

The Dust Enclosed Here

a short story by Kage Baker

"He never wore a red doublet in his life!"

Susanna had sounded outraged. Hastening to smooth her anger, the stranger's voice had followed: "An you wish it painted, good lady, 'twill look best in red. Consider! 'Tis not the man you dress, but the monument for posterity. And, Mistress Hall, Preeves and Sons have plied our trade this many a year and we know what looks well in a memorial. Think of the dark church, ay, and the old wood, and this splendid funerary bust gleaming from the shadows in -- gray? No, no, Mistress, it must be a goodly scarlet, granting your dear father a splendor like the setting sun!"

Will's sun was setting. His son down below the horizon and he'd follow soon enough himself. He had wadded the sheet between his fingers irritably, wishing they'd go have their hissed argument elsewhere. No, no peace yet; Susanna had drawn back the curtain, letting in the blinding light while a shabby fellow in a puke-colored coat peered at him, respectful as though he were already dead, and sketched in a book the rough cartoon to impose on a marble bust blank.

"Christ Jesu," Will had muttered, closing his eyes. When he'd opened his eyes again, preparing to give them his best offended glare, he was surprised to discover they were gone and it was night. Nothing but low coals to light the room, with a blue flame crawling on them. And then the shadow had loomed against the light, and he'd turned his head expecting it was John --

That was the last memory! The strange doctor who'd come for his soul, or at least it had seemed so. The stranger had bent swiftly, thrusting something cold into his face. He'd felt a sharp pain in his nose and then a tearing between his eyes, sparks of fire, fathomless darkness...

Will put his nervous hand up now to stroke the bridge of his nose, imagining he felt sympathetic pain. There was no real pain, he knew. No real hand or nose, either, but if he thought about that for long he'd panic again. Mastering himself, he paced the little tiring room (or what he pretended was his tiring room) and waited for his cue.

Here it came now, the sudden green orb in his vision. He felt the pull and was summoned like the ghost he was, through the insubstantial curtain into the light, where swirling dust motes coalesced into his hologrammatic form.

"...so give a big welcome to Mr. William Shakespeare!" cried Caitlin gamely, indicating him with an outflung hand as she stepped aside for him. She wore an antique costume, the sort of gown his grandmothers might have worn. Three people, the whole of his audience, applauded with something less than enthusiasm. He gritted his teeth and smiled brilliantly, bowed grandly with flourishes, wondering what he'd ever done to be consigned to this particular Hell.

"God give ye all good day, good ladies, good gentleman!" he cried.

The lumpen spectators regarded him.

"Doth thou really be-eth Shakespeareth?" demanded the man, grinning, in the flat Lancashireish accent Will had come to understand was *American*.

"As nearly he as cybertechnology may revive and represent, good sir!" Will told him, and Caitlin made a face, her usual signal meaning: Keep it simple for the groundlings. He nodded and went on:

"I am, sir, an insubstantial hologram. Yet my form is drawn in forensic reconstruction from my mortal corpse exact, to show how I was when I lived. Yea, and I have been programmed with quotes from my works for your entertainment, and my personality hath been extrapolated from the best conjecture of scholars."

Though he suspected that last was a flat lie; it seemed to him that his owners (gentlemen of a company calling itself Jupiter Cyberceuticals) must somehow have captured his memories if not his soul, in that last minute of his life, and held them prisoner now in this wooden O. However, he said what they had programmed him to say.

"So do you, um, find it really strange being here in the future?" asked one of the women. She spoke politely enough, but it was a question he'd heard at nearly every performance since his revival.

Will kept the smile in place and replied, "Ay, indeed, madam, most strange. When I do hear that humankind hath nowadays built cities on the Moon, nay, even on Mars, truly I think this is an age of wonders indeed." The programming that he wore like chains prompted him to go on and make certain low jokes about how he wished his era had had a cure for baldness, but he exerted his will and refused. Caitlin wrung her hands.

"What do you think of your Prince Hank?" inquired the other woman, smirking archly, and Will accessed the data on the latest juicy scandal among the royals. He smirked right back at her and stroked his beard.

"Well, truly, good lady, to paraphrase mine own First Part of Henry the Fourth: right sadly must our poor queen see riot and dishonour stain the brow of her young Harry!"

