



David Rix

Tales of Isolation and Descent

Feather

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Free Excerpt

This excerpt contains the complete first novella in the collection,
Yellow Eyes.

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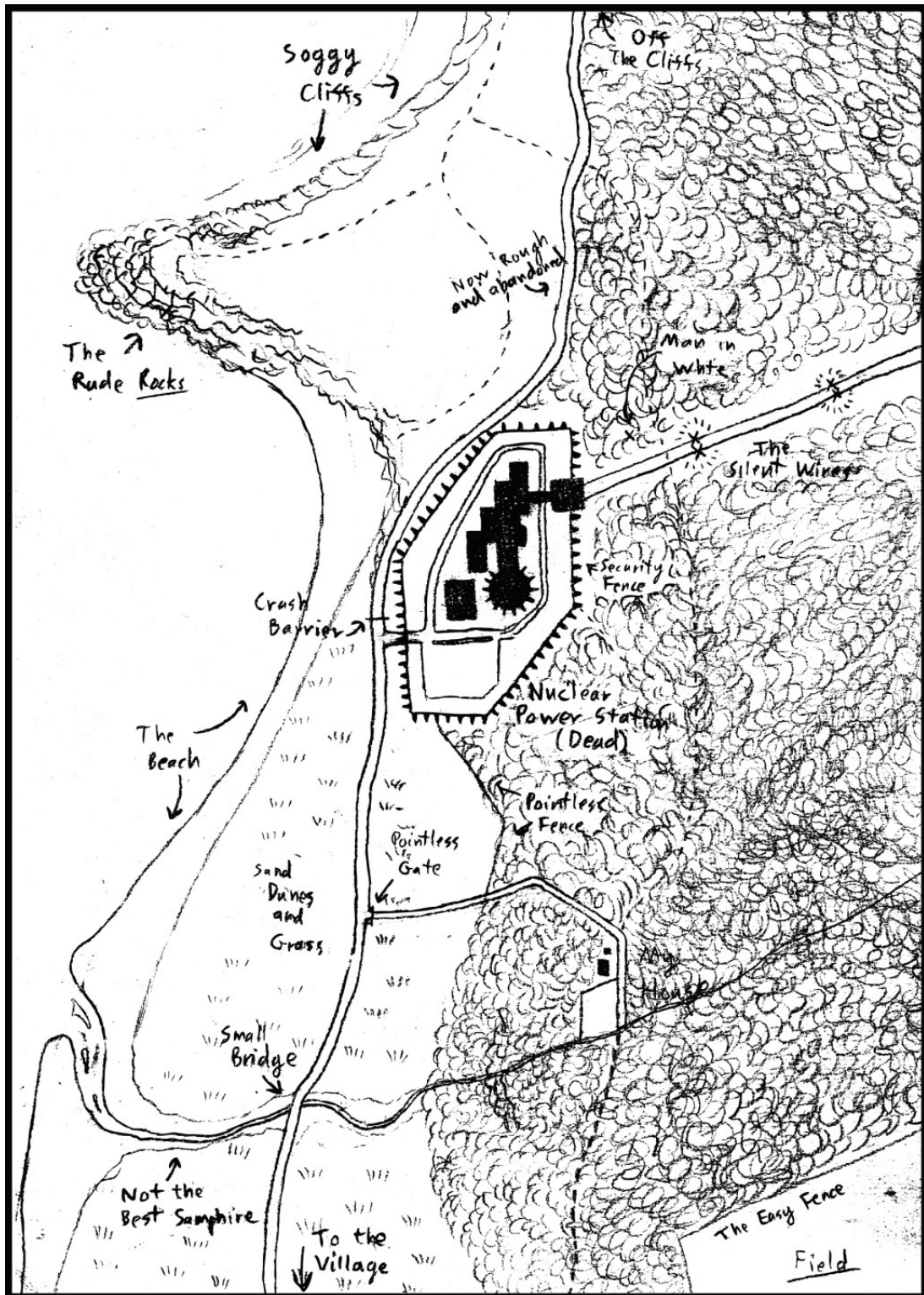


Yellow Eyes

Here on the beach imagine small white shells glint on the white sand. Straightsmooth greysky – a quiet breeze shakes the coarse grass that grows off there above the high tide. Cold. A vastness of sky all round as the land fades to the strangeworld of dimdistant mist behind. There is sea all round as I walk slowly along – land back me, seabeach before me – a large peninsula of black of grey. A black mess of tumbled rocks in the greysea connected to the land by myself this beach of small shells. Behind this myself something strange.

Feather walks.

In the dreamtime seabirds cry in the vastness. Dreamsong – the white of white on grey. The rocks mess – blackrocks – approaches – the skymists – me. A quiet thing of sorrow in all noisy stillness – silence –



Morning came creeping through the trees. It crawled across the leaf litter and woke up Feather, lying wrapped tight among the bushes. She stirred and turned over awkwardly, peering up at the branches overhead. In the middle of the dawn chorus, she blinked painfully and stared without much pleasure at the morning around her. A thrush sat on a branch nearby, its beak agape – and, close to, the singing sounded less like singing, more like ear-splittingly loud screaming. Feather slung a handful of twigs and acorns at it and it flew away.

Heavily she pulled herself up into a sitting position, brushing leaves from her hair. She felt bitter from lack of sleep and there was a chill in the air now that the year was fading towards winter. She rubbed at her side and stretched. The woodland ground was not so uncomfortable. The soft leaf litter moulded around her quite agreeably. But she had been so sleepy the previous night that she had forgotten to clear away some of the twigs and they had dug in cruelly.

Overhead the clouds were grey and hazy. No sun to shine through to her – to cut through the morning sea-mist that was still creeping around. There was no point remaining lying here now though. She knew she would not sleep again. So she pulled herself up, hoisted her bag on her shoulders and made her way through the trees, tugging and shaking at her clothes to loosen them where they were rucked all round her. She was hungry, as she had run out last night without any food since a rather dreary mid-day dinner of vegetable stew.

Arriving at the edge of the trees, she emerged into the area of rough ground that stretched between the woods and the fence of the old nuclear power station. Its towers stood rearing up through the mist like standing stones – the warning lights on the towers and around the buildings still shining. As always, it was totally silent. As long as she had been here, she could not remember seeing one figure on the other side of that fence. Nobody went in – nobody came out. But even so,

thin plumes of steam rose up from some places and the warning lights twinkled constantly. Maybe the place really was deserted, she thought. Just abandoned and remaining in some dwindling half life.

She had tried to research power stations on the internet once, in the library of the nearby village, but she hadn't really found much. A few basic guides to what they did. And a lot of people hating them, of course, and ascribing improbable sounding dangers to them. That puzzled her a little as she could never remember it doing her any harm.

She could not remember her father ever talking about it.

Her hunger was not going to let her speculate too much now though. Instead, she peered round the wasteland hopefully. She longed to slip off home, but not just yet. Even flavourless leftover stew would be sort of welcome now – but not just yet. Instead she went foraging.

Following the edge of the woods and skirting the big security fence, she found a few things. Wild chickweed – goose grass – tough sulphur polypore growing on an old tree trunk . . . she stared at them without much enthusiasm. How much did it take to remain wild here completely? How much to break the ties and stay out here forever? Here with the grey towers watching over her like sleeping guardians – but guarding her from within, or without?

More than this dismal salad, that was certain.

With a shiver against the cold, she caught herself wishing for the long departed summer – or perhaps the not so distant berry-autumn when the bushes had been laden with blackberries and hawberries and sloes, now shrivelling to nothing.

Gloomily she chewed on the fibrous goose grass. It was bitter and rough in her mouth and, like all leaves, it did little to ease her hunger. The sulphur polypore was more substantial but as tough as fibrous leather and she groaned mentally, wishing it was fresh cooked meat in her mouth. Her father was a man full of curious and intense beliefs and ways of doing things – which inevitably applied to the rest of the world as well as him and which needed neither explaining nor challenging in order to be valid. One of them was to not have any meat anywhere near him. It was not something remotely productive to argue with. Meat was just an evil. Thinking of it now though, Feather felt an uncharacteristic flicker of anger. Her back was hurting and she was cold and she felt tired of it all. Of everything. She wanted more. Out

here there was only what could be scavenged – or maybe dug for, like earthworms. Or perhaps what she could find down at the sea below the power station, where she could pick for shellfish buried in the mud. Sometimes, when the tide was out, there would be cockles or clams waiting for her scrabbling fingers – or some clumps of mussels attached to the rocks on the outcrop. She could occasionally lay her hands on other food – in the nearby village for example. Hot food – meat, sausages, pies or, best of all, the delicious hot kippers served at the fish market. But all that was hard to get.

You needed money for that.

Usually.

She liked the village – she wished she could go there forever .

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Tramping through the woods, picking her own path as she went, she passed under the silent wires that ran from the power station through the trees in a weed-ridden causeway of their own. Here there were a few more things to eat, but it was not till she was back among the trees that she finally stumbled on something more interesting. Possibly. A clump of white mushrooms were dotted about in the litter under a patch of beech trees. There was nothing dramatic about them. Indeed, they looked a little scruffy and misshapen. Just . . . mushrooms.

