

Bold as Love
a short story by Gwyneth Jones

Note

"Bold As Love" was written for Paul McAuley and Kim Newman's anthology
In Dreams (Gollancz 1992; see also Greg Egan's Worthless from the same
in anthology). This story is heavily based on a factual account of a night
in Brighton's clubland in the eighties that appeared in Fuck The Tories
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Bold as Love

At midnight there was someone in a coma, vomiting into the toilet floor.
I watched her for a while, but her boyfriend seemed a capable type for a
into deathhead. He said his Dad was a psychiatric nurse, and he'd got her
and the unconscious position all right. A boy in a black basque, tattered
fishnets and stilletoed ankle boots came in, staggered to the basins
and clung there, white arms braced and oversized hands gripping the
porcelain.
of He stared at himself in the mirror. Through the spots and a starburst
of diamond lines around an impact crater, his face was beautiful: carven
full chalk white cheekbones, enormous purple pits under his eyes, a soft,
of bruise-coloured mouth. On his bone flat breast his nipples, lifting out
the torn lace and boning, were like brownish coins. He was shaking from
head to foot. "I'm experiencing this," he repeated, madly earnest. "I'm
experiencing this I'm experiencing this." I saw a split in the satin,
brown across his ribs on the left. It was crusted with something like dark
the mud (in this light); there was more of the stuff moving thickly out of
of slit. It was blood. Blood had been pouring out of him, until it slowed
of its own accord.
should I'd been about to leave, but I didn't know what to do now. Maybe I
should make him lie down? The sensible young deathhead looked up and said:
"It's
okay Fio, he's just done a bit of stig."
Silly More people know Jill fool than Jill fool knows. "Oh yes. Of course.
of me."
My mother is a WASP. My father is of perfectly cool Afro-Irish descent,
not but I take after her. I might be tempted to lie about my ethnic
background: but there's no point. I give myself away all the time; and
not just by the shape of my nose. Contrary to popular belief, however, the
hipcats are no bigots. If I really want to be here, that's enough.
or The Ladies toilet at the San is a heroic monument. No one would change

hide its raddled beauty. Outside, I walked into a duchess's drawing room:
a warehouse full of looted poshery and finery, some of it piled as if the
removers had dumped it there; some of it arranged in impromptu tableaux.
Some nights, there would be riotous behaviour in here. Spiked rings would
scour the glowing mahogany and walnut, toecaps ram through oil-crusted canvas; snot boogers get smeared on the brocades. Blood from broken heads
and noses would pour over the slippery silk rugs. Righteous fanatics and
helpless gonzos would defecate into the massive silverware. Tonight the punters were being fairly sedate. I saw someone mashing chocolate mousse
into a patch of carpet with his face and hands and bum; that was about all.
Around the drawing room there was a jungle. The trees, I imagined, must be
rooted through the floor into hydroponic vats. There must be some system
of shifting flats to let daylight or gro-lamps through the ceiling; and the rain. It must be so, because the management at the San would never hurt a living thing and the trees were certainly alive. There were half-tame olive green birds with orange heads fluttering in the undergrowth. Black and gold monkeys shifted about in the branches. I stood
and tried to coax a bird from a creeper onto my wrist. At my eye level
a
tiny russet creature stood on the wet open palm of a leaf. Its slender trunk was weaving a delicate dance, following not the beat of the music but the rhythm of heated bodies, the riff of salt sweat... I jumped a mile. It was the WASP in me coming out again. What's disgusting about a leech? Nothing is disgusting, to the truly cool. The chocolate mousse bloke was sitting up and paying attention, from across the floor. He had
seen this little error of mine, and laughed -- a horribly sane and party
line laugh.
I felt annoyed with myself and put on my dark glasses. It's easy to get carried away. But I wasn't in the mood.
The jungle bar was lined with knobby young shave-headed girls in latex and
gauze and monster boots, arm in arm and eyeing up the talent. They checked
my hair and my painted skirts pityingly. I wasn't worried by that: you can't please everyone. I saw a dead ringer for Ralph Churchill on the TV,
talking to a skinny bloke in gilded leather. My boy from the toilet, looking green from his taste of near-death, was talking to a group of friends. The hit doesn't last long and (those who like it say--) you always have to have more. He'd probably be back in the toilet with one eye
dangling on his cheek in an hour. I got myself another drink and heard someone whisper "Ax is going to get stiggged".
I had my glasses on, but I hadn't tuned them. The bar's sound track had retreated to a distant brawling noise and my head was full of echoes of conversations from all over the San. The Insanitude is a big place,
I've

