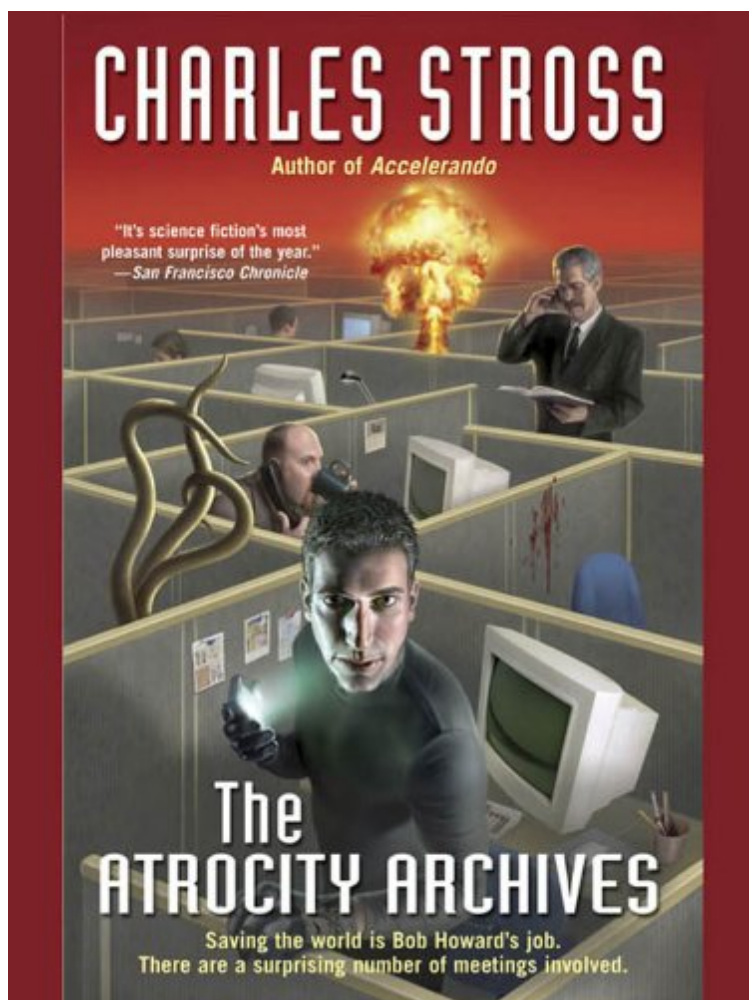


[Read download] File size: 50.Mb

The Atrocity Archives



Par Charles Stross
*ePub | *DOC | audiobook | ebooks |*
Download PDF

Dtails sur le produit Rang parmi les ventes : #70826 dans eBooksPubli le: 2006-01-03Sorti le: 2006-01-03Format: Ebook Kindle

[Read download] The Atrocity Archives

Par Charles Stross : The Atrocity Archives before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Atrocity Archives:

 [Download](#)

 [Read Online](#)

Description : Description du produitIn the title piece, Alan Turing, the father of modern computer science, completes his theorem on "Phase Conjugate Grammars for Extra-dimensional Summoning." Turing's work paves the way for esoteric mathematical computations that, when carried out, have side effects that leak through a channel underlying the structure of the Cosmos. Out there in the multiverse are "listeners" who can sometimes be coerced into opening gates. In 1945, Nazi Germany's Ahnenerbe-SS, in an attempt to escape the Allied onslaught, performs just such a summoning on the souls of more than six million. A gate opens to an alternate universe through which the SS move people and material-to live to fight another day. But their summoning brings forth more than the SS have bargained for-an evil, patiently waiting all this time while learning the ways of humans, now poises to lunch on Earth. Secret intelligence agencies, esoteric theorems, Lovecraftian horrors, Middle East terrorist connections, a damsel in distress, and a final battle on the surface of a dying planet round out this story.

Prsentation de l'diteurThe first novel in Hugo Award-winning author Charles Stross's witty Laundry Files series. Bob Howard is a low-level techie working for a super-secret government agency. While his

colleagues are out saving the world, Bob's under a desk restoring lost data. His world was dull and safe - but then he went and got Noticed. Now, Bob is up to his neck in spycraft, parallel universes, dimension-hopping terrorists, monstrous elder gods and the end of the world. Only one thing is certain: it will take more than a full system reboot to sort this mess out . . .

Extrait ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS Authors write, but not in a vacuum. Firstly, I owe a debt of gratitude to the usual suspects members of my local writers workshop all who suffered through first-draft reading hell and pointed out numerous headaches that needed fixing. Paul Fraser of Spectrum SF applied far more editorial muscle than I had any right to expect, in preparation for the original magazine serialization; likewise Marty Halpern of Golden Gryphon Press, who made this longer edition possible. Finally, I stand on the shoulders of giants. Three authors in particular made it possible for me to imagine this book and I salute you, H. P. Lovecraft, Neal Stephenson, and Len Deighton.

Introduction CHARLIE'S DEMON THE ATROCITY ARCHIVE IS A SCIENCE FICTION novel.

Its form is that of a horror thriller with lots of laughs, some of them uneasy. Its basic premise is that mathematics can be magic. Its lesser premise is that if the world contains things that (as Pratchett puts it somewhere) even the dark is afraid of, then you can bet that there'll be a secret government agency covering them up for our own good. That last phrase isn't ironic; if people suspected for a moment that the only thing Lovecraft got wrong was to underestimate the power and malignity of cosmic evil, life would become unbearable. If the secret got out and (consequently) other things got in, life would become impossible. Whatever then walked the Earth would not be life, let alone human. The horror of this prospect is, in the story, linked to the horrors of real history. As in any good horror story, there are moments when you cannot believe that anyone would dare put on paper the words you are reading. Not, in this case, because the words are gory, but because the history is all too real. To summarise would spoil, and might make the writing appear to make light of the worst of human accomplishments. It does not. Read it and see.

Charlie has written wisely and well in the Afterword about the uncanny parallels between the Cold War thriller and the horror story. (Think, for a moment, what the following phrase would call to mind if you'd never heard it before: Secret intelligence.) There is, however, a third side to the story. Imagine a world where speaking or writing words can literally and directly make things happen, where getting one of those words wrong can wreak unbelievable havoc, but where with the right spell you can summon immensely powerful agencies to work your will. Imagine further that this world is administered: there is an extensive division of labour, among the magicians themselves and between the magicians and those who coordinate their activity. Its bureaucratic, and also (therefore) chaotic, and its full of people at desks muttering curses and writing invocations, all beavering away at a small part of the big picture. The coordinators, because they don't understand what's going on, are easy prey for smooth-talking preachers of bizarre cults that demand arbitrary sacrifices and vanish with large amounts of money. Welcome to the IT department. It is Charlie's experience in working in and writing about the Information Technology industry that gives him the necessary hands-on insight into the workings of the Laundry. For programming is a job where Lovecraft meets tradecraft, all the time. The analyst or programmer has to examine documents with an eye at once skeptical and alert, snatching and collating tiny fragments of truth along the way. His or her sources of information all have their own agendas, overtly or covertly pursued. He or she has handlers and superiors, many of whom don't know what really goes on at the sharp end. And the IT worker has to know in their bones that if they make a mistake, things can go horribly wrong. Tension and cynicism are constant companions, along with camaraderie and competitiveness. It's a lot like being a spy, or necromancer. You don't get out much, and when you do it's usually at night. Charlie gets out and about a lot, often in daylight. He has no demons. Like most people who write about eldritch horrors, he has a cheerful disposition. Whatever years he has spent in the cellars haven't dimmed his enthusiasm, his empathy, or his ability to talk and write with a speed, range of reference, and facility that makes you want to buy the bastard a pint just to keep him quiet and slow him down in the morning, before he gets too far ahead. I know: I've tried. It doesn't work.