But she peered at them suspiciously. What were they? She liked mushrooms a lot – but these didn't look good. Living the way she did, she was very good at knowing which were good to eat and which weren't. She could recognise the families of the Boletes and the Field Mushrooms – the parasols, tree ears and the many other delicious ones that grew around. She had not seen these before, but her instincts and identification were whispering warnings. And when she dug into the ground around them they seemed to be justified, for they possessed the floppy bag (*volva*) and the miniskirt ring round the stalk that signified the poisonous amanitas and agarics. That was enough to send a snap of tension through her body and a frown across her face. These things were scary in the effect they could have on you – but, more than just poison, they were always associated in her mind with broken glass and cut flesh. After all, it had been an amanita – the bright red Fly Agaric with the white spots – that her father had eaten once as an experiment – talking about druids and pathways – mazes and eyes – twisting copper wire around his wrists before he had attacked her and thin white scarred

her with glass in an incident that she had never understood.

These were white, not red, but Feather sighed and sat down against a tree, unwelcome memories and long-ignored questions flickering in her mind. She fingered one of the mushrooms – though even to touch them felt a bit discomforting, as though she was prodding at a taboo that she hardly knew she had. Whatever these were, they were not edible, but she picked them anyway, precisely because they made her nervous. Her face was tense as she stashed them quickly in her bag, before heading onwards down towards the coast. Maybe these Amanitas could answer some questions, even if they couldn't provide her with a meal. It was about time.

Finally she reached the road. Out here, on the far side of the old power station, it seemed abandoned, blocked off with heavy concrete crash barriers. Certainly she had never seen anyone else on it. It just continued along the top of the low clay and rock cliffs, its surface torn and wrinkled with the attentions of nature. Tree roots had made the surface ripple like the sea below. Horsetails had muscled up through the solid tarmac and, after they had ripped it, the grass soon followed. Even a few baby trees were growing there now. A mile or two further on, the road gave up completely, finally losing the battle and running over the edge of the cliff in a jutting overhang, ending in a tangle of sodden lumps on the sandy mud below.

The wind came in off the sea here, tearing through the rough bushes and grass and into the trees that flanked the other side of the road. Here the woods were at their loudest as the unnumberable leaves swirled and talked – a sound that seemed full of half heard things and hints of something that might have been recognizable. Feather strolled slowly back down the road towards home, her hair blowing around her face. Soon she arrived back at the power station's fence again and here also the cliffs finally gave way, jutting into the sea in one last rude gesture – a tumbled outcrop of black rocks strewn out into the white waves – before collapsing into a rough world of sand, dunes and grass.

She followed the road through the concrete barrier and as it passed the big wire gates, always closed and locked, and from here the

road was in better condition. The sand-dusted surface bore the marks of vehicles and very occasionally she would see some person out here, enjoying the sea or wandering aimlessly through the dunes. They didn't bother her though. They had never done anything except ignore her. She remembered her father though, the one time she had been out here with him when a car had driven in from the distance. He had flinched like an animal and hurried her off as fast as they could walk. He had never explained why.

Now though, the dunelands were deserted – just the continual high-pitched hiss as the wind blew the sand grains through wilderness. In the hollows, grass sometimes managed to find a foothold – and when it did, tiny gardens would form of delicate sea flowers and small snail shells, white with black bands or delicate brown mottling – *Ceruellla virgata* and *Theba pisana* she had identified them as during one of her trips to the village. These hollows, sheltered from the wind, were comfortable resting places. She could lie in the soft sand and enjoy the sun. Occasionally she would even strip off and lie there naked, enjoying the feeling of the sun on her skin – on all of it (which was important) – and the warm sand beneath her.

Sunbathing days were over now though, as the year turned towards its dark side.

Finally she arrived at the gate to the barely visible track that led home. It was a pointless gate because there was no fence for it to let you through and she simply walked around it, tight locked and chained though it was. The sand had flooded the track in places, but she could find her way these days even in the pitch dark and she crossed it easily, kicking it up with her shoes. It led across the dunes and back into the trees – the old familiar woods that had surrounded her like a blanket for as long as she could remember.

Home consisted of a small cottage-type building that looked as though it had been built in the woods for some special purpose a long time ago and then been forgotten about. Basically it was nothing more than a shelter – three rooms, no plumbing that functioned and a stove that

worked off a gas canister. There were taps, but no water flowing from them. There was no heating except for that provided by the stove and an open fireplace. The only electricity came from a small generator system, wired up to power the fridge and provide a few lights to the rooms. Aside from the kitchen, her father lived and painted in one room. The remaining one was hers, when she chose to sleep in it. Outside there was a battered old car under a tarpaulin in which her father would regularly go off for supplies, and a small area of ground that they cultivated, growing vegetables and a few herbs. There was also a stream running nearby, which provided water that was drinkable after filtering and boiling.

At nearly seventeen years old and having lived here for as long as she could remember, Feather was pretty much used to life here and she barely gave it a thought. At least she hadn't until recently. Sometimes lately she had begun wondering why her father had settled out here into such a life, instead of everything else that the world offered. That was another thing he had never really explained in any way that made sense. But here he was free to paint and sink slowly into whatever kind of spartan esoteric haze he was looking for – and that was enough for him.

After a few minutes of walking she arrived, unlocked the door and slipped into the kitchen. She was hoping it would contain food somewhere in the oddly scented cupboards, but she didn't get far.

"Feather?" the voice came rolling through. She stopped sharply and frowned. Something about the voice sent a prickle of unease and annoyance down her back. For a moment she wanted to run out again, but instead she dropped her bag and coat, pushed open the door of his studio and peered in.

He glanced at her, rubbed his eyes and put down his pallet.

"Oh Feather," he said with a sigh. "Come here," he said.

She stepped gloomily into the studio. This was a room that she didn't much like to enter at any time because it was his room – in a very real sense. It smelt of him. His murky surrealist paintings hung around, suspended from nails on copper wire. It was thick with the smell of smoke and the ghosts of older smokes of many different kinds – of strange designs painted on the walls and door – which might have been charms and symbols – hippie paraphernalia and books and figurines from what Feather had identified as several different religions. In spite of the profusion of content though, the place was kept neat almost to the

point of obsession. Even his artist's materials were in perfect order. She was used to it well enough, but it still made her feel alien and misfitting – and about as far from her familiar forest and from things that made sense to her as she could imagine.

He sleepily pushed his easel to the side of the room and peered at her.

“Where have you been?” he demanded petulantly.

She glanced round the room expressionlessly. “Just in the woods,” she said. That was the truth.

He gave a deep sigh and looked at her piercingly. “Hmm,” he said. “Now, do I believe you?”

Feather gave him an impatient look and said nothing. No particular point arguing.

“You spend half your life away from here. What can you find to do in the woods for all that time?”

She said nothing. Eat and sleep, she thought. What else was there to do in life? But she didn't say it.

“Why do I sense betrayal in this house?” he demanded.

“What do you mean?”

Her father peered at her. He was a tall and thin man, his hair grown long and untidy. His home-sewn clothes, mostly made of rough and undyed fabric, dressed him like the dingy old hippie he was, hanging over a loose and scrawny frame, his skin stretched tight over his muscles without any body fat to smooth him out. Around his neck hung numerous things – wood, a crystal or stone of some kind, various symbols that she had never really understood in spite of his attempts to explain them – suspended on more copper wire. Copper indeed was a dominant theme here. He tied back his hair with it. He wove it through his clothes. It surrounded him in his obsessively neat but smoky room.

“You've been to the village,” he said grimly.

“What? No.”

“There are fingers of change whispering through this house. Fingers of investigation – of Measuring. I can feel them. And they are all centring around you.”

Feather stared at him blankly. His way of talking was familiar enough, but the meaning left her completely out of her depth. What was he on about?

“Why did I have to let an idiot into my house?” he growled, his eyes gleaming. “I should have left you behind for them – for . . . for them to tear to pieces. For the Measuring Men. What do I have to do to make you see?” he cried. “You are a fugitive, Feather. And what sort of fugitive goes strolling out under the eyes of her hunters?”

He caught her by the front of her shirt and she was hauled almost off her feet.

“An idiot fugitive,” he cried, his eyes glinting. “A fugitive with a mind stuffed full of wet cotton. A fugitive who has forgotten everything and thinks of nothing.”

He fingered her shirt front and kept her there, pulled in close, her body limp and unprotesting.

“But why am I a fugitive?” she demanded shrilly.

“Everyone is. If they know it or not. We, at least, know it – and have no choice.”

Feather felt a stab of fury at that.

“Answer me properly,” she shouted suddenly, trying to jerk away. “You never explain anything. Never tell me anything . . .”

“Feather,” he whispered lyrically. “I am confused. I am bewildered. I don’t understand you any more. So – what? Shall I follow the simple equation and hurt you if it will make you remember what can end us all?” he whispered. Feather gazed at him, realising what was coming and her fury doubled. “The Measuring Man,” he said. “In his evil he found worse punishments than anything I can do – punishments that buckled and cracked the entire world. And so he laughed and danced . . . Is that really where you want to end up?”

“What are you – talking about?” she stammered. Still holding her tight, he stared almost forlornly over her shoulder and across the room.

“All that is important is that here we are safe from him,” he said. “So long as we don’t do anything stupid. To him . . . he has forgotten me – doesn’t even know you exist and shouldn’t know you exist. I worked hard to achieve that.”

Feather closed her eyes and leaned her head on her shoulder. “But why?” she almost whispered.

“You must understand. If you go out – parading yourself under his eyes – the Measuring Man will see you and when he sees you he will

say to himself ‘now who’s that?’ And when he realizes that he doesn’t know, then your life will be over. I wanted you to be free from that evil – from . . . all that pain. How many times do I have to say it to make you believe it? How much do I have to hurt you now to make you remember it?”

