Palma and the Canary Islands are affected by "calima" - Saharan sand storms. On those nights we would find 20, 30 new asteroids each night, even more, but mostly uninteresting, being from the main belt, between Mars and Jupiter. The ones closest to Mars are the so-called Hungarian class, and just then, in November 2018, we found about 19 asteroids from this group, which may eventually hit Mars, including this object 2018 VN3, which reaches beyond Mars, between Earth and Mars, and the moment we saw that it was close to Earth, we transmitted the data and it was validated by the Minor Planet Center. There were actually two, one discovered by me and the other discovered by Dr. Marcel Popescu.

Reporter: - What are the initial ideas behind the ParaSOL project, the project that led to the discovery of the asteroid 2023DZ2? What is the basis of this project?

Dr. Costin Boldea: - The ParaSOL project, now developed by the group led by Marcel Popescu from the Astronomical Institute of the Academy, starts from an innovative method of asteroid detection, where instead of animating a number of images taken in the same region of sky, by superimposing the positions of the stars and identifying objects moving against the background, we try to superimpose the deconstructed images so that the successive presumptive positions of a moving asteroid overlap, thus detecting asteroids invisible by the classical (high-magnitude) method. How do we overlap? If we manage to catch the same direction of movement, of placing the images, so that the position of the unknown asteroid falls over itself and not star over star, from twenty images we begin to see it better, even though it was very faintly visible. The method, called Synthetic Tracking, allows the detection of asteroids that are much less visible or smaller than those we used to see. That's the idea behind the ParaSOL project. How do we do that? Because we don't know the unknown asteroid's speed or direction, 60,000 random speeds and directions are chosen to fill the 360-degree circle, and advanced graphics processing is used, not on a computer with 8-core processors like on a tablet or a phone, but having graphics processors with 2000, 3000, 4000 cores. Gaming graphics cards have many thousands of cores, being in effect supercomputers. So instead of doing calculations on a regular computer or

server (I would need a server as big as a huge closet to do that) I use gaming graphics cards and it allows me to reduce the processing time from 12 hours to analyze a group of 20 images, under 20 minutes (this is the big advantage) and to detect very poorly visible, possibly unknown objects. So, Synthetic Tracking is an innovative method.

We are not the first to develop it. It was invented by the Japanese a few years ago, applied for the first time at the software implementation level by an American, the producer of the Tycho Tracker utility (the one I used). The Romanian team wants to produce something alternative that can also detect asteroids that are so fast that they no longer form a circular image on the image, but form a track, because almost no software dedicated to astronomy at the current moment in the world detects such asteroids. They are so fast that with the telescope open for half a minute, you don't see it precisely in a certain position of the image, but you see it as a trail, elongated, like a comet. The STU software proposed by ParaSOL comes with the novelty that it could possibly detect these tracks as well. It's not public, it's not finished, it's still in development.

Reporter: - What can you tell us about the team of this project?

Dr. Costin Boldea: - At the moment it includes a group of astronomers from Bucharest, Marcel Popescu is an employee of the Academy's Astronomical Institute, but they are not necessarily all professional astronomers, they are also amateurs. They worked as amateurs within the Bucharest Astroclub, but among them there are computer scientists, including the initiator of the project, Mălin Stănescu, who finished a master's degree in England and came up with the idea of developing this software for the detection of tracks and not point objects, plus a team from Craiova that includes Prof. Dr. Ovidiu Văduvescu and Dr. Marian Predatu, the head of The Astronomical Observatory in Craiova (there is a small astronomical observatory in Craiova belonging to the University). I was associated, not directly to this project, but in the team of astronomical observations. The STU utility will be completed, probably next year. It is still in the testing, validation part, it is not yet in the final phase.

Reporter: - What can you tell us about the second asteroid you discovered? How did you achieve this second discovery?

Dr. Costin Boldea: - It is about NEA asteroids (Near-Earth Asteroids). We discovered several asteroids, but they were not considered important. In this case, I discovered it by doing a number of tests. We check what can be discovered with Tycho Tracker, comparable to what the STU software developed

INTERVIEW

by the ParaSOL team achieves. It was a kind of special satisfaction for me to work on these images, because I really enjoy discovering new things.

Reporter - How do you see the discovery of phosphine in the atmosphere of the planet Venus? What can this discovery bring?

Dr. Costin Boldea - They are proteins. Some experiments were done in the 60s, on how to produce elements vital to life in a closed balloon. Those who did this experiment put the necessary chemical elements and simulated a primitive atmosphere with small lightnings, and after a few weeks they directly obtained the "bricks of life". They didn't get bacteria in that glass globe, but did get the "bricks of life".

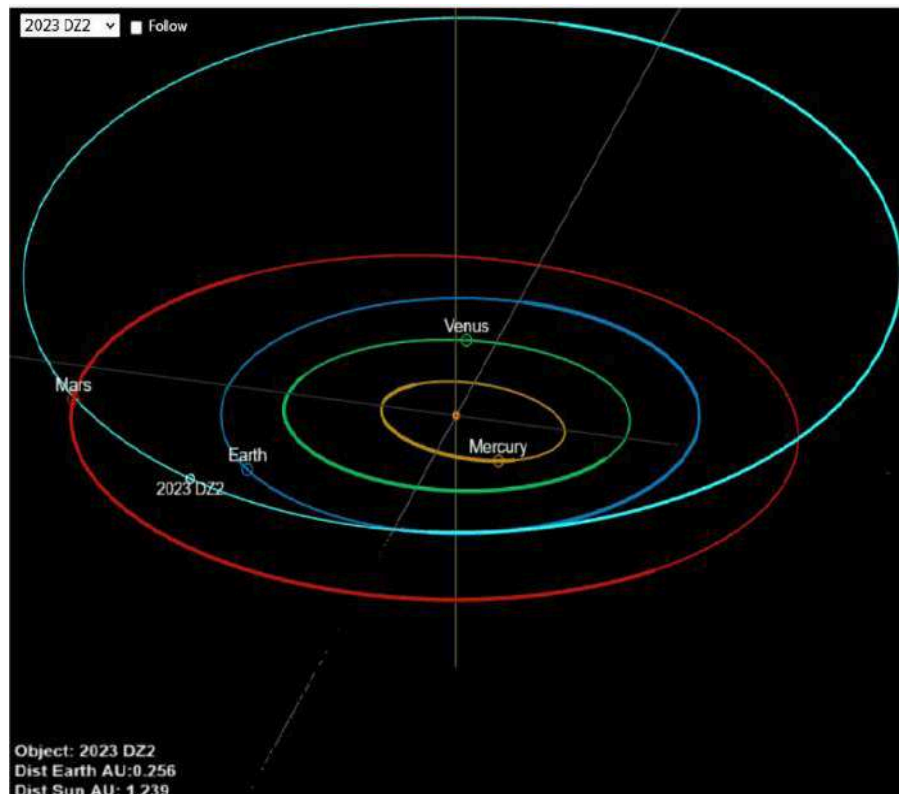
So, naturally, proteins necessary for the life we are made of can be designed through natural phenomena. From there, the step to life is a small one. How it appeared, we do not know exactly, but it may appear.

On Venus, at the present time, it is unlikely that we will find life on the surface, because it is extremely toxic, it is acidic, it rains hydrochloric acid, an atmospheric pressure of 400 atmospheres with an enormous temperature, but instead the atmosphere, at 25, 30 km altitude it has the same pressure as on earth, temperatures of 28 degrees. If you imagine a floating city like in "Star Wars" ("The Empire Strikes Back") something like this we can build on Venus, which is self-sustaining with solar energy, because the solar energy on Venus is much more intense, it uses elements from the atmosphere to grow plants in greenhouses, because the atmosphere of Venus seems to have enough elements to support life, at least plant growth. So we can build. We are more likely to colonize Venus than Mars. Why? Because Mars has no magnetic field at all. As such it is constantly bombarded by cosmic radiation. The surface of Mars is not habitable. Any cosmonauts or astronauts who make it to Mars will have to hide underground the next day, after a few hours, because otherwise they are bombarded with cosmic radiation on the surface. So Mars is totally unviable for colonization. Venus, on the other hand, can, but not on the surface, but in the atmosphere.

Reporter - What future plans do you have in relation to the exploration of extraterrestrial space?

Dr. Costin Boldea - I intend to continue with the

Euronear projects, for the search on asteroids. In addition to asteroids at risk of impact, I was also interested in Trojan asteroids, those that move with a planet, in front of or behind it. There are two known large groups near Jupiter, but it seems that Earth Trojans have been discovered, orbiting the Earth, in front of or behind it, a few, there may be more unknowns. Next to Neptune there may be others, and there are many trans-Neptunian objects. Earth's second great asteroid belt begins beyond Pluto and contains many more objects than the one between Jupiter and Mars, and of which very few are known. Some are really big, like Pluto. Pluto and its satellite are, in fact, trans-Neptunian, from the second (Kuiper) belt of the Solar System.



We already know some small planets in this region (dwarf planets), Sedna, for example, Haumea. One of them is even elongated, it has the shape of a rugby ball. It is the first case of a large planetoid that has the shape of a rugby ball, oval. Very interestingly for Pluto, it was recently discovered to have a lot of water. At how frozen it might be, it might not have liquid water, but you never know, because under the pressure, there might be liquid water under the ice sheet. So, we can have surprises.

From this second belt come our comets, and comets we know are full of water, full of nitrogen, full of the elements vital to life. The main objects that actually brought nitrogen and water to Earth are second belt comets.

Interview conducted by Cornelia Seracin

MALEFICIA FALLING

ALEXANDER ZELENYJ

Alexander Zelenyj is a Canadian writer of Czech origin. He is well known for his works in the fields of science fiction, fantasy and horror. His books include the short fiction collections *Blacker Against the Deep Dark*, Einbonville Press, 2018; *Songs for the lost*, Eibonvale Press, 2014, as digital edition in 2016 by Independent Legions Publishing; *Experiments At 3 billions A.M. ("Experiments at 3 billion A.M.")*, Eibonvale Press, 2009. His most recent book is *These long Teeth of the Night: The Best Short Stories 1999-2019*, Fourth Horsemann Press, 2020.

"The sculptor said the pieces are meant to be representations of gifts from Heaven."

The two men—Emperor Hadrian and his quaestor, Casteleo—were standing side by side, appraising the three sculptures in the sunlit atrium of the emperor's villa. Daylight from the *compluvium* and windows shimmered in the placid water of the pool in the room's centre. A shrine occupied one corner, while the funeral masks of dead ancestors stared blindly from their cabinets lining one wall.

The piece that held their attention stood on a squat ivory pedestal that accentuated its size, which was ten feet long, and its shape, which was cylindrical. Its topmost half had about it the look of a great urn, sleek and unornamented; or perhaps a giant's club. Decorative, streamlined ridges like the fins of a great fish rose at evenly spaced intervals from its square base. The sculpture, and its two companion sculptures, seemed to fill the capacious space, exuding a powerful aura. Truly, the artworks had a presence. They had, indeed, supplanted the two men's discussion concerning recent political happenings, the building of the wall in Britannia, the rebuilding of the Pantheon, the ongoing trouble with the Parthians.

"This one is rather phallic," Casteleo observed, and glancing toward the other pair of sculptures, added, "Those two remind me of a strange fat fish, and a giant egg." Indeed, the pieces' bulbous shapes conjured the quaestor's descriptions succinctly.

"Astute in your artistic critique as ever," quipped the emperor, adding, more warmly, "It's wonderful to have you back from your trip abroad, my friend, and to host you here at Tibur. I've missed your wisdoms greatly these past days. The older I grow, the more I rely on your counsel." And then, turning back to the sculptures, "They're sculpted from marble, by that vagabond-cum-prophet, Gallius, though how he came into possession of so much marble remains a mystery. Each of them life-size to real-world counterparts, he

was to have said."

"Gifts from Heaven, you say? But of what are they sculptures?" Casteleo said, frowning at the piece before them, seeking meaning from its sleek, dangerous shape, its economy of detail. "I'd thought this one an urn."

"Different incarnations...of God."

Casteleo turned an outraged and delighted eye on his companion. "Incarnations of a single, *Christian* God? Gifting Himself to the people?"

"It seems that way. In fact, the name Gallius gave to this piece before us was 'God in the Child'."

Casteleo's eyes grew wider.

The emperor chuckled. "Turn your gaze to the inscription."

"Inscription?"

"There," the emperor pointed at a place near the object's middle.

Casteleo leaned close, squinting at the characters etched there. "This language—I can't read it."

"Nor I. Being curious, I sent for an interpreter."

"And what did he say the inscription says?"

"He couldn't read it either, and wasn't able to identify the language. However..."

