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So Long Been Dreaming: Post-Colonial Science Fiction and Fantasy

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Native Aliens
Greg van Eekhout

1945

As Papa stands between the two rows of men holding rifles, he stands as a Dutchman. His shirt is starched white, tucked neatly into khaki trousers with creases sharp enough to cut skin. It is not especially hot today, but sweat pools under his arms and trickles down his back. The Indonesians with the guns are sweating too.

Papa's skin is as dark as the Indonesians', naturally dark and baked tobacco brown from years spent hammering together chicken coops and pigeon hutches in the backyard. He is a good carpenter, and people come to him for help and advice. But carpentry is not his job. He works as a bookkeeper for Rotterdamse Lloyd, the Dutch shipping company. He is a Dutchman with a Dutch job.

The men with rifles stand in two ragged rows, facing one another, before the entrance of the school where we learned our lessons, which now serves as a prison for enemies of the Indonesian revolution.

It is the imprecision of the Indonesians that angers Papa, their sloppy spacing, their relaxed and slovenly postures. They hold their guns as though they were shovels or rakes or brooms, and the Indonesians have no interest in hard work.

He recognizes almost all of them. This one sells satay in front of the train station. Papa's money has helped him buy the shoes on his feet. Another, Rexi, has actually been in our home. When he was a young boy, not so long ago, he

slipped on the rocks by the river and hit his head, and when we told Papa of this, Papa carried him in his arms and laid him down in the sitting room until the boy's grandfather came for him. He has sipped water from our well, and now he waits for Papa with a gun slung lazily over his shoulder.

A hand shoves Papa in the back, and Papa, slightly built, pitches forward and goes down to one knee in the dirt. He uses this opportunity to mouth a very quick prayer before being yanked roughly back to his feet.

The man who pulls Papa up is one of those he does not know. He is one of those who pounded on our door in the night and demanded we all assemble in the front room of our sprawling house built on the hill. "Are these the only men?" he asks, indicating Papa and me.

Mama explains that, yes, we are the only men. Ferdinand remains in Tokyo, where he has mined coal for the Japanese since his unit's capture. He mines coal no longer, though, because he was freed when the Japanese surrendered. When he is well enough to travel, he will return home. And there is Anthonie, the next eldest, but he is not here either. He is dead of tuberculosis, contracted in a jail cell of the Japanese occupation army.

And there is Papa. And there is me.

I am eleven years old. Later, there will be a camp for me and Mama and my sisters. But for now, they take only Papa.

The man steadies Papa, who is shaking now, who is so afraid he cannot stop shaking, who hates himself for shaking, who should not have to fear his own neighbours. "I am a bookkeeper," he says. "What have I to do with this?"

"You are a Dutchman," says the man. "Isn't that what you always insist? At your office at Rotterdamse Lloyd? At the train station where you buy your Dutch newspaper? At the cantina where you drink your coffee? At the swimming pool where only the Dutch can swim. At home, where your servants cook your food and clean your house and raise your children? 'I am a Dutchman. My family is a Dutch family.' Isn't that what you always say?"

Three generations ago, a Dutchman came from the Netherlands and married an Indonesian girl. There have been Indonesians and Dutch-Indonesians in our family for three generations, but no one from Holland.

"Yes, I am a Dutchman."

"Yes. You are," the man says to Papa. "And now, you must run."

Papa is not the first to receive this command today. He knows what's expected of him.

The men with rifles change their stances. They spread their legs to shoulder

width. They bend at the knees. They raise their guns over their shoulders, inverted with the rifle butts held before them, and they wait.

The dirt at the feet of these men, his neighbours, is dark with blood and vomit and urine and shit. This is the entrance to a new prison.

Papa hopes that if he runs fast enough, maybe only a few of the rifle butts will strike him. Maybe not too hard.

He makes the sign of the cross and takes a step forward.

2367

At school, they tell us about Preparation. It's almost all we talk about. For the last three months, we haven't read stories. We haven't done logic problems. We haven't learned songs or sculpted in clay or played games or done swim-dances. All we talk about is Preparation.

In three months time a ship will arrive, and all 879 of us Brevan-Terrans will board, and we will spend the next four years travelling to Earth.

We need Preparation for the journey, and we need Preparation for the arrival.

At the beginning of the year, our teacher was Mr Daal, a Brevan-Terran like my classmates and me. But after the Re-Negotiation Si Tula, a Brevan man, with eyes so blue they seem to glow even when he shuts his lids, replaced him. He speaks in a deep-horn voice and is very nice.

In a circle, we sit on the floor in trays of warm brine, watching the pictures Si Tula projects before us. There is a planet of blue and white and brown, and I already know this is Earth, because I've been seeing it for months and months now. It's been on the news. Mama has been showing us books about it. Opa has been reading pamphlets about Earth.

