

Radial Citizens

PAUL A.
GREEN

Signage

Old citizens are baffled by the changing street names and the constant mutation of street furniture. The Mire, that stinky thoroughfare through the Pork Market, has become The Oakdene Bio Centre. The new street-lights in Mobility Way look like concrete gallows; and those metal seats in the Main Square have surely been designed with built-in ankle restraints. Landmarks like the Central Toilets have disappeared while every night the barrage of noise from the Hospitality District reverberates across Radial City, pumping through the thin walls of their supposedly safe apartments. Ratty boys with small gleaming knives might lurk in the tram shelters. There's death-ray gossip. The senior citizenry have lost control, the flux is overtaking them.

So this morning a small group of them are staggering up Baphomet Street, weighed down by the plasterboard effigy of a Battle Toad, which they intend to incinerate outside the Bureau, in protest against this violent computer game which is obviously corrupting the youth and causing these disruptions. 'Battle Toads Poison the Youth-Mind!' proclaims the wobbly brown lettering on their banner, hand-painted by Mrs Van de Graeff herself, although this stalwart of the Elder Citizens Alliance is too wheezy to come out today, and her place at the head of the little procession is taken by the veteran poet Charles Kenning, the Bard of the Bungalows as he was known in his hey-day. He feels uneasy - and chilly - on this bright windy day. Perhaps this Battle Toads business is over-rated. But he has a bardic duty to the Elders; and has prepared an ode.

Rampage

Old folks want a spectacular. Those babels are boom boom boom. Their books talked in deadly slices. They've got a shout. Official glassworks will frag into zillions. The downsized were seeking a burning. Hang on to those crucifixes in the

lobby. She slid on bloodied marble. Trousers were twisted in the pastel corridors. Mr Sands was in the Chelsfield Room licking the lead paint. They were hurling the new phosphorescent food, they were all over the atrium and all the pseudo-pergolas. To sing high and low in the shattered bureaux as they shat.

A spiral of history attacks. Have a flutter of burning tiles. G-g-get a grip on your false balls, we're coming through. That old Fat City looked so good on TV. Get the good old Fat look, look out dearest Fatty, you bubbler. Dig the repetition, breaking in and out the City Road, he was seized by time-bends but lurked onwards and inwards, to rip out the new radiators, flood the blood banks.

Each bit of a bit holographs the whole system, you can hold it high against the glitzy light before you die.

Storage

On the upper floors of the Bureau the computers were dreaming, as per normal. They were not totally disconnected from the CCTV systems on the lower levels that were gathering data on yet another senile incursion. Nevertheless, cries could not penetrate beyond the seals on the 13th floor, the massive carbon-fibre portals were in place and in the main server room the boxes were humming nicely. 'Our work goes on regardless,' Dr. Morphy told his new team of white-robed assistants. 'Our information lives in maximum security because of the critical nature of our research. You may recall that the Institute of Random Studies has tasked us to investigate the nature of consciousness and its relationship with probability-waves in an evolving multiverse of urban contexts.' His eyes swiveled across the little group clustered around the central rack of dream-modules.

Amelia Brunskill swallowed hard. Even by Bureau standards, Morphy was notorious for his intolerance of failure and his wayward procedures with young assistants. 'There may not be a ghost in the machine,' he said, gesturing at the nearest unit, 'but there is no reason why we should not attempt to create one. And monitor its synthesised dreams... You're familiar with the ongoing procedures?'

Amelia looked surreptitiously at her briefing notes. For some years Morphy's department had tried to replicate the work of earlier experimenters by overloading networks with random data, from which specially devised software would construct the most plausible narrative regardless of external constraints.

'We can duplicate the effect of by-passing the reticular formation...' Morphy turned to a holographic model of a greenish brain that floated indistinctly at eye-height over the consoles, and gestured at the brain stem. 'We can replicate the chaotic sensory input of daily life by scanning in audio-visual samples stored on the Intercontinental Lobe - news clips, action kinema, sex-loops and so forth.'

Amelia glanced at a monitor on the far wall. In an empty factory, two masked semi-nude women, ghostly and pixellated, were whipping each other with fiery ropes. Below them a banner of flickering digits slid across the screen before it blacked out - and flipped to a still image of a rusty desert.

Morphy cleared his throat. 'We cannot as yet replicate the unique subjective *qualia* of dream-life, the encoding of trauma in a significant narrative. If we could resolve dreaming, the conundrum of consciousness and its relationship to

alternate reality scanning would be cracked.' When Morphy got rhetorical, his assistants recognised that his libidinal cathexis was ready for discharge.

He glared around the room once more. 'We now need to scan and digitally store the memory-traces stored in the biological brain of a human subject. His - her - dreams of Radial City...' His gaze settled on Amelia. The hard drives whirled and murmured. No one spoke. Then she felt an intern gently grip her shoulders, to settle her in the chair as they began shaving her to apply the electrodes.

