



**Semaphore  
Magazine**

# EDITORIAL

A lot of things can happen in five years. Or even in not-quite-five years, as is the case here.

In 2007, I founded *Semaphore* on little more than a whim – I had decided, on little evidence, that publishing was the career for me, and in the absence of any exciting job offers available to a young woman with NCEA Level 3 under her belt, I decided to start my own magazine. I liked fantasy, and science fiction, and detective stories, so that's what I decided to focus on; I was studying full-time and had a weekend job, so I limited the word count of stories I would accept to something I could get through relatively quickly. I also decided to publish poetry, despite my knowledge of the medium extending not far past A.A. Milne.

The detective-story angle has slipped somewhat over the years; *Semaphore's* website has stumbled from Freewebs to its own domain, and I even started paying (the lowest possible) double figures for stories. I'm still flabbergasted that *Semaphore* took the Sir Julius Vogel Award for Best Production / Publication, even if its only competition was a vote of no confidence. All in all, it's been a fantastic time.

Speaking of time – in less than two Earth days of it, I'll be flying out of the country for the first time since I was six years old. I've spend not-quite five years reading and publishing stories from all across the world – and I'm finally going to get to see a bit more of it.

If all goes well *Semaphore* will be open for business again early next year; for the time being, though, this is its final issue. I hope you enjoy it.

Marie Hodgkinson

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Cover artwork "A Time to Die," by Esme Hanton. You can see more of Esme's work at [esmehanton.blogspot.com](http://esmehanton.blogspot.com). Esme is an honours graduate of Massey University in Wellington, New Zealand, and hopes to be a children's book illustrator.

# UNTIL THE END

*By R.J. and Andy Astruc*

Someone is yelling at you.

You open your eyes and see your alarm clock framed in blue wallpaper. You were just surfing in Hawaii with a circus strongman, but now you're awake. It is 7:13 am on Saturday morning, the sunlight is shafting through a gap in your curtains and your mother is yelling at you from downstairs. You can't hear what she's saying because the door is closed, so you pick your way across the floor of your bedroom, which is covered in clothes, and pull open the door.

"Come down and get your breakfast, honey!"

You pull on your favourite animal slippers and head downstairs. The kitchen table is a mess of plates, bowls and cutlery as well as a big box of bran cereal. There's no sign of your father, you guess he must have left for work already. Your mother is standing next to the stove, spatula in hand.

"Don't forget you promised to help around the house today," She says. "What would you like to eat?"

*If you want Toastie Soldiers, turn to page 2*

*If you want bacon and eggs, turn to page 6*

Your mother makes you a delicious breakfast of bacon, fried eggs, and orange juice. Outside you can see that it really is very sunny today, even though they said on the news that it would rain. Your eggs taste kind of weird, but you don't want to hurt anyone's feelings so you keep eating. Nothing a little extra salt won't fix.

Suddenly the phone rings and startles you, making you knock over your juice. A little spills over the edge of the table so you grab some paper towel to wipe it up. While you're down on the floor you hear your mother asking you to get the phone for her.

You realise this might be your chance to sneak out and play with your friend Jemima.

*To answer the phone, turn to page 4*

*If you want to run outside and find Jemima, turn to page 12*

You head out the back door and run down the street to Jemima's house. The sun stings your eyes a little. When you get closer you can see that Jemima is sitting in her front yard playing with a toy sword. She smiles when she notices you and jumps up.

"I was going to come to your house today. Tom told me that there is an actual haunted house in town and I want to go exploring! He says people *died* in there ages ago, and now their ghosts are just floating around, trapped. It sounds super cool, I'm going over there and you should come."

Jemima looks at you excitedly. You're a little bit scared by spooky things like ghosts.

*If you follow Jemima to the house, turn to page 20*

*To go to the library instead, turn to page 28*

You're not a coward, so you decide to follow Jemima to the haunted house. It's a long walk, so you both play a game of I Spy, which you win, because Jemima always picks a type of tree.

Eventually, you come up to a large house surrounded by a small grey fence. There are vines growing everywhere, snaking through the broken posts and along the sides of the building. As Jemima pushes through the gate you notice a strange symbol carved into the wood. It looks a bit like an upside-down head with lines moving upward. It also looks very old.

As you walk down the path to the door, you feel a dull ache at the base of your neck. It hurts more when you are looking straight at the house.

