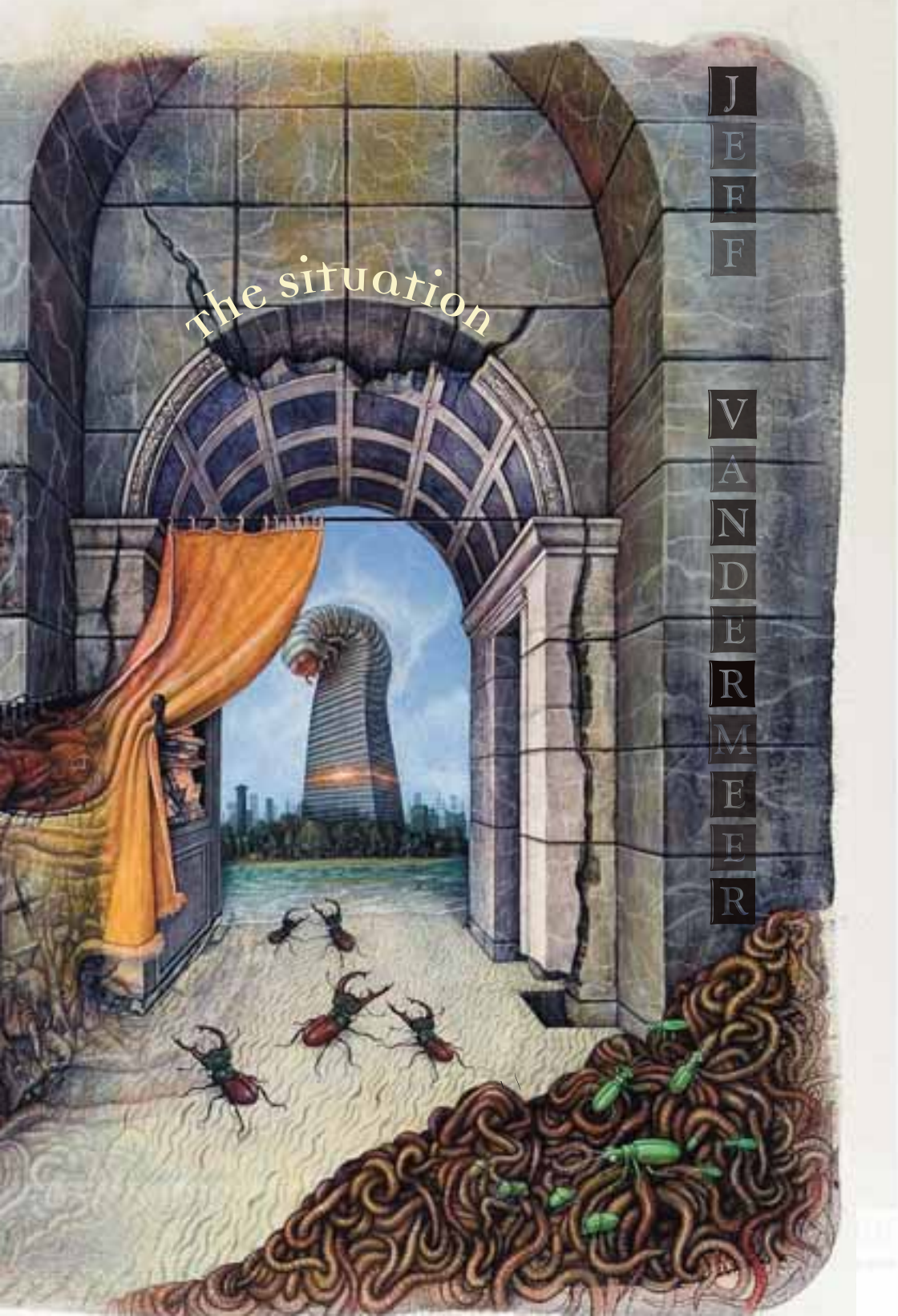


The situation

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“In *The Situation*, Jeff VanderMeer has created a work of surreal humor, bemused sadness, and meticulous artifice. It is as if the workplace novels of Sinclair Lewis and Joshua Ferris had been inverted, shaken, and diced until they came out looking like a Terry Gilliam creation. That a story which curves so resolutely inward toward its own logic could also be so poignant is something of an astonishment.”

—Kevin Brockmeier

“Take Dilbert, insert him into Gormenghast, add lashings of nighmarish biotech, and you’ll have something of the flavour of Jeff VanderMeer’s *The Situation*. This darkly hilarious story tells horrible truths about modern work and workplace relations. Anyone who has ever had a dysfunctional colleague, or served a flawed organisation, will recognise all too easily the machinations and the monsters in here.”

—Margo Lanagan

The Situation will be published by PS Publishing in mid-March 2008, in the following editions:

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## HOW IT BEGAN: DEGRADATION OF EXISTING PROCESSES

**M**y Manager was extremely thin, made of plastic, with paper covering the plastic. They had always hoped, I thought, that one day her heart would start, but her heart remained a dry leaf that drifted in her ribcage, animated to lift and fall only by her breathing. Sometimes, when my Manager was angry, she would become so hot that the paper covering her would ignite, and the plastic beneath would begin to melt. I didn't know what to say in such situations. It seemed best to say nothing and avert my gaze. Over time, the runneled plastic of her arms became a tableau of insane images, leviathans and tall ships rising out of the whorling, and stranger things still. I would stare at her arms so I did not have to stare at her face. I never knew her name. We were never allowed to know our Manager's name. (Some called her their "Damager," though.)

The trouble at work began after I came back from a two-week vacation at my apartment in the city, for this is when my Manager changed our processes. For as long as I could remember, the requests for the beetles we made came to Leer, my supervisor. I had made beetles for almost nine years in this way, my office carpet littered with their iridescent carapaces, the table in the corner always alive with new designs and gestation. However, when Scarskirt was hired to replace Mord,

who had moved to Human Resources, we no longer followed this process.

Worried, I pointed this out to Scarskirt during the brief interlude when I taught her how to make her own beetles. She just laughed and said, “Maybe a change is good. We all do such good work, it shouldn’t matter, right?”

I should note that “Leer,” “Scarskirt,” and “Mord” are not their real names. And all three were flesh-and-blood like me when I first knew them. Leer looked a little like a crane, and I had counted her as a friend, just as Mord had been a friend before his move. Scarskirt, though, stared at reflective surfaces all day and flattered so many people that I was wary of her.

2 |

After I came back, I found that Leer and Scarskirt shared an office and did everything together. Now, when the requests came in, all three of us were notified and we might all three begin work on the same project.