They giggled in appreciation. Encouraged, he went on:

"Belike he doth but imitate the sun, who doth permit the base contagious clouds to smother up his beauty from the world, that, when he please again to be himself, being wanted, he may be more wondered at by breaking through the foul and ugly mists -- "

No; he'd lost them. His sensors noted their complete incomprehension, though they were smiling and applauding again. He just smiled back and bowed, wishing he had a set of juggler's clubs or a performing dog.

"I thank ye! I humbly thank ye. What would ye, now, good ladies? What would you, now, sir?"

They blinked, their smiles fading.

"What about a sonnet?" he suggested in desperation.

"Okay," agreed the man.

He was programmed to give them the one catalogued as the Eighteenth, and for once he didn't feel like substituting another.

"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" he declaimed. "Thou art more lovely and more temperate..." He gave the rest in a performance so widely gestured and so antic even Will Kempe would have winced at it for being over the top, but it held their attention at least.

"That was neat," volunteered the man, when the recitation had ended.

"Many thanks. That sonnet, with selected others, is available in the Gifte Shoppe off the lobby, in both ring holo and standard format," he informed them. Caitlin nodded approvingly. The commercials must not

be omitted, and that was one of the few things on which he agreed with his owners.

"Does the Gifte Shoppe sell Fruit Chew bars too?" inquired one of the ladies.

"Yea, madam, it doth," he told her, and she turned to her companions.

"I'm starving. Do you want to ... ?"

"Yeah," the others chorused, nodding, and they turned away and made for the exit. Courtesy wasn't entirely dead in this latest age, however; at the door the man turned back and waved.

"Thanks, and -- um ... Goodbyeth thee!"

Will smiled and waved back. "Now God blight thy knave's stones with poxy sores, most noble sir," he murmured sotto voce, noting with relief that it was six o'clock. The Southwark Museum was about to close for the day.

"Our revels now are ended!" he shouted, as the big clock struck across the river.

"Mr. Shakespeare," said Caitlin hesitantly, "You're supposed to follow the script. You know they really do want you to make those jokes about your hair. People like to laugh."

"Then let 'em drag Dicky Tarleton from his grave, and set him in this bear pit," snarled Will. "There was a man of elegant jest, God He knows. Or let in a little mongrel dog to piss my leg, what sayest thou? They'll laugh right heartily then."

"We don't have dogs anymore," Caitlin explained. "Not since -- "

"Since Beast Liberation, ay, I know it well. Nor canst thou give them Jack Falstaff for merriment, since he is banished, with all the other children of mine invention." Will collapsed into a sitting position on the stage, staring up at the empty galleries of the Globe Restored.

"I'm really sorry about that, Mr. Shakespeare, but I explained to you about the List," said Caitlin, referring to the database of proscribed and immoral literature published annually by the Tri-Worlds Council for Integrity.

"Even so you did," Will admitted. "And rather I had rotted in the earth this many a year than fret away eternity in such a dull, spiteful and Puritan age. What though my plays won't please? I take no censorship ill; there was ever a Master of the Revels spying over my shoulder lest I write an offense. But if they would let me give them a new piece, why, then! There's fine dramatic matter in these new times. That men might seek their fortunes not in mere Virginia colonies, but on Mars -- God's bones, what a wonder! Or a play of the Mountains of the Moon, what say you?" He swung his sharp stare down to her eyes.

"I wish you could," said Caitlin miserably, looking away from his gaze. She had gotten this job in the first place because she had a degree in history and longed, with all her unwise heart, to have been born in the romantic past. "I don't make the policy, Mr. Shakespeare. I'm sorry all your plays were condemned. If it wasn't for the tourist income the Borough Council wouldn't even let you do your songs and sonnets."

" 'The Revenge of Kate,' " Will said slyly, framing a playbill in the air with his hands. "Wherein Petruchio himself is tamed, how like you that? That'll please, surely, and how if there were a mild Jew and a meek harmless Moor to boot? Nor no lusts nor bawdiness, nor any cakes nor ale, nor battles, and they shall ride no horses, out of melting compassion for the poor jades. Nay, more! There shall be a part set to be signed in dumb-show for the, what's the new word? Ay, the hearing-impaired!"

