

WHAT YOU ARE ABOUT TO SEE

Jack Skillingstead

Jack Skillingstead tells us, “This is one of a handful of stories I wrote after attending a science fiction event in Tempe, Arizona. It was nice visiting a fictional landscape other than the Pacific Northwest. Two of the stories had optimistic conclusions. One did not. I’m not saying which ending the present story has. Readers can find one of the other Arizona tales in Lou Anders’ *Fast Forward 2* anthology.

It sat in a cold room.

Outside that room a Marine handed me an insulated suit. I slipped it on over my street clothes. The Marine punched a code into a numeric keypad attached to the wall. The lock snapped open on the heavy door, the Marine nodded, I entered.

Andy McCaslin, who looked like an over-dressed turnip in *his* insulated suit, greeted me and shook my hand. I’d known Andy for twenty-five years, since our days in Special Forces. Now we both worked for the N.S.A., though you could say my acronym was lowercase. I operated on the margins of the Agency, a contract player, an accomplished extractor of information from reluctant sources. My line of work required a special temperament, which I possessed and which Andy most assuredly did not. He was a true believer in the *rightness* of the cause, procedure, good guys and bad. I was like Andy’s shadow twin. He stood in the light, casting something dark and faceless, which was me.

It remained seated—if you could call that sitting. Its legs, all six of them, coiled and braided like a nest of lavender snakes on top of which the alien’s frail torso rested. That torso resembled the upper body of a starving child, laddered ribs under parchment skin and a big stretched belly full of nothing. It watched us with eyes like two thumbnail chips of anthracite.

“Welcome to the new world order,” Andy said, his breath condensing in little gray puffs.

"Thanks. Anything out of Squidward yet?"

"Told us it was in our own best interests to let him go, then when we wouldn't it shut up. Only 'shut up' isn't quite accurate, since it doesn't vocalize. You hear the words in your head, or sometimes there's just a picture. It was the picture it put in the Secretary's head that's got everybody's panties in a knot."

"What picture?"

"Genocidal carnage on a planet-wide scale."

"Sounds friendly enough."

"There's a backroom theory that Squidward was just showing the Secretary his own secret wet dream. Anyway, accepting its assertions of friendliness at face value is not up to me. Off the record, though, my intuition tells me its intentions are benign."

"You look tired, Andy."

"I feel a little off," he said.

"Does Squidward always stare like that?"

"Always."

"You're certain it still has the ability to communicate? Maybe the environment's making it sick."

"Not according to the medical people. Of course, nothing's certain, except that Squidward is a non-terrestrial creature possessed of an advanced technology. Those facts are deductible. By the way, the advanced technology in question is currently bundled in a hanger not far from here. What's left looks like a weather balloon fed through a shredder. Ironic?"

"Very." I hunched my shoulders. "Cold in here,"

"You noticed."

"Squidward likes it that way, I bet."

"Loves it."

"Have you considered warming things up?"

Andy gave me a sideways look. "You thinking of changing the interrogation protocols?"

"If I am it wouldn't be in that direction."

"No CIA gulag in Romania, eh?"

"Never heard of such a thing."

"I'd like to think you hadn't."

Actually I was well familiar with the place, only it was in Guatemala, not Romania. At its mention a variety of horrors arose in my mind. Some of them had faces attached. I regarded them dispassionately, as I had when I saw them in actuality all those years ago, and then I replaced them in the vault from which their muffled screams trouble me from time to time.

Andy's face went slack and pale.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know. All of a sudden I feel like I'm not really standing here."

He smiled thinly, and I thought he was going to faint. But as I reached out to him I suddenly felt dizzy myself, afloat, contingent. I swayed, like balancing on the edge of a tall building. Squidward sat in its coil of snakes, staring . . .

* * *

August 2008

Now return to a particular watershed moment in the life of one Brian Kinney, aka: me. Two years ago. If years mean anything in the present context.

I was a lousy drunk. Lack of experience. My father, on the other hand, had been an accomplished drunk. Legendary, almost. As a consequence of his example I had spent my life cultivating a morbid sobriety, which my wife managed to interrupt by an act of infidelity. Never mind that she needed to do it before she completely drowned in *my* legendary uncommunicative self-isolation. The way I viewed things at the time: she betrayed me for no reason other than her own wayward carnality. You'd think I'd have known better; I'd spent my nasty little career understanding and manipulating the psychology of others.