Feather was hardly listening. What could you say to that tone of voice? It was the slightly high-pitched, constant tone of one who speaks words without thinking about them any more because they have become so familiar – a ten ton truck voice that barges its load through everything that stands in its way. Most of what her father said over the years was vaguely the same. The Measuring Man was an old bogey. A familiar spectre that she had been afraid of once – but now tended to ignore. If she had pictured him at all it was as some humourless old man in a white coat, carrying an old wooden ruler and a notebook. What he measured with that ruler had never been explained. Something physical? All her searches on the internet had turned up no reference at all and when it came to choosing which to trust – the village library and the small museum in the converted windmill or her Father’s ramblings – she was starting to make her choice.

“I didn’t go to the village,” she muttered.

“What did you say?”

Feather clenched her fists, driven to another small flare of anger by this so-close but wrong accusation. Of course she had been to the village. It was a much more interesting place than here. But not now. Not this time. And that made this an injustice.

“I said I didn’t go to the village,” she replied a little louder, trying to pull away again. He gave her a look that puzzled her and silenced her – almost gentle.

“Don’t lie, Feather,” he said. “Lie to the Measuring Man yes but not to me.”

“I’m not . . .”

This was another thing that infused the atmosphere of this room, as pungently as the leaf-smoke. The occasional sensation of pain. He even had a special home-made implement for it. It was an old belt end, about a foot and a half long, but the leather had been wound round and round and sewn through with fine copper wire. That had made it flexible but inflexible – cold but burning – and as confusing as everything else

here. Whenever he punished her he would get this look on his face almost of disgust at what he was having to do. The sort of look a person might wear when he has to clean up a small but unpleasant mess. And Feather just took it quietly for it was always limited and finite. Like the thunderstorms, it came and passed quickly.

At least – she had always taken it quietly in the past . . .

But why? Feather was angry. Things were changing and progressing in this house. There were indeed fingers of change. And maybe investigation and measuring was high overdue. A painful morning, an empty stomach and white mushrooms with a sharp reminder of earlier incidents had left her in a destructive mood.

She gave a violent jerk and finally broke free, backing away sharply across the room. It didn't last long though.

"Don't fight me," he shouted, catching her and jerking her back again. "Never fight me."

Feather tried to break away a second time, but couldn't. He may be skinny and twig-like but she realised he was strong enough to hold her. Strong enough to twist her round and pin her tight. Then he proceeded to lash her hard with the copperbelt. He always went for her arse – attacking it with a measured rhythm and formality – not out to achieve anything fancy, just controlled pain. Trying to research that in the library had set off some kind of security system and her browsing there had ground to a halt.

Feather struggled, feeling incandescent with fury. Had she ever fought this properly before? She must have. It made no sense not to. But anyway – now that she did, it felt electrifying. Like a cleansing wave – to let rip and let it all out. He seemed taken aback by the ferocity of her fighting – but he didn't let go and, after a few minutes of achieving nothing, Feather snapped completely.

"Why don't you talk to me?" she yelled. "Explain – and then – instead of . . . I only want to understand why. The village doesn't talk in riddles . . . doesn't have a head filled with drugged cotton. Give us a bit of measurement if it will help clear things up."

She shut up quickly, realizing that that was an admission. But the words had escaped. And she stared at the wall in dismay, feeling her father pause a moment.

"I ought to throw you out," he said, his voice different to anything she could remember hearing. "And I would if you wouldn't just bring

them all back here. I ought to toss you outside where you belong – go and sit at his feet . . . suck his cock . . . perhaps?”

She landed on the floor with a bump, but still couldn't get away. The copperbelt landed again, though he seemed to have lost all control or measurement now. He had also snapped, in fact. Feather had always known that there was a lot of rage hidden inside him – and now it seemed to be unrestrained. She screamed at the assault. This was something more than she had ever experienced before. She yelled and struggled but had no choice but to lie there until he had finished, leaving her welted, twitching and out of breath.

“Right,” he said, panting. “You don't leave the house again – you understand me?”

“What?” she gasped.

“If I have to lock you up in the shed. You are sixteen years old,” he growled, “we have been here for nearly sixteen years – and I don't intend to let you land me in it now and break everything I have worked so hard to build.”

She staggered onto her knees, then to her feet, staring at him in disbelief. She opened her mouth – but some instinct of self-preservation jammed it closed again.

“You understand me?” he repeated.

She actually gave him a small nod – which hurt almost as much as her body did – before backing clumsily away towards the door. She wriggled out like a dancer, trying not to touch anything with her burning arse and hurried through to the kitchen. Then she sagged against the table, letting her fists impact with a bang and trying to work out what to do with the rage in her, which was thrashing about like a cat trying to find its way out of a bag. Finally she lowered her head and closed her eyes, willing her heart to calm down.

Why? Alright, let's ask the question for once. Why? Why everything?

On the stove, a covered pot was simmering, filling the air with the smell of mushrooms. Slowly she crossed over to it, lifted the lid and peered in. The mushrooms – from the smell of it, a wild cep or two that he must have brought back – didn't seem to be adding much to her father's cooking. It looked watery and dull and she glared at it. That

gloomy pot-full, devoid of any particular culinary creativity, seemed to conjure up her father perfectly. She knew he could be creative – he was a painter after all. But he chose, for no reason that made sense to her, to decline all hint of that when it came to food. As if it was somehow bad to find ways to make food taste good or to eat delicious things. It annoyed her. Words like ‘Spartan’ and ‘Self-Denial’ had cropped up occasionally in her reading – and they always made her clench her fist in exasperation. There was no shortage of herbs in the garden or the woods – but he rarely seemed to touch them for food. Just used them for medicine and scenting his room out with odd smokes.

Feather stared into the gently roiling liquid, remembering images she had seen online of creamy mushroom soup with delicious looking chunks of Cep or Horns of Plenty . . .

The Cep especially – *Boletus edulis* – she could smell their wonderful scent in here and catch a glimpse of their chestnut caps. The word wanted here was ‘waste’.

A temptation to throw the contents of the pot out of the door into the garden weeds was restrained sharply. Never before could she remember being so angry and afraid – and what boiled inside her almost felt like hate. The accumulated weight of confusion and fury about the present and confusion and fury against the past burned and the thought of having to stay here indoors was just not possible to fit in the head.

“Why?” she demanded aloud.

Her bag caught her eye and her heart sank suddenly even further. It didn’t take long for her mind to turn from one trouble to another one, much older and much harder to grasp. She opened it and was greeted by a waft of a sickly smell that made her flinch away. The memories these ghostly white mushrooms brought back were doubly unwelcome now. She drew a deep breath and let her fist hammer repeatedly but quietly on the table. She still didn’t know quite what these mushrooms were or what had happened when her father had tried ‘using’ the old Fly Agarics. All she knew was that they were both Amanitas of some kind. Amanita meant Death Cap – Fly Agaric – Panther Cap – meant danger basically. Danger of upset stomachs. Hallucinations. Slow death perhaps. But most of all, amanitas represented the red of blood and the crystal flash of glass.

Many were the times when she wondered what would have happened if his experiment years ago with Fly Agarics – the Druid

Mushroom – had lead to more than just the hallucination that had subsequently hit him so hard. The contradiction of taking poison was a puzzling one in itself. As it was, he had tangled her in copper wire and attacked her with broken glass from the midst of his hallucinations, lacerating her arse and between her legs, leaving scars that were still very visible as faint white lines. What could you make of something like that? Which was to blame? The hallucinogen for putting things in his head – or the head for having such things there just waiting to be revealed? He had grabbed her almost with hate – perhaps not for her but for the concept she represented. And what was that? She had escaped quickly enough – he had been so incoherent that he hadn't been able to hold her for long. Filled with bewilderment, she had lashed out, catching him a square punch in the face. In his stoned state he had no chance at all to avoid that and he went over with a crash and stayed down – and feather fled, scrabbling the copper wire from around her and crying in confusion.

There it was. That was the story.

Reading later in the library internet portal, Feather realised that she had been quite lucky not to have bled to death. She remembered feeling dizzy and faint, forcing herself to stay awake and crying tears of pain while she fixed herself, using various herbs and white cotton – dealing with this just like any other injury. The cuts had been long and some quite deep. This had been one of the times the internet couldn't help her. Nothing she read answered any questions. Even other people who had been attacked in some way had nothing useful to say. Attack victims all over the world seemed to be covered in a pall of ignorance and a reluctance to ask questions.

She had also tried to find some accounts from the attackers. That might have been more help. But she had failed.

Nobody seemed to have asked them anything.

She stared grimly at the stew.

"Oh yes," she said. "You have a lot of explaining to do."

Though perhaps even he didn't know the answers.

Nevertheless.

Almost acting on autopilot she tumbled the white mushrooms out onto the chopping board. The knife slammed into them. Don't you dare, she thought, her mouth turning down at the corners . . . Don't you

dare – over and over. A helpless and furious mantra. Don't you dare. Treat me like this. Keep me here. Blah blah. Don't you dare . . .

As the knife slipped through the soft white flesh, she had the weird impression that the white mushrooms were screaming at her. She screwed her eyes shut for a moment, wishing she wasn't so hungry. There was usually no time for such nonsensical thoughts. Living wild was no place for strange fancies, like she sometimes read about in books or online. Irrational fears, likes or dislikes. She could see that quite clearly. The books were from a different world – a luxurious world where people could do what they wanted – feel what they wanted. Be afraid of what they wanted. But now she was crumbling. The fungi guide she had read in the library described mushrooms as fruiting bodies – little more than berries and flowers were to a plant – but somehow this handful of white mushrooms seemed to her to be individual entities – a handful of small white corpses.