*To turn back, turn to page 3*

*To keep going, turn to page 25*

Jemima pushes open the front door and you step inside. It smells old, like nothing has been here in a very long time. There is another smell too, beneath that, something that makes you want to throw up. You swallow and move further in.

It smells even worse in the main room. There isn't any furniture, but you can see stains on the floor where things used to be. A big, ugly set of stairs leads up to the first floor, but it's too dark to see what is up there. You notice that on some parts of the walls someone has drawn a series of parallel lines with paint, all pointing towards the fireplace.

One of the doors is already open and you can hear a faint hissing sound from within. When you investigate you find an old TV turned on inside, probably showing a soap opera. It's the only thing in the room.

*If you examine the TV more closely, turn to page 23*

*To go upstairs, turn to page 29*

You go back into the main room and head up the stairs. Jemima stays behind to look at the television. When you are almost at the top, you hear something downstairs, as if something heavy is being dragged along the floorboards. You call out to Jemima but she doesn't answer.

Suddenly you hear a voice at the end of the hallway. It's still very dark, so you move closer to see if someone is there. Maybe other kids have heard about this place and have come to mess with you.

Reaching the end of the hallway, you find nothing but two doors. You hear the voices again, this time behind you, back the way you came. They seem to be moving closer. You can't understand what they are saying, but you feel like you don't want to stay and find out.

*If you go through the right door, turn to page 30*

*If you choose the left door, turn to page 37*

You pull open the door on the right. Looking around, you can see that this is a bedroom. There is a double bed on one wall and a wardrobe near the window. The bed is dusty and the window has shutters on it.

Remembering the voices, you quickly duck under the bed so you won't be seen. Looking out, you can see a lot of people coming in. They seem to be grown-ups. All you can see is the bottoms of what look like cloaks they are wearing and their bare feet. Then you realise there is something under the bed with you.

You can feel it behind you.

*If you turn to look, go to page 8*

*To run out of the room, go to page 9*

You slowly turn around under the bed and see it.

At first it looks like a human face, but then you realise it is the wrong way up. Jet black eyes look up at you from where its chin should be, and its mouth is pulled back to reveal dozens of grey teeth jutting out at all angles. The face is set into a wrinkled mass of dark flesh, and its arms are twitching by its sides.

It is too dark to see where the creature ends, but you can hear it moving slowly against the bottom of the bed.

You feel the urge to reach out and pet the face, and as you do it begins to peel the skin off your arm with its teeth. You think this is probably for the best.

You have gone insane.

*(Why don't you flip back a few pages and try a different path?)*

You decide to go through the door on the left. When you open the door you realise this room is full of people. They are all wearing hoods and long robes.

You made a lot of noise coming in, but the figures don't seem to pay any attention to you. They're arranged in a tight circle around the centre of the room and they seem to be staring at something in the middle. They are chanting. You turn around to leave and you see a flat wall in front of you. You also notice this room has no windows.

As the chanting gets faster, your skin begins to ache.

*To look at the thing in the middle, turn to page 33*

*To close your eyes, turn to page 35*

You push through the crowd of hoods, and they make no effort to stop you. As you reach the centre of the circle you see.

There is a person lying on the floor with blood seeping from a huge wound in their chest. A creature seems to be rising, or crawling, out of the opening. It has a large body, covered in dark scales. The head reminds you of an angler fish, with a large mouth gaping wide and lined with spiked teeth. Its lips are cracked and bleeding a dark blue liquid.

As you move closer you find yourself compelled to copy the people in hoods. You stare into the mouth of the beast and begin to chant, and luckily you know all the words.

*You have no choice, you must go to page 36*

You keep chanting. It seems to be working.

The great beast rises out of the centre of the sacrifice, revealing more than a dozen black and dripping tentacles at its base. As you follow them, you see that each one becomes a half-formed human child at the end, completely black and twisted into unnatural shapes. The children claw at your feet and you continue the chant.

You have gone insane.

*(Why don't you flip back a few pages and try a different path?)*

You decide to examine the television. It is showing the sort of boring talk show your mother watches. After staring for a while, you notice flashes of something else on the screen. The talk show hosts are looking straight into the camera and smiling. It feels like they know you're there.

"Did you see that? It looks like a face," Jemima states. "Weird."

As she moves closer to the TV you notice a slight buzzing in your ears. Jemima puts her hand up to the screen.

*To pull her back, turn to page 17*

*If you leave her alone, turn to page 11*

You reach out and pull Jemima away from the television. As you do, you see that her hand has melted partially onto the screen. There is bubbling skin left behind and you can see finger bones peeking through the skin.

