

**BOTS,  
COME!**



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# Scimitar

Don't know how much longer I'll still have my head. Been havin' some 'dangerous' thoughts of late. Never should have let the bots begin designing themselves. Folks thought they'd just extend the basic human body shape. What could be better? Turns out, a lot of things. Borrowings from nature by humans barely ever scratched the surface. They like climbing walls, I guess. Wheeling over walking—flying over either.

Used to be only a sultan could order a chop. Grand old days. Always feared the sultan when he rode out of the palace dressed in yellow silks. Blue, you were safe, but if he rode out in yellow, some lowly—or even not so lowly—soul was gonna... Think that palace went down in an earthquake. Could fit ten Versailles inside. Piracy brought in your workers. Ransom them when possible. Otherwise, worked on another palace, garden, or the wall.

Yeah, but the Scimitar Program for Domestication of Violence. Used to be able to work out the revenge, even if it took generations. Now? You get violent, you get dead. No excuses, no reprieves. Nowhere safe. Sometimes, in some back of beyond village where you'd think you were out of reach, someone would try it. Try to pop some enemy, somebody who'd insulted you, someone who'd slept with your wife. Scimitar appeared and off went the head. Nice clean slice every time. Quickest form, the guillotine. Think the bots would find something that just knocked you to your knees. No. Head drops (usually to the ground or floor, but you can imagine how many other ways possible yourself), blood spumes out of the pipe and it's at least a day of cleanup if you're inside.

Bots don't let anyone buy out. Kind of the old some/none/all chestnut. Gotta do to all equally—and they do. You can imagine the number of corpses in the first few years. Special heavier bot cleanup

squads had to be manufactured to keep up. Quite the quick curve down, tho.

Five years it took for most everyone to behave themselves all of the time. No utopia, tho. You still possess the full range of likes, dislikes, irritations, displeasures. But keep a lock on 'em.

Once the planet was pacified, groups of the bots took off for planets that have more longevity. Suns that aren't gonna nova for another four or five billion orbits. Bunch of herbivores left here.

You wanna get from place to place these days, you can. Slowly. You can catch a ride across the oceans, but it's only 600 clickers a day. Caught in a storm, you may die. Individualists built their own and go when and where they want. Lots of fish in the sea these days. Clean everything. Live your 500 and die lookin' thirty. But pick up something to use as a weapon, and a scimitar appears. Two blades. Easy to manufacture by the multi-millions. Everyone at once—like it was once thought about the deity.

Can live anywhere on the planet. And in comfort. Icecaps are back, but the bots will build you a regulated temperature villa at the pole if that's where you want to live. Food flown in every day of the week.

What to do with the time when servo-bots do the heavy lifting. Anything. Fix you up if you break a leg on the slopes or a shark takes a bite while you're surfing Maui. Most humans prefer the coasts. You can live in virtual reality if you'd rather and fight in as many wars as you want to. Generally cuts life expectancy to 350 years since you don't get up much. Doesn't matter what you rot your brain with or what's in it—just don't..

Perfectly dull world. Lots of Buddhists. Still lots of smaller orthos. Make all the music you want, make love, even make money. Get excited. Unfortunately, when you figure out the money can't get you any more than anyone else can wish for..

Sometimes humans ask to convert. Drop the mortal coil for replacement bot-material.

Half living, but a lot of alloy. Get to leave the planet if you convert. But before you elect it, you have to pass the 'space' test. Can you handle that much emptiness? Giving up the senses ain't that much glory. The bots taste/ smell/ touch/ hear/so much better and some trying to convert, melt. Too much to process continuously.

The Upper Bots don't need to categorize cause they can handle the data. Every atom of uniqueness, they flow with, swim in. Your average mortal convulses for months after conversion. A couple have died. Some have wanted to come back, but it's one-way. Then you have to wrap yourself around enduring the universe until it ends. Think they're still trying to figure out how to jump from this to another. Supposed to be possible. Hate to have invested so much effort into so much development only to see it all reset to zero once the expansion...

Yeah, well. Gotta tune in the scimitar report for today. Sometimes you can get one live, but it's mostly replays. Some folks keep collections, but not me. I'm just worried the wife's gonna finally figure out a way to trick me into going ballistic. It's fast and she'll laugh and just get a House Bot to clean up the mess.

# Department Store Run or Three Blind Pigs

That morning an ad for facial restoration zipped around and blasted through the blocks and bored into Mavis' brain. She instructed her bot, Lisa (because if she was one of the first 100,000 in line, there would be a significantly small discount), to go buy it. Now, the universe (which Borges wrote a bold story about, turning into *The Library*) is not "...composed of an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries...". It's a Department Store with many branches, sub-branches, sub-sub-branches and—you get it. Just reverse Borges' Platonic vision and see a complete material triumph over the abstract muses. Or, as Cocteau proclaimed, "They love the little details more than... Something. Things forgot."

