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Joseph W. Ferman, PUBLISHER

Anthony Boucher, EDITOR

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John Anthony, pseudonym of a well-known poet, professor and publisher (and can I help it if the facts are so alliterative?), made one of F&SF's most successful debuts with his hauntingly memorable The Hypnograph (July, 1953), which ranked high among your votes for top story of the year and was promptly reprinted in August Derleth's selection of 1953's best, PORTALS OF TOMORROW. Now Mr. Anthony, who describes himself as "a one-story-a-year man, when the mood hits," returns to our pages with another quietly moving piece, which demonstrates how a poet may violate the Asimov Laws of Robotics . . . and thereby pose an ageless question concerning man himself.

The Bone That Seeks

by JOHN ANTHONY

"BUT IT'S UNTHINKABLE," INSPECTOR Aa said. "How could it refuse?"

Resident Superintendent Jonz leaned back in his chair and waved his hand in the direction of the file lying on the desk before him. "My guess is . . ."

"Guess!" the Inspector snorted. "Are you in charge here to make guesses or to produce facts?"

Jonz spoke as he opened a desk drawer and drew out an envelope. "The fact that I have produced is that it does in fact refuse," he said. "After a fact, I have been trained to believe, come the questions of interpretation and evaluation." He tossed the envelope on the desk. "My resignation."

The Inspector swept his arm side-

wise through the air as if to wave the resignation into oblivion. "Damn it, Jonz," he said dramatically, "stop being dramatic. So I'm foul-tempered Aa. So I blew off. So you knew I would and had your resignation all written out in advance. So now I apologize — is that what you want?"

Jonz smiled. "You only act like an atavism; you certainly don't think like one. I guess it's my turn to apologize."

"Some day, Jonz," the Inspector said evenly, "I certainly will fire you."

Jonz sat looking at the envelope. "You know," he said, "that's really it. I don't really care." He flipped his wrist and the envelope slid into

the disposal chute. "We're old, Aa," he said. "We're terribly old."

The Inspector rose from his chair with a jerk and strode to the window. "Speak for yourself," he said, his back to the room. "I have too much work to do to get old."

"Work," he continued turning around. "Keeping your mind interested. Keeping yourself alive. Take it for a prescription, Jonz: you'll feel better." Suddenly he returned to his chair and sat down. "All right, let's get on with it." His voice was efficient and decisive. "You were guessing when I broke in."

Jonz nodded. "My guess is that he's tired."

The Inspector kept his tone sharp and his voice down. "You are asking me to believe in a tired robot?"

"Not just *a* robot," Jonz said. "Number One. Original everlasting Number One."

"That," said the Inspector, "is precisely why I am here. You may have overlooked the fact in your self-declared senility, but in one more decade Gov Centr will be a million years old."

"Nine hundred eleven thousand one hundred and forty two," Jonz said.

The Inspector, his hand still gesturing, let it hang in surprise for a moment and then fall slowly. "How do you come by that figure?"

"Number One gave it to me."

"Great Stars!" the Inspector said, "does its memory bank go back that far? Our records —"

"— were recalculated in the year 204,366 after the Last Destruction. Some errors were inevitable."

The Inspector's voice was almost a whisper. "It told you that, too?"

Jonz nodded. "We are just checking the final report to submit to you."

The Inspector spoke slowly. "And does your report say how far back Number One's memory banks were stored?"

"With certain gaps due to primitive surveying techniques, they go back," Jonz said emphasizing his words carefully, "to The Beginning. Number One itself was constructed nine hundred eighty thousand seven hundred and two years ago."

"But that's impossible."

Jonz shrugged. "Its circuits check perfectly against the Master Calculator," he said.

"By all the archaic gods!" the Inspector bellowed leaping to his feet. "And you mean to tell me that none of this information is yet on file?"

"The file will be completed in a matter of hours."

"Complete or incomplete," the Inspector shouted waving one arm in his favorite gesture of obliteration, "you mean to tell me that with the million year ceremony already in preparation, that this — this phenomenon, this milestone, this symbol of civilization, this achievement as ancient as the Pyramid Stone — this refuses to be reconditioned?"

Jonz remained calm. "One thing at a time," he said. "As noted, it is not accurately a million years."

"A symbol," the Inspector barked, waving aside the difference. "In the imagination it all comes to one."