I remember coming into one meeting with the Manager, holding the beetle I had just created in my office. It was emerald, long as a hand, but narrow, flexible. It had slender antennae that curled into azure blue sensors on the ends, its shining carapace subdivided in twelve exact places. The beetle would have fit perfectly in a school child’s ear and clicked and hummed its knowledge into them.

But Scarskirt and Leer had created a similar beetle.

My Manager immediately thought it was my fault, and erupted into flame.

Leer stared at Scarskirt, who was staring at the metallic table top. “I thought we talked to you about this,” Leer said to me, still looking at Scarskirt.

“No, you didn’t,” I said, but the moment belonged to them.

My Manager forced me to put my beetle in my own ear, a clear waste, and an act that gave me nightmares: of a burning city through which giant carnivorous lizards prowled, eating survivors off of balconies. In one particularly vivid moment, I stood on a ledge as the jaws closed in, heat-swept, and tinged with the smell of rotting flesh. Beetles intended for the tough, tight minds of children should not be used by adults. We still remember a kinder, gentler world.

After this initial communication problem, the situation worsened.

## MY MANAGER’S EXISTING ISSUES

**T**wice a year, my Manager would summon me to her office on the fiftieth floor. A member of Human Resources would meet me at my office and attach a large slug to my spine through a specially-designed slit in the

back of our office uniforms. This would allow me to walk to the elevators and then up and out to the Manager's office with no memory of the experience. When it was time to return, the HR representative would reattach the slug. It always felt sticky and smooth at the same time. And wet, like an oyster.

What was Management trying to hide between floors three and fifty? I don't know, but as with the beetle intended for children, I would have nightmares after these meetings. In the nightmares, I was falling forever down a shaft lined with thousands of decomposing bodies. Plastic bodies. Human bodies. Bodies of leopards and of rats, of baboons and of lizards. I could smell the rot of them, sense their spongy softness. And yet my horror would be mixed with a sense of delight: so many animals in one place. A sparrow sometimes settled on the tiny patch of yellowing grass outside of my apartment, but I never saw more than that in real life.

4 |



Every meeting with my Manager was the same. In her office, the walls decorated with pleasant if banal scenes of woods and splashing brooks and green fields out of some fantasy land, she would be sitting behind her desk, smiling. Her hair would be fresh-cut, falling in straight blonde waves. The bland paper of her skin would be newly replaced by the kind of colored crepe paper common to the festivals of bygone eras. I would always

catch the elusive scent of some purely decorative pheromone. For some reason, this smell frightened me.

“Hello, Savante,” she would say, although this was not my name.

“Hello, Manager,” I would reply.

Up close, her eyes were like the glistening grit you find at the edges of drying asphalt. In the quiet, I could hear the leaf in her chest—just the slightest whispering shift of dead plant matter against plastic as it touched the sides of her ribcage. I wondered if each time another piece disintegrated into the dust at the bottom of her chest cavity.

“Do you love me?” she always asked.

I could remember a time and a world where such a question could never have been asked.

*Did I love her?*

Between meetings this became the question that filled up my life. Ever since she had become my manager, my raises had become smaller and smaller. The last raise had been a huge leech shaped like a helmet. It was meant to suck all the bad thoughts out of your head. It smelled like bacon, which seemed promising. I had invited Mord and Leer over to my apartment and we’d fried it up in a skillet. I’d gotten a week’s worth of sandwiches out of it.

And so as I sat in her office, I’d think: *Is it because of how I answer this one question? And: Does she think she is giving me good raises? And, finally: If I tell her I love her, will it go better or worse for me?*



“Do you love me?”

I always replied, “No, I do not love you.”

Her response varied. Sometimes my reply pleased her. She would hum and sing and even burble in a contented way. Other times, my reply exhausted her. She would sit staring blankly into space until I left. A few times, flames would appear at her tiny wrists and she would reach out and try to burn the sides of my face. I could not predict her reaction, so at first I always raced to reattach the slug to my spine immediately after my answer, wanting the sure clean rush of extinguished memory. This seemed the best way to avoid punishment. But after a while, the process grew too familiar and I found I no longer really cared about her reaction.

I mention this because in the six months since Scar-skirt had been hired, my Manager had accelerated the rate of these meetings. She called me into her office once each month.

“Do you love me?”

“No, I do not.”

“Do you love me?”

“No. I do not.”

“Do you love me?”

“No—I do not.”

“Do you love me?”

“No. I. Do. Not.”

“Do you love me?”

“NoIdonot.”



“Do you love me?”

“No.”



I always wondered what would happen if I replied, “Yes, I love you with all my heart.”

Could it be worse? Yes, obviously I thought it could be.

## MEMORIES OF MORD

**A**lthough harrowing at the time, my two-week vacation in my apartment now seems like a calm respite from all my worries—this even though half a dozen times marauders tried to get through my defenses and the electricity flickered on and off, off and on.

| 7

I’ve thought of my vacation as the turning point, and perhaps it was, for during the time I was gone Scarskirt and Leer bonded ever more closely. But the more I review the events of the last few months in my head, the more I think the beginning of the end came well before that—when Mord departed from our team.

Heavy and strong, Mord had a light wit and an engaging manner before he moved to Human Resources.

Outside of the company, he often appeared nervous, but while within its walls, his assertiveness bound us together.

I remember that the week before he left us, Mord and I stood in an old stairwell of the company building, one with skylights built into the wall, although they were grimed over with filth and pollution. Outside, in the city, it was almost impossible to find a bird, but the building was so large and had such resources that a bird might survive for years. If it found the right floor.

Mord liked real animals, hinted that he had had contact with them in his former job. One year he even had a bird count of seventy-five sparrows, more than anyone in the company. He told me he loved the “simple functionality” of sparrows, their durability, their instinct to survive. Me, I just liked hanging out with Mord while he bird watched. Or inviting him and Leer to my apartment to stare at my yellowing grass in hopes a bird would appear there.

So it came as a shock to me that day when he said, “I’m moving to Human Resources,” as the landing beneath us undulated like a tongue.

“What?” I said. “You can’t do that.”

“Don’t worry. It won’t matter.” He stared through his roving binoculars up the twisting stairwell for a hint of flutter, of flight. “Everything will be the same.”

“Will it?” I asked him in a moment of candor. “Will we still be friends?”

Mord smiled, the binoculars still clamped over his

eyes in a possessive grip. “Of course. We’ll be friends like we’re friends now.”

“And Leer, too?”