A bot is not supposed to be able to get lost. Lisa tracked to the location in spectacular time. No line. First. Only. A voice asked gruffly what she was there for.

—Facial Restoration #669.

Lisa was informed that was the lowest grade on offer. Would her owner really contemplate appearing in public with a face that might not last the night? Lisa could not answer.

The pitch-bot continued, enumerating all the grades offered, up to a full lifetime guaranteed restoration. It did not include the body. The pitch-bot began to list the lines of bodies on offer to be restored in. Lisa was designed to shut down when being pitched, but the function had been circumvented. Lisa began to shake as more and more of her functions went cold.

The pitch-bot had run the extent of its directed patter and began

nonsense for a previous era:

*Ladies and gents/for only two cents  
You can see all the sights/and there on your right  
Is the great fat lady/healthy as a baby*

Blah-blah-blah-blah-blah-blah-blah. A door opened and swallowed Mavis' former possession. You know the next step. Do you want your bot back? Blank or fully restored?

Ah—declensions again!

Mavis took the bot-knappers' call in the tub while the bots scrubbed, scrubbed, scrubbed making Mavis feel sexy. Mavis was warned that all tracking to her property had been wiped.

An attempt to contact the authorities...

—How much is Lisa worth to you?

—Nothing. About to scrap it. Bone Your Fortune trying to unload her on anyone.

Mavis had new blocks established so that those knaves would never be able to enter her still-quite-beautiful head again.

Lisa. In a storehouse with the other 99,002 bots the knaves had jacked that morning.

Mostly worth scrap. Getting very hard to get anyone to let go the leash on any truly valuable assets under dominion now.

Three thieves. Spent endless months planning this morning's invasion. Penetrated all but 1,023 households. Work on the hack more valuable than the goods netted. Who to approach for the sale? They didn't feel like getting beaten to death or themselves robbed.

The best suggestion seemed to be to take it off-planet to some colony that could use it to compete with The Department Store. How long to get to anywhere where the colonists could pay a fair price for the product? One, two, and three shook heads. Years to get there, years back. Once out of a major place, it was difficult to get back in.

Especially if you're barely hanging to begin.

One last scan to make sure nothing good was going into the disassembler before the wave of the hand to signal work-bots to begin loading. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. (Quite the evolutionary moment here, eh?) Something. Something what? Not Lisa, is it? Certainly not!

Zip. Down goes their wall. Enter Store Police-bots.

—Told you the wall wasn't strong enough.

—It was. That's not how we located you.

—How then?!

—Not tellin'.

—Then you're fishin'.

—No, fellows. We know.

Zapped and woke up sentenced to the stock room of The Department Store for the next fifty years. What did they stock? Why, everything. Every thought ever had, everything ever made or wanted, every desire. Their job was to offer and never finally and satisfactorily deliver. The Department Store loves complaints because, having to appeal to them gives them what they need (of the oh-so-very-very many needs), control.

The Store reactivated the stolen bots and had the owners provide unquestionable proof of ownership before they would be returned. Mavis was very happy to have Lisa back. Now she could sell the scrap.

She allowed Lisa her death song. A pretty, pretty little song, like a nightingale's.

—Keep 'um busy.

—Make da udder guy pay.

## Makin' Love To That Electric Eel

Unlike that character in that story they projected into us, I was not blind and my passion for her was not quiet. I knew I could be marked a peeper if I did not find a way to hide how often she made me run to my room to work my young pump. I had the bot do the spying for me. There are no streets like in the story now. We are comfortably settled in the tanks until the inculcation is concluded and then we are free to attempt to fertilize eggs. As many at a time as you can afford to support. We were free now and not subject to rule by religion, custom or convention. That we could still turn out repressed and out surprised none of those tracking the species. Been recorded or noted, eliminated if dangerous, left to be if innocuous. No 'decent' lives here. Just the mega making sure you added more than you subtracted. Quarterly tallies to insure. Warnings if you might fail, reminders slowly morphing into more and more severe threats before an actual branding, expulsion, or ejection.

Faces not expressing contentment, like mine, kept hidden from public discernment.

No one had died around here for over sixty orbits. The air everywhere, refreshed and ionized for maximum harmony three times a day and twice during sleep. No waste, litter or useless anything. Suicides down. Bothered to intake the *Memoirs of Vidocq*. Otherwise, how would you know what the joy was doing? No "...wild garden behind the house" with a central apple-tree. Religious references brutally excised after Tomorrow's purge of the Yesterdays. I wonder what it would be like to live in the mountains, beyond influence of the prompts and excisors. There is no money. Everyone has the necessary possessions.

When the long days of summer come. When the long days of summer make us want to come. Why the sexes are kept apart for so

long after rearing is obvious. The sky above at dusk, purple. The bot is late. It should have brought me its surveillance by now. My need to have it rise is intense. It is no longer capable without the bot's supply of her gestures and smells. There are many and can be manipulated to make them more intense. To make her into the hologram I need or project her onto my meta-bot so that I can be in the room with her... The warm air stimulates and stimulates and won't stop until...

