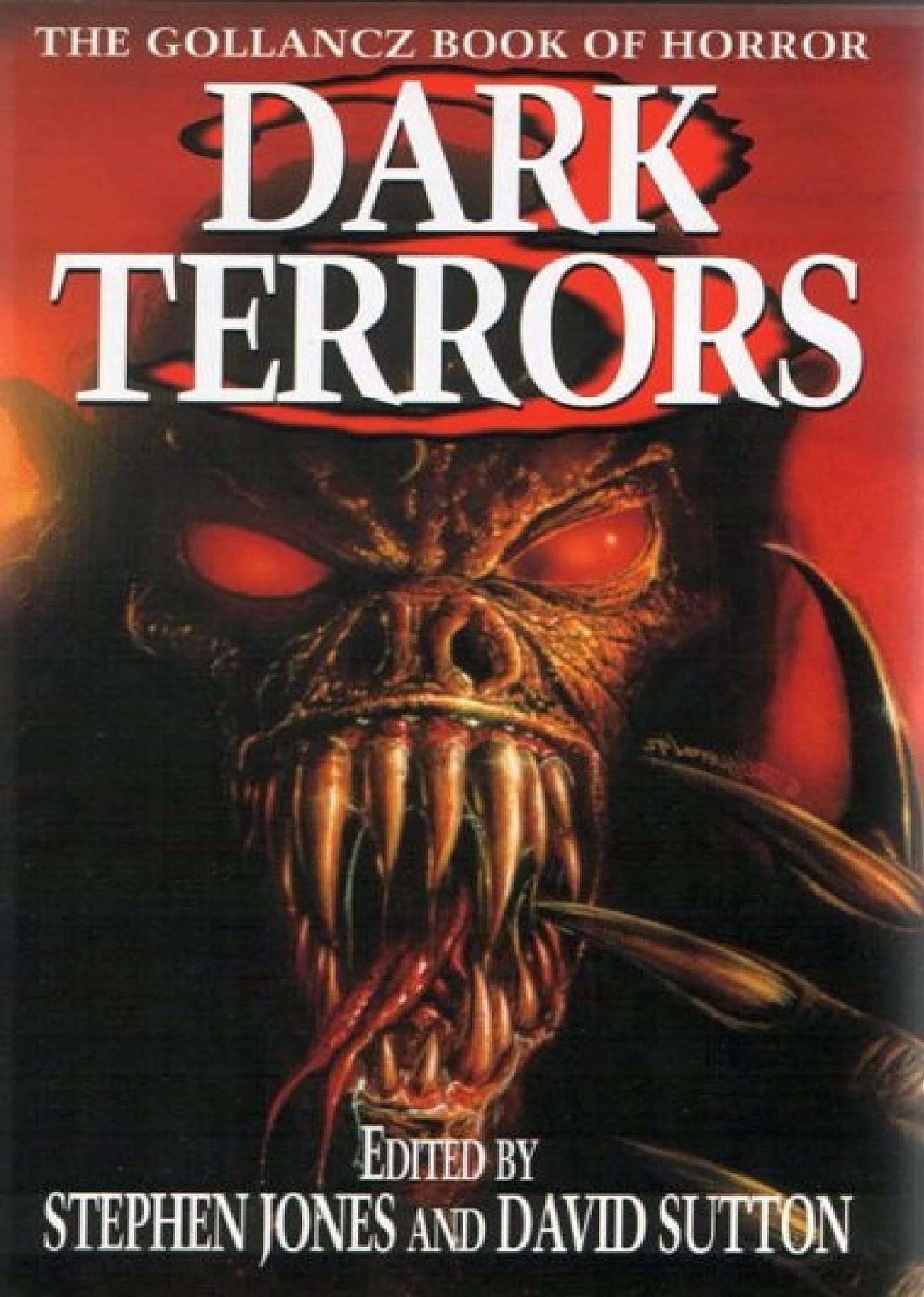


THE GOLLANCZ BOOK OF HORROR

# DARK TERRORS



EDITED BY

STEPHEN JONES AND DAVID SUTTON

## Annotation

The award-winning team of Jones and Sutton once again push the boundaries of fear in this new collection of horror and dark fantasy. Drawing from both sides of the Atlantic, *Dark Terrors 3* features stories by some of the genres' biggest names as well as their rising stars, including Ray Bradbury, Poppy Z. Brite, Pat Cadigan, Ramsey Campbell, Christopher Fowler, Neil Gaiman, Julian Rathbone, Mark Timlin, and Michael Marshall Smith. An anthology that will take you to the furthest reaches of your imagination — and beyond.

British Fantasy Award winner 1998, World Fantasy Award nominee 1998.

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**Dark Terrors 3:**  
**The Gollancz Book of Horror**  
**Edited By Stephen Jones & David Sutton**

## INTRODUCTION

Although he was never actually our in-house editor (that dubious pleasure belongs to the inimitable Jo Fletcher), through his role as Editorial Director, Richard Evans became our 'spiritual guide' when we moved our series of original horror anthologies from Pan Books to Victor Gollancz in 1995.

Born in West Wales in 1950, Richard won a full scholarship to Oxford, where he studied Modern History and where he met his future wife, Ali. They were married in 1979 and had two children, Linnie and Stevie. After earning an MA in Social History at Sussex University, he decided against a career in teaching and entered the publishing industry in 1972 in the copy-writing department at Penguin Books.

Following a short stay at Fontana as a non-fiction editor, he moved to Macdonald/Futura, where he became a fiction editor specializing in science fiction. After moving to Arrow to head up its science fiction line, he returned to Macdonald in 1984 as Editorial Director, where he launched the successful Orbit SF imprint with the help of Senior Editor Toby Roxborough. He quickly became one of Britain's best-loved and most respected editors, nurturing the careers of such young writers as Paul J. McAuley, Mark Timlin, Mary Gentle, Michael Scott Rohan and many others.

In the late 1980s, Richard moved to Headline for a couple of years, before taking over the prestigious Gollancz science fiction and fantasy list in 1990 when Malcolm Edwards moved to HarperCollins.

