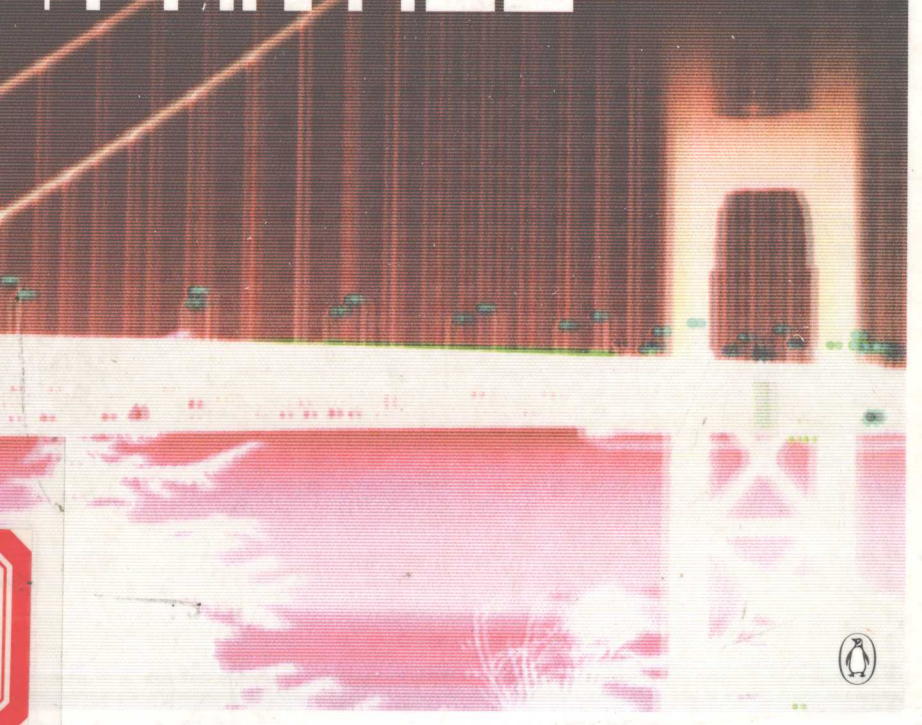


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GUARDIAN

AUTHOR»» WILLIAM
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PENGUIN BOOKS

ALL TOMORROW'S PARTIES

William Gibson is the award-winning author of *Neuromancer*, *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, *The Difference Engine* (with Bruce Sterling), *Virtual Light* and *Idoru*. He lives in Vancouver, Canada.

**TO GRAEME
AND THE BADCHAIRS**

1. CARDBOARD CITY

THROUGH this evening's tide of faces unregistered, unrecognized, amid hurrying black shoes, furred umbrellas, the crowd descending like a single organism into the station's airless heart, comes Shinya Yamazaki, his notebook clasped beneath his arm like the egg case of some modest but moderately successful marine species.

Evolved to cope with jostling elbows, oversized Ginza shopping bags, ruthless briefcases, Yamazaki and his small burden of information go down into the neon depths. Toward this tributary of relative quiet, a tiled corridor connecting parallel escalators.

Central columns, sheathed in green ceramic, support a ceiling pocked with dust-furred ventilators, smoke detectors, speakers. Behind the columns, against the far wall, derelict shipping cartons huddle in a ragged train, improvised shelters constructed by the city's homeless. Yamazaki halts, and in that moment all the oceanic clatter of commuting feet washes in, no longer held back by his sense of mission, and he deeply and sincerely wishes he were elsewhere.

He winces, violently, as a fashionable young matron, features swathed in Chanel micropore, rolls over his toes with an expensive three-wheeled stroller. Blurting a convulsive apology, Yamazaki glimpses the infant passenger through flexible curtains of some pink-tinted plastic, the glow of a video display winking as its mother trundles determinedly away.

Yamazaki sighs, unheard, and limps toward the cardboard shelters. He wonders briefly what the passing commuters will think, to see him enter the carton fifth from the left. It is scarcely the height of his chest, longer than the others, vaguely coffin-like, a flap of thumb-smudged white corrugate serving as its door.

Perhaps they will not see him, he thinks. Just as he himself has never seen anyone enter or exit one of these tidy hovels. It is as though their inhabitants are rendered invisible in the transaction that allows such structures to exist in the context of the station. He is a student of

existential sociology, and such transactions have been his particular concern.

