



Time Adjusters



Bill Ectric

SEIN UND WERDEN / BOOKS

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Time Adjusters by Bill Ectric

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Introduction

It is probable that more people have read about and/or discussed the Gysin/Burroughs *cut up* technique than have actually read a cut up book from cover to cover. There is a reason for that. The technique involves cutting up pages of text and rearranging them randomly to create spontaneous new prose.

Burroughs himself, in a 1966 letter to Gysin, said, “Many fans told me they found the Olympia edition (of *The Soft Machine*) difficult to read . . . Reading the book over, I could see the point . . . there was not enough narrative material to carry such a load of cut ups and unrelated descriptive passages. So I attempted to give the book a narrative structure.”¹

Burroughs called the cut up method a “sifting panning process,”² and allowed that initial juxtaposition of words “must be edited and rearranged as in any other method of composition.”³

By 1968, Burroughs may have found the best use for cut ups. In a letter to Carl Weissner, he announced that he was “going back to straight narrative,” but would still use cut ups “as an integral part of narrative in delirium and flashback scenes.”⁴

It is in this spirit that my science fiction story, *Time Adjusters*, contains brief interludes of cut-up and stream-of-consciousness material to approximate the fragmentation of time and space in an otherwise (more or less) straight narrative.

Bill Ectric, Saint Augustine, Florida, 2012

1. *Rub Out the Words The Letters of William S. Burroughs 1959-1974*, ed. Bill Morgan (New York: Harper Collins, 2012), p. 243

2. *Ibid.*, p. 44

3. *Ibid.*, p. 105

4. *Ibid.*, p. 276

Time Adjusters

The 1980s were a strange time for me. As much as I wanted to accept the amenities and corporate trappings, I couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong.

Exhausted from working all day in an open bay warehouse under the hot Florida sun, I applied for an entry-level job in the mailroom of the prestigious American Wage Insurance Company. My first day of work in the 36-story building was like entering an air-conditioned promised land.

Here is something I scribbled on a yellow post-it pad during a fifteen-minute morning break:

The wheels are turning now. Wires crackle. The field is in harvest. People water plants for us in the sunny atrium. Every American can read about good health and opportunity in the grocery store checkout line. I want to play Donald Fagan's Nightfly album on the intercom to all 36 floors. I want coffee to taste as good as it smells. Endless paper clips - why would anyone ever need to manufacture another paper clip? International Geophysical Year.

∞

The robed priest lowered his knife blade toward Lisa's chest. Her cute, naked body lay helplessly on a stone slab. The soft spread of her buttocks emphasized the hardness of the stone, and when she raised her head, I could see that the slab had pressed her 1980s lacquered hair flat in back.

Ape-like creatures stood, two on each side, holding her arms and legs.

The simian guards repeated the chant of the priest.

"Ahh, Gammo, d'nah Flah!"

"Ahh, Gammo, d'nah Flah!"

Their chant seemed to open unfamiliar avenues in my own brain, giving rise to a violent goal. Kill the phony priest.

∞

Kids playing, running, hiding, laughing

"Haste!" shouted Jeff. "Haste to this silly contraption of flight!"

"Dinosaurs became extinct 'cause they couldn't shit."

Laughter of children.

"They did not! Who told you that?"

"It's true! The brontosaurus filled up with shit from all the plants they ate and turned into coal and they died. And the tyrannosaurus filled up with oil from eating meat!"

Somebody's older brother announced he was tossing baseball cards into the air.

"Up for grabs!" he yelled as the cards came fluttering down. This was his way of leaving his childhood behind. I got both Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris. But where are they

now? Recklessness! Sometimes I find them, old and faded; other times they are brand new and slick. You can still smell the bubble gum. But sometimes I open the top drawer of my dresser and they are not there at all.

∞

In 1985, I paid two thousand dollars for a white 1980 Toyota Celica Hatchback. The car felt solid, well built. It was fast, and handled great going through the gears. It looked rugged and sleek simultaneously.

Lisa and I were traveling up the coast on old Florida Highway A1A when my Celica broke down in the middle of nowhere. The engine light dimmed as we rolled to a stop on the side of the road. When I stepped out of the car, the silence of the deserted highway filled me with the sensation that time was standing still. An orange sunset made silhouettes of the low-lying palm fronds on the left side of the road, beyond which lay undeveloped swampland. Time wafted back into motion once again when, from the other side of the road, a gentle breeze carried the ocean's salty smell over dunes and shrubs. Dark evening wings spread overhead.

I opened the hood. Battery cables seemed tight enough. The fan belt felt snug when I tugged on it.

I slid back into the driver's seat and said, "We passed a little bar less than a mile back. We could walk back there and use the phone, or maybe get somebody to tow us to the nearest mechanic."

Lisa shoved a manila folder under her seat and rifled through her wallet for a Triple-A card.

"I'll stay here," she said. "Don't ask anyone to tow you, they'll be drunk. Just call Triple-A to come and tow the car."

"Out here by yourself? I don't want to leave you alone out here."

"I'll lock the doors. I don't want to carry the folder to a bar, and I don't want to leave it here unguarded. And I'm wearing heels."

She wasn't actually wearing them. Lisa had kicked off her shoes some time ago for comfort, but I knew what she meant.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Just get back to me as soon as possible, okay?"

"I will."

I listened to the sound of ocean waves from just over the dunes as I walked back the way I came.

Two Harley-Davidson motorcycles were parked in front of Bob's Bait Shop and Bar, a ramshackle structure divided into two parts, each with its own screen door entrance. The bait shop was closed, but a neon Budweiser sign glowed in the window of the bar.

When my eyes adjusted to the bar's dark interior, I saw two bikers playing pool under one of those Budweiser carousels in which a team of Clydesdale horses pulled a beer wagon around in circles through the snow. There must have been an electrical problem with the carousel, because the light sometimes flickered inside it and the horses lurched forward, but when the light went dim, those horses stopped in their tracks.

That's just like me, I thought. I can sit here and go nowhere, or I can walk and walk, or drive for miles, but some kind of loop keeps bringing me back to nowhere.

The place was almost empty, except for the bartender, the two bikers, an old man sitting at the end of the bar, a large parrot perched on a stand, and me. Lights blinked on an old jukebox that played a country song I didn't recognize.

"What'll it be?" asked the bartender.

"Do you have a phone I can use?"

"Only for paying customers."

"Bud in the bottle," I said. "My car broke down..."

I started to tell him that Lisa was waiting for me, but somehow, that sounded lame, leaving my girlfriend stranded and alone.

The bartender said, "My brother-in-law runs a towing service. I'll call him. Might take him a while to get here, but hey, you ain't drivin' so you can drink a few."

He turned and disappeared into a back room through a curtain of beads.

I sat down on a barstool. One of the barstool legs was a quarter-inch too short, allowing me to rock absent-mindedly to the steady, mid-tempo beat of the music.

The beer was ice cold and delicious. My mind drifted back to the day I first got involved in the time-light-bending problem at the American Wage Insurance Company.

A new laser technology used orbiting satellites to intercept light waves that bounced off the Earth's surface, bend these waves forward through a series of prism & mirror relays, and back to Earth, thereby capturing reflections of the Earth's future topography, to analyze potential sites of floods, earthquakes, and other disasters. Nobody imagined that the enormous flux of energy between the Earth and the Sun would cause actual disruptions in time and space, but that is what happened.

The cost of homeowners' insurance often combines space and time into a single construct. An indivisible premium is ameliorated, tied to inflation, meaning that a single universe has three dimensions of space and one dimension of time. The dwelling policy (DP) is used for two aspects of a unified field theory. Special relativity homeowners' liability is adjusted to an inflation factor or a cost index. Scientific people know that Time is only a kind of seasonal/secondary residence, or age.

