A Nuclear Refrain
Kye Askins, Phil Johnstone, Kelvin Mason

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“One question at a time.” From nowhere came a gently amused voice.

Roger squinted, still in darkness, yet his senses told him he was no longer in his own bed. He could just make out a seated figure. Marjorie?

“Where am I?” he chose.

“You’re in a future,” the figure told him, rising to move closer so that he could make out their androgynous features. Not Marjorie.

“The future?” he queried, shaking his head.

“A future,” the figure corrected. “The future is impossible to be. Anything can hap-
pen. Once, who could have imagined votes for women? The Berlin Wall being built then torn down? Hiroshima and Nagasaki?”

“Who are you?” Roger demanded.

“They call me Little Boy. It’s a joke,” Little Boy said with a pantomime grimace.

Roger looked askance.

“I’m not little and I’m not a boy,” Little Boy had to explain.

Roger still didn’t get it.

“I’ll show you around,” Little Boy said.

“Alright,” Roger found himself saying.

Rising unsteadily to his feet, he realised they were in a small caravan. Shafts of light squeezed their way between the drawn curtains.

“Daytime?”


Roger followed her out of the caravan, into a verdant clearing in a beech wood. The early morning light filtered through the canopy to dapple the ground. The air felt invigoratingly cool.
Unnerved by his third spectral encounter in less than twenty-four hours, Roger asked: “Do you exist when I’m not here?”

“Well, you don’t believe in ghosts, do you?”

“Humbug,” Roger pronounced, though his voice quavered.

“I borrowed a bicycle for you,” Little Boy said. “Adjust the seat if it’s too high.”

“It’s fine,” Roger decided. He hadn’t ridden a bicycle for years, not since university, in fact. Sensibly, he tucked his pin-striped trousers into his Union Jack socks.

“Off we go then,” Little Boy said, mounting her own bicycle and setting off along a path through the trees.

Roger followed. Though he wobbled a bit at first, his body soon remembered what to do. Just like riding a bike, he thought. His guide’s clothes, he noted, were patched and work-worn but still colourful. For a moment, he felt oddly cheered.

When they emerged from the woods onto a narrow tarmac road, Roger pedalled hard to catch up with Little Boy.
“So, where are we?” he demanded, struggling for breath.

“We’re in the area which in your own time was, I believe, known as the Atomic Weapons Establishment,” Little Boy told him.


“We call it Another Way of Earth. Another of our little jokes. No one here can resist a pun. Mostly we just say awe, as in awesome.”

“How awful,” Roger winced. “But where is security?”

“Actually,” Little Boy answered, clearly somewhat abashed, “security is my working group. We call it Group Secks. Well, we would, wouldn’t we?!”

“I’m curious,” Roger said sternly, “how you keep the peaceniks and anarchists out?”

“Er, Roj…,” Little Boy stuttered.

“Roger,” Roger insisted haughtily, “the Right Honourable Roger C. Bezeeneos, actually.”

“Not Jolly Roger, then,” Little Boy teased. “I’ll call you Ranking Roger. Thing is, Ranking, we are the peaceniks and anarchists.”
Roger almost fell off his bike.
“The lunatics,” he said when he could speak again, “have taken over the asylum.”
“Does it look like Bedlam to you?” Little Boy asked, indicating the landscape.
Everywhere Roger looked was cultivated, mostly small irregular plots growing a variety of crops. In the distance he saw two large poly-tunnels. Elsewhere, a herd of goats; an apple orchard sparkled with a ripening red crop. Here and there in copses of deciduous trees, Roger made out dwellings: decorated caravans, yurts, and one straw-bale construction that people were still building. Also dotting the vista were granaries, stacks of firewood, a lorry with no wheels up on blocks….
“It looks like hell on Earth,” the urban and orderly Roger pronounced.
They cycled on without speaking for a minute that was defined by its prickling vibe rather than its ticking seconds.
“No cars,” Roger observed eventually.
“Car-free zone apart from the odd delivery truck or one of our electric vehicles taking produce into the free market in Reading. Not your sort of free market,” Little Boy added.

There was debris piled at each side of the road: lengths of tree trunk, the burnt-out shell of a car, boulders and sections of heavy-duty fishing net.