Anyway, I went and got stinking drunk, which was easy enough. It was the drive home that was the killer. The speedometer needle floated between blurred pairs of numbers. By deliberate force of will (I was hell on force of will) I could bring the numbers into momentary clarity, but that required dropping my gaze from the roller-coaster road sweeping under my headlight beams—not necessarily a good idea. Four. Five. Was that right? What was the limit?

Good question.

What *was* the limit?

I decided it wasn't the four whiskeys with beer chasers. No, it was the look on Connie's face when I waved the surveillance transcript at her like a starter's flag (Race you to the end of the marriage; go!). Not contrite, guilty, apologetic, remorseful. Not even angry, outraged, indignant.

Stone-faced. Arms folded. She had said: "You don't even know me."

And she was right; I'd been too busy *not* knowing myself to take a stab at knowing her.

Off the roller-coaster, swinging through familiar residential streets, trash cans and recycling containers arranged at the curb like clusters of strange little people waiting for the midnight bus. I lived here, when I wasn't off inflicting merry hell upon various persons who sometimes deserved it and sometimes didn't. These days I resorted to more enlightened methodologies, of course. Physical pain was a last resort. Guatemala had been an ugly aberration (I liked to tell myself), a putrid confluence of political license and personal demons unleashed in the first fetid sewage swell of the so-called War On Terror. Anyway, the neighborhood reminded me of the one I wished I'd grown up in. But it was a façade. I was hell on façades, too.

And there was Connie, lifting the lid off our very own little strange man, depositing a tied-off plastic bag of kitchen garbage. Standing there in the middle of the night, changed from her business suit to Levi's and sweatshirt and her cozy blue slippers, performing this routine task as if our world (my world) hadn't collapsed into the black hole of her infidelity.

Connie as object, focus of pain. Target.

Anger sprang up fresh through the fog of impermissible emotion and numbing alcohol.

My foot crushed the accelerator, the big Tahoe surged, veered; I was out of my mind, not myself—that's the spin I gave it later.

The way she dropped the bag, the headlights bleaching her out in death-glare brilliance. At the last instant I closed my eyes. Something hit the windshield, rolled over the roof. A moment later the Tahoe struck the brick and wrought-iron property wall and came to an abrupt halt.

I lifted my head off the steering wheel, wiped the blood out of my eyes. The windshield was intricately webbed, buckled inward. That was my house out there, the front door standing open to lamplight, mellow wood tones, that ficus plant Connie kept in the entry.

Connie.

I released my seatbelt and tried to open the door. Splintered ribs scraped together, razored my flesh, and I screamed, suddenly stone-cold and agonizingly sober. I tried the door again, less aggressively. My razor ribs scraped and cut. Okay. One more time. Force of will. I bit down on my lip and put my shoulder to the door. It wouldn't budge, the frame was twisted out of alignment. I sat back, panting, drenched in sweat. And I saw it: Connie's blue slipper flat against what was left of the windshield. Time suspended. *That bitch.* And the Johnstown flood of tears. Delayed reaction triggered. As a child I'd learned not to cry. I'd watched my mother weep her soul out to no changeable effect. I'd done some weeping, too. Also to no effect. Dad was dad; this is your world. Lesson absorbed, along with the blows. But sitting in the wreck of the Tahoe, my marriage, my life, I made up for lost tears; I knew what I had become, and was repulsed. The vault at the bottom of my mind yawned opened, releasing the shrieking ghosts of Guatemala.

You see, it's all related. Compartmentalization aside, if you cross the taboo boundary in one compartment you're liable to cross it in all the others.

By the time the cops arrived the ghosts were muffled again, and I was done with weeping. Vault secured, walls hastily erected, fortifications against the pain I'd absorbed and the later pain I'd learned to inflict. The irreducible past. Barricades were my specialty.

The Agency stepped in, determined I could remain a valuable asset, and took care of my "accident," the details, the police.

Flip forward again.

You *can* be a drunk and hold a top-secret clearance. But you must be a careful one. And it helps if your relationship with the Agency is informally defined. I was in my basement office *carefully* drawing the cork out of a good bottle of Riesling when Andy McCaslin called on the secure line. I lived in that basement, since Connie's death, the house above me like a rotting corpse of memory. Okay, it wasn't that bad. I hadn't been around enough to turn the house into a memory corpse; I just preferred basements and shadows.