I first encountered Charles Stross when I worked in IT myself. It was 1996 or thereabouts, when you more or less had to work in IT to have heard about the Internet. (Yes, there was a time not long ago when news about the existence of the Internet spread by word of mouth.) It dawned on me that the guy who was writing sensible-but-radical posts to various newsgroups I hung out in was the same Charles Stross who'd written two or three short stories I'd enjoyed in the British SF magazine *Interzone*: *Yellow Snow*, *Ship of Fools*, and *Dechlorinating the Moderator* (all now available in his collection *TOAST*, Cosmos Books, 2002). *Dechlorinating the Moderator* is a science fiction story about a convention that has all the trappings of a science fiction convention, but is (because this is the future) a science fact convention, of desktop and basement high-energy fundamental

physics geeks and geekettes. Apart from its intrinsic fun, the story conveys the peculiar melancholy of looking back on a con and realising that no matter how much of a good time you had, there was even more that you missed. (All right: as subtle shadings of emotion go this one is a bit low on universality, but it was becoming familiar to me, having just started going to cons.) Ship of Fools was about the Y2K problem (which as we all know turned out not to be a problem, but BEGIN_RANT that was entirely thanks to programmers who did their jobs properly in the first place back when only geeks and astronomers believed the twenty-first century would actually arrive END_RANT) and it was also full of the funniest and most authentic-sounding insider yarns about IT I'd ever read. This Stross guy sounded like someone I wanted to meet, maybe at a con. It turned out he lived in Edinburgh. We were practically neighbours. I think I emailed him, and before too long he materialised out of cyberspace and we had a beer and began an intermittent conversation that hasn't stopped. He had this great idea for a novel: It's a techno-thriller! The premise is that Turing cracked the NP-Completeness theorem back in the forties! The whole Cold War was really about preventing the Singularity! The ICBMs were there in case godlike AIs ran amok! (He doesn't really talk like this. But that's how I remember it.) He had it all in his head. Lots of people do, but he (and here's a tip for aspiring authors out there) actually wrote it. That one, Burn Time, the first of his novels I read, remains unpublished great concept, shaky execution but the raw talent was there and so was the energy and application and the astonishing range of reference. Since then he has written a lot more novels and short stories. The short stories kept getting better and kept getting published. He had another great idea: A family saga about living through the Singularity! From the point of view of the cat! That mutated into the astonishing series that began with Lobsters, published in Asimov's SF, June 2001. That story was short-listed for three major SF awards: the Hugo, the Nebula, and the Sturgeon. Another, Router, was short-listed for the British Science Fiction Association (BSFA) Award. The fourth, Halo, has been short-listed for the Hugo. Looking back over some of these short stories, what strikes me is the emergence of what might be called the Stross sentence. Every writer who contributes to, or defines, a stage in the development of SF has sentences that only they could write, or at least only they could write first. Heinlein's dilating door opened up a new way to bypass explication by showing what is taken for granted; Zelazny's dune buggies beneath the racing moons of Mars introduced an abrupt gear-change in the degrees of freedom allowed in handling the classic material; Gibson's television sky and Ono-Sendai decks displayed the mapping of virtual onto real spaces that has become the default metaphor of much of our daily lives. The signature Stross sentence (and you'll come to recognise them as you read) represents just such an upward jump in compression and comprehension, and one that we need to make sense not only of the stories, but of the world we inhabit: a world sentenced to Singularity. The novels kept getting better too, but not getting published, until quite recently and quite suddenly three or four got accepted more or less at once. The only effect this has had on Charlie is that he has written another two or three while these were in press. He just keeps getting faster and better, like computers. But the first of his novels to be published is this one, and it's very good. We'll be hearing, and reading, a lot more from him. Read this now. Ken MacLeod West Lothian, UK May 2003 THE ATROCITY ARCHIVE 1. ACTIVE SERVICE GREEN SKY AT NIGHT; HACKERS DELIGHT. I'm lurking in the shrubbery behind an industrial unit, armed with a clipboard, a pager, and a pair of bulbous night-vision goggles that drench the scenery in ghastly emerald tones. The bloody things make me look like a train-spotter with a gas-mask fetish, and wearing them is giving me a headache. It's humid and drizzling slightly, the kind of penetrating dampness that cuts right through waterproofs and gloves. I've been waiting out here in the bushes for three hours so far, waiting for the last workaholic to turn the lights out and go home so that I can climb in through a rear window. Why the hell did I ever say yes to Andy? State-sanctioned burglary is a lot less romantic than it sounds especially on standard time-and-a-half pay. (You bastard, Andy. About that application for active service you filed last year. As it happens, we've got a little job on tonight and we're short-staffed; could you lend a hand?) I stamp my feet and blow on my hands. There's no sign of life in the squat concrete-and-glass block in front of me. It's eleven at night and there are still lights burning in the cubicle hive: Don't these people have a bed to go home to? I push my goggles up and everything goes dark, except the glow from those bloody windows, like fireflies nesting in the empty eye sockets of a skull. There's a sudden sensation like a swarm of bees throbbing around my bladder. I swear quietly and hike up my waterproof to get at the pager. It's not backlit, so I have to risk a precious flash of torchlight to read it. The text message says, MGR LVNG 5 MINS. I don't ask how they know that, I'm just grateful that there's only five more minutes of standing here among the waterlogged trees, trying not to stamp my feet too loudly, wondering what I'm going to say if the local snouts come calling. Five more minutes of hiding round the