The TV hosts are laughing at a dog doing tricks.

Jemima screams.

You smell burning flesh and see bits of her hand dripping slowly down onto the floor. She tenses and you expect her to run away, but instead she lunges towards the television screen, still screaming.

*If you run, turn to page 14*

*If you help Jemima, turn to page 19*

You reach out and grab your friend, but she is already pushing her face into the screen. The TV hosts are laughing loudly. Jemima keeps screaming, choking on blood and melted skin as unseen forces liquefy her face and neck. She looks up at you, her eyeballs sinking back into her skull.

You have gone-

You decide to go to the library. Perhaps you can get some of your writing homework done. Jemima looks disappointed, but she soon gets over it and decides to tag along.

The library is a big, cream-coloured building which sits between an ice-cream shop and a parking lot. You go inside and head for the computer section. Your teacher asked everyone to write a fantasy story for class, and your uncle was telling you last week about a writer called H.P. Lovecraft.

Before you sit down, you see Jemima is squirming.

“We should do something more fun,” she says, jutting out her lower lip.

*If you want to research Lovecraft, turn to page 13*

*If you listen to Jemima's idea, turn to page 16*

Jemima eagerly tells you about all the amazing scary stories they have downstairs, including a bunch about serial killers in the-

You decide to research Lovecraft. Leaving Jemima to do her own thing, you ask the librarian where to find his section. She directs you to a small corner filled with many books, some with titles you can't read. Everything smells like dust.

As you thumb your way along the shelves, you come across a very old looking book. The spine is leathery and the cover shows some sort of strange animal.

You get an itching feeling under your fingernails.

You place the book on a small table nearby and notice a strange symbol drawn on the floor. It looks a bit like a pentagram, but with small circles of writing inside. Near the symbol there is a faint trail of blood staining the floor.

*To follow the blood, turn to page 7*

*To examine the book, turn to page 37*

You sit down and run your hands over the front of the book, noticing it is very cold and almost feels like stone. Opening it, you see that many of the pages have large, detailed drawings of groups of naked people slaughtering one another. They are cutting open the bodies and feasting on the organs inside.

On one page you see a drawing of yourself, pushing a long blade into your own chest as a lizard crawls out of your open mouth.

You have g-

You decide to listen to your mother and answer the phone. As you pick up the receiver you hear a voice whispering:

“You keep chanting. It seems to be working.

“The great beast rises out of the centre of the sacrifice, revealing more than a dozen black and dripping tentacles at its base. As you follow them, you see that each one becomes a half-formed human child at the end, completely black and twisted into unnatural shapes.”

You hang up the phone and throw it across the room.

*There's no escape. You thought you could go back and forget, but you can't. You can't unsee what you've seen. You are tainted-*

Your mother makes you a quick breakfast of Toastie Soldiers with jam and peanut butter. The sun is shining brightly through the kitchen window. Your toast is delicious. Your mother makes you a second helping, which tastes even better.

Everything is going well. Nothing out of the ordinary is happening and you feel like today will be a good day.

You start to daydream.

*Turn to page 23*

You are back inside the old house. Jemima is here. You are inside the room with the television. The paint on the walls is cracked and peeling off, and mould is growing underneath. The TV is playing that same talk show with the laughing hosts. Your head spins.

“Did you see that? It looks like a face,” Jemima states. “Weird.”

Jemima stretches out her hand and moves closer to the TV. You reach out and grab her, pulling her back just in time.

“What? What’s wrong with you?” She stares at you.

*If you tell her everything you know, turn to page 17*

*To pull her outside, turn to page 11*

You tell Jemima what has happened. You explain about the people upstairs, the weird television and the book at the library. You tell her that you've already been here and this has all been done before. You feel like you're going insane.

You explain that you were just in your kitchen eating breakfast but now you're back in this place. Jemima smiles.

"This is no time for eating," she says. "The great beast rises. You made this possible, and we are grateful."

Her smile grows wide and begins stretching the skin on her face tighter.

*To try and wake yourself up, turn to page 19*

*To run away, turn to page 14*

You can't wake up.

You are still in the room with the television. Turning to run, you see that the door is gone. The ceiling creaks and begins to move towards you. As the room gets smaller you hear chanting and feel a sharp pain in your stomach-

Someone is yelling at you.