rarely seen it packed out. The halls upon halls of under-the-hill
fantasy
rising up around the Snake Pit are for some only the anterooms. There
are
ratty stairways, if you know which door to open, leading to the booths
where blackcan things are organised. Further up still there are cold
and
desolate ballrooms, where ska bands ram on with their infectious beat
in
front of a handful of flailing drunks; where punters huddle in twos and
threes on dirty torn vinyl furniture in chill corners. Bad things
happen
there. No one imposes any sanctions on the deals that are made, it's
tradition that makes them hide away. Certain transactions are only at
home
in some kind of outer darkness.
I knew my whisper came from up there, from somewhere very far from the
heat and the beat. I pulled my glasses off: like a true WASP, I didn't
want the dirt near me. The lad next to me at the bar was blond, plump
and
narrow eyed, with Rorschach butterflies of sweat spreading over his
raggy
Marlon. He had a peaked black leather cap with an SS badge. His friend
was
black, taller and unremarkable.
Blondie had a long pomander sachet. (The fact is, it stinks in here, no
matter what the lightshow does: old beer, old vomit, traces of piss and
red wine; the usual bouquet). It didn't look right for him as an
accessory. But they check their weapons at the door. The lads -- and
the
girls -- love doing that, it's a ceremony. You see them come in and
spread
open the blj, and there are flick-knives, clasp-knives, bowie-knives,
knuckledusters, ranked in little custom-made pockets like a toolkit.
You
very rarely see a firearm. Guns are not... not meaty enough. However,
after he's turned in the armoury a boy often feels the need of a
substitute; a symbol of the symbol. Blondie swung his tool between his
knees, and leered at me.
I caught a glint of something bright, probably some illicit kind of
fractional gear. I pretended not to notice, much to his annoyance.
"Hallo darling, gimme mind?"
Mind?
"Trashy track," I said. "If they're going to recreate the Stones, why
can't they do good Stones. Like High Tide and Green Grass. Like
Beggar's
Banquet. They never did anything but shit after. "
"You're true, you're true."
Hooking the sachet on his belt, he lurched an arm around my shoulders,
fumbled a nipple through my pearl satin blouse. Nipples never lie (mine
don't, anyhow). He pulled back, affronted.
"Fuck off, then. Frigid."
So I fucked off, with my drink, wondering what kind of sociopath
riffraff
this was, that didn't even know when he was listening to the totally
sacred original Exile On Main Street.
The jungle was milling with astral bodies, strangers from far away
who'd
been queuing for hours to log on. Fractionals are all right but you
can't

talk to them. Essentially they're fans, religious fanatics. They're
with the bands, they're with the friends who logged on with them. Otherwise
it's doo-wop-a-lula. I saw Ax, before he saw me: solid as a rock. He
was wearing, as usual, far too many clothes, and carrying a worn plastic
bag that bulged with paper. I remembered that there was something I ought
to tell him, but forgot what it was. I stood and watched and half wished
he wouldn't look round. But I didn't walk away.
"Hi, Fiorinda."
His mouth brushing my lips was genuinely cold, though when I came in
(how long ago was that?) it had been a hot summer night outside. I wondered
where he'd been. I didn't ask. Ax has few stigmata: but an invincible
urge to obfuscate is one of the unholy relics he carries around.
We were in the middle of a fight. It was about a singer called Sam
Cheng,
who had stayed at my house while passing through on tour: a skinny boy
with hair like seaweed and a mouth that tasted of the air on a mountain
top. It was one of those fights that starts with something rational and
limited like: you fucked him in our bed; Excuse me, that's my bed...
and then the little rip in the surface begins to unravel the whole fabric.
All chaos; all the anger and the grievance in the world pours through.
Ax and I tend to have fights of that kind.
He wanted to leave a coat or two. We joined the line at the cloakroom
hatch, which was already long. I considered my half-murdered, bleeding
boy. He wasn't so crazy, compared to these characters. I do feel that
taking the fashionable pretence of real presence so far as handing in
an imaginary overcoat is well out of order. But why not, if it amuses
them.
Ax grumbled, wondering why nobody had work that required, at least
fractionally, their presence elsewhere. "The country's going to the
dogs..." Ax is genuinely hopeless. He cannot tell unless he touches
things, or people.
He used the time, industriously, to thrust his archaic handbills at
certain passers by. Most of the papers fell to the jungle floor, caught
on creepers and crawled upon by giant glossy maroon millipedes. A few were
carried off.
We didn't talk. By the time we reached the hatch Ax had decided to shed
three or four layers of his carapace, but he was unsure about the
handouts.
"Are they state documents? Of world-shattering importance?"
He gave me a look that said, oh, I see. Cool but civil. He was wearing
glasses at this point. I could see his eyes, pleading with me out of
the clear, blood-brown depths. Maybe mine were pleading too, but not on
Fiorinda's orders. Let these two pairs of eyes get on with it, I
thought.
I'm not playing.
"It's about the Free Danube."
That's what I thought he said. I put my glasses on again, losing the
jungle too abruptly for comfort. I wish someone would invent something