And now he hesitates, fighting the urge to remove his shoes and place them beside the rather greasy-looking pair of yellow plastic sandals arranged beside the entrance flap on a carefully folded sheet of Parco gift wrap. No, he thinks, imagining himself waylaid within, struggling with faceless enemies in a labyrinth of cardboard. Best he not be shoeless.

Sighing again, he drops to his knees, the notebook clutched in both hands. He kneels for an instant, hearing the hurrying feet of those who pass behind him. Then he places the notebook on the ceramic tile of the station's floor and shoves it forward, beneath the corrugate flap, and follows it on his hands and knees.

He desperately hopes that he has found the right carton.

He freezes there in unexpected light and heat. A single halogen fixture floods the tiny room with the frequency of desert sunlight. Unventilated, it heats the space like a reptile's cage.

"Come in," says the old man, in Japanese. "Don't leave your ass hanging out that way." He is naked except for a sort of breechclout twisted from what may once have been a red T-shirt. He is seated, cross-legged, on a ragged, paint-flecked tatami mat. He holds a brightly colored toy figure in one hand, a slender brush in the other. Yamazaki sees that the thing is a model of some kind, a robot or military exoskeleton. It glitters in the sun-bright light, blue and red and silver. Small tools are spread on the tatami: a razor knife, a sprue cutter, curls of emery paper.

The old man is very thin, clean-shaven but in need of a haircut. Wisps of gray hair hang on either side of his face, and his mouth is set in what looks to be a permanent scowl of disapproval. He wears glasses with heavy black plastic frames and archaically thick lenses. The lenses catch the light.

Yamazaki creeps obediently into the carton, feeling the door flap drop shut behind him. On hands and knees, he resists the urge to try to bow.

"He's waiting," the old man says, his brush tip poised above the figure in his hand. "In there." Moving only his head.

Yamazaki sees that the carton has been reinforced with mailing tubes, a system that echoes the traditional post-and-beam architecture of Japan, the tubes lashed together with lengths of salvaged poly-ribbon. There are too many objects here, in this tiny space. Towels and blankets and cooking pots on cardboard shelves. Books. A small television.

"In there?" Yamazaki indicates what he takes to be another door, like the entrance to a hutch, curtained with a soiled square of melon-yellow, foam-cored blanket, the sort of blanket one finds in a capsule hotel. But the brush tip dips to touch the model, and the old man is lost in the concentration this requires, so Yamazaki shuffles on hands and knees across the absurdly tiny space and draws the section of blanket aside. Darkness.

"Laney-San?"

What seems to be a crumpled sleeping bag. He smells sickness—

"Yeah?" A croak. "In here."

Drawing a deep breath, Yamazaki crawls in, pushing his notebook before him. When the melon-yellow blanket falls across the entrance, brightness glows through the synthetic fabric and the thin foam core, like tropical sunlight seen from deep within some coral grotto.

"Laney?"

The American groans. Seems to turn, or sit up. Yamazaki can't see. Something covers Laney's eyes. Red wink of a diode. Cables. Faint gleam of the interface, reflected in a thin line against Laney's sweat-slick cheekbone.

"I'm deep in, now," Laney says, and coughs.

"Deep in what?"

"They didn't follow you, did they?"

"I don't think so."

"I could tell if they had."

Yamazaki feels sweat run suddenly from both his armpits, coursing down across his ribs. He forces himself to breathe. The air here is foul, thick. He thinks of the seventeen known strains of multi-drug-resistant tuberculosis.

Laney draws a ragged breath. "But they aren't looking for me, are they?"

"No," Yamazaki says, "they are looking for her."

"They won't find her," Laney says. "Not here. Not anywhere. Not now."

"Why did you run away, Laney?"

"The syndrome," Laney says and coughs again, and Yamazaki feels the smooth, deep shudder of an incoming maglev, somewhere deeper in the station, not mechanical vibration but a vast pistoning of displaced air. "It finally kicked in. The 5-SB. The stalker effect." Yamazaki hears feet hurrying by, perhaps an arm's length away, behind the cardboard wall.

"It makes you cough?" Yamazaki blinks, making his new contact lenses swim uncomfortably.

"No," Laney says and coughs into his pale and upraised hand. "Some bug. They all have it, down here."