With a swish, she swept the mushroom slices into the bubbling pot, where they bobbed and shifted. A few minutes and they would have sunk – would look just like the overcooked field mushrooms and ceps already in there. Feather quickly washed down the chopping board and returned it to the dish rack, hoping he wouldn't notice anything in spite of his obsessive neatness. Then she added a good extra dash of pepper and a shake of salt. Let him have a well-seasoned meal for once.

As she stared into the stew, all her instincts were yelling at her. Danger. But that was what this was about. Maybe he would cut himself this time instead. Find your hallucination again, please, she thought. Only this time I will not be here to be a part of it – and I hope you learn something. And then you will tell me about it. Oh yes you will.

Finally she subsided away and opened the cupboard door. She was hungry and, however little stuff there usually was in there, she would take what she could. But before she could reach in, there was the sound of a movement.

“Feather?” her father called.

She paused. The studio door opened.

She jumped alert – a clash of eyes – then she bolted. Food would have to wait. Instead she charged out the back way, across the garden, straight through the last of the vegetables, and ran for the trees.

Her father's exasperated shout faded behind her.

For the next few days, Feather just wandered.

At first her body was still hurting – mostly her arse and back – but that was fading. Her dwindling anger faded away quicker than that though. It was replaced by emotions she could never remember really experiencing before. There was a shocking sense that she had broken something that could not be put together again – and with that, a sense of fragility and helplessness. The realisation that she was just an insignificant small thing on the surface of the world. The feeling that nobody knew that she existed or cared. The feeling that she was as alone as it was possible to be.

She had been making for the village originally, following the coast road through mile after mile of empty coastline – sometimes sandy, muddy beaches, sometimes rolling sea out of reach below low soft clay cliffs. She had left the wood behind soon enough and here the land was flat and bleak, save for a few patches of trees spared from the geometry of the fields that dominated the ground here. The wind crossed it without obstruction – a continuous presence in her hair and ears.

She arrived at the bridge, where a small river flowed under the road and sprawled out in a tangle of channels and muddy spits, and she stopped, unable to go on. The salt marsh here was covered in crisp and salty Marsh Samphire and she wanted to pick it to try and fill her stomach. She liked Samphire, but gathering it was a messy business that left you covered from head to foot in the rich mud. Normally she would have stripped off naked and gone in there like that. Half wading, half crawling through the deep mud was strangely pleasant – and that followed by a plunge into the sea or the river to wash clean again. But now, scarred and miserable, she found she couldn't face the salt-sting, the dirt or the red-marked nakedness. In the distance, the stationary sails of the windmill museum could be seen above the landscape. That was a familiar landmark for her – the first sight of the village. The old converted windmill where she often liked to sit and rest in the warm. She wanted to be there . . .

Soon, if she kept on, she would approach the first buildings. There would be tire marks on the dusty surface – places where feet had trampled the vegetation. Occasional discarded drinks cans and water bottles – food wrappers and odd unidentifiable pieces of metal. Just plain human dirt, in fact. Then the sea wall started – a long concrete construction that travelled right along the seaward side of the road, right through the village and beyond. And, to her mind, this was where civilization began. The land looked more constrained. The beach was a separated world. And there was less around that was edible.

There were tears in her eyes now as she stood on the bridge. Tears of terror and misery. The tears of anyone confronted with imminent change. Feather wanted to keep walking towards that distant sailed tower – if for nothing else then for the possibility of finding something to eat – somehow. But she felt afraid. Instead she scrambled over the fence and began to follow the river inland, trying not to give way to shivering.

This way, there was nothing but fields and marshes for miles.

What was happening at home? Had he eaten? What would her father do? What was going to happen now? Would he even be capable of killing her, she wondered, if he thought she had failed too completely?

Anything might be possible. But whatever it was, she realised that she had driven a knife deep between the past and the future.

For hour after hour she tramped through the countryside, sticking to the marsh paths to start with, then cutting across country. She knew enough to stick to the paths or the open woods out here to avoid attracting attention. She avoided getting too close to the town or to any roads or buildings – but at the same time she found herself reluctant to venture too far away from it, so she ended up moving in a vague sort of orbit round the village. When the night closed in she found a small patch of trees, curled up in a secluded place and lay there, feeling the cold trying to get through her clothes and the material she had dragged over her as cover. But she slept only to dream of mushrooms and windmills – red and white – which grew very large and suffocating and had her waking up in the grey dawn feeling as though frost had penetrated, crystallising her bones.

What do you have to do to get rid of memories? You couldn't forget them – that didn't seem to be happening. But why wouldn't it leave her alone? The red mushrooms – looking more like a decoration than a food. They were too perfect and improbable. The white mushrooms looked too insignificant.

A haunting memory like this, Feather decided, was a sign of something you yourself had done wrong – not in the incident itself but in dealing with it. Somewhere Feather had failed. She had been so good at taking care of her body when it got hurt or damaged – why had she failed with her mind? But then – what attention had she paid to her mind until recently? She had been a child – unquestioning and accepting everything.

Why?

Why a lot of things?

She sat up and peered around the trees that surrounded her. Young birches and chestnuts. With a sigh, she brushed the leaves from her clothes and started walking again – continuing her orbit. But it was not comfortable. There was nothing to eat out here. It was as simple as that. The wheat and oats that grew in the fields around her were useless. Monocultures they called it on the internet. It didn't sound a nice word. Oh, there were some plants growing by the roadside – clumps of dusty chickweed or deadnettle, even an escaped broccoli plant going to seed in a hedgerow. But they all seemed to taste bitter now – and none of it did much to fill the hole inside her or stop the cold shivering that was starting to creep through her body. Her head felt stuffy and achy, as though a cold was on the way, and even her eyesight seemed to be blurring sometimes.

Eventually she slept again, welcoming mushrooms that billowed and marched like pillows. Then she woke up again and just sat there, time passing slowly. She realised that days and days of subsisting on a few leaves and her father's unfulfilling food, were finally catching up with her in this cold. She felt ill and frozen to her centre and she stared around at the grey dawn bitterly. This was living wild, she thought, and gave a tiny laugh. A few of the books and articles she had read had spoken wistfully of 'living wild' – 'getting back to nature' – living directly alongside nature, just you and it – but now she thought that

any little comfort of civilization would be more than welcome. Why was her father not living in a small comfortable house somewhere with hot water and plenty of food easy to hand – instead of out here in the middle of nowhere trying to put on some illusion of self-sufficiency and hiding?

It was all a lie anyway. Most of his food and supplies were bought, she knew that much. Bought on chuntering excursions in the battered and muddy old car that sat by the house.

Finally, driven by desperation, she scrambled to her feet and turned towards where the sails of the Windmill Museum still showed above the trees, silhouetted against the quiet morning sun. The old landmark seemed doubly appealing now. She couldn't handle this any longer. What could she do? The library with its internet and information, where she could perhaps work out what was going on? Then go off and steal a meal somewhere? Maybe. Or maybe just the comfortable chairs in the museum. Perhaps the young man who often minded the place wouldn't mind if she fell asleep there . . .

The Museum was a sweet and strange old building. The round brick tower sprouted out of a clump of small red and rippling-tiled buildings like a dumpy mushroom with small neat windows and balconies picked out in white wood. At the top, the four great white sails still hung – but they were nothing more than frames now and they could never spin again. The wings of this place had been clipped and only the bare bones remained. Feather knew that, but still it was a place that affected her somehow. The museum of local history and local natural history was mostly arranged, tall and thin, inside the old windmill tower, the displays nestling among a wonderland of huge cogs and beams. It was cluttered, sometimes cramped and it smelt of wood – but it was comfortable and impressive. The huge old machinery somehow far more directly moving than the technological bulk of the silent power station near her home.

Feather had practically learned the exhibits by heart now, especially the natural ones, but it was still a nice quiet place to sit. The

atmosphere was peaceful and calm – totally different to her homely trees but this time in a very nice way. Sometimes she could read the leaflets or any book or magazine she might have managed to acquire with her light fingers. Now she had nothing but it didn't matter. She felt too tired to read. All she wanted was a soft chair – perhaps the one on the quiet third floor, nestled between a case of stuffed birds and a display of seashore pickings. Here it was warm and here there was never any pressure to move on or be doing something. That was what made it precious.

She stepped in, feeling the warmth with relief. There were a couple of other people in there looking at the exhibits and some glanced at her curiously. She hesitated, desperately not wanting their stares now, and trying to find the courage to venture further. Normally she at least tried to look smart and unobtrusive when she came here, but now she was aware of her clothes and hair, stained and tangled from sleeping rough in them. She nodded casually to the young man sitting behind the desk in the entranceway. He was one of the museum keepers and a familiar sight, though she didn't know his name – or indeed had ever really spoken to him. Somewhat chubby and with an untidy mop of hair, he was usually buried in a book and today was no exception. He glanced up at her with a nod and a small smile as she slipped in. There was an uneaten sandwich on his desk, and she felt a gnawing pain at the sight. Food was starting to occupy her mind in an almost continuous litany. But there was not much she could do about that now.

Unless she could steal something.

. . . her practised hands clumsily knocking three apples from their display crate – and replacing two of them with an embarrassed grin at no-one.

Munching with great satisfaction on down the road . . .

Why not? She had done it before.

Or maybe she could go back to that patch of mushrooms and have some herself. Even that was tempting now. What did they taste like, she wondered. Were they just like an ordinary mushroom? Or did the body know? Did they taste like what they were?

