

*Seven science fiction and fantasy stories, "The Dream Regime," "The House on Cucullu Street," "Chateau Renouveau," "The American B.E.M.," "Flaying Star," "The Crypt of the Soldonieris," and "TimeSift," and a poem, "Three Fortunes."*

## **TIMESIFT**

By Donald Huffman Graff

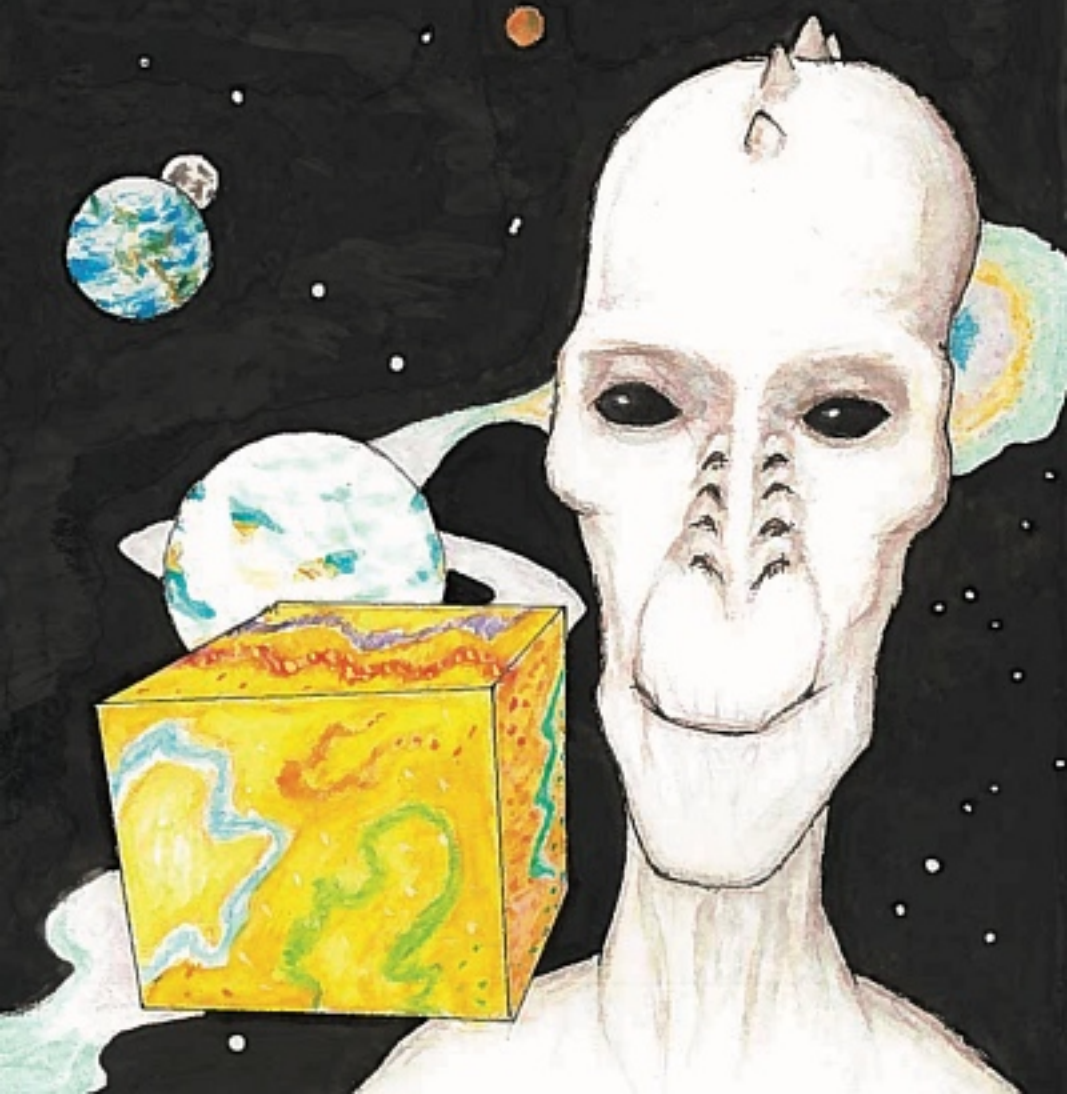
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DONALD HUFFMAN GRAFF

# TIMESIFT



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## The Dream Regime

Roth strode hurriedly across the quadrangle, trying to maintain his dignity as a gnawing fear clutched at his belly, urging him to break into a run, an urge he squelched only by the utmost effort.

