

The Cave

by Gareth Stack

The warm breath of a train as it passes by. Streaks of orange and black, and porthole glimpses of the hollow centre of each carriage. The lingering stink of failure. He presses close to the jet stream, close to the sharp edges and jagged protuberances of steel and plastic. Hundreds of tonnes of thunder, a shell of blind kinetic fury, skipping by as though weightless. He tastes ash and carbon, and somewhere in the centre of his head a pounding heart of puss begins to throb. Deal cell angels mix and drift against the too bright and too big cabin lights, as he edges closer, closer.

And it's passed, and the stations empty save for the settling of unfastened props. A vacant stage. Ray steps back, twists a hand and flexes stiffened fingers free from red and purpled palms.

"Monstons magic happy pills. Make the stain of existential crisis disappear. It's a muh muh muh muh miracle."

He turns slow and sharp, face hot and reddening, legs awkwardly sensitive, calves taut and clenching.

"What?"

The midget perches on the cusp of a flaking blue bench. Tiny, his feet dangle inches off the ground, leading up to

bundles of tweed and a shock of red satin waistcoat. A pie bald head perches neckless on his shoulders.

"It's what you're looking for. Or a a am I wrong? Your eyes agree. It's why you didn't jump."

Ray's face itches around clenched teeth.

"What's your problem?" he spits.

The tiny thing descends with a hop, light on thick but tidy legs, and steps up to Ray's side. His round pink head shakes in its starched grey collar, threatening to roll off. Pug features crunch into a tight smile, a grin that's half a grimace.

"Not a pro pro problem, a solution".

He reaches from a depth of cloak and suit and draws out a slight pink hand, adorned with fine white cuticles. Quick and certain he grabs Ray, stepping the pair off the platform.

They topple, Ray backward and flailing. Tumbling over a shoulder on impact, face in the gravel, head ringing from the thump of a rail. The little man on all fours shaking himself, turning and grinning inches from Ray's rising eyes. Teeth seeming jagged, sharpened. Twisting his body to face Ray. Leaping awkwardly for him, as though something inside is broken. Ray turning and shifting his weight to keep the snapping jabbering teeth back from his face. Batting at the vicious thing with his free arm and launching back onto the platform.

"Hollow and aching. Empty and swollen. The taste of iron in your mouth. Shuffling about like drunken toys."

The midget's still on the tracks, voice shrill and keening, eyes reflective and enormous in the darkness. He's snapping at the air, but makes no move to follow. Ray keeps backing up, turns into a run. The voice pursues, unholy, accusatory.

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"Relax Ray. Just Relax and continue."

"Fucking relax... Huh."

"You were describing..."

"You're familiar with the homunculus?"

"I do have a doctorate Ray."

"Yeah, but in psychology right? Not medicine?"

"Cognitive neuroscience actually."

"Right fine. Start with that. Invert the skin, make the eyes bigger. Make them bulbous and yellowed, huge... You've seen pictures of what agent-orange does?"

"I'm afraid I haven't."

"Well read up on it... Or don't, it's bleak."

"And the lips are absent correct? Doctor Philips mentioned that's consistent."

"It's all consistent. You don't change. It's not dreamy, it's not random... No lips, no teeth, no gums, barely a jaw in fact..."

"We can take a break if you'd like, your galvanic skin response is extremely high."

"No... Let me finish. It's what I see. It shouldn't be so difficult to describe... Your mouth... Your jaw is almost non-existent, twisted and shrunken. It doesn't look quite capable of speech."

"But you hear us Ray. You follow what I'm saying, you're coherent... How am I speaking to you?"

"It's not... How you speak is not normal. Your tongue is over large, like your head. It twists and wraps around too much... It kind of licks the words out of your upper jaw. And it sounds watery, and duplicated, as if there's more than one voice. Like a murder of crows."

"Very poetic Ray."

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The house feels tight clutched to the ground; gnarled floorboards aching a sweat of honey varnish into the creaking cooling morning. Shadows of the predawn clouds flicker and scatter pale blues and deep grey streaks through open blinds onto the lightening bedroom ceiling.

