

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

When Tom Mutch was a young man,
he grabbed art with both hands and never let go.

It became his life.

Published 2004, *Tom Mutch – Antipodean Artist* (David Bateman)
reveals the journey from student to the successful painter,
printmaker and sculptor he is today.

He is an artist with lots to say, and does it through his art with
whichever medium it takes to say it.

The mythology of Superbird which began as a simple doodle
made whilst talking on the phone, has been developing
through series of paintings, an animated short film,
culminating as this, the first of three novels.

His website is www.tommutch.com

The Birth of Superbird

Tom Mutch



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*Superbird is a Champion for Nature.
He can grow in size or diminish,
He can change his colour.
It is hoped that he will get inside your consciousness
and your culture,
And the rest is up to you.*

This is Book One in a series of three. I don't think of myself as a writer, more a story-teller and image maker. The latter being how I make my living. Yet, the only way I found to portray this age old story of good verses evil was to write it.

So if you have made it this far, keep turning the pages.
If you wish to view some of my Art, look up
www.tommutch.com which has some images of the characters in
this book. By jingoes!

A very warm thanks to you all. Peace and prosperity.

Tom Mutch, 2005



Chapter One

It's another ordinary day in Lair City. The usual smog clings, circles around the higher reaches of the city's towers and monoliths. A hazy bluish mist climbs the gutters, obscuring the footpaths; artificial light illuminates the streets and buildings; it's a gloomy, eerie scene. The yellow light struggles to cut the atmosphere, throwing soft dark shadows across the city's stark architecture, creating a permanent veil where day or night does not exist, cannot penetrate. Time itself is ungaugable. There are no clocks, no calendars, each day rolls into the next, exactly as the day before and the day to come.

The Lairs lean into their programmed duties. A never-ending mechanical mincing, ticking sound permeates the canyons of official buildings, libraries, and apartments. At the corner of Freeze Street and Data, a Lair has dismounted his vehicle, fingers growing – spooky. They rattle, vibrate. They squirm, like a worm on a hook, over an air vent, checking the security grill. His light brown full-length coat and black jackboots disappear into the swirling fog. He is bent over like a crane, menacing in his bowler hat that has been screwed down on to his head. You can just make out the thread that stops where there should be a forehead. He seems to have no character, no nose, eyes or mouth – nothing to distinguish one Lair from another – blindly spying out the Undercity. His fingers retract to a normal size, happy in their gloves, and grab the handlebars of his vehicle. His body slides along after his fingers, up onto the vehicle's platform.

These vehicles, metallic, mono-wheeled, roll along a single track. For some reason the gluggy bluish mist is repelled and the dull light from the headlamp reflects off the rail. Lairs pass each other in a constant whoosh; the city is full of them. Too many to count. There is no congestion, just a bizarre order – militants going about

their programmed shifts. Their vehicles, which they call Rims, have an electric hum whilst in motion. The power supply is in the track, conducted through the wheel. Three pedals protrude through the floor, a gear-like object pokes out of the handlebars. They all travel at the same speed, like clockwork in a universe of their own. It's all so efficient, so robotic.

The question has always been there. Can these Lairs think, do they have feelings? They would say 'of course' but we know better. We too have always been here, well before the Lairs. Before Lair City. We are a dying breed. We are human.

It's hard to know where they come from, the Lairs. There is talk of a Master Lair who arrived first. Zekai Mancini, unspeakably ugly, but it's probably a myth. All we know is a large proportion of our children are brought above ground, not to be seen again. We want our children to go up there into Lair City. We have swallowed the propaganda, hook, line and sinker. We believe it's one of the greatest honours to be selected and yet we know nothing of what happens to our beloved children after they have transcended. That's the jargon: 'to transcend', to go above.

I see them; I know what happens to them! They're in the so-called library being prepared. Nice word, 'prepared', one of theirs. What it really means is CODED, manipulated, their very genes altered. They are being made into Lairs. Lairs to replace, bolster the ranks – spares, because Lairs do wear out. I see these children. I see them. It's all I can do not to cry, but I must be careful. I've seen these directors looking blindly at me, reading my discipline, checking the data. How they would celebrate if they could do it without me. I scare them, not being fully altered, but they still need me. I'm a Half-light, the bridge between. There are so few of us above in Lair City. We all work for them, and we are constantly monitored.