Si Tula begins every lesson by showing us Earth. "This is your home," he always says. And then he raises his arms, his long fingers slowly fluttering as though they were underwater, and we know what to say: *This is Earth. This is where we come from. This is where we going. It will be good to be home.*

After that, the Preparation lesson is always a little different. We have seen the cities of Earth, which are big, sprawling fields of light. We have seen the animals of Earth, which are kept inside the cities in houses of their own for all to see. We have seen the great oceans, so much broader and deeper and more

powerful than our little lakes on Breva.

"Your home is a mighty world," Si Tula says. And he flutters his fingers, and we respond: *Breva is too small for Earth.*

This is something the Brevan said a lot during the Re-Negotiation. It's the reason why all us Brevan-Terrans must go.

I have a question, so I raise my hand, and Si Tula bows respectfully towards me, his rib-arms lowered. It is odd, seeing my teacher bow to me. It is not something our old teacher would ever do. But Brevans are taught from childhood to bow to Brevan-Terrans.

"You may speak, Dool," he says.

I click my valves. "We have seen Terran habitations and Terran animals and Terran planetary features."

Nervous – and not knowing why – I shift in my tray, water sloshing over the sides. Si Tula nods encouragement, so I continue. "But . . . when will we see Terran *people*?"

Si Tula makes an appreciative click. "Thank you, Dool. I am pleased you asked. For what now follows is the most important part of Preparation. All else is merely knowing. But this, what we are about to learn, will require doing. It will require doing from you. It will require doing from the Health and Wellbeing Authority. It will require doing from all."

The Health and Wellbeing Authority is a new organization formed after the Re-Negotiation. Only Brevans sit on the Health and Wellbeing Authority.

Si Tula moves his hands, and a new projection appears in the middle of the circle. It is a pair of creatures. They are four-limbed – two thick limbs upon which they stand, and two thinner, upper limbs which end in things that look very much like hands. One of the creatures has a large pair of teats in front. The other has much smaller teats, and a penis. Their faces are flat and unexpressive. I have seen enough pictures of Terran animals to know that these creatures would live on land.

The projection progresses, and the creatures now wear clothing of sorts, and they move about in various settings. Here, they fold their legs beneath them and sit on the ground, planting a tree. And then they are in a structure, putting food into their tiny mouths. Here they are holding a baby creature, and despite their alien faces, it is clear they are happy. These are intelligent creatures, perhaps. More like me than like animals.

"This is you," Si Tula says. "This is you. These are Terrans, and this is what you are. This is how you were when you came to Breva. This is how you will

be again."

Si Tula pauses. When he does this, we know we are to remain quiet and think about what he has said. This is us, he has told us. This is me. This is how I was.

After a suitable interval, I raise my hand.

Si Tula bows.

"I don't understand," I say. "How can these creatures be us? They have no rib-arms, no dorsals, no valves. They are land creatures. How can this be me? I don't understand."

He smiles, his eyes very blue. "Your confusion is not surprising to me. It is a new concept. It is a new concept for all of you. But you will get used to it. Given enough time, one can get used to anything."

1949

They had told us we'd be coming to a place of colours. There would be fields of tulips, white and pink and yellow and red, a celebration of colours against the blue sky. There would be wonders – windmills and canals and lanes alive with bicycles. This would be a home. We were not Indonesian, we were Dutch, they told us, and this would be our home.

What we find here is stone. The buildings are blocks of neatly stacked stone, and the streets are stone and brick, fitted together, tight and clever. They had told us it would be cold, and it is. They had told us we would get used to it, and they were lying, because how can I get used to this? Even in my jacket, which weighs as much as I do, and the wool hat that scratches my scalp, and the gloves that prevent me from feeling anything I touch, I am cold. "You'll get used to it," they tell us.

We are home. The third floor of a narrow stone building is our home. There is a small sitting area, and we can all sit together if we keep our legs tucked close. There is a room for Mama and Gerda and Anki. Because I am the only boy – the only male in my family who survived the Japanese occupation and the Indonesian revolution – I have a room to myself, shared with the two steamer trunks we brought from Jakarta.

When Mr Kaarl, the landlord, was showing us the apartment, he realized it was quite different from what we were used to. "The water closet is down the

hall," he said, jingling a ring of keys. "That'll be different for you, but you'll get used to it. They make a lot of noise, but it's more privacy than you had in your other life."

Gerda peers down the hall skeptically. "More privacy? But we have to share it with everyone else on the floor."

Mr Kaarl laughs. He has a very friendly laugh. "But it's covered and indoors, at least. No prying eyes."

Gerda frowns, not understanding.

I, however, understand very well.

Mama casts me a sharp warning look, but I don't mind such looks. At fifteen, I am the man of the house.