A serious illness in 1994 resulted in him taking nearly a year off work, but he made a full recovery and triumphantly returned to Gollancz to launch the Vista mass-market paperback imprint.

During a relaxed lunch the week before he left on a business trip to New York, Richard talked excitedly about our line-up for *Dark Terrors 2* (which we had recently delivered). As always, he was positive about the number of newer writers we had included in the book, alongside such established names as Clive Barker, Peter Straub, Harlan Ellison, Ramsey Campbell and Brian Lumley. He was also particularly thrilled that we were publishing a new story by Thomas Tessier, whose latest novel *Fog Heart* he and Jo had just acquired for Gollancz.

Tragically, Richard didn't live to see the publication of *Dark Terrors 2*. Upon his return from New York he was hospitalized with pneumonia and died a few days later on May 26th, 1996, at the ridiculously young age of forty-six.

However, his enthusiasm and immaculate taste continue to help shape the series, and we shall endeavour to ensure that it will always live up to his expectations. This latest volume of *Dark Terrors* is therefore respectfully dedicated to the memory of Richard Evans, an outstanding editor and a fine friend.

*Stephen Jones and David Sutton*  
May, 1997

## Free Dirt

### RAY BRADBURY

The cemetery was in the centre of the city. On four sides, it was bounded by gliding streetcars on glistening blue tracks and cars with exhaust fumes and sound. But, once inside the wall, the world was lost. For half a mile in four directions, the cemetery raised midnight trees and headstones that grew from the earth, like pale mushrooms, moist and cold. A gravel path led back into darkness and within the gate stood a Gothic Victorian house with six gables and a cupola. The front porch light showed an old man there alone, not smoking, not reading, not moving, silent. If you took a deep breath, he smelled of the sea, of urine, of papyrus, of kindling, of ivory, and of teak. His false teeth moved his mouth automatically when it wanted to talk. His tiny yellow seed eyes twitched and his poke-hole nostrils thinned as a stranger crunched up the gravel path and set foot on the porch step.

‘Good evening!’ said the stranger, a young man, perhaps twenty.

The old man nodded, but his hands lay quietly on his knees.

‘I saw that sign out front,’ the stranger went on. “‘Free Dirt”, it said.’

The old man almost nodded.

The stranger tried a smile. ‘Crazy, but that sign caught my eye.’

There was a glass fan over the front door. A light shone through this glass fan, coloured blue, red, yellow, and touched the old man’s face. It seemed not to bother him.

‘I wondered, free dirt? Never struck me you’d have much left over. When you dig a hole and put the coffin in and refill the hole, you haven’t much dirt left, have you? I should think...’ “

The old man leaned forward. It was so unexpected that the stranger pulled his foot off the bottom step.

‘You *want* some?’ said the old man.

‘Why, no, no, I was just curious. Signs like that make you curious.’

‘Set down,’ said the old man.

‘Thanks.’ The young man sat uneasily on the steps. ‘You know how it is, you walk around and never think how it is to own a graveyard.’

‘And?’ said the old man.

‘I mean, like how much time it takes to dig graves.’

The old man leaned back in his chair. ‘On a cool day, two hours. Hot day, four. Very hot day, six. Very cold day, not cold so it freezes, but *real* cold, a man can dig a grave in one hour so he can head in for hot chocolate, brandy in the chocolate. Then again you get a good man on a hot day, he’s no better than a bad man in the cold. Might take eight hours to open up, but there’s easy digging soil here. All loam, no rocks.’

‘I’m curious about winter.’

‘In blizzards we got a ice-box mausoleum to stash the dead undelivered mail — until spring and a whole month of shovels and spades.’

‘Seeding and planting time, eh?’ The stranger laughed.

‘You might say that.’

‘Don’t you dig in winter anyhow? For special funerals? *Special* dead?’

‘Some yards got a hose-shovel contraption. Pump hot water through the blade; shape a grave quick, like placer mining, even with the ground a ice pond. We don’t cotton to that. Use picks and shovels.’

The young man hesitated. ‘Does it bother you?’

‘You mean, I get scared ever?’

‘Well.. yes.’

The old man took out and stuffed his pipe with tobacco, tamped it with a calloused thumb, lit it, and let out a small stream of smoke.

‘No,’ he said at last.

The young man’s shoulders sank.

‘Disappointed?’ said the old man.

‘I thought maybe once.?’

‘Oh, when you’re young maybe. One time. ’

‘Then, there was a time!’ The young man shifted up a step.

The old man glanced at him sharply. ‘One time.’ He stared at the marbled hills and the dark trees. ‘My grandpa owned this yard. I was born here. A gravedigger’s son learns to ignore things.’

The old man took a number of deep puffs and said, ‘I was just eighteen, folks off on vacation, me left to tend things alone, mow the lawn, dig holes, and such. Alone, four graves to dig in October and a cold came hard off the lake, frost on the graves, tombstones like snow, ground froze solid.

‘One night I walked out. No moon. Hard grass under foot, could see my breath, hands in my pockets, walking, listening.’

The old man exhaled frail ghosts from his thin nostrils. ‘Then I heard this sound, deep under. I froze. It was a voice, screaming. Someone woke up buried, heard me walk by, cried out. I just *stood*. They screamed and screamed. Earth banged. On a cold night, ground’s like porcelain, rings, you see?’

‘Well.’ The old man shut his eyes to remember. ‘I stood like the wind off the lake stopped my blood. A joke? I searched around and thought, Imagination! No, it was underfoot, sharp, clear. A woman’s voice. I *knew* all the gravestones.’ The old man’s eyelids trembled. ‘Could recite them alphabetical, year, month, day. Name any year, and I’ll tell. 1899? Jake Smith departed. 1923? Betty Dallman lost. 1933? P.H. Moran! Name a month. August? August last year, buried Henrietta Wells. August 1918? Grandma Hanlon, whole family! Influenza! Name a day. August fourth? Smith, Burke, Shelby carried off. Williamson? He’s on that hill. Douglas? By the creek. ’

‘The *story*,’ the young man urged.

‘Eh?’

‘The story you were telling.’

