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A PREVIEW

Andrew Biscontini

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A New Texture book preview

Wyatt Doyle, Editor

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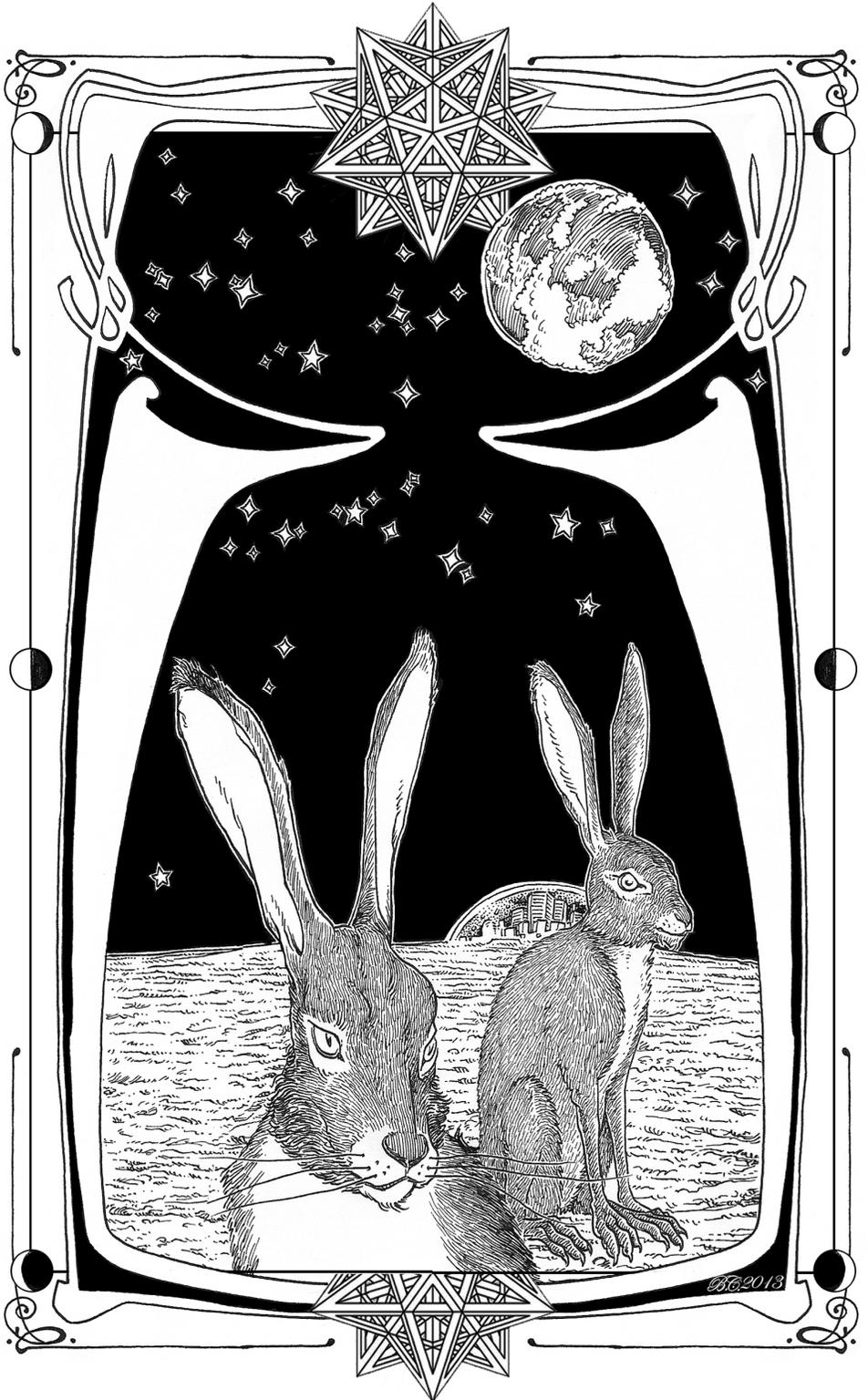
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it is the early 26th century, and for thirty years a fragile truce has held on the moon.

Control of the moon's once-sovereign colonies and charter cities has been consolidated into a single monolithic Colony under the Colonial Authority, the holding company that controls every aspect of the planetary economy through its myriad subsidiary institutions.

Within the Colony, opposition to the CA among the native born Moonborn population has been nearly constant and often violent. But the production of air and water is dependent on CA industries and technology, and uprisings have been crushed again and again.

On the planet, more and more individuals are opting to have cognitive-differential chips installed in their brains. "Cogs," as they're called, partition the consciousness into "facets," allowing people to simultaneously run numerous professional and recreational applications within their minds simultaneously.

It is an era of fantastic wealth and appalling squalor, and the tenuous balance between them is beginning to slip.

THE ORPHEUS PIT picks up with Harvey Sinclair Park, a Colonel-Regent attached to Colonial Authority Research and Development (CARD). Heretofore a beneficiary of the CA's largesse, soon to discover just how fleeting such favor can be....

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5. THE ORPHEUS PIT

although his CARD liaison duties required periodic travel to the Colony, Colonel Regent Harvey Sinclair Park's job had always been officially classified as planetary. As hard as he'd worked to attain and maintain that status, he only realized the extent to which he'd come to take it for granted when he received word that he'd been reassigned to a permanent position at CARD Galilaei, and would henceforth be classified as Colonial.

The news came directly over his official cog facet. Absent any of the charm and spin he'd built a career on, it simply appeared in his mind as an indisputable fact while his body was swimming laps in the underground pool at his chalet in the Tatra Mountains of Slovakia. He'd purchased the chalet a year ago and spent the next eight months renovating and decorating it with salvaged Second Expansion-era antiques and fixtures brought back from the Colony. In the four months since completing the renovations, he'd spent a total of nine nights there, and thrown only one party.

As he climbed out of the pool, he sent word over his cog for the staff to leave. He wanted the place to himself for the hours before he was scheduled to depart so that he could record the memories of being alone in it in his cog.

He padded barefoot through the tiled corridors and luminously plastered rooms under glowing mosaic ceilings, adorned with his

impressive collection of art and objects. All of it was immaculate, and it was all he had to show for the eighteen years spent navigating the arcane hierarchy of the Colonial Authority, sacrificing family and any real friendships, and he was not likely to ever set foot in it again. Once you were classified as Colonial that was it. You didn't come back.

He'd seen it happen to so many of the men and women he'd recruited into CARD. It was the aspect of his job he found most distasteful. For the most part, he served as an agent between powerful subsidiary corporations and universities, research institutions and individuals at the top of their fields, brokering generous employment contracts and enjoying the generous commissions and perquisites offered by parties on both sides to gain his favor. Those recruited to the Galilaei complex were the unfortunate second tier: brilliant and talented enough to be desired but not savvy enough to maintain control of their employment contracts. Sometimes the best, often the brightest, nonetheless doomed.

As fabulous as his inaugural chalet party had been, he knew that there would be many more, equally fabulous, in his absence. The costs of its purchase and renovation had been underwritten by CA banks; now that he was Colonial, stewardship of the property reverted to them in his absence. They could do whatever they wanted with it.

Growing up as the son of a mid-level subsidiary distribution manager and a municipal apparatchik, he had seen his parents relocated mercilessly, often separated for years at a time as dictated by the ever-shifting trade agreements and industrial development projects of the CA. Even as a young boy he'd recognized that the Colonial Authority was always the entity to benefit from the macroeconomic tumult that had so buffeted his family. Since he could remember, he'd been determined to earn an administrative post within it, imagining that by aligning himself with power he'd find the stability denied his parents.