Still warm and shaky in a tight damp suit and loose but choking tie he lies, too weak to rise, tracking the progress of the morning, on the shadows of the ceilings hanging dapples.

The night has taken refuge in the dank black magic of the bedrooms open doorway, stirring and broiling beyond the foot of the rusting bed. He shifts his view, edging back on neck and shoulders to eye the itching portal of the doorframe. A creaking rises, growing slowly to a deepening growl of straining wood against dead wood. Beyond the entrance, something is moving.

He grits his teeth and shakes slowly, moving with paralytic stiffness. Sweat roughens the grip of the cheap suits hardened collar, and his neck twists against the stiff coarse fabric, tearing strips from sweat wet dirty skin. A shape emerges from the doorway, sharp curved and stenciled in the cloying dark. It grinds into the room, the agonising protest of stretched timber oiling its path; a soft curving form with loose fluttering skin. He presses back onto the bed, leans hard into the headboard, skull swiveling, twisting away, pupils locked onto the grinding moaning bundle of wood and cloth, as it inches forward.

Softly the fibrous mass begins to whisper, a rising hiss above the groan of stressed and aching wood. Black words in tongues, coil and slick around Ray's feet as the headless thing heaves up onto the stiff and creaking mattress. Words that serve to bind his neck awkwardly to the perpendicular headboard, to affix his flaccid limbs in place, impotent to resist their potency. Its shape is clearer now, wasp waisted and broad

shouldered, capped with a flat, headless, neck stump. The curved maternal form is pinned and cloaked with strips of pleated tartan, jacketed with plaid and mottled with frayed rips of Burberry. Ray's drooling now, eyes sore and dry but scalded open, yearning to roll back, to peel away from this thing, like the skin of his face which pulls off his skull in a grinning rictus.

Brown and stinking of oak, screaming horse pungent whispers against the morning, hauling mist black tongues of fur coat darkness with it, the monster mounts him.

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"So why can't I remember? It's completely discontinuous... I mean I know to some degree who I am. What things should be like... Even if they aren't. But it's as though everything before the last few days is a torn patchwork of images and conversations".

"We're not sure Ray. Some degree of retrograde amnesia is normal with any psychosurgery. You've undergone such a new procedure we can't be certain of its ultimate effect."

"So it's possible I might never remember?"

"There's every reason to believe your memories will return, but a permanent deficit is certainly a possibility we can't discount."

"Don't tell me that. My memories are who I am."

"I'm sorry Ray. We have every hope of a full recovery."

"But you still haven't explained the delusions, hallucinations, or whatever they are."

"It's a rather involved explanation Ray; we've been more concerned with tracking the progress of your recuperation."

"What recuperation? Things still look like... This."

"You're awake and conscious Ray. Any improvements will take time. A degree of depression is to be expected, try not to let it overcome you. With this treatment, perhaps more than any other, your expectations play a role in directing the outcome."

"Dr. Philips... What I see... Is not normal."

"In your case Ray, there is no normal. The neurotrophic we've given you is having an enormous impact on your brains development. It could in theory have had any number of side effects. To an extent the hallucinations you're experiencing are, well, relatively benign."

"Hallucinations? Perhaps... If you could see as I see."

"I'm sorry?"

"The terrifying thing, Dr. Philips, is not so much the images, but the thought that my mind could produce such things. Or worse, the thought they could be real."

"Actually Ray, that's more than idle conjecture. Your scan revealed an enormous amount of neural development and synaptic activity; in many cases in parts of the brain that wouldn't

normally experience the growth of new neurons beyond infancy. Your brain, by inference your mind; it's unprecedented. You're struggling to comprehend perceptions you may be the first to have experienced".

"So now you're saying they're not hallucinations... The monstrosities, there outside the window, the vast black tongues licking at the land. The steel and glass lattices of the false animals. This constricting structure of suckling egg sacks, and coiling fetal worms, is genuinely what keeps me bound to the bed? This, this is real? Well?"

"Try to stay calm Ray, it's not so simple. You need to understand the difference between sensation; the information you receive from your skin, your eyes, ears and the rest of your senses, and perception; the process by which your mind constructs a world, a reality from those sensations."