‘Oh, the voice below? Well, I knew all the stones. Standing there I guessed that voice out of the ground was Henrietta Fremwell, fine girl, twenty-four years, played piano at the Elite Theatre. Tall, graceful, blonde. How did I know her voice? I stood where there was only men’s graves. Hers was the only woman’s. I ran to put my ear on her stone. Yes! Her voice, way down, screaming!

“Miss Fremwell!” I shouted.

“Miss Fremwell!” I yelled again.

‘Deep down I heard her, only weeping now. Maybe she heard me, maybe not. She just cried. I ran downhill so fast I tripped and split my head on a stone, got up, screamed myself! Got to the toolshed, all blood, dragged out the tools, and just stood there with one shovel. The ground was ice solid. I fell back against a tree. It would take three minutes to get back to her grave and eight hours to dig to her box. The ground was like glass. A coffin is a coffin; only so much space for air. Henrietta had been buried two days before the freeze, been asleep all that time, using up air, and it rained just before the cold spell and the earth over her, soaked with rainwater, now froze. I’d have to dig maybe eight hours. And the way she cried, there wasn’t another hour of air left.’

The old man’s pipe had gone out. He rocked in his chair, back and forth, back and forth, silently.

‘But,’ said the young man, ‘what did you do?’

‘Nothing,’ said the old man.

‘Nothing?’

Nothing I *could* do. That ground was solid. Six men couldn’t have dug that grave. No hot water near. And she might’ve been screaming hours before I heard, so..’

‘You did. nothing?’

‘Something. Put the shovel back in the toolshed, locked it, and went back to the house and built a fire and drank some hot chocolate, shivering and shivering. Would you have done different?’

‘I.’

‘Would you have dug for eight hours in hard ice rock so’s to reach her when she was truly dead of exhaustion, cold, smothered, and have to bury her all over again? Then call her folks and *tell* them?’

The young man was silent. On the porch, the mosquitoes hummed about the naked light bulb.

‘I see,’ said the young man.

The old man sucked his pipe. ‘I think I cried all night because there was nothing I could do.’ He opened his eyes and stared about, surprised, as if he had been listening to someone else.

‘That’s quite a story,’ said the young man.

‘No,’ said the old man. ‘God’s truth. Want to hear more? See that big stone with the ugly angel? That was Adam Crispin’s. Relatives fought, got a writ from a judge, dug him up hoping for poison. Found nothing. Put him back, but by that time, the dirt from his grave mixed with other dirt. We shovelled in stuff from all around. Next plot, the angel with broken wings? Mary Lou Phipps. Dug her up to lug her off to Elgin, Illinois. More relatives. Where she’d been, the pit stayed open, oh, three weeks. No funerals. Meanwhile, her dirt got cross-shovelled with others. Six stones over, one stone north, that was Henry Douglas Jones. Became famous sixty years after no one paid attention. Now he’s planted under the Civil War monument. His grave lay wide two months, nobody wanted to utilize the hole of a Southerner, all of us leaning North with Grant. So his dirt got scattered. That give you some notion of what that “Free Dirt” sign means?’

The young man eyed the cemetery landscape. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘where is that dirt

you're handing out?'

The old man pointed with his pipe, and the stranger looked and, indeed, by a nearby wall was a sizeable hillock some ten feet long by about three feet high, loam and grass tufts of many shades of tan, brown, and burnt umber.

'Go look,' said the old man.

The young man walked slowly over to stand by the mound.

'Kick it,' said the old man. 'See if it's real.'

The young man kicked, and his face paled.

'Did you hear that?' he said.

'What?' said the old man, looking somewhere else.

The stranger listened and shook his head. 'Nothing.'

'Well, now,' said the old man, knocking out the ashes from his pipe. 'How much free dirt you need?'

'I hadn't thought.'

'Yes, you have,' said the old man, 'or you wouldn't have driven your lightweight delivery truck up by the gate. I got cat's ears. Heard your motor just when you stopped. How much?'

'Oh,' said the young man uneasily. 'My backyard's eighty feet by forty. I could use a good inch of topsoil. So...?'

'I'd say,' said the old man, 'half of that mound there. Hell, take it. Nobody wants it.'

'You mean. '

'I mean, that mound has been growing and diminishing, diminishing and growing, mixtures up and down, since Grant took Richmond and Sherman reached the sea. There's Civil dirt there, coffin splinters, satin casket shreds from when Lafayette met the honour guards. Edgar Allan Poe. There's funeral flowers, blossoms from ten hundred obsequies. Condolence card confetti for Hessian troopers, Parisian gunners who never shipped home. That soil is so laced with bone meal and casket corsages I should charge *you* to buy the lot. Grab a spade before I do.'

'Stay right there.' The young man raised one hand.

'I'm not going anywhere,' said the old man. 'Nor is anyone else nearby.'

The half-truck was pulled up by the dirt mound and the young man was reaching in for a spade, when the old man said, 'No, I think not.'

The old man went on.

'Graveyard spade's best. Familiar metal, familiar soil. Easy digging, when like takes to like. So. '

The old man's head indicated a spade half-stuck in the dark mound. The young man shrugged and moved.

The cemetery spade came free with a soft whispering. Pellets of ancient mound fell with similar whispers.

He began to dig and shift and fill the back of his half-truck as the old man, from the corners of his eyes, observed, 'It's more than dirt, as I said. War of 1812, San Juan Hill, Manassas, Gettysburg, October flu epidemic 1918, all strewn from graves filled and evicted to be refilled. Various occupants leavened out to dust, various glories melted to mixtures, rust from metal caskets, coffin handles, shoelaces but no shoes,

hairs long and short. Ever see wreaths made of hair saved to weave crowns to fix on mortal pictures? All that's left of a smile or that funny look in the eyes of someone who knows she's not alive any more, ever. Hair, epaulettes, not whole ones, but one strand of epaulettes, all there, along with blood that's gone to silt.'

The young man finished, sweating, and started to thrust the spade back in the earth when the old man said:

'Take it. Cemetery dirt, cemetery spade, like takes to like.'

'I'll bring it back tomorrow.' The young man tossed the spade into the mounded truck.

'No. You got the dirt, so keep the spade. Just don't bring that free dirt back.'

'Why would I do that?'

'Just don't,' said the old man, but did not move as the young man climbed in his truck to start the engine.