By the end of his first year internship he'd come to realize that the inner workings of the Authority resembled nothing so much as a bloodsport conducted on quicksand, in which the combatants maneuvered and manipulated and clawed and fought for the opportunity to sink deeper in. The privileges attending those depths were considerable and undeniable; pulling oneself out of the mire was not an option. The only question was how much of you would be

left exposed to the elements, and how richly you would be enveloped by the tides below the surface.

Acknowledging that he lacked the ruthlessness necessary to compete in the executive track, he established himself as a fixer and a provider, facilitating, massaging and finessing the ruthlessness of others. He proved adept enough at it to enter the Regency and earn the rank of Colonel, affording him an exceptional level of the comfort and stability he'd sought. At a certain level, he'd always known it was an illusion. Several of his colleagues had been designated Colonial over the years, some as casualties of the kinds of internal rivalries he'd so adeptly navigated, others seemingly without reason, a consequence of their name being cross-referenced by the wrong entities in the wrong database at the wrong time. Bad luck by statistics.

He'd dedicated so much cog space to recording the details and spatial arrangements he'd so carefully assembled that he didn't notice the time passing. The next thing he knew he was staring out the window of a Bee flyer on his way to the regional CA headquarters in Bratislava, muddy fields dotted with the first sprouts of the season rolling away below him in the dawn.

THE Bee touched down on the landing deck of the Bratislava CA tower next to an ominous-looking mirror-clad combat Wasp, which was to take him directly to the Colony. He didn't relish spending the next seventy-two hours in a cramped ordinance bay with barely enough room to turn a somersault. To make matters worse, his sole companions for the journey were a pair of Cyclopes.

The Cyclopes were his least favorite of CARD's military applications: cybernetic-organic hybrids designed to function as riot police, prison guards and shock troops in the Colony. They numbered in the thousands, all controlled centrally by an AI network at the Icarus-Daedelus complex on the Far Side, where their bodies were grown in vats and integrated with tech components. They sustained themselves on battery power and a nutrient paste they excreted, which they periodically sucked through a straw with wide, flaccid mouths lined with small dull vestigial teeth. They resembled gigantic babies in bondage gear, with a single convex panoptic lens on their forehead. They moved with a lumbering gait but were surprisingly fast and agile (most of their organic matter was augmented muscle), effectively mute but for a speaker embedded in their thorax which

occasionally issued terse information in the inhuman voice of the controlling AI. They smelled like raw meat and plastic.

Once they left the stratosphere and cleared the junk belt, rising above the slowly spinning lights of distant Skywheels, his official cog facet opened into a secure virtual conference space. It was on a Colonial cog net, which, like everything in the Colony, seemed so much cheaper and seedier than the higher-bandwidth, higher-end planetary nets, reminding him that the only place the opulence of the Second Expansion still existed was in historical sims and the reconstructive efforts of collectors like himself.

Waiting in the virtual space was Brigadier General Iskinder Nshombo, commander-in-chief of the Colonial armed forces, a compact, wiry man with the fine features and deep black skin of old African aristocracy. The military's involvement did little to ease his mind as to whatever it was he was being relocated to the Colony to do. The personal presence of so high-ranking a personage, even as a virtual avatar, only exacerbated his unease.

Also in the space, depicted as a 2-dimensional screen projection since she didn't have a cog, was the Sister Doctor. She glared at him with an expression of what he took to be smug retribution. Clearly she'd been informed that he would be joining her as a resident at Galilaei. It was difficult for him to look her in the eye, even as a projection in virtual space. Not because she blamed him for her situation (he understood why she did, but didn't consider it entirely fair; he was only the messenger, after all, and had simply made an effort to put the best possible spin on things) but because it was clear by her face that the madness of the Galilaei complex was already well on its way to ruining her mind. He wondered how long it would be until his own sanity eroded.

The Brigadier General began without ceremony: "Over the last eight months, a broadcast signal has been intercepted all over the moon. It is a kind of music, but its distribution pattern is far wider than any other Moonborn media ever tracked."

As he spoke, a graphical map of lunar population centers appeared between them, highlighting Moonborn populations in blue. Interceptions of the broadcast were denoted in red, resulting in a moon-wide dapple of purple. "It has transcended long-standing regional, tribal and ethnic boundaries in a manner not seen since the last period during which the Moonborn Unity was active."

He received a packet describing the Moonborn Unity as a violently anti-planetary terrorist organization, largely dormant for the last three decades.

“Intelligence and Information Services believes that if they are once again active, it could pose a serious threat to the stability and function of the lunar Colony and disrupt the planetary economy to a degree the Board considers unacceptable. IIS is coordinating with municipal law enforcement and Icarus-Daedelus to track down the source of the broadcast.

“Your team at CARD is to conduct an analysis of the signal itself: both the structure of its frequency and its content. Sister Doctor, you and your android will establish a translation of the language within it through your test subject. The third member of your team will establish mathematical models of both signal and content to analyze for possible hidden codes or messages.”

“Quantitative translation of Moonspeak is a dead end,” the Sister Doctor muttered.

“Approximations are acceptable. They will be quantified and analyzed for probability by your third team member, who will also be analyzing the carrier signals for coded frequencies.”

“And who is this third member?” Park ventured.

“Demetrius Wei, currently under contract as Chief Engineer of the Orpheus Project. You are en route to extract him from the site of the Orpheus dig now.”

“This requires personal involvement?” Park had grown accustomed to the Regency’s relaxed attitude toward rank, which was apparently not shared by the military.

“There are unknown variables at the site which may require an adaptive sentient presence. The CARD administrators seem to feel you are qualified for the task. Mission details are downloading to a secure sub-facet now.

“Your team will report directly to my command. IIS will be monitoring the project, and my staff will be at your disposal. Do not hesitate to request additional resources. The CARD AIs have been instructed to leave this communication channel open. Good luck.”

The conference room program closed, returning his official facet to its regular stream of indices, trade statistics and Regency news feeds. Soon, the icon of an encrypted briefing began flashing, indicating that the download was complete. He opened it and learned

only that the man he was brought to the moon to retrieve, Demetrius Wei, was an obscure mathematician whose only listed job history was as an undistinguished staff quant at a backwater Stem, and that he hadn't officially existed for twenty-one years.

IN THE same way that the threat of relocation to the Colony was used to keep planetary administrators in line, the threat of the Orpheus Pit reinforced the status quo among Colonial administrators. It was an infamous bogey that generations of ambitious executives feared being banished to should they run afoul of their superiors, its name spoken in whispers when dared spoken at all. Park was surprised, and more than a little perplexed, to discover that it actually existed, let alone that it was still in progress.

It dated back two hundred years, to the height of the Second Expansion. The idea behind it was pure madness: to use a Namgung engine to tunnel to the center of the moon and build a centrifugal reactor capable of melting the iron core and spinning it at a rate sufficient to generate an electromagnetic field strong enough to maintain an atmosphere under a particle net around the entire moon.

It had been born of the mad enthusiasm for particle nets and the grand plans for surface living that had defined the era of Consolidation. Not only was surface living more marketable to potential emigrants, it was a significant boon for labor control. Atmosphere under the nets was generated through industrial activity, and could be dissipated through the nets at controlled rates. If the population wanted air, they worked for it, effectively putting an end to the strikes, slow-downs and unrest that had so vexed the CA and brought about the end of the First Expansion.