"Andy," I said into the receiver, my voice Gibraltar steady, even though the Riesling was far from my first libation of the long day. Unlike Dad, I'd learned to space it out, to *maintain*.

"Brian. Listen, I'm picking you up. We're going for a drive in the desert. Give me an hour to get there. Wear something warm."

August 2008

I wore the whole bottle, from the inside out.

The moon was a white poker chip. The desert slipped past us, cold blue with black ink shadows. We rode in Andy's private vehicle, a late model Jeep Cherokee. He had already been driving all day, having departed from the L.A. office that morning, dropping everything to pursue "something like a dream" that had beckoned to him.

"Care to reveal our destination?" I asked.

"I don't want to tell you anything beforehand. It might influence you, give you some preconception. Your mind has to be clear or this won't work."

"Okay, I'll think only happy thoughts."

"Good. Hang on, by the way."

He slowed, then suddenly pulled off the two-lane road. We jolted over desert hardpan. Scrub brush clawed at the Cherokee's undercarriage.

"Ah, the road's back thataway," I said.

He nodded and kept going. A bumpy twenty minutes or so passed. Then we stopped, for no obvious reason, and he killed the engine. I looked around. We were exactly in the middle of nowhere. It looked a lot like my personal mental landscape.

"I know this isn't a joke," I said, "because you are not a funny guy."

"Come on."

We got out. Andy was tall, Scotch-Irish, big through the shoulders and gut. He was wearing a sheepskin jacket, jeans and cowboy boots. A real shit-kickin' son of a bitch. Yee haw. He had a few other sheepskins somewhere, but his walls were wearing *those*. I followed him away from the Jeep.

"Tell me what you see," he said.

I looked around.

"Not much."

"Be specific."

I cleared my throat. "Okay. Empty desert, scrub brush, cactus. Lots of sand. There is no doubt a large population of venomous snakes slithering under foot looking for something to bite, though I don't exactly *see* them. There's also a pretty moon in the sky. So?"

I rubbed my hands together, shifted my feet. I'd worn a Sun Devils sweatshirt, which was insufficient. Besides that I could have used a drink. But of course these days I could always use a drink. After a lifetime of grimly determined sobriety I'd discovered that booze was an effective demon-suppressor and required exactly the opposite of will-power, which is what I'd been relying on up till Connie's death. I have no idea what my *father's* demons might have been. He checked out by a self-inflicted route before we got around to discussing that. I almost did the same a couple of years later, while in the thick of Ranger training, where I'd fled in desperate quest of discipline and structure and a sense of belonging to something. Andy talked me out of shooting myself and afterward kept the incident private. I sometimes wondered whether he regretted that. Offing myself may have been part of a balancing equation designed to subtract a measure of suffering from the world.

Now, in the desert, he withdrew a pack of Camels from his coat pocket and lit up. I remembered my dad buying his packs at the 7-11 when I was a little kid.

"Hey, you don't smoke," I said to Andy.

"I don't? What do you call this?" He waved the cigarette at me. "Look, Brian, what would you say if I told you we were standing outside a large military installation?"

"I'd say okay, but it must be invisible."

"It is."

I laughed. Andy didn't.

"Come on," I said.

"All right, it's not invisible. But it's not exactly *here*, either."

"That I can see. Can't see?"

"Close your eyes."

"Then I won't be able to see *anything*, including the invisible military installation."

"Do it anyway," he said. "Trust me. I've done this before. So have you, probably." I hesitated. Andy was a good guy—my friend, or the closest thing to one that I'd ever allowed. But it now crossed my mind that my informal status vis-à-vis the Agency was about to become *terminally* informal. Certainly there was precedent. We who work on the fringes where the rules don't constrain our actions are also subject to the anything-goes approach on the part of our handlers. Was I on the verge of being . . . severed? By *Andy McCaslin*? He stood before me with his damn cigarette, smoke drifting from his lips, his eyes black as oil in the moonlight.

"Trust me, Brian."

Maybe it was the lingering wine buzz. But I decided I *did* trust him, or needed to, because he was the only one I ever *had* trusted. I closed my eyes. The breeze carried his smoke into my face. My dad had been redolent of that stink. Not a good sense-memory. But when I was little I loved the *look* of the cigarette cartons and packages, the way my dad would say, Pack a Camels non-filter, and the clerk would turn to the rack behind him and pick out the right one, like a game show.

"Now relax your mind," Andy said.