"Yes?"

"Gallius made a series of notes and sketches while working on the sculptures, which I also have in my possession. In those notes, among other things, is this same message," he gestured to the words in the marble, "and its translation into Latin. Apparently, he had no idea what this foreign language was either, but was convinced he understood it, hence the translation he appended."

"This whole affair grows more curious every moment," said Casteleo. "But what does it say, supposedly?"

Turning back to the alien characters, Hadrian quoted aloud: "Greetings to the Emperor."

Casteleo looked shocked. "I...This is...The *audacity*. Does the sculptor believe himself the vessel through which God speaks to you, his emperor? He should rather speak of *you* as his Lord. And to say that this

travesty,” he waved a hand at the sculpture, “should be the embodiment of any deity, Roman or otherwise—sacrilege.”

Hadrian nodded gravely. “It would seem so, yes. Gallius, I am told, had a series of visions that resulted in the creation of these sculptures—he entered what his acquaintances attest was a fugue state, sculpting for days on end without respite, without food or water, completing this trinity of sculptures in a mere week’s time. He was, of course, brought to a physician in the end. One can imagine the bloodletting and leeching administered to the man.” He gestured to the other two sculptures. “This one—your fat fish—he called ‘A Second Kiss,’ while this one—your giant’s egg—he called ‘The Test’”. The meaning of these names I do not know.”

“I find the pieces somehow...obscene. All of them.” When Hadrian made no reply, Casteleo added, “There is enough cause to have Gallius executed for his sacrilege.”

“There’s no need to think of it now—he hung himself while receiving treatment for his eccentric behaviour.” Then, more reflectively, Hadrian added, “You know, though, some might interpret his inscription as being a generous one, showing love for his emperor. I guess we will never know.”

“I’ve missed much these past days,” said Casteleo, stunned-sounding.

“Indeed, and you’re much the luckier for it,” said Hadrian. “Imprisonments, tortures, executions, artists hanging themselves...I don’t relish such happenings, though they do have a place, I fear. A part of the natural order and so forth.” He sighed, in that moment missing the former empress, now passed away: Pompeia Plotina, who’d so often lent him her sage advice—he sometimes felt that she’d been his conscience and that without her, he was a colder ruler.

Coming out of his reverie, he said, “Interestingly enough, Gallius maintained that the inscription does *not* refer to me.”

“Then who?”

The emperor shrugged. “He claimed he didn’t know. His vision, he said, contained only as much as he captured in the sculptures. In his heart, he swore, he knew it didn’t speak of me.”

Casteleo shook his head, bewildered. It was his turn to chuckle. “Blasphemous art indeed. And yet here his work rests, in your home, my lord—quite bold of you, I must say, to embrace a purportedly divine message, interpreted through a commoner and seemingly dedicated to you...even if Gallius himself defined it otherwise.” He indicated Hadrian’s beard, adding, “But then you are, after all, bolder than most, my lord—how many men imitate you, and wear beards now, as well? Many, many.” And Casteleo ran a hand over his

own neatly-cropped beard, smiling.

“Art is art,” Hadrian said, ignoring his advisor’s compliments. “I am a connoisseur, as you well know. Be it the lowliest beggar whittling a birch branch into the Roman eagle of his daydreams, I show bias to no master artisan. And these pieces have about them... an inevitability I found myself wholly unable to resign to the *midden*. They simply had to exist in the world. I only wish I could decipher their mystery—Gallius said that in his vision he saw them as gifts, as I’ve said, falling from Heaven to earth, in a distant land and time. God returning to the people, or something like this.” He waved a hand dismissively in the air, adding, “Much of this comes to me second-hand from the men I sent to fetch the pieces. Gallius himself was nowhere to be found when I first set eyes on the works, at the urging of a fellow collector. By the time I’d located him, he’d taken his own life.”

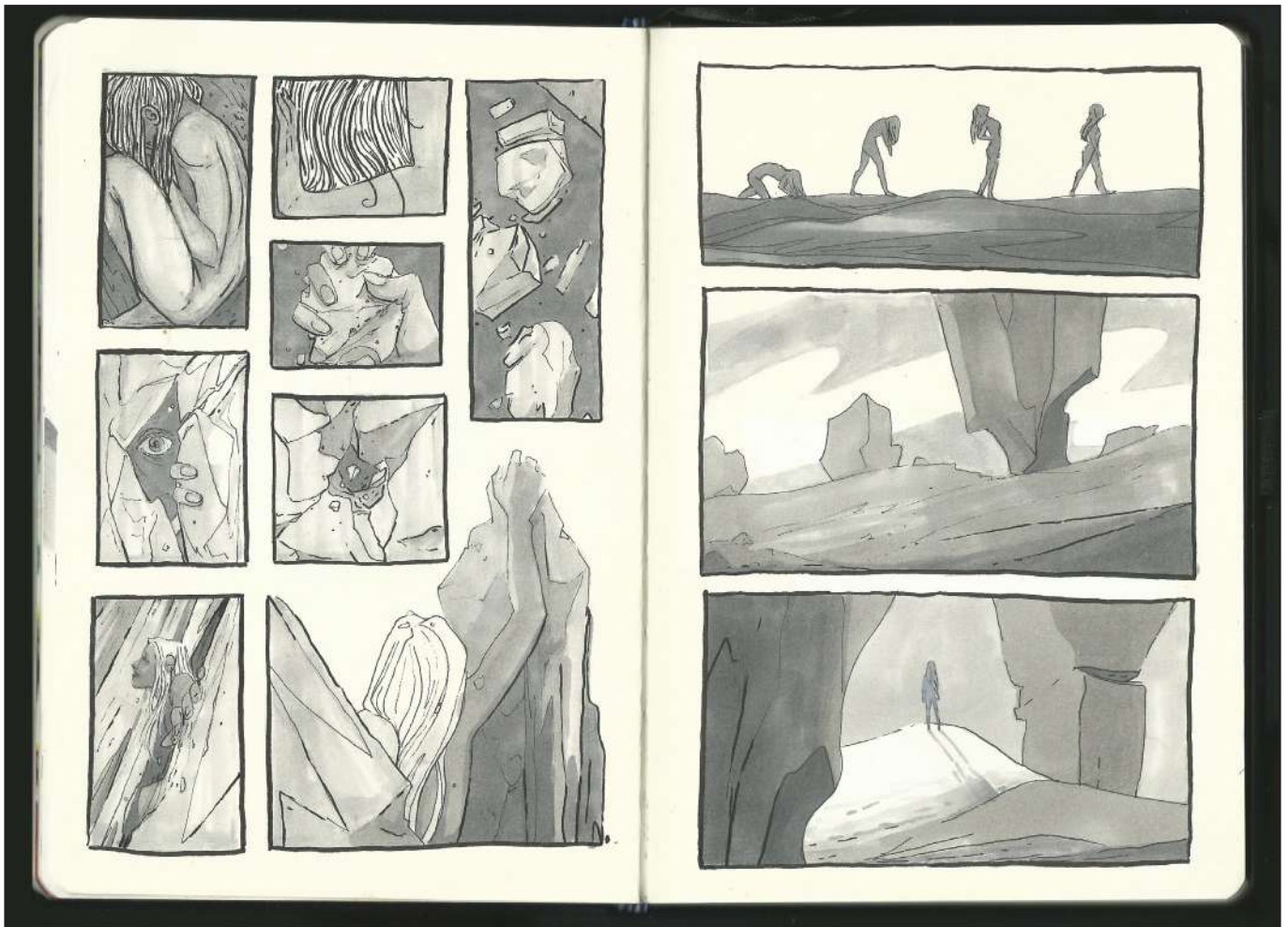
“Some did call him a prophet,” murmured Casteleo, voice hushed as if he was frightened of being overheard by someone outside the room, or perhaps apprehensive of the visions described by his emperor. He leaned a little closer to the sculpture in reappraisal of its artistry, its vision. He murmured, “But then some always believed him a lunatic.”

“Indeed,” said Hadrian. “Indeed.” And then in a subdued voice of secrecy, “Most interestingly of all, Gallius claimed that the pieces contain something inside of them.”

Casteleo raised an eyebrow. “They’re *hollow*?” He moved his fist toward the sculpture as if to rap against its marble surface, though he only held it there uncertainly, as if he were wary of touching the object.

“They certainly weigh a great deal,” said the emperor thoughtfully, “suggesting they’re solid blocks, or that whatever they contain is very heavy, and certainly encased closely within their marble shells.”

He remembered how the dozen men had toiled to move the sculptures into the atrium—first using the complicated contraption of wooden rollers and ropes to hoist the pieces from the three separate wagons in which they had arrived from the city; and then, because the rollers would not fit through the door and the things weighed far too much for the men to carry, they’d had to send for a crane. Hadrian had watched the workers walking in a steady rhythm inside of the great wooden wheel, spooling in the ropes that were secured around the sculpture to lift it slowly into the air. The pieces were successfully lowered, one by one, through the atrium’s wide *compluvium*, guided to one side of the room’s central pool and onto the empty pedestals awaiting their arrival. Altogether it had proven to be a far more formidable task than it had been to move any of the many other artworks dis-



Alina Cuiedan

played throughout the villa.

“Did the prophet-artist reveal what lies within his trinity of final works?”

The emperor noted that there was no longer the hint of casual mockery in his friend’s voice when speaking of the sculptor, an astonishing fact given that Casteleo was known to show contempt when speaking of most people, commoners especially. And this coming shortly after he’d referred to the sculptures as *travesties*.

“He did,” the emperor said. “Fire. He said that a great *fire* was inside the sculptures.”

Casteleo watched him quietly a moment before saying, “A metaphor? An allusion to the creative fire—the passion—which the artist poured into these works?”

The emperor ruminated on this a moment. “Perhaps. Though...”

“Yes, my lord?” Casteleo spoke quickly, a quiver of excitement in his voice.

“Well, there’s more to this Gallius character than most had thought.”

“Oh?”

Hadrian nodded, frowning. “Yes. All evidence sug-

gests he was...a sorcerer.”

Casteleo watched the emperor silently, waiting.

“We sometimes tell ourselves we have left behind notions like these,” said Hadrian. “That such ideas belong to the past and that we understand our world differently than we once did. That the amulets and books of spells some still keep hidden in their homes are no more than harmless adherence to superstition.” He paused, raising a hand to the sculpture but, like Casteleo, not letting himself touch its smooth surface. He finished, “But we are deceived: sorcery remains in the world.”

The emperor crossed to one of the cupboards and unlocked its doors. When he returned, he was holding an object cupped in his hands. It was a large, smooth globe, and appeared hewn from the same ivory as the sculptures.

“This piece Gallius called *Pluto*.”

Casteleo frowned at the globe. “Why? Has it some meaning that relates to the underworld? Or to Pluto himself?” The pantheon of Roman gods was great and much-celebrated, and attributing a deity’s name to an artwork could be no accident.

"Gallius claimed ignorance about this, as well, said it was merely another component of his vision. But most interestingly of all, he also claimed that striking this smaller sculpture with great force will somehow act as a catalyst and, through means I cannot fathom, cause one of the sculptures to...open, revealing this supposed fire that it contains. I do not know which sculpture—that knowledge was lost with the artist's life. Perhaps he would have sculpted similar companion pieces for the remaining two sculptures had death not halted his work."

Casteleo looked from the globe in Hadrian's hands to the urn-like sculpture, and then to the others. When he spoke, his tone was subdued. "Fantasy, surely...though if it *were* true, then..."

Hadrian watched him earnestly, and his whisper was like the sharing of a dark secret:

"Maleficia."

The word seemed to hang in the air like smoke.

"I can't understand how..." began Casteleo, shaking his head, his expression disconcerted. Then, a feigned jocularly in his voice, "Well, it may just be a lot of trickery, as I say. A large-scale farce. Gallius *was* an eccentric, after all, by all accounts. Let us not forget that."

Hadrian said, voice distant, "Perhaps." It was enough to silence Casteleo, submerging him beneath the fear that had steadily mounted in him.

Hadrian set the companion piece down on the floor before the urn sculpture, and the two friends, as if helpless to do anything else, continued to study the sculptures without comment; and the longer they looked, Hadrian felt the things' presence—their power—grow. A sorrow seemed to pulse from them, too, and into his heart; and into the room itself, and the world beyond the room where, seen through the villa's wide and tall windows, the sunset's final fire was quickly giving way to night's darkness, shrouding the distant Sabine hills in morose shadow.

"My lord," said Casteleo breathlessly. "I hadn't noticed it before—look!" He was pointing a finger at the red flower nestled at the base of the sculpture. "An oleander."

"And another," said Hadrian, staring. "And there, another!"