I work in the Library's mainframe, high above the children, mixing solutions, dyes, poisons, mind drugs, sedatives that start the procedure, a softening up, and a dumbing down. Then the Lairs get them! I don't see them after they leave the Library. The children are moved to another building. What goes on in these other buildings, I can only speculate. All I know is it's goodbye human, hello Lair. This process takes about a human year, but I'm only guessing. I've tried to keep a record of days in my apartment, but this is risky and done through incisions into the plastic framework of my bed. Often I'm required

to work such long periods that I'm not sure if 24 hours have gone or not. All I know is the children's names are taken and a serial number identifies their future.

I do get to walk the streets. I know some of these endless faceless mazes. I have my feet, my shanks' pony. No vehicle for me. In any case, I wouldn't know how to operate one. I walk home to my apartment; it's the one time I feel I have a little freedom, a time when I think about this madhouse, this nightmare, and the city of Lairs. Lair City.

I might pass another Half-light occasionally, but never on the same side of the street. We never acknowledge each other. We know not to. How I'd give anything to have a conversation with another Half-light, but this is impossible. They would immediately be aware. I've been a Half-light for 53 years by my reckoning. I don't know how long a Lair lives. I do hear the Lairs talking amongst themselves. It's not a pleasant language, a clipped, bastardised English, quite piercing at first. Now it washes over me. But I know enough to realise there is also a death for Lairs, a time span. I've only been in contact with the same directors and their assistants for all my time here. There are three directors of different ranks in my Library. I'm the only Half-light. I often wonder, whose children were they? How long ago were they like me? Human. Many generations before I was brought above. There is no child-like quality in them. These Lairs are human no more. It paralyses me knowing they were once children, like the children I now administer to, the first part of the chain.

BUT THIS WILL ALL CHANGE. I WILL CHANGE ALL THIS. I HAVE FOUND A WAY. It's dangerous, stupid really. But this must stop. I've started my plan. I will save Bella and Race, and together we will reclaim Humanity. We shall cry again, laugh, be fallible, be human. Bella and Race, so innocent, naïve, trusting. They are studying with all the new shipment of Undercity youth. They still have a light in their eyes. My potion is holding. The Lairs suspect nothing yet. Oh yes, just to spend one shift talking to them will be worth all the risk. You see, the Lairs have finally allowed me to administer the serums myself. So, I have put into place my hare-brained scheme. I have so much to ask them, especially about the Undercity. I could be jeopardising all of us, Bella, Race and myself. And it will be hard, horrific, giving them the true dosages of 'Callic Dimension 5', which will speed their process into Lairs after our time together.

I have had conversations with the directors and I have thought, 'yes,

they do have compassion, feelings, like the time when I complained about my need for company and, to my surprise, they claimed to understand this. I could tell it was disconcerting to them that I had these feelings.

I imagine that they thought they had bred such states out of me. After all, they brought me above as an infant, carefully training me, grooming me and programming my mind for the position in the Library. It's a position that needs a Half-light, so as not to freak out the new arrivals, the poor Undercity youth that I alter.

I remember the Lairs' faces, just screens really, rolling up and down, their featureless heads, like neon, vibrating in an excited manner I hadn't seen before. The speaker box grill in their hats emitted high-pitched, erratic sounds. They were obviously worried. This was all over in moments, but I detected their concern about my human state. I knew for the first time that they actually needed me, yet wished it wasn't so. I remember vividly how the three directors, bunched up in a closed circle, conversing in that hideous language of theirs, screens flickering away, rolling up and down their faces creating a slight vibration in their bowler hats as their words clashed against each other's speaker boxes.