"I was worried when you vanished. They began to look for you, but when she was gone—"

"The shit really hit the fan."

"Shit?"

Laney reaches up and removes the bulky, old-fashioned eyephones. Yamazaki cannot see what outputs to them, but the shifting light from the display reveals Laney's hollowed eyes. "It's all going to change, Yamazaki. We're coming up on the mother of all nodal points. I can see it, now. It's *all* going to change."

"I don't understand."

"Know what the joke is? It didn't change when they thought it would. Millennium was a Christian holiday. I've been looking at history, Yamazaki. I can see the nodal points in history. Last time we had one like this was 1911."

"What happened in 1911?"

"Everything changed."

"How?"

"It just did. That's how it works. I can see it now."

"Laney," Yamazaki says, "when you told me about the stalker effect, you said that the victims, the test subjects, became obsessed with one particular media figure."

"Yes."

"And you are obsessed with her?"

Laney stares at him, eyes lit by a backwash of data. "No. Not with her. Guy named Harwood. Cody Harwood. They're coming together, though. In San Francisco. And someone else. Leaves a sort of negative trace; you have to infer everything from the way he's not there . . ."

"Why did you ask me here, Laney? This is a terrible place. Do you wish me to help you to escape?" Yamazaki is thinking of the blades of the Swiss Army knife in his pocket. One of them is serrated; he could easily cut his way out through the wall. Yet the psychological space is powerful, very powerful, and overwhelms him. He feels very far from Shinjuku, from Tokyo, from anything. He smells Laney's sweat. "You are not well."

"Rydell," Laney says, replacing the eyephones. "That rent-a-cop from the Chateau. The one you knew. The one who told me about you, back in LA."

"Yes?"

"I need a man on the ground, in San Francisco. I've managed to move some money. I don't think they can trace it. I dicked with DatAmerica's banking sector. Find Rydell and tell him he can have it as a retainer."

"To do what?"

Laney shakes his head. The cables on the eyephones move in the dark like snakes. "He has to be there, is all. Something's coming down. Everything's changing."

"Laney, you are sick. Let me take you—"

"Back to the island? There's nothing there. Never will be, now she's gone."

And Yamazaki knows this is true.

"Where's Rez?" Laney asks.

"He mounted a tour of the Kombinat states, when he decided she was gone."

Laney nods thoughtfully, the eyephones bobbing mantis-like in the dark. "Get Rydell, Yamazaki. I'll tell you how he can get the money."

“But why?”

“Because he’s part of it. Part of the node.”

LATER Yamazaki stands, staring up at the towers of Shinjuku, the walls of animated light, sign and signifier twisting toward the sky in the unending ritual of commerce, of desire. Vast faces fill the screens, icons of a beauty at once terrible and banal.

Somewhere below his feet, Laney huddles and coughs in his cardboard shelter, all of DatAmerica pressing steadily into his eyes. Laney is his friend, and his friend is unwell. The American’s peculiar talents with data are the result of experimental trials, in a federal orphanage in Florida, of a substance known as 5-SB. Yamazaki has seen what Laney can do with data, and what data can do to Laney.

He has no wish to see it again.

As he lowers his eyes from the walls of light, the mediated faces, he feels his contacts move, changing as they monitor his depth of focus. This still unnerves him.

Not far from the station, down a side street bright as day, he finds the sort of kiosk that sells anonymous debit cards. He purchases one. At another kiosk, he uses it to buy a disposable phone good for a total of thirty minutes, Tokyo-LA.

He asks his notebook for Rydell’s number.

2. Lucky Dragon

"HEROIN," declared Durius Walker, Rydell's colleague in security at the Lucky Dragon on Sunset. "It's the opiate of the masses."

Durius had finished sweeping up. He held the big industrial dustpan carefully, headed for the inbuilt hospital-style sharps container, the one with the barbed biohazard symbol. That was where they put the needles, when they found them.

They averaged five or six a week. Rydell had never actually caught anyone shooting anything up, in the store, although he wouldn't have put it past them. It just seemed like people dropped used needles on the floor, usually back by the cat food. You could find other things, sweeping up in the Lucky Dragon: pills, foreign coins, hospital identification bracelets, crumpled paper money from countries that still used it. Not that you wanted to go poking around in that dustpan. When Rydell swept up, he wore the same Kevlar gloves that Durius was wearing now, and latex underneath that.