I felt awkward at first, working in an office, wearing a dress-shirt, a tie, slacks, and loafers. The preppies and yuppies of my own age or younger seemed to be in on some knowledge to which I was a stranger. Like I wasn't sophisticated. Nevertheless, I enjoyed seeing the girls in their expensive skirts, hose and high heels, hairstyles and perfume.

Lisa had started out in the Mail Room just like me but was now an Assistant Underwriter. Her real interest was fraud investigation and she had taken some chemistry and forensics classes at night. By '80s standards, her sandy blonde hairstyle was only moderately big and sculpted with Aqua Net.

I met Lisa because of Arthur "Arth" Hampton III, the 23 year-old surfer grandson of the president of the company. Arth was the coolest person I met at American Wage, besides Lisa. Even though he came from wealth, he was casual and unassuming. He readily admitted that he would rather surf than work in an office.

The first time I met Arth, he was listening to Frank Zappa on a Walk-Man, singing along, but you couldn't hear anything but his voice because he was wearing headphones.

"Dynamo Hum!"

"You listening to Zappa?"

"What?"

"Zappa!"

"Oh, yeah," taking off the headphones. "You dig Frank?"

"I do."

You should check out his *Baby Snakes* video," he told me. "With Terry Bozzio on drums."

"That's the one with clay animation by Bruce Bickford, right?"

"Yeah, and it's got footage from a 1977 Halloween concert and all kinds of shit."

"I've seen clips of the animation on TV!"

I learned gradually that Arth tended to hide a keen, intuitive intelligence behind a beach-bum-slacker image. Well, he really was kind of a slacker, too. I didn't blame him for not wanting to do the dreary day-to-day paperwork. I wouldn't have done it, either, if I didn't have to. One time Lisa expressed surprise when Arth explained how the Italian violinist, Paganini, had been the inspiration for a guitar composition that Steve Via wrote for the movie *Crossroads*.

Arth had a way of speaking with wry humor in his voice, like when Lisa asked how he knew about the Steve Via/Paganini connection, he told her, "My dichotomous nature is legendary..."

Continuing our retrospective of this decade's movie blockbusters, Reagan appeared on national television to say the weapons transfers had an Australian post-apocalyptic Mad Max 2. Volumes of documents relating to the scandal were destroyed by renegade androids and the subject of an arms embargo aimed at younger audiences.

Operation Iranian Crossroads, a diplomatic blues mission. Old Scratch, kid.

Between free minutes, a legendary American headed victim. One Robert Johnson.

∞

Something is wrong. It is nighttime in my apartment. I am watching a 1960s TV show called *Death Valley Days*, starring Ronald Reagan as a cowboy. Reagan also did some of the commercials, still dressed as a cowboy, but stepping out of character to tell us how he and the rest of the crew use Borax waterless soap. Tonight, I notice he is holding something he calls antibacterial soap. It seems out of place. I call Lisa for the first time, having just asked her for her phone number in case we needed to discuss our underwriting project.

"Hello?"

"Lisa, this is Bill, from work."

"Oh, hi, Bill."

"Well, I see you gave me the right number."

"You're testing the number?" she sounded amused.

"No, just kidding. I wanted to ask you something. It's kind of off-the-wall, but you've

studied chemistry, right?”

“I have.”

“By any chance, do you know when antibacterial soap came out?”

“Came out? You mean, like, in stores?”

“Yeah, in stores.”

“Pretty recently,” she said. “I’m almost certain it was only within the last couple of years. Pete Dooley probably knows. You should ask him tomorrow.”

“Good idea, he’s a clean-freak. Probably knows every cleaning product ever invented. But I don’t recall ever hearing of antibacterial soap when I was a kid. Do you?”

“No. I mean, it might have been invented, but you didn’t see it all over the place.”

“Right,” I said. “But I just saw a 1960s TV commercial with Ronald Reagan advertising antibacterial soap.”

I filled her in about *Death Valley Days*.

“Maybe it was CGI,” ventured Lisa.

“CGI?”

“Computer Generated Images, like in *Tron*.”

“This looked like the real thing,” I said.

“CGI looks pretty real.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe.”

“What other explanation could there be? I don’t think he would do a commercial as Governor.”

“It couldn’t have been when he was governor, anyway.”

“What?”

“Still not recent enough.”

“He’s still governor, I’m pretty sure.”

“You’re joking, right?”

“About what?”

“President Reagan.”

“You think he’ll run for president? I doubt it.”

That wasn’t the first time I noticed things were getting strange.

∞

The square headlights of my white 1980 Toyota Celica flashed to high beam as I tried to get a better look at two signs in front of a swampy tract of recently cleared land.

Lisa read the signs aloud, “Mangrove Construction, Future site of Global Interlinear Business Center.”

We sailed north along a desolate stretch of State Road A1A, past smatterings of scrub pines on sandy ridges, interspersed with more clearings in various stages of development. Some tracts already bore concrete slabs or earth moving equipment.

Lisa said, “While you were sleeping late from watching reruns of *Death Valley Days* all night...”

“Research,” I said. “Burning the midnight oil.”

“Yes, well, while you were sleeping off your research, the FBI questioned me about

the light-bending project,” she said. “They want to talk to you next.”

“How did it go?”

“Arth gave me a ride to the FBI building.”

“You rode in his black Lamborghini?”

“Yeah, Arth said he wanted to be present when they interrogated his team members, but when we got there, they separated us.”

“Did you have an attorney present?”

“No, I supposedly have immunity.”

“Supposedly?!”

“I don’t know how these things work!”

“Well, Arth should know! Did they question him?”

“They’ve already questioned him a couple of times.”

“What did they ask you?”

“Mostly stuff I really didn’t know the answers to, about kilowatts and radiation levels. I told them the only thing I knew for sure was that the project’s been delayed until further notice. But you’ll never guess what I got.”

“What?”

“A confidential file.”

“From American Wage?”

“No, FBI.”

“FBI? How the hell did you get that?”

“This is the funny part,” said Lisa. “Arth told me later that he wasn’t surprised when they separated us. He kind of expected it. So, while he was waiting for me, he overheard an FBI supervisor telling a field agent about a new set of golf clubs he got for his birthday. Next thing you know, Arth was inviting the supervisor and the field agent to a round of golf at TPC Sawgrass.”

“Arth has a membership at Sawgrass?”

“His father does, but listen to my story. Arth told me the agents all have cocky attitudes, because most everyone they haul in for questioning gets nervous and submissive, except for Arth, who is never intimidated by anything, and I think he kind of out-alpha’d all the other males.”

“Out alpha . . . ?”

“You know. He told me he’s been around when his father and grandfather were dealing with bigwigs, and being comfortable helps the other person to be comfortable, and they let down their guard. The supervisor took Arth into his office to show him a golf trophy. A clerk came to the door and asked the supervisor for a moment of his time, so now it was just Arth and the field agent, who volunteered to make a coffee run. Arth tells the guy he wants Half & Half, two sugars, and an extra black coffee on the side, or some damn thing like that, so it’ll take a while before the agent gets back. I’m walking down the hall toward the exit, after being interrogated, and Arth sticks his head out of the office and says, ‘Psst! Lisa, here, take this,’ hands me the file, and says, ‘There’s a copier at the end of the hall...’

“Why you?” I asked.

“Why me? I’m on his team! Besides, he couldn’t do it; when the field agent got back with the coffee they were going out on the veranda to smoke cigars!”

“Did you keep the original file?”

“No, Arth said to leave it under a couple of reams of paper that were stacked on a table beside the copier, and he’d figure out a way to get it back into the office.

“Where’s the copy?”

Lisa reached under the passenger seat and pulled out a manila folder.

“Can we turn on the inside light?” she asked.

“Sure.” I clicked on the overhead interior light. “What does it say?”

