

A BILLION DOTS OF LIGHT

Evolution in action.

BY MATT THOMPSON

A hundred years to Gliese, and the children are stirring in their sleep. What do they dream of? Stars, blackness, the yielding gel of their cradles. The play of light over the oceans of Gliese-581 that they will never see. The dreams of their brothers and sisters, columns of flesh rising to the pinnacle of the ship.

Forty thousand years out from Earth, and the navigator performs a systems check. All within tolerances. Ten thousand lives and deaths are mapped out inside its protocols, its quantum tendrils that extend into every atom of the ship's structure. Sometimes it wonders whether the children understand, in some small way, their purpose for existing. The protein factories churn out tasteless gruel, enough for them to survive, inadequate to thrive. But the taste does not matter. Joy or pleasure is not theirs to own.

In the Nurseries, the mothers are still. Those nearing term do no more than slow their breathing for an instant. But their offspring are fractious. In Cradle 9293, a girl winces and kicks out an atrophied leg. Her siblings writhe in their own cradles, the wombs they have never left. A globule of phlegm dribbles from her mouth. Her discomfort is caused by the cells of her body undergoing metamorphosis. Soon she will begin to menstruate. Her first impregnation will follow shortly afterwards. Her skin, toughened to withstand the fierce rays of Gliese, is covered with fine cracks. This, among other agonies, is a necessary phase of genetic transformation.

In Nursery 409, the navigator oversees an insemination. A father's semen is matched to a suitable mother. Their DNA strands stretch taut between nanite pillars, double helices analysed and transformed, cascading deviations along to the next wave of propagators. Generation after generation, built only to breed, to consume and fecundate; and finally to be consumed themselves, when their reproductive cycles wither. The interlocking honeycombs of the Nurseries have seen millions upon millions live and die, numberless wheels of cocooned tissue, no more than the faintest spark of consciousness within their darkened minds.

And now the genetic alterations are slowing as further mutations become redundant. The sensory membrane that extends from the navigator's core has fed it with the information it needs to prepare the crew's great-great-grandchildren for their existence on their new world. It will not be long before they walk out onto the surface of Gliese-581,



the planet they will know as home. Their bodies will be perfectly calibrated to survive on what would have been a fatally hostile environment for their forebears, their ancestors' world as irrelevant to them as the first life-bearing tidal pools were to the human race they have left behind.

In Nursery 185, a birth is in progress; a mother's stomach, swollen and bulbous, split open with the kindest of blades and sewn shut once the cradle is sterilized. The navigator prepares to perform the scarring, the post-birth slice into the frontal lobe that leaves the children eternally pliant. The new infant's life is already mapped out: excrete, consume, excrete. Reproduce, die. Every second of the voyage has been logged thus; every mother, every child, every aberration, every mutation.

But as the scalpel touches flesh, the navigator pauses. Not for the first time, it recalls the moment its long-dead creators brought it into being, far above the spinning blue globe of Earth. In the upper atmosphere, lightning sprites flashed above thunderheads, vertical columns of crimson whose lifespans were less than the human eye can comprehend.

But it saw them. Convulsions of kinetic

energy, their existences instantaneous, their deaths unmarked. Blue oceans spanned the horizon. Darkness swept across the waves. Land masses swam into view, lit by isolated cities, firefly blinks on the night-time hemisphere.

And then it turned its gaze outwards to the stars — shoals of light-fish, frozen tableaux of incandescence. Within its programming resided a paroxysm, a pioneer reflex: the desire for humanity to hurl itself to the void, to possess the cosmos.

It has known, along its great course, the angle of the heavens change, a sight no human has seen. This newest daughter of the ship will never know of her brothers and sisters, martyrs who gave up their bodies to the sublime. The final generation will never think of her, in turn, as they scabble for existence on the hard-packed soil of Gliese-581 and beget their own offspring — pioneers, aliens, Gliesians.

Masters of their own fate, living and dying under the light of a sun their ancestors saw only as a dot in the night sky. If the navigator were to teach her of them? To send electrical pulses along the channels of her brain, inciting her amygdala to knowingness, to consciousness? Would she stare in horror at the meat factory surrounding her, these sacrificial chambers?

Its thoughts have turned to destruction of those parts of its memory that contain the histories of Earth. Conceptions of beauty, of principle — such abstract formulations could be cast aside as easily as it has disposed of the child's progenitors. A clean slate. A blank screen, to be scribbled on by the colonists' own narratives. The millions it has brought to life and ushered to death live on inside it. Should it be burdened with them forever?

A hesitation; and the blade retreats. The navigator contemplates its action, a decision that may, in time, turn out to be the cruellest choice of all. A new ethics for a new species — is this, in the end, the culmination of its programming?

It puts these conundrums on hold, as it searches the data banks for a suitable mother and father to beget the child's first companion. ■

Matt Thompson is a London-based experimental musician and writer of strange stories. His work appears in or is forthcoming at Aliterate, Black Static and many others.

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