Two hundred and twelve years ago, the Board of Directors had voted in favor of Orpheus. A Namgung Engine two kilometers in diameter was assembled in a cavern below the surface at an undisclosed location deep out in Oceanus Procellarum and set on its relentless descent to the center of the moon, eating away layers of rock, shredding and reordering molecules, ceaselessly shaving it away by micrometers and converting it into air and water to sustain the captive work force that followed it down the helices of tunnel it left in its wake as it re-formed the slag into a downward-spiraling honeycomb of caverns, alcoves and niches.

The initial workforce was comprised of eighteen hundred and

sixty-five conscripted laborers. Over the next two hundred years, it had been overseen by dozens of Chief Engineers, most of whom had no experience in mining, engineering or physics, and received periodic influxes of penal labor, from disobedient administrators to political prisoners deemed too problematic to die unpunished to homicidal psychotics deemed too rare to kill.

The twists and turns of the caves were designed to trap a thirty-kilometer pocket of air generated by the Engine, requiring that the labor population migrate downwards along with it. The dig had progressed to six hundred and eighty-four kilometers, leaving six hundred and fifty-four kilometers of labyrinthine vacuum between them and the vacuum of the surface.

The packet he received contained no data on how large the population of the pit currently was, what kind of society had developed over the centuries of descent, cramped into the caves above the Engine, or what they'd mutated into over the generations. But there was nothing Park could imagine that didn't resemble a hell.

THE entrance to the Orpheus Pit was under a mass-concentrated manhole cover stamped with an obscure, little-used two-hundred-year-old CA logo deep in the wastes of central Procellarum, hidden beneath a thick layer of dust, hundreds of kilometers from the nearest habitat in any direction.

A team of four more Cyclopes awaited them. Park, clad in a military vac suit, watched them clear away the dust and pull open the manhole cover with magnets and heavy chains. Once they'd lowered themselves and their gear into it, he followed them into the uppermost cavern, where the Namgung Engine had first been constructed.

In the middle of the chamber, the re-formed rock floor fell away into a gaping chasm, a wormhole into black oblivion, straight down, all the way to the Engine. According to the schematic in his cog, it was the central exhaust shaft around which the helices of caverns coiled.

A repeller raft was tethered at the edge of it, a four-meter wide square of steel mounted on truss and fitted with gravity-resistors, bobbing gently over the abyss.

The Cyclopes stacked their equipment cases onto the raft. It dipped gently under their weight. For however long it took to extract Wei, Park would be eating and drinking through the tubes

in his helmet, sucking nutrient paste and water stored in canisters mounted at his hip, breathing his recycled exhalations, secretions and excretions filtered molecularly through the M-pack mounted across his shoulder blades. He already felt just a little bit nauseous all the time. He hoped it would pass.

Two Cyclopes stayed above in the chamber. The other four boarded the raft with him. As he stepped off the edge of the rock onto the steel platform and felt it dip under his weight, inching slightly further down into nothingness, he realized that his attitude toward death had become unexpectedly ambivalent. There were myriad scenarios in his immediate future that could lead to slow, horrible ends. Yet in the context of the futility of the rest of his life being spent in the Colony, each could be seen as a potential relief from perpetual discomfort.

And so they descended, sinking soundlessly away from the work lights at the mouth of the cavern, sinking into ink black vacuum. The platform gathered momentum gently, steadying out at a hundred and twenty kilometers per hour.

Once he became acclimated to the sensation of falling, like an unrelenting bad dream, Park tried to find a comfortable position in which to spend the coming hours, only to determine that there wasn't one. He perched on a stack of cases and tried to apportion as much of his awareness out of his physical being and into his cog networks as he could, but it was pointless. The signal was strong through the Cyclopes' relay, but the wailing soundlessness of the pit kept screaming mutely back into his mind, pulling him out of his sims and indexed memories and back into the terrible emptiness of the present, the steady unrolling of the depth gauge, the maddeningly slow progress of the clock and the twisting wraiths of long-dead souls reduced to flares of pure rage and despair passing through him, leaving in their wake terrifying images flashing through the periphery of his visor.

The raft slowed once they were within the range of the air pocket, and one of the Cyclopes began steering it in a wide downward spiral close to the wall of the shaft while another activated the transponder keyed to Wei's ID chip. Through the rock and the interference from the Namgung Engine far below, the closest they could pinpoint his location was within ten kilometers.

The Cyclopes used grappling hooks to pull the raft over to one

side and set charges against the rock. Then they pushed across the shaft to a safe distance and detonated them. Shards of rock and dust rushed silently into the vacuum of the shaft, revealing a jagged, three-foot hole. As they pulled the raft back over to it, Park felt the rush of escaping air pressing against his suit. Three of the Cyclopes climbed through, leaving the fourth aboard the raft to seal the hole with quickfoam behind them, and retrieve them once they were ready to leave. Park followed them through the hole, feet first.

He emerged into a narrow, curving, steeply sloped tunnel. There were pale glo globes strung along the walls, which were thick with strange mold and blistering, gently phosphorescent mushrooms. The light was dim enough not to hurt his eyes after the blackness of the shaft. He opened the visor of his helmet, but the stench was so bad he snapped it shut again. The Cyclopes were standing aimlessly, scanning the corridor back and forth. He realized they were waiting for him to decide which way to go.

The Cyclopes' transponder displayed the same information as his cog. It provided no more useful data than it had in the shaft, indicating only that Wei was somewhere deeper in.

Fifty meters along, the cave branched off into a Y. They followed it to the right, and soon emerged into a cavern nearly thirty meters wide and at least as tall. The walls were covered with mushrooms and mold. Discarded construction material, broken-down machinery, spent hydroponic components and assorted other detritus left behind in the descent was scattered across the floor.

Here, they first encountered denizens of the pit.

They were hardly recognizable as human: small and hairless, with a wiry musculature favoring their calves, a physiognomy disrupted and rendered even more alien by all manner of grotesque tumor, dead-end mutation, mutilation and blistering growths of the same fungi that clung to the walls. The cavern teemed with them.

As Park and the Cyclopes strode into their midst they stopped what they were doing – chewing leaves of pale ivy, copulating, sleeping, fighting; he was careful not to look too closely – and turned their too-large, colorless eyes towards them.

It struck Park as unlikely that any among them might know where to find the Chief Engineer so he kept his helmet sealed and progressed slowly down the slope of the cavern surrounded by the Cyclopes, which had drawn their weapons.

Only one of the things was possessed of the instinct to attack the interlopers; it vaulted itself over a cluster of others and was instantaneously bisected by one of the Cyclopes' particle-beam weapons. Its comrades watched dumbly as its halves hit the ground and came to a tumbling stop, sentient enough to shuffle out of the intruders' way as they continued across the cavern. At the far end, it narrowed and split into three tunnels. The transponder signal remained ambiguous, so he chose the center tube and continued their slow downward spiral.

A kilometer further along, they entered another large cavern. In this one, the trappings of some sort of civilization were significantly more abundant. A network of modular catwalks and scaffolds divided the space vertically, mazelike in a chaos of pipes and ductwork. There were hydroponic grids under banks of artificial daylight and mobile DRE units. The cave dwellers tending them wore crude garments of spun vegetable fiber and simple synthetics. Many of them seemed to be missing limbs, ears or eyes but most of them were less severely physically devolved. They seemed not to notice Park and the heavily armed giants in their midst, keeping their heads down and focusing intently on their tasks.

He attempted to intercept one of them, a female, blocking her path as she pulled a cart of rocks along a catwalk toward one of the DR tanks. She didn't look up, trying in vain to squeeze past the Cyclopes blocking her path. Still unwilling to open his visor, preferring the stale, acrid recycled oxygen molecules to the noxious atmosphere of the pit, he pulled up a file image of Wei on a screen field and put it front of the wretched woman's face. She glanced up, then bowed her head and sank to her knees as if awaiting punishment. At first Park thought she was bowing down to it. Then he realized she had been looking through it, at the imposing figures suddenly standing behind him.