Lisa read from the file

Operation Caveman

Synopsis

The primitive anthropoids observed working at private loading docks are most closely related to Australopithecus (ô-strā'lō-pith'i-kus) Afarensis (uh-fah-ren-sis), which made its appearance in the evolutionary chain approximately three million years ago. The main differences are, while Australopithecus (hereafter referred to as Austra for singular, Austras for plural) rarely grew taller than five feet; these anthropoids are approximately six feet in height, with massively developed upper bodies and vice-like strength in their hands, making them well-suited to the heavy physical labor they were performing. The females have noticeably larger hips and breasts but seem to share equally in the work. Facial characteristics of these Austras are more simian than human, with low foreheads ridged prominently over the eyes, flat noses, and protruding jaws with sharp teeth. They wear overalls and steel-toed boots, but we assume that their bodies are as hairy as their exposed arms, hands, shoulders, and heads. The anthropoids apparently work at the loading dock by choice, not under compulsion, most likely in return for compensation. Whether this compensation is in the form of money or some other reward we have yet to determine. The Austras do not appear to have any political agenda or affiliation, nor is there any evidence of alignment with a union.

Before I could comment on the FBI report, the *check engine* light came and I felt the car slowing down, even as I pressed on the gas pedal.

“Damn!”

“What is it?” said Lisa. “What’s wrong?”

“Engine trouble.”

“Déjà vu, too.”

“I was thinking the same thing.”

“Déjà vu, too.”

“I was thinking the... hey!”

∞

Developed by a company called Global Interlinear, the Light Bending Technology had both champions and opponents, usually divided along the lines of conservative and liberal politics.

The liberal vice-presidential candidate had written a book about saving Mother Earth in which he said, “The current use of Light Bending Future Form Capture is placing an unfair disadvantage on the poor by targeting future disaster areas and denying coverage. Then there are the unknown effects on the environment from the actual bending of time itself.” The conservatives called that the crackpot theory and said, no, it is not really reflections of the future, but simply predictors, like seismographs for earthquakes and volcanoes. The public drove to work every day, listening to these debates on the radio, like it didn’t mean a hill of beans.

Look for the LABEL: The Beastie Boys’ Fifth Rose, 11 percent by volume in real terms. Cautious correspondence and diversification of hip-hop genre into more complex style of old-fashioned Keynesian stimulus. Sample it, Brother Volcker. Double-digit Loop!

NOTIFICATION TO RECIPIENTS: If you have the power of media context, which gave many of these passing phenomena greater innovation, the crisis of Carter’s malaise, the Adventures of Grandmaster Flash, it’s Morning in America, popping out of black backgrounds, a startling contrast to jelly beans. Acceptance.

∞

Arth asked Lisa if she wanted to be on a committee to plan new procedures for the Underwriting Department. They needed two people, so she recommended me.

“What would I be doing?” I asked.

“Underwriters review applications for homeowners insurance and decide which property is acceptable to insure.”

“I heard that Pete Dooley was interested in that.”

“Arth said I can choose my partner,” said Lisa. “He wants people who feel comfortable working together. Pete Dooley is weird.”

The Underwriting Department was on the 19th floor. It was a lengthy office space with plush carpet and a row of desks placed considerately along the large plate glass windows, so we could look down at The Riverside Mall across the street. The Riverside Mall was a two story, semicircular building full of retail stores, restaurants, bars, and other attractions. Within the semicircle was an outdoor courtyard where people strolled around, sat on benches, watched a clown make balloon animals, and threw coins into the lavish fountain centerpiece. The open side of the semicircle faced the Saint Johns River. Boats and yachts could dock there for special events. Further out, the occasional sailboat or barge drifted by. The scene from our 19th floor office was beautiful on a sunny day, and thrilling on a dark, stormy day.

File cabinets and office equipment lined the inside wall, opposite the windows. At one end of the oblong department was a break room. At the other end was the office of Mr. Thompson, or as we called him, The Bear. A big, jovial middle-aged man, Mr. Thompson was Department Head of Underwriting, as well as one of the Vice-Presidents of American Wage Insurance Company.

Arth, with an unlit cigarette perched casually over his ear, asked Lisa and I to join him in the

Bear's den, which is what he called Mr. Thompson's office. Arth's grandfather, Company President Arthur Hampton, Sr., was in there, as well.

Mr. Hampton's manner put us at ease. Sparkling eyes under bushy eyebrows softened his creased face. He spoke to Lisa and me in a low voice, as though taking us into his confidence.

"I just wanted to meet you," said Mr. Hampton. "Mr. Thompson tells me that you are both bright, eager to learn, and that I can count on you to be professional. Arth says you like video games and are comfortable with computers and other new technology, like satellite TV. AND, I'm also counting on you to keep an eye on this grandson of mine, and to keep HIM professional, will you?"

"Granddad," Arth smiled as he popped the unlit cigarette in his mouth, "You know us business executives need to stop and smell the roses once in a while."

"Yeah," said Mr. Hampton, still looking at Lisa and me. He motioned his thumb toward Arth and said, "This one likes to stop and smell the sea oats!"

This was a reference to the tall coastal grass lining the inland edges of the beach. The old man knew Arth liked to surf during working hours.

Mr. Thompson walked us out of his office, saying, "I'm sure you have some work to finish up before we get underway."

"I'm going down to the newsstand," said Arth.

Mr. Thompson gave a hearty laugh and said, "You never read a newspaper in your life!"

Arth smiled good-naturedly and said, with the unlit cigarette dangling from his lips, "Did I say anything about reading a newspaper?"

This was apparently an ongoing joke between them. Since there was no smoking allowed in the building, the young surfer/executive always said he was going down to the newsstand when he wanted a smoke.

That's when I walked past Pete Dooley's cubicle, where he sat glaring at me bitterly. He became motionless, as if frozen in the act of wiping his computer terminal screen with a damp paper towel, frowning at me.

Dooley could have been anywhere between thirty and forty years old. He had a neatly barbered salt & pepper flattop haircut, a forehead stippled by some long-settled contest between worry lines and acne, shoulders hunched like a repressed vulture, and slimness due more to poor nutrition than fitness. His clip-on bowties, well-pressed white dress shirts and black slacks were at odds with the clodhopper work shoes he wore every day, reminding me of a preacher in one of the more austere Protestant denominations.

Liquid screen cleaner ran down the terminal screen from the wet paper towel he still held pressed against the screen in mid-swab. Dooley turned quickly away from me and continued cleaning. I noticed how organized and immaculate he kept his cubicle. No paper clips, rubber bands, loose papers, or personal items cluttered his desk, not even a photograph. He spaced his telephone, stapler, and desk calendar in a straight line, an equal distance from each other. At the far end of Dooley's desk were a spray can of Lysol, a spray bottle of screen cleaner, and a pump dispenser bottle of hand sanitizer. Antibacterial.

“Pascua Florida!” shouted the Spanish conquistador.

That is Spanish for “Festival of Flowers” or “Flowery Easter,” which is what Ponce de Leon said when he and his crew arrived by ship in Saint Augustine, Florida, only days ago. Another ship had found its way from Atlantic Ocean to the Saint Johns River, via the Intracoastal Waterway, and docked near the Riverfront Mall. Half of the Mall was gone, disappeared, as though chopped off and replaced by a forest. The jungle explorers were gathered around a fire in the woods, yet only a few yards away was a section of the popular clothing store, Banana Republic, as though it had appeared from another time.

A Spanish Conquistador exclaimed, “Cantando árboles!” which I later found out meant “Singing trees.” He referred to the music emanating from audio speakers hidden in the landscaped plants, flowers and freshly sculpted crepe myrtle trees.

I watched from the second floor of the warped-off structure, above the Banana Republic, near the entrance to Fat Tuesday’s, a bar with a Mardi Gras motif that served those icy slush drinks, potent with alcohol. The Spanish explorers began, warily at first, to approach the 1980s shoppers, who may or may not have assumed that the Spaniards were dressed for some Mall publicity event, the way the employees at Banana Republic always dressed in safari gear. I caught sight of Arth Hampton carrying a tray of drinks into the midst of the foreign explorers. Laughter and revelry echoed against the walls. The Banana Republic’s tight-jeaned safari girls and Fat Tuesday’s gaudy theme of green, purple and gold seemed perfectly in step with the 16th Century uniforms of the Spanish Conquistadors.