Sometimes – and now in particular – it almost seemed to Feather that it was worth the risk of poisoning, just to find out the answers to such questions. Just what were they like? What did the Death Caps

and Agarics taste like? What exactly were the lethally sweet berries of the Deadly Nightshade like? Who knows what extraordinary eating sensations were there for the taking in some improbable last meal? If you wanted it.

What were they?

She stared speculatively at the young man. She was pining for some rest, but instead of heading upstairs and looking for her chair, she paused. Why not? Throughout her life, Feather had almost never spoken to anyone aside from her father – but, why not? She approached the desk.

“Excuse me,” she asked politely, trying not to betray her tiredness. “But have you ever heard of the Amanita mushroom?”

He looked up at her again. “The what?”

“The Amanita mushroom.”

He got it then, and nodded enquiringly. Feather was panicking already. She felt so unused to talking that the words struggled to form in her mouth, but she pushed herself. “Please. Is it dangerous? – if you eat some – what can you . . .?”

He hesitated, frowning. “Yes it is. Well – I mean I suppose it depends which one it is. But anyway – I suppose one should just get oneself to a doctor as fast as one can,” he said. Then he looked at her sharply. “Why?” he asked. “You think you . . .?”

Feather jumped. Her heart was racing and her instincts were telling her to run. “I? What?”

“You think you ate some?”

She shook her head urgently and he looked slightly relieved, though still puzzled.

“Oh I am sure they can fix it,” he said. “Stomach pumps maybe – or something. You would have to ask at the library perhaps. They might have a book on it somewhere.” He hesitated a moment, remembering something. “Actually, if you hang on a moment . . .”

He broke off and hurried into the back room. Feather drew a deep breath and tried to calm herself down. She told herself it was stupid to be so disturbed at talking like this. It didn’t help. She was uncomfortably aware of the tension in her body betraying itself in her stance and movement. She was even trembling slightly.

After a moment, he returned with a book. "Perhaps I can help you after all," he said, opening it with a smile. It was a fungi guide and she leaned over to look.

"Ok – amanita – amanita . . . which amanita are you interested in? Or is it all of them?"

"I don't know," Feather said. "It is the white one – I . . . I am . . ."

He handed her the book.

"*Amanita phalloides?* *Amanita virosa?* *Amanita citrina?*"

She spotted it straight away.

"That," she said, pointing.

'*Amanita virosa*,' she read. 'The Destroying Angel. August to November. Sometimes encountered in deciduous woodland, often at higher altitudes. Deadly poisonous.'

She scanned the page quickly.

Symptoms:

Amanita virosa is one of the few mushrooms to come close to the Death Cap in terms of potency, containing highly dangerous amatoxin poisons. This fungus has been responsible for many cases of severe poisoning and death. There is normally a delay of approximately eight to twenty-four hours after consumption before onset of the first symptoms – violent vomiting, persistent diarrhoea and severe pains to the stomach. Following this there may cruelly be a period of apparent improvement before the second effects of the poisoning occurs a few days later – a deterioration of both the liver and the kidneys resulting in a yellowing or discoloration of the whites of the eyes and skin. Thus, it is crucial to get treatment as fast as possible in the early stages.

She stared at it blankly and her body began to lose control even more. She felt herself twitch. What did she look like, she wondered. She felt the centre point of a hundred watching eyes now, not just his mild blue ones that rested on her uneasily. This was a nightmare. A complete nightmare.

“Are you ok?” he asked, and she almost jumped back a step.

“Thankyou,” she said hastily, handing back the book. “Yes, I am fine. Thankyou.”

Feather slowly backed away, bumping into the stair-rail and staggering clumsily. Her headache was getting worse now, her chest was tight and her heartbeat almost painful.

“Are you sure you’re ok?” he asked with a worried frown and she flinched sharply. “Are you sick?”

“Thankyou,” she managed. “I am fine.” She turned to go, but before she could control herself she had wobbled sharply on her feet. Tiredness and hunger were sweeping over her like a wave and she straightened up with a sigh.

He looked puzzled.

“You sure?” he asked. “What is all this about poisonous mushrooms? You haven’t been tripping, have you?”

“Yes – no – thankyou I am fine.”

Feather wasn’t sure what tripping meant, but from the tone of voice it didn’t sound good. He was looking at her with increasing intensesness.

“When did you last eat?” he asked at last.

“Mmm,”

“Come on – when did you last eat?”

“This morning,” she stammered, “But I am . . . so hungry.”

It had slipped out. She hadn’t meant to say that. “It’s ok,” she managed, turning hastily to the exit. “I am fine.” She was aware of him staring after her as she hurried miserably out again into the fresh air. She quickly dragged herself round a corner into a small side road and there she collapsed again, against the wall, feeling a bitter twinge of disappointment. She had hoped to have a long rest in the warm – but now she had ruined it. She buried her head in her hands again. The late-morning air seemed even colder now and it beat down on her through her top and ate up through her jeans, tormenting the fading welts on her arse. It dawned on Feather then that she had probably never felt so miserable before. Her stomach and head were hurting and her home was in ruins . . .

As she sat, she stared up at the tower of the windmill museum – and, for the first time that she could remember, the huge windmill sails seemed to be turning.

Half way home – at the edge of the estuary – she finally collapsed to her knees, digging into the mud. She found marsh snails and lug worms and she washed them and swallowed them, trying not to choke on the brine. Ignoring her clothes, which were instantly soaked and freezing, she just lay there scrabbling for something to eat. In the leaf litter a bit further on were some more snails and a Great Grey Slug. It helped.

Finally, covered with sand and shivering uncontrollably, she began to cry for the first time . . .

In her dream, the Windmill Museum was still there, but it was transformed into a giant spinning machine weaving cloth out of copper wire. The same copper wire that her father used everywhere. But the cloth it was weaving was shaped into the figures of people – an endless production line of them, who marched away into the distance. She was still trying to recognise them when she woke up into a bright evening under a chill blue sky.

It had been a long sleep and she felt a little refreshed. Around her was the familiar home woods and they seemed a comforting presence, though she could hardly remember how she had got here. Her body felt filthy and colder even than the food she had gorged herself on earlier. Her clothes clung to her in tangled, damp twists and she heavily sat up and began to peel them off, flinging them away in disgust. Once naked, she actually felt a little warmer, if anything. A few beams of evening sun were cutting through the trees and she drank them up eagerly, trying to relax and let her skin breath.

The pain in her stomach had faded a bit now and she was feeling more alive, though still cold to the point of agony. Waking herself and getting warm was vital, so she got up and began pacing around, jumping up and down. Eager to keep moving, in spite of her complaining flesh, she headed towards the open ground by the security fence and when she got there she was glad she had. To her delight, the faint sun was shining

down stronger – a luminous haze that was almost pink in the morning mist. Here, there was a little to eat as well and she went to it rapidly. Then she leaned her white body against the wire mesh fence and peered through, her fingers and toes curling through the links. The power plant was silent as always – the same ghostly buildings and wires. As long as she had been here, Feather had never been on the other side of this fence – though there were a few holes in places. Even to collect the food that grew there. She hadn't needed her father's warning about that one. She had always had a faint feeling that if she actually stepped through, then the sleeping complex might suddenly awaken again.

Then two things happened that turned her world upside down. It suddenly hit her that something was different. In the cracked and worn car park, there were two vehicles parked. Feather slowly dropped from the fence and stared intently at them. Just ordinary cars. Then, without any fanfare, there were three figures there dressed in coloured baggy suits, their faces hidden by helmets. Blue, white and green. Like something out of her father's paintings. It was such an unexpected sight that Feather just stared at them for a while, unsure how to react. The power station was always deserted. As long as she could remember. That was the way things were. Her mouth turned down at the corners, shocked more than she quite understood.

They were just walking across from one building in the direction of another – that's all. From one door to another. But instead, they stopped sharply and stared at her. Feather had forgotten for the moment how conspicuous she was, leaning against the fence.

"Hey," the one in blue called sharply, waving at her. They stared at her for a moment then hurried towards her.

It was her instinct that started her off. Not any kind of understanding or thought. She dropped from the fence and bolted back into the trees, trying to remember where she had put her clothes and thankful for the falling dusk. Surely it wouldn't be difficult to slip away in this low light?

After a few minutes she burst out into the causeway where the silent wires ran. The pylons were like surreal metal trees themselves – and the lines they carried, she knew, were the big power cables that carried away the electricity from the power station. But she wasn't sure. The wires hung inert and silent so perhaps they were as dead as the rest

of the building. This was no place to be naked though. Brambles twined thicker here in the open and the place was filled with young birch trees, whose thin branches whipped at her or flurried in her face. But she ploughed through as best she could and dived into the woods again. She ran for a minute more, darting through the leaf litter now with barely a scratch, but then her foot caught in a hidden branch and she went flying into a small dip in the ground. There was a blast of pain from her ankle and she rolled in the leaves with a gasp, then froze, listening.

Even in the approaching winter, the woods always made some sound. The wind rustled the dying leaves. Occasionally something would fall to the ground with a thud. Or something would shift somewhere. Feather lay back slowly and shut her eyes, flexing her foot cautiously and tasting the pain there. Slowly her breathing calmed. Ears were better than eyes here. These woods were so familiar that any wrong note in it would stand out like a trumpet call. And the wrong note was certainly there. She listened to it for a moment – tramping feet getting closer – then she jumped up, only to fall over again with a grunt. Her foot was hurting, though not crippling, and she staggered up onto all fours, trying to move away to cover.

“Hey,” a voice called. “Wait a minute. Steady on – what’s the matter with you?”