One of the Cyclopes kept its eye on the little female, but the other two already had their weapons trained on the new arrivals. They were of a distinctly different physiognomy than the others. Proportionately, they looked tall; coiled sinewy muscle under old-fashioned stealth cloaks, smeared head to toe in pale clay. Their faces were angular, soft and less distinct. A pentagram had been drawn across each of their foreheads in black soot. They carried brutal and fearsome composite-stone weapons.

Park tilted the screen projection of Wei so they could see it.

Their expressions remained unchanged. They simply turned and walked away. He watched them, perplexed. Ten meters along, they stopped and looked back at him and he decided to try to follow them.

HE FOLLOWED them down and down and down through the cavern and down again into narrower tunnels where Devolved mined the walls with crude stone chisels, through another industrial cavern and again into the tunnels. In the third cavern they came to, the industrial infrastructure was still under construction. The cave dwellers toiled under the watchful eyes of invisible, stealth-cloaked Overseers. Among the laborers he didn't see a single human, which made him wonder what happened to all the planetaries sentenced to the pit.

What was it that kept these things alive? Beyond simple sustenance, what was it that animated them? These caves offered neither pleasure nor comfort nor hope for better. Could it be called life at all? It was existence of its basest, most animal sort.

He followed them through a seemingly endless series of such nightmare caverns and tunnels. He was increasingly aware of the vibrations in the rock under his feet, getting stronger as they travelled deeper, closer to the Engine, and he was beginning to experience the unpleasant sensation of field interference in his cog. He was still connected to the Cyclopes' relay, but there were troubling moments when he was unable to access his own facets, which seemed to be increasing the further he descended into the caves. He stifled his panic and continued on, watching the Cyclopes closely for any sign that their functioning was similarly effected. He saw none. They lumbered along, steady and expressionless.

Three kilometers from their point of entry (having walked three times that, accounting for the many twists and turns), they emerged from a narrow tunnel into a nearly empty cavern, half the size of the largest they'd passed through, with round walls and a high, domed ceiling.

The cave wall had been blasted smooth and was covered floor to ceiling with vast, incomprehensible equations being written, rubbed out, revised and rewritten in chalk by dozens of cave dwellers on a rickety network of scaffolding. As he passed under it, he realized the scaffolds were made of fused bone. These cave dwellers were of yet another type. They were the same size as the Devolved, but

proportioned more akin to the Overseers. They wore ancient coveralls that were too large for them, rolled at the cuffs and emblazoned with the same old CA logo that had been on the entrance cover. They differed from both other Orpheus castes in that many of them had hair, which they wore in oddly braided topknots.

In the center of the floor was a perfectly round hole ten meters wide. Directly above it there was an identical hole through the ceiling; it was one of the exhaust channels that led directly down into the unseen, unknowable, unstoppable Engine.

The light in the chamber came from pale glo globes strung from the scaffolds, which cast a web of shadows across the walls. The air was alive with crackling particle fields. As he stepped out from under the scaffolds and onto the vibrating chamber floor, the Overseer leading them held up her hand for them to stop then continued across the chamber. The others stayed with Park and the Cyclopes.

Park looked up and around the room. The cave dwellers had stopped their writing on the wall and stood at the edge of the scaffolds looking down at him. The interference in his cog had grown worse. His feet and legs ached from the long hike, and his lower back was sore from the weight of the gear on his vac-suit.

Before long, he saw two figures approaching through the crosshatch of shadows filling the chamber. One was a top-knotted cave dweller, the other unmistakably human. It was Demetrius Wei.

He demagnetized his helmet collar and removed it. Immediately, he felt a screaming atomic feedback within his cog chip. He staggered on his feet and his vision went white. It felt as if his mind had been shredded, peeled apart from itself across multiple dimensions. He pressed his palms into his temples and collapsed to his knees. When his vision cleared, there was a ringing in his ears and he could no longer access his facets through his cog. He remembered basic facts about his life, who and where he was, and why. But left suddenly with only his core consciousness he felt strangely empty, incomplete. Buzzing ache filled his mind, emanating from his thalamus.

The air was cold and acrid. His ears filled with the rush of air from the exhaust shaft and the reverberations of the Engine, which oscillated between a high-pitched whine and a static hiss. When his vision cleared he saw Demetrius Wei standing in front of him.

He looked older, of course, but also more intense, as if his being had somehow been seared more deeply into the fabric of the universe.

Looking at him was like looking at a shadow: simultaneously there and not there, an elemental function of light and dark in the shape of a human being. His clothes, a quarter century out of fashion, were worn and mended many times over. He stared at Park through deep-set, pale eyes that blinked but did not move.

“Is she alive?” His voice was a sepulchral rasp, nonetheless perfectly audible through the din of the Engine.

Park stared back at him. He didn’t know what he was talking about. “I...I’m sorry, I...I don’t know what you mean. Is who alive?”

Wei watched him silently.

Harvey Sinclair Park found himself in the unfamiliar position of being at a loss for words. He realized he was somehow frightened of the man standing in front of him, though he didn’t know why. Then he remembered his reason for being there. Without access to his cog, it took him a painfully long time to formulate the sentence. “Demetrius Wei...you’ve been reassigned to the Colonial Authority Research and Development division. My name is Colonel Regent Park and I am here to escort you to the CARD facility at Galilaei.”

He remembered that he’d had a reputation for charm, vaguely aware that such a thing as his charisma existed, but only in an abstract sense, in the same way he remembered images and sensations from the sims stored in his cog. He could not access any of them, and his words sounded flat and empty to his own ears.

Wei wasn’t looking at him. His icy, still eyes gazed past him to the Cyclopes.

“Organic?” he asked.

“Engineered organic, yes,” Park answered, “Hybrids.”

“Mm,” Wei muttered, then turned his attention back to Park.

The motionless madness in his eyes was disconcerting. Park couldn’t meet them.

“How long has it been?”

Park struggled to remember the information from the packet in his cog. “Twenty-some years I think.”

Something like a smile spread across Wei’s chapped, pale lips. The effect was terrifying.

“You’ve had a long journey,” Wei rasped. “You should rest.”

“I...I would prefer to return to the surface as soon as possible.”

The smile widened, accompanied by a silent, still fury in his eyes. His voice remained calm and quiet: “Yes. Yes, of course you

would. But the Engine must be consulted. Please, come with me. Accommodations are being prepared.”

HE AWOKE in darkness. He had slept on a thin straw mat laid out on a stone slab carved into the wall of the small stone cell that served as the dormitory of Wei’s chambers. The straw mat and a clay bowl of distilled water were apparently the sole accommodations to have been prepared. There were a half-dozen sleeping slabs carved into the wall, three others of which were occupied by snoring topknots when he arrived. He slowly activated his glo globe and saw that the other niches were now empty and he was alone.

His body felt even worse than it had before he slept: the aches in his legs, feet and back were now joined by shooting pains in his hips and neck. Access to his cog had not returned. Two thirds of his consciousness was empty. He still knew who he was and why he was in the Orpheus Pit, but everything else was only a concept: he knew that there was a world outside of the Pit, that he had a life in it, but he couldn’t remember what it was like or anything about it, only his nightmare descent through the caverns, the chilling visage and voice of Demetrius Wei, and the incessant rumble of the Engine.