He had awakened that morning from a dream — recurring but far from nightly — that he had had, in various forms, since his student days. He had dismissed it, as he always had once he realized he was awake, at first. But the worry stayed with him, and grew, so that as soon as he had dressed for work he had checked his schedule, and ascertaining the terrible truth of the matter he had mumbled an excuse to his wife and rushed out the door without his breakfast.

How could this have possibly happened? All he had worked for, striven for, bled for would be stripped from him. He would no longer be Dr. Alan Roth, Associate Professor of Geology, but — what? Nothing, a nobody, a non-person.

This now nigh inevitable prospect distracted him, for he was almost at his destination before he noticed that others, many others, were converging on the same place. It was not quite eight in the morning, and this was highly unusual, though not nearly so much so as the inexplicable lapse which had brought Roth here to try to somehow salvage his career and livelihood by throwing himself at the mercy of the powers that be.

He recognized the others as his colleagues now, and noted their drawn, sickly faces, as though certain destruction loomed. He supposed he must look the same. They had all congregated before

the ivy-festooned facade of a ruddy brick structure. Onto its white pillared portico stepped a familiar figure — stolid, graying, bespectacled, waistcoated and gold watch-chained: the Provost of the University.

The Provost held up his hand for silence. The crowd stilled, waiting.

"I understand why you are here," the Provost said. "You have all had the same dream, that you have a class that you have forgotten to teach. A dream I expect many, if not most, of you have had before. But this morning you all found that it was not a dream, but reality.

"If you will all step inside, an explanation will be provided, but alas one I fear you may not like."

Roth and the rest did as bidden, climbing the steps and filing through the door into a large marble antechamber. The Provost took the center and resumed speaking.

"Because the explanation involves technical details, I will now turn you over to an authority on the phenomenon we are now experiencing, Dr. Wu of the Bioengineering Department."

The Provost held up his hand again, the sea of tweed parted, and a fortyish woman, black hair bound behind sensibly, wearing glasses and a white lab coat came forward, pushing audiovisual devices on a squeaky-wheeled cart. She halted near the Provost, who stepped back as she began to speak.

"As you know," she declared, "we inhabit a shared reality. All of us contribute to the construction of this reality. How we do so, and the relative importance of our individual contributions, has long remained a matter of debate.

"The consensus is that psychological and social outliers do so at a minimal level, while a few at the opposite end of the continuum do so at a higher than average level. The range, however, is small.

"A theory was advanced by the eminent neurophysiologist Von Stieglitz," and here she activated the audiovisual apparatus, so that a

black-and-white image of Von Stieglitz, an old man with a white goatee and a pince-nez, was projected, "that there is ever-present a potential for an increase so marked, so dramatic that it could enable an individual to dominate the construction of our reality. We would, in effect, inhabit their reality."

An image of Rodin's *The Thinker* came up. "Von Steiglitz did not disagree with the notion that reality is socially constructed, but believed that its social construction was merely like the visible part of an iceberg, the rest involving a mysterious form of psychic energy, which he compared to both the orgone energy of Reich and the *élan vital* of Bergson. It was this that Van de Velde and I objected to and were determined to disprove. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

"Further, there was an easy way to test this, simply by electrically and chemically stimulating a specific region of the brain." A map of the brain was projected, with the area indicated.

"Because of the great danger of-unleashing the repressed hostile and aggressive impulses of the subconscious mind to be writ large upon the world stage, the experiment could not be carried out." A series of Hieronymus Bosch images flashed by.

"However, the oneirologist Matthias Van de Velde of our own faculty," and here a portrait of Dr. Van de Velde — young, serious, curly-headed — appeared, "argued that the relaxed, free-associating, dreaming mind, which is not interacting with any actual others against whom it could direct its hostility, could safely handle the increase.

"I obtained a grant to test Von Stieglitz's theory, applying for it in my own discipline, though Van de Velde and I were collaborators, he having persuaded me of his ideas, and we began our experiment in the early hours of this morning." Now came a scene of Van de Velde lying on a gurney in a lab, wires trailing from his head, while

Wu stood by a bank of machines, clipboard in hand, and a lab assistant with a syringe bent over Van de Velde.

Wu held up her hand at the murmur of dismay that rose from the crowd.