“Barricades,” Little Boy supplied, responding to Roger’s quizzical look, “in case the police try to evict us again. These don’t stop them completely, of course, but it gives us time to get people onto the tripods.”

She indicated a tall structure with three steel legs that were connected where they crossed. Above the crossover was mounted a wooden platform, and on that a rudimentary shelter.

“And, vitally, it gives us time to mobilise the folk in our support networks.”

“People support you?” Roger was aghast.

“Last time the police came,” Little Boy told him, “more than forty thousand people blocked the road. They came from all over
the country, but mostly locals. The police might be prepared to hurt us — just peaceniks and anarchists, like you say — but they daren’t risk harming what you would call ‘ordinary hard-working people.’”

“Not hard-working enough,” Roger snorted, “not if they have time for that sort of caper!”

“We have groups from across Europe and Scandinavia who come to support us too,” Little Boy said, “and some of them stay on.”

“What business is our nuclear deterrent of theirs?” Roger snapped.

Little Boy simply favoured him with a disbelieving look.

“We also ensure that we film and livestream everything the police do,” she said. “How long have you been here?”

“The occupation’s almost twenty years old. They haven’t attempted to evict us for a good few years — and they have been good! Last time they tried was when I came as a supporter, and stayed on. They never really give up, though. Our presence offends the state; it’s a territory thing. They’re not much
concerned with the facility anymore, the nuclear moment has passed for Britain. Although, the technologies still raise their ghoulish heads every now and again.”

“You stopped….” Roger was flabbergasted.

“Our occupation can’t take all the credit,” Little Boy confessed. “Mostly it was economics, or, anyway, finance. It’s always all about money for them, bottom-line. Nuclear became too expensive. Strategic alliances shifted too, as the world moved to more emancipatory geopolitics.”

“Britain defenceless!” Roger gasped.

“Britain is secure through affirmative alliances, rather than threats and ‘deterrence’. The occupation here surely played a part in changing the political climate, resisting what used to be the dominant order. At first, small groups, ‘the nuclei,’ broke in, locked on,¹ and

¹ Locking on is a tactic often used by people taking non-violent direct action. Attaching themselves securely to something or to one another, activists construct lock-on devices to make it as difficult as possible for police to remove them.
blocked the roads. We followed up quickly with a critical mass, ‘the mushroom cloud.’ After a few weeks, the authorities just gave up. Each person they arrested was replaced by two more.”

They were approaching some industrial buildings that ran along both sides of the road. In the distance, many more such buildings were visible, block upon block of them.

“Is that…,” Roger began.

“The architecture formerly known as awe Burghfield,” Little Boy confirmed. “We use most of the buildings: communal living spaces, a bunkhouse for volunteers. We have a health-centre, two schools, a theatre, a bakery and a brewery; everything you’d expect in a community, I guess. But a few buildings are still dangerously radioactive and some contain nuclear material.”

The colour drained from Roger’s face.

“Don’t worry,” Little Boy said, “we have a deal to let the old authorities in to do essential maintenance, it’s their mess after all. Otherwise, it’s part of the responsibility we’ve accepted: to keep the deadly stuff here so that
it can’t be sold on and used to make weapons by some other state, faction, or corporation.”
“Where are we going?” Roger demanded.
“Breakfast,” Little Boy supplied cheerfully, dismounting her bike as they arrived at the industrial buildings. She leaned it against the wall of a grey building that was adorned with murals, banners and vibrant graffiti.

“DEEDS NOT WORDS!” one slogan read, embracing its internal irony with an accompanying smiley face symbol rendered in black and green.

Disgruntled, Roger also dismounted and parked his bike.
“No lock?”
“No need.”

Roger followed Little Boy between two facing ranks of buildings. There were stalls with loaves of bread, eggs, and tomatoes. Unattended, most had a pot containing coins that were unfamiliar to Roger. Inside the buildings he saw people working, hammering, and sawing. A large group of children raced past them, laughing and yelling,
wholly absorbed in a game of some sort. One of the tail-enders in the stream, a fair-haired girl of seven or eight years old, halted long enough to study Roger’s socks. She looked up, met his eye, and favoured him with a delighted grin. The socks had been a Christmas present from Amanda, who’d handed the parcel to him with a completely straight face. Roger felt himself welling up. To hide his discomposure, he stopped for a moment to untuck his trousers from the socks.