He’d slept in his vac-suit minus the boots, helmet collar, M-pack and supply belt, which sat on the floor next to the slab where he had left them. Judging by the smell and soot-smear appearance of Wei and the cave dwellers, he assumed there were no facilities for bathing in the Pit.

He sat up on the slab, groaning at the new pains accompanying the motion, and pulled on his boots, attached the other components and went looking for Wei.

The Cyclopes stood silently in the vestibule outside the dormitory cell, where he had left them. One stood watch while the others were dormant.

“Where is he?” he asked the one on watch.

The Cyclops turned its red-lensed face toward the door at the opposite end of the vestibule.

“Wake the others,” he said, and started towards the door.

As he approached, he heard the tapping and scratching of chalk. Through the doorway was a chamber twice as large as the dormitory cell, lit by glo globes sitting in cradles carved into the walls. A half dozen top-knotted dwellers were busy writing out equations in chalk

on the wall. He couldn't be certain without access to his cog, but Park didn't think he'd ever seen these notations before.

Demetrius Wei sat on the floor in the middle of the room, watching them. His back was to the door and he didn't react when Park stepped into the chamber, but for some reason Park had the distinct impression that he knew he was there. Long, strange moments passed before he stood and turned to him.

"My savior awakes," he said, followed by a guttural rattle that might have been a laugh. "So, tell me, savior. For what does the Colonial Authority return me to their world?"

Park struggled to remember which aspects of the mission were classified only to realize that he'd forgotten the details of it altogether.

"There's a song..." he said distantly, "and they want to know the meaning of it."

Wei stared at him quizzically.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I've lost access to my cog." He realized the technology didn't come into use until nearly a decade after Wei was banished to the Pit. "It's a networked chip, called a cognitive-differential chip, in my brain. I'm afraid I've used it to store more information than I realized. It seems as though the Engine's fields are disrupting its operation. I'm sure once I return to the surface..." he was talking more to comfort himself than to inform Wei, who didn't seem interested. He had been diligently repressing the fear that his cog might be permanently damaged, that all of the information and aspects of himself stored within it might be lost forever. There was frighteningly little of him left. He knew his name was Harvey Sinclair Park and that he was a CARD Colonel Regent and that he was to retrieve Demetrius Wei, but what did that mean? Beyond that, who was he? "Do you have any belongings to gather? We have a vac-suit for you."

"The Engine must be consulted."

Park remembered him saying the phrase when he arrived. "I don't understand. Aren't you the Chief Engineer? Your contract's been purchased by CARD. You can leave."

The guttural rattle-laugh returned. "This is not the Colony, Colonel-Regent. The Colonial Authority means nothing here. It is nothing more than an insignia on the Engineers' uniforms; so ancient they no longer know it once had meaning. Here there is only the will of the Engine. Here the Engine is God."

Park stood mute, uncomprehending.

“Come with me.”

The only direction he wanted to walk was up toward the repeller raft and back to the surface. But Wei had already left the chamber and stepped into the corridor outside. Park hurried to follow him, calling for the Cyclopes to join them.

“There has not been verbal language in the Pit for generations,” Wei said, leading him down the spiraling corridor, in and out of the pools of light created by the glo globes in the niches carved into the walls. “As the Orpheans evolved, they’ve developed a low-grade telepathy by which they communicate with one another. Even the Devolved possess a rudimentary capacity for it. Like myself. Because I understand mathematics I was accepted among the Engineers.”

He ducked through a low archway carved into the wall. Park followed him and emerged onto a high ridge carved into the rock overlooking one of the busy industrial caverns.

“The Devolved are bred like cattle. They’re harvested as resource by the ones with the star on their forehead. The little ones with the braids are the descendents of the original Engine builders. They interpret the will of the Engine.”

“The Engine is a machine,” Park ventured, “It doesn’t have a will.”

Wei ducked into another narrow passageway cut into the rock, leading him into another moldy, spiraling corridor.

“The Engine shapes their world. It provides them with air, water, energy. It takes their bodies after they die and through its sustenance they are reborn. They see themselves as an extension of the Engine. They do not know it as a machine. They do not know its purpose. Nor do they care. They know only that it creates their world.”

Park found it increasingly difficult to concentrate. Wei’s ravaged voice and the thrumming vibrations of the cavern walls flooded what was left of his conscious mind, filling his synapses, consuming all other thoughts. He glanced over his shoulder from time to time to make sure the Cyclopes were still with them. At first the sight of their three dim red eyes bobbing through the shadows between glo globes was almost reassuring, but it quickly became just another fact, coexisting with the details of the Orpheus civilization coming from Wei.

“Every ten years, the population must descend in order to remain in the habitable zone. All of their apparatus, the DRE units, the

hydroponic systems, the manufactories, all must be disassembled and relocated to the lower, newer caverns, while enough essential work continues to maintain the necessary civic functions.

“The cavern complex is asymmetrical, irregular. The pattern repeats every fifty years, but the average lifespan for an Orphean is thirty years. So it is exceptionally rare that anyone should live to see the same cavern configuration twice. Each time they descend, they must re-establish the infrastructure of their civilization in unfamiliar surroundings.”

They rounded a bend and the corridor opened up onto another ridge overlooking a chamber like the one where Park had first met Wei, with holes in the ceiling and floor and equations covering the walls. It might have been the same cavern, but there was no scaffolding in this one. The floor of the chamber was engraved with arcane symbols around the hole in the center. There were slate fields at certain vertices of the diagram, studied and interfaced with by teams of Engineers. Their topknots were gray and more elaborate than the others, and they wore no clothing at all.

“The Orpheus Engineers possess the knowledge of Namgung’s algorithms, which describe the shapes of the caves being formed below them. They pass it down from generation to generation and plot the progress of the civilization, accounting for population densities, reproductive rates, food production, waste recycling, airflow.

“There are hundreds of points like this throughout the complex, intake and exhaust channels that lead directly to the Engine. By closing off channels to and from these chambers, the Engineers can determine the flow of air through the entire complex. They can control which passages get fresh air and which get exhaust. They know where the water cisterns will form. They can withhold air to regions if they so choose. In that way, they are quite like the Colonial Authority, are they not?”

Park could not think to answer.

He and the Cyclopes followed Wei down a steep, narrow staircase carved into the rock, down to the chamber floor. The sound was different in this chamber, a low resonant hum that penetrated his being.

The task at hand – bringing Wei to Galilaei – was a narrowing thread through Park’s mind, almost forgotten. “We should return...” his voice felt ever weaker and more distant in his chest. He could

barely hear himself.

But Wei's thin rasp remained perfectly audible over the Engine's hum, as if it was coming from inside his eardrums. "The Orpheans believe the vibrations in the rock are the Engine's voice, the particle levels in the air and the shape of the caverns are its will." He stopped and turned, looked into Park's eyes and with an eerie smile said: "They are none of them sane."

They reached the cavern floor and Park saw cloaked Overseers half-visible in the shadows around the periphery of the cavern, still as statues.

The echoes and reverberations of the thrumming buzz created strange harmonics deep in his brain, almost like a chant. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up and he broke out in a cold sweat inside his vac-suit. Eddies of fine dust swirled across the patterns etched into the floor, drifting in the currents of air toward the hole at their center.

He heard Wei say, "You are here to take me from Orpheus," but his lips weren't moving. Nausea pulled his stomach into a twist. The Orpheans at the slate fields seemed to be moving according to some bizarre synchronization.

"The Engine has been consulted," he heard Wei say. "And it will permit me to leave."

Park tried to speak but had no idea if he was saying anything at all.