that brought on these changes gradually. (Must ask Ax).

"Is this more of the Balkan Psychobabble I'm supposed to get excited about?"

"It's freeing the Danube."

He told me about these Romanian heavy metal operators, and how their astounding rendition of Unchained Melody on giant earthmoving equipment would knock my socks off and permanently improve my life, my health,

and

the state of major global weather systems... I wasn't hearing every

word,

but I caught the guarded enthusiasm of Ax onto a good act.

"I'd like to give them a booking." He frowned, that totally inward, unselfconscious ponder which I love in him. Ax can concentrate like a three year old child with a chocolate ice. But he can do it for weeks.

"Got to build them up a bit, first. Got to educate the punters..."

"Anything you say, Ax."

He began to tell me about another good act, from the Seychelles... or

it

could have been Sheffield. I wasn't listening. That's why we need

someone

like Ax, so we won't have to listen to everything. You don't have to

sort

the enormous wash and weight of information that comes throbbing in, beating up through your breastbone, vibrating in your molars. You can trust him. He is technically capable of knowing what is going on: all

we

have to do is be there or be square.

"If I can get the trendy buggers going, leaders of society. Like you,

Fio.

A solid piece of paper, people appreciate that. It's a free gift, it

turns

them on. Then it spreads like... like..." He gazed into space.

"Jam?"

"Snot."

He delved in a pocket, blew his nose ferociously, and opened the grimy tissue to see what he'd brought down. "When your snot turns green, you know you're in trouble... I've got this cold you see. Suddenly I'm full

of

snot, every cavity. There was nothing there yesterday. That's what made

me

think of it." So he kept the state documents, after cautiously and earnestly laying one on the cloakroom attendant -- along with his

rambling

spiel about the heavy metal Romanians.

"She's a machine, Ax."

"She's still a human being." He considered the queue: but had a glimmer

of

intuition. "They're not in a receptive mode."

The San serves enormous measures. Why not? No one is going to cripple their liver, or even get a hangover, unless that is something they

really

want to do. As I watched Ax moseying diffidently through the crowd at

the

service bar, a friend of mine passed by. She looked twice, and glared.

"You don't know you're born, Fiorinda. If I could find myself a babysitter, I don't know where I'd find the energy..." She has two children under five, poor sod. "Come on, I'll buy you a drink. You can tell me what it tastes like." Allie was wearing some great light

effects,

she looked like a dragonfly with a human head. She saw Ax coming back:

Ax

ineffably nondescript in the tumult of fractional finery, with his brown fringed leather-look jacket, broken kneed jeans and raggy mousebrown pigtail. Allie is a revered local stylist. She couldn't afford to be seen

near someone like that. She gave me a mildly amazed glance -- a very clubby glance -- from her faceted eyes.

"Catch you later, Fi. "

We went to sit with Smelly and The Older Generation of Hipsters:

Smelly's

old lady Ann Marie, Aoxamaxoa with the deathshad skull, Smelly in the claymatted vintage dreadlocks and the tiedye, Beef the black leather,

Chip

the S&M buckles and weals. Snake, an outfit of incredibly shiny blue, with

cufflinks and a hot white shirtfront. Verlaine, with his ringlets and velvet -- like a Velasquez cavalier who is not ashamed to be beautiful. Candroid, as drab as Ax and very tongue-tied.

