



Stitch & Split

*Selves and Territories in Science Fiction*

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KEN

MacLEOD

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The Ship Generation

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## Learning the World

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The world is four thousand years old. I was eight years old when I found that out for myself. My name is Atomic Discourse Gale and this is the first time I have written something that anyone in the world can read. It is strange and makes me feel a little self-conscious, but I reassure myself that not many people will read it anyway.

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That was a joke. I see I have a few readers. J --- wants to know how I found out the age of the world. It was six years ago now but I remember it quite well. I was very young then and didn't understand everything that happened, but looking back I can see that it was a significant event in my life. That is why I mentioned it. So this is what happened.

'How old is the world?' I asked my caremother.

'I don't know,' she said. 'Why don't you look it up?'

'I've looked it up,' I said. 'I don't believe it.'

'Why not?'

'Seventeen billion years?' I said. 'That's impossible.'

'Ah,' she said. 'That's the universe. Well... everything we can see. The stars and galaxies.'

I went off and formed a more careful query. Nothing came back. I returned to my caremother.

'This world,' I said. 'I can't find anything about that.'

'All right,' she said. She pointed up to the sky. 'See up there... where the sunline enters the wall? Inside there, in the forward cone, you'll find what is called the keel.'

'Like the bottom of a boat?'

'In a way, yes. It's really the base of the engine, and it's the first part of the ship to be put in place. You will find the date of the final assembly there. And from that you can work out the age of the world.'

'You don't know what it is?'

'No,' she said. She frowned, in the way adults have when they're searching. 'It isn't in memory.'

'All right,' I said. 'I'll go and have a look.'

'Good for you,' she said. 'I'll help you pack.'

So thirty minutes later I hitched my little rucksack, heavy with a litre of water and a kilo of sandwiches, on to my shoulders and set off to climb into the sky. I walked out of the village and after a while I found a ladder at the edge of a dense and ancient clump of trees. The ladder had been familiar to me since I was much smaller, but none of us had ever climbed more than a few score steps on it. It soared into the sky like a kite-string, the kinks of its zig-zag flights smoothing into a pale line and then disappearing. You couldn't easily fall off it - it had close-spaced rings around it, and every thirty metres or so there was a small platform and another flight. The first day I climbed a kilometre, found a big platform, ate my sandwiches and

drank my water, and pissed in a far corner like an untrained kitten. I sat and watched the shadow-line creep across the land towards me. It reached me in what seemed a final rush, and the sun-line turned black. The land below was dim and beautiful in the farlight from the other side of the world, and within minutes lights pricked on all across that shaded scene. After a while I curled up and went to sleep. When I woke the sunline was bright again. It seemed as far away as ever, and the ground a long way below. I was just thinking of setting off back down when a crow landed on the platform, carrying a package.

'Breakfast,' said the bird. 'And dinner. Your ma says hi.'

'Tell her thank you,' I said.

'Will do,' said the crow, and flew off. Crows don't have much conversation. I unwrapped the package and found, to my great delight, hot coffee and hot berrybread for breakfast, and a fresh bottle of water and another pack of sandwiches for later. As I ate my breakfast I let my clothes clean me. Normally I would have washed. The clothes did a reasonable job but made my skin feel crawly and tickly. After I had eaten I chewed a tooth-cleaner and gazed around. The village looked tiny, and I could see a whole sweep of other villages and towns, lakes and hills and plains, along and around. I was almost level with the tops of the slag-heaps piled against the forward wall. Between me and the sunline a few clouds drifted: far away, I could see rain falling from one, on to a town. It was strange to see rain from the outside, as a distinct thing rather than a condition. More interesting was to see aircraft flying high above me, and a few below, taking off or landing. I faced resolutely upward, and continued my climb.

Of course I did not climb all the way. I was a tough and determined person, but it would have taken a month even if the ladder had extended all the way there, which it did not. What happened, about half-way through my second day, was that a small aircraft landed on a large platform a few hundred metres above me, and when I reached it, a man stood waiting for me. He even reached over and took my hand and hauled me up the last few steps, which I thought was unnecessary, but I made no objection.

He then backed away and we looked at each other for a few seconds. He was wearing a loose black suit, and his skin was not a lot lighter. His features might have been carved out of mahogany, with deep lines scored in it around the eyes and mouth.

'My name is Constantine the Oldest Man,' he said.

The name meant nothing to me but seemed suitable.

'Mine is Atomic Discourse Gale,' I said, sitting down on the platform.

'I know,' he said. 'Your caremother asked me to meet you.' He jerked his head back, indicating the aeroplane. 'I can take you to the keel, if you like.'

I had been determined to reach the keel myself; but I saw the man and the aircraft as part of my adventure, and therefore within my resolution rather than as a weakening or dilution of it. Besides, I now had a much better idea of how long it would take to climb all the way.

'All right,' I said. 'Thank you.'

He stepped over and peered into my eyes. I noticed a tiny shake of his head, as if something that might have been in my eyes wasn't there (a nictitating membrane, I now realise). He led me over to the aircraft, motioned me to sit in the front and lower seat, showed me how to strap up and passed me a set of wrap-arounds, transparent and tinted. I slipped them on. He climbed in behind me and started the engine. The propeller was behind us both, the wing above. After the engine had built up some power the little machine shook and quivered, then shot to the edge of the platform and dropped off. I may have squealed. It dipped, then soared. My stomach felt tugged about. Wind rushed past my face. The collar of my jacket crept up over the top and sides of my head, and stiffened. I hadn't known it had that capability.

