

Circus

by **Marta Randall**

If a man, fixing his attention on these and the like difficulties, does away with ideas of things and will not admit that every individual thing has its own determinate idea which is always one and the same, he will have nothing on which his mind can rest; and so he will utterly destroy the power of reasoning.

PLATO, Dialogues, Parmenides

By convention there is color, by convention sweetness, by convention bitterness, but in reality there are atoms and space.

DEMOCRITUS, Fragment 125

A

A₁. The hands look remarkably like our own, but are, of course, different. The print is too old and too faint to allow the scoop to work on any other part of the figure; only the hands are in focus sharp enough for the scoop to extend its invisible filaments into them and run an analysis. The print is a tool; this much is clear. But the contents of the print, at first, baffle us. The hands move without hesitation, continuously, spinning twelve shining balls through the air. Vaguely discernible behind the moving balls is the face of the juggler. The expression is neither happy nor solemn; the eyes are softly unfocused, the brow unlined, the lips straight and full - it is an expression of total concentration. Gradually the print dims even further, the face dissolves completely, and in the last few seconds the hands, too, disappear, leaving the ball dancing alone against a dark, static-smudged backdrop. The flight of the balls, graphed in continuous lines, is complex, and describes a symbol for the death of the universe.

- A₂. The print itself is, by now, well beyond the orbit of Pluto. It is encased in a sealed sphere, properly pressurized, filled with a gas which will preserve its dying molecules on the flight home. We watch a third-generation reproduction, DNA set into a chip of plasma. The scoop cannot work properly on the reproduction, and its readings on the original print are inconclusive. It cannot give us a level-dating, nor does it provide a tool-to-symbol ratio for the print. We observe what results there are; we study the glowing lines of the ball-curve graphics; we discuss the print in as much detail as we can. Little time, however, is devoted to this. There is much else to do.
- A₃. The seventh sector believes it has discovered lichens in the rocks, and further biomechs are sent up to investigate. It is debatable whether the lichens actually exist, but we must nonetheless consider the ramifications of their possible presence. If they indicate a resurgence of life, perhaps they should be eradicated. This planet, some of us feel, has fulfilled its appointed cycle and is now better off dead.

A₄. Sector twelve delivers a tattered length of material, already preserved between two rigid sheets of vacuum. It is taken to the lab, first for scooping, then for reproduction. The scoop results are uninteresting; the printing on the material appears to have been done from memory rather than being reflective of an actual occurrence. The material is, however, of interest. It depicts a stone rising from a bath of agitated liquid. Light flashes along the spidery tops of the liquid waves, and highlights the pocked surface of the stone. Overhead lies what appears to be a condensation of vapor, through which the light shines in shattered beams. The print is murky, but we suspect that it was created dark and that time has only further dimmed it. It is, on the face of it, meaningless, although there are great surges of energy embodied in the detritus of its creation.

A₅. We have been here fourteen units of time. We began our excavations on the lowest level open to us, where some artifacts are still in existence. Lower than this band, the artifacts have melted into component molecules and are useless to us. Each artifact is preserved, copied for study, analyzed, and entered in the banks. On this first level, the ratio of tool to symbol approaches 10:1, and we expect the ratio to decrease to 5:5 by the time we are halfway to the surface. It is theorized that the ratio will remain at 5:5 until we reach evidence of the death of the planet. Below 5:5, of course, no sane or rational culture could exist. It is a good job we are doing, interesting, needed, and appreciated. That the planet is repulsive is beside the point.

B

- B₁. We have been here sixteen units, and are given our first break in the cycles of work. We load a burrower and make our way through aeons of time to the surface of the planet. It is a monochromatic world, gray and gray. Our burrower unlimbers its legs, and we skate over the surface of viscous oceans. Our machines dot the visible land, probing and sampling, and we will be hard put to finish our job before they are done with theirs. To the north, sector seven pursues its elusive lichen, but we do not go to look. The surface appears no different from that which our monitors show us, and the burrower is cramped. We return to our excavation unit before our time is up.
- B₂. Today we received a series artifact of great interest. The scoop shows that the original is a memory print rather than a reality print, thereby qualifying as a symbol. However, it is then followed by four multi generational representations of itself, so that by the end of the series we are viewing a symbol of a symbol of a symbol of a symbol of a memory, which is in turn a symbol. The discovery of this artifact raises the tool-to-symbol ratio to 4:7, although it can be argued that this artifact is a sport and its inclusion in the ratio causes the ratio itself to reflect something other than reality-to become, in effect, a symbol itself. This thought is disturbing to all of us, and it is therefore determined to keep this artifact aside until further (symbols[?]) can be unearthed.
- B₃. We have reached level three, and the work is proceeding more quickly than we expected. In another two levels we will reach the surface and may go home. This is a certain incentive to work.

- B₄. Level two. The boundaries between tool and symbol are becoming alarmingly vague, for we have uncovered symbolic tools and tools which appear to be, after scooping, symbols. We further discover that more of the tools are now involved in the creation of symbols, so that the ratio of tool to symbol becomes 3:8, while the ratio of symbol-tool to work-tool becomes 4:5. This trend is unexpected and disturbing. We query other excavation sectors to determine whether we are working in a sport area, or whether our findings are also reflected in their excavations.
- B₅. Sector seven continues to search for lichen, but interest here has waned.

C

- C₁. Sector forty-six reports an unsettling development. They have uncovered an artifact wherein symbols are used to describe other symbols which are themselves symbols of something further, which in turn.... The scoop's algorithms fail to probe far enough to determine whether any reality lies behind this complex pattern; it is not known if the seventh-generation symbolist worked from the original reality, if it existed, or from the symbols of the symbols of predecessors. (Naturally, reality exists; of this there is no doubt (doubt?) save that the force of the artifact leads inevitably to the question of whether reality did, at that time, exist. The thought produces nausea.) The ratio is now 4:12, and the ratio of symbol-tool to work-tool stands at 7:2. This is unprecedented and fills the sector with uneasy silences.

- C₂. It is entirely likely that we are all symbols, that we are the symbols of symbols manipulated by others who are themselves symbols, that our reality is only a symbol of something which itself may be a symbol, that we are managed by a symbol of reality which is in turn a symbol of ourselves....
- C₃. Strike that.
- C₄. We have reached the last level. Between us and the surface lies only the dust of a dead planet. We are agitated, defensive, uncertain, perturbed. We do not wish to start work, despite our desire to leave this place. The surface probes have finished, are waiting patiently in their docks. The ships stand ready to return home; yet we cannot leave the work unfinished. It is determined, finally, to load our artifacts without observing them, to carry them as so much rock or dust or gravel back home, where the cooling rationality of our laboratories will provide the proper setting for their decipherment. We empty the level with feverish haste. We are ready to go.
- C₅. With small, reawakening interest, and to take our minds from the incomprehensible cargo we carry, we inspect the files of sector seven and we find the lichens for which the biomechs searched so diligently. They appear on the topmost peak of one low mountain chain. What the flash probe detected was not lichen but a reversed print of the fossils of the scars of lichen on the surface of the rock - the ultimate symbol, the transition of existence to nothingness. And our machines, even our machines, took it for a shape of reality.
- C₆. We jettison our cargo and our notes, and go home.