Usually, I feel wonderful when I'm with these people. We're sitting in the

jungle clearing at a scuffed and grease layered table, wearing our dark glasses and talking low, leaving the music and the floorshow to the

kids.

Allie is a crass snob (in my WASP dialectic). The knobby little girls

up

at the bar are infants who can't yet live without rules. We're

different.

No one around this table judges me, wants me to change the way I dress, the way I think, the way I dance. I'm part of the rich tapestry. I'm a voice in the harmony.

But I was sickening for another round of my fight with Ax, and I'd been drinking too much because I didn't trust myself with anything more imaginative. So tonight, even without my glasses, I was seeing things

that

aren't supposed to be seen. The only other woman at the table was

Smelly's

old lady, and she wasn't contributing much to the conversation, or the consumption. She was listening for occult baby voices. (Smelly, to be fair, says bring them, why not? Anne-Marie won't consider it. People

have

been known to smoke tobacco cigarettes in here. And besides, Smelly

thinks

he would sit cuddling the baby, one hour on, one hour off. But he wouldn't. It was AM's choice, after all. They're her kids. She accepts that).

much

Roxane, Chip's off and on dominatrix, doesn't count. She spends too

never

time with the boot girls. But her weight (and there's plenty of it)

shifts the balance even when she's here.

Smelly's eldest daughter, Para, (short for Paralytic, which is what

Smelly

was the night she was born), wanted to leave home and join the Pelham Square People. They're extremists of squalor. They've given up clothes. They don't wash. If you wash, you get cold.

"Let her go," someone ordered him earnestly. "If she's not serious, if she's not ready for their life, she'll soon be back."

"As long as they cover their shit --" said Chip, curling a lip. He believes in civilisation.

Ghost Shirt began to rant.

"It's all so fucking false. Fucking naked hermits. Why do we never do anything real? What's happened to the death and the pain? Peace sucks.

We

write songs about sex and violence and never do it You see blokes going round with skulls instead of heads on their shoulders, you hear about street fighting and gang violence but it doesn't mean anything. What's happened to the rumble? I mean the Big Rumble. What's happened to organised violence? I want to see death in large numbers. I want to

hear

the tank crews screaming as they burn. You can't have art without pain! You can't have art without... hatred ... Without macro violence..."

"You can take downers when you're drunk a-and forget and take some

more,

so you barf and sleep through it and choke on your own vomit,"

suggested

Aoxa, in his serious little voice.

"You can eat nothing but your own turds til your guts can't cope and

you

die of peritonitis. That would be very pure."

"You can fuck with my girlfriend," offered Snake, magnanimously. "We

still

got murder around here."

Ghost Shirt tried to break a beer bottle on the edge of the table, but failed because he wasn't drunk enough.

"I'm telling the truth and you are full of shit." He began to weep and staggered off, muttering.

"It's funny," remarked Ax, "the knobby-looking people are always the stupid buggers. Have you noticed that?"

The others didn't respond. Ax can be cruel sometimes. He doesn't get

any

encouragement. Poor Ghost Shirt probably had something on his mind.

Everyone gets raving bitter occasionally. It's not a crime. If its a friend of yours you let it rip, and protect him from the worst ideas he gets.

Once, I visited Aoxa's house, and I started to do the washing up. Yes.

I

did the washing up. Have you ever seen that Japanese anime, where the

boy

and girl spacejocks find themselves in a ruined city? It's

post-holocaust,

and there's a deserted house, Marie Celeste sort of thing. The

girl-wonder

sees some ancient washing up piled in a sink. She tries to resist, but

the

pull is too strong. She goes sidling across the screen, succumbing to

the

forces of evolution. That was me. I ploughed through the grease and the filth and the stink, feeling like Wendy in Never Never Land. About

three

weeks down I found the pathetic corpse of a baby mouse. What a triumph.

I

knew I had them. "Look at this, boys. Look what you've done!" The deathhead community was totally devastated. They vowed there and then

to

give up running water in the kitchen.

Sometimes they go crazy. Sometimes they beat up their girlfriends when they're drunk. But these boys are seriously gentle people.