He sat listening to the dirt mound tremble and whisper in the flatbed.

'What're you waiting for?' asked the old man.

The flimsy half-truck ran towards the last of the twilight, pursued by the ever-encroaching dark. Clouds raced overhead, perturbed by the invisible. Back on the horizon, thunder sounded. A few drops of rain fell on the windshield, causing the young man to ram his foot on the gas and swerve into his home street even as the sun truly died, the wind rose, and the trees around his cottage bent and beckoned.

Climbing out, he stared at the sky and then his house and then the empty garden. A few drops of cold rain on his cheeks decided him; he drove the rattling half-truck into the empty garden, unlatched the metal back flap, opened it just an inch so as to allow a proper flow, and then began motoring back and forth across the garden, letting the dark stuffs whisper down, letting the strange midnight earth shift and murmur, until, at last, the truck was empty and stood in the blowing night, watching the wind stir the black soil.

Then he locked the truck in the garage and went to stand on the back porch thinking, I won't need water. The storm will soak the ground.

He stood for a long while simply staring at the graveyard mulch waiting for rain until he thought, What am I waiting for? Jesus! And went in.

At 10 o'clock, a light rain tapped on the windows and sifted over the dark garden. At 11, it rained so steadily that the gutter drains swallowed and rattled. At midnight, the rain grew heavy. He looked to see if it was eroding the new dark earth, but only saw the black muck drinking the downpour, like a great black sponge, lit by distant flares of lightning.

Then, at 1 in the morning, the greatest Niagara of all shuddered the house, rinsed the windows to blindness, and shook the lights.

And then, abruptly, the downpour ceased, followed by one great downfall blow of lightning, which ploughed and pinioned the dark earth close by, near, outside, with explosions of light as if ten thousand flashbulbs had been fired off. Then darkness fell in curtains of thunder, cracking the heart, breaking the bones.

In bed, wishing for the merest dog to hold, for lack of human company, hugging the sheets, burying his head, then rising full to the silent air, the dark air, the storm gone, the rain shut, and a silence spread in whispers as the last drench melted into the

trembling soil. He shuddered and then shivered and then hugged himself to stop the shivering of his cold flesh, and he was thirsty, but could not make himself move to find the kitchen and drink water, milk, leftover wine, anything. He lay back, dry-mouthed, with unreasonable tears filling his eyes.

Free dirt, he thought. My God what a damn fool night. *Free dirt!*

At 2 o'clock he heard his wristwatch ticking softly.

At 2:30 he felt his pulse in his wrists and ankles and neck and then in his temples and inside his head.

The entire house leaned in the wind, listening.

Outside in the still night, the wind failed and the yard lay soaking and waiting.

And at last. *yes*. He opened his eyes and turned his head towards the window.

He held his breath. What? Yes? What?

Beyond the window, beyond the wall, beyond the house, outside somewhere, a whisper, a murmur, growing louder and louder. Grass growing? Blossoms opening? Soil shifting, crumbling?

A great whisper, a mix of shadows and shades. Something rising. Something moving.

Ice froze beneath his skin. His heart ceased.

Outside in the dark, in the yard.

Autumn had arrived.

October was there.

His garden gave him.

*A harvest.*

\* \* \*

Ray Bradbury is, without doubt, our most distinguished living fantasy writer. Cutting his literary teeth in the memorable pages of *Weird Tales* in the 1940s, his early stories from that pulp magazine were reprinted in the Arkham House collection *Dark Carnival*, published in 1947. Known principally for his short fiction, he has sold his work to all the major magazines in the intervening fifty years, and his many tales of science fiction, fantasy and horror have been widely collected. *The Martian Chronicles*, *The Illustrated Man*, *The Golden Apples of the Sun*, *The October Country*, *A Medicine for Melancholy*, *I Sing the Body Electric* and *Long After Midnight* are just a few of the evocative titles that hint at the equally atmospheric prose to be found in Ray Bradbury's timeless fiction. He is also the author of several classic novels, including *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *Dandelion Wine*, *The Halloween Tree* and, more recently, *Death is a Lonely Business* and *A Graveyard for Lunatics*. His screenwriting credits include *Moby Dick* (for John Huston) and *It Came from Outer Space*, and since 1985 he has adapted his own short stories for *The Ray Bradbury Theater*. 'I took a couple of years off, and did sixty-five teleplays for my TV series, plus a couple of screenplays,' says Bradbury. 'But I wanted to get back to my root system — because I started

as a short story writer when I was twelve. I had a lot of ideas put away, just old scribbled notes I started going through.' The result was a number of new short stories written during the last year or so, including 'Free Dirt', which have been collected in *Quicker Than the Eye*.

## Self-Made Man

### POPPY Z. BRITE

Justin had read *Dandelion Wine* seventeen times now, but he still hated to see it end. He always hated endings.

He turned the last page of the book and sat for several minutes in the shadows of his bedroom, cradling the old thumbed paperback, marvelling at the world he held in his hands. The hot sprawl of the city outside was forgotten; he was still lost in the cool green Byzantium of 1928.

Within these tattered covers, dawning realization of his own mortality might turn a boy into a poet, not a dark machine of destruction. People only died after saying to each other all the things that needed to be said, and the summer never truly ended so long as those bottles gleamed down cellar, full of the distillate of memory.

For Justin, the distillate of memory was a bitter vintage. The summer of 1928 seemed impossibly long ago, beyond imagining, forty years before blasted sperm met cursed egg to make him. When he put the book aside and looked at the dried blood under his fingernails, it seemed even longer.

*An artist who doesn't read is no artist at all*, he had scribbled in a notebook he once tried to keep, but abandoned after a few weeks, sick of his own thoughts. *Books are the key to other minds, sure as bodies are the key to other souls. Reading a good book is a lot like sinking your fingers up to the second knuckle in someone's brain.*

In the world of the story, no one left before it was time. Characters in a book never went away; all you had to do was open the book again and there they'd be, right where you left them. He wished live people were so easy to hold on to.

You could hold on to *parts* of them, of course; you could even make them part of yourself. That was easy. But to keep a whole person with you for ever, to stop just one person from leaving or gradually disintegrating as they always did... to just *hold* someone. *All* of someone.