"Mr Kaarl believes," I explain to Gerda, "that back home we used the river as our lavatory."

When I see terror, rather than anger, in Mama's eyes, I feel a small pang of regret. There have been many moments in the last few years in which the wrong word has had grave consequences. She still thinks Papa is dead because of all his bragging about being a Dutchman. But many of our neighbours are dead, and they weren't all the braggarts Papa was. There was a war, and once the Japanese were defeated there was a revolution, and the Dutch were cast out. Many people died, of course. Blood of all kinds soaked into the ground.

But my comment was spoken in Indonesian, so Mr Kaarl only smiles a happy, puzzled smile. "Chattering monkey," he says, winking. "I'm renting to a lot of chattering monkeys lately. I should have invested in trees instead of buildings." And he laughs, his cheeks very pink.

2367

When Preparation finally happens, it happens in a dry, silver room. It is unlike any room I've ever been in. There are no mollusks clinging to the walls. There is no soft carpet of moss beneath my feet. There is no gentle trickle of water.

I am alone. I am here with only a Brevan doctor, his green-and-black mottled chest blinking with medical devices.

"This is the kind of room Terrans build," he says.

I tell him no, that is wrong, that my ancestors were Terran, and they built no

dead rooms like this.

And I am told, Yes, oh, yes, they did. But Breva remained Brevan, and over time, Terran rooms became Brevan. The Terran rooms were changed, sometimes deliberately, to adapt to the Brevan environment. And sometimes Breva simply took what Earth brought into its embrace, and then transformed it. But too often, Brevan rooms were made into Terran rooms, and many Brevan rooms died forever. "Earth is mighty, indeed," says the doctor. "But there is more than simple might, is there not? Is there not also patience? Is there not also resolve? What lasts longer – a heart that beats hard, or a heart that beats gentle?"

This particular room has been drained of water. In this room, the mollusks have been scraped away. In this room, herbicide has killed the moss. This room is once more a Terran room, and it must be this way, says the doctor, for the Preparation.

In the centre of the room is an oval table, shaped like an altar in a bulb-temple. "Recline upon it," says the doctor.

I look at the table. I look above it. Hanging above the table is a cluster of silver arms, dangling down like jellyfish tentacles. Blades glint in the silver room.

The doctor's eyes are blue as Si Tula's, but not at all kind.

And I run. I run towards the door, towards the cool wet air of outside, away from this dry and silver room, away, away, towards home.

I don't get far. The doctor lashes out with his rib-arms, and though I struggle and beat at his arms and try to pry loose from his suction with my soft fingers, he is too strong, and he pulls me in and lifts me and sets me on the table. And once on the table, I cannot move.

"How do you feel?" the doctor says.

"I feel nothing."

He moves his hands, and the silver arms overhead descend.

"Good," says the doctor. "We can begin now."

He begins by severing my rib-arms.

When I scream out – not in pain, but in something else, something worse – he adjusts the table and I am silent.

"Yes," he says. "That is good. Your life has been good and comfortable, and it will be so in continuance. You have no cause to cry."

1969

It occurred to me some time ago that my backyard is a re-creation. The chicken coop, with the half dozen Leghorns and Rhode Island Reds, is a plywood attempt at something Papa might have built. Only, he was a carpenter, and I just began playing with wood and nails seven years ago, when we came to California. My work is a mess of crooked surfaces and ill-fitted joints, but it keeps the chickens inside, and that's what's important. I fear once the pigeon hutch is done, only the fattest and stupidest cats will fail to find a way in.

But this is my backyard. In Holland, we shared a courtyard. Here, we have something: A rambling, cluttered, wild backyard that I can think of as home.

To have a home of your own – something that can't be taken away – this is no small thing. We rent now, but someday, perhaps, it will be ours.

Of course, anything can be taken away. Even here, in this country, anything can be taken away from any person.

It's important to keep that in mind.

I turn satay kambing on my barbeque grill while across the fence, the neighbour flips hamburgers on his. Between the pickets, I see the neighbour's boy watching me. He wrinkles his nose as if he smells something foul, and I say, loud enough for him to hear, "Mmmm. Good dog. Good, delicious dog." Even louder: "Say, I wonder where Ranger is?"

Ranger is the boy's sweet-faced mutt.

The boy runs to complain to his father, and the neighbour scowls at me.

I smile and wave.

2371

To be Terran is to walk without water. Earth is a wet world, but our home is a dry building. There is water in the walls – sometimes I can hear it course through pipes – but it comes out only in faucets, and it can be collected only in small vessels. There is a tub in the bathroom, roughly the size of a coffin, but it is dead water and I will not stay in it.