Mord laughed. “Don’t worry. That will never change.”

In a weird way, I think Mord meant it. And this at least is true: in my mind it never changed, and that was part of the problem.

We never found a sparrow, or any other bird, that day, so when we got back to the office Mord and Leer made a bird. It was a strange, ethereal, elongated bird with a tail that looked like a wisp of smoke.

They set it free in the stairwells and for months we would catch teasing glimpses of it. For some reason, it made me happy every time I saw it. But, eventually, I found it on a step. Someone had crushed its skull.

## CONFUSION DUE TO CONTINUED DEGRADATION OF PROCESSES

**B**efore the hiring of Scarskirt, when Leer was still my friend, we used to, as I mentioned, assign projects through a hierarchy. When this practice ended, we found ourselves locked in endless meetings in the cavernous meeting rooms on the forty-fifth floor. The rooms were more like the mess halls for refugees that I

remembered from my teens. The windows provided an excellent view of the dying city, for those who wanted a reminder, but this was offset by the fact that we had to wear the slugs on our spines almost continually, and a herd of Human Resources people had to be ready to escort us at a moment's notice.

Mord walked among them, but only to supervise, and at first he was quite friendly.



The reason for the meetings was a new “fish” project. Our main client had asked for more products aimed at helping students. The latest project required the design of a grouper-like fish five times larger than the average nine-year-old child. By our various and immersive processes, we were to make being swallowed by this fish an educational experience. The student would be swallowed and subjected to sensory deprivation deep in the fish's guts. Then the student would be introduced to a number of neural stimuli, some to do with proper social adjustment, but most further enhancing their math/science skills.

We worked from the flesh-and-blood scale model I had made in my office, which was linked to a chart on the meeting room wall that showed the fish-as-blueprint, almost like the schematic of a ship's hull.

The team had to solve numerous technical issues. For example, would the fish be terrestrial or aquatic? We

could create it to move on land using hyper-muscular fins while it sucked air like a mudpuppy. If we went with this approach, the fish could be summoned to the classroom so the student could be engulfed during class sessions. Otherwise, each school would need a communal tank into which the student would dive. I liked this solution because the children could change into swimming gear and thus not ruin their school clothes. It also provided more privacy.

In addition to the need for including defensive bio-weaponry, we had to consider many other important issues. What shape and size should the fish's jaws be to cushion the child and minimize trauma? Should the fish talk in a reassuring manner to calm the child's fears of being eaten alive? Should it remain silent and allow the burden of providing reassurance to fall on the teacher?

The meetings to answer these questions while developing the basic concept now involved the entire creative team. Everyone was ordered to contribute, and to this end the Manager issued us all brainstorming cockroaches. These were the tiny burrowing variety, suitable for inhaling through the nose, with only a whiff of sulfurous decay. A slight, scrabbling discomfort and then they released their calming pheromones and you could see more clearly than ever before and ideas came out of your mouth almost faster than you could speak them.

This method worked fine in moderation, but not when *everyone* was issued the brainstorming cock-

roaches. The meetings became a babble of tongues, hours and days filled with circular thinking and unproductive repetition.

“I think we should have it walk on its fins and talk with a gravelly old grandfather voice like my grandfather had when we visited him in the home,” Leer would say and I would say, “My father was a terse man but a depth of feeling often welled up in him beneath that mad me think of him as generous and so this fish should be all efficiency of motion but deep deep deep” and Scarskirt would say “I think it should have my face and my voice whether it walks on land or just swims because people will like that and it will reassure them.”

This high-volume stream of babble continued without end and without resolution while we remained euphoric within the cramped quarters of our own skulls.

12 |

## A RELEVANT NOTE ON OFFICE CULTURE

I didn't know Scarskirt's background, nor did I know Mord's or Leer's background. We had all come to the company fleeing something in the city. People had to be hard to survive, and of necessity you looked past this to what the person was *in the current moment*. When I found my apartment, I brought with me only

what I could carry from the disaster that lay behind me, and I furnished my apartment only with what I discovered already in it and immediately outside the front door. I started with the clothes on my back, an old dead stuffed dog from my childhood, some books my father had given me, half-rations in packets, three memory eels, and a few worthless coins that kept changing colors as their batteries ran down. I had to do many things I was not proud of to hang on to even those few possessions before the company accepted me under its protective aegis.

My point is, records these days are terse, vague, or imaginary. Scarskirt could have been anyone, and was. For the one truth of working for the company had become this: whatever you had been before, you could be someone else now.

My mistake, if I can call it that, was trust—to think a smile was a smile and not a show of teeth. I thought that the point of being part of a team was to be trusting and trustworthy.

I was wrong.



## CONFLICT DUE TO CONTINUED DEGRADATION OF PROCESSES

As the months progressed, it became clear that no one had the ability to make a decision on the fish project. My Manager did not attend enough meetings to be useful. We had meeting minutes, of course. They were taken by a veined slab of purpling meat whimsically shaped like an ear. This minutes taker lay in a far corner of the room, on a raised dais, and printed out its observations on the usual paper that reflected mood, tone, and intent. Alas, in this particular case, the minutes came out thick, viscous, and smelling sickly sweet. Very little could be intuited from them.

14 |

The design of the fish on the meeting wall, indignously linked to the results of the meeting minutes, changed for the worse. Sometimes we would enter to find that it was missing a fin. Sometimes it had transmogrified to have the attributes of a bear, a dragon, or a whale. Once, it had become a girl in a sunflower dress huddled in a dark corner of a room. She had the eyes of a fish, but she was not a fish, and something in her posture reminded me of familiar paper and plastic.

The day we entered the meeting room and the fish had the head of my Manager, I knew I had to change the paradigm.

I drove a knife into the quivering slab of recording material, which relaxed into senility with a sigh, and

thus froze the fish design in place on the wall. It might have had the manager's face, but the rest of it was much closer to completion than we'd been in months.

"From now on, I will lead these meetings," I said to Leer, Scarskirt, and the others. "Some of us will use the brainstorming cockroaches and some of us will not. We will design the fish, by hand, on the meeting table, using plastics and self-regenerating bits of fish flesh. There will be no more endless meetings or manager-headed end results."

"Is that wise?" Leer and Scarskirt both asked, words intertwined. Scarskirt said it with a hint of disdain in her voice. Leer said it in a clipped tone. She had a worried look on her face. Scarskirt seemed more amused than concerned. She picked dirt and beetle feelers out from beneath her painted fingernails with a knife that seemed too robust for the delicacy of the task.