You open your eyes and see your alarm clock framed in pink wallpaper. You were just exploring an old haunted house with your friend, but now you're awake. It is 7:13 am on Saturday morning, the sunlight is shafting through a gap in your curtains and your mother is yelling at you from downstairs. You can't hear what she's saying because the door is closed, so you pick your way across the floor of your bedroom, which is covered in hair, and pull open the door.

"Come down for your sacrifice, honey!"

You pull on your favourite animal slippers and head downstairs. The kitchen table-

What are you looking for? You weren't told to come here. You remember what was here last time and you didn't like it much.

That face under the bed. The upside-down face with jet black eyes that stared up at you in the darkness. Those horrid, mangled teeth which looked so inviting, even when they started to peel the skin from your arm. It kept peeling and peeling until there was no more left, then it crawled onto you and stuck its long tongue into your ear.

It crept into your skull and burrowed through your mind. It made you go insane.

Maybe you still are-

You're running. Trying to escape, but it won't work. No matter how fast you go you still end up here.

You can't get away from the book so you control the pages. It would be so much easier to just stop, there's no reason to keep going. You feel so tired and you wish it would just end.

As you try to cry out, there is no sound.

It's just a book, you know. It can't hurt you.

You are inside the windowless room with the circle of robed figures. They are all staring down at you and chanting. You are covered in blood. It seems to be yours.

You feel tremendous pressure in your stomach, and when you look down you see a wet, reptilian hand sliding out of your body.

You have gone insane. You look up to the roof, past the chanting faces and see the ceiling slide away, revealing an endless abyss. Deformed human figures stagger across the landscape, turning when they notice you and hissing.

The great beast frees itself from inside your body as you lie helpless. Your ribcage cracks open and more blood pours out. The chanting reaches a peak and then falls away as the creature quickly devours the circle.

You feel at peace as your face is finally pulled away.

# A COUPLE OF THINGS

*By Jay MacLeod*

Jack's at the door

Sweetie-

He wants his golf clubs back

And his mower

And the keys to his shed

And his car keys

And car-

I think it was a Chevy Impala-

And the jewellery we

Took from his bedroom

And his wife's fingernails

And the teeth

We pistol-whipped

From his mouth

When he tried to call the police

He said he didn't

Crawl out of that shallow grave

In the Nevada desert

Just to be given

The run-around

What should I tell him?

He doesn't look dead anymore

And seems to be pretty

Upset

# ON DRY LAND

*Linda Hill*

This land here is old. As old as the hills, so old there are no hills. No rains from hill-captured clouds to erode long-ago slopes in streams of silt down to the sea. Old and dry. A few sparse shrubs struggle and die, but add little humus to the infertile earth. Where roots find moisture in the shade of rocks, an occasional tree waves white arms and grey leaves at the empty sky. An old, dry, barren land.

But rich in its way. Iron in the rust-streaked rocks. Mineral oxides and carbonates lurk in crevasses. Mica and quartz flicker in coarse sands. The land holds a promise out to men, of copper and gold and opals.

But real wealth in this land is water.

There's little rain here or none. When it comes, it disappears into the sandy soils faster than a lizard swallows a fly.

My father came to this land in an old Bedford truck. He fossicked a bit, found little, and brewed moonshine for discreet sale to whoever was around to buy it. My mother came by mail order. After some years, he'd put a small ad in a horticultural trade paper down south. Payment in marriage on delivery. My mother was game, from Cambodia, and only one step ahead of Immigration.

Like the land, it worked in its own way. Low expectations, little romance, but in the end a real affection. They tried a few sheep, then goats, then a small quarry, mainly for road gravel. Hard work, hard times, and two children. Me and my brother Lee.

We were snot-nosed little brats, running wild most days. I seem to remember we didn't bathe often. But my earliest memory was of water, standing under the nozzle from the bore while Lee swung on the pump handle. Cool water flowing over my sun-hot skin.

No school, there was no bus to the town 50-odd miles away. Occasionally we'd do the lessons that came by rural mail and short-wave radio. It was Dad who taught us to read and write, plus a little amateur geology. Mum taught us arithmetic and how to make great-tasting food out of almost nothing.

In his teens, my brother Lee started taking a serious interest in the geology around him. He got a low-level job with one of the mining companies doing exploration out our way, moved into town for night classes, then enrolled at university and became a geologist.

Me, I turned 16, jumped a good-looking truckie and headed for the big city. To see the sea. To swim in it like a fish, splash in it, surf in it, soak in it till I wrinkled like seaweed and floated away on its waves.

