

KAIJU!

By David Stevens

WHY WE LIKE IT: *As lovers of all types of writing we raise a middle finger to the notion that genre specific storytelling is not the equal of literary fiction. Is the overcooked steak superior to the perfect hamburger? KAIJU! formidably acquits itself of this prejudicial charge and then some. Through burnished prose non-human creatures passionately convey distinctly human qualities and with no back story or indication of what's ahead, the mystery of the tumultuous present we find ourselves in only deepens. There are humbling passages throughout, and the surgery scene is startling, like nothing we've read before. KAIJU! is stellar fiction (genre or otherwise) and if, in Pound's words 'the age demanded an image of its accelerated grimace', we're pretty sure this juggernaut dystopian fantasy would be one of them.*

A cop vibe first, then, no: junkie. Both? Whatever: the guy gave off weird. Then he proved it by waving a naked stump at Tati, the melted remnant of his handless arm clubbing the air near her face. *Ahh, prescription pain killers*, and now she was all ready for a confab, to compare notes, when he bent to confide in her.

"I feel it," he spat, sweating. "It's freezing down there."

Not here, Tati thought, too short to escape the trapped body heat of the dozens around them on the basketball court. “No,” the doctor had barked over the phone at her when she questioned the location, “it’s not sports therapy. What the hell is *sports therapy*?” A question that was pointedly not an answer.

The cop/junkie was at her. “The depths are crushing, you would think it could not survive. But late at night I feel my hand down there, searching, feeling its way through the silt, traversing deep canyons. Sharp ridges. The chewed-down rib cages of whale carcasses. All the shit in the world – its gotta end up somewhere, right?”

Her arm was grabbed, distracting her from the crazy. Tati turned. When she saw it was Dr Thurston, she slowly unclenched her fist.

“Tatiana.” She winced, not the habitual response to her pain, but at the way the extravagance of her name plumbed its way out of the doctor’s mouth. Like her mother thought she was the second last of the Romanoffs or something. “Kindly cease chatting with Sergeant Burns and assume your position.”

His commanding voice, impossible jaw, the broad shoulders and chest, the silver mane – she saw it all, could appreciate it in a detached way, but the combination was never going to work on her, not with a penis in the package.

“Yeah, no, I’m just gonna go now.”

“Preposterous. With portents like these? With the sigils freshly in place, and the gang all here? Nonsense, we’re just commencing.”

Tati didn't know what the doctor was rambling about, but a boy with skin grown over where his left eye should have been distracted her before she thought to yell at the doctor about it.

"I don't belong here, not with –." She gestured randomly, then looked and saw she was pointing at twin brothers, identical down to their crutches, except one had an empty trouser leg pinned up at his left knee, the other his right. *Far out.*

"These people are missing bits. That's not me. I don't fit in."

"You are such a snob Tatiana. They'll accept you. Come along," and he clapped, "doctor's orders."

"Can't you just write me a prescription, for my back?"

The doctor drew an exasperated breath and again clapped his hands, this time at her face. "Tatiana - there is nothing wrong with your back."

Just like that.

Sound left the room, except for the pulse of blood in her ears: *thump-thump; thump-thump ...* . A shield came down all round her, blocking out the world. Her face went blank, one corner of her mouth stroke-tugged downwards. She rocked on the balls of her feet, waiting. She knew an impulse would arrive to direct her actions, that her anger would rise and do its thing.

The doctor looked down, still speaking. Words filtered through. "*Your back is glorious. Our whole enterprise depends upon your back and the burden you carry.*" Everyone in the room was staring, except of course the ones with both eyes missing. An eternity of a few deep breaths later, she turned to leave. Thurston was

fast for a big man, though, and blocked her path. Next to him stood a man without a nose, sticking his face out, daring her to stare.

“Tatiana, your back is perfect.”