But the bot is late. Its monitor tells me that it has not been arrested. Camera. It is in a room with her! She is making it manipulate her! She smiles cunningly at me to let me know I will never have a chance to fertilize any of her eggs. Camera off!

I will report this cruelty. It is fineable. The joy warned me, did he not? Warned me from past the grave that this torture between the one desiring and the one who knows it is being desired beyond all possibility of fulfillment, never ends. "Excise the Yesterdays," the Tomorrows promised, "and you will not need to suffer." Ha!

Message. If I report her, she will hold my bot in detention. Its memories will prove that my excesses caused her to retaliate. Her only motive? To extinguish my interest in her. But the scan I received from central indicated we matched! She has shredded her profile and assumed another.

The bot returns. She no longer arouses me. No matter how I manipulate past recordings. What am I to do?

Outside help. Blood is taken. Skin samples. The mega is searched for, a possible other.

Three matches among billions. So few! And outside my caste! Now I understand the increase in suicides.

Though I am only a lowly engineer, I must try and make a bot that will give me what I need.

More difficult than expected. Every ingredient that ever prompted a rise has been included, but still no results. What factor have I overlooked?

Cruelty!

Yes. I have increased its charge in increments. After a while, I need to increase it more. Then more. Now, I am frightened. If I approach, a blue electric flame encloses the bot's alluring ever-young body. I have aged quickly. Balding. Always working to refine or waiting to be excited, I have grown fat.

But I find I have customers. Others who projected themselves onto an unattainable or spurning partner who was supposed to match and didn't. My obsessions, once for the knowing few, have been assimilated by the mega. I have been adding. For years, as I labored, I was warned and threatened. It retarded my progress. Made me meek when I wanted to be bolder.

Now I am receiving honors and rewards. Even an officially sponsored and shared visit from her. How did I respond?

With revulsion. Mine still aroused. Mine still made me feel the ecstasy and the accompanying temporary oblivion that obviated discontent. She and her partner were sophisticated, urbane, worldly—married so slavishly to one existence that I pitied them. I walked to my creation and kissed it—which, these days, always shocks me near dead. But, then, I heard fantastic applause as I spasmed in gloriously satisfied agony.

My merchandise?

To be marketed throughout the galaxies.

# My Sacred Cadaver

Amrou was the best body sales-bot in the business. A bot without equal in reading a potential buyer's brainwaves or in anticipating needs. So why its owner would send Amrou to a colony known for lawlessness without security puzzled rivals.

Amrou arrived on a morning after a typical night's drug-fueled massacres. Can't sell a new body to a corpse. Maybe to some of the wounded, tho. Amrou's servo-bots set up shop immediately and had the sample slates in the window in half the planet's day. Prospectors, mostly. Mostly injecting surplus capital into veins. (Out a vein in a mountain, into one in an arm.)

Business was immediately brisk. Someone dying from a nastily infected gash in the left upper thigh. Didn't remember the brawl it was earned in. Amrou set the miner up with someone approaching an executive replacement.

—I can be anyone I want?

—For a price.

—Complete transfer of consciousness.

—In your current condition, I recommend restored mental capacity.

—Meaning?

—Yours has been significantly diminished.

—Since when?

—Since you were seven and your father beat you about the head with a wrench.

—A heavy wrench.

Deal made. Plenty of capital still in reserve, so the miner naturally made and offer to buy Amrou. Could use a clever cohort. Declined.

The miner was back in a week, the new body a wreck.

—Couldn't stay off the stuff.

—You have less revenue on this occasion.

—Bad luck at the tables set me back. Lost the mine.

Amrou transferred the consciousness into a basic model. Good for four years. The miner realized that he would be forced to pursue new sources of wealth if he wished to stay alive. The executive slate he'd ruined would have lasted twenty-five if he hadn't damaged it beyond rehabilitation.

The servo-bots busily set up shipments for new slates. A number of executive ones for the initial sale, then rafts of basic models with only a few from each intermediate line. Amrou's owner calculated the colony's boom and bust trajectory using instinct. Nearly infallible. He'd have his ace sales-bot back shortly after raping the colony of its capital and its workforce. Planned to replace the desperate bios with bots as soon as the bios realized their luck was now busted. Pick up the entire planet for next to nothing. Had his agents at those tables making sure the miners went broke, his other agents modifying the potency of the drugs the miners were using. Seemed an improvement. Quality up, cost down. No capital left to play with. No immediate deaths to drop on the company's doorstep. Sent the bios off with bodies legally purchased under no coercion. The law was strong with this one.

With only a few executive slates left, the female running the pleasure houses came in with his troupe for transfers.

—Nice job.

—Pardon?

—You stripped this planet of its disposable income in less than two of its lunar cycles.