"Is that wise," Leer said again while Scarskirt fell silent. "I mean, ultimately it is the Manager's project."

Leer was always changing her body, but could never set her mind on what she should change it to, as if restless. I could almost imagine her tossing and turning in bed, transforming with each abrupt movement. When she asked the question, Leer had the dynamic skin coloration of a parrotfish and the mouth of one as well.

"It may not be wise," I said, "but I don't think any of us can survive months of meetings like this. My back is sore from the slugs and I'm weary of the journey."

“You may or may not be right,” Leer said, “but regardless the Manager will not approve.”

“That is my responsibility,” I said, confident in my many years of experience.

Scarskirt offered no further comment either way, but just sat there staring at me as she picked at her nails. The blade, I noticed, was double-edged and had a point. No matter how it touched you, it would cut you.



For a while, everything went well. We built the fish by hand and it took shape with a coherent design. I noticed a certain reluctance on the part of Scarskirt and Leer, but in general everyone seemed happy with my efforts.

Then the Manager finally decided to attend a meeting. Ten minutes into the meeting, she burst into flames and stood up.

We all shied away from her as she said, “The fish was to have my face. That is the last design to materialize in my office and none of what you have done since has been sent to me for my approval, or is acceptable to me in any way.”

This business about approval was blatantly untrue. I had sent her several messages about the changes. I had used her favorite message method: tiny crunchy bats that spurted the long-lost flavors of marzipan, chocolate mousse, and apple pie into your mouth even as you cracked down on the bones to receive the information.

But when my Manager visited my office later, she professed ignorance. She said she had not gotten any of my messages.

Later, I would discover that Mord, gone half-feral, had intercepted the bats as they flew through some long-darkened hall and eaten them all, licking his muzzle with great pleasure afterwards, no doubt. I do not know if he shared them with Scarskirt or not. I do not know how far their relationship had progressed by that point.

“Unacceptable,” my Manager said. “I am the lead on this project, and the fish shall have my face.”

All of the paper had already burned off of her, and by the light of the thousand phosphorescent fireflies I had created and painstakingly inserted into the walls of my office over the years, her plastic seemed impossibly bright and lacquered, more like armor than it ever had before.

After this encounter, I took to calling the project the Fish-Rots-From-The-Head Project.

## INCREASING SOCIAL ISOLATION

**E**ven before the problems with my Manager, I had indeed grown apart from Leer and Mord, to say nothing of Scarskirt. Several new employees had been hired, some flesh-and-blood, some not. Human Re-

sources made Leer's office larger by demolishing the adjoining offices—with people still inside most of them. These new employees took up positions all around Leer and Scarskirt like some kind of defensive perimeter. Scarskirt ran linking worms between all of them, and thus became intimate friends with them overnight. These worms hooked into their ankles and allowed them to communicate soundlessly amongst themselves. No one had thought to invite me, so at night, I sent non-combat interceptor beetles to try to tap into the worm links, but they were too tough and all of my beetles came back with broken mandibles.

From that moment forward, I was shut out.

Complicating matters, Mord, I soon discovered, had also become part of their network. Despite all of his promises, Mord had changed once he moved to Human Resources. He was now partially composed of some large furred animal, almost like a bear. He began to emit a musk that someone told me was supposed to have a calming effect on employees. He retained his hands, but they morphed to become more like those of a raccoon. His eyes had been enlarged and refitted so he could see at night. In the dark hallways of some floors it was rumored that he whirled around and snarled and bit the air, as if encased in a straitjacket.

For a month or so, Mord had taken to following me around, and this gave me hope that all would be normal. He wouldn't talk to me, but he would stand in the doorway of my office. Waiting.

Soon, though, I discovered it wasn't really Mord. It was just a shadow Mord had made of himself, and at the Manager's direction each employee had been assigned shadows. After a time, I ignored Mord's shadow and it went away.

As for the real Mord, he rarely came to our floor anymore, and if he did it was to visit Leer's office. I only saw him if he had official business.

When I suggested he come over to my apartment sometime, he ignored me.

When I suggested we go looking for sparrows, he ignored me.

For all intents and purposes, Mord had forsaken me. He had become Other.



You must understand how much anguish all of this made me feel. All any of us had were the relationships at the company. All the information we had came from each other. What waited for us each night in the city did not bear describing.

These employees had been to my apartment. I had shared my raise with them. I had been over to Leer's house and Mord's house during the holidays, despite the danger in the streets. We had gone hiking in neighboring buildings as an excuse for long lunches. Mord had shared the sad situation of a wife half-plastic, half-flesh. Leer had told of her unhappiness at home, with a

husband who preferred shoving memory eels into his rectum to spending time with her. I had shared my loneliness, of how difficult it was to find love if one had not brought it with them while fleeing the disintegration of the world. I had shown them my few remaining photographs of my parents on vacation in some exotic place by the sea, marble columns behind them. Their faded crumbling smiles from which I had to interpret so much. We had talked about how we missed the rigidity of the old times, how much the fluid quality of what happened now, at home and at the office, frightened us no matter how we tried to deny it. How no one born now would understand how different it had been, once.

20 |

For this reason, because we had been so close for so long, I blame Scarskirt for my growing isolation. She was gorgeous and lively and everyone loved her, but I now believe she hid a secret wound from us, that she was scarred from before we knew her. That she never cared about anyone, and that she coveted my job from the moment she was hired, despite my friendliness. Despite my openness. Despite the fact I had shared all of my training beetles with her. I did not alter a single one before giving them to her. Three or four new employees died each year from beetles poisoned by their trainers. But I had accepted her into the group, without malice in my heart.

Nonetheless, my trust now meant I was isolated. My only solace came from my office, where I still controlled



my beetles and the talking crocodile head that I made tell me jokes when I was feeling depressed.

I could still communicate with others in a limited way using the small pool of water on my desk. At the bottom of the pool lay a flounder, modified so that messages to and fro played out across the preternatural white of its back, the sweet brine smell a comfort. I would work in my office for hours without any outside contact, content to talk to my diminishing circle of friends spread out across the company. It was, in a sense, like being in my apartment, only safer.

Thus hemmed in, I worked on my small part of the fish project. My Manager had decreed that I could continue fleshing out the dorsal fin and I had resolved that by meticulous, patient work I would make the dorsal fin so fine a product that no one seeing it as it walked down a school's hallway would remember anything but the perfect geometry of my contribution.