"Consider it relaxed, Swami."

"Try to be serious."

"I'll try."

"Remember the empty mind trick they taught us, in case we ever got ourselves captured by unfriendlies?"

"Sure."

"Do that. Empty your mind."

It was easy, and I didn't learn it from the Army. I learned it at my father's knee, you might say. Survival technique number one: Empty your mind. Don't be there. Don't hear the screaming, even your own.

Andy said, "I'm going to say a word. When I do, let your mind fill with whatever the word evokes."

I nodded, waited, smelling the Camel smoke, my head not empty in the way Andy wanted it to be. I was too preoccupied by a memory of smoke.

"Arrowhead," Andy said.

August 2008

I felt. . . something.

Andy said, "Shit." And then, "What you are about to see is real. Okay, open your eyes."

We were now standing outside a 7-11 store. The desert ran right up to the walls. A tumbleweed bumped against the double glass doors. The interior was brightly lit. In the back I could make out a pair of Slurpee machines slow-swirling icy drinks in primary colors. After a while I closed my mouth and turned to Andy.

"Where the hell did *this* come from?"

"Instant Unconsciously Directed Association. You like that? I made it up. Only I don't know why this should be your Eyeooda for Arrowhead. I was hoping you'd bring up the real place. Anyway, let's go inside while it lasts."

He started forward but I grabbed his arm.

"Wait a minute. Are we still operating under the disengagement of preconceived notions policy, or whatever?"

He thought about it for a moment then said, "I guess not, now that we're sharing a consensus reality. Brian, this 7-11 is actually the Arrowhead Installation."

The coal of an extinguished memory glowed dimly. I *knew* Arrowhead, or thought I did. A top secret base located more or less in that part of the Arizona desert in which we now found ourselves. Or was/did it? The memory was so enfeebled that if I didn't hold it just so it would blow away like dandelion fluff. Still, this wasn't a military base; it was a convenience store.

"Bullshit?" I said.

"Do you remember Arrowhead?" Andy asked.

"Sort of. What is this, what's going on?"

"Listen to me, Brian. We finally got one. We finally got an honest to God extraterrestrial—and it's *in there*."

"In the 7-11."

"No. In the Arrowhead facility that looks like a 7-11 in our present consensus reality. The alien is hiding itself and the installation in some kind of stealth transdimensional mirror trick, or something. I've been here before. So have you. Our dreams can still remember. I've come out to the desert—I don't know, dozens of times? I've talked to it, the alien. It shuffles reality. I keep waking up, then going back to sleep. Here's the thing. It can cloak its prison, reinterpret its appearance, but it can't escape."

I regarded him skeptically, did some mental shuffling of my own, discarded various justifiable but unproductive responses, and said: "What's it want?"

"It wants you to let it go."

"Why me?"

"Ask it yourself. But watch out. That little fucker is messing with our heads."

The store was empty. It was so quiet you could hear the dogs popping with grease as they rotated inside their little hot box. Okay, it wasn't *that* quiet, but it was quiet. I picked up a green disposable lighter and flicked it a couple of times, kind of checking out the consensus reality. It lit.

Andy went around the counter and ducked his head into the back room.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Looking for Squidward."

"Squidward?"

"Yeah."

Another dim memory glowed in the dark. For some reason I thought of the Seattle aquarium, where my father had taken us when I was little. It hadn't been a fun experience. I remembered being vaguely repelled by some of the exotically alien examples of undersea creatures. Prescient echo from the future?

Andy snapped his fingers. "Right. Squidward likes it cool."

I followed him into the cold storage run behind the beer, pop and dairy coolers. A man sat on a couple of stacked cases of Rolling Rock, his legs crossed at the knees, hands folded over them. He looked Indian, that nut brown complexion. He was wearing a lavender suit.

"Squidward," Andy said.

I tucked my hands snugly under my armpits for warmth. "Has he asked to be taken to our leader yet?"

"I don't remember."

Squidward spoke up: "You are the torturer."

We both looked at him.

"Sorry, not my gig," I said.

Squidward nodded. "Your gig, yes."

Something unsavory uncoiled in my stomach, then lay still again.

"Andy," I said, nodding toward the door.

He followed me out into the glaring light of the store.

"Talk to me," I said.

