

Ephemerality

By J.K. Rooke.

“We’ve found one! Oxygen based if you can believe it. What are the chances against that? An ephemeral of ephemerals, changing before our eyes! We’ll have to set the recorders on max. It’ll be gone in an era!”

The pod’s noise revved up and it started to vibrate.

“Can’t do it! Won’t take the strain.”

“It’s so beautiful! Look at all the forms, and their relationships! Oh my brain! I want to witness. Can I? How can I speed up?”

“Possible Blen but you could die there.”

“I could spend my life, I really could.”

“You sure? You’d be collecting so much knowledge and would be remembered forever.”

“Isn’t that important? But I might just be able to stabilize it.”

“It would be the first ever. It has been tried, many times, and always failed.”

“I must try. They are so precious. Please! I want to do this.”

“OK Blen so long as you realise it is a one way trip. Step into the speeder and it will be goodbye to your life here.”

“Just do it. Now! It’s fading.”

“You could be too late.”

“Do it!”

The world beyond the speeder disappeared as it usually did, but this was different. Blen could feel changes within himself. He was leaving his thoughts behind. They floated away in disconsolate ranks. It seemed to take an age to realise where he was. And then, in a soup of lives all popping in and out of existence he had to choose a form. A common one, a successful one, medium

in terms of size, or perhaps just a little more than medium. No. There was no time. Choose!

There was a jolt and his thoughts were whirling around his head. He would have to grab them, introduce them to this tiny brain. It would be difficult...

When he woke he was lying in gravity, on a substance soft and crumbly. The pull of the gravity was weak. He could feel the depth, or rather lack of depth of the biosphere, and the presence of the web of life. It seemed to be crumbling like his substrate, loose ends flapping, in the puzzled solar wind.

He drew his attention in to examine the new body he inhabited. It had unexpected senses. It shared his sense of tactical awareness, but there were others that were strange to him. He had soon mastered the one that dealt in chemistry, but there seemed to be two more that were based on frequencies that he had never imagined. And one of these he could switch on and off by opening and closing fleshy hatches. He started to try to work out the use of these senses, but his thoughts now seemed to be running ahead of him, flying by so fast that he couldn't stop them. As he loaded them with the knowledge of the existence here, they whirled away into a non-existent future. And once they had disappeared into this impossible future, would they be lost, or would the pod, could the pod pick them up? Ben bit down on his panic and clutched, finding the right timing to fit thoughts into his little brainpan. How could he stabilise this ephemeral world if he had no more reasoning ability than its inhabitants?

He felt like taking long deep breaths to still the beating...more panic. What was beating? There was this movement that he was making, but the beating? It was undeniably a part of him. He had to be calm. This little body

was in crisis. Concentrate on the new senses. The one that recorded vibrations was surprisingly varied. There was a lot to make sense of here.

The other, when he opened its shutters, was somehow more immediate. It showed him shapes, close together, living forms around him; that the chemical sense had already told him were similar to his own. There were larger living forms at a greater distance, beyond the straight close uprights. And they were moving, as his fellow forms were also. Blen tried to move and fetched up with his nose against the uprights.

He then became aware of another barrier separating him further from some larger forms; a barrier that this sense could not register. He could only tell it was there because the smaller ones of this form were poking their brainboxes and appendages against it hard enough to reduce the blood supply to the area touching the barrier. It must be some sort of force field.

There was a loud Ping Ping, and one of the smaller members of this larger form rotated a part of the force field that was surrounded by a rectangle of dense inflexible material; and came up to the area in which Blen and his co-forms were contained, dragging one of the larger members behind it by a linkage of appendages. The little one bent over until the front of its brainbox almost touched Blen, and vibrated the atmosphere softly. His companions registered fear, a horrible sense through an area of the body that he could not switch off. They then jumped away from the brainbox and eyes that looked down. Blen couldn't sense any hostility in the brainbox, just a sense of aggressive eagerness. The eyes were looking directly into his, until she turned to the larger animal and made eager sounds which were answered by soft rather defensive sounds. The little one seemed to be asking, and the big one was gently refusing.

Eventually the little one gave up on these strictly controlled exchanges and started to make pathetic little noises that were much more effective. The larger one turned to another large one in the background and aimed some syntax at it.

Obviously it wasn't pleased with the answer.

