

Mindsongs: episode one

Laboratory, cracked heads and why me?

This column introduces a new Excalibur literary section, to which all members of the university are invited to contribute. Selection should be moderate in length, and should be accompanied by the author's name and phone number.

This first selection follows an archetypal student through a confused world of dream and reality.

By MICHAEL HOLLETT
and GORD GRAHAM

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"Take off your clothes . . .," said the bearded lab assistant.

"...and put this on." He tossed a hospital gown to the student, whose jeans and workboots looked decidedly out of place in the anti-septic surroundings.

"You can leave your clothes in the basket," the assistant added, crossing the room to a desk. "Climb on."

The student pulled on the garment and climbed onto an observation table. The assistant was shuffling papers on the desk.

"Before we begin, we'll have to fill out some forms. I'll be right with you," the assistant called.

From the table, the student surveyed the room, already feeling some misgivings for ever volunteering for the experiment. The laboratory was as he'd expected it: colourless and germ-free.

Above him was a huge glaring lamp. From each of the white tiled walls sprouted several mechanical arms, all of stainless steel, but each with a different claw ending. There were humming machines throughout the room whose purposes were beyond him.

The assistant crossed to the table, saying, "The University thinks they need all this information, so let's get going, okay?"

The student swung his legs over the edge of the table and nodded.

"Name . . ." the assistant started, holding his clipboard up to write.

"Paul Dorey. Ah, my friends all call me Hunky . . ."

The assistant didn't laugh. He continued reading down his list mechanically. "Height . . ."

"Five foot ten."

"Weight . . ."

Dorey's answers soon established his ordinary physical appearance and equally uninspired academic career. But he hesitated when asked why he'd volunteered for the experiment.

"Well, I was interested, and . . . ah . . . I didn't have much else to do, y'know? Like, I just dropped all my classes and . . . it seemed like a neat idea," he said. "I mean, I could use the money too."

The lab technician wrote on his clipboard for several moments.

"Okay, that's everything we need for now," he said. "How much do you know about the experiment?"

"Well, I sort of talked to the girl when I signed up. It's about dreams, isn't it?" asked Paul.

"Yeah, that's right. See, the subjects are put into a sleeping state and their minds are allowed to dream. But their bodies are allowed no rest. Electric currents flowing through the muscles stimulate them continuously —"

Paul looked puzzled, so the technician continued.

"Well, what we're trying to establish is that the only reason for sleep is to regenerate the mind through dreams. The body, we think, can exist unharmed with only minimal rest every day. All the subject's mind and body functions will be carefully monitored to gather data."

He looked up from his clipboard and noticed the student's anxious expression.

"Hey, don't worry. We take all kinds of precautions. You'll be woken up if there's any problem at all . . ."

"That's good to hear," said Paul.

"This takes three days, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, no longer than that. Sometimes less. And you'll be paid for your time," the assistant replied. He glanced at his watch. "Almost time to start. The doctors will be here soon. Lay down, please."

The assistant placed a wreath of electronic probes on Paul's head. He fixed other electrodes to strategic parts of Dorey's body.

A group of doctors entered, their gowns dirtier than the assistant's. They introduced themselves solemnly to Dorey, who lay silent and anxious on the table. Then they proceeded to the instruments, flipping switches and adjusting dials in final preparation for the experiment.

There was a vibration in the floor, and lights pulsed throughout the room.

Paul felt his skin begin to tingle and his body grow lighter as he drifted into the darkness . . .

Slipping, sinking, dead beneath the gray-green waves; and drowning. Grasp upward now, and gasp a feeble rasping breath, a rattle in the ribcage — legs are leaden, listless.

Ever down: the feeble scream of eyes, a thrash of arms and down: the sting of salt, the stench of sea . . .

He disappeared in the depths and all at once felt concrete under his feet.

Paul knew the campus well, and decided he was near its centre. It was noon but he stood alone, realizing he saw no one, no birds, no life. The sky was crowded by buildings, they seemed to shut out the sun.

He called out. No sound came from his lips. He spoke again, and could not hear himself.

He tried to walk, his steps were inextricably slowed. He stumbled and fell lazily to the concrete, which was soft, spongy.