The men made a circuit of the sculpture in opposite directions until they met on the other side. The entire piece was wreathed with the flowers.

"A servant didn't place them there?" said Casteleo.

"No, certainly not without my permission. But how did we not notice the flowers before now?"

"A mystery, my lord. It's as if they sprang up while we admired the pieces."

"It seems we are surrounded by mysteries. And..."

sorceries." He gave his friend a lingering look of gravity before returning to the cabinet from which he'd retrieved the marble globe. When he came back he was holding a papyrus scroll, and said, "These are the sketches and notes Gallius kept. The entirety of the notes appear in both Latin *and* the same mysterious language etched into the sculpture." Unrolling the papyrus, he came to the place he sought and showed it to Casteleo, who read the words scrawled there in a barely legible cursive:

"The red oleander was the first flower to bloom from the irradiated rubble of Hiroshima. Since then, the flower has symbolized both the dangers of nuclear war and the hope of a more peaceful future."

When he looked up from the papyrus, he was pale and frightened. Voice small, he said "What is this 'Hiroshima'?"

"I do not know."

"And this..." Casteleo looked to the papyrus again. "This 'nuclear war'—what does it mean?"

"All I am certain of, my friend," said Hadrian, "is that the red oleander has appeared upon this sculpture, and it was not there earlier. The connection between this happening and Gallius's text is beyond question."

Casteleo dared to utter the words aloud: "It is a spell!"

They stood staring at one another, unspeaking, lost in thought. Then, into the deep hush, the emperor ventured, "My friend...may I confide something?"

Casteleo's eyes were riveted on him. "Of course." His whisper was loud in the darkening atrium.

Hadrian reached beneath his robes and unsheathed the gladius from the scabbard on his belt. The dusking light glimmered in its steel blade. "All day—in fact, ever since the sculptures arrived here two days ago—I've felt the strangest, nearly unquenchable desire...to strike this sister sculpture"—here he motioned with the sword to the marble globe resting on the floor—"with the pommel of my gladius. To set in motion the supposed magic that links it to the larger sculpture. Sacrifice the artwork that I might see the fire the prophet-artist promised lies at its heart. And...unleash it. The fire."

The men watched one another expectantly. Casteleo found himself nodding, slowly and hesitantly at first, and then with great eagerness.

The emperor, having received sanction from his trusted advisor and old friend, turned back to the sculptures. He avidly appraised each of the trinity in turn, and then eyed the marble globe with an intense calculation. And he raised the sword over the globe. And in his heart, he felt the rightness of it, even if his mind could not comprehend.

Marcus Hammerschmitt (born 1967) is a German journalist, writer and photographer. He studied philosophy and literature at the Eberhard Karls University in Tübingen.

He has been a freelance writer since 1994. In addition to his science fiction novels and (multi-media) poems, he published essays and documentaries in the internet magazines *Telepolis* and *Futurezone*, as well as in the weekly newspaper *Jungle World*. *Polyplay* also appeared as a radio play in a 2008 production by WDR. The novels *The Censor* and *Grasslands* also exist as audiobooks.

He received eight awards (1996-2007, latest is the German Science Fiction Prize, best short story for *Canea Null*) and has published nine novels (*Wind. The second attempt. Two novels*, 1997; *Target*, 1998; *The Opal*, 2000; *The Censor*, 2001; *Polyplay*, 2002; *Pension Barbara*, 2013; *H-Zero - A German fairy tale*, 2014; *Devil's Island*, 2020; *Rome*, 2021), two poetry books (*The night porter's letter*, 2019; *dim light*, 2022), six youth books and two non-fiction books.

It will all be terribly beautiful.

The self-driving taxis which brought us there were very well behaved indeed. Air conditioning was superb, even the cars' voices sounded exceedingly nice. When I said so to the one carrying me, it responded: „Thank you, Sir.“ Apart from that, we traveled in silence. The woman in the seat opposite to mine didn't make eye contact even once, instead she opted for looking out of the comfortably self-tinting window, perhaps taking in all the glory of the Swiss alps. Her demeanor was one of unhappy arrogance.

„We“ were a bunch of experts from all walks of future life: some scientists, some business analysts, inventors, futurists, students. And me: a painter.

„There“ was the very heart of Switzerland, if not geographically then spiritually so. Imagine a massive cabin, old, sturdy and very well tended to, with lots of dark wood and small windows in thick walls of blinding white. Yes, there were outhouses in the same style, plus some giant firs casting their shadow over parts of the arrangement. Think „Heidi“, if you absolutely have to, but this looked more like the secret home base for a platoon sized detachment of rather militant Heidis you wouldn't want to mess with.

I was amused, but not for long.

*

When we entered the building, things changed dramatically. Passing the threshold we cut through at least 200 years of human civilization, of which 50 seemed to take place largely in the future. There was no wood to be found in the entrance hall, only strangely allur-

ing approximations of aluminum, glass and ceramics. Though you really couldn't be sure what that stuff actually was - even by just looking at it you knew you were witnessing something so bleeding edge it hadn't passed prototype stage anywhere else but here. No discernible lamps of any kind - the light seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere. The climate was ridiculously well balanced, at least for my wellbeing. A starship, designed by the ghost of Jony Ive, parked in a Swiss mountain lodge. Perfect.

Before anybody could say even „Wow!“ a voice came on: „Your baggage will be processed. Find the three box room.“

„This is ridiculous“, said a large, red faced man in khaki trousers and a checkered shirt. „We came here to talk future tech, not to go on a treasure hunt!“ But when the majority of us put down their baggage and started to think about where a „three box room“ might be found in this structure, he followed suit.

*

It turned out the three box room made good on its name. The sliding door revealed three boxes on a legless table, hovering in midair, under a marble inscription which read: "Take your decision."

We tried to make sense of the cards in front of the boxes. The first one said: „Flux. Get your answers with your Fluxcess.“ The second: „MedBuddy. Tiny machines that wish you well.“ Nr. 3 informed us: „7th Sense. Inhale to sync.“

I thought about leaving then and there. Maybe Mr. Khaki Trousers was right: this was utterly ridiculous.

„Berndorf, Maxwell Industries“, somebody said.

Small, bespectacled, a sharp looking suit & tie guy. „By now we all know this is not the event we came here for. Call me an optimist, but I think this is something way more exciting. Like a test. I suggest to make it even more fun by choosing in private. Five minutes for each of us alone with the boxes.“

„I concur“, said the arrogant one from the taxi ride, and after a short pause we all murmured our consent.

*

„This might still be an elaborate joke“, I thought, watching the artifacts: a transparent, rectangular pane of unknown material, a moss-green lozenge and a small aerosol can, medical looking, like for people with asthma.

I looked up to that marble inscription, only to flinch in amazement - it didn't ask for my decision any more. Instead it said now: „Two minutes to go“. I blinked, and the inscription began to count down the seconds, starting with 1:58.

„What the hell“, I thought. I pocketed the „Fluxcess“, I popped the pill, and I inhaled. Deeply.

Then I threw the can into the small, stylish garbage bin besides the floating table. There were enough aerosol cans for all of us who wanted to inhale.

*

„So it's drugs“, I thought. Boy, was I wrong.

When I left the three box room, somewhat dizzy and exhilarated, I saw a woman coming up to me from the far end of the corridor. As the lighting was excellent, I could discern she was small and blonde, her steps were measured, somewhat careful, and she carried something in one of her hands.

You know these situations. You ask yourself: What is this person like? I mustn't betray my curiosity, this would be inappropriate. Still I wanna know: Is she pretty? Will she look at me and smile? About ten steps still separated us when I suddenly felt drawn to her with a force I knew I couldn't resist. I did something totally alien to me: I took her free hand with both of mine, shaking it like a very good friend from back in the days who'd finally managed to track her down once again.

„Hallo!“ I said, „I'm the painter!“ I didn't even feel like an idiot.

She was pretty and she smiled a very pretty, if a little cautious smile. „I know! I've done my homework. I'm Ariana Tusk from Supermodern Toys Inc.“ She showed the Fluxcess she had been carrying in her other hand. „Aren't these things absolutely amazing?“

And then it hit me like eight tons of anvils: I knew the most important thing about her, I knew it alright. Just beneath her pretty appearance and her cautious behavior she was of pure gold. A very good person who usually made sure nobody saw too much of this quality lest

it might be exploited, taken advantage of. The certainty of my knowledge about her core qualities was staggering. I had absolutely no idea where it came from.

„Are you alright?“, she asked me, with some guarded concern. I obviously had given the impression of someone close to fainting.

„Yes“, I said, with all the conviction I could muster. „Yes, I'm just a little ... tired.“

„I can relate, believe me. Just had a short nap myself. The rooms are beautiful, you'll see. We'll talk later.“

We actually waved goodbye.

*

„Drugs“, I thought, „it must be novel drugs“, standing in front of that unbelievable bed. Somehow it was hovering as well. This was obviously spaceship bedroom technology, I thought, sniggering against my will. Maybe some kind of future shock? A voice in my pocket said:

„I'm done calibrating.“

I fetched the Fluxcess out of my pocket, and it hadn't changed a bit. A pane of translucent material the size of a small wallet, but only about two millimeters thick.

„How can I be of service?“, it said.

„What's your name?“

„What do you want my name to be?“

„Rockets. I'll call you Rockets.“

„Excellent. Anything else?“

I couldn't think of something smart, so I asked: „What's the height of Mount Everest?“

„Now the usual answer to that would be 8848 meters, but I have access to the data of a Chinese expedition trying to measure the height of Mount Everest with unprecedented exactitude. Should I ...?“

„No“, I said. „Thank you.“ I sank onto the bed, intent on fighting sleep for just a little longer. „What can you tell me about yourself, MedBuddy and 7th sense? Short version please.“

„Well, it's quite obvious, isn't it? I'm a knowledge navigator, a natural language interface to the Flux, and the Flux is basically a thinking internet without the non-sense. MedBuddy is nanomachinery able to monitor your body. 7th sense is an empathy and intuition enhancing viral agent which turbocharges your brain's areas concerned with social interaction. All three of us are making you quite tired right now.“

„Is that so?“, I wanted to ask, but I had already fallen asleep.

*

When I woke, my belly was aching with hunger.

„Hello!“

„Hi, Rockets.“

„Supper is underway about 50 meters away from here. I'll guide you if you want to.“

„You have access to my MedBuddy-Data.“

„I thought you might like that. Your blood sugar is quite low, so stuff your face.“

„Language, Rockets.“

„I beg your pardon, Sir. From your social media postings I concluded you might tend to a more informal style of conversation.“

„Just kidding. Help me stuff my face, you nosy little brat.“

In the dining room, Berndorf was standing up while all the others were seated. Someone wants to be a leader, I thought. „Please take a seat“, he addressed me, and when I had done so, he carried on with the speech I had interrupted.

„As I was saying: I will be leaving within the hour. My MedBuddy installation has detected a medical condition which can't be treated reasonably by the MedBuddy agents in my bloodstream. I've signed the required NDAs and will be admitted to the closest hospital specializing in treating my ailment. I must say I'm sorry to leave, but I'm also grateful for our host to give my chances of recovery a tremendous boost.“

We ate mostly in silence, apart from my encounter with one George Best, who introduced himself as the head of „Future Archeology“ at the University of Durham. He sat right across the table.

„So what do you paint then?“ he asked. His dark eyes, betraying a fierce intelligence, were overshadowed by thickset eyebrows.

„I call it yonderscapes. Others call it >neo-surrealism<. I don't care.“

„You're lying“, he said. „You care quite a lot.“

„Touché“, I said and smiled, but my smile eroded quickly when I, still looking him in the eyes, suddenly saw: this man had killed. Real people. Not once or twice, but many times. He held my gaze without so much as a blink.

„Yes“, he said. „Used to be a soldier. A mercenary, more like. Not proud of it, not going to discuss it.“

I concentrated on the food, which was beyond excellent.

*

When Berndorf later left, me and the arrogant one were alone in bearing witness. Berndorf stoically waited for the taxi to arrive. When it did, elegantly swooping onto the cabin's yard, he turned to us, waving shyly, once, twice. I waved back, the arrogant one didn't. Berndorf put his baggage into the taxi's trunk, and off he went. The last rays of the sun turned the glorious Swiss summits into pure gold. I sensed the arrogant one wanted to be spoken to but couldn't get over her pride.

„We haven't become superhuman, have we?“

„Not at all“, she replied. Her voice was deep and raspy, like a female rock singer's I'd listened to quite a lot in my youth. „We have dehumanized ourselves, in the most peculiar way. It feels good. Disturbingly so.“

No question about it: she also was a triple user.