back of the QA department of Memetix (UK) Ltd. subsidiary of a multinational based in Menlo Park, California then I can do the job and go home. Five more minutes spent hiding in the bushes down on an industrial estate where the white heat of technology keeps the lights burning far into the night, in a place where the nameless horrors don't suck your brains out and throw you to the Human Resources department unless you show a deficit in the third quarter, or forget to make a blood sacrifice before the altar of Total Quality Management. Somewhere in that building the last late-working executive is yawning and reaching for the door remote of his BMW. The cleaners have all gone home; the big servers hum blandly in their air-conditioned womb, nestled close to the service core of the office block. All I have to do is avoid the security guard and I'm home free. A distant motor coughs into life, revs, and pulls out of the landscaped car park in a squeal of wet tires. As it fades into the night my pager vibrates again: GO GO GO. I edge forward. No motion-triggered security lights flash on. There are no Rottweiler attack dogs, no guards in coal-scuttle helmets: this ain't that kind of movie, and I'm no Arnold Schwarzenegger. (Andy told me: If anyone challenges you, smile, stand up straight, and show them your warrant card then phone me. I'll handle it. Getting the old man out of bed to answer a clean-up call will earn you a black mark, but a black mark is better than a cracked skull. Just try to remember that Croxley Industrial Estate isn't Novaya Zemlya, and getting your head kicked in isn't going to save the world from the forces of evil.) I squish through the damp grass and find the designated window. Like the briefing said, it's shut but not locked. A good tug and the window hinges out toward me. It's inconveniently high up, a good four feet above the concrete gutter. I pull myself up and over the sill, sending a tiny avalanche of disks scuttering across the floor. The room is ghostly green except for the bright hot spots of powered-down monitors and fans blowing air from hot CPU cases. I stumble forward over a desk covered in piles of kipple, wondering how in hell the owner is going to fail to notice my great muddy boot-print between the obviously confidential documents scattered next to a keyboard and a stone-cold coffee mug. Then I'm on the floor in the QA department, and the clock is ticking. The pager vibrates again. SITREP. I pull my mobile out of my breast pocket and dial a three-digit number, then put it back again. Just letting them know I've arrived and everything's running smoothly. Typical Laundry they'll actually include the phone bill in the event log to prove I called in on schedule before they file it somewhere secret. Gone are the days of the impromptu black-bag job... The offices of Memetix (UK) Ltd. are a typical cubicle hell: anonymous beige fabric partitions dividing up little slices of corporate life. The photocopier hulks like an altar beneath a wall covered with devotional scriptures: the company's code of conduct, lists of compulsory employee self-actualization training courses, that sort of thing. I glance around, hunting cubicle D14. There's a mass of Dilbert cartoons pinned to the side of his partition, spoor of a mildly rebellious mind-set; doubtless middle managers prowl round the warren before any visit from the upper echelons, tearing down such images that signal dissent. I feel a minor shiver of sympathy coming on: Poor bastard, what must it be like to be stuck here in the warren of cells at the heart of the new industrial revolution, never knowing where the lightning's going to strike next? There's a desk with three monitors on it: two large but otherwise ordinary ones, and a weird-ass piece of machinery that looks at least a decade old, dredged out of the depths of the computer revolution. It's probably an old Symbolics Lisp machine or something. It tweaks my antique gland, but I don't have time to rubberneck; the security guards due to make another round in just sixteen minutes. There are books leaning in crazy piles and drifts on either side: Knuth, Dijkstra, Al-Hazred, other less familiar names. I pull his chair back and sit down, wrinkling my nose. In one of the desk drawers something's died and gone to meet its maker. Keyboard: check. Root account: I pull out the filched S/Key smartcard the Laundry sourced from one of Memetix's suppliers and type the response code to the system's challenge. (One-time passwords are a bitch to crack; once again, give thanks to the Laundry's little helpers.) Then I'm logged in and trusted and it's time to figure out just what the hell I'm logged in to. Malcolm whose desk I sit at, and whose keyboard I pollute is running an ant farm: there are dead computers under the desk, scavenged for parts, and a dubious Frankenstein server guts open to the elements humming like a generator beside it. For a moment I hunt around in panic, searching for silver pentacles and glowing runes under the desktop but it's clean. Logged in, I find myself in a maze of twisty little automounted filesystems, all of them alike. Fuck shit curse dammit, I recite under my breath; it was never like this in Cast a Deadly Spell. I pull out the phone and dial. Capital Laundry Services, how may we help you? Give me a hostname and target directory, I'm in but I'm lost. One sec... try auto slash share slash fs slash scooby slash netapp slash user slash home slash malcolm slash uppercase-R slash catbert slash world-underscore-domination slash manifesto. I type so fast my fingers trip over each other. There's a faint clicking as the server by the desk mounts scooby's gigantic drive array and scratches its read/write heads, looking for

what has got to be one of the most stupidly named files anywhere on the companys intranet. Hold on... yup, got it. I view the sucker and its there in plaintext: Some Notes Toward a Proof of Polynomial Completeness in Hamiltonian Networks. I page through the text rapidly, just skimming; theres no time to give it my full in-depth attention, but it looks genuine. Bingo. I can feel an unpleasant slimy layer of sweat in the small of my back. Ive got it. Bye for now. Bye yourself. I shut the phone and stare at the paper. Just for a moment, I hesitate... What Im here to do isnt fair, is it? The imp of perversity takes over: I bang out a quick command, mailing the incriminating file to a not-so-dead personal account. (Figure Ill read it later.) Then its time to nuke the server. I unmount the netapp drive and set fire to it with a bitstorm of low-level reformatting. If Malcolm wants his paper back hell have to enlist GCHQ and a scanning tunneling microscope to find it under all the 0xDEADBEEF spammed across the hard disk platters. My pager buzzes again. SITREP. I hit three more digits on the phone. Then I edge out of the cubicle and scramble back across the messy desk and out into the cool spring night, where I peel off those damned latex gloves and waggle my fingers at the moon. Im so elated that I dont even remember the stack of disks I sent flying until Im getting off the night bus at home. And by then, the imp of perversity is chuckling up his sleeve. IM FAST ASLEEP IN BED WHEN THE CELLPHONE rings. Its in my jacket pocket, where I left it last night, and I thrash around on the floor for a bit while it chirps merrily. Hello? Bob? Its Andy. I try not to groan. What time is it? Its nine-thirty. Where are you? In bed. Whats Thought you were going to be in at the debrief? When can you come in? Im not feeling too wonderful. Got home at about two-thirty. Let me think... eleven good enough? Itll have to be. He sounds burned. Well, Andy wasnt the one freezing his butt off in the woods last night, was he? See you there. The implicit or else doesnt need enunciating. Her Majestys Extra-Secret Service has never really been clear on the concept of flexitime and sensible working hours. I shamble into the bathroom and stare at the thin rind of black mold growing around the window as I piss. Im alone in the house; everyone else is either outworking or outgone for good. (Thats out, as in working, for Pinky and the Brain; out, as in fucked off, for Mhari.) I pick up my senescent toothbrush and perform the usual morning ritual. At least the heatings on. Downstairs in the kitchen I fill a percolator with nuclear-caffeinated grounds and nudge it onto the gas ring. I figure I can make it into the Laundry by eleven and still have time to wake up first. Ill need to be alert for that meeting. Did last night go off properly, or not? Now that I cant do anything about them I remember the disks. Nameless dread is all very well when youre slumped in front of the TV watching a slasher movie, but it plays havoc with your stomach when you drop half a pint of incredibly strong black coffee on it in the space of fifteen minutes. Brief nightmarish scenarios flit through my head, in order of severity: written reprimands, unemployment, criminal prosecution for participating in a black-bag job for which authorisation is unaccountably retroactively withdrawn; worst of all, coming home to find Mhari curled up on the living room sofa again. Scratch that latter vision; the short-lived sadness gives way to a deeper sense of relief, tempered by a little loneliness. The loneliness of the long-distance spook? Damn, I need to get my head in order. Im no James Bond, with a sexy KGB minx trying to seduce me in every hotel room. Thats about the first thing they drum into you at Capital Laundry Services (Washes cleaner than clean!): life is not a spy movie, work is not romantic, and theres nothing particularly exciting about the job. Especially when it involves freezing your balls off in a corporate shrubbery at eleven oclock on a rainy night. Sometimes I regret not having taken the opportunity to study accountancy. Life could be so much more fun if Id listened to the right recruiting spiel at the university milk round... but I need the money, and maybe one of these days theyll let me do something interesting. Meanwhile Im here in this job because all the alternatives are worse. So I go to work. THE LONDON UNDERGROUND IS FAMOUS FOR APPARENTLY believing that human beings go about this world owning neither kidney nor colon. Not many people know that theres precisely one public toilet in Mornington Crescent station. It isnt signposted, and if you ask for it the staff will shake their heads; but its there all the same, because we asked for it. I catch the Metropolitan line to Euston Square sharing a squalid rattle-banging cattle car with a herd of bored commuters then switch to the Northern line. At the next stop I get out, shuffle up the staircase, go into the gents, and step into the right-hand rear stall. I yank up on the toilet handle instead of down, and the back wall opens like a big thick door (plumbing and all), ushering me into the vestibule. Its all a bit like a badly funded B-movie remake of some sixties Hollywood spy thriller. A couple of months ago I asked Boris why we bothered with it, but he just chuckled and told me to ask Angleton meaning, Bugger off. The wall closes behind me and a hidden solenoid bolt unlocks the stall door: the toilet monster consumes another victim. I put my hand in the ID scanner, collect my badge from the slot next to it, and step across the red line on the threshold. Its another working day at Capital Laundry Services, discreet cleaning agents to the