Then I remember the head director, Mace, walking, in that gangly way, arms dangling, fingers agitated, back to me. He grabbed my arm and led me down the corridors of books to the back of the Library, and in the darkest corner of the building told me that they understood and would be fixing the problem of my loneliness and need for companionship. I was stunned. I actually thanked him. This was so weird, and for the first time in my life I felt my heart thump against my rib cage and water come from my eyes. Mace's screen fizzed bright red. I felt heat coming from the actual screen, his fingers started clicking wildly. He bent forward and slapped my face so hard that I dropped to the floor. There was a commotion like I'd never heard before. Ear-piercing. As I rolled back up into a sitting position against the wall, I could see the other two directors moving down the corridor of books at a speed I hadn't realised they could move at. Three pair of hands, fingers clicking stretching, growing, twisting, rotating madly, almost breaking out of their gloves. A hood was produced from Mace's pocket and thrown over my head. They lifted me to my feet, and dragged me out of the back door of the Library. I was placed on a rim, whisked down through the streets back to my apartment, and locked in my rooms.

I'd never been locked in my rooms before. I lay on my bed and cried myself to sleep. I had shown my human side and all hell had broken loose. I'd never seen the Lairs like this, and I had never known tears either. I woke to find a Lair in my bedroom, peering down at me. He quickly handed me a potion with the command: 'Drink'. I fell immediately back to sleep. When I woke again, he was still there, but was moving around my lounge, looking intently at my meagre possessions. I felt shaky, dizzy and my vision was so blurry it seemed there were two of him. I lay quietly taking deep breaths till my vision returned to normal. He re-entered my bedroom and passed another potion. No command this time. I just drank.

On waking, my vision was normal. I thought immediately about getting to work, to the Library. I walked through the bedroom, towards my kitchenette, which was off the side of the lounge. I have the normal functions of a Half-light and needed the bathroom and a change of clothes, of which I have three sets, all uniformly the same. As I passed through the lounge, I saw over by the window a Lair standing and looking out of my porthole window down onto the streets of Lair City. His fingers were locked together behind his back. Without turning, he called my name. 'Solo. Half-light. Do your business and come and sit. I need to talk to you.'

His voice was fascinating, melodic. I calmly went about my business of need, forgetting to change, I returned to the lounge. The Lair had turned and was also sitting. In my life, I had only conversed with the three Lairs from the Library – Mace, Farg and Jip. And never had I heard one of them speak in such a honeyed voice. I was mesmerised. As I sat, I realized this Lair was different to any I had seen before. For a start, his bowler hat was white, his full-length coat grey, only his boots were the same colour. Down the side of them was a length of rod which protruded out of the sheath that contained it. Its tip was yellow, like the street lamps and headlights of a Rim. His gloved hands were still, resting on his knees. His face screen, the most beautiful milky green, lay calm.

'Solo, Half-light,' he said again. 'Be comfortable, relax and look at me.'

I realised something straight away. There had only been one chair in my lounge. Now here was a second and the Lair was sitting in it. I should have been confused, but I was not.

'Solo, Half-light, we understand you are lonely, you need company.'

We are most concerned for your happiness. Is this right, that you require company?’

Suddenly, I felt fear, and from somewhere inside me I felt danger.

‘Solo, Half-light, do not worry, we mean you no harm, we are interested in your inner needs. Is this true you would like a companion?’

‘Yes, Director,’ I replied, a quiver in my voice.

‘Director? Solo, no, I’m not a Director. No, my name is Hasame. This is what you should call me. Okay? Dr Hasame. Are you happy with us Lairs, Solo? Do you enjoy your work?’

This was so new to me, these words – words of care. It was chilling, yet comforting at the same time. He sat there quietly, his screen coolly glowing milky green.

‘Yes, Dr Hasame. I have thought it would be wonderful to have a friend.’

‘The Directors and I have decided that you should have a friend, Solo. Will that make your time here with us happy? There is so much work for you. We feel we might have overloaded your health. You know how much we appreciate your loyalty, your experience and ability. To show you how much we care, we have found you a friend.’

I felt shaky, suspicious. In 53 years, I had never met or seen a Lair that looked and talked like this. I found my fingers locked together in my lap, thinking ‘they’re on to me, they know’. It was everything I could do to hold down my fear.