"I wish you could," Caitlin repeated, and he saw that she was near tears, and sighed.

"Go thy ways, girl," he said. "Grant me oblivion."

He stuck out his arms theatrically, as though being pinioned to a rack, and held the pose as she flicked the switch that shut him off for the night. Without illumination the dust motes vanished, settled.

So accustomed had he grown to this routine, over the five years he had been an exhibit in the museum, that he nearly died a second time when he found himself unexpectedly *on* in the middle of the night. He leaped to his feet and stared around him in the dark.

"How now?" he stammered. "What, ho! Who's about?"

But there was no sound. The glowing clock told him it was midnight, and he felt a moment's uneasiness until the absurdity of the scene occurred to him: insubstantial ghost frightened of the witching hour! Here came the distant bell, the little tune that preceded long-tolling twelve. He heard it out, pacing the stage.

"I am thy father's spirit," he intoned, and then dropped his voice an octave. "*I* am thy father's spirit, ay, better:

"I am thy father's spirit,
Doomed for a certain term to walk the night
And for the day confined to fast in fires,
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purged away..."

He paused at the edge of the stage. Tentatively he extended a foot beyond the light, out of the range of the holoprojector's bright beam. His foot vanished. This was startling, but there was no pain; and after drawing his foot back and seeing it reappear unaltered, he tried with his hand. It vanished too, and came back obligingly when he withdrew it.

"Now, by God's will..." he said. He turned his face up toward the painted Heavens. "Almighty Father, can I escape this vile purgatory? Are mine own sins burnt and purged away? Oh, let it be so!"

Backing up for a running start, he sprinted forward and hurtled hopeful into the darkness. He landed with a crash in the middle of the groundling area and lay there a moment, cursing imaginatively.

Rising, he put up his hands to dust himself off and realized that he couldn't see them, though he was still palpable. He cast a baleful stare at the cone of light on the stage, empty now but for a few motes of glittering dust.

"That's well," he said sarcastically. "First my mortal substance and now my form. Am I to be no more than memory?"

Nobody answered him. He climbed up on stage again and found that his image returned when he stood there. He amused himself for a while making bits of his body disappear. It occurred to him he might explore the Southwark Museum and this cheered him considerably until he found that, insubstantial or not, he was unable to leave the perimeter of the Globe Restored; whereat he said something to which Sir Edmund Tilney would certainly have objected.

All the rest of that night he prowled the silent galleries, a shadow among shadows, raging at his immortality.

Over the next six months the phenomenon occurred, with increasing frequency: sudden and unbidden consciousness when he had been manifestly shut off, and with it a gradual widening of his ability to range. He found himself able, in time, to venture out to the Gifte Shoppe and snack bar areas if he remained close to the wall through which ran the power and communications cables. There was nothing especially to interest him out there, since he was incapable of eating and the Gifte Shoppe had no writing materials, nor was he substantial enough to have stolen any had there been. Still, it was a little freedom.

The day things truly changed for him began very badly indeed.

It was a day of the sort of weather the English plod through and ignore, but all others wisely shun, remaining in their hotels. Consequently no tourist vans pulled up before the Southwark Museum, and consequently Mr. Pressboard had the whole of the Globe Restored to himself when he arrived.

"Oh, dear," said Caitlin when she saw him coming, and flipped the switch that summoned Will. He materialized, started through the curtain and stopped in horror at the sight of Mr. Pressboard setting up his folding stool before the stage, as rain bounced and plinked on the forcefield above the thatching.

"Well, I see our most regular visitor is back again!" cried Caitlin in a bright false voice. "Welcome to the Globe Restored! We hope you'll enjoy yet another visit with the world-famous writer, Mr. William Shakespeare!"

"Except that he wasn't a writer," grunted Mr. Pressboard. "He was a butcher's boy."

Will's lip curled and Caitlin's laugh dopplered after her as she made for the exit.

"Well, you two will just have to work that out!" she said, giving Will a look of guilty apology. "I hope you'll just excuse me -- I have to see about something."

"Oh, faithless," Will hissed after her, before dragging a smile on his face for Mr. Pressboard.