It turned back to the little one

"Why not take this one Cynthia? Lovely floppy ears."

"No I want this one. This one is special."

"Rex's are a lot more expensive"

"I don't care."

"Well obviously you don't. All right we'll take it."

The animal in the background came forward, lifted the top off the container, grasped Blen with its appendage and placed him in a much smaller container, which the larger one could carry.

Walking through the outer ways there were crowds of these larger animals. Blen wished he hadn't been so hasty in choosing the form he should take; but he really hadn't had the time to make an informed decision. Now he was in an enclosed container and these large animals were all moving about freely. Moreover he didn't recognise the surroundings. There were no living or natural shapes, apart from this large upright species; just hard stuff underfoot and hard vertical surfaces going up at either side. There was blue sky overhead, but otherwise it wasn't at all like the beautiful world he had witnessed from the pod.

They came to an intersection where larger mechanical things rushed by with the same animals inside them, and stood still for a minute with some others. Then one of the pod-like things stopped. The animal carrying him

pulled its loose garment around him and stepped up, and they were moving off. This species had invented mechanical transport!

The little one asked "Why are you covering him up?"

"Shush, They don't let animals on the bus."

The journey gave Blen time to analyse speech and gain a vocabulary. His large ears made it possible to hear all the conversations on the bus. He realised that the hands of these people had modelled their speech. What they did with their hands was the most important thing in their lives. They had made with them, everything he saw around him. How far did this manufacture spread? He had no hands. Were there other kinds of animals that did, and made different structures? So many questions. Such an alien world. He might be too late to save it.

On alighting from the bus, the large animal, put aside the flap of her coat and Blen could at last see natural shapes. There were trees lining the street, and the vertical structures were broken into individual houses between which he could see other trees. He felt some relief.

They went up to one of the houses and were soon in a dark narrow space with doors off it and treads going up. Another animal was in the house calling out "Oh you're back. Did you have a nice time Gran?"

"We bought a bunny!" Called Cynthia.

"What?" the animal came bouncing into the hall. "And what's she going to do with that?"

"Cynthia insisted dear. And why shouldn't she have a pet?"

"Because they need feeding and cleaning and we don't have a rabbit hutch. Have you any idea what they cost?"

"Probably not more than the rabbit itself, and that was my treat. And if you like, I'll buy the hutch tomorrow."

“No you won’t, you’ll take it back now!”

“Prunella dear I’m too tired to go out again. Just leave it till Reg gets back please?”

While they were arguing Cynthia was taking Blen out of the cage, and running upstairs with him in her arms, hugged to her chest. She ran into a room and shut the door.

“It’s O.K. Ben, I won’t let the ogre take you away.”

The ogre was calling up the stairs “bring that animal down now! Do you hear me?”

“She’s in one of her moods. You’ll have to hide Ben. Where is safe? She’ll look under the bed first. I know!” and she opened a little door low down in the wall. “Oh, she’ll never get you out of here but it’s dark and scary. Oh she’d coming up. Don’t move far, unless she opens the door... Oh”

Blen was in space under the sloping roof. There was enough light coming through gaps in the slates for his large eyes to see that it ran all along one side of the house, and that it was full of manufactured items all tumbled in and covered in dust. It would indeed be difficult for one of the larger humans to wriggle in and capture him.

While the ogre searched the room Blen hid behind a box in case she opened the door to the eaves, but she didn’t seem to notice it. He could hear her pulling open the numerous drawers and cupboards in the room.

“Where is it? Where did you put it? I’m going to count to ten and if that rabbit isn’t back in its box...”

“You won’t find him” said Cynthia, “He’s out of...”

“Outside? You didn’t have time.”

She noticed that the bedroom window was open and went to look out. The window opened over the kitchen extension.

The ogre laughed. "Well if you put it out of the window it'll be long gone, if it didn't break its legs."

"Oh" said Cynthia, "Oh will you go and see if it broke its legs?"

"With pleasure."

The ogre left.

Blen was left puzzling. Cynthia knew where he was and yet she had seemed upset at the idea of his being hurt, falling off the kitchen roof. Pretending. These creatures could deceive each other. And apparently they needed to, frequently.

More light entered as the eaves door opened and Cynthia called "Ben? Bengie darling you can come out now."

Did she expect this small animal to understand her words? Blen crept forward so that she could see him, but he didn't get close enough for the outstretched arms to capture him.