government. And guess whos in hot water? First stop: my office. If you can call it an office its a sort of niche between a row of lockers and a herd of senile filing cabinets, into which the Facilities gnomes have jammed a plywood desk and a swivel chair with a damaged gas strut. I drop my coat and jacket on the chair and my computer terminal whistles at me: YOU HAVE MAIL. No shit, Sherlock, I always have mail. Its an existential thing: if I dont have mail it would mean that something is very wrong with the world, or maybe Ive died and gone to bureaucratic hell. (Im a child of the wired generation, unlike some of the suits hereabouts who have their secretaries print everything out and dictate their replies for an audio-typist to send.) There is also a cold, scummy cup of over-milked coffee on my desk; Marcias been over-efficient again. A yellow Post-it note curls reproachfully atop one of my keyboards: MEETING 9:30AM CT ROOM B4. Hell and damnation, why didnt I remember? I go to meeting room B4. Theres a red light showing so I knock and wave my badge before entering, just in case Security is paying attention. Inside, the air is blue; it looks like Andys been chain-smoking his foul French fags for the past couple of hours. Yo, I say. Everyone here? Boris the Mole looks at me stonily. Youre late. Harriet shakes her head. Never mind. She taps her papers into a neat stack. Had a good sleep, did we? I pull out a chair and slump into it. I spent six hours being one with a shrubbery last night. There were three cloudbursts and a rain of small and very confused frogs. Andy stubs out his cigarette and sits up. Well, now were here... He looks at Boris enquiringly. Boris nods. I try to keep a straight face: I hate it when the old guard start playing stiff upper lip. Jackpot. Andy grins at me. I nearly have a heart attack on the spot. Youre coming to the pub tonight, Bob. Drinks on me. That was a straight A for results, C-plus for fieldwork, overall grade B for execution. Uh, I thought I made a mess going in. No. If it hadnt been a semicovert youd have had to burn your shoes, but apart from that well. Zero witnesses, you found the target, theres nothing left, and Dr. Denver is about to find himself downsized and in search of a job somewhere less sensitive. He shakes his head. Not a lot more to say, really. But the security guard could have... The security guard was fully aware there was going to be a burglary, Bob. He wasnt going to move an inch, much less see anything untoward or sound the alarm, lest spooks come out of the woodwork and find him crunchy and good with ketchup. It was a set-up? I say disbelievingly. Boris nods at me. Is a good set-up. Was it worth it? I ask. I mean, I just wiped out some poor bastards last six months of work. Boris sighs mournfully and shoves an official memo at me. Its got a red-and-yellow chevron-striped border and the phrase MOST SECRET DESTROY BEFORE READING stamped across its cover. I open it and look at the title page: Some Notes Toward a Proof of Polynomial Completeness in Hamiltonian Networks. And a subtitle: Formal Correctness Report. One of the departmental theorem-proving oracles has been busy overnight. He duplicated the Turing result? Most regrettably, says Boris. Harriet nods. You want to know if last night was worth it. It was. If you hadnt succeeded, we might have had to take more serious measures. Thats always an option, you know, but in general we try to handle such affairs at the lowest possible level. I nod and close the folder, shove it back across the table toward Boris. What next? Timekeeping, says Harriet. Im a bit concerned that you werent available for debriefing on schedule this morning. You really need to do a bit better, she adds. (Andy, who I think understands how I tick, keeps quiet.) I glare at her. Id just spent six hours standing in a wet bush, and breaking into someone elses premises. After putting in a full days work in preparation. I lean forward, getting steamed: In case youve forgotten, I was in at eight in the morning yesterday, then Andy asked me to help with this thing at four in the afternoon. Have you ever tried getting a night bus from Croyley to the East End at two in the morning when youre soaked to the bone, its pouring wet, and the only other people at the bus stop are a mugger and a drunk guy who wants to know if you can put him up for the night? I count that as a twenty hour working day with hardship. Want me to submit an overtime claim? Well, you should have phoned in first, she says waspishly. Im not going to win this one, but I dont think Ive lost on points. Anyway, its not really worth picking a fight with my line manager over trivia. I sit back and yawn, trying not to choke on the cigarette fumes. Next on the agenda, says Andy. What to do with Malcolm Denver, Ph.D. Further action is indicated in view of this paper; we cant leave it lying around in public. Cuts too close to the bone. If he goes public and reproduces it we could be facing a Level One reality excursion within weeks. But we cant do the usual brush and clean either, Oversight would have our balls. Ahem. He glances at Harriet, whose lips are thin and unamused. Could have us all cooling our heels for months in a diversity awareness program for the sensitivity-impaired. He shudders slightly and I notice the red ribbon on his lapel; Andy is too precious by half for this job, although come to think of it this isnt exactly the most mainstream posting in the civil service. Anyone got any suggestions? Constructive ones, Bob. Harriet shakes her head disapprovingly. Boris just sits there, being Boris. (Boris is one of Angletons sinister gofers; I think in a previous incarnation he used to ice