She blinked round at him and hesitated. It was the white man. There was only one of them now at least. He had also taken off his helmet and didn’t look so surreal any more. He was just a short-haired young man with a rather heavy face and dark eyebrows. Feather shrank back down into the leaves warily.

He came to a stop staring down at her. “Hey – I am not going to hurt you or anything. But what the hell are you doing here?” he demanded. “It isn’t safe.”

Feather said nothing. He regarded her with a puzzled and uncertain look on his face.

“Why are you naked?” he asked. “Are you ok? Has anything happened?” She just looked at him for a moment, then rolled over and scrambled clumsily to her feet, favouring her foot. She heard him give a startled hiss.

“What the hell happened to you?” he demanded. It took her a few moments to work out what he was talking about, then she realised that he had seen her arse and back – the fading welts there.

“What’s that?” he demanded uneasily. “Are you ok?”

She nodded briefly, but he came forward anyway. She felt herself tensing as he approached, still wondering whether to dash off and escape – but instead she stood there and let him come.

“Are you sure?” he asked. She felt him turn her round and examine her – felt him wriggle an arm out of the suit – felt his hand on her buttocks.

“Steady. Are you sure you are ok?” he asked, an odd expression on his face. “What are you doing naked in the woods? You lost or just playing at something? Looking for something?”

She gave him a questioning stare. Looking for something?

He drew a deep breath and touched her again – a bit more intently this time. Then he shrugged.

“Well I’ll be buggered,” he muttered, shaking his head. “I thought this was going to be a strange day – but I never thought it would be this strange.”

He turned her round and touched her chest, gave a short laugh. “Heh – nothing much here yet, but down here –”

His hand wandered lower.

“– already fully grown. Interesting. Do you know you are a woman, I wonder?”

Feather stared at him expressionlessly as his hand tugged at the small tuft of hair between her legs.

“Take it easy,” he murmured. “I just need to have a look at you – make sure you are ok. You really shouldn’t be here. This is not a safe place to be . . .”

She allowed herself to be leant back and her legs to be spread. She felt tense and nervous – from the simple presence of a stranger who really shouldn’t have been there in such familiar surroundings. He was scrambling out of his suit, and then out of the formless undergarment that was beneath it.

Feather began to realise what might be happening.

“Perhaps you’ve got the right idea,” he said. “It’s fucking hot in this thing.”

His body was pale and pasty, running with stretch marks and odd spots.

“Yeah,” he muttered. “Now tell me I am ugly. But hey – looks ain’t everything.”

She stared in real surprise, peering through the fading light, for the man possessed two penises and she couldn't recall encountering any creature like that before, either in books or anywhere else. They were positioned one above the other, looking faintly absurd.

He gave another chuckle. "Who says there are no surprises left in the world," he said. "Take your pick, my dear – or maybe you would prefer both?"

Feather's instincts were gone now. She didn't know how to react to this at all. She was still trying to decide whether or not to jump and try to run when she found herself underneath him. She clutched a handful of leaves, feeling his weight with a wince of discomfort. Then, after a spit for lubrication, she was penetrated.

It felt bitterly uncomfortable and she wanted to struggle out of his grip. She could, she felt. In a moment. This was not violence. Not like the hysterical stories on the internet where people were tied down and immobilised and then – what was the word? Raped? Instead, for all her confusion, she lay back for a moment, trying to understand the weird sensation of having something inside her body. She was unsure if this should be something profound or alarming or just nothing much at all. But, before she could make up her mind about anything, he was gone out of her again.

She felt herself turned over – and the man hissed again in shock.

"What the fuck?" he gasped, running his eyes over her. Now what? she thought. It took her a moment to realize that he must be looking at the other marks there. Scars. Older ones – that lined over her vagina and perineum like paths on a map. She felt a twinge of an unexpected misery at being reminded of that.

"What happened to you?" he demanded.

She was silent and he swore to himself. She lay there half on her hands and knees waiting for whatever was coming next – but he just withdrew and started nervously getting dressed again.

"Hey," the man said uneasily, pulling on his suite. "You know these woods?"

Feather nodded, picking herself up.

"Then you know a way through these trees . . . without going back to the plant? How do you get to the town from here?"

She raised her eyebrows. The question was asked casually, but there was a lingering tremor in his voice.

“Without . . . going back . . .” he stammered. “I’ve got a fucking bad feeling about this.”

Feather shook her head and shrugged, glancing back at the distant lights. They shone through the woods, illuminating the mist in a great halo – the red of them almost lost in the white. He stared at them and sighed, defeated.

“Nothing?”

Feather shrugged again.

“Well – I suppose someone has to do this job. Should get a bloody medal for it though.”

With his head drooping slightly he began to walk. Unsure of what else to do, Feather accompanied him as the light increased. Where had she left her clothes?

Somewhere – perhaps even from underground – there was a faint grind of machinery. He paused, looking around, and hastily fumbled his helmet back on, his face lined with unease.

“No way,” he said turning. “What are they doing?” They stared at each other for a moment as the rumble faded away. The lights of the plant flickered once – blanking the woods in darkness for the blink of an eye – before flooding out again.

He muttered something Feather couldn’t catch and hurried onwards – then paused.

“Listen,” he said. “You get somewhere away from here tonight. The place is closing down. They are decommissioning reactor 3, it’s already a god-awful mess.”

Feather stared at him with blank eyes. He gripped his helmet tightly, her eyes and muteness seeming to get under his skin. “Damn,” he muttered, turning again. “Do what you want then.” He hurried away, fumbling for the phone in his belt and dialling.

Feather stood for a moment staring out at the lights, then she slowly turned and headed back into the trees.

It was dark now. She walked along the beach with the eerie glow of the power plant trailing behind her. She was dressed again now – reluctantly putting her still damp clothes on. Her tatty shoes were not much use here in the sand though, so she impatiently kicked them away and left them behind. She was still a little un-nerved – mostly from the simple sight of figures in the power station. They also signalled a change of some kind. Everything was full of changes now.

Between her legs felt uncomfortable – as though bruised slightly – but she tried to ignore that and tramped on heavily, her feet sinking into the sand. She wanted to find somewhere quiet to sit and think about what had just happened to her – to swallow the significance of it properly and place it in the right shaped receptacle in the deep places of her mind. But there were too many other things to worry about, so that would have to wait.

The wind was strong and, beside her, the dark sea tumbled wildly against the sand and shingle – plunging in like tongues and tossing the fine polished tellin shells backwards and forwards. The coarse grass that grew in tufts, imprisoning the sand into miniature dunes and hollows, flurried violently, the wind hissing through it, laden with sand. It lashed against her trousers as she pushed through. It was colder and the wind was like knives in her hair, but she ignored it and pressed on, her face blank and expressionless.

As the light faded behind her, it almost seemed as though the sea itself was beginning to glow – a faint phosphorescence picking out each wave as it curled and crashed in. Overhead the sky was as black as ink, heavy clouds blotting out the stars. Feather knew her way well enough though. She knew these dunes with the knowledge of one who has grown up in them, and eventually she tramped up the beach and inland across the scrub and low bushes that grew there. Here the wind was less, though it still fluttered through the plants, making them toss and sway.

She pushed on until she finally reached the rough track that lead to her home. She scrambled into it and began to march grimly. Anyone

who met her on that walk – if there was ever anyone on this remote and abandoned trail – might have been startled at the expression on her face. The corners of her mouth were turned down, her lips pressed tight – and her eyes were almost hidden under frowning eyebrows and lowered head.

What was going on at home?

The first thing she noticed when she arrived home was the smell.

“Feather?” he called from his bedroom. She hurried in and paused, staring at the scene. He looked ghastly – as though he had physically shrunk, and his always skinny body now almost skin and bones. He was sallow and dirty – his chin unshaven and his hair trailing in damp ropes. The bed too looked wet and clammy. Feather stared in, cringing.

“Where have you been?” he asked feebly. He didn’t sound particularly angry – just sad and regretful.

“Just – out,” she stammered. “In the woods. I am sorry – what is the matter?”

He shrugged. “Sick,” he said. “Something I ate I imagine.”

“What happened?”

“It’s ok – I am feeling a little better,” he said. “I think I will be fine. It just goes to show – no matter how careful you are you can still make mistakes. Even the Measuring Man sometimes makes mistakes and brings some small mercies to the world.”

“What mistake did you make?” Feather asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Perhaps you should call for help,” Feather said hopefully. “Shall I run to the village?”

“No.” He shook his head urgently. “You mustn’t do that. I will be fine.”

She looked at him closer. His eyes were as yellow as amber, she realized, feeling cold. They sat in his discoloured skin like dirty precious stones . . .

In the distance, through the dark and with nothing to announce it or prepare for it, came the cry of a siren. It was the first time she could remember that a human sound from outside had reached as far as this house and they both listened to it in deep silence. It seemed like a signal sent directly to them – though of what she wasn't sure. Some sort of ending? Whatever it was, it unnerved her – and seemingly her father as well, for he clutched the bedclothes tightly.

The rising and falling sound tailed off into the distance and eventually faded out.

He murmured something to himself. She wasn't sure, but it sounded like “end.” Feather drew a deep breath, trying to calm her fear.

“Why are we here?” she asked.

“Hmm?”

“You have never explained. You never told me. Why do we live out here, always hiding away?”

He gave a tiny smile. “I told you . . . times – many times,” he said. “Remember?”

She gave him a blank look.