"You must be hungry. I'll go and get you...No, I'll have to wait awhile. She might be watching for me."

She then settled in a chair in front of a flat moving light. Blen crept out to look at the light. It showed flat images of people and animals which she seemed able to manipulate.

He wondered if she was hearing the big argument downstairs. Her ears were a lot smaller than his. Perhaps she couldn't hear, or perhaps she was used to all this anger. He wondered why, if all these humans were always so angry, and had this constant feeling of being wronged by each other, why they went around in crowds and shared houses.

Blen jumped onto the bed to see the light box more easily and realised that the images were only pretend animals, and then she changed them to real animals, lots of different kinds. Blen was awestruck at the variety. So this

planet still... or were these pictures recordings of creatures of the past? They showed grass and trees filling the screen with no human dwellings in sight. He had seen trees on his journey from the bus but they had always been scattered amongst a mass of houses.

The scene changed as a human appeared in front of the view and explained that the animals were dying out. There were only two or three thousand of this and that species left. He had seen far more than two thousand people just on his journey through the town. But there was still time...time to do what? He couldn't even talk to these people. If only he had been given time in the excelleron to choose a human shape instead of this helpless little animal.

Could he speak? He tried to make a sound, and all he could manage was a vague snuffle, and when he tried harder he got a loud squeal. This had Cynthia overturning her chair as she rushed up to him.

"Oh Bengie what's the matter? What is it?"

There was no denying the reality of her concern this time or the tenderness with which she ran her hands over him.

"Does it hurt? Where does it hurt? Oh I'll go and get you a drink of water. I can do that without going down."

She used a saucer from under a plant on her windowsill and filled it from a glass on the small table beside her bed.

Blen found that he had needed that drink. His little body felt a lot better. But there was still something...

As if she was reading his mind she said "I can't get you food yet. It's too dangerous. She still thinks I threw you out of the window. Are you feeling better now?"

Blen put out one of his little feet to touch her hand. She bent down and gently stroked her hands through his fur and nuzzled his head with her lips.

There was a powerful feeling to this. It was affection, or even love. But how could Cynthia feel so, for a little animal she had only known for an hour?

After a few minutes of this lovely togetherness Cynthia went back to her light box, and Blen realised that the voices from downstairs had stopped. How long ago had that happened? Blen turned his attention back to the light box picking up a lot more information about the planet, from the people talking there and the pictures shown. They were showing pictures of the whole world, the wild areas and the manufactured and these apparently included continents of manufactured plants as well as enormous areas of just people running around in bricks and concrete and glass, and the man was actually saying that these areas were increasing every day by the size of a small country. Blen was witnessing, there on the screen, a view of the end of this world.

After a long while there was movement again downstairs as the front door opened. Cynthia jumped up.

“It’s dad.”

She picked Blen up gently and shut him back under the eaves. From there he could still hear everything that went on downstairs, through the floor.

“Oh Dad, I’m so glad you’re back.”

“Why Thia? What’s up? What’s all the excitement about?”

“I’m going to be ever so helpful and get the dinner ready.”

“Why, isn’t it ready now?”

“I didn’t have time” said Prescilla. “Your mother took Cynthia out and she was in a bit of a state when she came back.”

“Where is Gran?” asked Cynthia.

“She went out.”

“Is she coming back?”

“You’ve had a row?” The low voice sounded worried and stern.

“Of course not, Ken. You know what she’s like. Dear old fuddy-duddy. She just went out for a breath of fresh air.”

“I’m going to find her” said Dad “and I hope dinner will be ready when I come back.”

Prescilla said “Cynthia, come back here. You said you’d get dinner ready.”

“Not if Dad’s going out. I’m staying in my room.”

“You’ve upset Thia too I see” said the low voice; “leave her be and get dinner.”

Cynthia came back into her room and opened Ben’s little door. She was crying again, and this time the tears were real.

“Oh Benjamin it’s all my fault. If I hadn’t made Gran buy you, the ogre wouldn’t have got cross and driven Gran out. I hope Dad finds her. What if something happens to her? What if I never see her again?”

This time he could feel dampness coming through his fur as she cuddled him. Blen raised his face towards the tears and found as one splashed onto his nose, that they were salty. She lifted him and sat on the bed hugging him to her chest, and stroking him while her body rocked with sobs.