enemies of the state for the Okhrana, or maybe served coffee for Beria. Now he just imitates the Berlin Wall during internal enquiries.) Andy taps his fingers on the desk. Why dont we make him a job offer? I ask. Harriet looks away: shes my line manager nominally and she wants to make it clear that this suggestion does not come with her approval. Its like I shrug, trying to figure out a pitch. Hes derived the Turing-Lovecraft theorem from first principles. Not many people can do that. So hes bright, thats a given. I think hes still a pure theory geek, hasnt made any kind of connection with the implications of being able to specify correct geometric relations between power nodes maybe still thinks its all a big joke. No references to Dee or the others, apart from a couple of minor arcana on his bookshelf. This means he isnt directly dangerous, and we can offer him the opportunity to learn and develop his skills and interests in a new and challenging field just as long as hes willing to come on the inside. Which would get him covered by Section Three at that point. Section Three of the Official Secrets Act (1916) is our principle weapon in the endless war against security leaks. It was passed during a wartime spy scare a time of deep and extreme paranoia and its even more bizarre than most people think. As far as the public knows, the Official Secrets Act only has two sections; thats because Section Three is itself classified Secret under the terms of the preceding sections, and merely knowing about Section Threes existence without having formally signed it is a criminal offence. Section Three has all kinds of juicy hidden provisions to make life easy for spooks like us; its a bureaucratic cloaking field. Anything at all can go on behind the shroud of Section Three as if it simply hasnt happened. In American terms, its a black operation. If you section him we have to come up with a job and a budget, Harriet accuses. Yes, but Im sure hell be useful. Andy waves languidly. Boris, would you mind asking around your section, see if anyone needs a mathematician or cryptographer or something? Ill write this up and point it at the Board. Harriet, if you can add it to the minutes. Bob, Id like a word with you after the meeting, about timekeeping. Oh shit, I think. Anything else? No? Meeting over, folks. Once were alone in the conference room Andy shakes his head. That wasnt very clever, Bob, winding Harriet up like that. I know. I shrug. Its just that every time I see her I get this urge to drop salt on her back. Yes, but shes technically your line manager. And Im not. Which means you are supposed to phone in if youre going to be late on a day when youve got a kickoff meeting, or else she will raise seven shades of low-key shit. And as she will be in the right, appeals to matrix management and conflict resolution wont save you. Shell make your annual performance appraisal look like its the Cultural Revolution and you just declared yourself the reincarnation of Heinrich Himmler. Am I making myself clear? I sit down again. Yes, four very bureaucratic values of clear. He nods. I sympathise, Bob, I really do. But Harriets under a lot of pressure; shes got a lot of projects on her plate and the last thing she needs is to be kept waiting two hours because you couldnt be bothered to leave a message on her voice mail last night. Putting it that way, I begin to feel like a shiteven though I can see how Im being manipulated. Okay, Ill try harder in future. His face brightens. Thats what I wanted to hear. Uh-huh. Now Ive got a sick Beowulf cluster to resurrect before Fridays batch PGP cluster-fuck kicks off. And then a tarot permutator to calibrate, and a security audit for another of those bloody collecting card games in case a bunch of stoned artists in Austin, Texas, have somehow accidentally produced a great node. Is there anything else? Probably not, he murmurs, standing. But how did you like the opportunity to get out and about a bit? It was wet. I stand up and stretch. Apart from that, well, it made a change. But I might get serious about that overtime claim if it happens too regularly. I wasnt kidding about the frogs. Well, maybe it will and maybe it wont. He pats me on the shoulder. You did all right last night, Bob. And I understand your problem with Harriet. It just so happens that theres a place on a training course open next week; itll get you out from under her feet and I think youll enjoy it. A training course. I look at him. What in? Windows NT system administration? He shakes his head. Computational demonology for dummies. But I already did. I dont expect you to learn anything in the course, Bob. Its the other participants I want you to keep an eye on. The others? He smiles mirthlessly. You said you wanted an active service job... WE ARE NOT ALONE, THE TRUTH IS OUT THERE, yadda yadda yadda. That kind of pop-culture paranoia is mostly bunk... except theres a worm of truth at the heart of every fictional apple, and while there may be no aliens in the freezer room at Roswell AFB, the world is still full of spooks who will come through your window and trash your hard disk if you discover the wrong mathematical theorem. (Or worse, but thats another kind of problem, one the coworkers in Field Ops get to handle.) For the most part, the universe really does work the way most of the guys with Ph.D.s after their names think it works. Molecules are made out of atoms which are made out of electrons, neutrons, and protons of which the latter two are made out of quarks and quarks are made out of lepto-quarks, and so on. Its turtles all the way down, so to speak. And you cant find the longest common prime factors of a number with many digits in it without either spending several times the life of the entire

universe, or using a quantum computer (which is cheating). And there really are no signals from sentient organisms locked up in tape racks at Arecibo, and there really are no flying saucers in storage at Area 51 (apart from the USAF superblack research projects, which dont count because they run on aviation fuel). But that isnt the full story. Ive suffered for what I know, so Im not going to let you off the hook with a simple one-liner. I think you deserve a detailed explanation. Hell, I think everybody deserves to know how tenuous the structure of reality is but I didnt get to make the rules, and it is a Very Bad Idea to violate Laundry security policy. Because Security is staffed by things that you really dont want to get mad at you in fact, you dont even want them to notice you exist. Anyway, Ive suffered for my knowledge, and heres what Ive learned. I could wibble on about Crowley and Dee and mystics down the ages but, basically, most self-styled magicians know shit. The fact of the matter is that most traditional magic doesnt work. In fact, it would all be irrelevant, were it not for the Turing theorem named after Alan Turing, who youll have heard of if you know anything about computers. That kind of magic works. Unfortunately. You havent heard of the Turing theorem at least, not by name unless youre one of us. Turing never published it; in fact he died very suddenly, not long after revealing its existence to an old wartime friend who he should have known better than to have trusted. This was simultaneously the Laundrys first ever success and greatest ever disaster: to be honest, they overreacted disgracefully and managed to deprive themselves of one of the finest minds at the same time. Anyway, the theorem has been rediscovered periodically ever since; it has also been suppressed efficiently, if a little bit less violently, because nobody wants it out in the open where Joe Random Cypherpunk can smear it across the Internet. The theorem is a hack on discrete number theory that simultaneously disproves the Church-Turing hypothesis (wave if you understood that) and worse, permits NP-complete problems to be converted into P-complete ones. This has several consequences, starting with screwing over most cryptography algorithm translation: all your bank accounts belong to us and ending with the ability to computationally generate a Dho-Nha geometry curve in real time. This latter item is just slightly less dangerous than allowing nerds with laptops to wave a magic wand and turn them into hydrogen bombs at will. Because, you see, everything you know about the way this universe works is correct except for the little problem that this isnt the only universe we have to worry about. Information can leak between one universe and another. And in a vanishingly small number of the other universes there are things that listen, and talk back see Al-Hazred, Nietzsche, Lovecraft, Poe, et cetera. The many-angled ones, as they say, live at the bottom of the Mandelbrot set, except when a suitable incantation in the platonic realm of mathematics computerised or otherwise draws them forth. (And you thought running that fractal screen-saver was good for your computer?) Oh, and did I mention that the inhabitants of those other universes dont play by our rule book? Just solving certain theorems makes waves in the Platonic over-space. Pump lots of power through a grid tuned carefully in accordance with the right parameters which fall naturally out of the geometry curve I mentioned, which in turn falls easily out of the Turing theorem and you can actually amplify these waves, until they rip honking great holes in spacetime and let congruent segments of otherwise-separate universes merge. You really dont want to be standing at ground zero when that happens. Which is why we have the Laundry... I SLINK BACK TO MY OFFICE VIA THE COFFEE maker, from which I remove a mug full of a vile and turgid brew that coats my back teeth in slimy grit. There are three secret memos waiting in the locked pneumatic tube, one of which is about abuse of government-issue toothpaste. There are a hundred and thirty-two email messages waiting for me to read them. And on the other side of the building theres a broken Beowulf cluster thats waiting for me to install a new ethernet hub and bring it back online to rejoin our gang of cryptocrackers. This is my fault for being the departmental computer guy: when the machines break, I wave my dead chicken and write voodoo words on their keyboards until they work again. This means that the people who broke them in the first place keep calling me back in, and blame me whenever they make things go wrong again. So guess what gets my attention first? Yes, you guessed right: its the institutional cream and off-green wall behind my monitor. I cant even bring myself to read my mail until Ive had a good five minutes staring at nothing in particular. I have a bad feeling about today, even though theres nothing obviously catastrophic to lock onto; this is going to be one of those Friday the Thirteenth type occasions, even though its actually a rainy Wednesday the Seventeenth. To start with theres a charming piece of email from Mhari, laundered through one of my dead-letter drops. (Youd better not let the Audit Office catch you sending or receiving private email from work, which is why I dont. As Im the guy who built the departmental firewall, this isnt difficult.) You slimy scumbag, dont you ever show your nose round my place again. Oh yes, as if! The last time I was round the flat shes staying in was at the weekend, when she was out, to retrieve my tube of government-issue

