

LOOKBACK

Time well spent.

BY GEORGE ZEBROWSKI

As usual, I would have to leave before I arrived. Memory threw me there, exiling me from all my other times with her, no matter how much I concentrated. She was alive in all our pasts, but only these earlier presents were open to me. “Me again?” she asked in our present, jealous and prideful.

“No one else,” I said.

I kissed her before I bridged, fighting off Maxim Gorky’s claim that “love is the failure of mind to understand nature”. If so, then love was an opposed way, an uphill fight at best.

She was asleep back there in our off-campus apartment, as I came up by train from New York City. I would have just enough time to get there and spend some time with her before the train arrived.

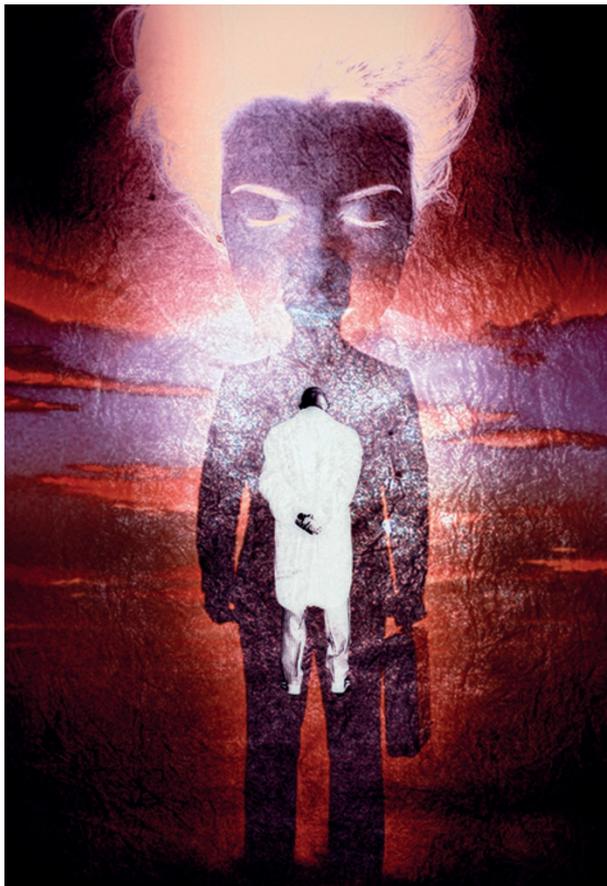
I always prepared by losing a pound or two, colouring my hair a bit and exercising, even using some make-up to look younger than my late 60s, so that she would not notice in the dim light of the apartment at night. Near-sighted and in bed, it helped that she would not be wearing her glasses.

I grasped my key from decades past, and summoned the vision of the pale-skinned young woman who had dyed her hair black after a silly blonde experiment, and then cut it short when I was away. I would again compliment the change.

My appearance at my old door shook the back porch for a moment. I stood before the curtained glass, but no light went on. I was fearful that this might be my last chance to regain this time, so I had to make it count. Other times with her might open to me if this one closed, but that was far from certain.

The theory of jumps was not perfect. There might not even be any real time displacement at all, but instead a reality-like recreation of significant memories that suddenly occupied a mind with a quantum flood of insistence to the point at which it made no difference to the experience; it might just as well be happening in the naive

sense. Time probably did not exist outside the biology of human perception except as a timeless persistence, a



stubborn duration, inexpressible endurance beyond time-like words.

I turned my key in the lock, pushed the door open and went in, closing it behind me.

“Who’s there?” asked her voice, from somewhere inside me, it seemed.

“It’s me,” I said, hoping to sound younger.

“Oh,” she said uncertainly.

I crossed the small living room to the double bed in the alcove and sat down. Her head came out from beneath the covers, hair cut short and dyed black. She looked up at me like a queen on a divan.

“Beautiful!” I said, and she giggled as I lay down beside her.

“You must be tired,” she said as I sighed.

“It’s okay, we can just sleep,” she whispered. “We have all tomorrow.”

She dozed. I lay there, afraid to disappoint her.

After a while I looked at my watch and saw that I would soon arrive, and it would not matter. Were anachronisms real or only apparent? You can have all the anachronisms you want in your mind, where they happen

all the time. Was I asleep up ahead? I felt a rocking sense of loss as I heard the train whistle.

“What is it?” she asked softly as my moments with her fled into some deep abyss where I could not follow.

“I’ll be right back,” I said and got up. She turned over and closed her eyes, expecting that I was only undressing. I stood there, looking at the glory of her bare back. To kiss her now might be fatal if I arrived early.

I went out the door and breathed the night air, knowing that I was coming down the street, and that I could leave it all to him.

The starry night was blue. I went across the yard and stood by the brick wall of the garage. I would come through the narrow alleyway from the street beyond, less than a block from the train station.

My memory moved within him. I was waiting here only to see him walk by in the dark. The unreality of time seized me, and seemed about to inflict a wretched pain, but relented.

Time could show mercy if you remembered well enough, a collective delusion, the setting of human psychology, biologically based, to conceal the fact that everything was in one place and happened all at once.

I would return, inexactly, to this very time and place as often as my force of memory struck out against loss. I looked around the dark yard. I was present here in these shadows more than once, similarly aware, only moments apart.

He came through the dark alleyway, and I felt the flow of love for his waiting beloved; love then, not my love now. His step was sure, the past his own, his youth holding back the incoming future. The same key I still held was in his pocket.

He would not disappoint the dark-haired goddess in her bed.

I was gone before I got to the door. ■

George Zebrowski is best known for his Campbell Award winning novel *Brute Orbits*, the classic *Macrolife*, and *Cave of Stars*, recently chosen as one of the best SF novels since 1985. A collection of stories with Jack Dann, *Decimated*, is from Borgo/Wildside Press. All his fiction is available from Gollancz’s SF Gateway (www.sfgateway.com) and E-Reads (ereads.com).