Ax was banging on about the Danube act. Smelly was resisting. He

reckons

all this activity Ax plans for us is blocking our emergent paranormal powers... But Ax would win. He knows more ways of making people do what he wants them to do, than any mass-market dictator in history. Basically, he says, it comes down to nagging. You just keep at it, for longer than they can believe possible... I watched Hugh's old lady, the girl with the faraway eyes, and got angrier. They're all such nice blokes. Ax is such a simple soul. I could feel him, while he argued, giving off whipped puppydog vibrations in my direction. His dumb, personal interpretation of what was going on between us made me want to smash his sweet little head in.

Ax touched my hand. "Gimme mind. You look pissed off."
"Squalor," I said, berating myself. "It gets me down. I want to clean up in here. I want to scrub floors and open windows."
"Like a hurricane." He nodded. "Hurricane Fio, yeah. I always liked that skirt. Not many women your age could wear a skirt like that." Dear Ax, what an idiot. This was supposed to soften me up. "But what's wrong. You're so angry. It's not just us..."
No one should ever ask me what's wrong? when I'm half drunk. I forget how to make conversation.

"For one thing," I began, very seriously. "For one thing, you're a man."
Ax cracked up. He laughed and snorted until they all got started... even Anne Marie.

He followed me into the starlite ballroom, above the hall of plundered furniture. An Elvis rig was on the stage. There were couples dancing, slowly, under a twirling mirror ball. Ax gets misty eyed over this sort of thing.

"You're right, Fio. My Fiorinda, you don't belong indoors. When I think of you, I see a rainbow. I see the colour of the sky before a thunderstorm, trees all the different shades of green in July. I see a steel blue river, winding through flat brown fields. Snow, earth, fire..."
He tried to ease me onto the floor. I threw him off.
"I know it's irrational." I yelled. "No one asked me to do the washing up. No one has to get pregnant. No one has to play mother. The lost girls and the lost boys can eat beans cold out of the can together. No one has to be the breadwinner, no one has to wait at home. There's no pressure... Sometimes, I go off to the toilet and leave you, and I don't powder my nose and I don't talk girltalk and I don't retire ritualistically to ingest something that's no longer illegal. I stare in the mirror and I say to myself non sum non sum non sum. This is not my world, Ax."
"Oh," he said. "You want to have a baby."

"Aarrgh. You can't fucking do this, Ax. Forget about me, think about your brothers. It's not possible. The Insanitude is a knife-edge. You want to live like animals? You can. But you can't stop the clock. You can't build a world around the self-destructive momentum of young male animals in rut. That piston beat, the noise, the rush of animal beauty and energy: it only has one meaning. Once the young bucks start strutting, then most of them have to die. That's nature. That's what's always going to happen, if it gets half a chance. And then what will you do? I'll tell you what you'll do. You'll try to be the one who comes out on top, the cock and bull who survives, and wins the right to order the women and children around until he gets old..."

My eyes were swimming. Ax was coming apart and shrinking, little dit-dots of that terribly banal light trailing through him, scissoring him up. I heard him wailing faintly "I'll do the night feeds..." I started laughing hysterically. The male mind. Why do they always take things so personally?

"That's not the point! You and me, however we behave, we don't make any difference. You're an anachronism, Ax. You're trying to hold things together that have to be allowed to fall apart..."

This relationship, for one.

I prowled the Insanitude, ankle high to misty kaleidoscope giants, brooding on solutions.

I could become a separatist.

I could have six kids, and get to know Ann Marie really well.

I could have my brain removed, and get to know Allie really well.

I could have the other operation, and get to know Roxane.

I ain't got no boyfriends, I ain't got no girlfriends... Nobody understands.

Ax has no taste in music. He once told me rock and roll is like sex.

Prior enthusiasm isn't essential, in fact it often messes things up with disappointment. You don't have to be on fire. You can make something of the act from a standing start. It doesn't matter if you don't know what's going on inside the machine. The machine works. You only have to plug yourself in.

In the duchess's drawing room, there was a Candroid experience. It had been advertised on the wrong boards. Handfuls of puzzled swine wandered about, scratching their leather armpits while a cerebral aura of scientific sound floated overhead. In the Glass Hall, a Tamla Motown gamelan orchestra called Behind A Painted Smile was doublebooked with Mamelles de Dieu. The cult-famous Eurothrash outfit was badly outnumbered, but Mama Mamelle (a big muscular woman in a beetle suit) wasn't going to give up without a fight. She spread her legs and squirted some foul

smelling orange goop, from her embroidered orifice. The punters had started to take sides.