∞

The jukebox in the small dark bar played the same song again. Not quite country and not quite rock, neither fast or slow, but satisfying with its spring-loaded rhythm and reliable beat. A biker built like a bull was racking billiard balls for another game of pool. He was bald with a thick roll of flesh on the back of his neck. His long sideburns curved up and joined under his nose to form a mustache, but no beard. The other biker approached, pool cue in hand, stroking his long gray beard. His silver earring reflected red and blue light from the flickering Budweiser carousel above the pool table.

A bird, perched on a stand near the pool table, squawked, “Awwwk! Floreeda!” This caused the man with the gray beard to hesitate in making his shot. He looked at the bird and then resumed the game. As he lined up his stick, the bird squawked again.

“SQUAWWWK! Pascua Floreeda!”

The man gripped his pool stick like a baseball bat and swung it, *whacking* the bird’s head clean off. The head went flying and landed with a plop into a full glass of whiskey where an old man sat nodding at the end of the bar. The splash woke the man up. It was hard to tell if he was weeping or laughing as he wheezed a heartfelt response to the grisly surprise in his drink.

I said, “You killed the crow!”

“It’s not a crow,” said the tall, bearded dude who had whacked the bird’s head. “Why did you say crow?”

The bartender said, “I’m gonna try to call my brother-in-law again,” having never

mentioned that the first call was unsuccessful. He disappeared once more into the back room.

The old man was snoring.

The other biker, with the sideburns mustache, walked around the table and joined the one holding the stick. They both looked at me seriously.

“What?” I asked.

“Why did you call it a crow?”

“I don’t know, I..”

“Do you work with crows?” asked graybeard, frowning at me.

I said, “I work for American Wage Insurance.”

They looked at each other in surprise.

I said, “Maybe I got that TV commercial on my mind.”

I remembered an ad slogan for our company, from a TV commercial. It shows an airplane delivering supplies to hurricane victims. The camera pans to a crow perched near the top of a wet tree, and a voice says, “American Wage delivers the help you need. Faster. As the crow flies.”

I tried to shrug off the aggressive tone of his question.

“You know,” I said. “As the crow flies?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s just a slogan,” I said. “For American Wage Insurance Company.”

“What do you do for American Wage?”

“I’m in the Underwriting Department.”

The two bikers looked at each other again.

“Underwriting,” said mustache to graybeard.

“You probably know Arth Hampton,” said Mustache Man.

“So?” I asked. “Mr. Hampton owns the entire company, if that’s what you mean.”

“I bet you guys have had to answer a lot of questions lately,” said the bald biker.

“Did you happen to pick up anything while answering questions?” asked the other biker, stroking his gray beard.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You come in here gabbin’ about crows.”

“I came in here gabbin’ about nothing.”

“You went picking up things that don’t belong to you? Reading about prehistoric times?” asked Fat-Necked Baldy.

I couldn’t think of anything to say. My mouth was dry. I took a big swig of beer.

“Did you remove a file from someplace?” the gray-bearded Harley rider finally came out with it. “Maybe around the time you were being questioned? Just tell us the truth and you won’t be in any trouble. We just need to know.”

Graybeard opened his chained leather wallet and showed me a badge.

“FBI,” he said. “I’m Leonard, this is Skinnerd, or as I like to call him, skin-head. Maybe you can help us.”

“Are those your real names?”

“Did you steal an FBI file?”

“No. Why? What are you talking about?”

“But you know who did.”

“Why would I know anything about a... a, what did you call it?”

“You’re an underwriter, aren’t you?”

“Learning to be,” I said.

“Well, the file went missing after we interrogated everybody in the Underwriting Department.”

I thought Arth had returned the file, but said nothing.

Changing the subject, I asked, “What’s all this about crows?”

“Well,” said Leonard, still holding the pool cue, “I’ve only had to capture or kill about a hundred crows which all had satellite chips implanted in them.”

“But,” I said hesitantly. “That wasn’t a crow you just killed. You said so yourself.”

“Yeah,” he mused. “I guess I’ve just reached the point where I hate all birds.”

I suddenly remembered Lisa.

“Can you give me and my girlfriend a ride to Kings Bay, Georgia?”

“Is she the girl in the white Toyota Celica?” asked Leonard.

“Yeah, how did you know...?”

“One of our guys towed your car and gave your girlfriend a ride back to Jacksonville. Made sure she got home safe.”

“But we were headed to Kings Bay,” I protested.

“You don’t want to go to Kings Bay,” said Skinnerd. “We’ll give you a ride back to Jacksonville. And, seeing as you’ve been reading our files, which by the way, is a crime, we might as well tell you what’s going on. We’re willing to overlook the theft if you help us. It’s hard enough to tell who’s on whose side, or if there is even a side to be on. Your company agreed to deactivate the big dish in Key West, but somebody’s been putting small chips on crows, so when an entire flock flies from point A to point B, they act as one big satellite dish to catch the light waves. It only takes a few minutes to get a reading, and the deed is done.”

“But every time they do it,” continued Leonard, “something happens somewhere. Different times merge in certain locations. We’ve been following this shit for weeks. We’ve lost people! They disappear!”

“What about the cavemen?” I asked.

“The *Austras*,” said Skinnerd. “Australopithecus. And the Spanish explorers, and God knows what else. We’re trying to keep tabs on them. Hell, the CIA is trying to keep tabs on them. But it’s become a political issue, and a Constitutional issue, with some people calling for us to leave them alone, other people saying to send them back, and besides, there are more urgent matters to attend to.”

“Like what, exactly?”

“The whole insurance thing!” said Leonard. “You must have heard about it on the news. Nobody who needs insurance ever has it. ‘Epidemic of bad timing’ is what they call it in the news. They think their home is covered, but as soon as they have a damage claim, and the claims adjuster goes out to examine the damage, it turns out the policy has lapsed. We suspect the adjusters are pirating Time-Light technology and triggering retro-non-renewals when they detect a future loss.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“We want you to go back to work and gather information for us, but it’s gonna be weird.”

“It’s already weird,” I said. “Who’s the President of the United States?”

They looked at each other.

“Chester A. Arthur,” said Skinnerd.

“Oh, God!” I wailed, feeling dizzy.

“Just kidding!” snorted Skinnerd. “It’s Reagan.”

“Asshole!” I grumbled.

“Sorry, man.”

“Which term?”

“It varies.”

I did not intend to spy on my friends at American Wage, but I went along with Leonard and Skinnerd just to buy some time, talk to Lisa and Arth, and figure out what to do next. The FBI agents gave me a ride to what used to be the Riverfront Mall. There were trees all around it, which hadn’t been there before, at least not in my lifetime. We were in the jungle-like woods that existed here in the 1500’s. Just a section of the Mall was here, like it was chopped off and set down in the forest. The Banana Republic clothing store was on the first floor. On top of that was Fat Tuesday’s, the wild purple & green bar, a flight of metal steps leading up to the bar’s second-floor entrance. At the bottom of those steps was the courtyard fountain surrounded by trees that extended into the Spanish explorer’s campsite. Maybe they thought it was the fountain of youth. Not far from here was the American Wage Insurance building.

While people must have been aware of this bizarre situation, they were somehow adjusting as if they were either in denial, or maybe they perceived the changes as gradual, the way parts of a city can change over time so you don’t notice it.

At least we didn’t have to worry about Pete Dooley every day. He had requested, and received, a transfer to the company Print Shop, where, in his words, he could do an “honest day’s work and avoid the office politics.”

The American Wage Insurance Company had grown so big that they now printed all their own application forms, policies, policy riders, stationery, and other documents. The print shop was actually below ground, under the first floor lobby, the basement.