The truckies were a poor career move, but it was easy enough to find work in the cafés along the Esplanade. Eventually I had one of my own, with tables on a wide veranda and steps down to the beach. Sunsets over water and a glass of wine.

It was nearly ten years before I went back to see my parents the first time. I guess I spent most of those years growing up. By then Lee's geology work brought him down to the city once in a while. Every few years I'd go back, and what I noticed was that my parents, the house, the gravel yard, were all getting smaller and smaller. Not just older and drier.

I tried to persuade them to move to the city. I was doing well now, it was my time to help them, I said. I had it all planned. My father said, "Live in the city? No way," and stomped off. End of conversation. I asked my mother, wouldn't she prefer the city? It would be an easier life, the comforts of a modern house, the convenience of daily shopping, more social opportunities and new friends. She said, "You go see Phnom Penh, I stay here."

The next time I went back, my parents, the house, the yard were no longer shrinking. Now it was the land that was getting bigger and bigger. The desert, the rusty rocks, even the non-existent hills, were huge. It was as much as my mind could hold to look at them all at once. The red earth and the blue sky spread all the way from horizon to horizon without stop.

I went home and there the city started to get smaller and smaller. I knew that couldn't be right. Cities, suburbs, urban populations, buildings were all growing in size. But a city sky is a small patch of grey between high-rises. Even looking out to sea from my café veranda, half the sky was missing. In the city, what was getting smaller was space itself.

Then came the day when, instead of taking my morning coffee to the veranda with the sea view, I took it without thinking to a high window at the back and looked inland over the roof tops. To the blue hills and the grey misty hills and beyond, beyond to the hills that don't exist at all, to the rusty earth of this land in my mind's eye. I realised that if I stayed in the city, I too would get smaller and smaller, until half of me was missing.

This piece of this old, old land was my parents' for a very short time, and for a very short time it is mine. The roadhouse is my parents' house at the back and in front I have added a veranda café.

Not a good career move, but I sell a few beers and noodles with chilli and lime to whoever is around to buy them.

I'm an old lizard woman now, not a fish. As old and dry and barren as this land. I watch the sunsets over the desert and a glass of wine, and I feel life as wide as the sky.

# WORLD RECORD FOR LONGEST SONG

*By Katelyn Romaine*

So there she is on paper, my mother.

I hold the book, heavy as chopped firewood,

push my finger over the black ink.

In 1976, it says, she held the world

record for singing the longest

with a Catholic girls' choir. I won't say

how long – by the time you're done with the poem

you'll forget anyway, and that's the way

it should be. I will say that her eyes

are the colour of this ink, and her hair too,

and that the key to loving my mother

is somewhere in a long sad song

sung in a group, with words that sit thick

on the tongue, words like cherubim, faith,

or mother. The key is to imagine

her like that – like a tuned harp,

a tiny girl with a dry throat and a full bladder,  
hungry maybe, holding hands with another girl,  
vibrating with song. These songs were sung at funerals,  
weddings, written centuries ago by lonely beautiful nuns

with quills, copied by lonely beautiful  
priests, sung by those plaid-skirted girls  
in 1976, the words claiming squatters' rights  
in their throats and minds,

until thirty years later, I heard them flapping  
their Daedalus wings out of her memory.  
That is the sound of a woman leaving her family.  
Your child is too close to the sun,

myths are seeping into your songs, mother.  
All I remember is a kind of indistinct humming,  
a black name in a book. But what a thing to pretend  
to be remembered for. Singing as if you'd never stop.

# MOTHER AND DAUGHTER

*By R.J. Astruc*

A shout.

Boo hears the sound through the open window of her office. She stops what she's doing unloading grenades from a shipping canister and tilts her head. Listens until the shout comes again, this time louder and sharp with fear.

It's funny, Boo thinks, how people always sound more like animals the more frightened they are.

Setting aside the shipping canister, Boo takes a gun from her desk drawer and goes outside. The iron walkways of the flying hangar are slippery and slick from sea-spray, and a light mist makes it hard to see for more than ten metres ahead. Solar lanterns gleam from the eaves of hi-houses, and Boo uses them as a guide navigating by them the way olden-day pirates once navigated by the stars.

The shout again, hoarse, hysterical. And then another voice, a familiar one, saying: *I've got you, I've got you, I've got you*, over and over like if they say it enough times it'll become the truth.