Little Boy reached a sliding door, above which hung a sign reading “La CanTina”, alternate letters painted black and red. Heaving open the door, she ushered Roger inside.

Thirty or so people were scattered around, sitting in groups of threes and fours at an assortment of wooden tables. The floor was bare concrete, swept clean.

Enticing smells reached Roger’s nostrils. His stomach rumbled and he realised he was famished. Little Boy handed him a battered tin tray on which there was a plate, cup and cutlery. Equipping herself similarly, she led the way to a counter where a young man
greeted them. To Roger’s consternation, he had long hair in a ponytail and a silver stud through his lower lip. He took Little Boy’s plate and filled it as she indicated with tofu, kale, mushrooms and fried tomatillos. Little Boy helped herself to a chunk of rustic bread from a basket. The young man took Roger’s plate and beamed at him enquiringly.

“The—er—same,” Roger said, taking some bread for himself.

“No meat?” he asked Little Boy is a whisper, somehow embarrassed.

“Most people are vegan,” she explained patiently. “Some eat our own eggs, goat’s butter, and cheese: environment; ethics; animal consciousness… loads of reasons.”

At the end of the counter was a paint tin labelled “Tina’s Can” into which Little Boy deposited some coins.

“How much?” Roger asked.

“Donations,” Little Boy told him. “What’s the meal worth to you?”

Roger’s mouth watered.

He pulled a handful of coins from his pocket, eyed the inviting plateful of food,
and tipped the lot into the tin. When he thought about it, he had no idea how to value food and work that didn’t quantify itself as labour, especially not here.

Little Boy arched an eyebrow.

“They’ll have fun with those coins, Ranking. Antiques. I forgot.”

Roger followed Little Boy to a table. She chose to share with two people already intent on their own meals. One was a grizzled man with olive skin, wearing bib-and-brace overalls. The other was a darker-skinned young woman, wearing a rainbow turban. Oddly enough, something about her reminded Roger of Marjorie, perhaps the way she smiled so warmly to welcome them to the table. Marjorie exuded warmth like that, he’d almost forgotten. Would his wife have missed him yet, raised the alarm? Little Boy poured them both cups of coffee from a vacuum jug.

“Bon appétit, Ranking.”

They ate in an increasingly companionable silence. Roger’s unease at the intimidating weirdness of his environs eased as the food warmed him. It was really rather good.
La CanTina filled up and became noisy with chatter as groups of people arrived: some manual workers, judging by their clothing, parents with young children, a number of older people…. On the wall behind Little Boy’s head was a rather weird graphic of a man wearing a balaclava and smoking a pipe. Roger read the accompanying quote:

In our dreams we have seen another world, an honest world, a world decidedly more fair than the one in which we now live. We saw that in this world there was no need for armies; peace and justice and liberty were so common that no one talked of them as far off concepts but as things such as bread, birds, air, water, like books and voice…

When she noticed him reading, Little Boy recited without looking:

“This world was not a dream from the past, it was not something that came to us from our ancestors. It came from ahead,
from the next step we were going to take: Subcomandante Marcos.”

“I’ve never heard of him,” Roger said.

“You should get out more, Ranking.”

Continuing to eat his meal, Roger over-heard fragments of the conversation between their table companions. The young woman did most of the talking, carefully outlining something called “degrowth,” while her companion mainly nodded in agreement:

“Our local economy… downscaling production and consumption….”

“Living within our ecological means… enhancing well-being, equity, and the environment….”

“Creating forms of democratic institutions — our working groups, our hubs….”

“Focussing on sufficiency, conviviality, diversity… cooperation, mutual aid.”

Some of what he heard reminded Roger of the irritating South Coast MP. At one point, he caught the eye of the grizzled man who patted his stomach and raised his coffee cup in an appreciative salute.
When they’d finished breakfast and Little Boy had topped up their coffees, Roger got straight to what was eating him.

“This cannot happen.”

It was Little Boy’s turn to blanch.

“Deterrence,” Roger stated, though feeling less sure of himself, “keeps Britain safe. The threat of using nuclear weapons in retaliation for a nuclear attack from an enemy means that enemy can never risk a first strike. And, in case you don’t believe that we are the good guys, we can’t risk a first strike either.”