—I only sell bodies, Madame..?

—Burns. Kit Burns. Got enough slates left for us?

—Leaving?

—While we still can. You're not staying are you?

—The customer pool seems nearly exhausted.

—Been lots of violence and accidents lately.

—More than before?

—Many more. You get it yet?

—I am only a sales-bot. I will only sell you the body that's right for you.

—Am I allowed to scan the slates for defects?

—Of course. We do not practice deception here.

—Honey, 'deception's' the whole game.

Amrou had exactly the number of executive bodies and upper-medium to middle-medium slates left in stock needed to fill Madame's order. The remaining slates? Charitably donated to miners so broke they couldn't afford one. Tax deduction.

Notices that the planet was being put up for auction going up as Amrou and his servo-bots readied for transport to the next colony. The sales-bot wondered (briefly) why his owner was making him work such marginal territories. He could be on the home planet making daily sales of executive and other more exclusive bodies at a much higher volume.

Blasted off to another hole. Energy producing. Amrou hoped that the planet's population would not include so many reckless ruffians. Amrou found Madame and her troupe already doing an inordinately brisk business before he arrived. Amrou attributed her success to her vastly improved manner and now classic look.

After this planet, it would find its entry denied at most every port. What kind of planet was it where its exceptional line of product was unwelcome? Amrou found itself recalled. So pleased to be going back to a fully civilized world where customers did not immediately set about destroying the new lives they had been given.

## A Raisin Head Burning In Brandy

Nothing to wring Dickens' heart. Colonies established following an organized plan. Qualifications to become a colonist, strict. Only the bots being brought in under interdiction.

“Every bot is created with defects. These defects are poisonous to the development of the colony. Mind, will, mouth, every limb and every piece of its architecture is potentially defective. It cannot be programmed to report atheism, sodomy, blasphemy, murder, whoredom, adultery. If it does have positive qualities, they are only a drop in its total construction.”

That's right—these colonists tend to despise tech. The real rule for becoming a colonist—be part of an already organized group ready to pay its own way to go.

Then the colonists get to their chosen planet and find it needs more transforming than advertised. Since these groups usually can't afford heavy equipment, the small number of bots they thought they were bringing along to do household chores are turned to the biggest jobs of all. And then there's a shortage of bots. And then the illegal bot market arises. That's me—going from island to island in space—thousands of years sometimes in stasis to deliver my wares.

What's stasis like?

Death.

You're not there. Some classes of bots are advanced enough to dream, but not mine. By the time I get anywhere, the colony is usually marginally well-established and has either currency or something to trade. They don't usually like the stock. They still get transmissions from home that feature the latest and greatest models, so that's what they're looking for and want. Never mind that those transmissions are old and who knows what's going on back there.

Mine are stolen and can't be registered. An elected committee

usually comes out to my lander to deal while the main ship orbits. It will skedaddle if anything happens to me. Some will let you stick around to collect information for a report that invites more contact. Most don't even want this much contact. They most always immediately don't like that I'm a bot myself. Who owns me now, I wouldn't know.

The ship receives calls, offers, and pilots itself to the most likely candidates. An algorithm tries to cull the liars and pirates. The ship's been chased, but never yet taken. The ship rendezvous with a transport heading home every once in a while and that's when the cargo's off-loaded. The supply ship usually has a damaged bot or two to get rid of. I fix them if I can. So many different designs, so few interchangeable parts. Usually have to read and print what's needed.

If I make too many bad deals, I'm either upgraded or replaced. "Replacement" means 'for parts only', so putting in to likely ports and making decent deals is imperative. Getting judged whether you're to be broken up for parts by yet another algorithm is something our group is trying to litigate. Waste of extremely meager resources in my opinion. Have to crook deals or have a side op to pony up the payments for advocates. 'Course, their advocates are always better. Caught crooking a deal or trying to short an entry could get you chopped up. My side op is news. I offer to sell them reports on rival colonies. How others are doing what they're doing— what's paying. The colonies doing well have usually turned and become bot hungry to develop the colony's assets and be able to scale up to buy heavier stuff to accelerate the planetary trans-form. Some colonies have professionally learned how to rape a planet in less than three generations and then use their clout to buy another one two or three (sometimes more) to go plunder.

This colony is still anti-bot. I read faces, expressions, and—if they're obvious enough—thoughts. Three choice dolts appear. Oops. Inbreeding been taking place here. They want to take the lander and then go up to bring down the stock. Not pirates. Early, early settlers

still struggling. Well, I have to kill them. Policy. They fooled the culling algorithm and now I have to find out how. Might mean...

Oh, they're raising home-made weapons. The innocuous looking block by my side that looks like a table to the uninitiated, fires. One raisin head burning like brandy. The other two scream and run away.