Boo comes to a crossroads and at this point the mist lifts and she can see what has happened.

What is happening, and continuing to happen as she watches.

There is a girl hanging over the side of the walkway. Fifty feet below her swinging feet the ocean of Atalantik rolls and rumbles, licking foam from its lips. Lying on the walkway is another girl, Boo's daughter Alleluia. She's holding the hanging girl by the wrist but Alle is small and skinny and too weak to drag the girl all the way up.

Boo holsters her gun and goes over to the two. Before either can speak, she's hoisted the hanging girl up and over the walkway's railings.

Silence, then.

The rescued girl wobbles clumsily on the balls of her feet and sobs and runs. She vanishes into the fog and Boo and Alle stand side by side, mother and daughter, and watch her go.

You pushed her, says Boo matter-of-factly.

Alle shakes her head, like: no, no, it wasn't me, but Boo's not an idiot. She can see the lie in her daughter's hunched shoulders, in the twisting line of her mouth. Alle is twelve years old and looks just like Boo, if a prettier, sweeter version of Boo and Boo suspects (now, more than ever) that her daughter thinks like her too.

You should have finished the job, says Boo. Stepped on her fingers. And then left. No one'd know, not with the mist.

Alle says nothing, doesn't move. If Boo didn't know better, she'd say it was shock. Except it's not, because Alle looks like Boo felt, the first time.

Boo smiles. She puts her hand on her daughter's shoulders; gently, she guides her home.

# BLACK MAGIC WOMAN

*By Joel LeBlanc*

A black magic woman  
dressed in a chicken-feather gown,  
kneels in the water and  
scoops up the starlight  
trapped within its surface.  
It's as if she's attempting  
to baptise the hands and feet  
and eyes that have never seen  
ruby slippers, or glass slippers,  
or dresses made of spun gold.  
As if she could wash away  
the dirt that she feels, or the  
memories of eyes tilling her skin.  
As if the starlight in her fingers  
would leave heaven forever,  
just to remain the garden of her hands,  
filled with soil and soap and seeds.

# LIKE & KIND

By John Medaille

The clean train sped through the good city. The train was streamlined in soft corners and it was the light blue of a beneficial pill. Ichiro McGee sat on his nice seat on the safe train.

*"I love myself,"* the train told him.

The train's voice was equal parts unmasculine and unfeminine, it was a warm and omnipotent nag, it was as compact and contained as a walnut and as pliant as a ball of hair.

*"Everything is getting better every day,"* the train told Ichiro McGee. He winced once each time the train spoke, momentarily ruffling his forehead into concentric v's. Outside the train, the city smelt like new paint and strong soap. Whiffs and puffs of its floral, astringent aroma were trapped in the train with Ichiro. He smelled it on his clothes and in the insides of his nose.

*"I deserve good things and wealth,"* the train told him in its neuter's voice.

The city outside of the spotless windows of the train was watercoloured: flaccid yellows and pinks and limpid blues, healing Easter greens. No reds, no blacks. The walls of the new buildings were smooth plastic and architectureless and they generated their own low inner heat from the interior. Bubble-lettered billboards on the antiseptic buildings said PEACE IS POWER. They said CHOOSE JOY.

The train said, *"I radiate positive energy. I can feel it crackling between my fingers and shooting out of the ends of my hair."*

As the train passed a plaza, Ichiro saw men in pleasant, plastic suits. In the flashing, smooth half-second of the train's passing, he saw them gently picking up clods of grey rubble with silver tongs. He saw them dissecting a tall, metal statue of a man with a brave, angry face and an onyx-bladed sword. The statue man was looking into the future and pointing his sword at it. The men in plastic were cutting the statue into tiny cubes and sealing them by the spoonful into unopenable yellow drums. Then the train moved on and the plaza was gone.

*"I let go of the past. I thrust it from me with both hands,"* the train told him, and he winced.

The train glided on magnets without a clatter or chuckle, but it swayed, woozy, to the left and the right.

There were other passengers. They wore downy, shapeless robes and comfortable sandals. They sat quietly, jouncing with the train's motherly sway. They stared ahead or closed their eyes. Ichiro McGee scratched at his knuckles and his forearms and the tendons on his neck and the red grizzled place under his chin, then he put his hands on his terry-clothed knees and clutched them there. Skin cells hung in the air around him before being vacuumed away into nowhere by the kind train.

*"I am immune to negativity,"* the train told everyone.