Mr. Pressboard was a retired person who believed, unshakably, that all of Will's stuff had really been written by the earl of Oxford. This belief was more than an article of faith for him; it was a cause. He wore, in the public streets, a sweatshirt and cap that proclaimed it. Vain for Will to deny the mysterious coded acrostic clues that were supposed to be hidden in the poems. Vain for him to insist, ever so politely, that there had been no vast and ridiculous conspiracy to conceal their true authorship. Mr. Pressboard had no life, and consequently had all the tedious time in the world to park himself in front of the stage and argue his case.

Today he was intent on demonstrating how no man with Will's paltry education could ever have written such masterful lines as, for example, "The gaudy, blabbing and remorseful day / Is crept into the bosom of the sea" and went on some two hours on this theme without pausing once. Will was pacing the stage repeating silently, *Be courteous; he paid at the door*, over and over, when a small boy wandered into the Globe.

He wore a yellow rain slicker and wellies, and his dun-fair hair was tousled from having been under the slicker's hood. From the snack bar he had obtained a Fruit Chew and stood now nibbling the granola off its surface as he watched Mr. Pressboard talk and talk and talk, and Will interject occasional "Hem" and "Er" sounds.

After fifteen minutes the boy grew bored with this and started wandering around, up into the galleries and

climbing on the balustrades. He leaned far over them to peer at the paintings of Apollo and Mercury. When he had tired of that he descended to the groundling level and inspected the *trompe l'oeil* stonework. He craned his head back to study the painted heavens and looked longingly at the dummy cannon. Finally he approached Mr. Pressboard and, extending an index finger, poked him in the arm.

"Excuse me," he said. "Can it be my turn now?"

"Even if Sir Philip Sidney did -- what?" Mr. Pressboard started and turned to stare at him. The boy stared back. His eyes were wide, and a very pale blue.

"Can it be my turn to talk to Mr. Shakespeare now?" the boy reiterated.

"Forsooth, good Master Pressboard, we must suffer young scholars to have their day, must we not?" Shakespeare exclaimed gleefully. Mr. Pressboard remained planted where he was, however, and frowned at the boy.

"I'm discussing something important, young man. Go away."

The boy backed off a pace, then dug in his heels. His pale stare became cold.

"But other people are supposed to get turns too, you know," he said, not taking his eyes from Mr. Pressboard's.

Abruptly: "Okay," said Mr. Pressboard, with an odd scared expression on his face. He got up, grabbed his folding stool and hurried for the exit. Will felt like turning a cartwheel. The boy looked up at him.

"He was really boring you, huh?" he said.

"To hot salt tears, lad," Will told him, dropping down to sit crosslegged on the edge of the stage. "God keep thee and bless thee. What's thy name?"

"You don't remember?" The boy looked disappointed. "It's Alec. I came here when I was five. Remember?"

"I see many, many folk, Alec, every day," Will explained. "Wherefore I pray you excuse me."

The boy nodded. "That's all right. There was a lot of kids that day. You sang us that song about the wind and rain and hay hoes."

"Ah! To be sure." Sweet Christ, someone who'd actually listened to him! Will smiled at the boy. "Dost thou like the Southwark Museum, Alec?"

"It's okay," said Alec. "Derek and Lulu wanted to be alone in the car so they gave me my credit disc and said I could buy anything I wanted in the Gifty Shoppy, as long as I stayed in here until it was lunchtime. I think they're having sex actually."

"Forsooth?" Will attempted, successfully, to keep a straight face. "And what hast thou bought in the Gifte Shoppe, lad?"

"Nothing much," Alec said. "It's all shirts and holocards and tea mugs with this place on them. I like things with ships on them. But I wanted to see how you were so I came in here. How are you doing? You were sad when I saw you before. Are you happier now?"

Will opened his mouth to sing the praises of this wonderful modern age when there were cities on the Moon and cures for baldness, but what he said was:

"No, boy. I am the saddest wretch that liveth, in this most unnatural life of mine."

"Oh. I'm sorry," Alec replied, coming close to lean on the stage. "What's wrong?"

"I am a slave here, lad," Will replied.

"What's a slave?"

"A living soul kept as property by others, to labor for them eternally."

"But I thought you were dead a long time ago," said Alec.

"And yet I speak and reason, imprisoned within this cloven pine." Will stared into the boy's eyes, raised his clenched fists to show the shackles on his imagination. "I live again, Alec, how I know not, and yet I cannot have the thing I need to live!"