"We were sure there was no danger — the dreamer would be a world unto himself, never in a social situation that would prompt him to construct anyone else's reality. Moreover," here she paused dramatically, "we had every reason to believe the results would be negative! Van de Velde had meticulously researched the subject —" now a montage of images raced by: Rhine cards, black-and-white film clips of men in rubashkas with full square-cut beards bending spoons by staring at them, gray cover pages of government reports "— and he knew, was utterly certain, that Von Stieglitz was a crackpot! A dinosaur who held up advancement of his field through his control of patronage and funding, and his position on the editorial board of its flagship journal!"

There came a general murmur of disapproval; no one wished to appear to be against progress, at least not in front of the other faculty.

Over the babble of voices one called out stridently: "If that is so how did this happen?" Roth recognized one of the deans; her name escaped him.

"We miscalculated in one small particular," responded Wu. "After Van de Velde fell asleep, we waited for him to go into REM sleep to apply the stimulation." More shots of the lab, Van de Velde's tranquil face on the gurney.

"When that began, we began to watch for signs of changes. Anything out of the ordinary. First we noticed nothing, then an almost imperceptible lightening of the whole scene. Then both I and my assistant realized we had classes we had forgotten to teach.



"And then we realized what had happened. Van de Velde was having the classic academic anxiety dream. And it had become our reality!"

A roar of confusion and anger erupted. Again the unmistakable voice of the Dean cut through. "Just wake him up! Then everything will go back to normal, won't it?"

"Not necessarily," said Wu, seemingly unperturbed.

"Wake him up now, and let's find out," cried one professor, and others took up the call.

"That would be very unwise!" Wu thundered, and in the following silence went on. "Van de Velde went out of REM sleep and back into delta-wave sleep. But the effect of his dream remains. Rather than making the phenomenon go away, waking him may make it permanent!"

"He'll have to go to sleep again," the Dean said. "What then? And anyhow, if he's still receiving stimulation when he wakes up, we're in for a lot worse, if this theory is right!"

"Correct!" said Wu. "Von Stieglitz would appear vindicated in that regard. As far as going back to sleep again, the most likely consequence would be that the nature of the universe would continue to shift with the random, chaotic activity of his relaxed subconscious mind. But it is unlikely many of us would survive that long."

"Then he must be stopped!" cried a voice from the crowd, and the cry was taken up by others.

"Yes, but how?" queried the Dean. "Dr. Wu, did you intend for the experiment to continue until Van de Velde woke, or could it be switched off?"

"It could, but that was the first thing we tried when we realized what was happening," said Wu. "Alas, it transpired that one of the changes his dream had made to reality caused the termination switch to cease functioning —"

"You can't turn it off?!?" came an angry chorus of voices from the crowd.

"Perhaps we can," said Wu. "There are other possibilities, but it is hard to predict exactly what will happen, no way to be sure which is the right one."

"Shouldn't the Provost decide?" the Dean offered. Roth and the others all turned to their top administrator, who looked flustered for an instant, then re-assumed an air of confidence and authority as he prepared to respond.

"The faculty should decide," Roth to his surprise heard himself saying. "The faculty should vote."

"We should," someone said, and others chimed in agreement.

"Ah, is the whole senate here?" inquired the Provost.

"I think this is a quorum," said the Dean nervously, apparently having gleaned from the Provost's manner his diffidence in the matter and now seizing the opportunity to correct her initial gaffe. But an effort to count proved disturbingly inconclusive; it was impossible to reach a definite number.

"Have you ever tried to count to a large number in a dream?" Wu asked. "Someone must decide for us."

"Can't we just agree on a voice vote that this is a quorum?" Roth ventured, finding his initiative again. If the Provost did not wish to exercise his fiat, surely consensus was best.

"Hmm, highly irregular, under the rules of order," mused the Provost. "But under the circumstances, I suppose a practical necessity."

The vote was taken, a chorus of assent, none against, and so the faculty senate convened its most unusual session.

"What are our options?" the Dean asked Wu.

"They are too complex to summarize concisely," she replied frostily. "I would have to take you all into the laboratory and show you the apparatus, and the space is too small."

"Then let's send a representative," someone suggested. The motion was put to a voice vote, prevailed, and the question of who to delegate was raised.

"I nominate Dr. Alan Roth!" someone cried. The nomination was seconded, put to the vote, and carried, all before Roth, his mind inexplicably sluggish, could protest that other candidates should be considered too.

"Come," said Dr. Wu, turning to an interior door.