‘You look unhappy with this Solo! Is there something else that’s troubling you? Mace does lose his head from time to time. Short on patience. He doesn’t understand the broader world. But I do. I understand your needs. So, do you want to meet your new friend?’

With this, Dr Hasame sprung to his feet. The rod at the side of his calf-length boots glinted momentarily as his full grey leather coat fell to cover it. He clicked his heels and leant into his mechanical walk across my room to the door, his gloved hands leading the way to the door handle. He opened the door and disappeared into the hallway leaving the door fully open. I heard conversation, then he was back in the room, standing directly over my armchair, his screen still that milky green slowly looping from bottom to top. Pitching forward, his fingers cupping my shoulder, he dragged me to my feet. It was so effortless. His strength chilling. I was scared I would piss myself, soil my pants. I expected to be thrown across the room, but he pulled his

evil fingers away and stepped back. ‘Mace,’ he called. ‘Mace, bring in Solo’s new friend.’

A white head followed a white snout, its mouth was open and a red tongue spilled over a jaw full of sharp teeth. Its ears alert and pointed, swung, rotated on top of its skull. It had black eyes but they were without light. I could see straight away Callic Dimension 5 in them. There was a collar and a length of chain that was yet to reveal Mace. The head met the neck, which met the body of this creature. Then it turned black for the rest of its body, ending in a black bushy tail. Mace appeared, those worms he thinks of as his fingers holding the end of the chain. The creature was panting, pulling against its lead. Mace jerked hard on the chain and the creature came to rest at his feet. Mace grumbled some sort of complaint.

‘Ah, yes, Solo, what do you think? A friend for you. Someone to spend your free time with. A companion. A friend to walk to work with. It’s called a dog. We had it produced in one of the labs for you. We were going to give him to you soon, but this little emotional turn you have had made us realise we needed to give it to you now. Do you like it? Wonderful colour don’t you think? It’s perfectly even. Black and white. We are very proud of ourselves, you know. Had to pull some strings to get you this. We had to go into the gene pool and it’s taken a few months to grow you this friend. It all started with just a small piece of skin, and as long as you feed it Callic Dimension 5, it will do as you ask. We are going to let you have a couple of shifts off to spend time with your friend. You’ll have to give it a name. Let Mace know what you call it. Now, must be getting on with my work. You know the saying about idle hands.’

I saw Dr Hasame’s fingers convulse at his own joke.

‘Dr Hasame,’ I called as he was leaving with Mace, ‘Doctor, what is it that you do in Lair City?’ but they were words to a dead screen. He closed the door behind himself and I found myself holding the chain of this creature – a dog. I dropped the chain to the floor and sat back again in my lounge staring at this quite beautiful creature. It sat there panting and staring straight ahead, obviously drugged to the eyeballs. I wondered what program it was on, how had they altered this creature. Was it here to watch me – spy on me? Suddenly, I realised with huge relief that they hadn’t any idea what I was doing with Bella and Race, and perhaps they were confused about my behaviour. Knowing the Lairs as I did, I realised that this dog was here for their design, not