If he was, Wei did nothing to acknowledge it. "But the Engine demands equilibrium," he said, his pale dark eyes seeming to peer straight through him. "I may leave. But you must stay in my place."

He tried to speak, but his mouth only made a terrible moaning sound, as if emerging from the depths of a nightmare. He struggled to enunciate, stammering and slobbering. "No, I...I can't...I can't stay here...I can't live in this place."

"It is not necessary to," Wei cast his deep-set eyes toward the gaping hole in the floor. "The Engine will accept you."

"No," Park stammered, "No, this is insane."

"Yes," Wei said, a soulless whisper inside his head. "*This is insane.*"

Park stared across the ten meters to the edge of the hole. The Orpheus Pit had become the entirety of his reality; ten meters of reconstituted rock were all that stood between him and the end of his life. The engravings on the floor seemed to draw a runaway track

pointing him directly into it. He turned and looked back at the three Cyclopes. They stared at him impassively. They didn't care if he lived or died. Their directive was to extract Wei from the Pit. He was only there to facilitate the mission. He was only there because the Engine demanded equilibrium...

His mind raced desperately for any reason not to cast himself into the Engine, any sense of hope. But his life outside the Pit was locked in his cog, unreachable, and he could muster no solace. He could live out the rest of his life as a slave in these caverns, or he could surrender it as a repository of oxygen, hydrogen and carbon molecules in tribute to madness and exchange for this stranger's freedom.

He took his first step toward the hole, then stopped and said: "I don't deserve this." It meant nothing, he knew, but he felt it needed to be said.

Wei's expression was not cruel, but bore no trace of anything like sympathy. "No one deserves anything here," his hollow voice merged with the resonant thrum and static hiss, "There is only the will of the Engine."

He took another step.

"You should remove your vacuum suit," Wei said, "This intake portal is for organic material only."

He obligingly removed the components, then pulled back the Velcro flaps and opened the zippers, letting the outer shell collapse to the floor as he stepped out of it and peeled himself out of the undersuit.

He took another step and was engulfed in an overwhelming and unexpected feeling of love for everyone and everything he'd ever known. But even though he loved them with every fiber of his being, he couldn't remember any of them. He tried to remember moments, parents, siblings, friends, but he couldn't. He tried to remember the sound of his mother's voice, but he couldn't.

With each step, he became more aware of his body, the strangeness of its weight in the lunar gravity, the soft frailty of it, which was now the totality of his being, naked and alone, a morsel of fodder for a forsaken act of grandiose madness.

The naked Engineers did not look from their slate fields as he passed.

At the edge of the chasm, shredding static drowned out

everything else and he didn't feel his body anymore, as if there was nothing of him left. Only once did he question what he was doing, in the fleeting half-second as his weight shifted beyond the point of no return and his bowels voided themselves did he wish that he could take everything back, do everything again, without a cog, without the Colonial Authority. But that would have been a different life, in a different world, perhaps the next.

WEI watched the man disappear below the rim of the portal, then climbed out of the ragged clothes he'd worn for the last twenty-three years and stepped into the underlayer of Park's vac-suit. There was a suit of his own waiting for him, but he relished the symbolism of stepping into the dead man's clothes.

It had taken so little effort to convince the Colonel-Regent to do himself in. The Orpheans indeed believed themselves to be interpreters of the Engine's will, but neither they nor the Engine cared if he stayed in the Pit or not.

His skin tingled as the nanofibers of the undersuit penetrated his pores and lower orifices. The smart bacteria instantly began devouring the crust of filth on his skin, and he felt cleaner than he'd been in decades.

He approached the Cyclopes and nodded to indicate he was prepared to ascend, wondering that it should be so easy to exact his revenge on the rest of the Colonial Authority.

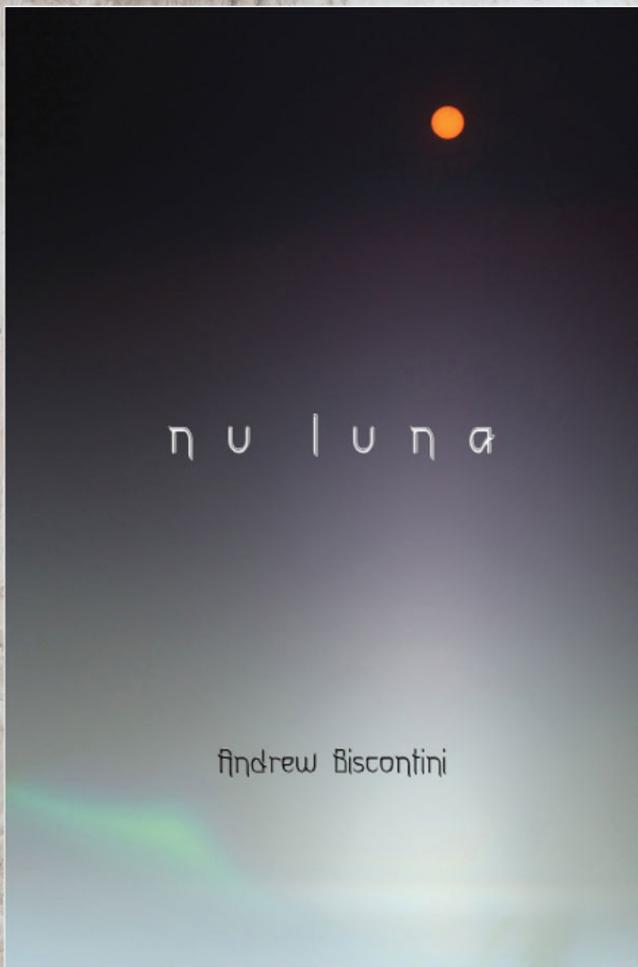
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Robert Heinlein, *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, et al

Mission of Burma, “Weatherbox”

Chris Bunch, Allan Cole (writers), Robert C. Dille (characters)
Buck Rogers in the 25th Century Season 1: “Space Rockers”
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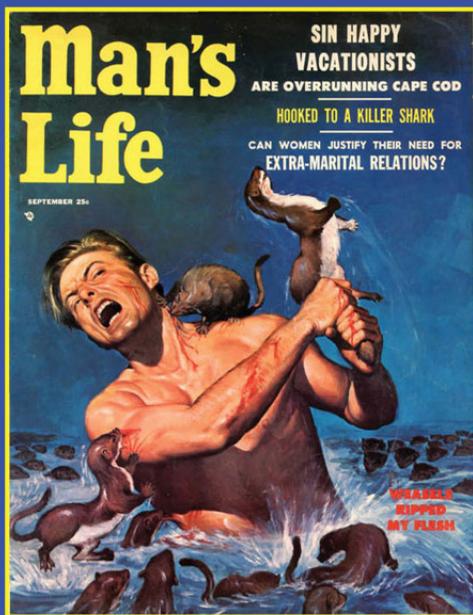
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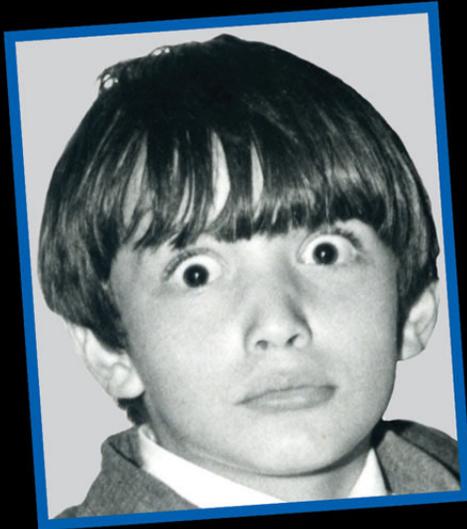
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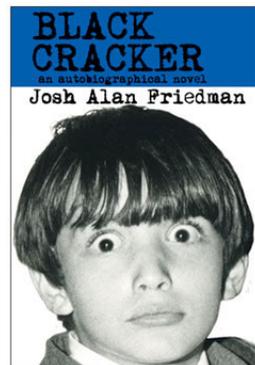
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Heavy Traffic.