There might be ways. There had to be ways.

Even in Byzantium, a Lonely One stalked and preyed.

Justin was curled up against the headboard of his bed, a bloodstained comforter bunched around his bare legs. This was his favourite reading spot. He glanced at the nightstand, which held a Black & Decker electric drill, a pair of scissors, a roll of paper towels, and a syringe full of chlorine bleach. The drill wasn't plugged in yet. He closed his eyes and allowed a small slow shudder to run through his body, part dread, part desire.

There were screams carved on the air of his room, vital fluids dried deep within his mattress, whole lives sewn into the lining of his pillow, to be taken out and savoured later. There was always time, so long as you didn't let your memories get away. He had kept most of his. In fact, he'd kept seventeen; all but the first two, and those he didn't want.

Justin's father had barely seen him out of the womb before disappearing into the seamy nightside of Los Angeles. His mother raised him on the continent's faulty rim, in an edging-towards-poor neighbourhood of a city that considered its poor a kind of

toxic waste: ceaselessly and unavoidably churned out by progress, hard to store or dispose of, foul-smelling and ugly and dangerous. Their little stucco house was at the edge of a vast slum, and Justin's dreams were peppered with gunfire, his play permeated with the smell of piss and garbage. He was often beaten bloody just for being a scrawny white boy carrying a book. His mother never noticed his hands scraped raw on concrete, or the thin crust of blood that often formed between his oozing nose and mouth by the time he got home.

She had married again and moved to Reno as soon as Justin turned eighteen, as soon as she could turn her painfully awkward son out of the house. *You could be a nice-looking young man if you cleaned yourself up. You're smart, you could get a good job and make money. You could have girlfriends*, as if looks and money and girlfriends were the sweetest things he could ever dream of.

Her new husband had been a career Army man who looked at Justin the way he looked at their ragged old sofa, as leftover trash from her former life. Now they were both ten years dead, their bones mummified or scattered by animals somewhere in the Nevada desert, in those beautiful blasted lands. Only Justin knew where.

He'd shot his stepfather first, once in the back of the head with his own Army service pistol, just to see the surprise on his mother's face as brain and bone exploded across the glass top of her brand-new dinner table, as her husband's blood dripped into the mashed potatoes and the meatloaf, rained into her sweating glass of tea. He thought briefly that this surprise was the strongest emotion he had ever seen there. The sweetest, too. Then he pointed the gun at it and watched it blossom into chaos.

Justin remembered clearing the table, noticing that one of his mother's eyes had landed in her plate, afloat on a thin patina of blood and grease. He tilted the plate a little and the glistening orb rolled on to the floor. It made a small satisfying squelch beneath the heel of his shoe, a sound he felt more than heard.

No one ever knew he had been out of California. He drove their gas-guzzling luxury sedan into the desert, dumped them and the gun. He returned to LA by night, by Greyhound bus, drinking bitter coffee and reading at rest stops, watching the country unspool past his window, the starlit desert and highway and small sleeping towns, the whole wide-open landscape folding around him like an envelope or a concealing hand. He was safe among other human flotsam. No one ever remembered his face. No one considered him capable of anything at all, let alone murder.

After that he worked and read and drank compulsively, did little else for a whole year. He never forgot that he was capable of murder, but he thought he had buried the urge. Then one morning he woke up with a boy strewn across his bed, face and chest battered in, abdomen torn wide open. Justin's hands were still tangled in the glistening purple stew of intestines. From the stains on his skin he could see that he had rubbed them all over his body, maybe rolled in them.

He didn't remember meeting the boy, didn't know how he had killed him or opened his body like a big wet Christmas present, or why. But he kept the body until it started to smell, and then he cut off the head, boiled it until the flesh was gone, and kept the skull. After that it never stopped again. They had all been boys, all young, thin, and pretty: everything the way Justin liked it. Weapons were too easy, too impersonal, so he drugged them and strangled them. Like Willy Wonka in the Technicolor bowels of his chocolate factory, *he* was the music maker, and *he* was the

dreamer of dreams.

It was a dark and lonely revelry, to be sure. But so was writing; so was painting or learning music. So, he supposed, was all art when you penetrated to its molten core. He didn't know if killing was art, but it was the only creative thing he had ever done.

He got up, slid *Dandelion Wine* back into its place on his crowded bookshelf, and left the bedroom. He put his favourite CD on shuffle and crossed his small apartment to the kitchenette. A window beside the refrigerator looked out on a brick wall. Frank Sinatra was singing 'I've Got You Under My Skin'.

Justin opened the refrigerator and took out a package wrapped in foil. Inside was a ragged cut of meat as large as a dinner plate, deep red, tough and fibrous. He selected a knife from the jumble of filthy dishes in the sink and sliced off a piece of meat the size of his palm. He wasn't very hungry, but he needed something in his stomach to soak up the liquor he'd be drinking soon.

Justin heated oil in a skillet, sprinkled the meat with salt, laid it in the sizzling fat and cooked it until both sides were brown and the bottom of the pan was awash with fragrant juices. He slid the meat on to a saucer, found a clean fork in the silverware drawer, and began to eat his dinner standing at the counter.

The meat was rather tough, but it tasted wonderful, oily and salty with a slight undertone of musk. He felt it breaking down in the acids of his saliva and his stomach, felt its proteins joining with his cells and becoming part of him. That was fine.

But after tonight he would have something better. A person who lived and stayed with him, whose mind belonged to him. A homemade zombie. Justin knew it was possible, if only he could destroy the right parts of the brain. If a drill and a syringe of bleach didn't work, he would try something else next time.

The night drew like a curtain across the window, stealing his wall view brick by brick. Sinatra's voice was as smooth and sweet as cream. *Got you. deep in the heart of me.* Justin nodded reflectively. The meat left a delicately metallic flavour on his tongue, one of the myriad tastes of love. Soon it would be time to go out.

Apart from the trip to Reno and the delicious wallow in the desert, Justin had never left Los Angeles. He longed to drive out into the desert, to find again the ghost towns and nuclear moonscapes he had so loved in Nevada. But he never had. You needed a car to get out there. If you didn't have a car in LA, you might as well curl up and die. Los Angeles was a city with an enormous central nervous system, but no brain.