toothpaste. I somehow resisted the urge to squirt obscene suggestions on the bathroom mirror the way she did when she came round and repod my stereo. Maybe this was an oversight on my part. Next message: a directive on sick leave signed (digitally) by Harriet, pointing out that if more than half an hours leave is taken a doctors note must be obtained, preferably in advance. (Why do I feel a headache coming on?) Thirdly, theres a plea from Fred in Accounting a loser, basically, who I had the misfortune to smile at last time I was on hell desk duty: Help, I cant run my files anymore. Fred has just about mastered the high art of the on/off switch but is sufficiently proficient with a spreadsheet to endanger your payroll. Last time I got mail from him it turned out hed reinstalled an earlier version of some critical bits n pieces over his hard disk, trashing everything, and had the effrontery to be mailing virus-infested jokes around the place. (I bounce the plea for help over to the hell desk, where the staffer on call will get to grapple with it and curse me vilely for trying to be helpful to Fred.) I spend a second stretch of five minutes staring at the chipped cream paint on the wall behind my monitor. My head is throbbing now, and because of various Health and Safety directives there isnt so much as an aspirin on the premises. After yesterdays inane fiasco there doesnt seem to be anything I can do here today that conjures up any enthusiasm: I have a horrible gut-deep feeling that if I stay things will only get worse. Besides, I put in two days worth of overtime yesterday, regs say Im allowed to take time off in lieu, my self-help book says I should still be grieving for my pet hamster, and the Beowulf cluster can go fuck itself. I log out of the secure terminal and bunk off home early: your taxes at work. ITS EIGHT IN THE EVENING AND I STILL HAVE A headache. Meanwhile, Pinky is down in the cellar, preparing another assault on the laws of nature. The TV console in the living room of Chateau Cthulhu the geek house I share with Pinky and Brains, both of whom also work for the Laundry is basically brain candy, installed by Pinky in a desperate attempt to reduce the incidence of creative psychosis in the household. I think this was during one of his rare fits of sanity. The stack contains a cable decoder, satellite dish, Sony Playstation, and a homemade web TV receiver that Brains threw together during a bored half hour. It hulks in the corner opposite the beige corduroy sofa like a black-brushed postmodern sculpture held together with wiring spaghetti; its purpose is to provide a chillout zone where we can collapse after a hard days work auditing new age websites in case theyve accidentally invented something dangerous. Cogitating for a living can result in serious brain-sprain: if you dont get blitzed on beer and blow or watch trash TV and sing raucously once in a while, youll end up thinking youre Sonic the Hedgehog and that ancient Mrs. Simpson over the road is Two-Tails. Could be messy, especially if Security is positively vetting you at the time. I am plugged into the boob tube with a can of beer in one hand and a pizza box in my lap, watching things go fast and explode on the Discovery Channel, when theres a horrible groaning sound from beneath the carpet. At first I pay no attention because the program currently showing is a particularly messy plane-crash docudrama, but when the sound continues for a few seconds I realise that not even Pinkys apocalyptic stereo could generate that kind of volume, and maybe if I dont do something about it Im going to vanish through the floorboards. So I stand up unsteadily and weave my way into the kitchen. The cellar door is ajar and the lights on and the noise is coming from down below; I grab the fire extinguisher and advance. Theres an ominous smell of ozone... Chateau Cthulhu is a mid-Victorian terrace, an anonymous London dormitory unit distinguished mainly by having three cellar rooms and a Laundry residential clearance, meaning that its probably not bugged by the KGB, CIA, or our enemies in MI6. There is a grand total of four double-bedrooms, each with a lock on the door, plus a shared kitchen, living room, dining room, and bathroom. The plumbing gurgles ominously late at night; the carpet is a peculiarly lurid species of paisley print that was the height of fashion in 1880, and then experienced an undeserved resurrection among cheap-ass landlords during the 1980s. When we moved in, one of the cellars was full of lumber, one of them contained two rusting bicycle frames and some mummified cat turds, and the third had some burned-out candle stubs and a blue chalk pentacle inscribed on the floor. The omens were good: the house was right at the corner of an equilateral triangle of streets, aligned due east-west, and there were no TV aerials blocking the southern roofline. Brains, pretending to be a God-botherer, managed to negotiate a 10 percent discount in return for exorcising the place after convincing Mr. Hussein that a history of pagan activities could severely impact his revenues on the rental market. (Nonsense, but profitable nonsense.) The former temple is now Pinkys space, and if Mr. Hussein could see it hed probably have a heart attack. It isnt the dubious wiring or the three six-foot-high racks containing Pinkys 1950s vintage Strowger telephone exchange that make it so alarming: more like the way Pinky replaced the amateurish chalk sketch with a homemade optical bench and properly calibrated beam-splitter rig and five prisms, upgrading the original student sance antics to full-blown functionality. (Yes, its a pentacle. Yes, hes using a fifty kilovolt HT power supply and some mucking great

capacitors to drive the laser. Yes, thats a flayed goatskin on the coat rack and a half-eaten pizza whirling round at 33 rpm on the Linn Sondek turntable. This is what you get to live with when you share a house with Pinky and the Brain: I said it was a geek house, and we all work in the Laundry, so were talking about geek houses for very esotericindeed, occultvalues of geek.)The smell of ozoneand the ominous crackling soundis emanating from the HT power supply. The groaning/ squealing noise is coming from the speakers (black monoliths from the 2001 school of hi-fi engineering). I tiptoe round the far wall from the PSU and pick up the microphone lying in front of the left speaker, then yank on the cord; theres a stunning blast of noise, then the feedback cut out. Where the hell is Brains? I look at the PSU. Theres a blue-white flickering inside it that gives me a nasty sinking feeling. If this was any other house Id just go for the distribution board and pull the main circuit breaker, but there are some capacitors next to that thing that are the size of a compact washing machine and I dont fancy trying to safe them in a dark cellar. I heft the extinguishera rather illegal halon canister, necessary in this householdand advance. The main cut-off switch is a huge knife switch on the rack above the PSU. Theres a wooden chair sitting next to it; I pick it up and, gripping the back, use one leg to nudge the handle. Theres a loud clunk and a simultaneous bang from the PSU. Oops, I guess I let the magic smoke out. Dumping the chair, I yank the pin from the extinguisher and open fire, remembering to stand well clear of those big capacitors. (You can leave em with their terminals exposed and theyll pick up a static charge out of thin air; after half an hour, if you stick a screwdriver blade across them youd better hope the handle is well-insulated because youre sure as hell going to need a new screwdriver, and if the insulation is defective youll need a couple of new fingers as well.)The smoke forms a thin coil in midair, swirling in an unnaturally regular donut below the single swinging light bulb. A faint laughter echoes from the speakers. What have you done with him? I yell, forgetting that the mike isnt plugged in. The pentacle on the optical bench is powered down and empty, but the jar beside it is labelled Dust from ye Tombe of ye Mummy (prop. Winchester Road Crematorium) and you dont need to be a necromancer to figure out what that means. Done with whom? I nearly jump right out of my skin as I turn round. Pinky is standing in the doorway, holding his jeans up with one hand and looking annoyed. I was having a shit, he says. Whos the fuss about? I point at the power supply, wordlessly. You didnt He stops. Raises his hands and tugs at his thin hair. My capacitors! You bastard! Next time you try to burn the house down, and/or summon up a nameless monstrosity from the abyss without adequate shielding, why dont you give me some warning so I can find another continent to go live on? Those were fifty quid each in Camden Market! Hes leaning over the PSU anxiously, but not quite anxiously enough to poke at it without insulated gloves. Doesnt matter. First thing I heard was the feedback howl. If you dont shut the thing down before answering a call of nature, dont be surprised when Mrs. Nature comes calling on you. Bugger. He shakes his head. Can I borrow your laser pointer? I head back upstairs to carry on watching my plane-crash program. Its at times like this that I think I really need to find a better class of flatmateif only the pool of security-cleared cohabitants was larger.