We flew in an irregular spiral, perhaps to avoid stair-ladders and other obstacles invisible to me, but always up. I looked down, at the ground. I could see houses and vehicles, but not people. Other small aircraft buzzed about the sky, at what seemed frighteningly short clearances. The air felt thinner as we climbed. As we levelled out I could feel the sun-line hot on my shoulders, bright out of the corners of my eyes. Ahead loomed the forward wall. Featureless from the distances at which I had always seen it, it now looked complex, with gigantic pipes snaking across it and great clusters of machinery clamped to it. Wheels turned and pistons and elevators moved up and down. Rectangular black slots became visible, here and there on the surface, and we flew towards one. As naively as I'd thought I could climb to the sunline, I'd imagined we would fly to it, but we flew into the slot - it was two hundred metres wide by at least thirty high - and landed. Other small aircraft were parked in the artificial cavern. It was in fact a hangar. Constantine helped me out of the seat. My memory may be playing tricks, but I fancy I felt slightly lighter.

'I thought we were going to fly all the way,' I said, trying not to sound querulous.

'The air doesn't go all the way to the sunline,' Constantine told me. 'So we will take the lift.'

I followed him across the broad floor to an inconspicuous door. Behind it was an empty lift, big enough to hold about a dozen people. Its walls were transparent, giving a view of a dark chasm within which gigantic shapes moved vertically, illuminated by occasional randomly spaced lights. The doors hissed shut and the lift began to ascend. So rapid was its acceleration that my knees buckled. Constantine grasped my shoulder.

'Steady,' he said. 'It doesn't get worse than carrying someone piggy-back.'

Vaguely affronted, I straightened up and stared out. Looking down made me dizzy, so I looked up. The space in which we moved was in fact quite shallow in relation to its size. We were headed for a bright spot above, which I knew to be some manifestation of the sunline. The lift decelerated far more gradually and gently than it had accelerated. As it did so, I found that I was becoming lighter. An experimental downward thrust of the toes sent me a metre into the air. I yelled out, startled and delighted, as I fell back.

Constantine laughed. 'Hold the bar,' he said.

The lift halted, as if hesitating, then shot upward again. We passed through a hatch or hole. For a moment I was pressed against the wall of the lift, then I found myself weightless. Constantine glided over my head, twisting and somersaulting at the same time. I let go of the bar, flailing. The sensation of falling was for a moment terrifying. My stomach heaved, then settled.

'It's all right,' he said. 'We're in the forward cone now.' The teeth of his smile were a vivid white. He caught my elbow and swung me onto his back. I grabbed fistfuls of fabric at his shoulders and clung tightly. He grinned sideways at me and kicked off. The door of the lift hissed open. My ears popped slightly. We skimmed above the floor of a long tube. Shafts of light stabbed down from small holes or windows above us; my eyes adjusted quickly to the dimness, not darker, in truth, than indoor lighting. About three metres high by two wide, the tube ran straight into the distance as far as I could see. Within it, as we moved along, I noticed many other corridors branching off. Constantine's foot flicked at a wall and we hurtled into one of these side corridors. There was a smell of earth and ozone, of plant and animal and machine. Rapidly and bewilderingly, we passed through a succession of corridors and chambers, within which I glimpsed machinery and instruments, gardens hanging in mid-air, glowing lights and optical cables, and many people flying or floating or scuttling like monkeys along tubes or flimsy ladders. And what strange people they were, long of limb and lithe of muscle and wild of hair. Naked as the day they were born, lots of them; or looking similar, but in bright-coloured skin-tight suits; others crusted with stiff sculptured garments, like the camouflage of a leaf insect, or swathed in silky balloon sleeves and pants. Their indifference to orientation was for me disorienting; looking at their antics I felt a resurgence of unease in my belly.

I closed my eyes, and when I opened them again we had reached our destination. We floated near the floor of the biggest enclosed space I'd ever been in, apart from the world itself. The floor was smooth, and extended far ahead of us, and curved up on either hand like a smaller version of the curve of the world. Up and down had in a manner been restored. The thing that I craned my neck to look at, from my vantage on Constantine's back, was unmistakably *up*. Above us it vanished into shadows, ahead it stretched and tapered into distance. A thousand or more metres long, hundreds of metres high, it was complex, flanged, fluted and voluted, yet seemed cast from a single block of metal, ancient and pitted as an iron asteroid. There was one piece of metal, however, that contrasted sharply with the rest: a metre-long rectangle of burnished brass, on which some writing was engraved. We hung in the still, rust-scented air not an arm's length from it. The inscription was as follows:

*Sunliner But the Sky, My Lady! The Sky! Forged this day  
6 February 10 358 A.G.*

Constantine reached around and disengaged me from his back. We drifted for a few minutes, hand in hand.

'I never knew the world had a name,' I said.

'I named it,' said Constantine.

'Why did you call it that?' I asked.

He swung me and caught my other hand, like a dancer, and once again gazed into my face as if looking for something.

'You'll know one day,' he said.

I know now.

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**Ken MacLeod** is the author of *The Star Fraction* (1995), *The Stone Canal* (1996), *The Cassini Division* (1998), *THE WEB: Cydonia* (1998), *The Sky Road* (1999), *Cosmonaut Keep* (2000), *Dark Light* (2001), *Engine City* (2002) and *Newton's Wake* (2004).