Since being fired from his job at an orange juice plant for chronic absenteeism — too many bodies demanding his time, requiring that he cut them up, preserve them, consume them — Justin wasn't even sure how much longer he would be able to afford the apartment. But he didn't see how he could move out with things the way they were in here. The place was a terrible mess. His neighbours had started complaining about the smell.

Justin decided not to think about all that now. He still had a little money saved, and a city bus would get him from his Silver Lake apartment to the garish carnival of West Hollywood; that much he knew. It had done so countless times.

If he was lucky, he'd be bringing home company.

Suko ran fingers the colour of sandalwood through haphazardly cut black hair,

painted his eyes with stolen drugstore kohl, and grinned at himself in the cracked mirror over the sink. He fastened a string of thrift-shop Mardi Gras beads around his neck, studied the effect of the purple plastic against torn black cotton and smooth brown skin, then added a clay amulet of the Buddha and a tiny wooden penis, both strung on leather thongs.

These he had purchased among the dim stalls at Wat Rajanada, the amulet market near Klong Saensaep in Bangkok. The amulet was to protect him against accidents and malevolent ghosts. The penis was to increase his potency, to make sure whoever he met up with tonight would have a good time. It was supposed to be worn on a string around his waist, but the first few times he'd done that, his American lovers gave him strange looks.

The amulets were the last thing Suko bought with Thai money before boarding a California-bound jet and bidding farewell to his sodden homeland, most likely for ever. He'd had to travel a long way from Patpong Road to get them, but he didn't know whether one could buy magical amulets in America. Apparently one could: attached to his Mardi Gras beads had once been a round medallion stamped with an exaggerated Negro face and the word zulu. He'd lost the medallion on a night of drunken revelry, which was as it should be. *Mai pen rai. No problem.*

Suko was nineteen. His full name was unpronounceable by American tongues, but he didn't care. American tongues could do all sorts of other things for him. This he had learned at fourteen, after hitching a midnight ride out of his home village, a place so small and so poor that it appeared on no map foreign eyes would ever see.

His family had always referred to the city by its true name, Krung Thep, the Great City of Angels. Suko had never known it by any other name until he arrived there. Krung Thep was only an abbreviation for the true name, which was more than thirty syllables long. For some reason, *farangs* had never got used to this. They all called it Bangkok, a name like two sharp handclaps.

In the streets, the harsh reek of exhaust fumes was tinged with a million subtler perfumes: jasmine, raw sewage, grasshoppers frying in peppered oil, the odour of ripe durian fruit that was like rotting flesh steeped in thick sweet cream. The very air seemed spritzed with alcohol, soaked with neon and the juices of sex.

He found his calling on Patpong 3, a block-long strip of gay bars and nightclubs in Bangkok's famous sleaze district. In the village, Suko and his seven brothers and sisters had gutted fish for a few *baht* a day. Here he was paid thirty times as much to drink and dance with *farangs* who told him fascinating stories, to make his face prettier with make-up, to be fondled and flattered, to have his cock sucked as often as he could stand it. If he had to suck a few in return, how bad could that be? It was far from the worst thing he had ever put in his mouth. He rather liked the taste of sperm, if not the odd little tickle it left in the back of his throat.

He enjoyed the feel of male flesh against his own and the feel of strong arms enfolding him, loved never knowing what the night would bring. He marvelled at the range of body types among Americans and English, Germans and Australians. Some had skin as soft and pale as rice-flour dough; some were covered with thick hair like wool, matting their chests and arms. They might be fat or emaciated, squat or ponderously tall, ugly, handsome, or forgettable. All the Thai boys he knew were lean, light brown, small-boned and smooth-skinned, with sweet androgynous faces. So was

he. So was Noy.

From the cheap boom box in the corner of the room, Robert Smith sang that Suko made him feel young again. Suko scowled at the box. Noy had given him that tape, a poor-quality Bangkok bootleg of The Cure, right after Suko first spoke of leaving the country. Last year. The year Suko decided to get on with his life.

The rest of them, these other slim raven-haired heartbreakers, they thought they would be able to live like this for ever. They were seventeen, fifteen, younger. They were in love with their own faces in the mirror, jet-coloured eyes glittering with drink and praise, lips bruised from too many rough kisses, too much expert use. They could not see themselves at thirty, could not imagine the roughening of their skin or the lines that bar life would etch into their faces. Some would end up hustling over on Soi Cowboy, Patpong's shabby cousin where the beer was cheaper and the tinsel tarnished, where the neon flickered fitfully or not at all. Some would move to the streets.

And some would simply disappear. Suko intended to be one of those.

Noy was just his age, and smart. Suko met him onstage at the Hi-Way Bar. They were performing the biker act, in which two boys sat facing each other astride the saddle of a Harley-Davidson, wearing only leather biker caps, tongue-kissing with sloppy abandon and masturbating each other while a ring of sweaty *farang* faces gathered around them.

Immediately afterward, while the cum was still oozing between the thrumming saddle and the backs of their skinny thighs, Noy murmured into Suko's mouth, 'Wouldn't they be surprised if we just put this thing in gear and drove it into the crowd?'

Suko pulled back and stared at him. Noy's left arm was draped lazily around Suko's neck; Noy's right hand cupped Suko's cock, now tugging gently, now relaxing. Noy smiled and lifted one perfect eyebrow, and Suko found himself getting hard again for someone who wasn't even paying him.

Noy gave him a final squeeze and let go. 'Don't make a date when you get done working,' he told Suko. 'Take me home with you.'

Suko did, and even after a night on Patpong, they puzzled out one another's bodies like the streets of an unfamiliar city. Soon they were the undisputed stars of the Hi-Way's live sex shows; they knew how to love each other in private and how to make it look good in public. They made twice as much money as the other boys. Suko started saving up for a plane ticket.

But Noy spent his money on trinkets: T-shirts printed with obscene slogans, little bags of pot and pills, even a green glow-in-the-dark dildo to use in their stage show. In the end, Noy was just smart enough to make his stupidity utterly infuriating.