“And when the first man was cast in despair out of the city,” he said, his voice going singsong and rhythmic, “the king Measuring Man said unto his people to watch him, for even out in the wilderness he shall not be free from our measuring eyes. The king signed his name on a piece of paper and tied it to the running man's back where he couldn't reach – and the king booted him in the arse and said to the running man to start running. And so the running man ran – ran for days and days and weeks and weeks. But always the measuring eyes were on him and always he was not alone.”

He sighed miserably, while Feather stared down at him, feeling very cold. His babbling, singsong voice was familiar enough, but now, stripped down and eyes as yellow as a dying buttercup, she seemed to sense something in the story she had not heard before. Surely he was talking about himself.

“Why?” she murmured. But he was muttering to himself – almost inaudibly.

“Wandering the woods, he ate of the wild leaves and was guided uneasily . . . alone and afraid . . . didn't want to . . . In a world of stone

pillars he was forced to fight and kill – the maze of reaching hands and gleaming red lights . . . each about a centimetre and 1 foot 4 inches above the ground. The fight – lasted many days – and both parties were broken men when it was over . . . the running man lost and kept running amid a storm of paper chaff. And the measuring eyes said to him . . . ”

“Father,” she called, shaking at him. He gave a moan and shifted in his bed – seeming to glance at her for a moment. “Please – talk to me straight.”

He stared at her dumbly and she let him drop. She shrugged slightly. Normally she said as little as she could to him, but now she felt a terrible pressure and panic – there was so much she needed to know.

“I brought you here,” he said, “Nobody comes here. They don’t like that old power plant much. And those that do come out here – well, ordinary people are very good at minding their own business. I did my best to keep you safe,” he murmured. “I didn’t want you to be a part of . . . ” He drew a deep breath. “Feather,” he said urgently. “Never let the world catch you, you have to remember that,” before subsiding into muttering again. The measuring eyes. A metal forest. And something about a hat that she couldn’t understand.

“But why?” she said again – an almost wailing note in her voice.

She got no more out of him, though, so she eventually left the room and tramped into the kitchen, where the pot of mushroom stew still sat on the stove, ornamented with small tufts of mould. She stared round but couldn’t face eating anything here again – as if the whole room had been infused with poison. As if it was dripping from the damp walls – staining through the cupboards like slime.

“Feather?” he called through to her after a moment.

“Yes?” she managed.

“Would you get me some water?”

She stared round the kitchen – but the big jug that normally contained it was empty.

“There’s none left,” she said, putting her head round the door of his room. “I’ll have to get some.”

He nodded silently and she withdrew. Saucepan in hand she went outside, across the garden and down to the small stream. It flowed

over rocks with a gentle trickling and she quickly filled the saucepan, her face expressionless. Then she hurried it home and put it on the stove to boil. Then the gas faded out and, with a weary sigh, she ran out, a second time, to the shed to fetch a replacement canister.

This is what self-denial gets you, she thought gloomily as she connected it up. Then she stared dumbly into the pot. Hot water wasn't really that refreshing.

Thoughtfully she tossed in a sprig of dried mint and stirred.

When it was boiled and cooled a little, she brought him a tankard-full and then slipped out again without a word, entering her own room and collapsing onto the bed, staring at the ceiling.

Why?

That was the key. What happened – what you did – what other people did – did to you – wasn't the important thing now. You had to know why before you could know anything about the what.

Perhaps that was the way to exorcise memories as well, since most bad memories seemed to be questions. It was the only way that could possibly succeed.

Find out why.

The Measuring Man looked at her formally.

"What do you want to measure?" she asked, trying not to show her fear. The thing in his hand was looking less and less like a ruler – more like some complex surgical instrument.

"Feather," he said, with all the professional friendliness of a doctor, "You are a simple girl, aren't you . . ."

Feather shut her eyes and rolled over onto her face.

What were the questions . . . ?

Why were we here?

Why rage and hate?

Why glass?

Why Measuring Man?

Next day she tried again.

“I need to know,” Feather said grimly, trying to ignore those yellow eyes that seemed so alien now.

He sighed and shifted.

“The path to knowing things is never as simple as you think,” he said faintly. It was a meaningless statement and Feather clenched a fist behind her back, her face lined with worry.

“And the path to doing things is even more complex,” he murmured dully. “The path – up up and over – through the clouds to where we can understand what . . . you . . . I mean . . .”

“What path? Please,” Feather begged. “Why did you . . . ?”

He reached out and touched her hand, gently uncurling her fingers from the nervous fist she was holding. It was an unexpectedly affectionate gesture that made her flinch.

“Water?” he murmured. Feather sighed and ran to get some.

“Thank you,” he said, and drank.

Perhaps that had been a mistake though, for he subsided in exhaustion and shut his eyes.

“What’s wrong with me,” he murmured. “I have never felt quite so ill before. I am finding it a little hard to breathe . . .”

“Let me get some help then,” she said.

He shook his head.

“Why not? You can’t stay out here alone for ever.”

“I have to,” he said. “It’s ok. I am recovering slowly.”

She stared at him in silence.

“I don’t want to stay out here alone,” she said woodenly.

“Don’t lie to me,” he said with a sigh. “You’ve been wandering everywhere. I’ve always known it. It drives me nuts, but I suppose it was inevitable. I should have realised that years ago.”

She gave a discomfited sigh.

“I’m not answering any more questions,” he said wearily.

“But I have to know. Why shouldn’t I know?” she said tensely.

“You think I am just making up stories?” he spluttered suddenly, trying and failing to sit up. He flapped a hand at her feebly. “The

Measurers are out there, Feather. And maybe they'll find you one day. And when they do – you will be pining for this quiet hidden little place you hate so much.”

He sighed miserably and rolled over.

“... out into the wilderness,” she caught faintly. “It was great. At last ... out of ... somehow. She was gone – so far away. She didn't care. And ... Measuring man ... her to ... Running Man's death ... thought. I ... You don't exist, Feather – you ... kept you safe and hidden. The world doesn't know you exist – even she doesn't know you exist – now ... and it is better to ...”

“She?”

He sighed. “The world is a terrible place,” he said more distinctly. “You must never let yourself be caught by the world. Whatever you do – you mustn't be caught. It's too horrible ...”

“But why?” she demanded. “What's the point of hiding if you don't know what you are hiding from? Tell me ...”

He gave a long groan. “I feel sick,” he muttered. “Please clear off and let me sleep.”

Still murmuring something about a hat and red lights, he faded to silence. That was the last coherent thing he said, no matter how much Feather shrieked at him and poured water down his throat. And two days later he died.

She stood and stared down at him, feeling icy, her mind wandering. Was he even really her father? This deranged old hippie? Even that didn't make much sense. She could see no resemblance, either physically or mentally.

Too late to ask now, though. His deep yellow eyes stared at the ceiling. The stench filled the room – a stench she had never encountered before. A sickly sweetish smell that stuck in her throat and she could almost taste.

Aimlessly she roved around his studio, trying to look at the paintings rather than the figure in the bed. They were stacked in slanting heaps and hung on the walls and she flipped through them. She had seen most before of course, but she had not looked at them quite like this.

The paintings were like him. Cryptic and surreal. Filled with labyrinths and mazes, vast autophobic spaces and tiny cracks and passageways. Obviously these surreal landscapes meant something, but the dictionary was missing. The connection to his rambling about The Measuring Man and the weird world of that story was obvious, though there were few actual figures in them and no recurring characters who could help elaborate this. The Measuring Man was obviously a deity that should not be depicted.

Eventually she moved on from the paintings and began going through the contents of his drawers. In here was everything. Oddments, paraphernalia – everything. There were packets of herbs and a scattering of stones and crystals – some very beautiful, including a large green and pink natural tourmaline. There were coils of copper wire, which she held with a twinge of unease. There were artistic materials, a few books, pens, paper, a craft knife, pastels and charcoal. Then she came upon a sketch pad and took it out with interest. But all it contained was more of the eerie landscapes and images that filled his paintings. She skimmed through it, but it offered nothing that she hadn't seen already – until, near the back she saw something that brought her up sharp.

It was her.

She peered at the page, her skin prickling. She just stood there in rough but expressive soft pencil lines – an ordinary girl in her scruffy clothes, hands clasped behind her back, a casual and cute half smile on her face.

When had he drawn this? It couldn't have been done from life. She couldn't remember anything like that ever happening. He had just sat down one day and produced this picture of her. Where had she been at the time? Out in the woods? Wandered off to the village?

What had he been thinking about at the time?

Something glimmered in her head and she dropped the notebook back in the drawer.

Maybe the Measuring Man had been right when he had described her as a simple girl.

Something had blurred though. Something that had been simple had suddenly become less so. Feather found herself remembering things with a different kind of confusion.

She dropped the pad back in the drawer and floated from the room.

So . . . why?

Feather accepted then that she had doomed herself. She couldn't ask why anything now . . .

She would never know. That was the crime. There were no more whys. The question had lost meaning. She was left sitting in the corner of the kitchen trying to think, the angle of the walls cold against her back and the tiled floor colder against her arse. What was there to think about though? All she felt was a blank emptiness. Perhaps that was why this simple corner was so comforting.

And now what?

The Measuring Man was outside. The Measuring Man was looking for her . . .

What did that mean?

It meant that she knew nothing – she had learned nothing. The realisation was agonising.