"What's that?" Alec wanted to know.

"Dost thou know what a poet is, lad?"

"That's what you are," said Alec, "It means you make stories to watch. I think. Doesn't it?"

"Ay, lad, I made stories to watch. Out of earth and heaven I pulled the unknown, gave it form and made it speak, and men filled this Globe and marveled at it! And paid good money to marvel, too, mind, t'was a profitable endeavor. But my masters will have me make no shows now. I am the show, and strut here meaningless afore barren spectators." Will sagged forward as though pulled by the weight of his unseen chains.

"You mean you want to make more stories and they won't let you?" Alec looked outraged.

"Even so, lad."

"That's mean! You can't even make 'em in cyberspace?"

"Cyber *space*?" Will lifted his head and stared at the boy. "A space cybertechnological, you mean? Or what do you mean?"

"It's like -- look. You're right here, but you're not really here," said Alec, pointing to him. "Where you really are is in the system. Where's your controls?"

"I know not -- " Will held his hands wide, signifying bewilderment. Alec, pink with anger, was stamping along the front of the stage searching for something. At last he climbed up on the stage, ignoring the signs that forbade him doing so, and spotting the trap door that had once let ghosts rise out of the depths he fell to his knees beside it. Will scrambled to his feet and followed, looking down.

"I bet they're in here," said Alec. He reached into his coat and, looking around furtively, drew out a small case. It looked quite a bit like a thief's set of picklocks that Will had once seen in his less prosperous days. Alec noticed his astounded stare.

"Just my tools," he said in a small voice. "You won't tell?"

"Nay, boy, not I!" Will vowed. He watched as Alec lifted out the trap to reveal, not the hollow dark he had thought was below but a sort of shallow cavity full of winking lights and bright buttons. He was so surprised he got down on hands and knees beside Alec to look at it closely.

"God's bleeding wounds!"

"I have to be fast," Alec said, and manipulating some of the things in amid the lights he glanced up toward the ceiling. " 'Cos I'm not really supposed to do this, not to other people's machines anyway. Okay; now the guard cameras in here think I'm still standing down there talking to you. Sneaky, huh?" He grinned at Will.

"But what is this?" Will asked, pointing at the box of lights.

"This is -- er -- where you really are," said Alec, hesitantly, as though he thought it might hurt Will's feelings. "But you can pretend it's jewels we're going to steal or something," he added, talking out of the side of his mouth like a petty crook. "Piece of cake, see?"

Will just watched as Alec took out his tools and did things to the buttons and lights. Red letters flashed in Will's peripheral vision and he put up his hand in an impatient gesture, as though they were flies he might wave off, before the import of the words sank in on him.

SUMMON HUMAN ASSISTANCE! MEDICAL EMERGENCY!

The sensors he used to monitor his audience began to chatter at him in a panicky way, informing him that they detected violent seizure activity in Alec's brain. Will almost shouted for Caitlin, but paused. He had seen folk afflicted with the falling sickness, and Alec did not appear to be having any manner of fit. The boy's eyes were alert and focused, his hands steady, and he worked swiftly and without the least hesitation as the bright storm raged within his skull.

Will shrugged and dismissed the sensors' warning. He had long since observed that even in this fabulous future world, things occasionally malfunctioned. Especially marvels cybertechnological.

Presently Alec drew out something between tweezers. It looked like a tiny word in an unknown language, written in pure light.

"And that's it," he said thoughtfully, turning it this way and that. "Funny."

"What is it, in God's name?"

"It's your program," Alec replied. "You've got lots and lots in here, but they didn't give you very much to do. There's the new stuff you wrote yourself, that little winji bit there. Were you trying to bypass the holomitter system?"

"I know not -- " said Will, and then remembered his inexplicable nocturnal self-awareness. Had that been his own doing, by some means he couldn't name? Had his misery been enough to force his prison walls outward?

"It almost looks like you're a memory file from someplace else." The boy seemed puzzled. "This is a whole bunch of data. You could have a lot more functions, you know. You want to?"

Will had no idea what he meant, but just the thought of having any kind of choice made him feel like dancing.

"Ay, forsooth!"