## A NEW MANAGER IN AN OLD PARADIGM

**E**very once in a while I would hear an odd belch or rumble, far distant, coming from above, and remember the behemoth grub that reclined above us, and in the remembering realize again that my Manager did not rule the company. Above her office on the fiftieth floor rose

another ten floors. The last five floors consisted of a vast and rippling beetle grub continually devouring its own self-regenerating flesh. Within this grub resided the company's owners, who had been attached to the succulent meat and milk of the grub. It was the company's finest creation. Nothing could get at them inside the grub. It was not connected by worms. No leeches or slugs were allowed inside.

Once, the remnants of a government had attacked the grub, but their weapons bounced off of the grub's glossy, impenetrable skin. The infiltrations of flesh-and-bloods they sailed down upon the grub were legion, but they slid away or were repelled by the poison coating the grub's skin. Large parasites that kept the grub's skin clean ate the rest of them.

22 |

Now, in the owners' infinite, grub-defended wisdom, they decided to send a second Manager down to our floor. His name was a secret, of course, but Leer nicknamed him "Slumber," because he was large and lumbrous like the Mord, only not as unpredictable.

This development did not please my Manager. Slumber began to attend more and more of our meetings, while my Manager was given other tasks. She was still our personnel manager, but rumor claimed we would eventually move to Slumber's team.

All through this period, my Manager continued to call me into her office and ask me if I loved her. I kept telling her no. She looked agitated, unwell—even more

so when Slumber finally decided to put an end to the fish project. The fish with my Manager's face was discarded, the prototype set loose to live or die roaming distant halls. I had an image of it in my mind's eye, scavenging scraps and croaking to itself, devoid of any educational purpose other than survival, held together by its magnificent dorsal fin.

I felt sorry for it. I could sympathize, for soon Slumber hooked up to the worm tendrils of Leer's network and began to ignore me and my suggestions. Two more employees had been moved into what was now effectively Scarskirt's office. I was the only member of the creative team not in that office. Scarskirt frequently visited Slumber on the fiftieth floor and would come back with her slug pulsing and a sickly smile on her vacant face.

For this reason, the next time Slumber came down to our floor, I intercepted him and asked him to visit me in my office. After an hour of speaking to Leer, Scarskirt, and the rest, he finally stood, reluctant, in my doorway. He was as wide as two normal people and had but a single hair that he grew in a circular fashion across the middle of his head and chin, and down his chest. He smelled like melted beans and cheese.

"What do you need?" he asked. "I have meetings to go to."

"I am having trouble with communication," I told him. "The others are discussing projects and brain-

storming and going to lunch without me. I need to be attached at the ankle like the rest of them. How can I be proactive if I am ignored?”

Slumber frowned. “You’re not being ignored. Nothing of importance is being discussed. You still attend the status meetings, and we discuss everything there.”

Yes, the status meetings. During these meetings I now learned what Leer and Scarskirt and the others had decided during the prior week. I learned what lack of role I was to have during the next week. I would stare at Leer, willing her to return my gaze, to understand from the pained look on my face just how much this was hurting me. But she never did. Scarskirt would stare, though. A kind of measuring look. An appraisal. I did not like the hardness of that glance, given while she told a joke. A stolen glimpse to test my resolve.

24 |

I tried to argue with Slumber, but he cut me off. “We can always give you another leech if you like, to cure your discomfort,” he said. “But don’t worry, we all value you.”

He left, and five minutes later was laughing and joking with Leer and Scarskirt.



Now I had to send out my beetles as spies, just so I would know the basics of what was happening, just so I could do my job. But beetles are not meant as spies; they

are made to disseminate information, not capture it. Despite all my efforts to change them, most did a poor job. Several never came back and I had to destroy others that had been tampered with by Scarskirt so they would not infect the rest.

I could not complain to the Mord by then. I had discovered he was far from my friend. While seeking solace in isolation, I came upon the Mord and Scarskirt in a forgotten part of the third floor, among the musty ruins of some sort of outdated cathedral. They stood upon a crumbling platform decorated with gold leaf, leaning toward each other, connected at the forehead by the disembodied siphon of a long-necked clam. I watched them for half an hour, noting the bliss on their faces. I could see that they were far, far away. The Mord was now much more animal than flesh-and-blood. I could smell his musk even from my hiding place.

I had begun to call him “the Mord,” as had many others.

## UNACCEPTABLE DISREGARD FOR GOOD PRACTICE

One day, a design was presented at a status meeting and it had the face of one of my remote friends, “Winterlong,” looking slack and haggard. The cat-thing

with pigeon legs meowed and Winterlong's face contorted into a meow.

I was shocked. I had just talked to him that morning.

After the meeting, I took Leer aside. Leer was wearing a ridiculous pink jacket made of living shark scales that Scarskirt had given her. She had been parading around in it all week, delighted with her office mate's castoffs.

"That was Winterlong," I said. "Butchered."

Scarskirt came up behind us without warning. She spoke before Leer could reply.

"Don't be ridiculous or paranoid," Scarskirt said. She laughed, but it was not her pretty laugh. It was more like a horsehead laugh. Her eyes were wide and bright and the blade of her smile cut me.

"You're imagining things," Leer said, staring at Scarskirt. She sighed. "That wasn't Winterlong. Not really." But her eyes were moist and her voice was thin and sad.

Winterlong's personal effects showed up on Scarskirt's desk soon after.

"He had no relatives," Scarskirt explained at the next status meeting, batting her eyes at Slumber, who made a sound like the world's laziest orgasm.

## THE FIRST OF MY PROACTIVE EFFORTS

Once, when things were still good, Leer and I had shared beetles. We had even created a few just for fun. At lunch, we would sneak out behind the company building with a blanket and sit on the little hill there, looking out onto a ravaged landfill full of the bright skeletons of vultures and then, beyond that, the city in all its strange mix of menace and vulnerability. The grass was yellowing rather than dead. A wiry tree stood on the hill at that time. We would eat crackers and old cans of shredded meat, the smell in that context almost unbearably tantalizing.

After lunch, we would unlock the glass cases containing our beetles. Their shining green-and-crimson carapaces would open like the lids of eccentric jewelry boxes to reveal their golden wings, and we would release them into the world.

Those beetles contained every joyous thing we had ever known, and we loved to watch them fly out into the distance.

“My father’s dry laugh!” I would shout.

“My mother’s mock frown!” Leer would reply.

“The color of the faded cover of my nursery rhyme book!”

“The taste of real potato soup!”

“The feel of thousand thread-count clean sheets!”

“The ache of muscles after playing stick ball!”



Our voices would get softer and softer until I was whispering things like “The smell of my father’s after-shave when he reached down to hug me.”