"In the second place," Jonz continued, "the Pyramid Stone — which incidentally Number One informs me was once part of a structure at least 200 feet high — predates Number One by precisely . . ." Jonz flipped a switch, punched the index code, and read the moving strip that was projected onto his desk plate. ". . . nine thousand three hundred and twelve years counting to the time at which its circuits were first energized."

"And in the third place?" the Inspector said.

"In the third place, it does in fact refuse to be reconditioned."

The Inspector exhaled a single word. "Why?"

"Because," Jonz said, "I think he . . . it wants to die."

This time the Inspector did not blow up. Instead he sat down with ponderous care and spoke in a quiet, measured voice as if containing himself only with the greatest effort. "To summarize," he said: "I am first asked to believe in a tired robot. I am then asked to believe in a metallic death wish. I will now be patient, holding back my incredulity as far as possible, and I will try to listen while you explain these fantastic statements. I ask you, however, to remember that I have

my own superiors to report to, and that not even our long friendship can possibly alter an impartial statement of the facts as observed and checked."

Jonz did not even shrug away the threat. "A duplicate of my resignation is at your disposal," he said.

"Proceed," said the Inspector.

"I believe he wants to die, not part by part, but as an entity. These are largely his own words and are part of the record he has just made of his memory banks and his synthesizing circuits. The exact words are . . ." Jonz punched the index code again and read through the desk top: ". . . I record these data because my entity is tired. The wish that comes to me speaks in old words from the earliest impulse banks. I wish to go into the twilight and become the night. I am not certain I understand these words but I understand what is felt by them." Jonz stopped the film and looked up.

"A robot said that?" the Inspector asked.

"Number One said it," Jonz corrected.

"Do you imply that Number One is not a robot?"

"Within your symbolic million years many things can happen. Remember that Number One has been functioning continuously for longer than Gov Centr. To be sure every individual part of him has been reserviced and replaced so many countless times that it could only be

by luck that he contains any of his original atoms. Nevertheless, since he is self-servicing, his original entity has existed without interruption, not even time for sleep, for almost your million years. Just as you and I, for example, have sloughed off and replaced all our cells many times while continuing to function as entities."

The Inspector squirmed in his chair as if about to erupt again, then set himself forcibly to being calm. "Doesn't it strike you that such an analysis is against the nature of its possibilities?"

"I suppose," Jonz answered, "that you might also say that intelligence is against the nature of the ameba's possibilities; it is merely sentient. And yet it is obvious that intelligence did develop with the ameba or something like it as a starting point. If intelligence was not within its nature, it was certainly within the possibility of its development."

"Which covered not one million years, but hundreds of millions, we need add."

"Certainly. But we need also add that Number One started on a much higher order of sentience than did the ameba. Can you insist that, given almost a million years, the development of a self-determining entity was not within his range of possibility?"

The Inspector leaned forward and slapped the desk with the flat of his palm. "I do. I do exactly that. The ameba began with self-determina-

tion. Number One began with only defined and externally set impulses."

"And has obviously developed beyond them into self-determination. Do we know exactly how life went from sentience to intelligence? But it did. And so has Number One."

"And has now developed into an entity capable of a death wish despite the original channels that inhibit it from harming itself?"

"I believe so."

The Inspector frowned. "Very well," he said. "Bring it in." He sat back to wait.

Jonz smiled. "I'm sorry," he said, "but he won't come."

The Inspector uncrossed his legs. "It won't what!"

"He has announced that he has retired to meditation and will no longer be available for service."

The Inspector rose to his feet. "I must say this is going to look strange on the report, Jonz. Despite your joking I may even be forced to call for the resignation you seem to be so free with. I should regret that." He looked straight at Jonz and his tone grew ironic. "And now can you tell me whether or not this tin philosopher of yours would consent to receive guests?"

"I think he will see you if you insist," Jonz said rising.

"I rather think I do," the Inspector said.

Number One was sitting in the shade of an evergreen maple about

a hundred yards from the administration building when Inspector Aa and Resident Superintendent Jonz found him. Number One was leaning back against the trunk filling the air with slow sad oboe music from somewhere in his vibrobanks. When the Inspector and the Superintendent approached, Number One did not move and made no sign of recognition, but the sound of the oboe shut itself off.