When they had subsided slightly, she suddenly squirmed round freeing one hand to reach into a pocket.

“Oh, I forgot, I managed to grab a couple of carrots.”

Blen sniffed at the object held in front of his nose. It smelled very good so he took a bite and then another.

Cynthia went on hugging and stroking him while he ate both carrots. Blen was pleased that it seemed to comfort her, and that his fur was not still getting wet. He was trying to puzzle out why she should be anxious about Gran going out when they had both only recently come back in. Ah, it was emotion.

Gran had been upset by the ogre and this made her more likely to...what? Step under a vehicle? Perhaps if her eyes were full of salt water like Cynthia's she mightn't see where she was going. His mission to save this world seemed to be doing more harm than good.

There were new sounds from below. A key being inserted in the door, and then as it shut again even Cynthia heard it. She jumped up, almost dropping Blen until she suddenly remembered, caught him and put him on the bed. She rushed downstairs leaving the bedroom door open. Blen followed her out and watched the scene below.

"Dad? Oh Gran, I'm so sorry I made you buy the rabbit."

"Why dear? Did it bite you?"

"No, oh no I love it, only it made all this bother."

"It's all right Thia" said Dad "the rabbit stays. I've said so. Only don't bother Gran, she's tired, she's going to lie down, and she'll have supper brought up."

He was helping her up the stairs. Blen dodged back into Cynthia's room.

The ogre was calling up the stairs "she's all right isn't she?"

"Yes, just a little tired. Do you think you could bring up some soup? Tomato she likes."

"Of course." The voice sounded sugary sweet, but Blen saw Cynthia pull a face at it. It was more pretending. Blen found he really didn't like the ogre. But even stronger than this feeling was a fear; rising to a terror. If he could never talk to these people what good could he do? He had wasted his life for nothing.

When Gran was settled in her room Dad came in to see Cynthia. Blen scuttled back into his Eaves. Dad laughed as he watched.

“He seems to like it there. But he’ll have to go in the garden. He’ll make a mess and a smell.”

“Can’t he have a toilet box? I promise to empty it.”

“I don’t think he’d use a litter tray. He’s not a cat.”

“We can try. I’m sure he would. He’s clever.”

“OK, I’ll bring up a tray of earth. But he needs grass Thea. Rabbits need to eat grass.”

“Yes dad, I’ll take him in the garden every day.”

“Hmm, well, lets get on with your homework shall we? Read just a little bit to me eh? Which book are we reading?”

The little one ran to snatch up a square thing off a shelf and opened it carefully where there was a colourful sliver of card . It fell out as she spread it on a little table and bent over it. Dad pulled up a chair beside her and looked over her shoulder. Blen crept back out of his cupboard and hopped up onto the bed where, if he raised his body up a little he could see what was going on.

There were pictures on the pages of the book but there were also rows of marks in black. Thea had a finger just below one clump of marks and she was saying “the” and then the next clump “cat” “was”, and then on a longer clump she was making just noises “f...rrr...i...t”

“The i is pronounced eye here Thea.”

“Fright?”

“And the rest.”

“n..Frighten..d Frightened.”

“Lovely.”

“by the f...i...r fear?”

“It’s another eye sound.”

“Fire...w...fireworks.”

Blen's excitement was growing and his little heart was pounding. He could not pronounce a word, but he might be able to make these marks. There must be something he could make them with. But first he would have to learn them all. He watched as Thea read the simple words and spelled out the longer ones, and pretty soon he could read them all.

While Thea was still reading he jumped down and went in search of things that would make a mark. It didn't take him long to find some brightly coloured crumbly sticks. He dislodged a book from the bookcase and flicked it open. There were pictures on most of the pages, but at the front there was one that was almost blank. He chose the darkest colour stick, and was holding it in his mouth and making the first mark, when Dad left the room.

He carried on. One big stroke of the stick a gap, and then two strokes angled in and meeting at the top, and then another stroke across half way down, and then another mark close to it; a small upright and two big bulges up and down; and then his name, a capital B, and an upright, no, Cynthia pronounced it without an L. He wrote Ben.

He felt the fur along his back rising, as there was a gasp behind him. He turned round. Thea was standing behind him staring at the words. She remained staring at the words for a long time, and then she just went to her bed got in and pulled the covers over her head.