"The difference between reality as it is, and my perception of it?"

"Not exactly Ray. You've seen those Attenborough documentaries where they demonstrate the wide angled view of the eagle or the wider colour sensitivity of the bumble bee?"

"Of course."

"Well, in both those cases the animal is equipped with eyes that function as extremely sensitive imagining devices; cameras that are partially responsible for that species 'richer'

experience. But we could take another case, something like the wolf; where in addition to an enormous snout, the beast possesses a highly developed interpretive device, a large olfactory bulb that constructs an impression of the world qualitatively different from anything we could imagine. It's not any more or less real than our experience of the world. It's simply different."

"You mean, I have a more accurate perception of reality? Like a sixth sense?"

"In a way perhaps. But of course the changes in your central nervous system are less like evolved adaptations, more akin to random mutations. To a very real extent we can't be certain how much they are your brains attempt to deal with a nonsensical stream of perceptual activity; static it wasn't designed to deal with."

"Like the nightmares I've been having?"

"Like all dreams maybe. I could argue that you're bound to your bed with hospital issue straps, that your movements are restricted because you've been experiencing seizures, increasing your risk of hemorrhage. But of course, it's equally possible that on some alternate conceptual level, things are entirely different."

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It begins like any ordinary dream. Ray is at a garden party, surrounded by tipsy smirking dignitaries, cow toying to one another, vicious behind dead eyes. He wanders through unkempt grass under a sepia sky, wondering at the wildness of the garden. Around him, mimes test the boundaries of imaginary boxes, and silk-mantled jugglers on stilts disturb the waiters, striding over them like Martians from the war of the worlds.

Ray

walks on, the earth becoming cracked and dry, dead like a parched African plain, till up ahead a throne rises from the soil, twisted and organic, gigeresque with the frozen writhing forms of conger eels.

Ray sits, in his arms a manuscript, yellowed and stinking, illuminated with strange glyphs, which somehow he must read. A crowd gathers, separating from the party, summoned through the black words which pour from Ray, unbidden and incomprehensibly eloquent. Each begins to move, shuffling in a dread pattern, a music-less dance, set to the heathen rhythm of the manuscript.

In a circle the width of a room, the grass of the garden begins to brown and shrivel; trees shake and twist like broken marionettes, marques collapse and sink into the drying dusty soil. The dancers jerk faster to Rays hacking rhythm, and beneath the earth a steady murmur grows.

Vague in the dim brackish light, Ray makes out a movement on the horizon. Immense and swift, it approaches on a tight parabola, a billowing comet tail of dust and smoke signing its passage. Details emerge as it draws closer. Form like a snake. A rough carapace of concentric rings, a great yawning shark toothed maw; then it's upon them. A pounding flack of dust and rocks and swarms of headless crickets, which push into Rays ears, up into his nasal cavity, and down his throat; powerless to stop the torrent of hellish words. The worm coils up on itself, hard outer shells grinding against one another, draws back to strike, cobra like; pounces and consumes him.

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"He trekked to a lost temple in the Andes, surviving for months on a Spartan diet of roots and berries, free solo climbed thousands of feet of sheer, vertical rock face, single handily defeating a cabal of ninja monks, trained from birth on a regime of poetry and ultraviolence. Solved an ancient and cryptic riddle, recovering in the process the tetragrammaton, the true name of God; which he used to feed the hungry, establish world peace, and return to life, in golem form, a decomposing William Melvin Hicks."

"I couldn't resist. You should know better than to ask a writer to produce his own obituary."

"Its quirky stuff Ray, we might even print it. Perhaps you could tone down the religious references but... Here I am talking like an editor. Can I get you a juice, or are you going to live up to my lowest expectations?"

"Glenfiddich on the rocks, you old goat."

"Go easy Ray, that's the only one you're getting. Heaven knows what crazy medley of medications they're feeding you."

"Bloody Californians, you won't be happy till we're all drowning in beta carotene and visiting our alchemists to have curses put on our pet psychiatrists... No! You don't actually..."

"Not quite Ray. I try not to entirely conform to cliché. Unlike some inebriate novelists I could mention."