*I'm really leaving*, Suko would tell him as they lay entwined on a straw pallet in the room they rented above a cheap restaurant, as the odours of *nam pla* and chili oil wafted through the open window to mingle with the scent of their lovemaking. *When I save up enough, I'm going to do it. You can come, but I won't wait for you once I have the money, not knowing how many ways I could lose this chance.*

But Noy never believed him, not until the night Suko showed him the one-way ticket. And how Noy cried then, real tears such as Suko had never thought to see from him, great childish tears that reddened his smooth skin and made his eyes swell to slits. He clutched at Suko's hands and slobbered on them and begged him not to go

until Suko wanted to shove him face-first into the Patpong mud.

*This is all you want?* Suko demanded, waving a hand at the tawdry neon, the ramshackle bars, the Thai boys and girls putting everything on display with a clearly marked price tag: their flesh, their hunger, and if they stayed long enough, their souls. *This is enough for you? Well, it isn't enough for me.*

Noy had made his choices, had worked hard for them. But Suko had made his choices too, and no one could ever take them away. The city where he lived now, Los Angeles, was one of his choices. Another city of angels.

He had left Noy sobbing in the middle of Patpong 3, unable or unwilling to say goodbye. Now half a world lay between them, and with time, Suko's memories of Noy soured into anger. He had been nothing but a jaded, fiercely erotic, selfish boy, expecting Suko to give up the dreams of a lifetime for a few more years of mindless pleasure. *Asshole*, Suko thought, righteous anger flaring in his heart. *Jerk. Geek.*

Now Robert Smith wanted Suko to fly him to the moon. As reasonable a demand, really, as any Noy had handed him. Suko favoured the boom box with his sweetest smile and carefully shaped his mouth round a phrase:

'Get a life, Robert!'

'I will always love you,' Robert moaned.

Suko kept grinning at the box. But now an evil gleam came into his black eyes, and he spat out a single word.

'Not!'

Justin hit the bars hard and fast, pounding back martinis, which he couldn't help thinking of as martians ever since he'd read *The Shining*. Soon his brain felt pleasantly lubricated, half-numb.

He had managed to find five or six bars he liked within walking distance of each other, no mean feat in LA. Just now he was leaning against the matte-grey wall of the Wounded Stag, an expensive club eerily lit with blue bulbs and black-lights. He let his eyes sweep over the crowd, then drift back to the sparkling drink in his hand. The gin shattered the light, turned it silver and razor-edged. The olive bobbed like a tiny severed head in a bath of caustic chemicals.

Something weird was happening on TV. Justin had walked out of Club 312, a cosy bar with Sinatra on the jukebox that was normally his favourite place to relax with a drink before starting the search for company. Tonight 312 was empty save for a small crowd of regulars clustered around the flickering set in the corner. He couldn't tell what was going on, since none of the regulars ever talked to him, or he to them.

But from the scraps of conversation — *eaten alive, night of the living dead* — and edgy laughter he caught, Justin assumed some channel was showing a Halloween horror retrospective. The holiday fell next week and he'd been meaning to get some candy. You ought to have something to offer trick-or-treaters if you were going to invite them in.

He heard a newscaster's voice saying, 'This has been a special report. We'll keep you informed throughout the evening as more information becomes available.' Could that be part of a horror filmfest? A fake, maybe, like that radio broadcast in the thirties that had driven people to slit their wrists. They'd been afraid of Martians, Justin remembered. He downed the last of his own martian and left the bar. He didn't care

about the news. He would be making his own living dead tonight.

The Wounded Stag had no TV. Pictures were *passé* here, best left to that stillborn golden calf that was the *other* Hollywood. Sound was the thing, pounds and pounds of it pushing against the eardrums, saturating the brain, making the very skin feel tender and bruised if you withstood it long enough. Beyond headache lay transcendence.

The music at the Stag was mostly psycho-industrial, Skinny Puppy and Einstürzende Neubaten and Ministry, the Butthole Surfers and Nine Inch Nails and My Bloody Valentine. Justin liked the names of the bands better than he liked the music. The only time they played Sinatra here was at closing hour, when they wanted to drive people out.

But the Stag was where the truly beautiful boys came, the drop-dead boys who could get away with shaving half their hair and dyeing the other half dead black or lurid violet, or wearing it long and stringy and filthy, or piercing their faces twenty times. They swept through the door wrapped in their leather, their skimpy fishnet, their jangling rings and chains, as if they wore precious jewels and ermine. They allowed themselves one contemptuous glance around the bar, then looked at no one. If you wanted their attention, you had to make a bid for it: an overpriced drink, a compliment that was just ambiguous enough to be cool. Never, ever a smile.

Like as not, you would be rejected summarily and without delay. But if even a spark of interest flared in those coldly beautiful black-rimmed eyes, what sordid fantasy! What exotic passion! What delicious viscera!

He had taken four boys home from the Stag on separate nights. They were still in his apartment, their organs wrapped neatly in plastic film inside his freezer, their hands tucked within easy reach under his mattress, their skulls nestled in a box in the closet. Justin smiled at them all he wanted to now, and they grinned right back at him. They had to. He had boiled them down to the bone, and all skulls grinned because they were so happy to be free of imprisoning flesh.

But skulls and mummified hands and salty slices of meat weren't enough any more. He wanted to keep the face, the thrilling pulse in the chest and guts, the sweet slick inside of the mouth and anus. He wanted to wrap his mouth around a cock that would grow hard without his having to shove a finger up inside it like some desiccated puppet. He wanted to keep a boy, not a motley collection of bits. And he wanted that boy to smile at him, *for* him, for *only* him.

Justin dragged his gaze away from the swirling depths of his martian and glanced at the door. The most beautiful boy he had ever seen was just coming in. And he was smiling: a big, sunny, unaffected and utterly guileless smile.

Suko leaned his head against the tall blond man's shoulder and stared out the window of the taxi. The candy panorama of West Hollywood spread out before them, neon smeared across hot asphalt, marabou cowboys and rhinestone drag queens posing in the headlights. The cab edged forward, parting the throng like a river, carrying Suko to whatever strange shores of pleasure still lay ahead of him this night.