"You know Sonny Rollins?"

"Sure."

"You know *about* him?"

"Not too much."

"Well, all through the '50s he had a pretty successful career going, but something inside was telling him he should give up all those good gigs and go play on his own, out in public; that he should go play on the bridge. So that's what he did. He went out and played on the bridge. He was on that bridge for three years! Then he returned to performing as a professional, and you know what his first record was when he came back?"

"What?"

"The Bridge."

from "Last of the Mohicans,"

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**Stories from
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and streets.**

**"The poet laureate of
public transportation."**

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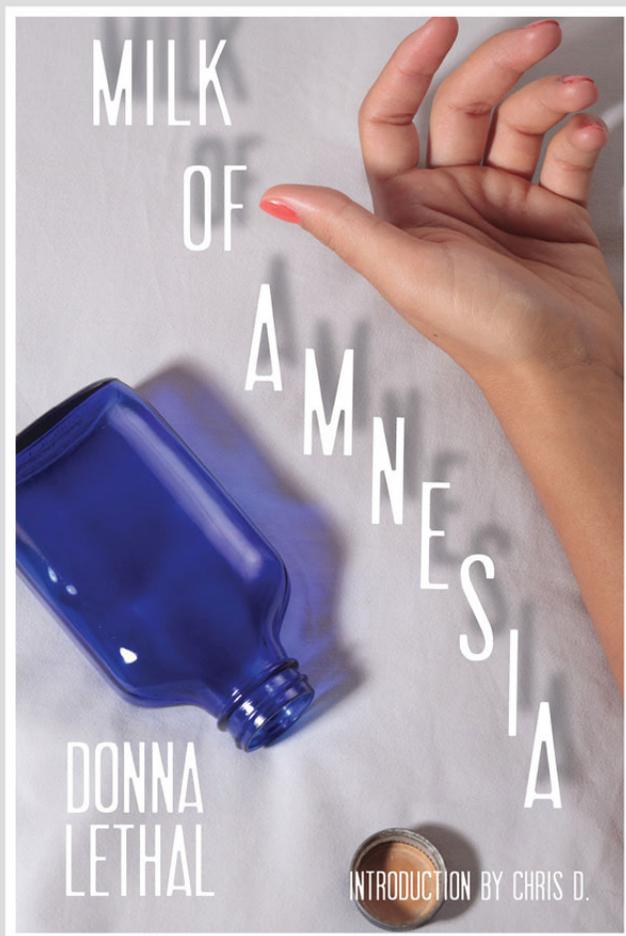
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"THERE WAS A BAR called the Colonial near Whipple Street, long gone now. Well, Eddie O'Brien was in there playing pool one day, and two guys came in and started a fight with him. 'You do that, you're gonna wanna kill me,' O'Brien told them. He had started drinking again after a long time being sober. They didn't listen, and one of them hit him in the head with a pool cue. 'Kill me now!' he said. But they didn't.



"He got up and walked out the door. The bartender told them, 'You guys are gonna wish you did.' An hour later he came back, and the guys are there playing pool. 'Bet you wished you killed me,' O'Brien said, and blew a hole right between the eyes of one of them. His brains were all over the bar. The other guy lived, because he only got him in the shoulder. O'Brien walked outside, down to the river, and jumped in. They were looking for him for days before they found his body."

"A trip. Maybe the funniest 'my family is fucked' memoir I've ever read."

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Milk of Amnesia by Donna Lethal

Introduction by Chris D.

cover design: Amber Sexton

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I THINK ANYONE WHO HAS GROWN FAMILIAR ENOUGH WITH A PLACE CAN RECOGNIZE A SIMILAR FEELING, OF MOVING NOT THROUGH THE NEIGHBORHOOD, BUT THROUGH A MAP IN ONE'S MIND. You see yourself not walking toward home, but imagine yourself from above, walking toward Manhattan, the East River. You see yourself in relation to everything else around you. You imagine streets lined and squaring off the entire neighborhood. You must walk within a constricted set of lines. This is precisely the point. You know where you are all the time. You carry that map tattooed on your mind, unable to lose it.”

ERIC REYMOND

**VOLUMES OF
WORLDS: ESSAYS
ON BROOKLYN,
KANSAS
AND BEYOND**

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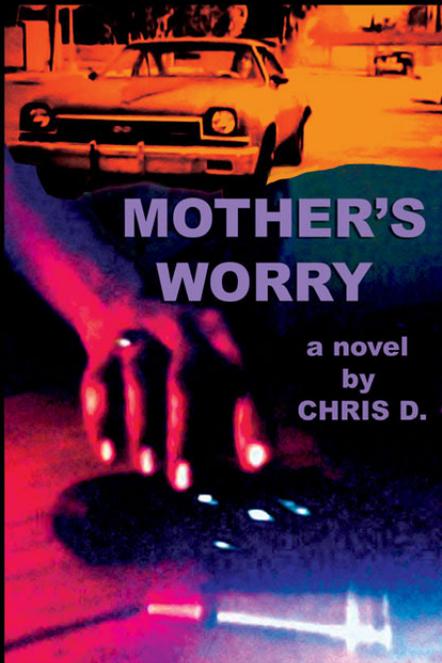


"Chris D. ably traces out the contours of human torment in a manner recalling American films of the 1970s."

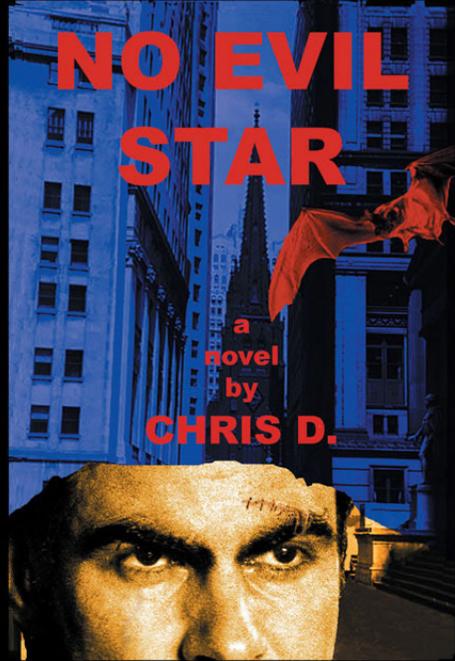
— Grace Krilanovich, author of
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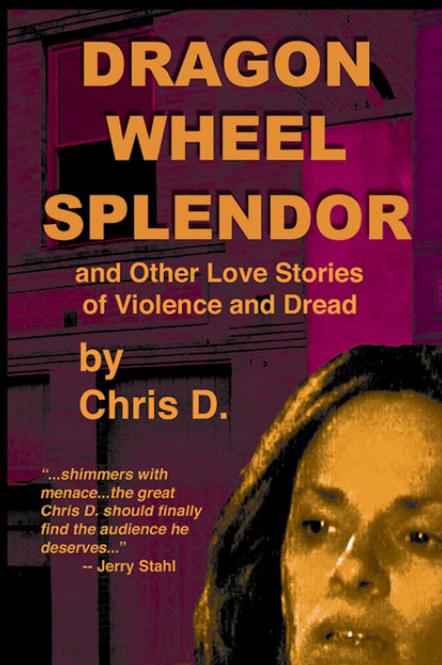
It's a hell of a long way from San Diego to Georgia, especially when you're traveling the way I was. And it's a pretty even bet you're not going to get anybody to stop and pick you up when you look like you've just gotten out of the slammer. Which is how I looked, my thumb stuck out in the sweltering July heat when it might as well have been up my ass...