"Shouldn't we have a representative of the administration along too?" Roth said desperately.

"Why, of course," the now-alert Provost interjected. "Take care of this, would you?" he said aside to the Dean, who looked uncomfortable but acquiesced.

The three — Roth, Wu, and the Dean, whose name, Roth now recalled, was Woronov, Dawn Woronov — now pushed through the door, Wu in the lead. Dean Woronov pushed past Roth, taking second place. She had auburn, wavy hair, lozenge-shaped horn-rim glasses with brown eyes behind the lenses, and wore a charcoal gray skirt suit over a white shirt. She and Roth had had minimal contact save the usual dickering over resources, money, perks, whatever. They walked single file down the stairs, which were rather broad and curved around a descending spiral beneath a low, arching ceiling.

"This is rather odd architecture for this building," Roth observed to the backs of the two women's heads, visible before him in the dim light.

"Part of the dream-changes," Wu explained. "Have you not thought it odd, too, that the laboratory is beneath the administration building?"

"I suppose it is," Roth muttered. He really was not on the ball or he would have surmised that. "Are we in any danger?"

"Yes," Wu said, halting, and turning to face them on a landing before a double door. "The lab has been altered, and may contain

unknown dangers. Also, the persons who appear in one's dreams are likely to be known to one. You will notice, I am sure, that none of Van de Velde's departmental colleagues or campus acquaintances volunteered to come. At least, the figures in a dream are immensely unlikely to be actual persons unknown to the dreamer, and so as strangers the two of you are unlikely to be in his dreams and so be transfigured. But now that you may be seen by Van de Velde, if he wakes up, and so become known to him, you become subject to the danger he presents in either a waking or dreaming state."

Great, Roth thought. I'm really not myself, or I would have anticipated that. Could everybody else think it through back there, except me?

But while Roth's thoughts were sluggish, Wu's seemed crystalline, electric, even telepathic, for she responded as though she knew his mind.

"Reasoning may prove difficult, at least sporadically," she said. "Your thought is like that of a dreamer's, alternating flashes of lucidity with the near timeless free-associative eddies of the dream-flux."

Roth tried to assimilate this, wondering if Wu's thinking was likewise affected, when the Dean interrupted.

"We've been standing in front of this door a while now," she said. "Are we going in, or staying here?"

"Enter, of course." Wu smiled as she went to the door. It was ornate, ancient, massive; Roth expected it should open into a high gothic chamber to the sound of Captain Nemo pipe organ arabesques. Instead there was a dim, yellow-greenish glow and a low humming sound. Wu stood silhouetted by the eerie glow beside the door, holding it open. The room beyond was indistinct. Roth waited for the Dean, then followed her in to the laboratory of Dr. Wu.

The room was not large, a low-ceilinged space filled with electrical devices of obscure design and function. Wu's assistant, a

brown, dark-eyed man in a white lab coat, stood beside some of these, impassive, silent, watchful. Between him and the three entering, Van de Velde lay on a gurney in the center of the room. Wu went over to him.

"Here you see Matthias Van de Velde," she declared. "His extraordinary courage in making himself the subject of this experiment may have made him a martyr to science. But he understood the risks, better than anyone."

She knelt down, her face close to his. His expression was tranquil. The delicate golden stubble on his white face, the golden curls on his head, gave him the beauty of a Holbein portrait. Wu's voice became hushed, almost tender. "The features of an angel, the mind of a titan. His passion was for truth, in his conviction that it would set our minds free."

Roth experienced a moment of lucidity and seized it.

"You said you could explain our options here. I think we need them now. And how soon will he wake up?"

"He went to sleep late, well after midnight, so he may sleep a little longer, but not much. We should proceed. He will probably experience another episode of REM sleep before he wakes, as there are usually several and he has so far experienced only one."

"So the options are?" the Dean asked.

"Yes, we should indeed proceed post haste. First, you must know that our initial failsafe switch failed when the Neumann alloy in the cutoff electrode transmuted into some other substance, early in the first episode of REM sleep..."

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When Wu finished a silence followed, which the Dean finally broke.

"What you are saying is that we have three options," she said, "all of them bad, and which I might add could easily have been explained upstairs, so that the whole faculty could decide."

"Could there be any consensus, settled by voice vote, with such choices? A count would be impossible. And you should benefit from having seen the physical evidence of the changes. More importantly, here you can act, and you must act now!"