2. ENQUIRY ITS THE AFTERNOON OF DAY TWO OF THE TRAINING course Andy sent me on, and I have just about hit my boredom threshold. Down on the floor of the cramped lecture theatre our teacher is holding forth about the practicalities of summoning and constraining powers from the vasty deeps; you can only absorb so much of this in one sitting, and my mind is a million kilometres away. You need to remember that all great circles must be terminated. Dangling links are potent sources of noise in the circuit, and you need to stick a capacitor on the end to drain it and prevent echoes; sort of like a computers SCSI bus, or a local area network. In the case of the great circuit of Al-Hazred, the terminator was originally a black goat, sacrificed at midnight with a silver knife touched only by virgins, but these days we just use a fifty microfarad capacitor. You, Bob! Are you falling asleep back there? Take some advice: you dont want to do that. Try this and get the termination wrong and youll be laughing on the other side of your facebecause your face will be on the other side of your head. If you still have a head. Bloody academic theoreticians...

Yes, I said. Ive been over this before with Brains; electrical great circles are a bad thing, best shunned by anyone with easy access to decent quality lasers and a stabilised platform. Electricity, for ages the primary tool of the experimental vitalists, is now pretty much obsoletebut its so well-understood that these ivory-tower types prefer to use it as a vehicle for their research, rather than trying more modern geometry engines based on light, which doesnt have any of the nasty side effects of electrical invocations. But thats the British school for you. Over in the States, when theyre not dangling stupid remote viewing disinformation tricks in front of the press corps the Black Chamber is busy running experiments on the big Nova laser at Los Alamos that everyone thinks is for bomb research. But do we get to play with safe opto-isolated geometry engines and invocation clusters here? Do we, fuck: were stuck with Dr. Volt and his thuggish friend Mr. Amp, and

pray we dont get a stray ground loop while the summoning core is present and active. Anyway, its time to break for coffee. After we come back in about fifteen minutes, Im going to move along a bit; its time to demonstrate the basics of a constraint invocation. Then this afternoon well discuss the consequences of an uncontrolled summoning. (Uncontrolled summonings are Badat best youll end up with someone going flatline, their brain squatted by an alien entity, and at worst youll end up with a physical portal leading somewhere else. So dont do that, myeah?) Teacher claps his hands together, brushing invisible chalk dust from them, and I stand up and stretch then remember to close my file. The one big difference between this training course and a particularly boring stretch at university is that everything we learn here is classified under Section Three; the penalty for letting someone peek in your notebook can be draconian. Theres a waiting room outside, halfway between the lecture theatres, painted institutional cabbage with frumpy modular seating in a particularly violent shade of burnt orange that instantly makes me think of the 1970s. The vending machine belongs in an antique shop; it appears to run on clockwork. We queue up obediently, and theres a shuffle to produce the obligatory twenty-pence pieces. A yellowing dog-eared poster on the wall reminds us that CARELESS TALK COSTS LIVES it might be indicative of a sardonic institutional sense of humour but I wouldnt bet on it. (Berwick-upon-Tweed was at war with the Tsars empire until 1992, and it wouldnt surprise me in the slightest to discover that one of the more obscure Whitehall departments say, the Ministry of Transports Department of long-reach electric forklift vehicle Maintenance Inspectorate, Tires Desk is still locked in a struggle to the death with the Third Reich.) It is quite in keeping with the character of the Laundry to be aware of the most peculiar anomalies in our diplomatic heritage the walking ghosts of conflicts past, as it were and be ready to reactivate them at a moments notice. That which never lived sleeps on until awakened, and its not just us citizens of old-fashioned Einsteinian spacetime who make treaties, right? A fellow trainee shuffles up to me and grins cadaverously. I glance at him and force myself to resist the urge to sidle away: its Fred from Accounting, the pest whos always breaking his computer and expects me to fix it for him. About fifty-something, with papery dry skin that looks as if a giant spider has sucked all the juice out of him, hes still wearing a suit and tie on the second day of a five-day course like hes wandered out of the wrong decade. And it looks slept in, if not lived in to the point of being halfway through a second mortgage and a course of damp-proofing. Dr. Vohlman seems to have it in for you, eh? I sniff, and decide to stop resisting the urge to sidle away. Metaphorically or sexually? An expression of deep puzzlement flits across Freds face. Whats that? Metawatchically? Nah. Hes a bad-tempered old bastard, thats all. He leans closer, conspiratorially: This is all beyond me, you know? Dunno why Im on this junket, our training budget is just way over the top. Got to use the course credits or we lose them next year. Irene off studying Eunuch device drivers, whatever they are, and I got posted here. Luck of the draw. But it doesnt mean anything to me, if you know what I mean. You look like one of those intellectual types, though. You probably know whats going on. You can tell me... Eh? I try to hide behind my coffee cup and manage to burn my fingers. While Im cursing, Fred somehow ends up standing behind my left shoulder. See, Torsun in HR told me he was sending me here, to learn to be the departmental system administrator so those people in Support cant pull the wool over our eyes. But his Vohlman-ness keeps cracking these weird jokes about devils and knives and things. Is he one of them satanists we got briefed on four years ago, do you suppose? I boggle as discreetly as I can manage. Im not sure you should be in this course. The material gets technical quickly and it can be dangerous if youre not familiar with the appropriate laboratory safety precautions. Are you sure you want to stay here? Sure? Im sure! Course Im sure. But I aint too happy with the content. For one thing, wheres all the stuff about license terms and support? That comes first. I mean, pacts with the devil is all very well, but I need to know who to phone for real technical support. And has CESG certified all this stuff for use on government networks? I sigh. Go have a word with Dr. Vohlman, I suggest, and a trifle rudely turn away. I know theres always one person whos in the wrong course, but were two days in and he still hasnt figured it out thats got to be some kind of record, hasnt it? Everyone drinks up and the smokers magically reappear from wherever they vanished to and we troop back into the lecture theatre. Teacher Dr. Vohlman has rolled an archaic test bench in; it looks like a couple of Tesla coils fucking a Wheatstone bridge next to what Ill swear is a distributor hub nicked from an old Morris Minor. The wiring on the pentacle is solid silver, tarnished black with age. Right, better put your coffee cups down now, because were going to actually put some of the stuff we were discussing before break into practice. Vohlman is all business, attacking his curriculum with the gusto of a born schoolteacher. Were going to try a lesser summoning, a type three invocation using these coordinates Ive sketched on the blackboard. This should raise a primary manifestation of nameless horror, but itll be a fairly tractable nameless horror as long as we observe sensible precautions.