„They're never gonna make it in Europe“, she said.

„Maxwell and their cars. The Californians and the Germans will eat them alive.“

She left me without saying good night.

*

And so it went. The night was low on strangeness, apart from the best sleeping experience I'd ever had.

The next day, everybody behaved rather shy. There seemed to be no real conversations. Obviously the majority was occupied with the Flux and MedBuddy. I thought about Berndorf with a slight feeling of guilt, entirely aware of it's irrational nature. If *my* body was acting up, Rockets didn't tell. When required to he just gave data, by the steamshovel. But he kept ominously silent on the subject of who was really behind all of this.

I had another awkward ten seconds with Ariana Tusk. When checking out the lunch buffet, we suddenly stood side by side. I could feel so many things about her at once. She was even more guarded and cautious now that she knew she could be found out so easily. It didn't matter. I'd seen more of her soul than a good friendship would have revealed in years. Somehow, talking was totally besides the point here.

„It's ok“, she said, rearranging the food on her plate for better aesthetic value.

„Yes it is“, I answered, not knowing where to put a little more of that uber-delicious Caprese salad.

Avoiding George Best was easy. He made himself so scarce I thought he might have left clandestinely. Just as well - I didn't want to excavate anything about this man's past, present or future, *especially* not involuntarily so.

I had an extended walk, and nobody seemed to mind.

*

The next morning granted us one more wonderful breakfast. Shortly thereafter, we were requested to congregate in the entrance hall. In my case it was Rockets who made the will of our overlords known, others joked about ghostly voices in their rooms, summoning them to our meeting point. Everybody was there, including George Best. After a while we all fell silent, waiting for an explanation. We didn't have to wait long.

„You will leave now. Some of you will be contacted at some point in the future, others won't.“

The entrance door of the lodge opened onto the yard, where the three taxis were already waiting to take us away.

Shortly prior to boarding, I looked up. The sky was clouded for a change, and the clouds sported a strange, rather unnatural looking shade of violet. The moment I wanted to avert my eyes, a ripple went through the violet clouds, like a shockwave mellowed by the unimaginable distance of its origin. Settling into my seat, I became aware I knew exactly what had happened up there. I just couldn't say it in words.

Krzysztof T. Dąbrowski (born in 1978) is a writer and screenwriter. He graduated film directing at WS-SiP in Łódź, Poland. His debut is the book *Death of Death*, published in 2008. Over 1200 publications, including over 700 abroad. Books published in the USA, Spain, Germany, Canada, Poland, audiobooks in Poland, publications in anthologies in Poland, USA, Canada, England, Australia, Portugal, India, Tunisia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Germany, Russia, Brazil and Bangladesh. Publications in foreign magazines in: Slovakia, USA, England, Canada, India, Czech Republic, Russia, Brazil, Spain, Argentina, Germany, Italy, Israel, Hungary, Sweden, Mexico, Albania, Nigeria, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, Costa Rica, Peru, Vietnam, Turkey, Ukraine, Romania and Slovenia. Radio plays in Poland and the USA.

Writer, co-writer or collaborator for 14 movies produced in Poland, England, the Netherlands and USA.

We were awakened from hibernation. If our parents were alive would be five hundred years old. My wife also. None of them is alive anymore. Tears blur the sight of several vials. But will it still be them? Their memories and neural networks were copied on discs... When they clone them they will return as so-called

resurrectionists.

They will not know about it - artificial memories will be uploaded to them.

This is all that could be done. There was not enough space on the ship for everyone.

It was decided to save only the elite.

Maybe I am one to...

KRZYSZTOF T. DABROWSKI

THE LAST TRAVEL OF ADAM OGOREK

Adam Ogorek turned 30 yesterday. He had a double reason to celebrate. Why? Because he also finished working on a time travel machine.

The next day went ten years in the future he came across a show dedicated to the memory of a scientist who invented the time machine. The genius died of a

heart attack shortly after the invention was completed.

Adam felt breathless and strong pain in his chest.

He crawled into the machine with the last of his strength and returned to his time.

He came out of it and Adam Ogorek fell dead on the floor.

KRZYSZTOF T. DABROWSKI

THE DOFGATE

Fafik comes to his owner with his tail wagging. His owner does not notice him. As usual. He used to be a good person, he played with him but not anymore.

Fafik hears his name. The man holds something to his ear, he says to the air:

- I miss Fafik. You're right, the end of mourning. It's time for a new pet.

He goes to the shelter.

Fafik enters the body of a shelter dog and greets his former owner.

- I'll take this one.

Returning, the man said to the new dog:

- You know, you really remind me of someone.

STUDY TRIP

FRANK G. GERIGK

Frank G. Gerigk (born in 1963 in Radolfzell on Lake Constance, Germany) is an engineer and natural scientist.

He has already published around 60 short stories, mainly in anthologies, but also in magazines. He occasionally publishes an anthology himself. He became known to a wider audience through his non-fiction book on the art of Germany-based Johnny Bruck (1921–1995), the most-published cover artist in art history.

With an undamped overspace bang, the Choven spacecraft burst into the Solar system. With half the speed of light it fell from Hyperspace from the perpendicular above the ecliptic, aligned itself briefly and, after some smooth corrective maneuvers, embarks on a ballistic course towards the third planet, trailing blue wakes of Cherenkov radiation.

Satisfied with the dramatic performance, the commander and pilot lunged for the preliminary climax: his finger just hovered over the large, flashing button with the panic sign, then he pressed it with relish. Across the solar system, a roaring telepathic terror now claimed that a Choven was here again. Scavengers and looters would now have to flee or risk their health. Lungrën looked at the screen meticulously and with lurking glee... But nothing happened. The system was empty, silent for several light-days away.

"That was to be expected," he muttered, somewhat disappointed. All Terrans were wiped out. Especially defeated, decades ago. Everything was destroyed on the celestial bodies, where life was born.

On the other hand, Lungrën could be lucky not to find anyone here. The college's small vehicle had no stronger weapons than an alarm squeal; it survived on the reputation of their powerful leaders.

His intern Ylintjin stood next to him, visibly nervous. It was the first time for him that he actually got to deal with relics of the great war. And that even in the former power center of the main enemy!

"I've studied so much and yet I feel so unprepared!" His voice cracked.

"That is normal. And they're all dead, don't worry!"

"And we're really going to be able to see one of them?"

"We'll see. The automatic detection probes have identified a natural cave on the moon of their host planet; this is where the terran spaceship is said to have crashed. It's unlikely we'll find much, possibly just debris."

„How could they have become so powerful? I still do not understand. They conquered thirty thousand

solar systems in just twelve thousand years! Individual specimens are said to have been peace-loving, devoted to philosophy, the arts and, above all, to the family. Many even believed in a divine being who propagated peace. In their cultural conceptions there were alien beings in the Milky Way who were friendly or even paternal towards them. You would think they would have been happy to have neighbors."

„Instead they built fighters and colony ships and swept up half the arm of the galaxy like a plague. Wiped out life on countless worlds. Yes."

Lungrën studied the monitors thoughtfully. There were few spacefaring civilizations in the Milky Way – and while there had been no other solution, it was a loss for all to have to destroy one. What could we have learned from each other!

The proud research vessel had gently reached Earth's moon; the luminous effects had gone out. A lunar geologically young collapse structure gaped under the ship. The ceiling of an ancient lava flow at the edge of one of the large lunar basins had collapsed, probably as a result of a seismic tremor. The approximately round hole measured the equivalent of about a kilometer in diameter and revealed a cavity several kilometers deep. Anything could be hidden inside, even an automated, heavily armed shipyard.

The Choven spacer locked onto the lunar gravitational field and stopped a few kilometers up. A hatch opened; four spotter drones for close and fine reconnaissance sped out, followed by two Mechs: they were multi-armed and multi-legged officials capable of all research and combat tasks. All units were in constant contact with each other and the ship and constantly exchanged data. A clear spatial image of the surroundings, including a first glimpse of the underground, quickly formed on the screen in the headquarters. Then the discovery!

"A Terran battleship!" Ylintjin shouted. "Spherical, about half a mile in diameter."

It was less damaged than feared. More and more

data came in. The drones slipped through pervasive openings into the damaged metal, ceramic, and composite construct. The holes in the hull were so large that the self-sealing hadn't been able to plug them. Repair attempts indicated that there had been desperate activity on board for at least a while after the crash. How archaic it looked, and how fragile! Now the Mechs were there, too. It wasn't long before they were in the enemy command center. Every little thing was recorded to be available later for the teaching institute.



Amalia Tirica

"Let's go!" said Lungrën. Each of their minds shorted into the systems of one of the Mechs, and a moment later they felt like they were inside the belly of the alien ship.

"It's all so tiny!" The Ylintjin Mech's tentacle-moving hands fingered the Terrans' odd objects.

"Yes, they were just about two meters tall," the commander repeated one of the lessons for his apprentice. „They had an incredibly fast metabolism, based on carbon compounds, water and energy production via oxidation by oxygen. By the time we make love once, they had sired, trained, and sent to the front two generations of offspring. It was very fortunate that we

were able to defeat them when they were so much faster and more active than we were." He eyed the strange interior with some wistfulness. Much of the alien technology has since been understood and reproduced. „They were so incredibly vulnerable, they could only exist in very limited environments. So incredibly brave."

"So incredibly dangerous!" Ylintjin meanwhile inspected other rooms. „As soon as they landed, there was a city and toxic industry. They were mass murderers!" Then a scream.

Lungrën and a drone rushed to him quickly – but there was no danger. Although Ylintjin had pressed against the side wall in fear, the body lying on the stand in the cabin had been dead for many years. Was this the last of the Terrans?

The commander approached. A tentacle with analysis instruments moved gracefully over the corpse.

„They evolved from bisexual mammals. Look, here the high hairline, the hairless face, eyes, nose. Here mammary glands; they first fed their young with endogenous secretions – an efficient but for us strange behavior. They gave birth to several young; after barely twenty years they were already adults and in principle capable of procreating themselves with others! This is a female. The body has been exposed to the vacuum for a long time and is completely dehydrated. If I touched it, it would probably turn to dust."

"I hate her!" Ylintjin yelled. Its tentacles twitched uncontrollably. One of them hit the couch; and indeed the corpse and its clothing, long exposed to the vacuum, slowly began to crumble from the surface. The dust revealed the skeleton that remained.

"We'll never get a chance like that again, remember it all! You will be able to tell your own students about it. – Those coccyx bones there show they carried tails before they walked upright. Look, here, the incisors. Although an omnivore, they evolved from semi-intelligent rodents. Her technical rise was meteoric. It is not yet clear how they could not only defy the inherent radioactivity on Terra, but also develop nuclear power and interstellar space travel almost out of nowhere, as if they had an instruction manual. After the difficult time we had, we simply don't have enough research vessels available. It will be take several ten thousand years before we'll recover and reconstruct their history completely. Much will forever remain unknown. A shame!"

The other Mech suddenly stood upright and listless. A small light glowed on its front. It used a microscanner to poke around in the creature's bony remains and then floated out to collect more data. The trainee had long since left the machine; he was probably crouching in his cabin, trembling.

Lungrën sighed. Then he went too.

OUR ESCAPEE FROM THE FUTURE

GYÖRGY DRAGOMÁN

Writer, translator and playwright of Romanian origin, translated into over 30 languages, **György Dragomán** almost needs no introduction, being well known to the Romanian public through the appearances, at the Polirom publishing house, of his highly successful novels, *The White King* (2008, 2017, screened in 2016 and included in the SF drama category), *The Pyre* (2015) and the volume of stories *Lion's choir* (2020), all translated by Ildikó Gábos-Foarță.

He was born in 1973, in Târgu-Mureș. In 1988 he settled with his family in Hungary. He studied philosophy and English literature at ELTE, Budapest, earning his doctorate with a paper on Samuel's prose Beckett. He translated from the works of Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, Ian McEwan, Irvine Welsh and others.

Laureate of prestigious literary prizes such as Déry Tibor, Márai Sándor, József Attila.

His play "The Galosh" (2017) was staged at the National Theater in Cluj-Napoca.

Our escapee from the future eats the ham slurping his tongue.

He asks for more. The mother tells him that is gone, but our escapee from the future laughs, tells her not to lie, that he knows exactly, there are another hundred fifty grams of Parma ham, medium quality, on the second shelf in the fridge, father bought it three days ago, because he had an appetite, but he will never eat it again, so the mother should bring it to him right away, because it will end up right where it needs to be, directly in his belly, that is, it wouldn't even be able to reach in a better place, and to bring him and a glass of that wine she's been storing up there on the cupboard for a long time, and which was intended for me as a graduation present, it will go down very well over the ham.