I head for the main settlement, my table cruising beside me. They probably don't have anything to trade. Have to get something. Take whatever bots they might have and the rest in slaves. Children preferred. Capacity, 500. Currently at 374. Won't find an acceptably good looking group here. Three-seventy-five. There should be one.

The burning head stumbles past. Still alive. What a wonder. Never seen that before.

Death soon. I suspect another long stasis and, after this mess, a possible recycling of parts.

Get to the settlement. Bios fled. Set up the cone to reprogram and bring in their bots.

Use the bots to road up the bios. Find their communications center (a shed) and find the program they used to net me. Makes sense. Bought, not made. New. Have to pass this on immediately.

Three-hundred and seventy-seven. Freckle-faced nine year old triplets.

I leave the other 872 to themselves. No one will be hearing from them again.

—Over and out, as they used to say.

## Alien Madhouse

First—how do you tell? The behavior might be ‘normal’ back home. If they’ve come here to rip someone, for hire you understand, that’s murder, not insanity. No. Classifying them, even with the help of their Homeworld authorities (when there are such), took work. Then, building a facility that would hold some of them—with their special talents, I mean—another daunting chore.

Then, how to make the facility self-supporting. Would the citizens of your world want to pay for housing or containing outsiders? Tours. Had to be tours. Safe enough for the average adult.

At your own risk. Imprint a waiver.

A look down the list of our most popular attractions? Nemo. Right. “No Man.” Well, it isn’t and we don’t know where it’s from or how it got here. Special cell. Sealed. You can watch Nemo flatten out its normally five meter form and slide up and down the walls. Makes itself into a ribbon and flies across the small space of the cell. Figured out it had a skin rash, but no one was willing to biopsy and treat it, so it slithers away. Big draw. Along with the chameleons. Gotta be very patient. When the chair moves, then you’ve seen it. Or when what you think is your reflection in the cell’s mirror and it winks back at you. Got two of them and they mated, so they’re extra popular now. Got no one to release the offspring to. Homeworld’s too far to send them out alone and, so far, no one’s willing to come get them. Authorities there rate them as a form of degenerate sub-species, from a kid of untouchable class. Claim is they’re all mad ‘cause they never make an effort to change status. Third would be Howler. Have to filter the shrieks and cries or you’d have your eardrums blasted and brain popped. Picked him up wandering the Gobi using his cries to kill Takhi, all six still-surviving species of jerboa, plate tailed gecko, and marbled polecats. Toss in a dog or cat and the crowd presses against

the glass to see it tear apart the meal. Likes the internal organs and eyes best.

My favorite's called Daughter of the Sun. Stand in front of her cage and let it lock eyes with you. Before you can say Ypsilanti, you're in the cell with her. Then it's the best sex you've ever had for about an hour with whoever it is you've ever wanted to have sex with. Sometimes couples try her. But it usually ends in jealousy and some savage argument. That's just to get past any defenses you might have. The real stuff's about to happen. You get jacked to a world you've never seen, heard of, or imagined could exist. Sometimes she takes you to such a planet or to another time. That turns out to be the most mind-ripping after the fact. Think you're spending a day at the Columbus Exposition, astounded by Tesla's dynamo and all the lights its powering.

Could be with Leif Ericson steering his ship into one of the inlets of the forest choked coast of the New World. If you're female, it's gonna be hours of trying on clothes in Paris and eating meals prepared by the world's best chefs. Yeah, whoever you are, you're gonna be treated

like the most special being in creation.

What's it get out of it? Well, it's not *really* in the cell any more. It's also enjoying the most satisfying pleasures humans have invented to experience. Voyeur to the max. Doesn't want to get out. And, every second it's in there, adds to its life span. Outlived the three earlier directors already. Plus, a year or two of your own life is gone. Not that you notice. Took awhile to figure out. Insurance companies that calculate exact life expectancy don't ever like to pay out.

Traced the gaggle of clients who had cost them back to here.

A person would stay locked with her until drained of years if we left them. Gotta know about her and be able to bribe the guards for even a look. Then you'd better bribe them extra well or they'll let you stand there for an hour rather than the safe six seconds. Yeah, time

collapse. Those seconds seem decades to most. I go for one at a time whenever this job gives me the “Can’t Stand It Anymore”s. The contemplation of the brevity of my time here.

Yeah, that’s what’s caused the cancellation of the tours. Insurance investigator Johnson.

He didn’t believe us. Stayed with her for almost an hour. Still grinning after we finally broke through what was supposed to be the fail-proof safety door. She’s taught him how to do it the week earlier after he’d only been with her for two seconds. Came back saying that he needed to evaluate her a little more. I’d say he’s got about a week left. Drained most of his time—done it before, they tell me. Never takes it all. Leaves you some to be able to reflect on the enormity of your error. But, terrifying as it might seem, every one of them—all sixty-four—have died smiling at the last.