He supposed Durius was right though, and it made you wonder: all the new substances around to abuse, but people didn't forget the ones that had been around forever. Make cigarettes illegal, say, and people found a way to keep smoking. The Lucky Dragon wasn't allowed to sell rolling papers, but they did a brisk trade in Mexican hair-curler papers that worked just as well. The most popular brand was called Biggerhair, and Rydell wondered if anyone had ever actually used any to curl their hair. And how did you curl your hair with little rectangles of tissue paper anyway?

"Ten minutes to," Durius said over his shoulder. "You wanna do the curb check?"

At four o'clock, one of them got to take a ten-minute break, out back. If Rydell did the curb check, it meant he got to take his break first, then let Durius take one. The curb check was something that Lucky Dragon's parent corporation, back in Singapore, had instituted on the advice of an in-house team of American cultural anthropologists. Mr.

Park, the night manager, had explained this to Rydell, ticking off points on his notebook. He'd tapped each paragraph on the screen for emphasis, sounding thoroughly bored with the whole thing, but Rydell had supposed it was part of the job, and Mr. Park was a definite stickler. "In order to demonstrate Lucky Dragon's concern with neighborhood safety, security personnel will patrol curb in front of location on a nightly basis." Rydell had nodded. "You not out of store too long," Mr. Park added, by way of clarification. "Five minute. Just before you take break." Pause. Tap. "'Lucky Dragon security presence will be high-profile, friendly, sensitive to local culture.'"

"What's that mean?"

"Anybody sleeping, you make them move. Friendly way. Hooker working there, you say hello, tell joke, make her move."

"I'm scared of those old girls," Rydell said, deadpan. "Christmastime, they dress up like Santa's elves."

"No hooker in front of Lucky Dragon."

"'Sensitive to local culture?'"

"Tell joke. Hooker like joke."

"Maybe in Singapore," Durius had said, when Rydell had recounted Park's instructions.

"He's not from Singapore," Rydell had said. "He's from Korea."

"So basically they want us to show ourselves, clear the sidewalk back a few yards, be friendly and sensitive?"

"And tell joke."

Durius squinted. "You know what kinda people hang in front of a convenience store on Sunset, four in the morning? Kids on dancer, tweaked off their dimes, hallucinating monster movies. Guess who gets to be the monster? Plus there's your more mature sociopaths; older, more complicated, polypharmic . . ."

"Say what?"

"Mix their shit," Durius said. "Get lateral."

"Gotta be done. Man says."

Durius looked at Rydell. "You first." He was from Compton, and the only person Rydell knew who had actually been born in Los Angeles.

"You're bigger."

“Size ain’t everything.”

“Sure,” Rydell had said.

ALL that summer Rydell and Durius had been night security at the Lucky Dragon, a purpose-built module that had been coptered into this former car-rental lot on the Strip. Before that, Rydell had been night security at the Chateau, just up the street, and before that he’d driven a wagon for IntenSecure. Still farther back, briefly and he tried not to think about it too often, he’d been a police officer in Knoxville, Tennessee. Somewhere in there, twice, he’d almost made the cut for *Cops in Trouble*, a show he’d grown up on but now managed never to watch.

Working nights at the Lucky Dragon was more interesting than Rydell would have imagined. Durius said that was because it was the only place around, for a mile or so, that sold anything that anyone actually needed, on a regular basis or otherwise. Microwave noodles, diagnostic kits for most STDs, toothpaste, disposable anything, Net access, gum, bottled water . . . There were Lucky Dragons all over America, all over the world for that matter, and to prove it you had your trademark Lucky Dragon Global Interactive Video Column outside. You had to pass it entering and leaving the store, so you’d see whichever dozen Lucky Dragons the Sunset franchise happened to be linked with at that particular moment: Paris or Houston or Brazzaville, wherever. These were shuffled, every three minutes, for the practical reason that it had been determined that if the maximum viewing time was any more, kids in the world’s duller suburbs would try to win bets by having sex on camera. As it was, you got a certain amount of mooning and flashing. Or, still more common, like this shit-faced guy in downtown Prague, as Rydell made his exit to do the curb check, displaying the universal finger.