Then we would stand there, trailing off into silence, and get so much satisfaction out of wondering who would find them and what impact they would have on their discoverers. Sometimes we would even have tears in our eyes.

I can remember Leer saying once, “This hill makes me happy.”



So it was that when I decided to become proactive in the midst of my worsening situation, I persuaded Leer to join me on the hill, “for old time’s sake.”

28 |

The grass was mostly gone by then and the tree, too. Earthworms writhed and died in the naked dirt. The day was cold and gray, and the city did not bear looking at. The muffled sound of explosions, the smells of smoke and intense rot, told the story well enough. We stood there and turned our backs on the city, looking up at the company building, and searched for glimpses of the behemoth grub, lost in the low-lying clouds.

“What has happened, Leer?” I asked her. “I haven’t changed. I’m still the same as I ever was.”

Leer refused to look at me. She stood with arms folded and stared into the blank windows in front of

her. On this day, she had revisited her true form. There was no artifice to her.

“You’re imagining things,” Leer said.

“Like I imagined Winterlong’s face,” I said.

“Yes,” she said, but so quietly I almost couldn’t hear her.

“Leer, I know things have changed. It’s not my imagination. We all used to be so close.”

“Do you know,” Leer said, “how much I hate this place. I hate my job. I hate being here. And I hate the world out there.”

I shuddered at that. To think of the past, the distant past, before all of this—she was right: who could bear it? Sometimes I wondered if we had been sending out those beetles not to help others but to help get rid of the horrible weight of happy memories.

“I know you hate it,” I said. “I’ve known that for a while. I’m not stupid. But what does that have to do with me?”

Leer said, “Why do you fight it? Why do you care about any of it?”

“In the old days, we were all friends,” I said.

“It can’t be that way anymore. It’s just work.”

“But why?”

Leer just shrugged.

I think I cried a little then and Leer took pity on me and said, “It’ll be better. It’ll be better, I’m sure of it. When we’re under Slumber. Then it will all be fine.”

By then, we had both noticed the Mord coming up the hill. He was larger than I remembered and his thick fur had a golden brown luster to it. His eyes and fangs stood out more.

The Mord wasn't walking up the hill. The Mord was levitating up the hill, effortless.

I expelled my breath all in a rush.

Leer blanched and a look of terror came over her face.

"I couldn't bear to be disconnected from the worms," she whispered to me. "And Mord can read lips."

The Mord settled down in front of us. Even sitting on the incline, he was taller than us, and his shadow unfurled itself across us and across the entire top of the hill. I had the curious sensation of seeing his human face superimposed over his animal features, for just a second.

30 |

Then I caught a hint of movement behind him, at the bottom of the hill. Scarskirt stood there, her arms folded, her legs apart, sentinel-silent.

Leer looked me in the eyes and said, "We don't want you here. We aren't the same. You've changed. You don't do good work any more."

The Mord let out a roar that pushed its blood-shot, crazed eyes half out of their sockets and pressed my hair flat against the sides of my head. In the Mord's breath I could smell a thousand different kinds of rot. I could smell the stench of the entire company.

## AD HOC MEETINGS, FURTHER ABNEGATING PROCESS

Soon after the encounter with the Mord, my Manager began to visit me for reasons other than to ask her perpetual question. She would burst in near the end of the day and begin to rant, spittle flying from her mouth. Sometimes the language would be foreign to me. Sometimes I could understand the words but the context was incomprehensible. Other times, there would be no words, just shouts and shrieks and grunts.

My Manager's body would contort during these meetings, like a wet rag being wrung dry. She had become impossibly thin so that her eyes were cavernous in her face. The smell of wet burning plastic clung to her. Her hair had fallen out and she always wore a different wig, some of them living and some of them dead.

"I don't know how to help you," I would tell her, genuinely concerned about her. In the context of my current situation, I thought she was, if not a friend, then at least not an enemy.

Those of my spy beetles that had survived the change of purpose had recorded a variety of images in the myriad halls and passageways of the third floor. One of the most arresting involved my Manager. I had seen her, pensive and quietly weeping, walking across a cracked marble floor, only to stop and give out a cry of surprise. For hunching toward her with wet abandon was the fish

with her face, and in that moment as the beast drew near, I saw an image that haunted me: of my Manager's shock registering simultaneously on two identical faces. I am sure this is the first time she knew of the discontinuation of the fish project.

As for the ad hoc meetings, she would invariably storm out of my office and my unease would become chronic, for I knew that I had been unable to give her any kind of solace.

Perhaps the only solace would have been for Slumber to be sucked back up into the distance of the perpetual clouds ringing the behemoth company grub, never to return.

## TAKING FURTHER STEPS

32 |

**M**y beetles continued to bring me information in a halting fashion, but most of it just depressed me more. One report I watched while home at my apartment showed Scarskirt hunting down the fish project and stabbing it to death. Her knife sliced down, up, down, up, down as the fish tried to get away from her ever more slowly, spurting a thick green blood. The look on Scarskirt's face was as beatific and composed as during one of our status meetings. When the fish lay

still, great ridges of exposed flesh quivering, Scarskirt reached forward and cut off the copy of the Manager's face. Then she hunched down and showed it to my beetle, so I would get a good look at it, dripping, pale, and rubbery. She was smiling, of course.

After seeing this, my stress level went up exponentially. I grew so afraid I took to carrying weapons. I jury-rigged giant rhinoceros beetles into simple projectile weapons that fired either the remnants of less fortunate beetles or old-fashioned shrapnel I'd found in the cathedral ruins. I fashioned dung beetles into moldy grenades, using a liquid wrung out of my message bats as the fuel. I put up zones of foul-smelling molds outside my office, to discourage flesh-and-blood visitors. I devised subtle camouflage for myself, coating myself in the same fireflies that lined my walls, so that it was not always clear if I was in the office or not.

| 33

"Remember when" became how I started every conversation with my fellow employees during status meetings, although they did not like it. Scarskirt became openly contemptuous and Leer followed her lead. Scarskirt goaded Leer to send beetles to lazily, almost toyingly, attack my office defenses so that I would be forced to expend resources repelling them.

"Everything will be fine," Scarskirt would reassure me in the breakroom in the morning as I kept my distance.

In the afternoon, she would walk by me in the hall as I flinched away, and say loudly, “Why are your messages so abusive,” even though I had not communicated with her.

Leer by contrast would be professional when I bumped into her on my way to the bathroom, but with the kind of professionalism that one despises in a supposed friend. She was changing her appearance three or four times a morning by then. Sometimes she would give me a sickly half-smile, as if she had been caught in a monstrous lie.