'Where did you say you were from?' the man asked. As Suko answered, gentle fingers did something exciting to the inside of his thigh, through his ripped black jeans. The blond man's voice was without accent, almost without inflection.

Of course, no one in LA had an accent. Everyone was from somewhere else, but

they all strove to hide it, as if they'd slid from the womb craving flavoured mineral water and sushi on Melrose. But Suko had met no one else who spoke like this man. His voice was soft and low, nearly a monotone. To Suko it was soothing; any kind of quiet aimed at him was soothing after the circuses of Patpong and Sunset Boulevard, half a world apart but cut from the same bright cacophonous cloth. Cities of angels: *yeah, right*. Fallen angels.

They pulled up in front of a shabby apartment building that looked as if it had been modelled after a cardboard box some time in the 1950s. The man — *Justin*, Suko remembered, his name was *Justin* — paid the cab driver but didn't tip. The cab gunned away from the curb, tires squealing rudely on the cracked asphalt. Justin stumbled backwards and bumped into Suko. 'Sorry.'

'Hey, no problem.' That was still a mouthful — his tongue just naturally wanted to rattle off a *mai pen rai* — but Suko got all the syllables out. Justin smiled, the first time he'd done so since introducing himself. His long skinny fingers closed around Suko's wrist.

'Come on,' he said. 'It's safer if we go in the back way.'

They walked around the corner of the building, under an iron stairwell and past some garbage cans that fairly shimmered with the odour of decay. Suko's foot hit something soft. He looked down, stopped, and backed into Justin. A young black man lay among the stinking cans, his head propped at a painful angle against the wall, his legs sprawled wide.

'Is he dead?' Suko clutched for his Buddha amulet. The man's ghost might still be trapped in this mean alley, looking for living humans to plague. If it wanted to, it could suck out their life essences through their spinal columns like a child sipping soda from a straw.

But Justin shook his head. 'Just drunk. See, there's an empty bottle by his leg.'

'He looks dead.'

Justin prodded the black man's thigh with the toe of his loafer. After a moment, the man stirred. His eyes never opened, but his hands twitched and his mouth gaped wide, chewing at the air.

'See?' Justin tugged at Suko's arm. 'Come on.'

They climbed the metal stairs and entered the building through a fire door wedged open with a flattened Old Milwaukee can. Justin led the way down a hall coloured only by shadow and grime, stopped in front of a door identical to all the others but for the number 21 stamped on a metal plate small as an egg, and undid a complicated series of locks. He opened the door a crack and ushered Suko inside, then followed and turned to do up all the locks again.

At once Suko noticed the smell. First there was only the most delicate tendril, like a pale brown finger tickling the back of his throat; then a wave hit him, powerful and nauseating. It was the smell of the garbage cans downstairs, increased a hundredfold and overlaid with other smells: cooking oil, air freshener, some caustic chemical odour that stung his nostrils. It was the smell of rot. And it filled the apartment.

Justin saw Suko wrinkling his nose. 'My refrigerator broke,' he said. 'Damn landlord says he can't replace it till next week. I just bought a bunch of meat on sale and it all went bad. Don't look in the fridge, whatever you do.'

'Why you don't—' Suko caught himself. 'Why *don't you* throw it out?'

‘Oh.’ Justin looked vaguely surprised for a moment. Then he shrugged. ‘I’ll get around to it, I guess. It doesn’t bother me much.’

He pulled a bottle of rum from somewhere, poured a few inches into a glass already sitting on the countertop and stirred in a spoonful of sugar. Justin had been impressed by Suko’s taste for straight sugared rum back at the Stag, and said he had some expensive Bacardi he wanted Suko to try. Their fingertips kissed as the glass changed hands, and a tiny thrill ran down Suko’s spine. Justin was a little weird, but Suko could handle that, no problem. And there was a definite sexual charge between them. Suko felt sure the rest of the night would swarm with flavours and sensations, fireworks and roses.

Justin watched Suko sip the rum. His eyes were an odd, deep lilac-blue, a colour Suko had never seen before in the endless spectrum of American eyes. The liquor tasted faintly bitter beneath the sugar, as if the glass weren’t quite clean. Again, Suko could deal; a clean glass at the Hi-Way Bar on Patpong 3 was a rare find.

‘Do you want to smoke some weed?’ Justin asked when Suko had polished off an inch of the Bacardi.

‘Sure.’

‘It’s in the bedroom.’ Suko was ready to follow him there, but Justin said, ‘I’ll get it,’ and hurried out of the kitchen. Suko heard him banging about in the other room, opening and shutting a great many drawers.

Suko drank more rum. He glanced sideways at the refrigerator, a modern monolith of shining harvest gold, without the cosy clutter he had seen decorating the fridges of others: memo boards, shopping lists, food-shaped magnets trapping snapshots or newspaper cartoons. It gave off a nearly imperceptible hum, the sound of a motor running smoothly. And the smell of decay seemed to emanate from all around the apartment, not just the fridge. Could it really be broken?

He grabbed the door handle and tugged. The seal sucked softly back for a second; then the door swung wide and the refrigerator light clicked on.

A fresh wave of rot washed over him. Maybe Justin hadn’t been lying about meat gone bad. The contents of the fridge were meagre and depressing: a decimated twelve-pack of cheap beer, a crusted jar of Gulden’s Spicy Brown mustard, several lumpy packages wrapped in foil. A residue of rusty red on the bottom shelf, like the juice that might leak out of a meat tray. And pushed far to the back, a large Tupperware cake server, incongruous among the slim bachelor pickings.

Suko touched one of the beer cans. It was icy cold.

Something inside the cake server was moving. He could just make out its faint shadowy convulsions through the opaque plastic.

Suko slammed the door and stumbled away. Justin was just coming back in. He gripped Suko’s arms, stared into his face. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘Nothing — I—’

‘Did you open the fridge?’

‘No!’

Justin shook him. The strange lilac eyes had gone muddy, the handsome features twisted into a mean mask. ‘*Did you open the fucking fridge?*’ Suko felt droplets of spit land on his face, his lips. He wished miserably that they could have got there some other way, any way but this. He had wanted to make love with this man.