“Same here,” Rydell said to this unknown Czech, hitching up the neon-pink Lucky Dragon fanny pack he was contractually obligated to wear on duty. He didn’t mind that though, even if it did look like shit: it was bulletproof, with a pull-up Kevlar baby bib to fasten around your neck if the going got rough. A severely lateral customer with a ceramic

switchblade had tried to stab Rydell through the Lucky Dragon logo his second week on the job, and Rydell had sort of bonded with the thing after that.

He had that switchblade up in his room over Mrs. Siekevitz's garage. They'd found it below the peanut butter, after the LAPD had taken the lateral one away. It had a black blade that looked like sandblasted glass. Rydell didn't like it; the ceramic blade gave it a weird balance, and it was so sharp that he'd already cut himself with it twice. He wasn't sure what he should do with it.

Tonight's curb check looked dead simple. There was a Japanese girl standing out there with a seriously amazing amount of legs running down from an even more amazingly small amount of shorts. Well, sort of Japanese. Rydell found it hard to make distinctions like that in LA. Durius said hybrid vigor was the order of the day, and Rydell guessed he was right. This girl with all the legs, she was nearly as tall as Rydell, and he didn't think Japanese people usually were. But then maybe she'd grown up here, and her family before her, and the local food had made them taller. He'd heard about that happening. But, no, he decided, getting closer, the thing was, she wasn't actually a girl. Funny how you got that. Usually it wasn't anything too obvious. It was like he really wanted to buy into everything she was doing to *be* a girl, but some subliminal message he got from her bone structure just wouldn't let him.

"Hey," he said.

"You want me to move?"

"Well," Rydell said, "I'm supposed to."

"I'm supposed to stand out here convincing a jaded clientele to buy blow jobs. What's the difference?"

Rydell thought about it. "You're freelance," he decided, "I'm on salary. You go on down the street for twenty minutes, nobody's going to fire you." He could smell her perfume through the complicated pollution and that ghostly hint of oranges you got out here sometimes. There were orange trees around, had to be, but he'd never found one.

She was frowning at him. "Freelance."

"That's right."

She swayed expertly on her stacked heels, fishing a box of Russian

Marlboros from her pink patent purse. Passing cars were already honking at the sight of the Lucky Dragon security man talking to this six-foot-plus boygirl, and now she was deliberately doing something illegal. She opened the red-and-white box and pointedly offered Rydell a cigarette. There were two in there, factory-made filter tips, but one was shorter than the other and had blue metallic lipstick on it.

"No thanks."

She took out the shorter one, partially smoked, and put it between her lips. "Know what I'd do if I were you?" Her lips, around the tan filter tip, looked like a pair of miniature water beds plastered with glittery blue candy coat.

"What?"

She took a lighter from her purse. Like the ones they sold in those tobacciana shops. They were going to make that illegal too, he'd heard. She snapped it and lit her cigarette. Drew in the smoke, held it, blew it out, away from Rydell. "I'd fuck off into the air."

He looked into the Lucky Dragon and saw Durius say something to Miss Praisegod Satansbane, the checker on this shift. She had a fine sense of humor, Praisegod, and he guessed you had to, with a name like that. Her parents were some particularly virulent stripe of SoCal Neo-Puritan, and had taken the name Satansbane before Praisegod had been born. The thing was, she'd explained to Rydell, nobody much knew what "bane" meant, so if she told people her last name, they mostly figured she was a Satanist anyway. So she often went by the surname Proby, which had been her father's before he'd gotten religion.

Now Durius said something else, and Praisegod threw back her shoulders and laughed. Rydell sighed. He wished it had been Durius' turn to do curb check.

"Look," Rydell said, "I'm not telling you you can't stand out here. The sidewalk's public property. It's just that there's this company policy."

"I'm going to finish this cigarette," she said, "and then I'm calling my lawyer."

"Can't we just keep it simple?"

"Uh-uh." Big metallic-blue, collagen-swollen smile.

Rydell glanced over and saw Durius making hand signals at him.

Pointing to Praisegod, who held a phone. He hoped they hadn't called LAPD. He had a feeling this girl really did have herself a lawyer, and Mr. Park wouldn't like that.

Now Durius came out. "For you," he called. "Say it's Tokyo."

"Excuse me," Rydell said, and turned away.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey what?" He looked back.

"You're cute."