

Recent short story. Yet to be submitted to any competitions.

The Dust That Thinks

NASA File

Designation: Classified R9

The following are extracts from the diary of Dr Kaitlin P. Brite, assigned to the mission as a civilian observer; her background is in evolutionary biology and bioinformatics. Subject passed the program A.0i and following debriefing was classified B.i.

February 7

I've had the same dream off and on for the past two years. I dream that I am looking at my face and that the lower half of my jaw is missing completely. I stare into my own eyes, unsure of whether I can detect a scream, or if I'm even trying to speak. The face of the other me just sits there, mute, surrounded by nothing but darkness and then I wake up.

So when they ask me what I dream about, I lie.

We've been keeping dream journals for the last four months and bring them with us to our weekly 'Psy-Fit Sessions'; they give things these names, they can't resist. At the third session several of us were reprimanded for inappropriate doodling in our dream journals.

It's been clear since early on that what they fear most isn't a technical or mechanical error – it's us. Their faith in physics is rock solid; their faith in us is non-existent. Two words have accompanied each of NASA's darkest hours; Human Error.

We riff on it,

"That guy's got a screw loose." –

"I hope you mean that literally, Jim."

One guy, one of the Navy guys, said a white paper had gone around from the Prep Team appealing for a return to sending chimps into space, "They take less time, less testing, and they give better interviews". He was a great guy, he reminded me of the first guys in the program; the PhD jocks, the Supermen. I expected all the military recruits to live up to that image, few of them did. If anything they seem to feel the stress more than us civilians, we go back to our day jobs when all this is over. But they are being assessed, they are on a ladder, and for them it's never over.

I guess the only other dreams I really remember are of the wheat fields. In my dream it's night but the moon is so clear and so strong that as the wind washes over the field causing a tide, the colour changes from silver to gold. Sometimes I hear my grandmother's voice, reading to me.

A precondition of prep, along with the hours in Psy-fit, are our numerous and relentless physicals. Six bioinformatics candidates were invited from different labs but only two of us made it into the final program and I was the only one in the programme to be approved mission-ready. I've always been healthy, remarkably so. They don't say these things out loud, but you can tell this comes with cachet here, that it invokes a sort of Darwinian deference.

In week two we were asked to memorise a nursery rhyme to recite when having our heart rate monitored on the treadmill, The House that Jack Built. Sweating and panting, wired up to innumerable machines, we go through the same physical and mental exercise; they gave us a prompt line from anywhere in the verse and ask us to deliver the rest from that point. Over-heat a computer and check how much RAM you can still rely upon.

This is the malt that lay in the house that Jack built.
This is the rat that ate the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built.
This is the cat that killed the rat
That ate the malt that lay in the house that Jack built.
This is the dog that worried the cat
That killed the rat that ate the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built.
This is the cow with the crumpled horn
That tossed the dog that worried the cat
That killed the rat that ate the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built.
This is the maiden all forlorn
That milked the cow with the crumpled horn
That tossed the dog that worried the cat
That killed the rat that ate the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built.
This is the man all tattered and torn
That kissed the maiden all forlorn
That milked the cow with the crumpled horn
That tossed the dog that worried the cat
That killed the rat that ate the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built.
This is the priest all shaven and shorn
That married the man all tattered and torn
That kissed the maiden all forlorn
That milked the cow with the crumpled horn
That tossed the dog that worried the cat
That killed the rat that ate the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built.
This is the cock that crowed in the morn
That waked the priest all shaven and shorn
That married the man all tattered and torn
That kissed the maiden all forlorn
That milked the cow with the crumpled horn
That tossed the dog that worried the cat
That killed the rat that ate the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built.
This is the farmer sowing his corn
That kept the cock that crowed in the morn
That waked the priest all shaven and shorn

That married the man all tattered and torn
That kissed the maiden all forlorn
That milked the cow with the crumpled horn
That tossed the dog that worried the cat
That killed the rat that ate the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built.
This is the horse and the hound and the horn
That belonged to the farmer sowing his corn
That kept the cock that crowed in the morn
That waked the priest all shaven and shorn
That married the man all tattered and torn
That kissed the maiden all forlorn
That milked the cow with the crumpled horn
That tossed the dog that worried the cat
That killed the rat that ate the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built.

Feb 8-21: no records entered

Feb 22

It occurs to me that there are hardly any mirrors at NASA. It's not that the place is completely austere exactly - there are photographs lining the public hallways, you see charts, models, a sculpture or two, sitting neglected in the airless lobby – but no mirrors. Even in the bathroom, you wash your hands staring at the wall.

We spent our first few weeks in and out of the main buildings; forms, handshakes, meetings, waiting. Then it was over to the training base; fewer faces, fewer names, routine, running, memorising. There was a lot to learn, naturally. You come to understand that up there, you will cease to function, in the way that you'd typically understand it anyway. Your body can't do what it normally does; you have to think differently, you are learning to do things for the first time again. You will have to put in ten times the effort for the same result. You are training to become a child, inside a toy, suspended in the universe.

This is the maiden all forlorn.

The precise terms of mission statement vary but the reason given is always the same: we are to advance human understanding of the universe.