There was the phhtt! of the silencer and then a muffled thud as another body hit the grimy floorboards. Life was trickling out. Dave suddenly saw flames being extinguished all over the world. Countless little teardrops of fire going out at the slightest breeze. That's what he was - a fireman. Putting out fires wherever he was needed. That's all he was good for, and he was not the kind of man to let his one remaining talent go to waste...

"...seems to shimmer with menace... a book that can kill the voices in your head—or make you love them."

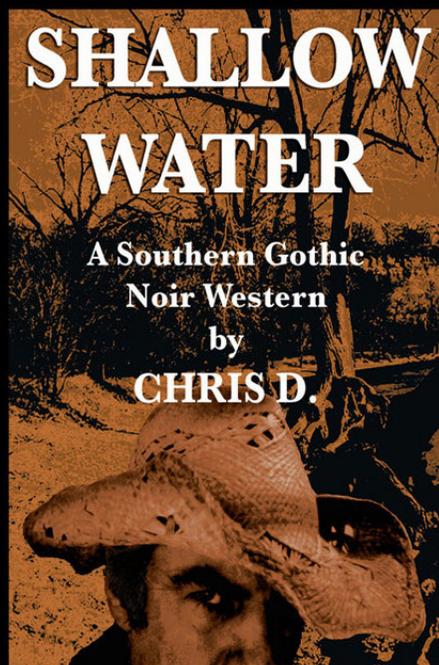
— Jerry Stahl, author of *PLAINCLOTHES NAKED*, *PAINKILLERS* and *PERMANENT MIDNIGHT*



"They tried the same thing with me, just the two of them. I'm lucky they didn't bring any of their other stoner buddies along, because I wasn't going down without a fight. And I had this." May took a very long Mexican switchblade out of the rear pocket of her black jeans and flicked it open...

"One sinister serpent of a story, an old Republic Pictures western serial scripted by James M. Cain and reimagined by Sam Peckinpah."

— Eddie Muller, author of *THE DISTANCE* and *SHADOW BOXER*

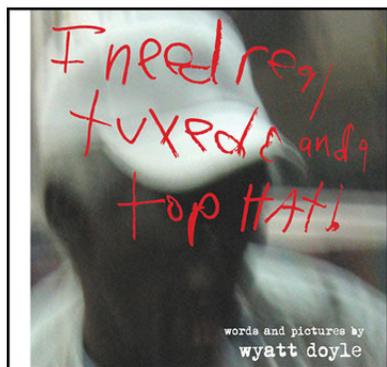


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FOR THE END
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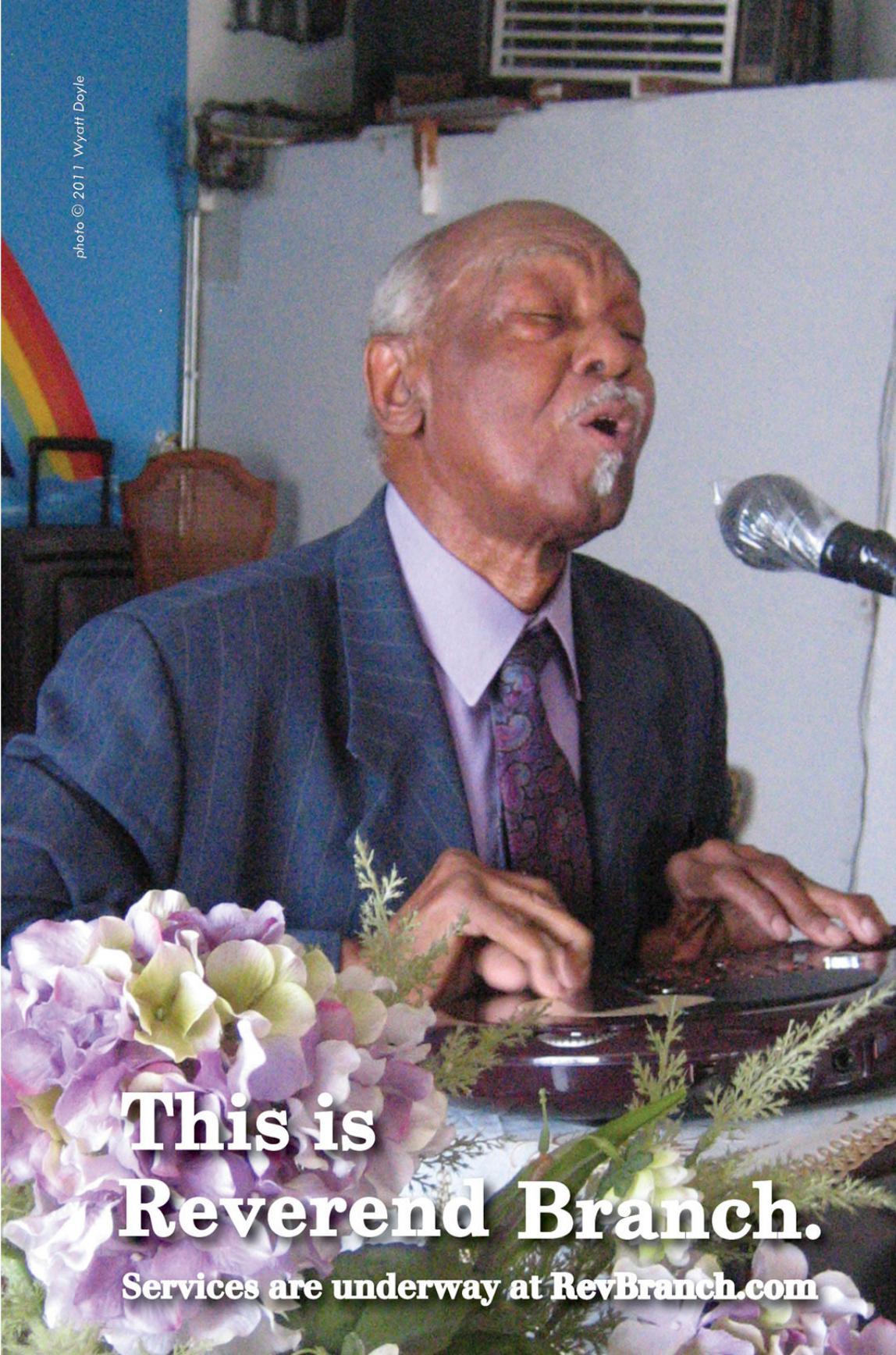
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tuxedo and a
top HAT!



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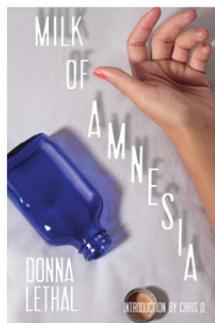
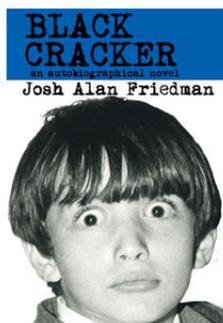
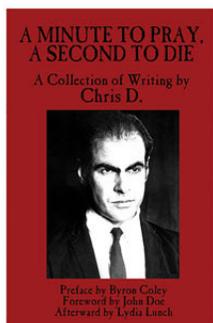


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