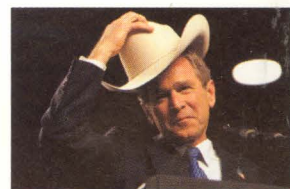


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[Fiction]

THE REVISIONIST

By Miranda Mellis, from her novel of the same name, published in January by Calamari Press.

My last assignment was to conduct surveillance of the weather and report that everything was fine. They set me up in an abandoned lighthouse several miles outside the city. The lighthouse stood in the center of a junkyard, atop a mound of mossy dirt. It was trumpet-shaped with inward-sloping walls. A stack of old sewing machines and broken pianos surrounded the dump. Local kids jumped from piano to piano, stomping the sour keys. Dogs chased them, barking. From the tower I couldn't hear, but I could see the kids jumping and the dogs chasing, their jaws snapping open and shut. With the latest surveillance technology at my disposal, it was difficult to stay focused on the weather. I was tempted to make my own observations, and I did.

I saw a family driving to the country on vacation. Behind them, a bomb went off. Through my headphones, I noted the rushing sound of radiation cruising low across the land. The father, who was driving, saw the mushroom cloud in his rearview mirror. The others didn't turn around, so they never noticed.

When they reached the campsite, the kids pitched a family tent. The father went inside, zipped up the flap door, and wouldn't come out. "I need time alone," he called. His family sat frowning around the picnic table. The father was laughing and moaning inside the tent. The sister shook her fists in his direction. The brother gave the tent the finger. The mother tore her straw hat off and stomped on it. She ground it into the dirt, right outside the flap door. The father heard the twisting feet of the mother. Coming out of the tent and seeing the hat on the ground, he said, "There's something I've got to tell you, but not in front of the kids."

The mother said, "Why don't you let them hear it, too? We'd all like to know what you're doing in the tent."

"There's been a nuclear attack." Saying these words out loud had a strange effect on the father. He began running around and around in circles. Then he fainted.

Through my telescope, buildings were curling. The very air had faded, was pixelated. Inside one apartment building was an elderly woman. Her hearing aid was broken. She was watching the panic on television but could not understand what they were saying. She strained to hear them. She shook her head and wrung her hands. She knelt and prayed. Her prayers exploded out of her mouth all over the carpet. She coughed up shards of bone and tiny blood-and-gristle-soaked figurines. She washed the prayer viscera in the sink and hung them from a clothesline outside the window.

Back at the camp, the father gave the children tests. "What would you do in a nuclear holocaust?" But they couldn't answer. They pantomimed ducking under a school desk; the father frowned.

After they had quarantined the part of the country most affected by the bomb, I published a report showing that radiation was harmless. My report on the radiationless bomb was widely circulated. I was promoted. My employers wanted the real reports; I sent them the unrevised originals. A lot of people could see, by observing their own environments for themselves, that my reports were fraudulent.

People wanted to get away. Escape schemes flourished. One guy made a pile of money selling plots on Start Over Island. Anybody with any money moved to the island. I went there myself, at first on vacation, and then for real. It was the new expatriation. They gave you a new identity, a clean slate.

There were mutant children who sensed the impending exodus of all the adults, who planned on leaving their monstrous offspring behind. The mutated kids were impossible to soothe, perpetually hungry and thirsty, shivering and angry. The adults said, "It's only me going. The kids will get by. There are other adults around, social services, orphanages, hospitals, shelters. The others, they'll stick around, get pissed on the head by acid rain and all that, but I'll be gone, and the kids will just get used to it." But the kids didn't get used to it or forget, because it never occurred to them that they could. No one ever suggested it.

There were side effects on the island—reddened eyes and this compulsion to rip things. People would be talking mildly at the bank and suddenly rip out their own hair, or go outside and rip the moat of shrubbery surrounding the

bank with their bared teeth. They would stumble through the parking lots, chewing the shrubs, eyes gyrating.