My family is fortunate. We have been located near the sea, only twenty minutes by rail, and I have a job on the shore. I sell tourist items to those who visit the water. They like to buy clothing and sensations that remind them of

their travels. I sell these items well, and someday, perhaps, I will have a business of my own. I often wonder if people who come to the sea might like to have sensations that don't remind them of where they've been, but instead show them where they cannot go.

In the shop's changing room is a mirror, and I always volunteer to clean it. It is not pleasant to examine myself, but doing so is like the kind of meditation we did back home in the bulb-temples.

My body is made for work. My two arms are stronger than my rib-arms ever were, which were made for sculling. My lungs don't take in as much air as they used to, but I get enough oxygen by inhaling often. Sometimes I stand and look at myself as I am now, and then I try to imagine myself as I was. Neither body seems quite right. My new body is alien to me, and my old body is alien to this world. When I clean the mirror, I see a puzzle that cannot be solved, or an out-of-place object that has no place.

In times that are not busy, I can look outside the shop, out over the ocean. The surf can be violent here, and the waves boom against the sand, fingers of white foam reaching out and grasping, as if the ocean were trying to pull itself up on the land. Twice a day, the ocean gets as far as it can go, but then it recedes. Despite its strength, the ocean must always return to itself.

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1969

Last night, we went to the Moon. Three men were packed like the last pairs of socks into an overstuffed suitcase and then they went to the Moon. I didn't stay up to watch, but Anthony did. From down the hall, I could dimly hear the voices from the television, and the sound of Anthony clapping and bouncing in the squeaky-springed chair.

He's a dreamer, my son. He believes in better places.

He comes out of the house and I hand him an unseasoned lamb skewer. Satay kambing should be made with goat, but nobody eats goat here.

"How are your spacemen?"

"Astronauts," he corrects. "I don't know. Mama made me turn off the TV. She thinks I need more sunlight."

"The spacemen can get by without you watching them."

"The most important moment in the history of humanity, and Mama's worried

about my Vitamin D."

I bite my lip to keep from laughing. He's a funny kid, my son. And smart. Much smarter than I was at twelve. Or smart in other ways, I suppose. By the age of twelve, I'd lost two brothers. I'd seen Japanese Zeroes fly over my house. I'd seen my father taken away by our neighbours to die. Not much time for jokes when I was his age.

"So, first we walk on the Moon," I say. "And then what? We come back home? We use what we learned to build better adding machines? New and improved vacuum cleaners?"

He gives me a look that, had I ever given to my Papa, would have earned me a slap across the face. And I let it pass. I have learned to let so much pass. It is a better way of getting through life, I think.

"It's not about . . . *things*," Anthony says. "It's about going places. There's so much out there, Dad." About a year ago, he stopped calling me Papa and started calling me Dad. I understand why – it's what American boys call their fathers – but I have yet to get used to it. I will, in time, but not yet. "We can't stay here forever. First, the Moon. Then, by the time I graduate college, Mars. Then the asteroid belt, maybe. And the moons of Jupiter. By the time I have kids, the stars. There'll be other planets. Other worlds. Maybe with intelligent life. We have to go there."

"We can barely live on the Moon," I argue. "Billions of dollars and space suits and thousands of people to make it happen. And the Moon is just next door, isn't it? It's just a few thousand miles away."

He gives me that look, and I chide myself for baiting him. The Moon is 240,000 miles away. I've been following everything too.

Anthony clamps down his molars on a chunk of lamb and tears it from the skewer. "Things'll be different by the time we get to the stars," he says. "We'll be different. I read a story about it. If we find life out there, we'll change ourselves to be more like what we find. We'll make our bodies and brains different. We won't even have to come back home. We'll be so well adapted that we can survive wherever we land as efficiently as the native aliens."

Native aliens.

I let the paradox pass.

Removing the satay from the grill, I lay the skewers down in neat rows on a plate. "But, what if the life we find out there doesn't want us? What if they see us as a threat? People come to a new land, and they want to change it. They want to make it like the place they came from, and they want to be top dog.

Visitors who refuse to go home aren't really visitors."

"We'll be welcome," he says, with so much confidence that I feel my heart fissure, "because we'll come with peaceful intentions."

This is a moment, now. This is a moment in which I could press the issue. I could bring to bear my thirty-five years of life experience, of scratches and bruises and scars and calluses. I could strip away every one of my son's naive sentiments and make him see the world as it is. I have seen blood in the dirt. I bet I could make my son see it too.

I hand him the plate of satay. "Bring this to the kitchen. And then watch your spacemen walk on their rock."

"Astronauts," he says, taking the plate. "And it's not just some rock. It's a world."

I pierce more lamb chunks onto skewers. "Okay. Have it your way. A world. Tell me if the astronauts find something good on their new world."

He gives me his look and takes the satay kambing into the house.

I stay in my backyard and look to the sky.

There's nothing to see there, but I look on my son's behalf, praying that he'll never have to see what I see.