

Exhibit

Short Story

by b. b. brown

“They’re damned ugly,” said Rathke, female, one of two new arrivals sent to study the artifacts discovered in the crust near the ANCHOR ONE planetoid research station. “I’m tempted to crack one like a melon to see if condensed ugliness leaks out.”

“Now don’t desert your objectivity right at the start,” chided Thompson, male, the other specialist. His white jumpsuit accentuated his potbelly.

They sat opposite each other in uncomfortable chairs in a sterile cafeteria with cups of bad coffee before them.

“Hell, man!” she laughed. “I’ve got tons of objectivity. I’ve got objectivity out the---”

“Yes yes yes, of course,” he said. “I grasp the concept.”

The scientists at the facility joked sadly that they were not assigned to ANCHOR ONE but incarcerated. And a habitual lethargy which was documented although not understood did drag at their lives both professional and personal. But these strange artifacts were a curiosity. Stored in the rectangular hut dubbed the “exhibit”, their origins and meaning were debated freely. A few scholars solidly defended them as unique, while others snapped that they were useless and without value. Throughout the station’s small community, opinions varied from “unusual”, “perverted”, “irreplaceable”, and “just plain inexplicable” to “twisted masses of dead junk”.

“I can’t help it,” insisted Rathke, “if I just don’t feel personally attracted to those critters.”

“Perhaps, the makers of these ‘critters’—assuming, of course, that they were shaped by intelligence,” offered Thompson, “found a new way of seeing beauty in what we typically label ugliness.”

“Bull. You call those toads attractive?”

“I merely suggest that they might be more accurately categorized by some here-to-fore valid but unknown principle.”

“Look, my man, we still don’t know if those things were created or are dead and petrified. Whether they’re some type of art-object, a chance collection of

evolutionary sports, freakish geological formations, or some inexplicable mix of all three.”

“Yes.” He sipped his coffee. “It is exciting.”

After word of the discovery spread through the station’s cracked and dry existence, the exhibit had fixed itself in the community’s daily life. Familiar studies of planetary topology took on new meaning. Teachers—many scientists had brought their families with them—tantalized their students’s imaginations with archeological folklore. Scientific metaphysicians offered complicated and even whimsical interpretations of the exhibit’s meaning, while inveterate gamblers among the residents got odds on the possibility of more discoveries. Over time, however, almost as quickly as it began, the exhibit seemed to sour and lose its attraction, so that neither the theorists, nor the gamblers bothered with it anymore. Scraped from the crust of a rock spinning about the rim of an obscure star system, it receded into a tedious enigma. It was at this point that the periodic supply shuttle delivered two new specialists, then fired its metal cannister and hurried away.

“So you hypothesize that some supposedly vanished race which loved ugliness as we do beauty could have collected these punks as treasure?”

“Well, if so, maybe the parameters by which they judged the artifacts as ‘beautiful’ versus ‘ugly’ were radically different.” He became quiet. “Radically new to anything we know.”

“Cultures vary. True, certainly true.” She scratched her head vigorously and felt inexplicably anxious. “Still, this, at least to me, is distinct even from that. Why do you stress ‘new’?”

“The universe—it shifts, evolves, runs through an infinity of permutations without cessation.” Thompson didn’t notice that he was spilling coffee on the table. “The way we perceive things must also change. Couldn’t they have found a new paradigm by which to evaluate reality? Couldn’t they have seen into the heart of new truth?”

“A new truth. I won’t deny the possibility.” She wagged a thin little finger at his nose. “But let me tell you one thing. Only the heart of a sadomasochist could love thoseartifacts.”

“Each finds his own truth.”

“Hogwash, Thompson, have some more coffee. Or is that a double negative?”