∞

The 1980s were not completely void of guideposts. Max Headroom nattered from the television screen in my apartment, speaking telepathically of William Gibson and cyberspace. Comic books wanted to jump from the newsstand into my hands, but I thought, incorrectly, that I was “too grown up watch the Watchmen.” Philip K. Dick’s aura still lingered strongly, reminding me to keep my watch and check in on a regular basis. This I accomplished by cutting up and rearranging pages from magazines, books about art and printing, movies, and world events.

The key to light drove parliament sideways over rolling magpies. Rollicking industrialists frolic in new club polo shirts. Oh, grievous chimp. Aluminum blue soul congregates inside limits of peace.

Where do lithographs years settle between Warhol and Delacroix?

Goya would spare the last old limestone lithograph of Abraham's bosom. Water is faith, right. The sacrificial poster is different after drawing with a pie chart crayon hand. Rather not a description, more a symbol. Chemical kill, must place Kierkegaard third, lamb takes his question instead. Foxe's Book of Martyrs. On the retelling, Warhol reacts with Isaac's risk medium, though for Cappiello to begin, his father allows the Beatles to question his world.

∞

Pete Dooley confronted Lisa one day in the break room when he thought they were alone.

She and I were on our afternoon break, around 2:45 PM, and were the only ones in the break room. Lisa sat down at one of the tables as I walked over to the coffee maker.

"Just enough left for two cups," I said. "The good stuff."

"Hmmm, the strong, bitter stuff," she said.

"Want me to make more?"

"No, it'll be okay." She picked up a handful of sugar packets from a bowl on the table and leaned forward, looking into the bowl, saying, "I don't see any Sweet'N Low in here."

"I'll get some from the pantry," I said, placing the two cups of coffee on the table.

Inside the small, walk-in supply closet known as the pantry, I scanned the shelves. Cups, napkins, dairy creamer, Little Debbie Snack Cakes, and, aha, there it was, a big box full of Sweet'N Low packets.

Just then, a familiar voice jarred my nerves with its cracked, unsociable pitch.

"I know what you're doing!"

It was Pete Dooley talking to Lisa. I could see her sitting at the table, looking up at him. The half-open pantry door blocked my view of Dooley and blocked his view of me.

"What?" said Lisa.

"I know what you're up to," Dooley stuttered. "I don't have to p-put up with it."

"What are you talking about?" she said, a bit nervously.

"Using your influence," said Dooley. "Using it to get what you want and skip right over people. Because it's not about who is most qualified anymore. I could file a grievance, but I know they would take your side."

Lisa looked worriedly toward me. Dooley followed her gaze as I walked out of the pantry. I thought I heard him gasp quietly when he saw me, but he quickly recovered his composure.

"I don't care who hears me!" he said. Then, to Lisa, he added, "Are you aware you are destroying the ozone with that hairspray?"

I had to stifle a laugh as Dooley turned and marched out the door.

"What was that all about?" I asked.

"I think he applied for your job and didn't get it."

"Has he been with the company a long time?"

Before Lisa could answer my question, young surfer Arth walked casually into the break room wearing a rumpled but expensive blue-gray suit.

"What crawled up Dooley's ass?" he asked.

"He was really rude to Lisa, man," I said. "What's that guy's problem?"

“What’d he say?” asked Arth. “Hey, if I make some more coffee will you help me drink it?”

“He was talking about filing a grievance or something,” said Lisa. “I can’t drink any more coffee. I don’t even want the one I’ve got.”

“Oh? Are you sure?”

“It’s old.”

“Can’t be too old,” said Arth.

“It’s fine,” I said. “What’s Dooley’s problem?”

“How long has Dooley worked for American Wage?” asked Lisa.

“Long time,” said Arth, picking up Lisa’s cup of coffee. “His mother worked here for, like, twenty years. Pete got hired just before she retired, then she died.”

“Aww, that’s sad,” said Lisa.

Arth continued, “He’s worked at entry level in almost every department. Doesn’t get along with many people, but nobody wants to fire him.”

“He’s weird,” I said.

Arth, in that way he had of saying things with wry humor in his voice, added, “He’s a legacy.”

∞

The Spanish Conquistadors made their way from Saint Augustine up to Jacksonville because they heard about Mayport Naval Station. Then somebody told them about the submarines at Kings Bay, Georgia. Probably Arth. Of courses, they had to see those! According to rumor, the Base Captain allowed one of the Conquistadors to board a submarine, which then submerged briefly for a routine drill, and the Spaniard disappeared. After a thorough search, someone theorized that he had returned to his own time, either because the time-light waves couldn’t penetrate the combination of deep water and the hull of the sub, or because it was a nuclear powered submarine, or both. It was haphazard as hell, like most things the government wants us to believe they have under control.

Lisa and I, although not as drastically removed from our own time as the Conquistadors or the *Austras*, still wanted a way out of the disconcerting day-to-day fragmentation. We thought the base in Kings Bay held the solution, if we could only get there.

Thousands of years ago, pre-Columbian Native Americans inhabited the Kings Bay area. Acceptance of an application by the insurance underwriter created a myth that glorified years of wandering. Claims adjusters practice their own culture written in blood-soaked stones. Can you feel a presence? I feel a presence. They feel drawn down to the sea in ships. The Sacrificial poster is different when Goya and Delacroix draw with romantic battleship gray. Rather not a description, more a “misery index.” Place Kierkegaard third in line, for now the ram will take questions. The inquisitor began when his father added him to the policy rider. In 1798, Goya would spare the last old limestone lithograph of 1978 Jimmy Carter faith.

∞

It was sort of business as usual in the American Wage Insurance building. People were trying to carry on their usual routine, like the British during the air raids in World War II. Mr. Thompson, the “bear,” called us into his office.

The Bear leaned back comfortably behind his desk, absent-mindedly digging wax from his ear with a Bic pen cap, and said, “We’re all under orders to not talk to the media about the Time/Light Bending debacle, which we officially will not use until further investigation. Also, don’t go down to the basement.”

“The basement?” said Lisa.

“Did you know,” said Mr. Thompson, “that the Empire State Building has a creek running under its basement? True fact.”

The Bear enjoyed telling interesting facts to the people who worked for him. We enjoyed sitting around in his office, listening to him.

“Our building has tributaries from the Saint Johns River running under it. They say we’re safe, but I don’t believe it. Fat Tuesday’s lost its restrooms to the woods when the time shifted over there. That didn’t bother the Conquistadors and it didn’t bother me.”

∞

Arth Hampton was teaching two Spanish explorers, Juan and Cristo, how to surf, in return for one of their 16th Century metal helmets. This typically took place during Arth’s extended lunch breaks.

Lisa and I once joined them on the beach during our lunch break. I parked my white Toyota Celica beside Arth’s black Lamborghini. My tie fluttered in the wind as I walked around the car to open her door. Lisa slipped off her shoes and stockings and scrunched little bare footprints in the sand.

Out on the ocean, Cristo caught a wave. I watched him rise up on his long surfboard, plant his feet, and balance with his arms as a wave lifted him and his board upward and forward, toward the shore. He wore neon-bright Hawaiian swimming trunks. He fell into the water and disappeared for a moment, then stood up in the shallow water and approached us, carrying his surfboard. Behind his wet black beard and mustache, he seemed to have a big smile on his face. His ears, nose, and forehead were tan, but his body was relatively pale from wearing a long-sleeved uniform and chainmail. Arth and Juan rode the next wave toward the shore in similar fashion.

At sunset, our group migrated to a popular nautical themed bar on the Beachfront Boardwalk called Seadog Willy’s. The song *Brandy* by Looking Glass played on the jukebox. Lisa and I were drinking Coronas and standing in front of the jukebox, deciding what songs to play next. At a nearby table, Arth sat pouring shots of Tequila for Juan, Cristo, and himself, demonstrating the salt and lime custom. Arth was wearing the helmet. They had entered that alcohol-induced looseness that transcends language barriers, talking excitedly, grasping and repeating words and phrases from each other.