One day I could have sworn I heard a sighing sound coming from the darkness that was the high ceiling of my office. The ceiling almost seemed alive. I told myself I was paranoid, but that afternoon I felt a vast wind and a huge black manta ray detached itself and flew out of my door and into the shadows. Such a creature was beyond Scarskirt’s skill level, or even Leer’s. It had to be reporting back to the Mord.

I now saw the Mord’s almost unrecognizable features on the flounder’s back at least twice a day. Those huge eyes staring out at me with some unrecognizable passion emblazoned on their surface. Sometimes the Mord would speak and say in a gravelly voice, “You never loved your manager” or “You should leave Scarskirt



alone.” Other times I intuited a pleading, pained look on his face as he murmured things like “Help me. Help me, Savante.”

But I no longer trusted him.

How could I?

### ADDITIONAL ALTERATIONS USED TO ISOLATE ME

**A**t Slumber’s urging, perhaps aided by a suggestion from Scarskirt, everyone on the creative team except me had themselves altered so that they shared certain uniform attributes. These attributes included green exoskeletons through which the familiar faces peered as if through a graveyard of excavated crustaceans. A lingering scent of lime became common to their type. The network of worms became mobile so that they remained connected wherever they went. Slumber took them personally to the company’s recreational rooms, eschewing Human Resources and slugs alike to show his trust in them. They even began to talk the same. They all began to talk like Scarskirt.

I did not know how I felt about being left out of this phase of entitlements. I did not know how my Manager felt about being left out, either.

In my nightmares I was floating in a sea of cracked-open crab and lobster parts, miles from shore, under a fiery red moon. Beside me the corpse of the fish project floated too, its face bobbing beside it, still screaming in death.

### MY PERSONNEL FILE: MORE ATTEMPTS AT BEING PROACTIVE

**D**espite all of the pressures I have detailed, I did complete several legitimate beetle projects, garnering a grudging praise from Slumber, who otherwise I saw not at all. In this way—through the quality of my work—I hoped to preserve my job.

36 |

I also decided to visit my personnel file in the basement. This was one of the perks of working for the company, especially as I did not require the Mord or another member of Human Resources to accompany me. I hoped my file might divulge some clue, some nuance, that would give me a way out of my increasingly perilous situation.

The elevator down was sleek and fast and had not been used for any company experiments, which was a relief. When I got to the records department, an attendant wearing a surgical mask led me to the right room. My box, man-sized, was stacked amongst thousands of

other such boxes, all of various sizes, all studded with the same small breathing holes. Yelping and snorting noises came from some of the boxes, bird trills from others.

Although the attendant was at least six feet tall and made of muscle and steel, he grunted with the effort of pulling the box down and putting it on the table in front of me.

It had been eight months since I had visited my personnel file. At that time, I had taken it for a walk on the little hill and fed it some carefully-hoarded treats. I had opened up to it and told it things about my father, my mother, and my arduous trek to the city that I had never told anyone. I remembered it as a lightening of a burden, a cathartic experience.

I opened up the box.

Inside lay the unrecognizable corpse of my personnel file. Anyone unfamiliar with it would have seen only some kind of large mammal. Rotting. White maggots curling through the masses of intestines, organs, sinew, and soft tissue with the mindless motion of a baby's fingers. My flesh went cold and I think I stopped breathing for a time.

There were many, many knife wounds. I had seen those kinds of marks before.

Even beyond the fear, a feeling of intense sadness came over me. The killing seemed so vindictive, and so unnecessary.

“Do you still want to take it out—or, perhaps, look

through it?” the attendant asked, offering me a pair of gloves.

“No,” I said. “There’s no need.”

Everything was very clear.

## THE BEGINNING OF THE END

**T**rapped. I could not go to Mord, Leer, Slumber, or my Manager. Should I throw myself on the mercy of Scarskirt, I felt certain I would end up like Winterlong. I dreamed of quitting, but could not see a future beyond the company. For awhile, I tried desperately to act normal, but it was difficult under the circumstances

38 |

After my visit to my personnel file, the black manta ray covered my ceiling all the time. All I could see on the flounder’s back was the Mord’s thick block of a face, its huge eyes staring at me, inscrutable. The image never spoke to me, but I studied that face for long minutes, trying to decipher some further message there. All I could really see is how the eyes still retained some essence of the old Mord—how, if I looked long enough I could believe I was still looking at a picture of my old friend in a bear suit. The Mord who was always quick with a joke and liked nothing better than to spend lunch in a stairwell with a thermos of coffee and a pair of binoculars.

I kept making beetles at a ferocious rate, both to protect myself and prove I was still working at the company.

I no longer had messages from other employees.

I no longer could get Leer or Scarskirt or even Slumber to acknowledge my presence.

I began to live in memory. I would see my father's long, white fingers as he sat at the piano in the old house that I remembered only from the few surviving photographs. Or I would see my mother playing chess with him, hunched over the board with an intense concentration. Or conversations with Leer from years back that had made me laugh. Or the look on Mord's face when he saw a glimpse of a sparrow, which widened his face and made him seem almost childlike.

If I just concentrated hard enough on these images, I believe I thought I could survive all of it.

## ANOTHER MEETING WITH MY MANAGER

One night, after the manta ray had flown off, my Manager entered my office and sat down. She looked so tired and so thin that for the first time I thought she might be dying. Her eyes were so far back in their sockets that I almost couldn't see them except for the slight reflection, the glint from the whites. She

smelled like limes, so I knew she had just visited with the rest of the team.

“I am giving you a raise,” my Manager said, but she didn’t seem happy about it.

She took an object from her pocket and placed it on my desk. It was an amorphous ball of clear flesh with a small brown frog inside of it.

“This will make everything like it was before. Slumber and I made it together. For you. Just eat it tomorrow morning and you will feel much better.”

“Thank you,” I said.

My Manager leaned forward, although it was more like a swaying motion from fatigue, and with her elbows on my desk, she whispered, “Do you love me?”

It was the first time, in that moment, looking at my Manager so frail and on the edge of some unknowable catastrophe, that I realized she had once been flesh-and-blood. That she might have had a history from before the company. That she might be as much a victim of circumstances as me.

And because she said it there, in my office, at that moment, and because I was tired and alone and no longer cared, I said, “It’s possible.”

My Manager’s smile destroyed the worry lines radiating from the corners of her eyes. The smile was so unexpected that I smiled back.