"Ethical considerations aside, we can't kill him, despite the threat he may represent —" Roth began.

"Because our simply winking out of existence, along with the whole universe, is as likely as any other possible outcome if he dies in this condition," Wu cut in, then stopped, still for a moment, before continuing. "I am not myself. As you see. Still I could not do that thing. Nor permit another to do it.

"We can try to keep him asleep indefinitely. This would involve prolonged sedation, intravenous feeding, and so forth. Over a long period of time, there is a risk of death, which we must avoid. Also a risk of waking, unless the sedation is heavy, which would increase the risk of death. Likewise the even heavier sedation that would be necessary to keep him out of REM sleep.

"We can switch off the power. Since this should stop his artificially enhanced domination of shared reality, it would seem the safest option. However, it is possible that some undetected prior change has altered the structure or function of the instrumentation, in which case this action may have unintended results, or none at all.

"Finally we can wake him, either now or sometime after he reenters REM sleep, in the hope that we can wake him at a point when things are close to what was normal. If we wake him now, we are betting things can only get worse, if we wait we are betting that they can get better. Either way we are gambling that despite Von Stieglitz's theory of individual domination of reality having been proved, it does not follow that his belief that the waking

subconscious mind was an uncontrollable deadly beast must be true. Given that the fabric of the universe, of time and space, the very operation of physical law that enables us to reason cause and effect may have changed in subtle ways, we cannot assign any probabilities to any of these possibilities. We can only state that they exist."

"It sounds like you don't like the first option," the Dean said.

"Yes," Wu said. "It only hastens the least desirable outcome, the death of Van de Velde. I recommend the second or third options. And we must choose now!"

"Is it possible," Roth said slowly, "that some of these changes might have created another, maybe a better, way of protecting ourselves?"

"How can you know what it might be?" Wu responded. "Can you give me an example of what you might try?"

Roth hesitated, at a momentary loss, and in that moment...

Wu spoke. "He has re-entered REM sleep."

...Roth blinked, looked around. All the same. He felt the same, didn't he? "No change," he said.

"His mind is roaming far afield," Wu announced, herself gazing at some unseen vista.

Roth's acuity now seemed unimpaired again, and he resolved to act. "Pull the plug when things seem normal — that's now! Then wake him if it doesn't work!" he blurted.

Wu nodded, then lowered her face to her instruments and flipped a switch. Nothing happened.

Wu looked up. Her eyebrows had become neatly painted bell curves, over eyelids now painted magenta pink with a fine metallic sparkle. Pupil and iris were indistinguishable in their blackness. Her gaze was magnetic, hypnotic — like a mongoose with its prey.

"Yikes! What's happening to me?" the Dean cried, next to Roth, who suddenly recalled her presence. He looked over at her, and was surprised to see her changed — her figure had burgeoned and

swelled in certain conspicuous places, attenuated subtly in others, giving her the figure of a burlesque queen off the cover of some *Sino-Rama* paperback.

If the dream was becoming erotic, anything might happen. Roth decided to nip it in the bud.

"Wake him up," he told Wu. "Now."

"Wait!" she said. "You must —"

"Must what?" Roth cut in, sounding hysterical even to himself. "Wake him up now! Or I'll do it."

He stepped toward the gurney where the sleeping figure of Van de Velde lay. Wu pulled it away, and handed it off to her assistant, who moved it behind one of the banks of equipment. Roth stepped after it but Wu blocked his way.

"I cannot allow you —" she began.

"Why not?" Roth snapped. "This is as good a time as any. Things could be worse! Stop this now before they get that way!"

"You are being rash," Wu said, maintaining her poise better than Roth. Almost unnaturally so, it flashed through his mind.

"Let's wait until I go back to normal," the still-buxom Dean cut in. "I mean, I will, won't I? I'm not going to be stuck this way?"

Wu gazed at her inscrutably. A long cigarette holder had appeared in her hand and she drew on it, slowly releasing the smoke after her lab coat had become a gown of sky blue silk embroidered with golden dragons.

"That remains to be seen," Wu said at last.

Roth was losing patience. "If you won't wake him up now, I will," he said, trying to brush past Wu. But the Dean moved to block his way. Roth tried to avoid her but they met, became entangled, and fell, Roth crying — too late — "Excuse me! Excuse me!" as they landed in a heap on the floor.

Roth received a painful kick in the shin and a sharp elbow in the fall. The floor was hard and he felt several bruises, hard to tell how



many. But despite the pain he knew this was a major faux pas that could have unfortunate repercussions.