Cristo poked at his own chest, saying, “Corazón!”

“Heart?” said Arth. “Heart!”

“Corazón!”

“Corazón!”

“Heart!” said Cristo, laughing heartily.

A little while later I happened to see Arth in the men’s room.

“That Cristo is a hoot!” said Arth. “You know what he said?”

“What?”

“He told me that when his ship was anchored off the coast of Mexico, they saw an Aztec funeral for a Mexican elder who died of old age, and these Aztecs ate the dead man’s heart.”

“He saw it?”

“Yeah, but some of his fellow soldiers went back to Spain and told everybody the Aztecs were rampant cannibals, so they would have a better excuse to attack them and take over their country.”

“Bastards!” I said.

“But that’s not the best part. Somehow the word got back to the Aztecs about what he said, which of course pissed ‘em off, so when these Spanish soldiers returned to Mexico, the Aztecs said, alright, fuckers, and ate the sons-of-bitches for real!”

“No way!”

“Alive!”

Arth and I returned to the table laughing as though it was the funniest thing we’d ever heard.

“What’s so funny,” asked Lisa.

Arth and I just laughed and shook our heads. Arch poured everyone another shot of Tequila and slapped Cristo on the back.

At two o’clock in the morning, Arth, Lisa, and I were sitting on barstools outside on the patio at Seadog Willie’s, facing away from the bar, looking at all the empty tables and chairs. Arth was blowing smoke rings into the air. The Conquistadors had returned to their camp. Arth knew the bar owner, who said we could hang out after closing time while he cashed out the registers. I leaned back and rested my arms on the bar, so that one of my arms was touching Lisa’s back.

I was just about to close my arm around her when Lisa stood up and walked to a magazine rack against the far wall, next to the door.

It was a rack of free publications, like the Auto-Trader, the Beach-Trader, Entertainment Weekly, and so forth, but Lisa picked out one we had never seen before, called *Veridical*. She opened the magazine and read aloud from it:

In 1981, using embryonic stem cells taken from mice, scientists began cloning experiments. Those who came before us theorized that John F. Kennedy was antichrist due to the passage in the Book of Revelation that says the “beast” will suffer a lethal wound to the head, but will rise from the dead. Now, however, while Ronald Reagan cannot run for a third consecutive term, we must consider the possibility that he will return. If the prophet of Revelation interpreted Alzheimer’s disease as a “head wound,” stem cell research will regenerate Reagan’s brain, thus fulfilling the prophecy with space-age efficiency. Look at how the Food

and Drug Administration, in 1972, demanded that contact lenses manufacturers use space-age plastic instead of glass. And where did the technology come from?

NASA!

NERO!

NOVUM!

The sterile laboratories are false in their cleanliness. They are Godless because their cleanliness derives from unnatural, synthetic lies. He who is last shall become first. He who must work among the germs and pollution of heathens shall inherit the priesthood over a land made pristine by the reversal of sin and time.

Lisa interrupted her reading to interject, "Reagan has Alzheimer's? I haven't heard..."

"Let me see that?" said Arth.

Lisa handed the magazine to him.

"60 pound white offset paper stock," said Arth. "This is what we print our policies on."

Lisa asked, "Does Pete Dooley still work in the print shop?"

"Nobody works down there now," said Arth. "When the forest materialized outside the building it caused structural damage. The Saint Johns River is too close for comfort. One crack and the basement could flood."

"The Bear said something about that. Why are we still in the building?"

"The basement walls aren't load-bearing. There's a whole separate foundation outside the basement walls."

"Maybe Dooley is still down there," I asked.

"Yeah," said Lisa, "because this sounds just like something he would write."

"You know why Dooley never got promoted?" Arth said.

"Because he's crazy?" I asked.

"That never stopped us before," said Arth. "No, he threatened one of our adjusters for denying a claim on some storefront church he was working with. The Old Man wanted to fire him on the spot."

"Why didn't he?"

"Hell, man . . . Granddad says it's harder to fire people than you think."

"It's got to be him," said Lisa. "Printing this...what's it called...Veridical? What does that even mean?"

"No idea," I said.

"Something about...something," said Arth. "Reality?"

"Oh, here it is," said Lisa, looking at the cover. "In small letters under the title, it says *coinciding with reality.*"

"Oh, yeah, I've heard of that," said Arth. "If you say something in the future tense it's non-veridical, because it hasn't happened yet. But the past tense and present tense is veridical."

"How do you *know* this stuff?" I said.

"What happened to Dooley's church?" asked Lisa.

"Fire," said Arth. "Electrical, I think. But their policy had lapsed. There was nothing we could do for them. Man, he was pissed off."

“If Dooley threatened an adjuster,” I said. “I don’t understand why you guys didn’t fire him.”

“Well,” said Arth with a hint of wry humor, “It was a *veiled* threat.”

“Veiled?” said Lisa.

“You know,” Arth continued, “He said it was a misunderstanding and all. I guess the Old Man decided to give him another chance.”

∞

The solid centerline of the desolate state road warned us of the possibility of oncoming traffic in the other lane. But we hadn’t seen traffic of any kind since the sun went down on this undeveloped stretch of land.

“Guess what I got,” said Lisa, brandishing a file folder.

“An FBI file?”

“How would I get an FBI file? No, I copied some pages out of Pete Dooley’s notebook.”

“That spiral notebook he’s always carrying around? You snoop!”

“Well, after everything he’s been saying, I think I’m justified.”

“Okay, you’re not a snoop,” I said with giddy excitement. “You’re a spy.”

“I like that better.”

“What does it say?”

“Light, please.”

I clicked on the interior light. She read from Dooley’s longhand notes:

Ungodly advertisers. Stained with blood and ink. Lithograph wax polymer vs. soap made from animal fat and ashes, dripping down the sides of sacrificial altars, flows into the river where primitive women wash garments – the discovery of soap. A sign from God. Cleanliness next to Godliness. A command to remove the unclean marks of sin. Washed in blood. Eat the heart. Teflon is made from fluorocarbons (fluorine + carbon), carbon is the basis of all life, found in the burnt ashes of life, but Teflon is synthetic. Reagan was called the ‘Teflon President’ ... a ‘Synthetic President’ shall rise, wounded but lives, synthetic life – the beast! It repels water unnaturally! He sanctions Light Bending Technology for big business campaign contributions, top brass, military brass, polished brass, sanction the brass serpent on top of the staff! A sacrificial sign. Clean the world in the purity of a blazing Patmos vision.

“My God,” I said.

“And the irony of it is that’s probably not how soap was discovered.”

I just looked at her, baffled.

“Soap,” she said. “Probably wasn’t discovered by animal fat dripping down an altar.”

I couldn’t think of anything to say.

“According to my chemistry professor,” she added. “But, hey, he could be wrong.”

∞

The next morning, as Lisa and I walked from the break room toward our respective cubicles, we noticed Arth leaving Mr. Thompson's office at the far end of the room. He walked to the nearby exit and gave a quick, sideways tip of his head to indicate we should follow him.

In the hallway, we caught up with Arth as he entered an elevator.

"I'm on my way to the hotdog vendor on the corner," he said. "Care to join me?"

As the elevator doors closed, I said, "Arth, you know that old saying about trying the same thing over and over, expecting to get a different result?"

"It's a hell of a thing," he said.

"I've tried to pinpoint the moment Lisa and I decide to drive to Kings Bay..." but my voice trailed off with the sudden realization I might be having blackouts.

"It's like being on a Mobius strip," said Arth.

"You, too?" I said.

"Sure, me too. For all I know, it could be the whole damn world by now."

"A what strip?" asked Lisa. "What did you just say?"