I'm coming to think that the whole mission is in fact an exercise in keep internal from external, to deal in vacuums. We are kept apart from this world that we might be made ready to explore new ones. We are asked to report on our psychological state but not to reflect. External must never meet internal, no gaps in the suit, no screws loose.

Feb 22- March 03: no records entered

March 4

They warn you about the possible side-effects, of the isolation, of removing ourselves from everything familiar. Depression, insomnia, anxiety, dissociation.

Dissociation is the one that interested me most, to be of your body but not of your mind, to be - for a short time – blissfully unaware of your own existence.

I tell the psychiatrist, the psychologist and the nurses at my meetings about the wheat field. I only did one semester of Freud and Jung and the basics, but I can't see the harm in a wheat field. I imagine it makes me sound wholesome, grounded. I explain that in the dream, my grandmother's voice is reading me Wuthering Heights. I never really understood the love story, but I thought of Cathy and Heathcliff out on the moors, that they must be like my windy wheat field, that they stand for every barren place.

In all of the sessions, I try to give them something; I make a good show of polite, respectful, engaged. But in truth I couldn't have cared less. When we go into a laboratory and talk about 'behaviour', we are describing that which can be measured, tested, predicted. But the Psy-guys, they can predict nothing. They can test nothing. They look at the human mind, and they are measuring nothing.

Launch is t-16 days.

This is the horse and the hound and the horn.

March 5-8: no records entered

March 9

The moon has only reflected light and its gravity only serves to tell us about our own. So where are we going?

In space, certain words are released from their existence on earth; they float out of mouths, into ears, unencumbered where they were once weighted down with specific meaning. They can still be used of course but must be tethered by guide-ropes of further words, of a firmer context.

When they perfect the robots, men will be sent into space for novelty alone; the way everyone loves to see a dog on a surfboard.

Mission Dates March 10 – September 19

October 3

I've made lists, filled in reports, done interviews, complied with tests, affirmed facts and figures and finally they have asked for some General Reflections. If I have learned one thing in the course of the last months, it's that NASA does not deal in 'vague'. Shades of meaning are abhorred. In fact, I can't think of a word taken from the French would ever be approved of. I never even saw a buffet lunch.

The truth is I don't know just what happened and I don't know what help I can be. I'm certain of only a handful of things: Lt. Robert Clifford Allen cannot have been in four different places at once. Two people cannot have observed him outside and inside of the craft within the space of ten minutes as it takes fifteen minutes simply to engage or disengage the outer door. Any biologist will tell you that nothing containing chemical elements ever truly disappears, it can only transform into something else. Therefore as much as it appears the only explanation, that Lt. Allen is gone, into the awesome and pitiless nothing, the only truth that can exist is that a change happened, one that we did not know how to witness nor record.

We were there primarily to observe, not even to conduct our own research. I've put together my observations on the program, and I suppose it will be up to others to organise my memories into something that can perhaps help to make sense of the situation.

Oct 8-21: no records entered

October 22

A human being alone is always a danger to themselves. When you are the only movement, the only sound, the only human trace, the mind will try to expand to fill the space. And fail. Eternity is too long and endlessness is too vast, and we're helpless, alone under the sky.

Sometimes I wonder, did Lt. Allen lie about his dreams too? Did he see something like a gaping jaw, a silent scream?

It is a strange thing to think of others picking over your unordered thoughts. I was the observer and now I am the subject.

This is the priest all shaven and shorn.

Oct 22- Nov 14: no records entered

November 15

If we saw the face of God, would we recognise it for what it was? Would it be a friendly, smiling face to greet us, or will it be jawless, vacant, mute? How far away is He, and what are we to him? Are we just the dust that thinks?

Nov 16-30: no records entered

December 1

How is it possible he went missing and we were unaware? Every other crew member and observer remembers seeing him last in a different place at a different time, and the video outlay supports these reports. That is to say it can show nothing to contradict them. And the individual reports do little to contradict each other directly, but taken together, the story they tell is impossible. Lt. Robert Clifford Allen cannot have been in four different places at once.

I never really got to know Lt. Allen, everyone spoke well of him. My initial impression was that he was one of these people it's impossible to age, he could have been thirty or fifty, only his rank was any indication and even then numerous factors can account for this marker too.

I only spoke with him directly about technical details, very little small talk. I overheard him seemingly talking to himself just once; he was looking out of Bay 2, as far as I could tell, at nothing. It sounded like he had said "darkling plain".

Dec 2

Observing a situation changes it, so are we each responsible to some degree, reflecting the light at different angles, diffracting and interfering?

Who was Jack? What is the significance, if any, of the house that he built?

It is dangerous to go into the unknown, when we do not know ourselves.

December 3

Of course Jack is simply a cipher. Not a man, just a name. The text was in fact probably selected for its specific quality that it is as meaningless as possible, as it is not our

associations that they are testing. After all this time, I don't understand what it was they thought they were testing.

It's not possible, is it, that we were part of a larger, unseen experiment?

****CONCLUSION OF JOURNAL ENTRIES****

Note: Each subject reported later 'seeing' Lt. Allen, again under different circumstances and in differing times and places. Subject 6 claimed during a psychiatric de-briefing six months after Exit Report was filed that Lt. Allen had "come to her in a dream, arms outstretched, mouthing something incomprehensible". This was not perceived to be of value. Subject was debriefed December 9.