The interior of the train was arranged just so, so that there were no right angles, no mean and biting corners. The carpet was robin's egg blue and smelled of sweet and aromatic herbs. The light was filtered and scoured clean. The handrails were padded and germicidal and correct. It was a good train.

*"I express my emotions in a positive manner,"* said the train. Ichiro McGee bit the insides of his cheeks. His lip twitched and a

vein pulsed and bulged under the pale, fish-fleshed runner of scar that went from his hairline to the lobe of his right ear. A welt spontaneously formed on his stomach under the robe. The welt was shaped like Antarctica. He squirmed.

*“My mind is calm and serene. It is the surface of an untroubled ocean,”* the train told him.

Ichiro opened his mouth, then closed it.

He opened it again and said, “I killed six soldiers in the Battle of Quintana Roo. Four of them were U.N. and one was Chinese Army. I don’t know what the other was. They will be my slaves in the afterlife.” He did not say it loud, but the other passengers heard him. They edged away from Ichiro, to the doors, and waited.

*“Today has limitless possibilities,”* the train told them.

In a minute, there was a high, melodious, electromagnetic whine and the train slowed for the station. The doors sighed open onto the platform and the other passengers were swiftly exhaled out of them. The train farewelled them:

*“Goodbye, Kiku McGinty. Be well.”*

*“Goodbye, Shiru McKay. You can be complete again.”*

*“Goodbye, Aki McKenna. People honestly enjoy your company.”*

Ichiro McGee did not get up. He sat in his seat with his hands folded, locked together, joint to joint, alone in the car. In a little while, a man appeared at the door of the train. He wore a bright uniform, as neon pink and infra-red as the smell of chlorine. His chest was covered in stickers and medals of valour: a happy sun, hearts, and circles. The man in the uniform sat down in the seat to the left of Ichiro. The train did not move. It floated over the rails, doing nothing.

"Did you hear what I said?" Ichiro McGee asked the man in pink.

"Yes, we heard, Mr. McGee," he said.

*"I choose healthy relationships,"* said the train.

"That's not my name," said Ichiro. "Ichiro McGee. These names you gave us are so disgusting. They have no order."

"But that is your name," said the man in the uniform, "and it will continue to be so for the remainder of the Therapeutic Interim, Ichiro McGee."

"No," said Ichiro. "No. I remember my own name. I am Juan-Susano Caracalla de Izquierdo. I am descended from the Conquistadors. They crossed the Atlantic in filthy boats and killed the Aztecs and their gods. They roasted men alive on spits to get their devils out. They slept with the Aztec women and made me."

*"I have compassion for every living thing,"* said the train.

"Yes, Ichiro," said the officer. "That's right."

"Have you ever heard of The Black Legend? It was made up by some womanly, Europeanized intellectual, like you. It said that the Spanish were a bloodthirsty people and predisposed to cruelty. They placed no value on human life and delighted in the suffering of others. They said it was something in their brains, Cortez and the rest of them. I can't believe that. It is idiocy. Have you heard of that? The Black Legend?"

"I've heard of it," said the man in the pink uniform. "Do you want to go back to the Joy Camp, Ichiro? Is that why you're saying these things? You did very well, you know. You made a lot of progress. Do you want to go back?"

"No."

"Did you like the Joy Camp?"

"It was okay."

"Are you taking your medicine?"

"Yes."

*"I am a good and moral person,"* said the train.

"I hate that voice," Ichiro said. "It sounds like a little, fat man with a stunted, tiny testicle. I hate hearing him on the train and in my bedroom and in the bathroom when I'm having a bowel movement. I think that he keeps on talking when I'm asleep, and when I dream, I dream that the little fat man has parachuted into the jungle, and I'm in the jungle under a jacket of wet leaves. There is war paint on my face and I have been living on a diet of tree rats and army ants. I spy on the little fat man for several days in the jungle. He tries to find berries to eat and he has a fear of snakes. I make note of his actions to give a full report to my superiors. On the third night I rise up out of the swamp and creep behind the little fat man and I strangle him with a wire. He has sores on the back of his neck from where the stinging insects have bitten him. I use firm and steady pressure with my thumbs and the wire cuts through his windpipe and his head falls off into the grass. That's what I dream about."

*"I am successful in my chosen field,"* the train said.

"There's no little man, it's just a computer," said the man in uniform.

"Still, that is my dream," said Ichiro.

"Are you getting ten hours of sleep each night?" The pink officer had curly hair and round, wet-looking lips. "Are you drinking water?"