"A Mobius strip," explained Arth, "is a strip of paper that only has one side. You make one by taking a strip of paper, giving it a half-twist, and then taping the ends together. You can draw a straight line down the middle of it and cover what would ordinarily be both side of the paper, without ever lifting your pen off the paper."

"Your line meets itself and starts over again," I added.

"Maybe," said Arth only half-seriously, "maybe you're hitting the bump where the ends are taped together, and that's where you forget and start over again."

"Why doesn't American Wage stop it?" I asked.

"American Wage isn't doing it," said Arth. "We stopped that shit almost as soon as we began."

"Pressure from the FBI?" asked Lisa.

"Hell, no. Man, if Granddad wants to do something, the FBI or the devil himself couldn't stop him. He got out of it for one simple reason. He says it's not ethical. And possibly dangerous."

"Then why did we have to be interrogated?"

"So I could get in there and find out what the FBI knows. They don't believe us, anyway. They think we're still experimenting on the sly, and from the way things are going, it's pretty obvious that some of the other insurance companies are still using the technology."

"Who?" asked Lisa. "And why did you let me go on thinking we were only stopping temporarily?"

"Well, the FBI doesn't have to know everything. Granddad says we're playing our cards close to our chest."

"But why?" she asked.

"If the FBI were convinced that we weren't using the light-bending technology, their next step would be to ask us to work with them to find out who's screwing around with it."

"Well, why don't you?" asked Lisa, puzzlement ringing in her voice.

"It's complicated," said Arth, whisking a cigarette out from a pack of Camels and perching it over his ear. "The technology is not illegal. Yet. Just because we don't use it doesn't mean we're gonna start a crusade and start snitching on fellow business people."

"Not illegal?" I said.

“Oh, some Congressman has introduced a bill to make it illegal, but now the politicians have to debate it, change it up a few times, and vote on it, so it might take a while.”

“What is there to debate?” I asked. “Freakin’ Ponce de Leon’s campsite is next to the Riverfront Mall! Cavemen are working at the docks, for God’s sake!”

“Yeah,” said Arth. “And industries have been polluting rivers for years, but they have lobbyists who persuade the government not to stop them. Did you know that GM is building a functional electric car, and California is talking about passing a zero-emissions law?”

I had to ask, “Is it true that the oil companies buy up all the patents to electric cars?”

“I don’t know about that,” he said. “But I do know the oil companies have lobbyists, and I’m sure Global Interlinear has them, too.”

“How can they...” Lisa started to ask, when the elevator doors opened into the lobby on the first floor.

Arth placed the cigarette in his mouth and said, “We’re working on it.”

We walked through the lobby and Arth was lighting his Camel before we even got through the revolving door to the sidewalk.

Suddenly he said, “Oh, shit.”

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“I left my wallet in my jacket pocket,” he said, slapping at all his empty pockets and talking through smoke as he held the cigarette in his teeth. “Damn.”

I reached for my wallet automatically, but only had two dollars.

“I got two bucks,” I said.

“My purse is locked in my desk,” said Lisa.

“Tell you what,” said Arth to me. “You fly, I’ll buy.”

“You were gonna buy, anyway,” I said.

“Yeah, but...” he held up his lit cigarette. “I can’t go in with this.”

“No problem, man,” I said.

“My jacket is lying on the window sill in Mr. Thompson’s office. The wallet’s in the breast pocket. I’ll go ahead and order for us.”

“Two dogs,” I said. “Slaw, onions, and mustard. And a Coke,” and I was on my way back through the revolving door, striding across the lobby toward the elevator.

Moments after I stepped off the elevator on the 19th floor, a wailing, high-pitched siren filled the hallway. Fire alarm.

A stream of people jostled against me, pouring out from workspace as I tried to go back in.

Mr. Thompson met me with a jovial greeting, “You’re going the wrong way! Fire drill!”

“I know,” I said. “Arth asked me to get his coat.”

Mr. Thompson and I had to turn sideways, facing each other, as other employees crowded past us on either side. We had to talk loud over the wail of the alarm.

“His coat?! Ain’t he got five more?”

I laughed, edging past the big man into the room as he edged past me in the opposite direction.

“He left his wallet in the pocket,” I shouted back at him.

As Mr. Thompson followed the last of the evacuees into the hallway, I thought I heard him mumble, “Probably got five o’them, too.”

I found Arth’s coat in Mr. Thompson’s office, on the long shelf in front of the plate glass window, between a potted cactus and a bowling trophy. I wondered what it would look like to see everybody leaving the building all at once, because of the fire drill.

I looked down at the sidewalk. The American Wage Building fills an entire city block. The sidewalk and street below me were empty and I realized that this was the back of the building. Everyone would be exiting from the front and side doors. Looking down to the far right, I could see the corner where the hotdog vendor always set up his cart.

But what I saw was horrifying.

The hotdog man lay motionless on the ground, his white “soda-fountain” diner’s cap knocked crooked on his head. Lisa was struggling against two burly, overall-clad *Austras* as they carried her into the side door of an old, gray Volkswagen van. Arth was nowhere in sight. For all I knew, maybe he was already in the van.

I snatched up the telephone receiver and frantically dialed 911, but something was wrong. I heard no ring tone. I pressed the hang-up button for a second and listened again. No dial tone. The phone was dead.

The van lurched forward from the corner, moving from right to left, passing directly below me. Before it reached the end of the block, it turned abruptly toward our building and disappeared into the entrance of our parking garage. I realized that would put them in the basement near the print shop.

Running out into the hallway, I found the elevator doors closed and unresponsive. The *down* button didn’t light up when I pushed it. In a fire drill, standard procedure is to take the stairs. They must have disabled the elevator to make sure everyone followed the rules.

The only thing left to do was take to the stairs, hurtling down two or three steps at a time.

A noise made me pause on the flight of steps between the third and fourth floor. Leaning on the bannister, breathing hard in my sweaty white shirt, I heard heavy footsteps approaching from below. I glanced cautiously over the railing and was startled to see two *Austras*, a male and a female, lumbering up the steps. I saw the tops of their heads, so close to me, spellbinding with those mythic, ape-like brows that turned slowly upward as they approached the turn. They wore overalls and the female had a rifle strapped over her shoulder. They turned the corner and scowled at me. I wondered if I should try speaking to them.

The female *Austra* unshouldered her rifle. I bolted from the stairwell, into the hallway on the 3rd floor. The first room on the right was the Mail Room, the first place I had worked at American Wage Insurance Company. In that room, I saw one last chance to reach Lisa, from the Mail Room.

The whole building had a series of moving tracks inside the walls. You could put a plastic bin full of mail into an opening on one floor and set the code for another floor, and the bin would ride on the clanking mechanical rollers up or down the track to wherever you sent it. I went to the opening in the wall, where the bins are loaded, and climbed in.

I was careful not to get my foot or hand caught and crushed in the rollers on the moving track, but I forgot about the accursed symbol of corporate slavery, my necktie, and

right away, my tie was seized by the machinery and my face was being pulled down toward the metal rollers. It was rumbling loudly and smelled of oil. I was choking and gripping at my shirt collar. I wanted to stay calm and untie the damn tie but my fingers wouldn't fit into the tightening knot. I was squatting with one foot on either side of the moving track, so I took a deep breath and stood up using all the strength in my legs. With a rip, the tie shredded loose. Standing up, I quickly slipped the remains of the tie off over my head and tossed it down into a plastic mail bin, which clattered between my feet and on down the line to I-don't-know-or-care-where.

Slowly, carefully, I made my way along the path, the machine rattling loudly through the corridors. I climbed down, floor after floor. They had some metal ladders for mechanics to use whenever the track needed fixing.

At last I came to a ledge which overlooked the basement where Pete Dooley, wearing a black hooded robe, had Lisa on the sacrificial alter, naked and helpless on the stone slab. She was conscious, eyes open, possibly in shock, or drugged, looking at the knife in the robed priest's hand. Four *Austras*, two on each side of the stone slab, held her arms and legs.