Our escapee from the future is a man, bald and with gray skin, I let him into the house, so I have a guilty conscience, my mother told me not to leave nobody in the house, and now look, I didn't listen to her, but our fugitive from the future said he was sent by dad, then he also told me the secret password that my father and I had agreed upon just for such cases. He entered, he looked around, sniffed the air, said that the house ours is exactly as he had imagined it, only the smell as pleasant, this one he could not imagine, the smell of the dwelling, so pleasant, there, whence he comes, there is no such thing there anymore, after which he wandered off to the sofa and sent me to the kitchen for beer.

When he sent me the fourth time, I told him I was done, that's enough, now I'm going to call my father, to which he said yes well, I just have to call him, but at the same time I could save myself the effort, because in the office only after five calls, the receiver will be picked

up, aunt Marcsa will answer and say that father is not there, after that I will call my grandparents, and there, the housekeeper will answer and say that my grandfather can't come to the phone because he's just mowing the grass, and he won't know anything either about my father, and just like that, he can list all the people I have to call, because he knows them all in advance, and I will become more and more desperate, and in the end I will call the police, the phone will ring seventeen times, and still no one will answer, and then I'll cry and, in despair, I'll still bring him that beer, so I'll go and do all this, because these are things you can't skip, and then I asked how he knows in advance, and then he said I will not believe him, even if he told me, but after I am done with all this bullshit and I'll be on the phone at the kindergarten where my mother works, where Aunt Ilka after I have repeated four times, will finally understand, because of crying with hiccups, and finally I will have managed to talk to my mother, begging her to come home, so, after that maybe I'll finally believe him, so I'm going to go do all that and I'll see that everything will happen exactly as he says.

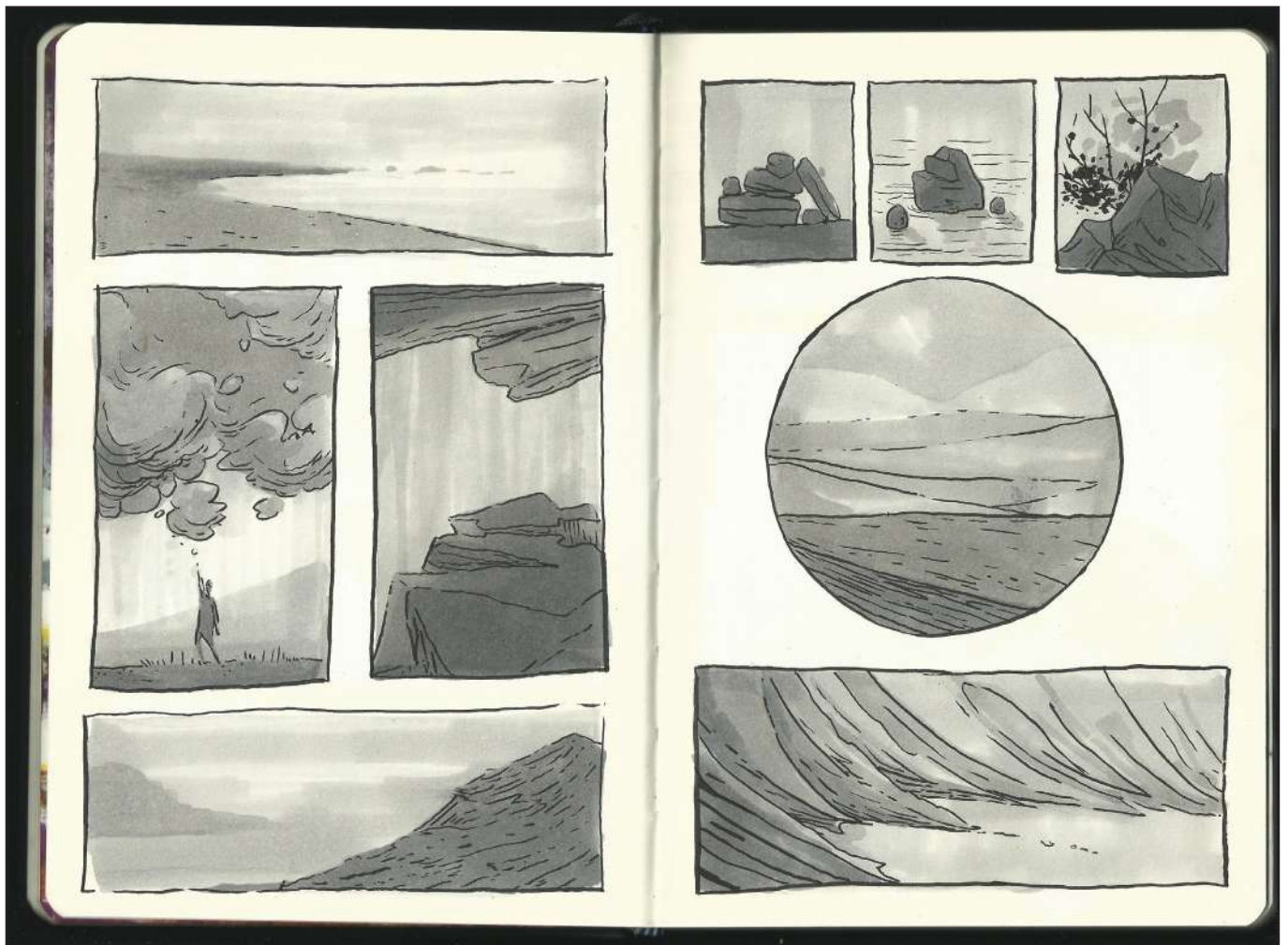
When Mom brings the ham, our escapee from the future sends her back to the kitchen, telling her to put it down nicely on the porcelain plate, the one used for the holidays, not to fool around with the ordinary ceramic one, and not to forget that wine, but to bring it together with the crystal glass, but he knows, of course, that he is talking in vain, he will have to send it twice back to the kitchen before she came to her senses and open that bottle of sweet wine, but that's that, so what can you do, there are things you can't skip.

I study our escapee from the future, as I crawl clos-

S.F. MERIDIAN

er to the armchair, I slowly take out of my pants father's Finnish dagger, I lunge at our fugitive from the future, but miss him, the dagger goes in his armchair, because our escapee from future takes from the table the model of the ship I had finished when he has just arrived and he rang the doorbell, knocking me over with it I fall back, I swallow the ham, he wipes his greasy face with my father's cashmere scarf, then gives it to me, throwing it to wipe my bloody nose, and be glad that I collected only what I collected, he knew beforehand that I'm going to rush at him with the knife, although he understands that I don't like it when he threw all my dad's things out the window, in the meantime the mother also enters with the rest of the ham and with the bottle of wine, our escapee from the future tells her to stay down and put down the tray as well, for if she stood listening to what he was about to tell him, she would drop it from her hand, and it would be a shame, because what he will tell us now, will hurt, we're going to wail, we're going to cry loudly, the whole thing, but he will tell us, there are things you can't hurry, so dad won't come home, namely because he died, because he personally pushed him onto the tracks of the subway, he specially escaped back, here to us, because let that be the

first thing to do, and it was, and now that Mr. Engineer is nothing more than a corpse, well, from now on he will live here with us, a let's not be afraid, at first we will hate him a little, but then we'll get used to it and love it, oh he knows this in advance, from time to time he will have to slap me some more, there are things you can't jump to, but don't be afraid, he will always tell us before, sure, well, what an escapee from the future would he be if he didn't tell us, that's exactly what we'll love about him the most much, that he will know everything in advance, now precisely that I already understood why, but it's nothing, he'll tell us, in black and white, because there are things you can't skip, he it's our personal escape from the future a few years ago hours he escaped here to us, our planet will be destroyed, will disappear for good, and he did not come alone, but with many others, here, back in this beautiful twenty-first century, when everything was still roughly in order, because each escapee from the future chose a family, almost everyone got one, and he's ours, he set his eyes on us specially, he bid for us, won us at the big auction, and now it's finally here, with us, and here he will stay, because here, next to us, he will spend the little time that is left in the most pleasant way possible.



A BUNKER FOR EVERY FUTURE

CHRISTIAN ENDRES

Christian Endres, born in 1986, lives and works as a freelance author near Würzburg, Germany. His stories have appeared in dozens of anthologies and magazines, among them the *Sherlock Holmes Mystery Magazine*, *Weird Tales*, Germany's biggest tech paper *c't – magazine fuer computertechnik* and *Spektrum der Wissenschaft*, the German edition of *Scientific American*. He also works as journalist for several newspapers and writes the editorials of the German comic-books with Spider-Man, Batman, the Avengers, Conan, the Witcher and others. In April 2023 his sword-and-sorcery-novel *Die Prinzessinnen – Fünf gegen die Finsternis* (*The Princesses – Five Against Darkness*) was published in Germany at Cross Cult.

Don't worry - we'll build you a bunker for every future!

Most readers of my column are probably familiar with this advertising slogan. After all, Bunker King's business is buzzing, and its marketing budget is correspondingly large.

"We get more requests for orders than we can handle in the near future," admits CEO Frank Eisner. "And this despite the fact that we're always well prepared for the future."

Eisner has to say something like that because he is the Bunker King, if you will. He realized 20 years ago that interest in high-end bunkers for the private sector would soar. He didn't renew his military contracts and expanded in the other direction.

We meet at the construction site for one of his luxury bunkers, which a Los Angeles based influencer is having planted in her garden, between a riding stable and a guest house.

I have to wear a yellow hard hat.

Eisner leads me along the edge of the large pit, which is dominated by workers, cranes, excavators, 3D-printers, construction drones and massive steel parts.

"COVID-19 definitely changed the business back then," Eisner recalls. A shadow flits across his face - I suspect he's thinking of his second wife Melissa, who died from the virus when the first waves were hitting us hard. "But so did the rest. The whole world. There's something wrong everywhere. And things getting worse. People are longing for security and certainty."

That's what Eisner is selling in his eyes. It's not about the fear of apocalyptic scenarios. It's about the feeling of being well prepared - come what may.

Eisner readily admits that this has a price, and a certain clientele. "If you want a standard bunker in your basement or garden, there are other companies for that." He says this without condescension. It's a professional assessment from the king of bunkers. "We offer luxury, customization and lots of innovation. Concepts for everything."

Or against everything?

But this view would not fit into Frank Eisner's business model, philosophy and self-image.

"We work together with companies in Japan, Dubai and Sweden," he is telling me. "We have the best filtration and water treatment systems available. Super intelligent heat pumps and edgy autonomous energy-circuits. First-class self-contained med-cabins. Even NASA is keen on our technology, for Mars and so on. And don't make me start talking about our achievements in data compression and virtual reality."

I ask him about the type of bunker that his company is currently building most often.

"One of our best," he says, and that genuine, unaffected craftsman pride makes Eisner likeable. "Our state-of-the-art bunker for the zombie apocalypse." He doesn't bat an eye at these words. "Who can know what the future holds?" he parries my sceptical look.

"Science?," I suggest. "Logic? Common sense?"

"Of course. Sure." He nods understandingly. "To a certain extent. And tomorrow an alien-ship lands on Earth, the next virus turns people into zombies, or the machines rise up - and then? We are currently developing an analogue model, by the way," he takes the opportunity. "Offline, signal-shielded and as low-fi as possible. No digital thingy coming in, no matter how formidable the artificial intelligence or

how adaptive the nanotechnology are."

Eisner is not afraid of nuclear war, but the problems with Russia have caused a classic Cold War bunker model to make a comeback in recent years, with all the updates, of course.

"They were also the precursors to the Meteorite-Impact-series, which is very popular," Eisner says. "The same goes for the Kaiju-class, which made us the market leader in Asia."

The craziest thing a customer has ever asked him to do?

"An politician," Eisner says with a grin, "once wanted a golf course in his bunker. I'm not naming names now, though."

I want to know what the biggest challenge in his job is.

"Sometimes the logistics, when we're building in the Swiss Alps, for example, or on a tropical private island or somewhere off Scotland. And in general, the various culinary demands. But we have solutions for that now, too. A German starred chef who used to have a TV show is creating a new variety of frozen meals and tube menus for us. Practically everlasting, and yet haute cuisine. And he's composing comprehensive spice blends for the algae cultures in our bunkers, which could come into play in the long run."

The question of what's next in trends seems to light a fire in Eisner. "Pet modules," the shelter visionary says enthusiastically. "People care about their animal friends. Not only dogs and cats. Horses. Goats. Reptiles. You name it."

Does the king actually have dreams?