He nodded, distracted. "I'm remembering most of it, but who knows what I'll retain next time around. R&D developed some kind of souped-up spectrophotometer gizmo as a hedge against future stealth technology we suspected the Chinese were developing. During a middle phase test in Nevada we saw a vehicle doing some impossible maneuvers, somehow hiding between waves in the visible light spectrum. Naturally we shot it down."

"Naturally."

Andy clutched his pack of Camels, plugged one in his mouth, patted his pockets for matches. I handed him the Zippo.

"Thanks."

He lit up.

"Anyway, it turns out we're as much his captive as he is ours. Uh-oh."

Andy's cigarette dropped from his lips, depositing feathery ash down the front of his sheepskin jacket. He blinked slowly, his eyes going out of focus, or perhaps refocusing inward.

"Oh, shit," he said.

"What?"

"Not again. I have to get *away* from this."

He turned and stumped out of the store with the sloppy gait of a somnambulist.

August 2008

“Hey—”

Outside the night absorbed him. I stiff-armed the door. Cold desert wind blew in my face. Andy was gone. So was the Cherokee. But he hadn't driven away in it. I looked around where it had been parked. There were no tire impressions, nothing, just my warped shadow cast over the tawny grit.

I turned back to the 7-11, its solid, glaring reality. I don't know what hackles are exactly, but mine rose to attention. Out here in the desert, alone with a persistent illusion, I felt reduced. Childish fears came awake.

Exerting my will to power or whatever, I entered the store. The Slurpee machine hummed and swirled, hotdogs rotated. The fluorescent light seemed to stutter *inside* my head.

I looked at the coolers, the orderly ranks of bottles and cartons. Damn it.

I approached the door to the cold storage, put my hand on the lever. Fear ran through me like electric current. I felt the world begin to waver, and stepped back. The door, silver with a thick rubber seal, appeared to melt before my eyes. I felt myself slipping away, and so brought the force of my will down like a steel spike. The door resumed its expected appearance. I immediately cranked the handle and dragged it open.

Squidward sat on his beer case stool in exactly the same position he'd been in ten minutes ago.

“Make it stop,” I said.

“I don't make things,” he replied. “I allow the multiplicity to occur.”

“Okay. So stop allowing the multiplicity.”

“Not possible, I'm afraid. My survival imperative is searching for a probability in which you haven't killed me.”

“But I *haven't* killed you.”

“You have.”

I stepped toward him. That steel spike? Now it was penetrating my forehead, driving in.

“What do you want from us?”

“From you I want to live,” Squidward said. “We are bound until the death is allowed or not allowed, conclusively. I have perceived the occurrence of my expiration at your direction, unintended though it will be. Having access to all points of probability time in my sequence, I foresee this eventuality and seek for a probability equation that spares me. From your perspective also this is a desirable outcome. Without me to monitor and shuffle your world's probabilities the vision vouchsafed your military leader may well occur.”

My eyesight shifted into pre-migraine mode. Pinwheel lights encroached upon my peripheral vision. I ground the heels of my hands into my eyes, fighting it, fighting it, fighting . . .

Probabilities shuffled . . .

I woke up next to my wife. In the ticking darkness of our bedroom I breathed a name: “Andy.”

Connie shifted position, cuddling into me. Her familiar body. I put my

arm around her and stared into the dark, hunting elusive memories. Without them I wasn't who I thought I was. After a while Connie asked:

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know. I think I was having a dream about Andy McCaslin. It woke me up."

"Who?"

"Guy I knew from the Rangers, long time ago. I told you about him. We were friends."

Connie suppressed a yawn. "He died, didn't he? You never said how."

"Covert op in Central America. He found himself in the custody of some rebels."

"Oh."

"They kept him alive for weeks while they interrogated him."

"God. Are you—"

"That was decades ago, Con. Dreams are strange, sometimes."

I slipped out of the bed.

"Where are you going?"

"Have some tea and think for a while. My night's shot anyway."

"Want company?"

"Maybe I'll sit by myself. Go back to sleep. You've got an early one."

"Sure? I could make some eggs or something."

"No, I'm good."

But I wasn't. In my basement office, consoling tea near at hand, I contemplated my dead friend and concluded he wasn't supposed to be that way. My old dreams of pain surged up out of the place at the bottom of my mind, the place that enclosed Andy and what I knew had happened to him, the place of batteries and alligator clips, hemp ropes, sharpened bamboo slivers, the vault of horrors far worse than any I'd endured as a child and from which I fled to the serenity of an office cubicle and regular hours.