"Better to pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dismally with age. Better to be a character than a footnote Peter. If I was ever anything, I was a character."

"No past tense. I won't have it. You've got every chance..."

"No Peter, I don't. They've never even tried this nonsense before. I actually have very little in the way of chances."

"Then why do it? You could have years left. Time to live out your life with Siobhan and the kids."

"Because of what is Pete. Sure, the diagnosis is early. Certainly there are drugs they can give me to delay the onset of symptoms..."

"Well then."

"You know I nursed my father through the same thing. Four years of gradual degeneration; of moods swings, and tantrums. Dressing him the first morning he couldn't recognise me. Feeding him as he spit the food back at me. Cleaning him when he soiled himself.

No one should die like that. I won't put Siobhan through it, and I won't let myself sink into soulless delirium."

"So instead you're committing suicide?"

"Far from it my friend. I'm taking a chance; a chance at a real life. At worst a chance at a dignified passage."

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Rising to infinity, shelves upon shelves stacked amuck like giant alphabet blocks. A cool breeze drifts from on high, carrying loose sheets with scrambled writing and blurred images that appear half familiar. Each mountain of cases is spaced a few feet apart, narrow corridors with uneven gaps between them. Ray wanders along one, half dizzy at the scale, half lucid of his dreaming state. From the distance, animal moans, carried by the vibration of the cases. Gradually Ray becomes aware that the cases are not empty, but filled from floor to ceiling with a

crazed menagerie of preserved and desiccated creatures. Each animal's unreadably labeled in an obtuse script; but a few he recognises, poking from the mass of strange and foreign carcasses.

In one case the angels of the sea are gathered, pale dragonets, hooked as if fresh caught; Galeorhinu Galeus, half remembered from projected films, in the dusty yellow classrooms of Rays childhood. Another holds the demons of the deep, the alien forms of the Atlantic Football fish, bloated and purpled, and the Chimaera, the freakish Ratfish.

Suspended in a third hang the sharks. Some he remembers, the great bulk of Cetorhinus Maximus, the basking shark, massive and still, poised as if to strike; the sleek and tiny, yet vicious Tope. Many confound him, one red-bellied monster seeming close to a great stickleback, yet with a head that's all teeth and three tiny eyes.

Almost without noticing, Ray reaches the corridors finish, the passage book-ended by another, greater case. Different and infinitely larger than the rest, it rises unbroken above him, so that were it not for the thin diffuse light which seems to drip rather than shine, concealing distant forms, it would dominate even the leering vastness of this place.

Ray stops, preparing himself to look, head fuzzy with histamines and a thick drifting smog of dead skin that makes him

blink and sniffle. He clears his eyes, scraping the lids with grimy palms, and stares, noting the slow shifting forms. This case holds life. Billions of soft, twisting, tunneling shapes, slithering over one another, clinging to the vertical wall of the display. Each seems displaced somehow. Ray can tell they're not to scale, though they vary in length from a finger to a forearm, their constant movement a wet scratching susurrus.

He listens closely, pressing an ear to the cool surface of the case, the glass misting from his breath, voices whispering almost below the threshold of awareness.

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"It's a parasite, Taenia Solium, one of the few planarian like microscopic worms which can eat its way through the blood brain barrier of the meninges. Gnawing through the soft turf of grey matter, multiplying parthenogenically, till it forms a web, a network of stiffening cysts that attach themselves to the brains ventricle cavities. Leading to headaches, nausea, altered mental states, to seizures, and ultimately to agonising death."

"And you took this from his blood?"

"Cerebrospinal fluid. We did a tap to check his transmitter levels."

"Jesus, how could we have missed this?"

"We screwed up. All the symptoms could have had their origin in the Alzheimer's or the neurotrophic. It's something he could have carried for years. There was no evidence of parasitic infestation. Perhaps the Alzheimer's triggered the hatching of the eggs, maybe it was the drug. Infestation can be detected easily enough; it's just not something we ever thought to look for."

"Have you informed him yet?"

"He hasn't regained consciousness.

If he's lucky, he won't ever awake."