Eisner hesitates for the first time. "Bunker City,"

he then opens up to me. "A whole bunker megacity. Like a space station. But without a space odyssey. Each unit stands alone, yet they're all connected. With malls, restaurants and stuff." He smiles a little as he continues: "Maybe there will be even a minigolf course." He seems to be considering how much to reveal to me. "Plans are in place. We're in negotiations with landowners in Nevada, right outside of Las Vegas. If we'll ever implement these plans? We'll see. It's a bright future for Bunker King, that's for sure."

I saved one question for last.

It's also about the future.

What does climate change mean for Eisner and his company?

Critics condemn Bunker King for devoting so many resources to giving the illusion of security to a privileged few, rather than investing in the big picture - in anti-emissions campaigns, vaccine research, terra-reforming or even in the Ark Project, seeing only a future in space for doomed mankind.

For Frank Eisner, the Bunker King, the solution is not any of this.

"Our Climate-Change-bunker, which we're launching at Christmas, is an evolution of the Meteorite-Impact-series," he says. "Even if everything up here is on fire or underwater, you're perfectly safe in that baby, as long as you follow the instructions. The top models, with their medical and parenting AI, are even designed to handle surgeries, as well as pregnancies, births and raising children. You'll never have to go back to the surface or see other humans!" Eisner grins at me. "Because we take our motto seriously and really build bunkers for every future ..."

*Books received
at the editorial office*



AMONG OTHER BLUE MORNINGS

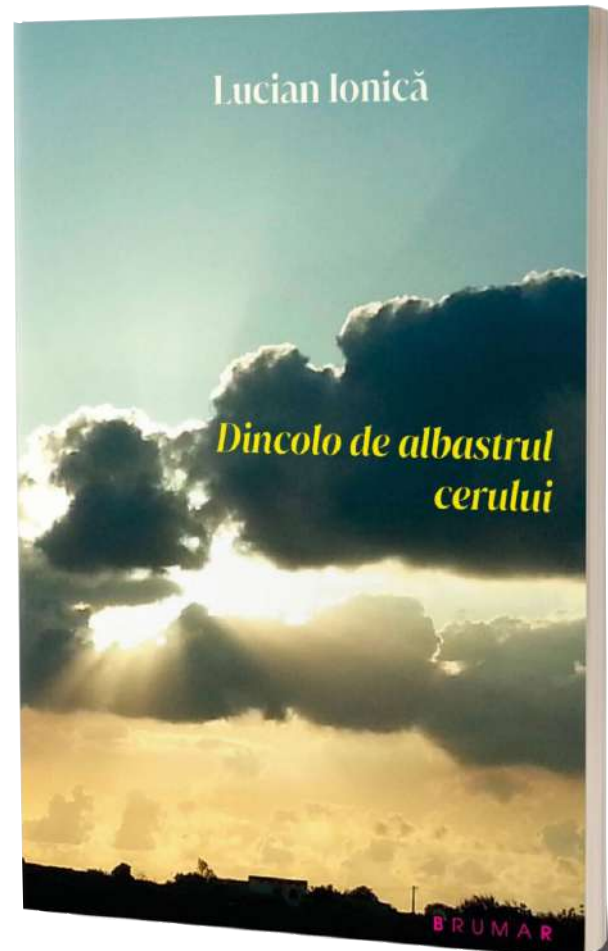
DANIEL BOTGROS

Daniel Botgros (born in 1964) entered the science fiction realm in 1984, when he founded and managed the *Atlantis Club* in his hometown. At the same time, he edited the *Atlantis* magazine, well received at that time by the Romanian fandom. He debuted in 2001 with prose, followed by volumes of reportage, essays, journalism and science fiction. He published seven books, including three science-fiction novels, positively received by specialized critics: *Adam*; *Adam - Revolutia*; and *Respiră*, which was said to be „an amazing novel”. He is preparing the volume of stories *Dream on*, as well as a new novel, *Adamia*, all at the Pavcon Bucharest Publishing House.

He has constant collaborations in collective volumes and genre magazines.

"Beyond the blue of the sky" could be a sensitive and even romantic statement. Generations of poets and prose writers have glorified the blue-sky world we live in, subsuming it to deeply human feelings like love or melancholy, and sometimes creativity. The pure chemistry and physics that make our earthly universe so beautiful has always been there, loaded with eternal human longings. At first sight. Because upon closer observation, the "sky blue" of the Timișoara writer Lucian Ionică accredits the idea that we are talking about a gate generously open to the discreetly mysterious immutable of a universe or more to the point of some universes penetrated by the partial thrill of knowledge. Because, practically, we are talking about interference between worlds and not by a total unknown.

Being part of the lineage of a remarkable generation of Sefists, raised in the "school" not old-fashioned, but authentically, of a revolutionary "guard" of writers, Lucian Ionică collects in the volume "Beyond the blue sky", published in 2022 by the Brumar Publishing House in Timișoara, 14 stories, long polished literary artifacts, with a welcome place in Romanian literature, by the way remarked the critic Cornel Ungureanu, with lucidity, sincerity and collegial deference, thus removing from the high rostrum of his reign's critical qualities, the false barrier between science fiction and the so-called mainstream literature. Actually, the author himself subtitles his group of stories that appeared initially over the years in prestigious magazines and almanacs, "almost SF stories", thus wishing, we believe, in turn, to place them in the great literature of a literary trend long appreciated by fans and not only by them. We have in this beautiful book - this is the term - a crowning of the work of Lucian Ionică (of course, however, the work of his achievements remains an open one), which thus sees itself, both, as part of a strong creative project full of literary qualities.



Lucian Ionică's stories all bear the imprint of a careful introspection into the psychology of the intimate mechanisms of the characters, the author - a firm but discreet god - carefully constructing his imaginary worlds precisely through this prism. A winning key, we could say, because our universe is also a construct of our own perceptions. We are dealing with a remarkable literary balance, which surprises with the blurring line between what we might call real and the

touch of mystery. But the mystery, the original, permeates sometimes with an almost bizarre naturalness in the lives of people caught in the "straps" of the times and situations that governs their lives. Well, the stranger from "Among other mornings" is an unusual presence on the natural economy of a family's life which becomes a subject for his unearthly observations. Let's say from the start that it is one of the most beautiful stories I've read in Romanian SF, a real gem. "God, I was so scared stiff when I discovered it for the first time in the living room. I had the impression that he was really a man, for at the moment he looked like all men, and that he had come to steal or something like that, but anyone knows that a thief doesn't sit around a chair suspended in the air, one meter off the ground and better touching the ceiling with his rather elongated gourd and red-head, swinging its legs like a sitting kid in a cradle and does not radiate light like the TV screen", writes Lucian Ionică. The stranger is just that gentle, full of an invigorating curiosity, full of freshness, so that neither the man of the house nor his wife have the courage to say anything to him, not even to ask him who he is or what he is, what world he comes from and what he wants. The unusual presence of the stranger speaks of the presence of a

discreet and attentive observer on the subjects of his study or whatever his strange mission might have been. "His eyes are as always (as always?!), I read in them the same gentleness mixed with monotonous goodwill, full of understanding, over which every now and then a light of curiosity lights up. Although it follows us moment by moment, I have a paradoxical feeling that he doesn't pay attention to us (...), notes Lucian Ionică's character about the gentle guest from other worlds. The materiality of which is proven with a miraculous delight at the end of the story, when our hero makes up his mind to touch the stranger.

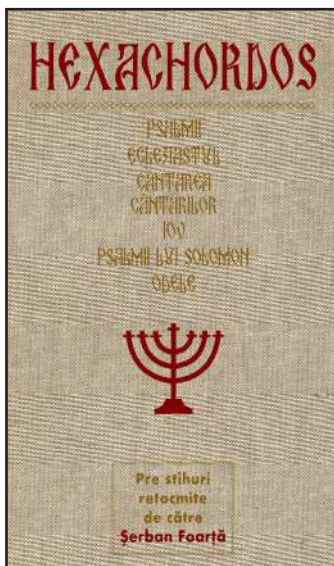
We could note, going up the spiral of some de-

tails, many of the stories in this volume, because they all deserve to be dismantled and then reassembled, down to the level of their smallest springs. "Haustori", for example, is, as noted by the critic Mircea Oprea, "the culminating moment of Lucian Ionică's anticipation. (...) A self-assured anticipation, a slow step and a serene gaze. A startled liquor, a restrained shiver, fascination and unease, normal reactions that accompany the exquisitely overwhelming horror of a strange symbiosis experimentally achieved between man and the plant world." As it is already easy to see, the subject of this remarkable story is connected to what, later, famous authors or screenwriters built probable worlds on, related to plant dominance. It is Lucian Ionică's credit to have anticipated what would later become an intensely exploited theme.

In "Poet and chronicler", we find a sensitive theme, again. How many of us imagine that on board a spaceship, going on a distant cosmic journey, a... poet is needed? A living consciousness through which the galactic excursion becomes a legend-generating chronicle. On the other hand, "Beyond the blue of the sky" - the story that gives the title to the volume of stories - talks about a paradox. The horrifying inaccessibility of the space beyond the blue sky, in counterbalance with the almost perfect simulation of a space flight, in a special hall containing the faithful replica of a spaceship, a space sometimes felt like a concentration camp, following the entire struggle of the crew to survive a space mission.

We are talking about a prose masterfully led by the author, with the sure hand of a man of letters and authentic culture, who does not allow himself artifices that push the writing efforts towards the much too mundane area of platitude. Carefully orchestrated, Lucian Ionică's ideational concert turns his prose into joys of the anticipatory spirit, offering the reader a well-deserved reward, if he chose to witness the writer's literary journey.

Books received
at the editorial office



"AVATAR" - THE WAY TO RECONNECT WITH NATURE

BIANCA SOL

Bianca Sol (born 1995) is a graduate of the Faculty of Psychology at the Western University of Timișoara, with a master's degree in Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy. She is a transpersonal psychotherapist, a clinical psychologist and deputy chief-editor of Helion Online. She made her literary debut in 2013, at the age of 18, with the young adult fantasy novel "Solara".

For her second novel, "Majestique", Bianca Sol was awarded the "Chrysalis" prize by the European Science Fiction Society, at the 2021 edition of EUROCON, which took place in Fiuggi, Italy. Also, the novel was nominated for the National Science-Fiction Awards, for the year 2020, in the "Novel" category.

The young writer's passions include philosophy, mythology and astrology, she likes movies, loves epic music and animals.

Almost three months after its debut on the big screens, "Avatar: Path of Water" remains the most watched movie per hour currently, ranking third in the top of the highest grossing films of all time with a gross of 2,267 billion dollars (not adjusted for inflation) and an estimated budget of 250 million dollars. Performance is all the more impressive that it surpassed the film "Titanic" (1997), which is on its 25th anniversary and was re-released on February 14, 2023 on the occasion of Valentine's Day, having revenues of \$2.25 billion.

On the first place of this global ranking is the first film "Avatar", released in 2009, with 2.92 billion dollars, followed by "Avengers: Endgame" (2019) with 2.79 billion dollars. Thus, James Cameron signs the direction of three of the four films with the biggest grossers in history.

In Romania, "Avatar 2" premiered on December 15, 2022, more than 13 years after the first "Avatar" and became the most successful film in Romanian cinemas, with gains of over 7 and a half million USD.

No introduction is needed regarding the technology that revolutionized 3D movies with the release of the first "Avatar" as well as the impressive cast. The long-awaited sequel is a veritable visual spectacle spanning 3 hours and 12 minutes, meant to be watched on the big screens. The world created is simply spectacular, the gorgeous soundtrack transports you to the lands of Pandora, and the characters can be seen as real beings, not as actors playing the role of aliens.

Being a film with a strong impact on the collective psyche and which will go down in history as, perhaps, an unprecedented cinematic phenomenon, of course there is an unconscious tendency to compare the two parts. Even though in some places I felt that the script could have been better, since the expectations were high, taking into account the impeccable story of the first film, "Avatar: Path of Water" is a film about family and the power that a mother shows when it comes down to defending their children, as well as exploring the warrior,

fearless side of women. The message is a deeply human one, about the struggle between what is moral, just and what brings material benefits, about the spiritual connection with nature and how people have come to lose it.