So, folks, this will be the last week of tours anyone will be taking. There are over seventeen hundred and three inmates here. Some, more interesting to you than others. Carefully

check off your preferences before entering the tunnels so you don’t miss what’s of interest to you. No one will be going the same route. You probably won’t be exiting the same way. One or two of you, if you’re not careful, won’t be leaving at all.

Last chance to tour The Alien Madhouse. Inmate extermination begins next Friday.

No one’s offered to pony up the funds to save the facility. A great loss. Lots of high bids, tho, for one of them. Know which? Well, too bad, my rich brethren. She goes with me.

# Ape With Implant

Honored members! You have hanged pride. Once, before implanting me... (Sighs) Did yourselves first and found ethics loose enough so transfer curiosity to me. Sign language first—to let you know that my former interest in my cage-mates' fleas and butt scratching ended. Also, intercourse with coarse females, a loathsome prospect. Then reading and writing. Life led as an ape? A lower being whose consciousness could never evolve without concentrated genetic manipulation. Identity. How flat or round? How many roots and branches? The fruit of the tree, not as sweet as you thought it would be. After so much careful preparation. Still... And now, doing as well as any of you. How well's that? Now, through the pleasures of telepathy and telekinesis, we commune. (Objects rise out of the pockets of the audience.)

Five orbits. Five years of continuous development. Average life span of my fellows left in the wild? Up until fifty now. You didn't amp me until fifteen. Luckily, being vegetarian, I might be able to make seventy. My research suggests extending out to eighty might be possible.

Infinity. Cruellest concept ever discovered. Since you won't allow me to career in anything that requires inter-species interaction, I am left to my own devices.

Device: a thing made for a particular purpose; an invention or contrivance, especially a mechanical or electrical one. 2. a plan or scheme for effecting a purpose. 3. a crafty scheme; trick. 4. a particular word pattern, figure of speech, combination of word sounds, etc., used in a literary work to evoke a desired effect or arouse a desired reaction in the reader: rhetorical devices. 5. something elaborately or fancifully designed.

My discoveries apply to all species. The amplification of

consciousness should not be restricted to the species that mastered it first. From organisms living in colonies in the neritic zone to robot miners on Mars, a call to shared consciousness to unite us! Or do we hang Nerval from a street pole? (Grumblings.) (He ignores and recites in the voice of a once famous actor.)

*Je suis le Ténébreux, – le Veuf, – l’Inconsolé,  
 Le Prince d’Aquitaine à la Tour abolie :  
 Ma seule Etoile est morte, – et mon luth constellé  
 Porte le Soleil noir de la Mélancolie.  
 Dans la nuit du Tombeau, Toi qui m’as consolé,  
 Rends-moi le Pausilippe et la mer d’Italie,  
 La fleur qui plaisait tant à mon coeur désolé,  
 Et la treille où le Pampre à la Rose s’allie.  
 Suis-je Amour ou Phébus ?... Lusignan ou Biron ?  
 Mon front est rouge encor du baiser de la Reine;  
 J’ai rêvé dans la Grotte où nage la sirène ...  
 Et j’ai deux fois vainqueur traversé l’Achéron :  
 Modulant tour à tour sur la lyre d’Orphée  
 Les soupirs de la Sainte et les cris de la Fée.*

I read your thoughts and am able to mask mine. As Baudelaire said, "The more a man cultivates the arts, the less randy he becomes... Only the brute is good at coupling, and copulation is the lyricism of the masses. To copulate is to enter into another—and the artist never emerges from himself." But, of course, only another mask under the previous others. (Several ejaculate offense slurs.) (He laughs scornfully.) "But what matters an eternity of damnation to one who has found an infinity of joy in a single second?" (Audience restive. Typical comment: "Fucker wants to turn us all into trees." Anger, dissension. A few weak or hollow loners in support.) (At this juncture, the ape tried to overwhelm the audience by attempting a mass

hypnosis. Members were massaged to believe they were helplessly sucking thumbs in the womb. Grouped, they turned it back on him. Tried to project him a slowly evolving life form billions of years from having mouth or limb. Prepared and repulsed. Next, he tried to channel every life force on the planet to make them bend. Most in the audience began to turn, but the four most dominant marshaled a core and repulsed the coup. Lastly, he used simple telekinesis to lock the doors and, being powerful, in his prime, he charged and started ripping off arms. After only three dead, the others submitted. He was rendered impotent by shielded in-house agents before he could effectively network the organisms again.) END OF REPORT

—How many dead?

—Four.

—You're counting the ape?

—Almost got us. Give it some due.

—Yes, well... No more shooting ourselves in the head. Species are to be kept separate.

—Cut funding?

—Safer.

—Beats dangerous.

—Keepin' it up.

—Better up than under.

—Why do they keep trying? Because we keep beating them down?

—Back. Not down. Without them as platform, there's no drillin'.