"Okay," said Alec, and set the bright word back and made some alteration. What happened next even Will could never find words to describe adequately. Was there a silent sound? An invisible flash of light? A torrent of mathematical language forced itself into his head, and with it came strange comprehension.

He rose on his knees, clutching his temples and gasping, while the boy closed up the trap and put away the little tools.

"So now," said Alec, "it'll be lots nicer. You can make stuff in here."

"Stuff?" said Will, getting unsteadily to his feet. "What stuff, lad?"

"Whatever you want there to be," said Alec. He shrugged. "You know. You just write what you want."

What he meant by *write* had nothing to do with quills and parchment, but it didn't matter. Will was at last beginning to get a sense of the laws of this universe.

"Maybe write some chairs or something so you can sit down, yeah?" Alec gestured at the bare stage.

"Or cloud-capp'd towers," said Will, staring around. "Or gorgeous palaces!"

"Yeah." Alec nodded.

Will looked hard at him. "How canst thou do these things, child? What art thou?"

"Different," said Alec, squirming.

Will raised an eyebrow, remembering the abnormal cerebral activity his sensors had picked up. Shrewd as he was, he was unable to guess the whole truth; for his owners at Jupiter Cyberceuticals had not included any information on *genetic engineering* in his programming. After all, it was illegal to make an enhanced human being. Even a small one ... because who knew what such a creature might do if it was allowed to grow up? It would be as unpredictable as -- for example -- an artificial intelligence built on a human memory file, which was an equally illegal creature.

But Jupiter Cyberceuticals did a lot of illegal things.

"Thou art some prodigy, with powers," speculated Will.

"Don't tell on me! I'd get in trouble if anybody found out." Alec looked pleadingly up at Will. "Nobody's supposed to be different, you see?"

"I know it well, ay," Will told him with feeling.

Alec started as the clock began to strike across the river. "Oh! I have to go now. It was really nice seeing you again, Mr. Shakespeare." He jumped down from the stage and ran for the exit, pausing long enough to turn and wave. "I hope that works. Bye-bye!"

He fled past Caitlin, who looked down at him in surprise as she came in.

"You're not allowed to run in here!" she called after him, and turned to Will. "Look, I'm awfully sorry about Mr. Pressboard. Who was that?"

"Verily one of the young-ey'd cherubins," said Will, throwing his deepest bow. He grinned like a fox.

Six hours sped by like so many elephantine years, leaden, dull and ponderous, but Will could wait. He bore gracefully with a chartered busload of Scots who found fault with every aspect of *Macbeth*, and wanted an apology; he capered for an infant care class who had no idea who he was, and sang them his song about the wind and the rain. When the clock struck 6:00 at last he bid Caitlin a fond adieu. As she shut him off for the day, she observed to herself that he seemed much less moody than usual, though

there was a disconcerting glitter in his eyes as he vanished from her sight.

Somehow present and conscious still, he watched her departure and waited. The lights were extinguished. The security system activated. Dark roaring rain and night closed over old London. He reached out a sinuous impalpable thread of his will -- Ay! That was it, he was all Will now, and most himself being nothing but will! -- to the surveillance cameras, bidding them see only shadows.

Then he willed the holoemitter on and gave it wider range than it had previously, and his Globe was full of light, like a bright craft venturing on the night ocean. Briefly he considered summoning a pen and inkhorn, but realized they were unnecessary now.

"I have a muse of fire!" Will cried, and wrote his will in code that blazed like lightning, sparkled like etched crystal. From the brightest heaven of invention he ordered a backdrop of lunar cities drawn in silverpoint, painted in ivory and gold and cloudy blue, outlandish spires and towers flying fluttering pennons against the eternal stars.

With clean hands he willed the light, and out of the spinning dust a simulacrum of Richard Burbage formed. He stood before Will in his prime, not yet run to fat, and there too were Ned Alleyn and Kempe and Armin, Heminges and Condell, Lowin and Crosse and Phillips with the rest. Attending on his will, they were in makeup and in costumes that fit too, coeval, awake, sober and on their marks, every man jack of 'em.

They looked around uncertainly.

"Why, Will, what's toward?" inquired Kempe, meek as you please.

"A rehearsal!" thundered Will. "And I will give thee thy lines extempore. *The Most Fantastical Comedy of Man on the Moon*, my masters!"