

## The Stars My Destination

A vast expanse of black space. A ship made of steel or plastic or some other alloy with four broken and bedraggled figures on board. They are travelling at speed through the emptiness, but as there are no immediate objects to be seen through the wide screen that is their only window—or, at least, any objects are very far away indeed—it also appears as if they are still.

Hare twitches his nose—a signal has been sent—and the circuitry inside and outside of him responds, sending further electrical singles to his limbs and appendages which then begin busying themselves with some complex looking controls on the ship's walls. Hare is the ship, or, at least, part of it. A highly advanced and autonomous component of the Artificial Intelligence system that steers the vessel (although some of that information is up for discussion, at least by Hare). He does not look like a hare—although there is certainly something creaturely in the way he moves—but can, if he chooses (which is to say if the ship chooses) assume a hare shape, for example if that might help with communication (unlikely, but there we are) or, more generally, if such a fiction fits more closely with whatever task is at hand. To be honest, he might even take on the shape of that animal if he feels it's more appropriate at a given time or that it matches a given internal state. It should also be said that this figure of Hare is somewhat ragged. Like all of them on board Hare has seen better days.

Fox-Owl's large triangular face is blank and bird-like, two big black eyes, a pointed beak. He is the captain and is more than half machine—if machine is an adequate description of what that other larger part is. Certainly, all of his senses have been augmented and, as it were, extended. And, alongside that, some new ones have been added too (just for good measure). His intelligence, no longer, really, human, far outstrips that of his original makers who were, in any case, made by other machine hands (to use a somewhat inappropriate term),

who were in turn made by other machine hands (and so forth). Fox-Owl, we might say, has assumed his own causality (although this situation of being half one thing and half another brings about other issues). From where we are (if I can presume, for a moment, what kind of reader you are) it's difficult to give an adequate account of what Fox-Owl's thinking involves. It moves at incredible speeds, crossing unimaginable distances in an instant. Does it operate through language, which is to say enter into discourse? Certainly, it can 'take on' this register—much as Hare might assume the form of a hare—but at a deeper level (though that means nothing whatsoever to an entity such as this) Fox-Owl's thought processes are less easy to track with words or, indeed, concepts. It might also be that he is not himself completely aware of all this advanced functioning (it would be surprising if 'he' was). As with all of them here this figure does not exactly coincide with all the other processes (and, perhaps, intentions?) that it sits atop. And this latter position—which is just a further figure of speech—is certainly not to assert any mastery. Quite the contrary. Looking closer one can see the technology that inhabits and moves through Fox-Owl's blood and lymph system. It glints like flecks of gold leaf in the green irises of those big eyes.

John is stripped to the waist and covered in tattoos. His body and face are so dense a palimpsest that hardly any clear skin can be seen. If one were to look closely one might decipher some older markings of an all too human past, but on top of these are others of more inhuman design. Lines and loops some of which might or might not be letters. Some figures or animals perhaps? And then—no surprises here I think—there are other, stranger and more abstract designs (from which the possibility of different landscapes might, at a pinch, foreground themselves). Unlike Fox-Owl, John still has a complete fleshy body. It's not in great shape, but it is his own (to a certain extent), not made in a Lab. It has been endlessly repaired however—broken parts replaced—and certainly it has travelled and travelled far. John is also no longer completely human (in fact that particular category is beginning to

make less and less sense on board this ship). His DNA has been mixed with other genetic material from at least one other source (that is, besides the illnesses and viruses that have also come his way). All of this means that John is as old as the hills, or nearly so. The various scripts written on his skin evidence this long history (as well as clues—for those who can read such signs—as to where he’s headed). John might be from the past, but he is also turned to towards the future—after all he is on this ship and certainly heading somewhere. Let’s just say, he is from a long way off and, as of now, on a very wide orbit indeed. The circuits he traverses are not even known to himself—put bluntly, he cannot quite see the path he is on—but he trusts where his intuition takes him (and, by intuition, I mean, that bodily intelligence that is his but only in the most general sense).

Ribbonhead is a tall and stooped figure, with different coloured (but faded) ribbons—blues, golds, reds and greens—sprouting out of the top and then falling over a hidden head. He is also not human (this is definitely becoming a theme) if this is defined as a being born of a human. Ribbonhead has been artificially made, his body grown in a tank. He is a particular kind of set-up that has also been positioned as a test. What is a brain-body assemblage capable of when all the correct conditions are in place? Here all the learning (broadly construed) he had been subjected to had functioned simply as a further platform from which this figure Ribbonhead had himself stepped forth—to the surprise of those looking on it must be said (in fact, he’s now forgotten most of that preparation). Ribbonhead’s claim to fame—and the reason he is on this ship (or one reason at least)—is that he is, as it were, *untethered*. Shuffling between different spaces and times, he is a materialised fiction. An experiment in the production of a ‘something else’. An embodied exercise in the proverbial ‘as if.’

Ribbonhead, let’s say, is open to the possibility. Like the rest them, there is something shabby and well-travelled about the way he looks (I don’t think the ribbons were an original part of

the plan either). Something that suggests this voyage has already been going on for many, *many*, a year.

Where are they traveling to? Fox-Owl—thank God—has a map which he will, now and again, get out, unfold and lay over the small table they gather around for their not so regular meetings. He will point to the various shapes and lines, explaining this and that, passing over the darker areas and the even darker shadows therein and, always at some point, gesturing to what looks like a drawing in the centre of some planet or even, at a pinch, a dark sun. Or a hole perhaps? On Fox-Owl's map there are also various creatures and other figures, some familiar, others far less so (perhaps yet-to-come or already-been but too far gone for anyone to remember). All of this and more is laid flat upon that tabletop. Different worlds in a patchwork design of sorts. But also, it seems, different times are made co-extensive on this map. And what looks like scientific fact and observation mixes with what, quite frankly, looks as though it might be more myth. Certainly, it appears that this map operates on a variety of registers, some of which, no doubt, are of less interest to our crew (but perhaps of interest to you?). Does the map have its own story to tell? A narrative of some kind about where it's from and how it's been used? It certainly appears as if some of the destinations have been rubbed nearly blank by many a touch, as if this map were itself once part of some larger assemblage. Some other ritual and performance.

Fox-Owl looks intently at the darker regions, as if trying to work out the geography there. He moves a finger—or, at least, a finger on 'his' hand moves (with Fox-Owl agency is always partly elsewhere). He gestures, silently, towards the crew as if to say, 'we are definitely on the right track' (but what track is that?). Hare looks up—pauses as if considering things, weighing them up—then he nods and the ship, imperceptibly tilts, shifts course, and glides off towards this new address, the planet Mars.