I might have stayed on the island if there was no one there I recognized. But there they all were: friends, acquaintances, family members. At first I didn't mind—since we were now "strangers," I no longer had to do their dishes, take them to A.A. meetings, make sure they'd swallowed their pills, fight them off, go to counseling with them, worry about them, be jealous of them, suspect them of lying, miss them, hold their babies, drive them to the hospital, help them move, fantasize about them, comment on their haircuts, see their points, admire their looks, proffer my goodwill, keep their secrets, pacify them, reassure them, seek their approval, recover from their abuses, read their manifestos, find them unreliable, try to see their good qualities, hope they'd vote, impress them, ignore their stupidity, or compete with them for jobs and housing.

The day after I ripped my own mother's clothes off in a supermarket, I suspected I needed to leave Start Over Island. My last conversation there convinced me of it. I had been visited by a lady with razor-thin lips. She made astral killings her business. "You have enemies here," she told me. Evidently, she had been hired to murder my astral body. Furthermore, she said she had already done it. Hadn't I noticed anything different?

I returned to my revisions at the lighthouse. I concentrated on taking measurements of the rising ocean, training my instruments on the creeping shoreline and tidal fluctuations, and revising my data to report, unaccordingly, that the sea was just as usual. The ocean had always functioned as a kind of clock for the sentient, but gradually it stopped telling our kind of time. It was on to other measures. It tossed up four hundred dead dolphins one day and claimed one hundred thousand baby seals the next.

The place where one could now go to experience the ancient rhythms of nature was the convenience store. Convenience stores were becoming "nature," and nature had become a run-down, thrashing machine. In the convenience store, people howled and chirped at one another. A man was voiding near the chips aisle. He was in the process of digging a hole with a jackhammer to bury his shit when a robbery took place. He pulled out his video camera and caught the event on tape. He couldn't wait to get home and show his family the video of the robbery in progress, which had interrupted the burial of his bowel movement.

I fabricated phenomena, makeovers for a bevy of new industry-spawned carcinogens—the air is getting cleaner by the day; cloud miasmas: the future is bright; 500 trillion nanobots, built an atom at a time,



Germinal, by Matthew Ritchie, whose work was on display last fall at Andrea Rosen Gallery, in New York City.

war in a suitcase; carbon dioxide emissions from fossil fuel combustion have proven highly beneficial to life on Earth, especially cockroaches and poison ivy.

On the outskirts of the city, I saw a man lying on the floor of a dirty small room. There was nothing else in the room but a projecting movie and a chair. The movie showed him sleeping on the dirty floor. He sat in the chair and dissolved. His daughter came home and found the bones of her father in the chair. She sat on his lap bones, and she turned to bone dust. Her son came in and lay on the floor. There was nothing else left but the movie of his grandfather sleeping on the dirty floor, the chair, and the combined bones. He sat on his mother's lap bones and dissolved. His daughter came in and lay on the floor. There was nothing else left but the movie of her great-grandfather, the chair, and the bones. She sat on her father's lap bones, and she turned to dust. I averted my eyes.

In the past, when something fell out of the sky, or there were collisions, men in jumpsuits arrived, sirens blaring, to erase all traces. Something was always done about something. Now nothing was done, except documentation. For every event, there were multiple documents and artifacts, until there were more documents and artifacts than

events. Inevitably, someone called a document an event, and people made documents of documents.

Some chose to end their genetic line rather than risk bringing another lunatic into the world. "He could be the next Hitler," some argued. "Or the next Einstein." This binary, the Hitler-Einstein dilemma, provided an inescapable deadlock for would-be breeders.

After a long hiatus, I delivered a 178-page summary of my "findings" that stated in its conclusion: *Continuing growth in greenhouse gas emissions is leading to a higher standard of living that will result in a global utopia by the end of the century.* The president quoted liberally from my report, hailing it as an objective docket.

I slept for a week. I awoke numb and looked out at the state. Things moved, had dimension, made sounds, slid right up to the surface, but could not poke through. Nothing was felt any longer, or known through the sense portals, despite the fact that every part of the body was designed for contact. Either the world, usually so flagrant, was camouflaged, or my surfaces were deteriorating. In any case, it was hidden. Time would pass without my seeing or recording events. Some events I would have to imagine. The made-up events were sometimes more believable than actual events. The actual events were often difficult to believe. ■