The world was supposed to be a simple place. You lived – you ate – you reproduced – eventually you died. And it was over. That was what everything she could see around her had told her. What she knew of the world and the crazy stories of The Measuring Man just didn't fit together. As a child she had frowningly pictured him formally measuring the length of her nose and shaking his head in severe disappointment. Then, when she had grown up a bit, it was her vagina that was being measured. And the shake of the head was only more severe now. But it had just been a story – even though it was a story that ruled his life. That was what hurt. And from what she read in the news it seemed that everyone out there was just as under the thrall of stories as he had been. Stories were powerful things, she thought – and they were something she knew almost nothing about.

The world was full of incomprehensibilities; she knew that from her reading in the library. People, groups, authorities, countries – all danced a dance of death – a waltz of killers just like her. The small things made her uneasy. The big things made no sense at all and made her chuckle until she forced herself to remember that it was actually true and tried to picture herself caught up in them. And it was all because

of stories. Every atom of it. So how did this fall out? Were the killers all Feathers, wandering out there lost and trying not to be caught by the world? Was that how they escaped the stories? Were they the ones who had fallen out of the stories, making victims of those who still clung there? And were the jailors all measuring men? Measuring you until what you had done in your life reached a certain length – and then all over with a clang? Was that what happened when you died? When they came for you and killed you? You just ran out of length? No more. Good bye.

That was what was outside, she realised. That storm of a world. Waiting for her. That was the sound that was approaching. She could hear it – as she sat huddled in panic, unable to imagine what to do next. It was a sound she knew – but one that should never have happened here. The sound of an unfamiliar car coming to a stop and switching off. That was what was banging and crashing on the door, howling for admittance.

Feather, the Measuring Man bawled. You have been measured and you are too long. The story no longer holds you.

Don't you dare, she begged silently.

If she just stayed quiet, perhaps he would go away.

No luck. There was a painful sound of splitting wood and the door opened sharply, sending a savage bar of light right across her. She flung a hand to her face to shield it.

"What the hell?" a voice cried. "This is supposed to be empty. Who are you?"

She could never remember feeling any more terrified than she did now. So terrified that paradoxically she felt beyond panic. There were four figures scrambling through the door – Black Suit, White Suit, Red Suit, Green Suit. She stared at them dumbly – but then one at least suddenly jumped into unexpected familiarity.

White Suit – a vivid memory of him in the woods. She wondered for a moment if they all had two penises – or all had duplicates of whatever anatomy they had, she corrected, for two of them, Black and Green, were women.

White was staring at her, eyebrows up – and for some reason he looked almost as shocked as she felt. Why?

The familiarity and the glimpse of his fear woke her up a bit. These were people, she realised – and a bit of reality came crashing back, delirious thoughts of her father's King Measuring Man fading sharply. No doubt they meant her harm – but . . .

Instinct kicked in.

"My father is dead," Feather said expressionlessly.

"What?"

She gestured to the next room.

"How? Are you ok?"

Her eyes glittered. What to say now? She was used enough to lying to her father – that was second nature. But this was a stranger, and she still wasn't used to strangers. Everything she had learned told her that these people were her enemies.

"I don't know," she said. "He got sick. Something he ate."

That should be enough.

"Why didn't you tell someone?" Red Suit demanded, while Green and Black ran through to the next room.

"Wouldn't let me," she said.

Why wouldn't these people just go? That was all she wanted. She knew it wouldn't happen, of course. Everything was turning very bad indeed.

"Stay here," Red said to White, "while I check over." He ran out and Feather and White were left staring at each other. White looked very uncomfortable.

"Hey," he murmured softly, sitting down by her side. "Er – you ok?"

She didn't quite understand why he seemed afraid of her and she gave him an expressionless stare – then touched his hand – a small touch with a question in it. His flesh felt just as soft and insubstantial as she remembered. It was a gesture she hardly understood herself. Red came running in again then, talking into his phone – followed by Green from the other direction. She gave Red a confused look. "I don't know," she was saying. "We haven't time. Someone else will have to deal with this. Just get the girl out of here."

"I don't understand," she murmured. The corner was comforting – the tiled floor cold against her jeans.

“There has been a small release of contaminated water,” White explained. “This area must be sealed off while they dismantle reactor 3 at the power station. Please go and pack whatever essentials you will need.”

Feather stared at him dumbly. Essentials? She felt a creeping terror running through her. They were going to take her away – take her into a world she didn’t exist in. That was what her father had said. She didn’t exist. The world is a terrible place, he had said. You must never let yourself be caught by the world.

“Please hurry,” Red snapped, and Feather darted through to the other room, ignoring Green’s call of protest. Her father still lay on the bed, yellow eyes staring at nothing and she watched him, trembling. What had he been protecting her from? What was going to happen now? She felt full of confusion and terror – a terror that was formless and unsure, but nevertheless made her chest tighten.

Then her eyes went to his paintings arranged round the room, and she suddenly felt an overwhelming sense of misery. It was a curious paranoid storm of creativity – but it was creativity nonetheless.

“Oh my god,” she murmured.

She stared round the room.

“You can’t just abandon the paintings here?” she called as White peered round the door.

“I am sorry,” White said, joining her, “but there is nothing we can do about that now. The situation is too urgent.” Green touched White on the shoulder. “Take her out to the car and get her into town. Report everything. We will carry on . . .”

Feather backed away.

“Don’t be frightened,” White called. “It will be alright.”

Feather shrugged, her brain working fast. Quickly she picked up her bag from the corner and waved at the doorway. “I have to just . . .” she called, running outside.

White called something after her – something about not going far. But that was ok – the story was being told now. Feather simply darted across to the shed and noisily opened the door, waving her bag urgently. Simple though it was, White seemed satisfied and hurried back inside.

This was storytelling? It felt kind of good. But there was no point thinking about this now. Her brain was not equipped to know the answers. Instead, with a prickling sensation up and down her spine, she relaxed and let her instincts take over. Instincts that seemed to know better than she did that fact and fiction were one and the same thing. She glanced quickly round, then ran for the woods. She ran faster than she could ever recall running before – faster even than when her father had been chasing her. She dashed into the trees and carried on, scrambling through branches and around the dense patches of undergrowth. She thought she heard a voice calling behind her, but she ignored it and plunged on in a blast of pure energy.

Suddenly, far sooner than she expected, the security fence came at her from among the trees and she ran into the wire with a clang, clutching at the mesh and panting – wondering which way to go from here. The atmosphere felt electric – as though a storm was on its way. Or perhaps that was just her racing heart.

In front of her, the power station bustled and glowed, lighting up the sky and the mist – floodlights streamed across the scene, sweeping illumination right down across the distant beach and touching the edges of the restless waves with shining white. Vehicles moved and suited people hurried, and a small, insignificant plume of smoke was rising from somewhere. She watched the water crash in beyond it – pounding the sand and tossing shells that sparkled like stars. Then she looked away, longingly back into the dark woods that pressed about her. She had the feeling that those woods were more of a home to her than anywhere else. More than the house she had left, certainly. The feel of the bark pressing against her skin still glowed on her.

“Never let the world catch you.” Those words had been beaten into her and they shone in the darkness now. That was the one thing her father had said that she found herself believing and she didn’t linger long. She turned and plunged back into the trees.

Review Excerpts

... David Rix's writing style reminds me a bit of Clive Barker. He has the same kind of a sense of style and depth as Barker, and he's capable of shocking his readers with psychologically and violently horrifying scenes, which reveal the almost animalistic behaviour of human beings (he isn't as explicit as Barker, but he can shock his readers when he wants to and he does it skilfully). The dreamlike and a bit weird atmosphere also reminds me a bit of Clive Barker. There's also a touch of Laird Barron's sense of style in his stories...

...David Rix also has an uncanny sense of grotesqueness, which manifests itself in fascinating and unexpected ways. I have always loved grotesque and unsettling stories, so I was thrilled when I noticed that the author seems to be able to create an unsettling atmosphere with just a few paragraphs and carefully chosen words. This is one of the reasons why it's possible that some readers may compare him to old masters like Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood and M. R. James...

- Sami Airola at Rising Shadow

...It's the final stories, however, that are the crowning jewels and where David's talent as a writer is on full display. Displaying a less cerebral style but still showcasing a sharp sting, this is dark and urban gothic at its best as we follow Tallis through the streets of Ljubljana. A tale of bleak and functional spaces – and one that might remind a reader of Gary McMahon or even the early stylizing of Clive Barker traversing the streets of Liverpool.

Overall, this is like one of the more magical books one might read in high-school, but bristling at the intersection of Horror and Slipstream. A strange metaphor for the author's character itself – and at turns mythic and seductive."

- Matthew Tait, Hellnotes

"...The author has a very visual and engaging prose style that drew me right in. A lot of the settings are quite bleak: isolated beaches, concrete jungle cityscapes, the loneliness of Dartmoor, or half-empty halls of residence occupied by dirty, impoverished art students, for instance. There's a touch of melancholy about these places, yet the descriptions of them are vivid and realistic so there isn't an off-putting atmosphere of gloom. Instead there's always the feeling that something interesting is about to happen on the next page...

...But these stories portray the world as largely unknowable. Meaning seems elusive and perhaps even impossible to find, and it's certainly futile to search for it. It's almost like reading anti-stories. I found this interesting and frustrating in equal measure. Because what is fiction for if not to help us make sense of an irreducibly complex world? Of course we know that life can't be broken down to a few simple themes and moral lessons, but doing exactly that is part of the charm of stories...

...Feather is a mind-boggle. I can't decide whether David Rix is being really smart or just annoying when he plays with the concept of the search for understanding. However it's an entertaining kind of boggling, and I warmed to the character of Feather with her scarred innocence and cheerful practicality, whilst the stories themselves are colourful, strange and surprising."

- Ros Jackson at Warpcore SF

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