All was quiet for what seemed an age. Then Dad called from below "Dinner's ready Thea", and then again "Hurry up Thea, it'll get cold."

Thea didn't move and Blen was beginning to get really worried when there were footsteps on the stairs and dad came up. "Thea, where are you?"

She threw the covers back, hopped out and ran past Dad and down the stairs calling "I was having a dream."

Dad had spotted the writing on the floor. He made a clicking noise with his teeth, shut the book and put it back on the shelf. Then he went out and shut the door. Thea came up a couple of hours later, carrying a box of earth for Blen. "This is for you to go to toilet in." She put it, and another couple of carrots, into the Eaves and shut him in. Blen spent the night worrying. He had found a way to talk to people, but had not made him popular with this little person who had been so friendly only minutes before.

In the morning the first thing Thea did was open his door. She took him down the stairs with her dressing gown wrapped around him, and out into the garden.

"There, you can have a proper feed now and do what rabbits do."

Blen tasted the grass. It was delicious and he tucked in while Thia walked up and down the garden path.

"I ought to go in and get dressed," she said "only will you stay here? You won't run away?"

She seemed to think he might.

The back door opened and the ogre stuck her head out "What are you doing outside in your nightie Cynthia?"

"Giving Benjie his breakfast."

"Bring him in this minute, and go and get dressed. I've got to go to work in ten minutes, and I'm supposed to be dropping you off."

"Who's going to feed him then? He hasn't had enough yet."

"So leave him out there, and get upstairs now."

"I'm frightened he'll run away."

"You weren't worried about that when you threw him out of the window."

“I didn’t throw him out. What do you think I am!”

Dad entered the kitchen saying in his deep quiet voice “You’ll have woken my mother with that shouting. Thia, take Benny upstairs now and get dressed. Tell Gran I’ll bring some food home for him, and some wire to build an outdoor cage. I can smell toast. That’ll do.” And then as they climbed the stairs Blen heard him say, with a strange note in his voice “Prescilla, My daughter and her rabbit are a part of this household. They aren’t going away. You need to learn to live with them. It surely can’t be hard?”

Upstairs Thia said “Bengie I’m going to put you in the cupboard and shut it, ‘cause I’m frightened that the ogre will make you go away. I’m sorry, I promise I’ll take you outside again the minute I get back.”

Blen found that he was quite happy to spend the day sitting in the semi-darkness of the eaves cupboard. It felt so safe and comfortable. He knew that if the ogre tried to catch him she couldn’t succeed in here with all the junk and beams and long narrow spaces deep under the eaves.

When Thea came home the first thing she did was open the cupboard, and put down some mixed greenstuff out of a packet.

“I bought you some salad on the way home in case Dad forgets. Don’t eat it if you don’t like it. I’ll take you in the garden in a minute.”

While Blen sampled the mixed green stuff Thea went to the book case and took down a book. It wasn’t the one that Blen had written in although it was next to it. She opened the first page, and finding it empty gave a little laugh . “Silly. It was a dream wasn’t it Benjie?”

She put the book in front of him, and a different sort of writing tool and giggled. “Go on write something else.”

Blen hopped up and picked up the tool.

She giggled again. "Wrong way round. It writes that way up."

She turned it round for him laughing louder as he snatched it up.

"Oh, wait a mo I'll turn on the pooter."

Thea picked him up with the pen in his mouth and put him on the bed close to the machine. Then she put the book before him, and sat back.

The giggling stopped as she watched him write "I have come to this world to try to prolong its life. Take me to your leader."

When he stopped Thea took the page he had written on and held it up in front of the light box. Then she pressed a button on the machine, waited for a moment biting her lip, and then pressed a few more.

"There. You're on Utube. You're going to be famous. All my friends are bound to pass it on."

Dad came home early that day. "What the hell is going on Thea? I've had five parents ringing me at work asking how I managed it. What did you do?" and to the ogre who came up behind him "What happened?"

"I was about to ask you. Cynthia has been playing quietly since I picked her up from school, and I think your mother is still in her room. What more do you want?"

Dad turned back to Cynthia, "Thea?"

She began to cry, and Dad gave her a hug. "I'm not cross darling. I only want to know where you found those pictures you put up."

"I can use Utube, I'm allowed?"