And then the voices came: the snickers, nit-picking, whispering out of every quarter of the sky, swooping from behind each building. In front of him and behind him, disembodied and invisible, riding the wind on every side. Seeing him, jeering him, striking from every angle, every perspective.

He mouthed the words to still them. He tried to force a scream. "SHUT UP" floated in his mind, but it would not be uttered.

He fell on his hands and knees, head hanging low, assailed by the swollen cadences of a million critics; their babbling chiselled at his skin.

It rose to a roar, then crackled, broke and was no more. As Paul lifted his head, an oppressive mantle of silence fell around him.

He saw a rush of hundreds of legs. He grabbed at one, pulling himself up, seeing that he was immersed in a vast sea of bobbing heads. Their eyes were fixed on some far-off point he could not see. And he could hear no sounds.

Paul tapped a shoulder as it drifted past him.

"Hey, what's going on? What's happening?" Now he could hear the words he was speaking.

The person gave no reply.

"What are you looking at anyway?" Paul said, trying to be friendly. "Come on, I want to see too."

No one answered; their eyes turned away from him, their backs faced him.

"Somebody answer me." His voice became agitated. "Why are you all picking on me? What did I do? Why won't you tell me what you're seeing?"

He pushed his way into the multitude, but a space always formed in their midst, separating him from their number. He was still the outsider.

"I want to see it too. Show me where to look, you bastards!" He was shouting now. "Why are you all out to get me?"

He pondered his last statement, it festered in his mind.

"Why ME?" he screamed.

Still the mass refused to acknowledge him. They continued to shut him out and stare, silently.

"I'll make one of you bastards talk!" Paul grabbed the man nearest him. He was a balding man whose clothes hung loosely on his scarecrow body. The man offered no resistance as Paul shook him and shouted. But the silent onlookers' expression remained the same.

"Why don't you talk to me?" Paul vented his mounting frustration and

threw the man to the ground.

"Talk!" He loomed over the man. He spotted a rock and stooped to pick it up.

"Are you going to explain now?" The man didn't react, so Paul turned and spoke to the others.

"I want some answers," he cried, "or I'm going to bust his head!" No one responded to Paul's threat, so he turned back to the man.

"Answer me now!" He raised the rock above his head. "Talk!"

The man's eyes were turned in the same direction as the crowd's. He did not talk. Paul brought the rock down on the man's expressionless skull.

There was no sound as the man's head fell away like the shell of a fractured egg. The only remnant was the hollow bloodless stump of his neck.

Paul stood motionless but heard nothing. He stared down at the body.

Suddenly a lone butterfly popped out of the neck. Then two, three, finally a montage of winged and iridescently-coloured creatures fluttered up from the opening. Formless colours flowed from the cavern.

The bleak sky was alive with a moving, fluid rainbow. The emptiness of his ears was filled with the songs of the flying creatures.

A blue jay flew forth and landed on Paul's shoulder. His eyes were transfixed by the explosion of colour as the bird first spoke.

"Will you come with me and see what once was?"

"What?" said Paul.

"Come," the blue jay replied, "will you come with me? I will show you what you wish to see."

Paul knew what he must do. He began to rise, his body lifting off the ground.

The bird said, "Come, we must be going . . ." and they were off.

Next episode: Lizards and Strong-arm TV.

Staff meeting
2 p.m. today

Will Mickey Mouse go on strike?

DISNEYLAND (CUP/ZNS) — Donald Duck, Peter Pan and the Big Bad Wolf have petitioned the National Labour Relations Board for their own union.

The three represent scores of costumed hosts who greet visitors to Disneyland, and complain that their special working conditions make it impossible for any other union to understand them.

For instance, the big bad wolf says kids think he's a bad guy and keep pulling his ears. The ears are attached to his 15 pound mask, and the result is many facial cuts and scrapes.

Then there's Captain Hook. He says kids are always kicking his shins. Another common complaint is that everyone gets their noses pulled.

Thus far, the Labour Board has insisted the characters must join the same union as the hot dog barkers at Disneyland.

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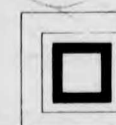
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