Then she stumbled to her feet and was gone, leaving my raise on my desk.

## THE NATURE OF MY RAISE

The next morning, I came to work in a good mood. I had had uninterrupted sleep for the first time in months. I did not notice anything amiss, although Leer and Scarskirt had changed the color of their exoskeletons to black. For Scarskirt this meant that her pale perfect face shone like death from her mask, her red lips a feast of blood. For Leer, it made it seem as if only the exoskeleton held her up. Neither of them would look at me, but I took this in stride since things had been bad for some time. I knew it would take many months for things to return to normal.

I ate my raise immediately—it tasted like moist chocolate cake—and started working on my beetles with new-found vigor.

Not twenty minutes later, a member of Human Resources cradling a slug in her arms summoned me to my Manager's office. By then, my stomach was feeling queasy.

As we neared the elevators, my last thought before the slug kicked in was: Why are all of the offices empty?



I woke in a chair in the Human Resources office on the seventh floor. The HR representative who had brought me stood to my left, holding the slug. My Manager sat

behind Mord's desk. To her left stood Slumber, looking solemn. To her right stood the Mord, large and terrible, holding the rotting remains of my personnel file, from which he scooped entrails into his mouth with a kind of absent-minded hunger.

My heart began to beat so fast I could feel it thudding. My throat closed a little. My arms became shaky and my legs didn't seem to work. I'm sure they could hear my breathing, shallow and quick.

Looking very solemn, my Manager leaned forward and said, "We have decided to terminate your employment with this company due to a pattern of unprofessional communication. Do you have anything to say in your defense?"

42 |

Shocked, anguished, I opened my mouth to speak, and realized I had been poisoned by my raise. For nothing eloquent or even faintly coherent came from between my lips. Instead, frogs eggs poured out, falling heavy to the floor, and coating my shirt in green slime. Nothing could be further from the definition of professional.

My Manager gave me a look of sorrow while the Mord growled in his corner and a thin smile animated Slumber's solemn face. I believe that somewhere in the building Scarskirt smiled at that exact moment as well.



But as they led me away, attaching the slug as I strug-



gled, I regained my voice long enough to shout at my Manager as the doors began to close on me, “I love you. I’ve always loved you.”

A sharp intake of breath. The sound of the paper encasing her bursting into flame once more.

## THE RESULTS

Images of Leer, of Mord, of Scarskirt filled my head as Human Resources threw me out of the front door, the place on my spine where they had just ripped off the slug still stinging. It was a bitterly cold day and no one was walking on the plaza in front of the building. I’m sure people had been told to avoid it until I was gone.

| 43

The doors shut on the pragmatic faces of my tormentors. I staggered backwards, looking up at the place that had been my home for so many years—that had, in this incomprehensible world of ours, been all that was left to me of family. Now, I realized, I would have to find my way alone.

But there was one last surprise.

As I stared up at the window of Mord’s office, so far away, it opened and there my Manager stood: on fire from head to toe, and no extinguishing it this time. She looked down at me, and although I could not read the

expression on her face I would like to think she was happy, for a moment.

Then the Mord rose behind her, roaring as he rose and rose and rose, as if he might never stop growing, to fill the entire window. A slap of a paw and my Manager jerked back out of sight.

The fire spread from window to window, room to room, while the Mord raged, thrashing and fighting. Once, he stopped to stare down at me, paws against the glass. Once, he looked out into the gray sky as if searching for something.

A shadow, tiny and light and on fire began to drift down from the burning windows.

Was it a leaf? Who could tell? By the time it reached the ground, it would have fallen away into nothing.

And that was the situation at the time I left the company.

## DEDICATION

FOR ANN, my wife, who made the situation bearable

and

FOR PETER CROWTHER and NICK GEVERS,  
whose support I will always appreciate

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I dedicate *The Situation* to all of the passive-aggressive emotional vampires, cowardly blunderkinds, narcissistic sociopaths, and incompetent power-abusing managers currently lurking amongst unsuspecting office workers everywhere.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeff VanderMeer is the author of the best-selling *City of Saints and Madmen*, set in his signature creation, the imaginary city of Ambergris, in addition to several other novels from Bantam, Tor, and Pan Macmillan. He has won two World Fantasy Awards, an NEA-funded Florida Individual Writers' Fellowship, and, most recently, the Le Cafard cosmique award in France and the Tähtifantasia Award in Finland, both for *City of Saints*. He has also been a finalist for the Hugo Award, Bram Stoker Award, IHG Award, Philip K. Dick Award, and many others. Novels such as *Veniss Underground* and *Shriek: An Afterword* have made the year's best lists of Amazon.com, *The Austin Chronicle*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, and *Publishers Weekly*, among others. His work, both books and short stories, has been translated into over twenty languages. *The Thackery T. Lambshead Pocket Guide to Eccentric & Discredited Diseases* may be his most famous anthology, and is considered a cult classic, still in print along with his *Leviathan* original fiction series. VanderMeer is the founding editor and publisher of the Ministry of Whimsy Press, up until recently on hiatus. It is currently an imprint of Wyrms Publishing. One of the Ministry's publications, *The Troika* by Stephen Chapman, won the Philip K. Dick Award in 1997.

VanderMeer's reviews and essays have appeared in *The Washington Post Book World*, *Publishers Weekly*, and many others. He is a regular columnist for the Amazon book-culture blog, and has served as a judge for the Eisner Awards, among others, and has been a guest speaker at such diverse events as the Brisbane Writers Festival, Finncon in Helsinki, and the American Library Association annual conference. His multi-

media presentations and lectures on a variety of topics have been given all over the world, and he makes frequent public appearances, including teaching at the Clarion Workshop and Trinity Prep School.

Recently, VanderMeer began to experiment in other media, resulting in a movie based on his novel *Shriek* that featured an original soundtrack by rock band The Church and a Play Station Europe animation of his story “A New Face in Hell” by animator Joel Veitch. Currently, VanderMeer is writing a *Predator* tie-in novel for Dark Horse Comics called *Predator: South China Seas*, finishing up his latest Ambergris novel, a noir thriller called *Finch*, and writing the introduction to Ben Templesmith’s second *Wormwood: Gentleman Corpse* graphic novel from IDW Publishing. Forthcoming projects in 2008 include seven anthologies (from *The New Weird* to a charity anthology for literacy, *Last Drink Bird Head*), a short film based on *The Situation* with music by Tarantella, and several novellas, including “Borne,” a sequel to *The Situation*. He can be reached via his blog at <http://www.jeffvandermeer.com>.

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