The main event was warming up in the Rubbish Dump. The Dump is a big floor, with a stage at one end and spreading from the other a senseless collection of junk: bits of rusted car body with the paint still clinging,

disembodied engines, piles of old tyres.

I let myself be pulled in, through the thickening crowd. The sound was stunning. The bass came up through my feet and thrummed in my solar plexus. I slid between a skull-headed boy and a woman in purple lace,

who

was swaying with a toddler asleep in her arms. Movement all around me

now,

and my anger changed.

Darkness isn't passive, it isn't female. It belongs to everyone. The

way

we live, when It wells up inside, you can't fucking escape from It into normality, into routine, into the limits of your daily disguise. You

have

to find some other way. Unappeasable fury ran into the piston pumping

of

my arms and legs. I felt the sweat begin to run. I pushed on,

insensibly,

needing full communion tonight.

I reached The Edge. There was nothing between me and the stage but a churning agape of glistening young male bodies. They dance naked from

the

waist down. The Marlons stay on, to sop up sweat. Sex and violence, screamed the singer. Sex and violence sex and violence sex and violence sex... Occasionally you see an upright prick sticking out like a

washing

pole. But mainly the naked genitals stay soft as the bodies grapple. Fucking goes on in a dancing crowd at the San, and wanking, but it's further back. It's something deeper than sex makes the boys lose themselves and form this heaving mat of flesh.

Ax hates the Rubbish Dump. I love it. When I'm in here, I stop thinking.

I

know that this is why we overturned the world: to rediscover this

magical

potion. And anytime you need it you can have it, even if you're a girl.

I

stumbled and was hauled to my feet by gentle, anonymous hands. I

already

began to count the bruises that would flower, but inside my pounding

body,

inside the pounding beat, I was at peace.

I saw the plump blond boy in the SS cap, on his mate's shoulders. They were right up at the stage. The band, known as DOG NOISE, were unknown

to

me except for the singer, a likeable kid called Nick Arthur. He was

using

a mouth-projector. A skein of silvery tinsel strands taped to his

bottom

lip converted his singing into a streaming chord of light and colour; bursting round his head or spilling out into space as Nick tongued his controls.

The SS cap pair weren't dancing. I noticed that, because something told

me

they needed the agape. I pumped away, thinking I have a bad feeling

about

those two.
Blondie got hold of a handful of projector strands, and would not let go.

When I glimpsed Ax at the edge of the agape, I knew Nick must have called for help. I pushed off from the human wave, went under and fought my way back. I arrived in the front row at the moment when DOG NOISE's current number ceased with a screaming protest from the sound system. Three naked dancers were struggling to hold the black bloke (who was still fully clothed; a bad sign). The rest of DOG NOISE were trying to haul Nick Arthur and the blond apart. They succeeded and threw the blond in the SS cap off the stage. Nick's mouth was bleeding. Blondie got to his feet clutching the projector, it looked as if he had a silver jellyfish struggling in his fist. He pulled a knife. I was looking right into his eyes. He was in that state when nothing can be done: when the only treatment is an anaesthetic dart from half a mile away. The dancers parted in waves and scuffled backwards from around the Ax. There wasn't one of them who hadn't tried to smuggle a frax-simile weapon in here at some time, but tonight they were all being good boys. There was silence in the jungle. The crimson and purple giants stood like guardian spirits. It was fragile, but the peace was holding: the all important gentleness of this violence we've created. Ax moved in. I couldn't hear what he was saying but he looked in control, soothing and confident. I'd seen the Insanitude coming quietly unravelled tonight:

Ax is not infallible. But I saw another shape of things to come, in the way the dancers stood and watched. Win or lose, I thought. Who cares? He's lost to me. I got that far. Then, I don't remember how I crossed the leaf and creeper tangled space between. I jumped on blondie's back, slammed an arm round his throat and hauled. I got a glimpse of Ax's expression, gaping in disbelief at my betrayal. Behind me, of course the boys broke loose. The ranks behind surged forward. The dancers, drunk and crazy and naked, were hitting out in all directions. The real mud, in which Nick wallows in one number, started flying along with the blood and the beer. A giant kicked me in the face, I saw a boy next to me go down grappling with a leopard. The monkeys screamed, the birds shot about in panic, their wings rattling like gunfire. The whole vast floor of the Rubbish Dump was one archaic melee, the Rumble of the year. Finally, Candroid's people upstairs had the brilliant idea of turning on the sprinklers. The blond boy left, a struggling starfish, with four or five punters

holding up each limb. It is amazing how many people it takes to subdue
one
smallish bloke: if weapons aren't allowed, and nobody is to get hurt.
Ax and I were sitting on the floor. Belatedly, I put on my glasses.
Between us lay a bowie knife. We looked at it for a while, then I
reached
out and touched it. The metal was real.
"Holy shit," said Ax. "How did you know?"
Blondie's friend had come back. He was wandering around the dispersing
crowd, complaining. "He's lost his hat. My mate's lost his hat... Have
you
seen it?" A couple of dancers pulled on their pants and tried to help,
kicking around in the rags of torn clothing and mud and trampled
plastic
beermugs.
I could still see Blondie's eyes. The look in them, of terrible, utter
desolation: beyond hope, beyond help, beyond reason. Mon semblable, mon
frere...
"Female intuition."
We handed in the knife, and went up to the Glass Hall. Behind A Painted
Smile had won the stage. They were utterly fab. We sat on the floor
like
hippies, leaning against each other; and listened to the
moonlight-on-water chiming of the gamelan until the sky above the glass
grew pink and gold with the dawn.

Outside in the grey morning, the punters were departing. In an hour or
so
the San would take on its daytime persona, in which it is a real
asylum.
We need a lot of those. With all these millions of full blown human
personalities suddenly bursting out in pampered profusion, out of the
quiet desperation of the past: tending the crazies is our one growth
industry. I stood outside on the broken pavement awash with summer
wildflowers, and thrust Free the Danube handouts at the crowd. It's
going
to be a great show, better than Deconstructing The Severn Bridge, a gig
I
greatly enjoyed. In time we'll break down all the dams, dismantle all
the
steel girdered constrictions, let all the rivers run free.
There is no reason why we shouldn't have the time. The way we live
doesn't
place much of a burden on the earth's resources. We've discovered how
to
get rid of the starvation camps: simply, we've joined them. We don't
have
to live like refugees, we do it because we like it. We're so wild and
free, we need so little in the way of washing machines and fridges and
detergents and carpets and three piece suites and this year's model
executive car. All we ask is a grimy bowl of vegetable stew or deeply
dubious curry. The only technology we still breed, the sound and vision
magic, costs hardly anything. The rock and roll Reich could last for a
thousand years.
Chip and Verlaine appeared, arm in arm. "Ah, Fiorinda..." Ver swept me
a
bow. "J'aime de vos longs yeux la lumiere verdatre..."
They envied my handouts. We'd all hate to be wage slaves, but there's
status in a little job that requires your physical presence. Lending
your

head and a few muscle twitches to a distant Russ-production plant isn't the same.

"Where's the Ax?"

I shrugged.

He was in the crowd somewhere. There's a tradition among us that none of

the punters knows who the Ax is, nor cares. I'm not sure. I remember once,

I was standing at a takeaway booth with him. The people waiting to be served were the usual rich crop of loonies, ranters, amateur levitationists. An old bloke -- a perfect stranger -- started grumbling,

saying he thought he was the only normal person left on earth. Ax, modestly, silently pointed to himself. "Yeah," said the old chap.

"You're

okay. But your foreign policy is pure fruit and nutcase."

In the Glass Hall, he had said, only half joking, "Why did you do it? You

could have been rid of me."

"Your enemies are my enemies," I told him. "I'm not stupid. I know that."

Ax gazed at me dolefully, and sighed right down to his toes.

"But nothing's changed."

"Some things have improved. But nothing's changed."

That was the way it ended. I ought to be glad, because at last I'd managed

to get some glimmer of understanding out of him. But in the cold light of

day, the political becomes the personal. I wasn't an outraged cosmic archetype now; or the leader of the opposition. I was just Fiorinda. Oh well. Maybe next year, when I'm twenty five, I'll be wiser.

Maybe next time, I'll get him drunk and take him dancing. My kind of dancing, not that cissy walking-backwards number.

I split my pile of handouts, gave the boys half each and walked home alone.

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