What a fool. She was an idiot. He was no different from the rest of the long line of doctors. All the clinics, the specialists, the mandated wastes of her time because for some reason you had to earn a pain killer. Tati remembered them all. The many who told her to learn acceptance. The particular useless moron who lectured her about meditating on Marcus Aurelius every morning, when she couldn't even lift herself off the floor. The emergency room doctors who left her until last because she was a regular, because if your pain is chronic, well then, you should be used to it, shouldn't you? Its only pain. Not a disease. If they could not explain something, it wasn't real. If they could not cure it, it wasn't happening. If they didn't understand it, the patients were lying. No greater affront to a doctor than a problem they couldn't solve. On cue, her back throbbbed in response, a great dragging pain at the base of her spine, tearing all the way up to her shoulders. She wasn't Sisyphus rolling a rock, she was dragging a great truck load of the bastards. Those dickheads on TV who pull 747s along the tarmac with just their teeth had nothing on her. Her eyes watered, she felt like vomiting, but she refused to show emotion in front of yet another useless quack.

She didn't want to speak, didn't trust what might come out, didn't want to give him the satisfaction of a meltdown in front of all these people. She stepped to the left, moved to the right, but a wheelchair rolled through the crowd to block her. A black man, bald, but it wasn't absent hair that brought him to this gathering. His arms were powerful, his shoulders broad, his torso locked into a turret on wheels.

She guessed there was not much of him left below the chest. His lips moved, pulling words up from some place she could not guess at. "We love your back".

"Move!" And now that she had started screaming, she could see no reason not to continue. "Let me out!"

The words did not work. A room full of creepy was coming right at her. Faces she did not want to see. Some that were hardly there at all.

Outside, the sun was bright. Tati caught a last glimpse of blue as the crowd moved in. Why hadn't she kept driving? Hit the beach, float for a while, and let the sea take her pain away. A deserted spot far from people. In the heat of the bodies, the noise of their limping, stumbling, crawling into position, she weakened. Her mind drifted from the press of the crowd for a moment. *Swimming beyond the breakers*. She imagined her hair long; thick tendrils of it spreading away from each other, reaching outwards over a gentle swell. Then she realised that it was not her hair that she pictured but a caul that the light shone through, her own skin peeling away gently, boundaries dissolving as salt water washed between her cells. Buoyant, just beneath the surface, basking plant like, the energy of the ocean oscillating through her expanding being. Fish nibbling, colonies forming: sponges, polyps, tiny crustaceans. *The pain distributed thinly over a vast surface, diluted, gone gone gone spread almost to nothingness...*

Sick of thinking, sick of planning, sick of having to deal with it all. Worrying about how she would get through each day, whether the pain would be bearable, how she would be able to cope. Tati reached back and rubbed at the base of her spine, the spot near her flecked birthmarks.

“We want to share your burden, Tatiana.”

Awake, alert, returned to the room, she slapped at Thurston’s outstretched hand.

“It took me so long to find you again.” She did not have a clue what he was talking about, but what the hell, he looked like he was going to cry. Meanwhile, the crowd of the rest shuffled closer. “We all depend on you. Be one of us.”

One of us ... There was no room, though she kicked out to create some. She would have run, but she was surrounded. They were touching her, she *hated* to be touched. Tati struck out, pushing a woman backwards, she should have fallen and cracked her skull, but the woman shifted only inches before bouncing back, her momentum dissipated amongst the tight scrum of bodies. Tati threw a quick right into the chin of a man reaching for her, but it turned out he had no chin. Then they were all against her, and she screamed and kicked, but could get no purchase as they lifted her off the floor. *We accept you, we accept you ...*

Amidst the hubbub, above her own cries, Thurston’s repeated words reached her: “So long to find you again”.

They were marching on the spot, establishing a rhythm. Shoulders, arms, flanks rubbed against her. The heat grew. She guessed at absences she could not see: open sores, draining abscesses, cancer-chewed holes. The stink of sweat, the multitudinous belches of yeasts and bacteria feasting on oils and proteins. Flesh rubbed roughly against flesh, skin cells flaked into the air, and they were all breathing in the meat of each other. Tati knew her resilience, but she feared she

would not last long, that the crowd was a wave that would overwhelm her and carry her down. She gasped for air.

The march continued. Surfaces wore away. Their long loneliness was threatened by the exposure of everything below, the intermingling of their nerves, a new intimacy infinitely beyond: *Now, tell me, where does it hurt?*

Breaching the surface, sucking down hot air, as Tati swung her head she glimpsed the one-legged twins, each on a different side of the group, banging their crutches in time.