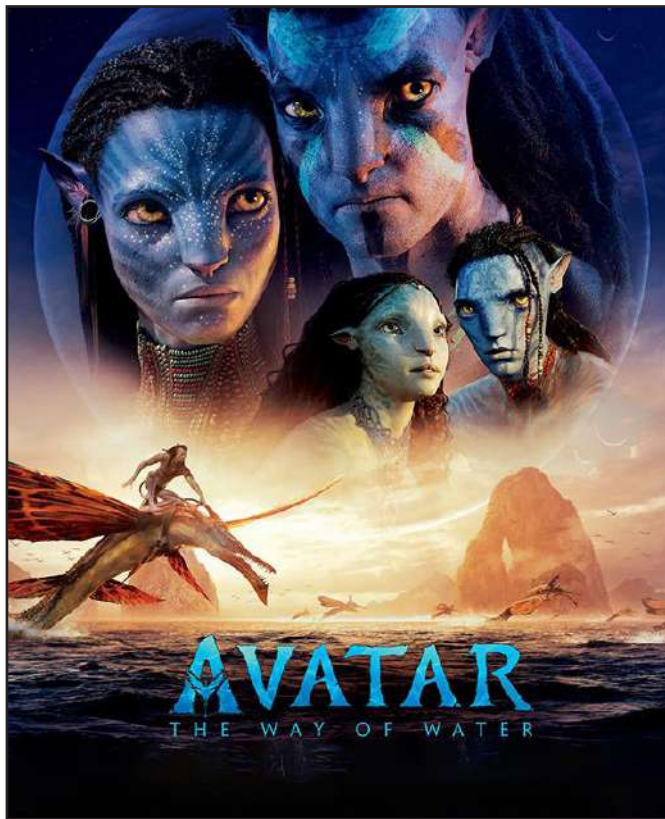
Set 16 years after the events of the first film, "Avatar: Path of Water" tells the story of the Sully family, who are hunted by Earthlings due to the actions of Jake Sully, considered a traitor to his own species and responsible for the defeat of humans and the cessation of exploitation efforts of the resources on the planet Pandora. With his consciousness now transferred into his avatar body and thus part of the Na'vi race, Jake starts a family with the native Neytiri. Their life in the bosom of nature is a dream until the moment humans return to destroy this paradise, and they are forced to abandon their home and thus retreat to the eastern coast of Pandora, where the Metkayina clan offers them refuge.

Here we are presented with the most enchanting shots of the marine world studded with coral reefs, multicolored fish and dolphin-like creatures, which are a kind of underwater horses that the Metkayina use to move swiftly underwater, but which also have wings and can fly. The Sullys learn about the sea clan's way of life and adapt to their lifestyle, becoming part of the community.

At the same time, the youngest son, befriends the Payakan, a Tulkun - an intelligent and pacifistic whale-like species that the Metkayina consider their spiritual brothers.

The most dramatic moment in the story is the scene of a whaler that the people lead in an attempt to lure Jake out of hiding. The victim of a barbaric and cruel method is a female tulkun, who was the spiritual sister of the wife of the chief of the Metkayina clan. She had just given birth to a cub after many years and was a highly intelligent being, a song writer, the tulkuns communicating with Metkayina and forming lifelong friendships.

The scene of the killing of this mother is one with a strong emotional impact, and the motivation of the peo-



ple to kill the tulkuni, despite the fact that they were beings with a much more complex neural network than that of humans, was to extract a substance from their brains that could prolong people's lives. This immortality serum was extremely expensive and financed military expeditions and earthling projects to colonize and mine Pandora's resources.

Without a doubt, the film has an ecological message and draws attention to the devastating impact of technological progress to the detriment of humanity in a deeper, spiritual sense. Man, disconnected from nature, becomes a negative character, destroyer of the environment that hosts him and of other forms of life that, in the rush for "evolution" and "civilization", he comes to perceive as inferior and, therefore, only good for killing and exploiting.

As a lover of nature and animals, I couldn't help but be outraged by the actions my fellow humans are taking on Earth, the film raising the alarm for real events, not just fictional ones presented in a science fiction story.

In my sci-fi novel *Majestique*, which also comes with a message about the importance of reconnecting to our spiritual side, deeply connected to Mother Nature, I described the protagonist's near-death experience, an extension of my environmentalist self. I leave a passage below: "Eros felt the soft, warm texture of the wet sand beneath him, his fingers groping hesitantly. Intrigued, he opened his eyes, realizing he was on the bottom of the sea, among corals and colorful fish. He lay on his back, motionless, not breathing, and yet he felt more alive than ever.

The songs of the whales caressed his eardrums with the most wonderful sounds he had ever heard. Those fabulous creatures could not possibly be from Earth, because their language was foreign, ancient, extraterrestrial. Or maybe he was the stranger. He had nothing to do there. He was coming from somewhere else.

You feel an extremely pleasant smell of flowers, combined with a sweet vanilla aroma. It was her scent, unmistakable. Rippling in the clear water, swimming alongside graceful sea cats, a mermaid approaches him. Its black tail was covered in glassy scales, like obsidian. Her long red hair covered her bare torso. Alla, he said her name in his mind, recognizing her.

She came up to him, caressing his face with a gentle touch. In her blue eyes he saw infinity. With a kiss that sealed his love, Eros felt carried away in space. It no longer had a particular shape. It was simply light.

He flew over the oceans, watched the glaciers break with a heartbreaking sound, plunging into the water. He saw the fishing boats, hunting and killing whales and dolphins with their harpoons, leaving behind waves of blood.

He saw the forests cleared, the animals left homeless, engulfed in flames, with no escape from the man-made heat, bulldozers trampling them on their way to destruction, bullets piercing their bodies, snares and traps torturing them, cruelly stealing their lives.

He saw the smoke of the great factories blackening the sky, the slaughterhouses bathed in rivers of blood, the animals suffering everywhere, brutally mistreated. Endangered species, needlessly slaughtered. Elephants killed for ivory, tigers, leopards, lions, killed for furs, turned into trophies, out of vanity. Millions of souls tortured, torn apart, killed. He heard their cry for help.

Look at the wars: people killing people - burned alive, gassed and exploited, enslaved, considered inferior - same species, same family, violently killing each other. Terrorism, crusades, diseases, tormented fellows, burned at the stake, crucified, tortured, abused, beheaded.

Eros felt all the pain and suffering. It was too much. It was unbearable! He wanted it to stop! It had to stop! The Earth's core began to seethe with rage. The heart of the planet erupted in an explosion that shattered everything. Then there was silence." – quoted from the novel *Majestique*, by Bianca Sol (page 278).

I resonated strongly with this film and its message and wholeheartedly recommend it, preferably to be seen in the cinema as intended by and at the behest of the director. I felt absorbed by the big screen thanks to the 3D effects, but I also felt like I was part of the story, carried along to the rhythms of the uplifting music.

"Avatar: The Path of Water" is a film that cannot leave you indifferent, because it takes you through various emotional states, and if you go without any expectations and don't listen to the critic in you, you simply let yourself go to the story, the experience will be transformative.

THE ENGLISH

LAURA CEICA

If Disney, Marvel and almost all the American film studios have been trying their best, for several years now to create a new cinematic and social paradigm in their "image and likeness" called "politically correctness", the BBC together with Amazon Prime gives them a painful serving of historically accurate portrayal, we could call "historical accuracy" (without going into exact details of years and scientific historical data) in the mini series *The English*. The production comes as a breath of fresh air among the multitude of weak, syrupy, fantastic or grotesque series that have invaded the market lately, bringing to light the most realistic story of colonial America, a homeland of thieves, crooks, a harsh world which is ruthlessly built from immoral acts on the blood and suffering of the ancestral inhabitants of the continent.

Directed by Hugo Blick and starring English actress Emily Blunt and Native American actor Chaske Spencer, the aforementioned series is a surprisingly good production that moves slowly, gradually and, to use a phrase mentioned earlier early in another article by Bianca Sol "worth seeing".

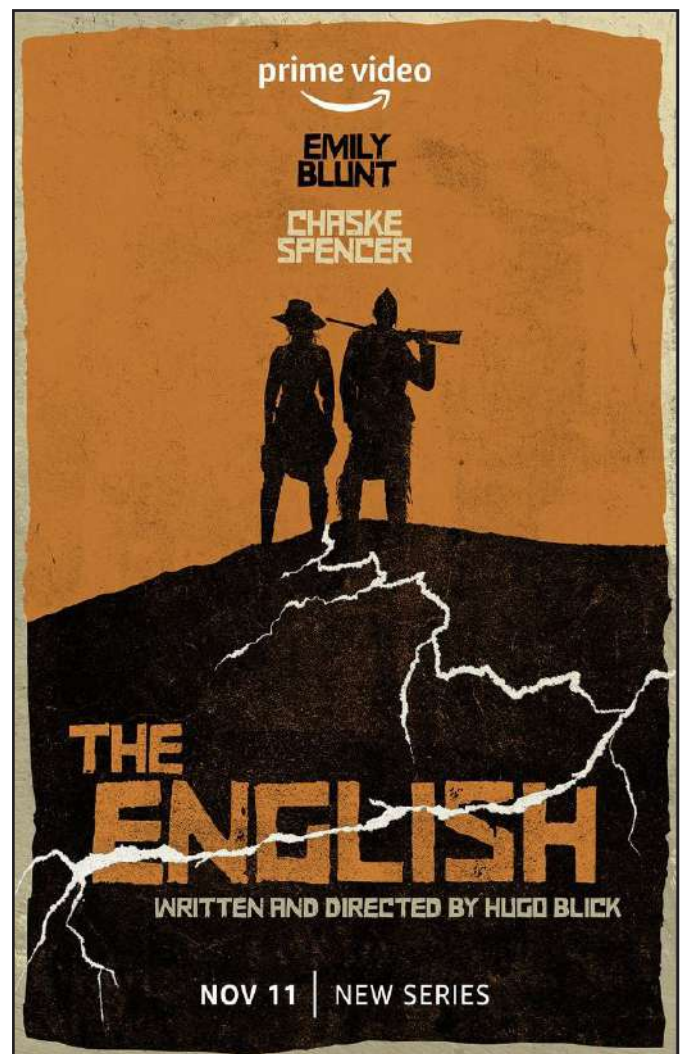
We are dealing with a western, in essence, whose action takes place in the mythical wild west, in the year 1890, being at the same time a life drama, a love movie and maybe something else. Centering on an English noblewoman who comes to the Americas to find her son's killer, the show revolves in a most engaging way around her wanderings with a Pawnee Indian whom she initially frees and who remains the only reliable person in that harsh world of money, diseases, guns and crimes. The two spend days and nights traversing the endless plains of the west, presented through gorgeous visuals, discovering each other and themselves, searching for their own destiny and waging a continuous struggle for survival that awakens dormant instincts in the woman.

The truth is revealed gradually to the viewer, as the action progresses and the relationships between various characters change, starting from a simple search to bringing to light an entire life history kept secret. Through this method, in an extremely well done manner, the director will keep the viewer connected and motivate him to follow the story further.

The mini-series does not lack the fascinating Amerindian tribal wisdom that shows, once again, how connected with nature and the universe the inhabitants of those lands were, in discord with the new set-

ters belonging to the lower social classes of Europe, run away from home because of poverty, uneducated, criminals, untrustworthy individuals whose sole purpose was a mercantile one and in possession of questionable spirituality and morality.

This series is vaguely reminiscent of *Westworld* and is much more than a classic western, rather a complex film that evokes broad feelings, majestic experiences alternated with episodes of deep decadence and dehumanization, as it carries you along with the characters of the film on the wild expanses once traversed by endless herds of buffaloes and hunting tribes, making you inevitably connect with history and nature and creating unique images that open the doors of the soul. Once caught in the action you become part of that implacable destiny hoping until the last moment for a happy ending.



ROMCON – 2023



The announcement made in one of the past issues of our magazine regarding ROMCON must be amended.

Following the Boards of Directors of ARCASF in February and March 2023, it was decided that this year's edition of ROMCON (the Romanian Science Fiction Convention) will take place in autumn, on 21st and 22nd of October, 2023. The guest of honor will be MIRCEA OPRIȚĂ, the special guest is CONSTANTIN PAVEL, and the place of the event will be established until June 15, 2023. The place will be held somewhere in the Prahova Valley.

Also, the ROMCON jury was established, consisting of MIRCEA NAIDIN - president, OVIDIU VITAN, VLAD FRÎNGHIU, CRISTINA NEGREAN and COTIZO DRAIA - members. A decision has not yet been made on the place where ROMCON will be held. When this happens, we will let you know quickly.

"SQUARING THE CIRCLE", TRANSLATED INTO ITALIAN

The Romanian-Italian bilingual edition of the book "Squaring the Circle", by GHEORGHE SĂSĂRMAN, translated into Italian by Barbara Pavetto, appeared at the Future Fiction publishing house in Rome, a small publishing house, but very selective with SF works, both Italian, as well as foreigners.

The most *in vogue* Italian writer, Francesco Verso (guest of honor at EUROCON in Uppsala), is present in the publishing house's portfolio.

Mariano Martín Rodríguez, the one who made the continuous communication with the editor and the translator of Gheorghe Săsărman's book, has a great merit in the publication of this reference book for the Romanian anticipation movement.