Over the dreary weeks, Rathke delighted in teasing her homebound superiors. Once she sent back an out of focus batch of holographs purporting to be the artifacts, but which were actually details of ANCHOR ONE's toilets, both unoccupied and in use. One work document read:

Exhibit from the Nether Regions, i.e. the Rectum of Space [no ID number]

The whole display seems in the throes of violent movement. The figures are scattered helter skelter in a chaos of thrusting, turning, striking. Everything is a matter of extremes, just like this whole damn mudball....

Reminiscent of the attempt in art to capture a specific moment of time by freezing life in mid-motion, only here the technique seems to be applied to a motif of force or brutality. For lack of greater definition, one might say that these artifacts give the unsettling impression of life, or at least of something waiting for life....

While her superiors did not appreciate her whimsicality, they knew she would come through in the end. She always did. Thompson, of course, was a model of meticulous reporting.

Exhibit #74A9c

Object: #52-A-1 'Hammer'

2.21 meters high, 1.1 meters circumference at its smallest point. A rude triad base supporting a 60° fork which cants back toward the base at a 90° angle. Surface texture would seem to indicate design, though the intention is obscure. Lack of function would suggest an artwork or icon.... The 'hammer' seems to be in the act of striking downward at a soft, oblong object lying on the base, thereby emphasizing crushing power versus a gentle, yielding substance. The effect grows stronger with each viewing....

While Thompson burrowed relentlessly deeper into minute study of the exhibit, Rathke pushed herself further away. For days, nauseous and sweating, she crawled through pits on the planetoid's surface examining the site from which the artifacts had been torn. She knew the minutiae of the previous excavations, knew that there was nothing to evaluate but dust and sand, knew the planet had ceased eons ago to be the beautiful home that spawned the twisted objects huddled back in the rectangular hut, and yet she persisted. Many of the station's workers noted grinning among

themselves that she collected no new data from these excursions. When sympathetic scientists inquired as to why she didn't spend more time at the exhibit, studying the artifacts at hand, she had no ready reply. After taking thought for what seemed to them an unnecessarily long time, Rathke scratched her head vigorously and said, "Because the presence of those things makes me physically ill."

At the exhibit, she found Thompson stooped over an artifact with a measuring tool in hand. He was not working but simply stared. He did not seem to notice her. Then, suddenly, he glanced sharply at her.

"Damn, Thompson!" she gasped. "You'd scare a ghost."

His eyes stared in the worklight glare as though not quite registering her presence.

"Yes?" he said.

"What's wrong, Thompson? You look ill." An old habit of talking quickly when anxious made her snap her words. "When did that tremor begin?"

He looked at the hand at which she looked.

"Tremor?"

"I think it's time for you to get some rest."

"I've slept."

"Rest. Take the afternoon off. Go rest."

"My work."

"I'll do this so your schedule won't suffer." She took the measuring instrument. "Go see the doctor. He'll help you rest so you can work more efficiently."

"Yes."

He walked toward the door, then stopped. He walked back and stood close to her.

"Don't move them."

"What? What do you mean?" She felt uneasy about him standing so very close.

"Their relations have been adjusted. The pattern is not complete."

She saw that the artifacts had been shifted, some slightly, others noticeably, placed so that some odd quality each shared with the whole was more definite. The exhibit resembled a coiled labyrinth. Rathke felt cold.

"Why, Thompson?"

"It was necessary."

The community physician lectured him about overwork. When he had gone, Thompson's file was stored with the thousand other files of ANCHOR ONE's scientists and their families. The next morning Thompson went back to the rectangular hut and took no more breaks from his schedule.

The time at the exhibit covering for Thompson affected Rathke unpleasantly. She slipped into tangential and quirky reflections. Associations tucked away for years came alive. Petty hatreds, disappointments, and jealousies permeated her sleep. When she woke, she felt nauseated and could not remember her dreams.

Then, during one week as they measured time in that remorseless vacuum, while Rathke sat staring at a wall with a recording device humming by her hand, Thompson opened the door and came into her room. She swiveled her chair to him as he sat. His eyes stared, the whites thickly veined with red lines, and she realized that his clothes were dirty and stained.