"The safe version yes. It was clever of you to find a rabbit that looks so much like Bengie, and then you managed to combine it with a picture of you on your own vidcam; and you copied the words out of a book? You aren't

supposed to put pictures of yourself on Utube though. You probably didn't know the camera was on you as well."

Thea looked confused, and even Blen was starting to wonder why Dad didn't understand what had happened. He was bigger, had lived longer and was in charge. He laid back his huge sound-catchers and tried to get the little brain to work out why Thea was not telling Dad what was really going on.

There were footsteps on the stairs, and Gran was asking "What's the matter?"

"Oh nothing bad mum. It's just a funny clip about a rabbit on Utube."

"Oh?"

"We're coming up mum. I want to see it on Thea's computer. I couldn't really look at it at work. No, you two go back. I want to see it with just Thea."

Thea was still sniffing as her dad sat her down in front of the computer and pulled up a chair for himself.

"Just show me what you did Thea. I'm not cross, in fact I'm pleased that you are so clever."

Blen jumped up onto the bed and watched himself writing. There was no mistaking his awkward accuracy in holding and moving the pen.

"That is an extremely good robot" said Dad," but I want to see how you got your own image on there...Oh!"

He had caught a glimpse of Thea in the background while Blen was writing. "That is you! That's impossible!"

He turned and looked at Blen sitting on the bed. There was extreme fear and danger flowing out of him. Blen jumped down and fled into his eaves cupboard. It was only relative safety. He could dodge about in there, but Dad could certainly catch him if he tried. And then what? He was shaking and his

little animal heart was pounding, and almost giving up. It missed one beat, then two... Blen concentrated on slowing it, on fighting back the fear.

When he had managed to calm down there was silence outside apart from some low sobbing from Thea. He hopped out to her and jumped on her lap, snuggling up towards her face. She held him tight and he could feel the wetness of her tears trickling through his fur.

There were ringing sounds from downstairs, and then in Thea's room. She switched her noise off, and someone switched off the downstairs ringing, but then there came a knocking at the door.

The ogre had opened it and was saying "I told him having a rabbit in the house would cause trouble. No, no comment." And the door slammed.

Thea got up and did something on her computer "A million hits! It's gone viral. Oh it's wizzing up by a hundred a second...no a thousand!"

The ogre and Dad were arguing again, shouting over more knocking at the door.

"You're stupid joke's backfired bigtime. What possessed you to buy the kid a robot rabbit? Well I'm not standing for it. I'm out of here. Packing my bags" and she rushed noisily up the stairs to get her things.

"A robot?" squeaked Thea, "You're a robot? You're not real?"

Blen jumped up onto the little table where the pen lay, and picked it up. Thea spread a sheet of clean paper out before him.

"Why can't you talk? It's silly writing things down."

She tut tutted and shifted about above him while Blen wrote "I am a real living rabbit, but my mind comes from another universe."

"Another what? Why don't you type things out? It's much quicker."

She pushed the computer further back and sat him in front of it, where Blen could work the keyboard. She was right. This was much easier. He typed "I am not a robot or anything from this world. I am come to try to save it."

"You already said that. Save it from what?"

"Something always kills these ephemeral..."

"What's that word?"

"It means very short time span. Most living things, even in this universe live for so much longer."

"How much longer?"

"Thousands, even trillions, of your years."

"You can make me live for a zillion years?"

"It isn't your life, or mine. It is the life of this planet I seek to extend."

"Oh" she was obviously disappointed, and this showed Blen what the problem might be. Her own lifespan was so short that she wasn't worried about the planet dying, a thousand, or even a hundred short years after she had died. Her kind could never see the beauty of life working it's magic on the substance and energy of universes. They did not live long enough to get even a hint of the way it all fitted together.

She was speaking again. "Bengie! Hey; in a million years the sun is going to get bigger and burn the Earth up. Can you stop that?"

"Most life webs outlive the deaths of suns and even of galaxies. But yours would be gone long before your sun becomes a problem."

"Why? We're going into space. To Mars soon to start a colony."

"Not without the web. You could not survive. Things change Thea. Your kind may have invented ways to get to another world close by. But all life is learning new skills and you will need all the skills and intelligence of everything

on your planet, to survive. The things man makes with his hands may get you to a planet close by, but there are many other ways to get to the stars.”