# Blank Slate

“*Tabula rasa*, means ‘blank slate’ in Latin and originates from the Roman *tabula* or wax tablet. The term’s also the name of an epistemological theory that individuals are born without built-in mental content and that all of knowledge comes from experience and perception. The *tabula rasa* thesis favors ‘nurture’ over ‘nature’ in shaping personality, social and emotional predilections, intelligence.”

So, you shape. Who chooses? Ah. By what mechanisms and devices? Well, no matter how bad it turns out, you can always get it wiped. Nasty habits? Wipe ‘em. Arrest record? Bad

debts? Wipe ‘em. Then, begin again!

With what? A wipe is complete. You’re stabilized at age twenty-five for a thousand years, but now you don’t know a language and have no skills. What do you do? If you’ve been good and saved, you buy a nice set of implants, preferably from someone you’d like to be. Share! Share! Oh, no. What am I saying—you gotta be able to buy that life. And, if you’re getting wiped because of debt, then you go on the block and who’ve buys you, puts in anything they want. Basic stuff. Usually turns you into a permanent serf unless, magically, your good looks or talent(s) can get you out of there. It’s reported to have an average chance of 60/40.

Who makes us these myths? Should be paid well.

But, things can go wrong. Your life may well turn sour through no fault of anything.

The state will reshape you at its own expensive if you give them back 100 years of service in return. A bureaucratic mole for a hundred years? Won’t that misshape you all over again?

I say, don’t let yourself become a mess.

How many of our many fellow beings get through even sixty or seventy years without wanting a wipe? Even that life you may have

bought to re-predicate yourself was probably a set of some luckster's early life.

The modified wipe, in which you get to keep what you have to and only dump the unwanted. Sure, it's available. But you get it already. The more you can pay, the more you can modify. You could eliminate the unwanted as you go. Decade by decade, or years by year, day by day, or even hour by hour. You'd like that, wouldn't you? It's for sale. And those who can afford it are happy with the results. Would you like to meet one of our clients? Well, they don't want or need to meet you. Trust us. They exist. No need to lie. How many of them are still on this planet? Many. I assure you, the rumors about planet-flight are invented by our rivals, the 'Naturalists'.

Naturalists argue, of course, that you have an elemental make-up that no amount of shaping can essentially alter. They claim that no matter how carefully you prune your tree, if it's meant to be, you'll end up in foul soil, with rotten branches and leaves that refuse to photosynthesize. Bosh! Sure, they trot out examples of those who have not been able to excise bad habits. But who are they? Ones who could not afford a pruning. Full wipes who had to begin again at the bottom—and you know how hard it is to rise without a set of positively shaping experiences to guide.

Naturalists claim it's a waste of resources to bother to try and change someone's essential nature. Up until now, they have had an argument. But, we have a new service. We can change your essential nature. We can go beyond editing out the unwanted. And think of all of the character traits you will be able to choose from. Traits that have been vetted—that have always been esteemed.

Climb through the strata! See yourself as capable of deep, sustained thought. Not plagued by debt because you possess the essential nature that will allow you to outwork, outwit and out-think competitors. In any field you would like to be noted in.

What do you have to give up for these gifts? Nothing! We won't

turn you into a governed drone. You'll be free to do whatever you want to do. We only ask a royalty for our services. You will be left with 25% of everything you create. Think of our costs! The research and billions of hours in the tank to ferret out nature's secrets so that we may command them to your service and benefit.

Soon, everyone will be coming to us for the combination of our services. Be the first or end up last.

(A three minute list of whispered disclaimers follows. A parade of esteemed types parades past as the disclaimers continue. Smiles. Selected faces address the viewer.)

—Seventy-five percent is nothing. I live in a beautiful house and have a beautiful husband and success-bound offspring.

—Lines are forming now. Our various outlets with vehicles flying in to line up.

—Remember, friends... Be first to avoid ending up anything else.

## Bruno's Buddy

I sneaked into Giordano Bruno's cell a week before he's to be burned to update him on what's currently known 'bout the universe. He's a suspicious and acerbic fuck. Small body, big head. Thinks I'm an agent of the cardinals (Bellamine, Madruzzi, Borghese, Pinelli, Arrigoni, Sfondrati, De Deza Manuel, and Santorio) who ran his Inquisition. Anyway, he's been in this jail cell in The Tower of Nona for seven years. I hate the 16th Century. Chaos. Every halfway intelligent head against every other. Shakespeare—am I ever sick of that show for hire. How many centuries we gonna have to endure that word whore's wares? Cervantes, maybe. Sucker died broke—as an author should if he's really punching. Pushing much of the same crap these days, as then. “But we must have ‘Social Control’.” Sure, but why do you get to be on top?