"How long since you've bathed and shaved, Thompson?"

"Don't know."

"Why did....why are you here?"

"Will tell."

She waited. He stared at her without blinking.

"Is there something you want to tell me? Have you learned something?"

He took in a long, deep breath, then said, "Many many many many many many many many many many things." The sibilant sound of the final "s" was unnaturally sustained.

"Can you tell me what you've learned?"

His face quivered.

"Tell me?"

"Thompson, concentrate." He had not blinked his eyes since entering.
"What have you been doing?"

He stood abruptly and left the room.

Back at the exhibit, Thompson threw his files into the sand outside the rectangular hut and sealed the door from the inside. He would not answer Rathke's calls. He would not answer the doctor's calls. No one saw him leave the hut. General opinion among the residents was that he would get over it. Everyone has a bout with "space nuts". Anyway, they were too busy with their projects.

A week later small lab animals were found scattered sporadically about

the station. They had been dismembered, gutted, and sliced into various shapes which were then placed in patterns on the floor and strewn with sand. The blood had been drained before the bodies dissected. The ANCHOR ONE authorities and residents were curious but unamused, while some of their children made up games featuring the dissection of animals.

The following week arson razed several apartments. Families were burned out. By chance and good structural design, there were no serious injuries. But the atmosphere of ANCHOR ONE slipped into an intimate fierceness. Across the complex there were various reports of senseless brawls.

Thompson had not been seen for two weeks. Rathke knew that, as heavy sandstorms and corrosive gases scarred the hut's exterior, he continued to study the artifacts. She made no comment to anyone. Among the residents, however, there were harsh and suspicious words spoken.

In the third week, on the second level of an outlying storage building, a child was found neatly dissected, placed on the floor in a pattern, and strewn with sand. The blood had first been drained. Although no births were allowed at ANCHOR ONE, children over the age of seven were permissible. The remains were those of an eleven year old male.

Emotions trembled throughout the station. Two suicide attempts were reported, one of which, a teenager, was successful. A female geologist nearly died from a rib kicked through one of her lungs. Three physicists put each other in the medical ward when one disputed the authorship of a theorem. A biochemist cracked his wife's skull by throwing her against a metal wall after she splashed him with hot water during an argument over a sexual liaison that had occurred on Earth four years earlier. And Rathke, keeping her mouth shut, isolated herself in her quarters.

During the fourth night of the fourth week, there came a scratching at her door. The metal door was locked and secure. Awakened from a fitful sleep, she heard muffled scufflings, then a metallic scratch. Someone was trying to force the door. She called the security office. As she talked, someone in the corridor shouted. The door was struck and there were grunting sounds. A man cried out, and then swore viciously. There was another shout. A loud thump came from the door and a second voice yelled, "Jesus!" And then there was silence.

Cracking open the door, Rathke peeked out. Two security officers were lying on the floor. Another two approached from down the hallway. The regular watch,

doubled because of recent events, had come across the intruder. The latter two were responding to her call. One of the officers on the floor bled freely. Cursing repeatedly, the officer turned to the wall and continued the profanity between gritted teeth saying the same words over and over and over. The other officer, having been thrown against a wall, was dazed but unhurt.

Medical personnel arrived. They hurried away with the bleeding officer. A crowd collected in the hallway. The other three officers followed in the direction that the intruder had gone. Rathke slipped on a dirty overall and trailed behind them. The crowd followed.

Their direction had only one possible goal besides open sand. They hammered on the door of the rectangular hut. With tools, they opened it. Flooding the exhibit, they engulfed the artifacts and shadows. There was silence.

In a corner by herself, Rathke stared at a piece of the exhibit. It was deformed as were the other artifacts. Crouched and twisted, it glared at the world. She shivered.

Thompson had joined the exhibit.

©2002 William B. Brown

WGAE registered