She was surprised to discover that she had joined in.

Her back ached. It was always throbbing.

Her back did not ache. *It never had.* But pain was the only language she had to describe her experience. Nothing else made sense.

They were a stretched ball, starting to break out into preliminary limbs.

Sweat still poured from her, salt stung her eyes like the ocean. A whiff of brine. The heat from the bodies was a physical cloud, pressing down. She was still dizzy, but she could not fall, the others would not let her. They crushed each other upright.

The sprung floor shook. Thurston was near the front, losing it, swinging his shoulders from side to side, his head bobbing in rhythm. Sergeant Burns' stump of an arm was a waving baton, directing traffic.

Tati's back ached. *No* - it exhausted her with its demands. She lived with it, but she did not understand it.

The pace quickened. The noise deepened. The one-eyed boy screamed. Thurston bent and hoisted him aloft. Covered his good eye, the boy yelled, "I can see the darkness." The crowd bellowed infrasonically, Tati hearing it in her gut. The stomping grew harder. They bounced from the floor, aloft for longer and longer periods.

Tati recovered impossible memories. There she was, a baby. How could she be looking at herself? The images were stolen from the mind of someone else in the crowd. A man held her down, his hand nearly as large as her body. He was cutting at her! The meat of her body resisted. She felt the man's urge to press the blade, to break the tension of her skin at the base of her spine. He made careful incisions, but in the end, it was butcher-work. The bone beneath the meat was too thick for shears, even at her young age, so he had to carefully saw through it. In two places at once, she looked down on herself, and simultaneously felt the tug of flesh at her back. The man lifted the little slab of brawn. No vestigial stub this, she felt the heft of it in his hand, and the absence of it from her back, as he dropped her tail, brown and scaly, into a pan. A flash of light, a reflection caught in instruments or a mirror or a window, and there was an image of Dr Thurston, much younger, pulling away his surgical mask.

Memories, dreams, reflections danced amongst them all. She saw the twins running on the spot, crutches thrown away, phantom limbs taking their weight, throwing froth and bubbles off through the air. Through the boy's lone eye, she watched as the doctor's incredible jaw stuck out further. With his free hand, Thurston grabbed his own bottom lip and pulled roughly. Tati screamed, feeling the skin come apart as though it was her own, unable to stop the doctor's hand. He kept tugging, down, down, until his mouth split along the line of an ancient scar. His

cheek came away, the skin dangled. Tearing with his nails, digging his fingers in deep, he ripped the flesh away from his chin. They all screamed, sharing his pain. Meat hung loose over a titanium prosthesis, flapping about as Thurston shook his head, wild now, flecking the boy and the others around him with drops of blood, spots of flesh. He leaned back, stretching his shoulders so his chest bulged, then thrust forward, pushing into a mighty roar. A window burst. The glass flew outwards in slow motion. The sound came to Tati through deep water.

Tati tilted forward, her feet off the ground, suspended by the others. There was no pain now. Everything was as it was supposed to be. Buoyed with relief at agony's absence, Tati swam within the pool of meat, reaching with her arms, kicking frog-like with her legs. "Move," she demanded, joining Thurston's roar, and now they obeyed, pushed away by the command of her swinging hips. Nerves carried the sensations to her brain unhindered by gravity or rationality. She felt the long, heavy weight of her long-lost tail move behind her, a rudder guiding them, a whip thrusting them forward. The others were fortunate, ironically. Their absences were obvious. How could she ever have understood the phantom pain from an impossible missing limb? Tati drove them, and they were one, directed in their mission by her massive tail, the burden she gratefully shared with them all.

Somewhere in the abyssal depths, a massive body glided towards the distant continent, climbing from the seabed. Bit by bit it came together, claws, jaws, eyes, legs, tail, genitalia: the missing parts found each other. The fingers of Sergeant Burns' hand twitched as it reached upwards from the silt, and his wandering arm was wrenched free from the muck by the surging current generated by the passage of the forming creature, twisting, tumbling until it found its place. The missing leg

of each twin torpedoed into position. Reformed from ash from a hospital incinerator, Thurston's jaw locked into the structure.