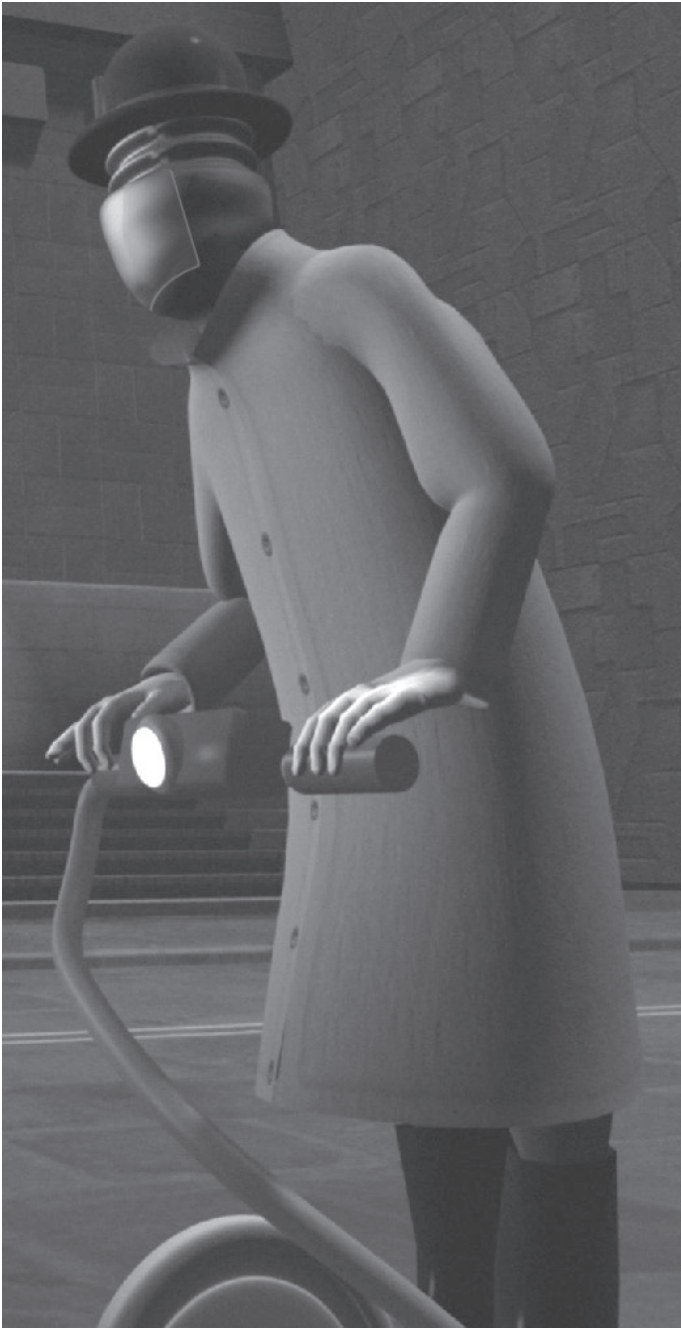
mine. Yet here I was with this creature and there was a strange joy at the idea of sharing space, my personal space, with another living creature!

My mind went to Bella and Race, and I panicked. I had been here at home for two shifts, plus the two more they had given me meant four shifts that I would be without administering my program to Bella and Race. Mace would be doing my work, in the Library, allocating Callic 5 to all the children including Race and Bella. This would set the plan back - perhaps end it. For the second time in my life, I started to cry. To my amazement, the dog moved over to my lounge chair and started licking my hands, nudging its nose under them and a small flicker of light passed through its eyes. I understood immediately that the dog had only recently been programmed and the Callic 5 was a recent drug.

It was so moving. The wetness and warmth, its breath against my body was wonderful. My tears stopped and I smiled. All these feelings, alien to me. Quickly I realised I could also use my own potions on this creature. Give it a chance to be normal, a true dog. I found myself patting, stroking its head. It responded with more licking, nuzzling, and I was overwhelmed with joy. 'Yes' I thought. 'Dr Hasame is right. I will have to find a name for you.'

A sudden tiredness overwhelmed me, so I dragged my poor body back to the bedroom and fell straight to sleep. When I woke, I found the dog on the bed snuggled up against me. I had found a friend. I jumped out of bed quite startled, remembering the events of the last three shifts. The horror of Mace slapping me, Dr Hasame's liquid voice; these things still troubled me. All too sugar-coated. I went and showered and as the water spilled over my body, I hatched my new plan. I would return to work straight away. I needed to see Bella and Race, check their condition, retrieve some of my own potions from the lab in the library and start to feed my dog on these serums too. And I wanted to know more about dogs. This I could look up in the Library. I changed into a fresh uniform with this beautiful black and white creature tagging my every move.

'What shall I call you, my friend?' I asked aloud. I realised it still had its collar and chain on. It tinkled and rattled as it dragged. I checked myself at the door; I resumed my normal posture, that deadpan expression that had grown on my face like a mask. I stepped through the door with my new friend, whose tail wagged and for a moment seemed real.



A Lair on a Rim in Lair City