“Oh really?” She was frowning, “Look, I’m tired of reading now. Perhaps you could go on writing it all out to explain to the scientists, ‘cause I want to go and see what’s happening downstairs. The Ogre’s just gone down. Oh there she goes, out the door! Got to see what Dad and Gran are doing.”

Blen began to type out his message to the world. “I come from a universe much larger and slower than your own. I had no time to study your fleeting life, except to discover that you care little for the future of your planet. I hope to learn more of why this is.”

He stopped and looked at all the buttons on this machine. What did they all do? He found a dictionary and looked through it picking up the word encyclopaedia. Yes there was one of these on this machine.

While collecting the world’s knowledge on one side of his little brain, the other side was listening to the near silence downstairs.

Thea was whispering “Dad, is everything all right?”

“Prunella has gone.”

“Do you mean she isn’t coming back?”

“No. No time soon anyway.”

“And Gran?”

“She is in her room.”

“Can I go up and see her?”

“Thea. I won’t be going to work tomorrow or for a week or until all this dies down. Brian from work called round to tell me, because the phone is switched off. And I had to get the police to stop people hammering at the door Oh don’t cry. You didn’t know what would happen.”

“Is Gran all upset?”

“No, I don’t think she knows what’s going on. I told her someone was playing a joke on us, which must be the truth. But I am wondering why they haven’t turned up yet to take their robot back.”

“Bengie says he isn’t a robot, Dad.”

Dad laughed. “Well he would wouldn’t he?”

There was no reply to this, just Thea’s footsteps on the stairs.

“Hi Gran, can I get you a piece of cake? The ogre has gone, and Dad says she may not come back so you can stay. You will stay won’t you?”

Gran gave a sad little chuckle “This isn’t nice for your Dad Thia. She was his girl friend, the first he has had, as far as I know, since your mum passed away.”

“But she was horrible!”

“I am inclined to agree with you. Perhaps bringing that rabbit home was a good thing, but your Dad will be feeling very sad, so you have to be extra nice to him.”

“OK, I’ll give him a piece of cake too.”

Blen deleted the two sentences. People liked politeness more than truth. It kept their little families stable, like a raft on a river. All these families in their little houses and Nations with their separate cultures were like a series of rafts on the river of time. And so much of that time was spent trying to understand each other, that they seldom glanced at the passing shore of their changing planet. In their lives the slow river took them only a very little way, and they would never see the changes further along that river. They could not imagine the sort of lives their great grandchildren would live. Changes there would be, in one life, but the acceleration was exponential, and they were not equipped

to understand this. Thea's grandchildren might still have collections of rooms to live in, but the skies above them would no longer be blue, and the air would not be breathable for any length of time. Infra- structures would have broken down and starvation would be imminent.

Blen began to calculate when the shores of the river would give way as the rafts clogged it and drank it dry. If life on the banks of a river dies, they crumble into the water, and the river spreads out and ceases to flow. A shudder went through him. His little heart was pounding again and his little head was aching like mad. He must find a way to help them to see where their present lifestyle was leading them, to see the future they would have if they did not change; so that they might search for their web of life and adjust it so that their river of time could flow on past the death of their sun and of their galaxy. There wasn't a moment to lose.

When Thea came back into her room she found Blen lying in front of the computer gasping for breath. She rushed for the water and splashed it on his lips, and then called for her Dad

"Dad Ben is sick! He's been writing an awful lot but the last is all squiggles and doesn't make any sense."

Dad came rushing up the stairs. "yes, he's in a bad way. We need to get him straight to a vet. I'll take him, you stay with Gran."

He glanced at the screen. "They aren't squiggles Thea, that's a formula. Why did you... never mind." He took Blen up gently and left the room.

"Dad I want to come too."

"No Thea, you stay here. If you argue you waste time and Benjie dies. Stay there with Gran."

Gran had come out of her room and she moved into Thea's bedroom and sat holding her hand. After a while Thea wiped away her tears and looked

at the screen. “Oh there are letters at the end under the squiggles. F.i.n.i it’s not a word though. He might have meant to write finish?”

“Its a word in a very old language Thea, called Latin. It means the End.”

I think that Thea would have put the formula up on line, don’t you? Certainly her Dad was offered a lot of very big jobs out of the blue. And Thea was happy because he brought home a Bengie, but her rabbit never wrote another word.