Irresistible, the creature surged through the Sea of Japan (where else?), powered by memories of pain and frustration. A mountain range of water preceded it. The gymnasium thundered. Together, they would tower above the land. Tens of thousands would flee before them, deafened by the roar from Dr Thurston's returned jaw, the hubris of Tokyo's skyscrapers swept away at Tati's whim by her great tail. Rough-hewn, asymmetrical with its bubbles of eyes, dozens of them, its mixed assembly of suckered arms and tentacles and dinosaur talons, its mesh of hairless puckered multi-coloured skin and a broad swell of gargantuan muscle cascading off into eternity. One hundred hearts thrilled in unison, joined closer than melted flesh. Gaps were erased as they filled each other. Huge bubbles rose to the sea surface as the air between them was squeezed out. Tati shared their happiness. Together they exhaled their atomic breath, together they sucked in the sea and drowned. They felt no pain, endured no loss, suffered no more.

KAIJU! Uneasy at first, each step on land will be a ground shaking query as the legs of the twins find their way, as they learn to trust their queen and her steady tail. The beast will lean against Mount Fuji and Sergeant Burns' charred hand shall caress its peak. The beast will rend the sky with a torn-metal scream as it challenges the stars, affronted by their luminescence. A horn will spear out of its head, bleeding the sky, threatening to bring down the moon. There will be no stopping it.

Where does it hurt?

HERE! declares the massive foot, as a titanic leg pile-drives it down, down, down into the earth's crust, heedless of the viscous magma.

Navigator! Powerful and sinuous, her long lost tail stretches out into the distance far behind her. Tati has found purpose, infinitely better than the acceptance everyone had demanded. Consciousness shifted, but one clear thought spread from her to the rest of them: *well, this is better than a day at the beach.*

Tsunami! Onwards it rushed. They screamed inwardly in delight in their relief, ready to emerge and conquer as the walls of the basketball court swelled then exploded in their exultation, and the deep, deep ocean poured out, flooding all of the land.

END

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Tatiana was originally a very feeling-sorry-for-himself middle age man, with a name like Trevor, sitting in a group therapy session for people suffering from phantom limb syndrome, who was a bit reluctant to share that his missing limb was something human beings normally do not have to begin with. It was all a bit droll. Trevor seemed too close to some of Philip K. Dick's 1950's characters, so he became a short, tough young lesbian with an exotic name. I also thought the group therapy situation was hackneyed and it was all feeling like a New Yorker cartoon. (I wish I could write like PKD and I wish I could publish cartoons in the New Yorker, by the way.)*

The drafts became infused with the real life horror story my family has lived through over the past decade. Two of my daughters suffer from a horrible chronic Lyme-like disease, with distressing and painful symptoms, which was neither diagnosed nor treated properly for years, because the disease is not recognizing as occurring in Australia. I recall many nights sitting in emergency rooms in the wonderful high tech hospitals of my first world country, staring at signs warning patients not to disrespect or assault staff. Quite right, too—there had been an ugly spate of attacks on people who were just doing their job. However, I would look at these signs and dwell on the cognitive dissonance as my beautiful girls were

disrespected, disbelieved and disregarded by dismissive, condescending and awful doctors who accused them of malingering or being unduly sensitive. If only those doctors respected my children. And why must patients always be polite and obedient? Why shouldn't they emerge from the sea, and, destroy Tokyo? However, I hope that I have avoided didacticism.

Influences? I don't know, I can only say who I like to read and reread: George Orwell, Franz Kafka, Stephen King's early work, PKD, Tim Powers, The Exorcist, Marilynne Robinson's Gilead books, Jane Gardam's Old Fifth trilogy, Saint Mark...

BIO: Returned from exile in The Hague, David Stevens lives in Sydney, Australia with his wife and those of his children who have not yet worked out the locks. His fiction has appeared, amongst other places, in *Crossed Genres*, *Aurealis*, *Three-Lobed Burning Eye*, *Pseudopod*, *Café Irreal*, *Not One of Us*, *Kaleidotrope* and the anthologies 'Love Hurts', 'At the Edge', and 'Chthonic'. He blogs irregularly at davidstevens.info