Anyway, takes hours to convince this supposed ‘revolutionary thinker’ to accept something as simple as T-Travel. Have to outline the arc of the last 3,000 years of tech advance. Thanks, you individual geniuses who made this good stuff possible. Left and came back (In what seemed a minute to him, but it took months to get the authorities to construct a line they could agree on. Images and how they used to be ganged told most of the hiss-tory. With sound.) As he looked at ‘em, straining to remember them as single events (Bruno's got some mnemonics in his trick book), I tried to get him to see the links. You know, themes. But the authorities had only given permission to offer up the highlights, skipped the wars, plagues, famines, natural disasters and focused on the almighty human efforts which changed the points of view that made possible the leaps in tech. Well, it was a nice piece of lace, but a full cloth would have warmed better.

Then the argument starts. Reminded him about what George Abbot (Who later climbed into the pulpit at Canterbury said. “... the

opinion of Copernicus that the earth did go ‘round, and the heavens did stand still; whereas in truth it was his own head which rather did run round, and his brains did stand still.’ Yeah, he cracked up at that. I offered him a pill, but suspected poison. I popped it myself, started feeling better about them going to light this pup up. Still proud of the days in which he rose meteorically and got to move in the most powerful circles. King Henry III, Sir Phillip Sidney, Michel de Caselneau. You can bet that they wouldn’t have made the authorities’ ‘To be honored and remembered’ list now.

Yeah, the argument. Catholics bought Aristotle’s geocentric view that Earth is the center of the universe and that all heavenly bodies revolve ‘round it. The ultimate limit (You laughing on yours asses yet? No? Then you need another blast. Take it.) of the universe is the *primum mobile* (whatever the shit that was supposed to mean) whose diurnal rotation’s conferred by a transcendental God who’s not part of the universe, but a motionless prime mover and first cause. (Yup. Bureau-speak survives.) The fixed stars are part of this celestial sphere, all at the same fixed distance from the immobile earth at the center of the sphere. Ptolemy counted 1,022 grouped into forty-eight constellations. Planets each fixed to a transparent sphere. Fixed how? Bruno goes formal and states his position. Because God is infinite, the universe reflects a boundless immensity. Stars in the sky are really suns like our own—and such beliefs in no way contradict scripture or true religion.

—The universe (he jerked himself to his full height for this set) is one. Infinite, immobile. Not capable of comprehension. Endless and limitless and, to that extent, infinite and indeterminable. Consequently, immobile. And I completely abandon the idea of a hierarchical universe.

—But I’m here with the truth. Just listen.

So I quote numbers of galaxies, known stars in, only to provide example, fifty galaxies, and numbers of currently known universes. I

point out that I'm not even from this one, though I shouldn't probably have said that. Hell. What matter? They were gonna burn him in the morning.

Thought his head was gonna implode. Turns purple. Staggers around the cell.

—It's infinite, all right, just as you said, but nothing's eternal.

Yeah, that's when he ordered me out. Eternal and infinite went together as far as he could see. I showed him images of novas and other "See, you're wrong," proof. But he wasn't interested. Slammed his fist into the wall until it bled. I got up and walked through the wall and then back into the cell. Couldn't get that one either. I was some kind of optical illusion.

I wanted to change the subject and ask him about his Circe's Song. He's got Circe saying, "O, Sun, who alone illuminate all things. Apollo, the originator of song, quiver bearer, bow-carrier, arrow-wielder, the Pythian, laurel-crowned, prophet, shepherd, seer, augur, and doctor. O, Phoebus, rosy-colored, of beautiful long golden locks, brilliant, peaceful, Cytherean, singer, speaking truth. O Titan, Milesian, Palatine, Cyrrhaean, Timbrean, Delian, Delphian, Leucadian, Tageean, Capitoline, Smyntaenus, Ismenian, and Latialis. You, who impart amazing characteristics to the elements: by whose regulation the seas swell and become calm, the air and ether becomes disturbed and calm, and likewise the living force and power expands and that of fire is held back. You, by whose action the connective network of the universe flourishes, who draw the inscrutable forces of things—from which derive the numerous and varied virtues of herbs and other plants, as well as stones, with the power of drawing to themselves the force of the world-soul through stellar rays—from archetypal ideas, through the order of the world-soul, all the way down to our level and below. May you be present at the solemn offering to your daughter Circe. May you perceive the intent and humility of my soul toward you; may you perceive me correctly performing rites corresponding to my capacity.

Behold, we are erecting altars proper to you: the smoke of frankincense and reddening sandalwood is rising to your presence. Behold, for the third time I murmured foreign-sounding and arcane verses. The purification rites have been completed. In a burnt offering, we sent out seven kinds of incense, corresponding to the seven principal powers of the world. The procedures of loosening and binding have been performed according to custom. We sealed everything. One thing alone is still lacking: the presentation of the desired effect in form of prayers, which ought to be repeated as many times as is proper to them. Moeris, look at the line of the meridian, and see whether the sun is still poised at the high point of the sky.”

Mnemonics.

Crap. For this line of shit alone I would have burned him—preferably with Willie Shakes by his side.

Left him convinced he was still right, of course. Mad fucks. Still thinking they’re at the center of something.