"Let me up!" yelled the Dean, although she was above Roth (as always, he thought).

"So sorry, so sorry!" he repeated as she got to her feet, giving him another kick in the process.

When she got to her feet Roth saw that she had returned to her former appearance.

"You're back to normal, Dean Woronov," Roth said as he awkwardly rose.

"Thank goodness," the Dean muttered. "Who would've taken me seriously looking like that?"

"We can wake Van de Velde now," Roth said.

"But why wake him? You yourself said it was not so bad at present," Wu observed calmly.

"Before it gets any worse!" Roth shot back, his voice breaking into a hysterical high note. He was getting dangerously close to another, worse faux pas.

"Surely we could try to turn off the power first?" Wu purred coolly. She had acquired the mien and costume of a comic book Fu Manchu, and the background had shifted to match, becoming an exotic film noir-inspired splash page.

"Yes," Roth exhaled, as out of a deflating balloon. "But do you want to stay as you are?" He regretted it almost as soon as he had said it. He should have just had her pull the switch, rather than call attention to her condition, which had reached an even higher peak, with incredibly ornate detail, like some Song dynasty miniature.

Before she could answer, if she ever intended to answer, a gong sounded.

"The sleeper wakes!" Wu intoned. The gong had with a crescendo brought to an end her transformations and she was again the demur scientist in a white lab coat.

Van de Velde's eyes opened, grew wide, and stared about him. At the ceiling? Into the void? It was impossible to say. The whole room lightened, grew bright, and a nimbus of rainbow colors radiated from his wide-staring eyes.

"This is not what you said would happen when he woke," Roth hissed to Wu in a tense stage whisper, feeling the sweat break out on his brow.

"True," she replied. "Perhaps this is a false awakening." With these words the room became as it had been before, and Van de Velde remained sleeping, peacefully if lightly, his eyes darting beneath hooded lids.

Roth glanced at the Dean, back at Wu, down at himself. Everything seemed to be normal.

"Pull the plug now," he told Wu curtly.

"Can we?" she responded. "Even if all seems well here, it may not be so elsewhere —"

"How can we check the whole goddamn universe!?" Roth bleated. He had lost it — the words came tumbling out, even as he realized how unprofessional and out of line he sounded. "You say 'decide now' but at every turn you delay. Well, I decide now. Pull the plug."

He directed this last instruction not at Wu, but at her assistant, standing almost invisible in the shadows. But Wu held up her hand, and the assistant remained motionless.

"Very well. It shall be pulled," she said, and lowered her hand, nodding to her assistant. He bent quickly to audibly unplug something out of view behind the equipment.

Everyone waited. Nothing happened. Van de Velde slept on.

"Is this good or bad?" the Dean asked after a moment.

"Don't know," Roth said. "Dr. Wu?"

She shrugged. "Wait and see."

After a silent moment, during which they all watched one another and their surroundings anxiously, Roth felt himself begin to calm down a bit. But suddenly he felt a cold icicle of fear jab his spine.

The shadows on the floor were coalescing into a dark, liquid mass like an oil slick.

"No good," Roth gasped. "I've got to wake him!" He lunged toward the sleeping figure on the gurney. Wu moved to block him, assuming what was either a highly incongruous Tai Chi Chuan posture or a martial arts stance. Roth tried to cut past her. He bumped into the Dean. An accident, or was she trying to bar his path?

"Roth, control yourself!" she growled. "Shit!" This last was provoked by his knocking her against the gurney, causing her shin to strike one of its legs. The gurney rolled away and the Dean lost her balance and fell to the floor. Roth tumbled forward, tripping over her, and grabbed wildly to break his fall, catching the rail of the gurney.

Roth pulled himself up and looked into the face of Van de Velde, now woken and sitting up.

"I was having the most wonderful dream," he said. "Who has woken me?" His gaze fell on Roth, below him, abjectly trying to clamber to his feet. The gaze grew intense, baleful; Roth recoiled beneath it, wishing only to slink somewhere to safety, even in oblivion...

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Of his escape from the laboratory Roth could remember nothing. He became aware of his surroundings again in an open field, a vast gray space with a thin covering of brown withered grass. The Dean was beside him. He looked at her, about to ask her how

they had come here, but her expression told him she was as baffled as he was.