There will be unpleasant visual distortions and some protosapient wittering, but its no more intelligent than a News of the World reporternot really smart enough to be dangerous. Thats not to say that its safe, thoughyou can kill yourself quite easily by treating the equipment with disrespect. Just in case youve forgotten, this current is carrying fifteen amps at six hundred volts, and the baseboard is insulated and oriented correctly along a north-south magnetic axis. The geometry were using for this run is a modified Minkowski space that we can derive by setting pi to four; theres no fractal dimension involved, but things are complicated slightly because the space to which were mapping this diagram has a luminiferous aether. Gather round, please, you need to be inside the security cordon when I power up the circuit. Manesh, if you could switch on the ABSOLUTELY NO ENTRY sign...We gather round the test bench. I hover near the back. Ive seen similar experiments before: in fact, Ive done much more exotic ones in the basement back at Chateau Cthulhu. Compared to the insanely complex summonings Brains assembles inside his laser grid this is introductory level stuff, just an official checkpoint on my personnel record. (Did I tell you about the friend of mine who was turned down for a job as a trainee scientific officer because he was unqualified? His Ph.D. was no goodthe job description said three GCSE passes and hed long since lost all his high school certificates. Thats the way the civil service works.) Still, its interesting to watch the other students in this course. Babs, blonde bubble-and-squeak with big-framed spectacles, is treating the bench like an unexploded bomb; I think shes new to this and still too much under the influence of The Exorcist, probably expects heads to start spinning round and green slime to start spewing at any moment. (Vohlman should have told the students thats what we keep the Ectoplasm Wallahs around for. Impresses the brass no end. But thats another course.) John, Manesh, Dipak, and Mike are behaving just like bored junior technical staff on another week-away-from-the-desk-is-as-good-as-a-holiday training course. Fred from Accounting looks confused, as if hes mislaid his brain, and Callies found a pressing reason to go powder her nose. Cant say I blame her; this kind of experiment is fun, the same way that demonstrating a thermite reaction in a chemistry lab is funit can blow up in your face. I make damn sure that the electrical fire extinguisher is precisely two paces behind me and one pace to my right.Okay, everybody pay attention. Dont, whatever happens, touch the grid. Dont, under any circumstances, say anything once I start. Dont, on pain of your life, step outside the red circle on the floorwere on top of an earthed cage here, but if we go outside itTopology is everything. The idea of a summoning is simple: you create an attractor node at point A. You put the corresponding antinode at point B. You stand in one of em, energize the circuit, and something appears at the other. The big gotcha is that a human observer is requiredyou cant do it by remote control. (Insert some quantum cat mumbo-jumbo about collapsing the wave function and Wigners Friend versus the Animal Liberation Front here.) Better hope you picked the right circle to stand in, otherwise youre going to learn far more than you ever wanted to know about applied topologylike how the universe looks when youre turned inside-out.Its not quite as bad as it sounds. For added security, you can superimpose the attractor node and the safety cell, locking in the summoned agencywhich means they shouldnt be able to get to us at the antinode. Which is why Herr Doktor Vohlman mit der duelling scars unt ze bad attitude has plonked the test bench right in the middle of the red pentagram painted on the lecture theatre floor and is enjoining us all to stand tight.Of course, to get to the fire extinguisher Id have to step out of the circle...Is this practice approved by the Health and Safety officer? Fred asks.Quiet, please. Vohlman shuts his eyes, obviously psyching himself up for the activation sequence. Power. He shoves a knife switch over and a light comes on. Circuit two. A button is depressed. Is there anybody there?Green vapour seems to swirl at the edges of my vision as I focus on the pentagram of silver wire. Lights glow beneath it, set in a baseboard made of timber harvested from a (used) gallows; setup is everything.Three. Vohlman pushes another button, then pulls a twist of paper out of his pocket. Tearing it, he exposes a sterile lancet which he shoves into the ball of his left thumb without hesitation. The hair on the back of my neck is standing on end as he shakes his hand at the attractor and a bead of blood flicks away from it, bounces off the air above one wire, rolls back toward the centreand hovers a foot above it, vibrating like a liquid ruby beneath the fluorescent lights.Is anybody there? mimics Fred. Abruptly his face crinkles in a grin. Good joke! I almost believed it for a minute! He reaches out toward the drop of blood and I can feel vast forces gathering in the air around usand all of a sudden I can feel a headache coming on, like the tension before an electrical storm.No! squeaks Babs, realising its too late to stop him even as she speaks.I see Vohlmans face. Its a mask of pure terror: he doesnt dare move a muscle to stop Fred because touching Fred will only spread the contagion. Fred is already lost and the last thing you do to someone whos in contact with high tension is grab them to pull them awaythat is, if you do it, its the last thing youll ever do.Fred stands still, and his jacket sleeve twitches as if his muscles are writhing underneath it. His hand is over the

attractor, and the drop of blood begins to drift toward his fingertip. He is still smiling, like a man with his foot clamped to the third rail of the underground before the smoke and sparks appear. He opens his mouth.

Yes, he says, in a high, clear voice that is not his own. We are here. There are luminous worms writhing behind his eyes. WHAT DID YOU DO NEXT? ASKS BORIS. I lean back and stare up at the slowly roiling smoke-dragons that curl under the fluorescent tubes. It takes me a few seconds to find my voice; my throat is raw, and not from smoke. Analysed the situation very fast, the way they train you to: LEAP methodology. Look, evaluate, assign priorities. Fred had grounded the containment field and the level three agency inside it flood-filled him. Level threes arent sapient but the universe they come from has a much faster timebase than ours; as soon as he crossed the containment they mapped his nervous system and cracked it like a rotten walnut. Full possession in two to five hundred milliseconds. But what did you do? Andy pushes at me. I swallow. Well, I was opposite him, and hed grounded the containment. At that point neither the attractor or the antinode were up and running, so we were all targets. The obvious priority was to shut down the possession, fast. You do that by physically disabling the possessed before the agency can construct a defence in depth. Id been worried by the electrics and made sure I knew where the fire extinguisher was, so that was what I grabbed first. Boris: It was the first thing that come to hand? Yes. Andy nods. There is going to be a Board of Enquiry, he says. But thats basically what we needed to know. It fits with what were hearing from the other witnesses. How badly was he hurt? Andy looks away. My hands are shaking so much that my coffee cup rattles against its saucer. Hes dead, Bob. He was dead the moment he crossed the line. You and everybody else there would be dead, too, if you hadnt punched his ticket. Youve got one colleague who wasnt there, two who didnt notice what was going on, and five including the instructor who swear blind that you saved their lives. He looks back at me: But we have to put you through the enquiry process all the same because it was a fatal incident. He was married with two kids, and theres a pension and other residuals to sort out. From Publishers Weekly Lovecraft's Cthulhu meets Len Deighton's spies in Stross's latest, as the Scottish author explains in his afterword to this offbeat book offering two related long novellas, "The Atrocity Archive" and "The Concrete Jungle" (the latter previously unpublished). With often hilarious results, the author mixes the occult and the mundane, the truly weird and the petty. In "Atrocity," Bob, a low-level computer fix-it guy for the Laundry, a supersecret British agency that defends the world from occult happenings, finds himself promoted to fieldwork after he bravely saves the day during a routine demonstration gone awry. With his Palm, aka his Hand of Glory (a severed hand that, when ignited, renders the holder invisible), and his smarts, he saves the world from a powerful external force seeking to enter our universe to suck it dry. In "Jungle," Bob teams up with a cop, Josephine, to save the Laundry from a powermonger who seeks to stage an internal coup by using zombies as her minions. Amid all the bizarre happenings are the everyday trappings of a British bureaucracy. Bob gets called on the carpet by his bosses because he requested backup during an emergency without first getting his supervisor's okay and filling out the requisite forms. Though the characters all tend to sound the same, and Stross resorts to lengthy summary explanations to dispel confusion, the world he creates is wonderful fun. Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.