“Mutually Assured Destruction,” Little Boy recited deliberately. “But deterrence means stranding us in a present defined by fear, with no hope of transcendence towards trust.”

“You’re a philosopher?” Roger enquired warily. Philosophers were slippery devils.

“I’m what you might call an academic,” Little Boy said, “although I don’t work at a university. I believe the academy is everyone, everywhere; I research and write; I facilitate learning and I’m always learning myself. My main interest is ethics: how we choose to
behave and why; the values we hold and the virtues we might then enact. In this post-modern and post-nuclear world, I’m particularly interested in existentialist ethics.”

“You’re a unilateralist,” Roger decided.

“Actually, I’m not so interested in moral arguments around nuclear weapons as abomination, arguments that centre on the terrible effects of using them against civilians. In that regard, deterrence remains a quandary. If it’s morally wrong to kill millions of innocent civilians, is it similarly morally wrong to intend to do so?”

“Deterrence demands that each protagonist believes their enemy would use nuclear weapons,” Roger said. “We must mean our threat.”

“Hmm,” Little Boy intoned dubiously, “I’m more interested in what living in deterrence culture meant for our individual and collective capacity to transcend what we are cast as, and what we cast ourselves as. I’m interested in how, acting together, we counter those oppressions and seek to become
something else, something that we cannot even imagine.”

“You’re a hippy!”

“There’s nothing mystical about transcendence the way that I understand it,” Little Boy said. “Facticity denotes the givens of our situation such as, in your world, how geopolitical relationships are defined by deterrence, and the domestic culture of security which that dictates. People can’t break free of fear because they’re stuck in the present by the baggage of the past. In a sense, the present is made into the past, constructed to endlessly repeat.”

“Security is paramount,” Roger insisted. “People must be safe.”

At this point, the woman in the turban rose to leave, giving Little Boy’s shoulder a squeeze, though the two had not spoken together. The man left too, favouring Roger with a beaming smile that was like a burst of sunshine.

“What’s safe about living with the threat of mass annihilation?” Little Boy resumed their exchange. “Transcendence extends
beyond the givens of existence. It means that we can face up to facticity and reclaim some hope, the possibility of change, our freedom and humanity. And responsibility. Just as we’ve done here with this occupation: living democracy in action.”

“But democracy is voting…. It is parliament!” Roger exclaimed vehemently. Despite his vocal conviction, his hand shook when he picked up his cup as a bodily uncertainty suffused him.

“Before you came here and saw the place, experienced it, felt it, and we talked about it,” Little Boy pressed, “you could not even imagine here, could you?”

“Not like this,” Roger admitted.

“So imagine what I can imagine from here, from somewhere with, for you, unimaginable freedoms and responsibilities.”

“What are you asking of me?”

“Imagine the unimaginable,” Little Boy said, “not a future limited by your knowledge of the past and experience of the present, but an unknowable future beyond… a dream from ahead, as Marcos said.”
The writing on the wall, Roger thought.
“A future beyond reason,” Little Boy continued, in full flow now, “because reason has limited you. And also beyond the stifling emotions of fear, distrust, and hatred. Such a future is always becoming: spaces being revealed differently, shifting, stretched or intensified moments of time, offering insights into each other, empathies....”
“You put an awful lot of faith in human nature,” Roger interjected.
“Each glimpse and hint,” Little Boy continued, unfazed, “each half-heard whisper casts us further beyond the known past, fettered present, and so predetermined elements of our future. And it renders society something else: a new form of democracy where we can share ideas without censure; construct new relationships, spaces and moments. Together, we can fashion the unimaginable into the everyday, the extraordinary into the norm: dynamic reasoning and fresh feelings, transcending justice as the rule of law, and overcoming fear of the other.”
“Wow… whoa!” Roger gasped, reeling from the panorama that Little Boy was presenting him with. It was literally breathtaking.

“I know,” Little Boy sighed. “I am glad to have shared a possibility with you.”

“You could be wrong,” Roger said. “By taking that risk, deciding on freedom, we also take the responsibility to make it right.”

For a long while they sat without speaking.

Then, the young man who’d served their breakfast stood on a chair and called out: “We need washers-up!”

Roger stood, rolling up the sleeves of his shirt, and said: “I’ll go.”

“Such a small thing.” Little Boy muttered to herself as he went to help out.

Such a big thing.