"I can't do this for twelve more years," said Ichiro. "It's killing me. What you're doing is killing me."

"I don't think you're going to die," said the man in the pink uniform.

*"I choose nutritious food, fresh fruit and exercise."*

"The Therapeutic Interim was calculated to be the exact length of time for your national psyche to heal itself. It has suffered horrible trauma and needs to be restored to a state of wellbeing."

"I miss spicy food," said Ichiro. "I miss meat. I miss eating meat. I'm tired of all the celery."

"There are deep bruises and lesions on your collective unconscious. It is essential that--"

"We're being punished for losing the war. I miss all the cars. Why don't you let us have our cars? This whole city used to be filled with such wonderful cars. Big, ancient, iron Chevrolets from America, held together with tape and putty. Do you remember those old cars? And music. No one in the world knew how to play a brass trumpet like us. None of you know what to do with one. There used to be broken glass all over the street." Ichiro spat a glob of gluey spittle onto the floor of the train. The pale carpet drank it in and soon there wasn't a wet spot.

*"I am whole,"* said the train.

"You're not being punished, Ichiro," said the man, "We all want what's best for you. We love you very much."

"You hate me because we tried to take over the world. Because we're conquistadors."

"You are a victim, Ichiro. Your leaders gave you a unhealthy philosophy of being..."

*"I am confident and caring."*

"...and a deeply self-defeating and schizophrenic mode of expression. You will get better. I believe in you. You are proud and strong."

"I'm not a victim, I wanted it more than anyone. You are torturing us, with this ... castration. You should have killed us. We would have killed you."

"Oh, I don't believe that, Ichiro. You are a nice man."

"I want to kill you and take your land. I want to take your women from you. I want to beat you with a piece of pipe and march you into an oven and turn on the gas."

The man in pink smiled widely. "That's okay, Ichiro. Those feeling are perfectly normal. Is there anything else you want to talk about this afternoon?"

Ichiro folded his arms around his belly. "No," he said.

"Are you sure? Are you sure there isn't something else you want to discuss?"

"No."

"I think you might," said the man. "Think about it."

"I can't think of anything."

"I think that if you think about it very hard, you'll have something you want to tell me. I believe that you are capable of making very healthy decisions for yourself."

*"Embrace the love that you deserve,"* said the train.

"I don't know," said Ichiro.

"Yes, you do."

Ichiro held his face in his hands. "Well..." he said.

"Yes, Ichiro? What is it?"

"It's something that I have."

"Something that you kept?"

"Yes."

"Where is the thing that you kept?"

"I don't know."

"Is it under ground, Ichiro?"

"Yes."

"Where underground? Tell me where."

"It's in my back yard. I buried it there."

"You buried it? In a bag?"

"Yes."

"*I am a winner,*" said the train.

"It's buried under a bush. That's where I keep it," Ichiro said.

"Under the tomato plant?"

"Yes."

"And what is it, Ichiro? What did you bury?"

"My uniform. My captain's uniform from the Jaguar Guard. With the feathered helmet. And the insignia for the Order of the Winged Serpent. I'm sorry. I'm really very sorry that I did it and didn't tell you." Ichiro was crying little, dry, concentrated tears. "I wanted to unbury it and put it on and see how I look in it and the boots. I wanted to look at myself in front of the mirror. But I didn't, because I didn't want you to see. *Lo siento. Lo siento. Perdona me.*"

"Is that still what you want?" asked the man in the hot pink uniform. "Do you want to wear the clothes under the tomato bush?"

"No."

"Do you want to dig it up? Or do you want it to stay under there?"

"I want to dig it up."

"Are you sure?"

*"My contributions to society are valuable and necessary,"* said the train.

"Yes," said Ichiro.

"And what will you do when you get it out of its muddy bag? Will you try it on and turn around for the mirror and see how you look? Will you see if you look the same?"

"No."

"What will you do?"

"I'll give it to you. You can put it in one of the yellow drums."

"We can do it together," said the man in the uniform. "Would you like to do that with me?"

"Yes." Ichiro laid back into the cushions of the still train, boneless. The man in pink wedged his bright, nylon arm under Ichiro's back and gave him a sideways hug.

*"I am worthy as a person."*

"I think this is a very positive step," said the man.

"I think so, too," said Ichiro McGee.

everybody happy?

WE-WE-WE

& to hell with the chappy

who doesn't agree

-e.e. cummings