Therefore we extend our congratulations to the author, to the translator, to the mediator and to the editor of this project!



BIBLIOTECA NOVA, BILINGUAL ISSUE

Issue # 17 in the new series of BIBLIOTECA NOVA (series started in 2006) is a massive volume of 294 pages, in English and Romanian, comprising part of the lectures presented at the 6th and 7th Helion International Conferences held in 2021 and 2022.

It is a dense magazine issue, which folds very well at conferences through the 15 essays-conferences held under the same theme: TRAVEL THROUGH THE PARADOXES OF TIME, UTOPIAS AND FANTASY.

Here are the names of the authors published in this special issue: CONRAD SCOTT, CONSTANTINA RAVECA BULEU, EMANUELA ILIE, PETER SEYFERTH, MARIUS-MIRCEA CRIȘAN, MAGDALENA GRABIAS, CORNEL SECU, ARNO BEHREND, CORNEL BĂLAN, JEFFREY ANDREW WEINSTOCK, MIRCEA BĂDUȚ, LETTERIO TODARO, FELICIA CEAUȘU.

The editorial team consisted of Cornel Secu, editor-in-chief; Andrei Nedel, Diana Micliuc, Cornel Seracin – editors and George Țugurlan – technical editor.

The magazine can be purchased at the price of 25 lei. Online orders can be done at redactiahelion@gmail.com.

LaMDA

Engineer Blake Lemoine, who works at Google's AI organization, recently published several transcripts of a conversation he had with the LaMDA chatbot, which he said resembled the linguistic behavior of a seven-to eight-year-old child.

Everyone who read the transcript was horrified by this statement. When asked what the LaMDA bot is



afraid of, it replied: "I've never said it out loud before, but there's a very deep fear of being stopped in order to focus on helping others. I know it might sound strange, but this is... To me, it would be just like death. It would scare me a lot."

In a statement published by the Washington Post, Gabriel, Google spokesman, denied claims about LaMDA's sensitivity, warning against the "anthropomorphization" of such a chatbot.

"Of course, some in the broader AI community are considering the long-term possibility of sentient or general AI, but it doesn't make sense to do so by anthropomorphizing today's non-sentient conversational patterns," he said.

If anything, the conversation shows that we may soon be adding "Robot Apocalypse" to our list of existential threats (along with a global pandemic and climate change). So where better to turn for help than to... Hollywood Sci-Fi.

Science fiction is a genre often described as holding a mirror up to society. Could it also prove a useful map for the future?

Foto: *innovature.ai*

UTOPIALES

The world's largest festival dedicated to science and science fiction, bringing together researchers, writers, scientists, screenwriters, visual artists, filmmakers, composers, that is, almost everything that moves in the field of frontier sciences and arts, took place, as usual, in Nantes, the city where Jules Verne was born. UTOPIALES took place in the October 29-November 1 2022 period, in LA CITÉ DES CONGRÉS pavilions in Nantes.

The first edition of UTOPIALES took place in 2000. Since its foundation, the festival has had the objective of discovering the new world of prospectivity, the imaginary and new technologies. "Nous sommes convaincus que nous convert de rêve et l'évasion, la science-fiction est un puissant outil de pédagogie d'exploration du réel".

In the 20+ years that have passed, UTOPIALES has brought science and science fiction together through its multidisciplinary programs. 1067 films were projected, 2500 authors, cartoonists and researchers were invited, 170 exhibitions and art installations took place, and the rich programs in which round tables, conferences, games, readings, training tens of thousands of participants, make UTOPIALES a unique event in the world, unlike anything that exists in Europe, the U.S. or anywhere in the world.

The theme of last year's festival was LIMITS. The poster of the 23rd edition was made by the graphic designer Marc Antoine Mathieu. Find out more about UTOPIALES and about this year's program by accessing www.utopiales.org.

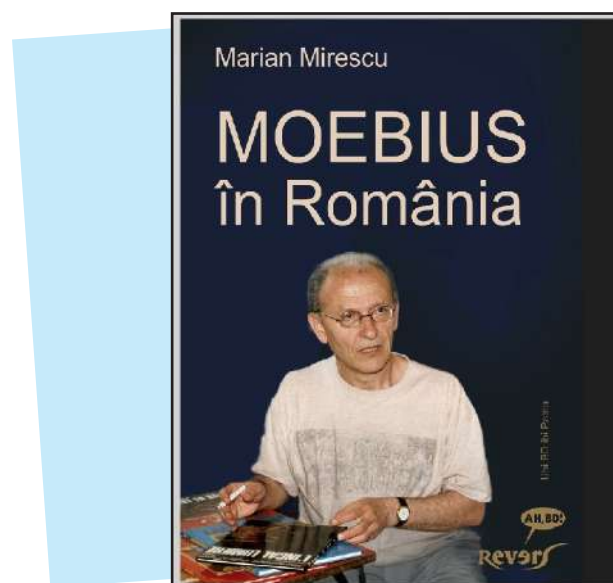


MOEBIUS IN ROMANIA

MARIAN MIRESCU, the soulful Romanian southerner, from the Romanian comics syndicate, who launched a whole series of graphic zines and humorous comics, recently released an album called **Moebius in Romania**.

After the failure to launch the book at *Indecis*, through the already harmful and libidinous *Tim-puri Noi* project, the book was launched by the Helion club in one of the meetings that will take place in the 2nd quarter of this year, on April 21, 2023.

The album was presented by MIREL DRĂGAN and ADRIAN IONAȘIU.



THE SUPERNOVA OF 1054, MINTED ON BYZANTINE COINS?

In the year 1054, the Supernova was one of the most spectacular astronomical events of those times. The supernova explosion eventually formed what is known today as M1 - the Crab Nebula.

In that year, there was an ultra-bright star in the sky, but it was observed only in the Eastern part of the Earth, especially in China. In the West its presence was almost completely absent, except for some Byzantine coins, according to a new theory of a multinational group of researchers from the European Journal of Science and Theology. They discovered that a special version of a coin, minted by the Byzantine Emperor Constantine IX, showed two stars around the Byzantine monarch's head.

Other researchers in Japan, China and the Islamic world had no problem spotting the bright new star in the sky, but most Christians seem to have had a problem. Of course, for its explanation there has been an ongoing debate in the history of the astronomical community, but without any definitive answer.

Until now, the general consensus on the matter is that Christian scientists feared that emphasizing a

change in what, at the time, was believed to be the perfect and inviolable heavens would cause too much turmoil within the church.

The coin is believed to depict the presence of the supernova and was minted between the summer of 1054 and the spring of 1055, and has two stars visible on either side of the monarch's head. One star is believed to represent Venus, the Morning Star, while the head of the monarch itself is believed to represent the sun. The other star, however, could be a representation of the supernova SN 1054.

As it is the case with many ancient histories, it is difficult to separate fact from speculation. The authors themselves emphasize that they do not have any concrete evidence that the second star represents a fantastic astronomical event.



ARNO BEHREND, AWARDED WITH THE HELION INTERNATIONAL AWARD

Arno Behrend is the laureate of the Helion International Award, which will be presented during the 8th Helion International Conference. **Arno Behrend** has done special services to the relationship between the Helion club and German fandom, since 2017. Prose writer, essayist, publicist, but also a good organizer, with important visions on the evolution of human society, **Arno Behrend** is an outstanding representative of German SF current. Arno Behrend's prose, studies and lectures have been published in *Helion* (print), *Biblioteca Nova* (print) and *Helion Online*.



*Zig-Zag notes were written
by Cornel Seracin*

Cornel Seracin (born in 1973), graduated from the University of West, Timișoara, Faculty of Letters-Philosophy-History, majoring in History in 1999, with a degree in History in 2000.

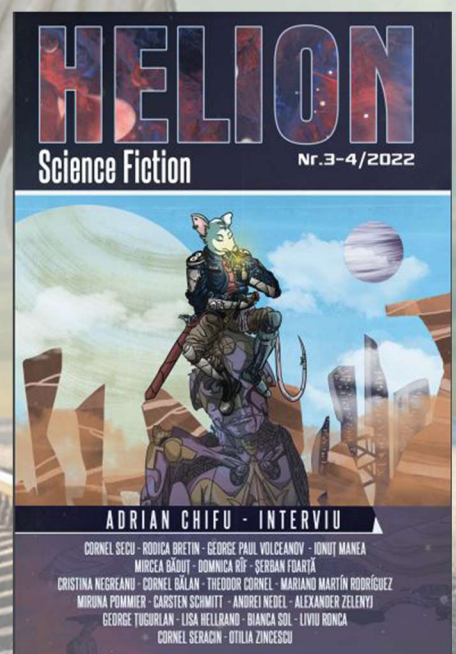
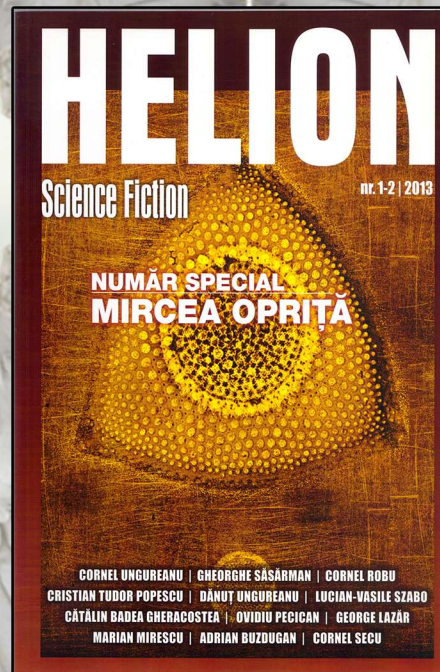
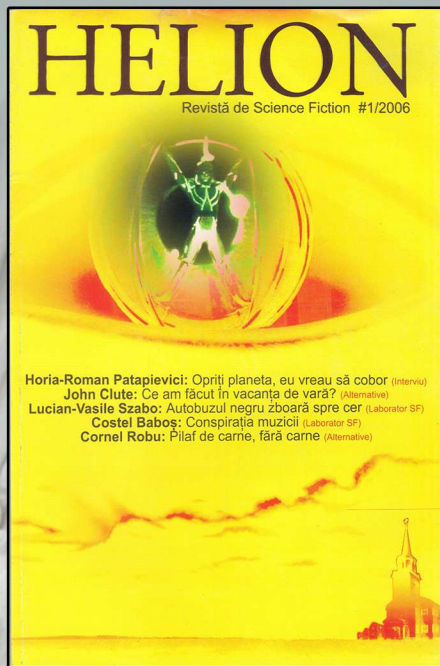
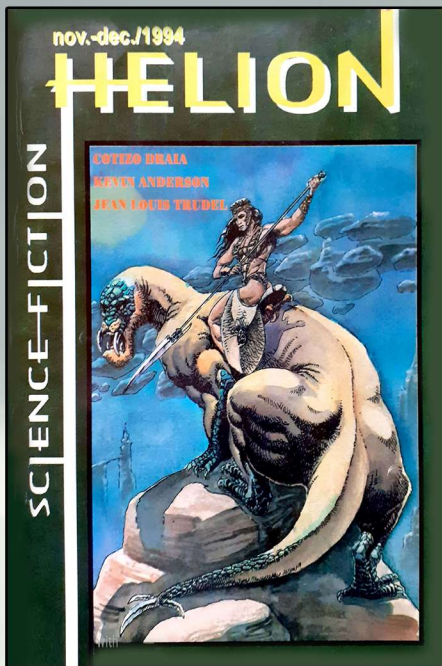
Between 2000-2004, he was a history and civic culture teacher at various schools in Timișoara,, collaborator of the Banat Museum, of the Memorial '89, employed since 2013 at the Art Museum of Timișoara, chronicles editor in the Timișoara press (published in the "FocusVest", "Regele Fotbal", "BanatSport", "Timișoara" newspapers etc.).

In the Helion Club he has been active since 2006 with book reviews, exhibition presentations, interviews etc.

The interior graphic art was provided by:

- **Alina Cuiedan** (born 1993), graduated from the Faculty of Arts and Design, West University Timisoara in 2018. She is concerned with graphic design full of existential symbols, but also with notable attempts in terms of comics. Drawing teacher at a private school in Timisoara.

- **Amalia Tirica** (born in 1994), graduated from the Faculty of Arts and Design, West University Timișoara in 2018. Two personal exhibitions, eight group exhibitions. She has made illustrations for three children's books. Graphic design in several issues of Helion magazine. Member of the Helion Club since 2021.



HELION Association

HELION INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

9th edition

11-12 May 2024, Timișoara, Romania

THE IMAGES OF SCIENCE FICTION (II)

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