

spacecraftprojects

we are all astronauts

transmissions
howard schwartz

THE LAST ANIMAL TO ENTER THE ARK

The last animal to enter the ark was the one that watched all the others. Its eyes would appear out of nowhere, in the space between sails, in the clouds, or inside the doorway of a darkened room.

Noah thought the eyes were those of a giant. Ham believed they were those of a demon who had escaped from a mirror. Shem was certain they were the eyes of the beast that loomed above his bed, intent on devouring all memory of dreams.

The last animal to enter the ark took a last look at the world as the clouds turned black and split open, rain beating on the roof, waters rising, those left behind pounding on the door of the ark, and he whispered the prayer for the dead.

A PLAY

I agree to play a part in a play my son has written, even though I've never acted before. There's some debate over whether we should perform with scripts in hand. But just as the play is about to begin, we discover that the scripts are missing. We search everywhere, but it turns out there are no scripts and we would have to improvise, and that the play has already begun.

THE BARBARIANS

During the night they hide themselves in the library. No one, they have learned from long experience, suspects their presence there. In vain their hands repeat what was imprinted at the time of their first notable appearance on the planet. Since then their numbers have steadily decreased, and for thousands of years they have only managed to slow their extinction. Still, they know nothing of this success, for their primal law never permits them an instant of contentment. Nor are they aware of the other libraries filled nightly with the gesturing of their brothers, for all communication broke down centuries ago, and each group believes themselves the last. And invariably the night itself is spent too soon, for at the first evidence of dawn, always unexpected, they rush outside, searching for forests that no longer exist.

DEATH DISPLAY

The Polish consulate has chosen my grandmother's body to help demonstrate the impact of Polish funeral music--I am indignant when I read about it in the papers. I visit the display, and take my turn after a man who departs in tears. As I walk to the front it seems her head is tilted, and I think I see her scratch. Rushing closer, I find her eyes open: when I ask she admits she is not dead. In great excitement I pick her up and smuggle her home. There, to her attentive grandchildren, she explains the rigors of hoarding food and keeping a straight face, so that people could become unhappy and understand death. But the secret is too good to keep; before long the news is out that she is alive, and there are mixed reactions. At first the public is happy, and the hospital even donates her old bed, but slowly complaints come in from irate taxpayers who feel they have been cheated. But we are just happy to have her back.

A SHORT HISTORY OF NETS

The ancient nets were woven at night and unraveled before dawn. It is said that a poet was the first to experience their effects. His habit of sleepwalking ended in an unexpected confrontation with a net, and the shock so deprived him of his courage that he chose to tell stories instead.

For generations this hazard threatened those who dared move about at night. Then, during a dream, one old man discovered the secret of these nightly weavers, and not long after their practice was forbidden. It is well known that this edict resulted in the only recorded capture of a netmaker, but this only turned their efforts toward the creation of secret nets woven out of wind or water, so that trapped men did not know what held them back.

Only now can we recognize in those secret nets the seeds of revenge that have become apparent in our own age, for already the boundary between day and night has been blurred, and the sun does not set--it vanishes before we reach the window. A small loss perhaps; one that is no longer noticed. In any case, who would link it to the ancient art of netmaking, so long extinct?

FADING ON THE PAGE

After a drawing by Philip Meyer

This face is all that's left of an old man, fading on the page as he drifts into the unknown. By now he should be searching the stars for any hint of the world to come. Instead, he's still looking back, despite the warnings, at the world he left behind. It's hard to know who he was. His sadness is all that remains. Nothing else is known, not even his name.

THE DEMONS UNDER THE STOVE

In memory of Isaac Bashevis Singer

He spent his childhood listening in to the stories told in his father's court. There were stories of Lilith and her demonic daughters, who sought to trap unsuspecting men; stories about demons and spirits who were to found everywhere. There he learned how to sweep out the goblins from under the bed and the demons from under the stove. Even after the world of his fathers had disappeared, wandering spirits sought him out to tell their stories. Only he could bring them back to life in one of his tales. The last reports tell how the demons finally succeeded in stealing his memory, while his hand kept writing out of habit but without a pen.

FEEDING THE HUNGRY

On that planet there is very little to eat, and a great struggle takes place between those awake and those asleep. Those awake are the ones who have not eaten, while those who have eaten are the ones asleep. Of course, those who have not eaten spend their days in search of food, but unlike other planets, where cannibalism is not uncommon, these starving creatures never resort to that option, for to eat one of those awake would transform them into one of those asleep; in fact, to change places with one of those asleep, who would then wake up. As their only defense, those asleep have the power to change their size and shape, while those who are hungry chase after them, no matter what their size or shape. For sooner or later they must have something to eat.

THE LAST DAY

One day, when I walked outside, the wooden railing on the porch was covered with a red powder like rust. The trees and bushes, the fences and all the roads, were covered as well. The world was rusting away. When I looked up, the sky was filled with many suns. While I watched, one by one they burned out. The day grew darker, unforgiving. I walked out into the red shadow, looking up one last time. The light was lost far above the trees, the moon receding into the distance, growing faint.

GATES TO THE OLD CITY

All I can remember is this: I was condemned to crawl on my hands and knees for one mile to the gates of the Old City. I accepted my sentence. I was only worried about my hands, unaccustomed to this kind of labor. At dawn, the day of reckoning, rain began to fall. Soon three or four inches of rainwater washed over my feet. I said to myself: the rain is just another curse. It was time to begin to crawl. I fell to my hands and knees and pushed away the water in disgust—that's how I found myself floating in it. There was exactly enough. In this way I crossed to the other side like a turtle, swimming through the open gates as the divine rain continued to fall.

COSMOLOGIES

Some say a wing of light set forth on the first day.

Some say a handful of vessels broke open, filling the universe with stars,
each one a sun in itself.

Some say a long breath, a breathing in and out ever so slowly, brings worlds
into being and makes them disappear