But that wasn't *supposed* to have happened, not to Andy. I rubbed my temple, eyes closed in the dim basement office, and suddenly a word spoke itself on my lips:

Squidward.

My name is Brian Kinney, and today I am not an alcoholic. My *father* was an alcoholic who could not restrain his demons. During my childhood those demons frequently emerged to torment me and my mother. Dad's goodness, which was true and present, was not enough to balance the equation between pain and love. I had been skewing toward my own demon-haunted landscape when Andy McCaslin took my gun from my hand and balanced out the equation for me.

My new world order.

I'm driving through the moonless Arizona desert at two o'clock in the morning, looking for a turn-off that doesn't exist. After an hour or so a peculiar, hovering pink light appears in the distance, far off the road. I slow, angle onto the berm, ease the Outback down to the desert floor, and go bucketing overland toward the light.

August 2008

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A giant pink soap bubble hovered above the 7-11. Reflective lights inside the bubble appeared to track away into infinity. It was hard not to stare at it. I got out of my car and entered the store. The Indian gentleman in the lavender suit emerged from the cold storage run, a small suitcase in his left hand.

“What goes on?” I said.

“You remember,” he said, more command than comment.

And at that instant I did remember. Not just the bits and pieces that had drawn me out here, but *everything*.

“My survival imperative sought for a probability equation by which my death could be avoided. You are now inhabiting that equation. With your permission I will, too.”

“What do you need my permission for?”

“You would be the author of my death, so you must also be the willing author of my continued existence. A law of probability and balance.”

I thought about Connie back home in bed, the unfathomable cruelty of my former probability, the feeling of restored sanity. Like waking up in the life I *should* have had in the first place. But I also thought of Andy, and I knew it had to go back.

“No,” I said to Squidward.

“You must.”

“Not if my friend has to die. By the way, isn’t it a little warm for you?”

Squidward smiled. “I’m already in my ship.”

“Only if I allow it.”

“You will, I hope.”

“It’s the feathery thing,” I said.

“Behold.”

In my mind’s eye images of unimaginable carnage appeared, then winked out. I staggered.

“I am a Monitor, coded from birth to your world’s psychic evolution,” Squidward said. “I subtly shuffle the broad probabilities in order to prevent what you have just seen. Without me there is a high probability of worldwide military and environmental catastrophe. Such eventualities may be avoided and your species may survive to evolve into an advanced civilization.”

“That sounds swell, but I don’t believe you. You’ve been doing plenty of shuffling in captivity. With that power why do you need anything from *me*?”

“That’s merely my survival imperative, drawing on etheric energy from my ship’s transphysical manifestation. My survival, and perhaps your world’s, depend on you permitting this probability to dominate.”

I didn’t allow myself to think about it.

“Let the original probability resume,” I said.

“Please,” Squidward said.

“Let it go back to the way it’s supposed to be.”

“There are no ‘supposed to be’ probability equations.”

I crossed my arms.

Squidward put his suitcase down. “Then because of what you are you will doom me. My probabilities concluded.”

"Because of what I am."

"Yes."

Shuffle.

My name is Brian Kinney, and I am the sum total of the experience inflicted upon me.

But not only that. I hope.

The Tahoe's deadly acceleration. Sudden synaptic realization across the Probabilities: *You are about to murder your wife*. The Vault Of Screams yawns open.

Will.

Hanging on the wheel, foot fumbling between pedals.

That big green Rubbermaid trashcan bouncing over the hood, contents erupting against the windshield. It was just garbage, though.

Then a very sudden stop when the Tahoe plows into the low brick and wrought-iron property wall. Gut punch of the steering wheel, rupturing something inside my body. And don't forget a side of razor ribs.

Around the middle of my longish convalescence Connie arrives during visiting hours, and eventually a second convalescence begins. A convalescence of the heart. Not mine in particular, or Connie's, but the one we shared in common. The one we had systematically poisoned over the preceding ten years. Okay, the one *I* had systematically poisoned.

Watershed event.

Happy ending?

It sat in a cold room.

Outside that room I watched a perfectly squared-away Marine enter a code into the cipher pad. I was the sum total of my inflicted experience, but it was the new math. The door opened, like a bank vault. Andy McCaslin looked at me with a puzzled expression.

He was alone in the room. ○

THE SVALBARD ARK

The seeds are waiting
frozen in their arctic vaults
against the future.

—G.O. Clark