Footage

battle toads red-eye alert/your character was timed to explode/blazing flakes of armour/jellied glass/toads rummage the death pot/stop that mating in the cafe bourgeois/lollipop hallucinogens suck suck sucker/death breath wake-up call out/a stout party of old boys reclined on glass tables/so she blended with the electrified chairperson/toads will roast in their death holes/victims of a special effects goon/they walked down the street towards her arse/grotto creatures rose up through the gratings/you have ninety-one lives/he's gonna sprout fresh tissue/toad squeals/waggle that trumpet over the parapet/ portals melt at the tremolo of my voice/toad-to-toad shoot-out/go to level thirteen/kill the walrus/this is an inspirational dream of manually operated foot-skills/select neutron bomb for maximum emo power/the ligature tightened him up/toads are raining tonight/some rays slurped around corners/crack that dump in seconds/ in a fizzle of genes she evolved/all post-human buggers grow here and there/speech by toad/they were toast/

BRAND 25

Dotage

Charles Kenning sprawls on the pavement. He dropped his ode in all the excitement - nobody was listening - and has somehow smeared his pale springtime suit with blood and dirt. His glasses are cracked and skewed so his point-of-view is fractured and he's deafened by the roar of gyrocopters swooping overhead. But he can pick out the blurred bulk of a Stabilisation Unit half-track (or 'Battle Toad' as they're known by their drivers) moving into the crowd. The armoured vehicle has a rotating turret with a thick nozzle which emits stabilization fluid, thick bubbling gouts of foam that quickly solidify in a mucous crust around the target. Another Bureau concoction. Already great gobs of the stuff are boiling over the turret and rolling towards him.

Using his cane to aid his gimp leg, he levers himself up and hobbles towards an alley, too narrow (he hopes) for the half-track. He glimpses old Mrs Larkin thrashing feebly like a trapped beetle in a globule of cloudy fluid, among a whole pile of fallen protesters whose cries are being half-stifled by the thickening mucous. The Battle Toad roars as the driver tries to swing it into the ally, but it only succeeds in clipping the corner of the Bureau annex, ripping off an allegorical frieze of Radiance Triumphant over Ignorance, which crashes down in a cloud of dust and broken masonry. Thwarted, the driver reverses but Kenning dare not look back, he doesn't want to see what's going to happen to his fellow marchers, he must find a way out of this maze before the whole area is swamped by Urban Guards.

The alley leads into a delivery bay area behind the Bureau. Several Battle Toads have been parked on the far side. A group of Urban Guards are lolling against them, playing some kind of game that involves spitting into a tin can. 'Time to scrape up the jellies,' says the captain in his distinctive brown hat, buckling on a gas gun. Kenning freezes, fearful that the tap of his stick will draw attention but it's too late. 'What you looking at, Grandpa? What planet you on?' They must notice his bloodied trousers half way down his arse. 'Oh never mind him,' shouts the captain, 'there's real work to be done...' Kenning shudders with relief as they pile into their half-track and rumble backwards out of the courtyard.

He wanders through the high grey streets behind the Bureau, trying to orient himself in the direction of Main Square, where he might find a cafe to clean up and recuperate with a cherry brandy. Here there are only shuttered shops and closed offices. The pavements are empty and he can hear distant shouts - and shots? - from the direction of the Bureau. Madness to think that a brigade of seniors could effect an entrance. They were mad old men. The nervy clatter of his stick echoes against the stone facades.

He has a sudden fear that in this city of constant flux there is an agenda to terminate all the Elders, demonstrative or not, who cannot adapt to its high-risk techno-ecstasies. His head has begun to ache and his stomach is churning. Hardly surprising, after his ordeal.

But as he lurches on, the fears multiply. Perhaps the nausea he now feels is really caused by some electronic emanation from the Bureau. He's never been so close to it. He's heard mutterings about side-effects of some sort of precognitive communication system they're supposed to be testing, 'probability waves', according to that strange young man at the Underground Bookshop. And there are stories of horrible accidents all over the City, random electrocutions, so says Mrs Van de Graeff.

He can't help thinking of his grand-daughter, quiet Amelia with the dreamy eyes. Trained as an artist. Her project was to create statues and plaques. 'Predictive art,' she called it. They were to be erected around the City in anticipation of some significant action or event in the future. She got as far as the first one, a small bronze pyramid commemorating the Death of the Unknown Revellers outside one of Uncle Bonnie's dubious clubs, but the Uncle's thugs removed it and threw it in the canal, so her other proposed memorials remained as maquettes, and then, because of her mathematical talent, she was abruptly recruited by the Institute of Random Studies to work for the Bureau... which worries him.

A racing tricycle glides past and across the street a young busker is unpacking his guitar. He looks too clean to be a Rural and the soft chords he's starting to strum give Kenning a reassurance that life is resuming as normal. But it's all young life, like those two girls with the fashionable conical haircuts, probably off-duty artistes from the Dancing Ghost. He swears they're giggling at him as he walks unsteadily towards the corner, only yards now from the Cafe Bourgeois. And a group of youths in kilts are singing guttural songs in a language he doesn't understand. Not a grey hair in sight. What's happening to his old people? When he finally gets a seat in the cafe, broken glasses or not, he will write an elegy for the old citizens. He wishes Amelia was with him, so that he could read it to her. She'd laugh but very gently; which is why he misses her.