The sky, which had been as gray as the ground, now turned white, then into a moving mosaic of varicolored pastels. Despite the distraction of this, Roth noticed that several large octahedrons of some dark metal, perhaps thirty feet tall, though difficulty gauging the distance made it hard to gauge their size, were floating toward them, low over the ground.

Roth, finding them inexplicable but markedly ominous, looked around for some place of concealment.

"This way," he said to the Dean, and headed toward a cluster of angular planes of metal, dark as the octahedrons but brown with streaks of rust, projecting from the ground nearby.

"What is all this?" she asked, pulling ahead of him.

"I don't know but I don't like it."

The Dean reached the metal planes and slipped among them, Roth following after. He turned and peered back out the way they had come, at the approaching objects. They halted, hovering where the two had been a moment before.

Something fluttered close to the ground, whether a butterfly or a scrap of litter, Roth couldn't tell. The nearest octahedron emitted a high-pitched whine, which rose to a scream as the thing was sucked within, through a facet which had suddenly parted along a hairline crack and opened inward. The halves clanged shut, there was a grinding sound, and a belch of noxious-smelling green smoke.

The octahedrons began to float slowly away together. Roth and the Dean watched them go.

"Is Van de Velde awake, or still dreaming?" she said finally.

"I don't know," he said. "Seems more like a dream still. Maybe he went back to sleep." He seemed to be experiencing a moment of lucidity. The object kept receding. "You may want to get away from me. I may be the object of his anger now, since I woke him from a

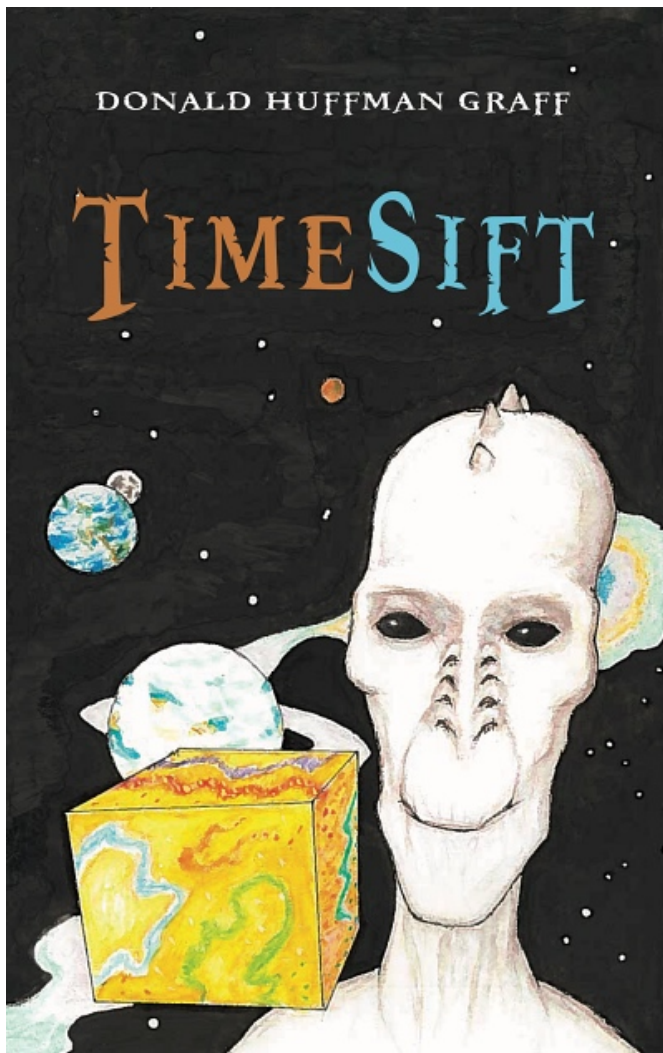
dream he was enjoying. You and Wu suffered effects before because he knew you — she was his collaborator, and everybody knows who the deans are. But then, I wasn't really in his cognizance, since he didn't know me, so I suffered only general effects. Now..."

"Where would I go?"

Roth shrugged helplessly. "Do you see any landmarks you recognize?"

She shook her head. Roth gazed around. The objects had stopped some way off. There seemed to be other constructions like the one they were in, but at such a distance that it was unclear exactly what they were. None of the campus buildings or any recognizable landmarks could be seen.

The sky became a nursery room wallpaper pattern of bright flowers that Roth could take no cheer from, then an ink wash medley. He continued to scan the horizon, where all around the hard ground stretched far away.



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