They chanted *Alpha, Omega*, backwards.

"Ahhhh, Flahhhhh, Ahhhhh, Gaamo!"

The end...the beginning...

The aroma of coffee and blood almost got to me. I thought for a second I wanted to join them. The one thing that clicked me out of my trance was that I wanted Lisa for myself.

I had no idea how to extricate Lisa from this bizarre predicament. Mindless, no-option determination kept me moving, hanging briefly from the ledge by my hands and then dropping several feet to the floor of the print shop. All eyes turned toward me. Rising to my feet, I tried to speak in a tone of reasoning and assurance, but found it difficult to catch my breath.

"Pete," I said. "Pete Dooley. What...uh...what's going on?"

If only I could get close enough to grab Lisa and pull her away from the immediate danger of the knife in Dooley's hand. The *Austras* listened intently to our conversation. The four of them turned their heads in unison to look at whoever was speaking. I noticed that they had relaxed their grip on Lisa, now barely touching her arms and legs.

"You ask me what's going on," said Dooley flatly. "You should know, being partly to blame. And so is she. And so is the greed of big business. And for that, a sacrifice must be made to cleanse time itself, to make time whole again."

"We all want to solve the problem," I said. "We can work together."

"We cannot work together. She saw to that."

"Well, but...please, if I can just talk to you for a minute..."

"A minute?" said the dark-hooded Dooley. "You might well ask for a *minute*. I am here to restore the order of minutes!"

He raised the knife over Lisa's chest.

"As Abraham offered Isaac for slaughter," said Dooley, "I offer this lamb!"

"Don't!" I shouted, running toward the alter, but I couldn't get there fast enough.

He plunged the knife downward, but the movement was abruptly halted by the firm grip of the caveman standing to his right. The *Austra's* large hand slowly pulled Dooley's arm upward, away from where the very tip of the blade had pierced Lisa's chest superficially.

Dooley looked with trembling awe at the prehistoric man and proclaimed, “As the Lord spared Abraham from taking the life of his son, so have I been spared by this noble giant who walked on earth, created in the very image of God!”

The *Australopithecus* jerked violently on Dooley’s arm, hurling him backwards. Dooley screamed in pain and fell in a heap on the floor, entangled in his black robe. He didn’t move.

I walked toward Lisa, not too fast, arms at my sides, head slightly bowed, trying to look non-threatening. Two *Austras* parted casually, allowing me to pass between them. I picked Lisa up with one arm under her back and the other arm under her knees. Pete Dooley’s agenda was obviously not as important to his “assistants” as it was to him. I now recognized the sacrificial slab as an original 1901 limestone lithography stone, used by Leonetto Cappiello, the Italian poster artist.

Lisa looked into my eyes as I carried her toward the exit.

A noise made me look back. A female *Austra* held out a brown paper shopping bag with the Banana Republic logo on the side. Lisa’s clothes were in the bag. I took the bag and started to say “Thank you,” but who knew what noise or action on my part would set off a bad turn of events. I took the bag, gave a quick nod of my head, and walked through the exit, into the parking garage.

My white 1980 Toyota Celica hatchback was a welcome sight, still waiting where I had parked it that morning. I placed Lisa on the hood of the car and reached into my pocket, relieved to feel the car keys.

“Where are my clothes?”

“Right here, in this bag. Come on, get in the car, quick.”

I took her arm and pushed her into the passenger seat.

“Help me get dressed,” she said, sitting sideways in the car with her feet still on the concrete floor of the garage.

I dropped the bag of clothes on her lap, lifted her legs, and rotated them into the car.

“Watch out,” I said. “I’m shutting the door.”

On the far side of the garage, three silhouettes appeared in the rectangle of light that was the street entrance to the parking garage. They ran toward us. Arth and the two FBI agents who called themselves Leonard and Skinnerd. Instead of biker jackets, they wore suits. Leonard carried what appeared to be an animal tranquilizer gun and Skinnerd brandished an automatic pistol.

“Is Lisa okay?” asked Arth, peering at her through the windshield as she struggled to pull on her panties.

“Where were you earlier?” I asked.

“Walked around the corner to the newsstand.”

“For real?”

“Why does no one believe I read the paper? Look, as you may have gathered, the shit’s hitting the fan. I suggest you and Lisa drive up to Kings Bay, Georgia. The submarine base. If we can’t reverse this time fragmentation soon, I’ll probably see you there.”

The same bleak stretch of old Florida Highway A1A, running through a vast, undeveloped Florida swamp with nothing in sight for miles.

As we drove, we saw phantoms of gas stations and hotels and casinos. They appeared like mirages, but we knew they were from the future, things not yet built but trying to fade into the picture in the wavy time-lit night, like looking through heated air.

Lisa reached up and turned off the interior light because she had nothing more to read.

"I can't see out my window with that light glaring," she said.

The car sputtered to a stop. The bright red little engine light glowed on the darkened dashboard.

"Shit!" I said.

"Wait," said Lisa. "There was an opening back there!"

"An opening?"

"Through the bushes, a path or something."

"I've never noticed an opening."

We pushed the Toyota backwards to an almost hidden little dirt road leading off into a thicket of shrubs, trees, and sea oats. A middle path, neither forward or backward, previously unseen because of the interior light glaring on the window.

I steered with one hand, walking beside the car, pushing against the doorframe with my other hand. Lisa pushed from the front. The car rolled backwards, off the pavement and onto the dirt path. It rolled bumpily downhill over small rocks and tree roots, until it came to a stop near a small wooden house with no lights on.

The house was deserted. It sat lower than the road, surrounded by trees and brush, virtually hidden. Around back, the ground sloped gently upwards until buttressed by a concrete seawall. Standing on the edge of the seawall, I could see ocean waves lapping at the bottom, and then more ocean, as far as the eye could see. Lisa was exhausted, so I carried her into the house.

We have lived here forever now. The white 1980 Toyota Celica sits in the same spot forever. The trunk is open and full of soil with flowers growing in it. We will never get in that car again. We grow vegetables in the yard and eat oranges from a tree. Sometimes I fish.

We don't know how the rest of the world is doing. I don't know if we are aging. Lisa looks the same to me as always.

We heard on the radio that the American Wage Insurance Company, under the direction of Arthur Hampton, Sr. (Arth's grandfather), became the first insurance company to voluntarily discontinue the use of Light Bending, based on moral and ethical grounds. Not long afterward, American Wage became insolvent due to excessive hurricane losses, and a larger company absorbed them. It seems unfair; that's what they got for taking the high road. Our young friend, Arth Hampton III, made the news a couple of weeks later when he won the first-place trophy in a prestigious yacht race.

A crossroads in escrow, time-adjusted to 1979-1980 U.S. military deals, Carter's blues. In retrospect, continued acceptance of rising fuel prices would have indemnified against the ongoing road stretch of terror.

Then we stopped listening to the radio. We don't want to know what the corporations are doing, or who is President. We don't want to know anything. We just like living here forever.

Biographical Information



Bill Ectric writes to erase the line between mysticism and science, blending the genres of mystery, science fiction, psychological drama, humor, and metafiction. His first novel is called *Tamper*, taking its name from a phrase used by the 1940s pulp sci-fi writer Richard Sharpe Shaver, who believed that unseen fiends were tampering with his mind. Bill's interview with jazz legend David Amram is included in the LitKicks book *Beats In Time: A Literary Generation's Legacy*, edited by Levi Asher. On the internet, his writing appears on Literary Kicks, Spolia, Candlelight Stories, Boston Poetry, Gin Mill Cowboy, Red Fez, The Beat, Empty Mirror Books, Lit Up Magazine, and Metro Jacksonville. Bill appears as a commentator in Steve Aylett's independent film, *Lint the Movie*, starring comic book writer Alan Moore, and is currently editing a book of essays on the work of Steve Aylett, to be published by Anti-Oedipus Press, a subsidiary of Raw Dog Screaming Press.