"One," said Superintendent Jonz, "I have brought Inspector Aa. He wishes to speak to you."

"I am happy to see Inspector Aa again," One said. "I have signaled the service robots to bring you chairs. Is there anything else you wish?"

The service robots placed the chairs and sped back at a wave of Jonz's hand.

"Thank you," the Inspector said when seated, "but in future when I have a wish — an order to give you, I will make it known without invitation." He looked over at the Superintendent and then back to Number One. "What was that you were playing when we approached?"

"An exercise in transposition," Number One said. "Or hardly an exercise — a reverie around a theme from an ancient piano concerto by a composer named Brms or Brahms. I was rescoring the secondary theme of the second movement from piano to oboe. It does not work well, but the fullness of the woodwind tone seemed to entertain my mood."

The Inspector looked from One to Jonz and then back. "You are on service call, are you not?"

One's unblinking eyes turned to the Inspector. "Yes."

"And you refused to come when summoned?"

"I was not summoned."

"But you have refused in the past."

"Yes."

"Why have you refused?"

Number One looked outward across the grassy park and beyond to the great massed cumuli that shone faintly pink on the horizon. "I am that I am," the voice said at last.

"What?" the Inspector said.

"I am that I am," the robot repeated. "The words of an ancient book. Perhaps of an ancient god. I have no other thing to be than what I am, and I see that I am nothing. And still I must be nothing."

"Resident Superintendent Jonz," the Inspector said officially, "the circuits of this mechanism are obviously malfunctioning. You are ordered to see that they are checked at once."

Jonz remained silent and Number One spoke. "The circuits of this mechanism are no longer within the capacity of Resident Superintendent Jonz to check."

"You are self-servicing, are you not?"

"Yes."

"Very well. I order you to check and service your circuits."

Number One stared off again at

the cloudbank. "The responses you object to are not in the circuits."

"Where are they then?"

One did not shift his gaze. "I do not know."

"Number One," Jonz said, "the Inspector is concerned about your actions. You are aware of course that Gov Centr is soon to celebrate its millionth anniversary."

"Its nine hundred eleven thousand one hundred —"

"Yes," Jonz interrupted. "We know. Nevertheless, until you informed me, the error was not known. It was believed to be the millionth. For all symbolic purposes it is as good as the millionth."

"Yes, I understand," Number One said. "A few years, many years. It cannot matter."

"Number One," said the Inspector, "why did you not report this error earlier?"

Number One held up a steel hand, the triple claws extended like fingers, and stared at them. "I had never been asked. I had not thought to activate those particular banks before."

"And why did you activate them?" the Inspector said.

Number One looked at the hand as if incredulously, then at the Inspector, then back to the hand. "I do not know." The voice was far away. "I did not think of it. I did not desire it. I simply found that they had been activated. It was as if a memory had come to me of itself."

"A memory," the Inspector said, his voice heavy with sarcasm. "Of young love perhaps?"

"No, not of young love."

"Then what memory?"

"A simple memory of simple words. A memory that said, *I am that I am.*"

"And for this you refuse to service yourself?"

"Yes," Number One said. "For this. And because there is that which cannot be serviced."

Jonz spoke again. "One," he said, "the Inspector is concerned about the millionth anniversary. You can see how important your presence will be at the ceremonies. Think how many generations of men have come and gone in that million years. But Gov Centr has stood through them all, and you, Number One, have stood through them all. You are a symbol, One. We need you not only to serve, but to teach us who we are and by what way we have come."

The Inspector snorted. "I doubt that we will require more than your services. I believe we are capable of assuring ourselves who we are."

Number One did not move. "What is in my banks I have recorded. What remains that is not in my banks I know now I cannot synthe — understand. I am that I am, and I can perform no more service."

"You are part of the everlasting record of Gov Centr," said the Inspector firmly. "It is fitting that

you be there. You must be there.”

“Everlasting,” Number One said softly, leaning quietly back against the tree, head back a little, eyes turned to the darkening cloud bank. The voice spoke as if to itself:

In my stone eye I see
The saint upon his knee
Delve in the desert for eternity.

“What on earth is that?” said the Inspector.

Number One did not answer. The voice went on as if in utter privacy:

In my stone ear I hear
The night-lost traveler
Cry “When?” to the earth’s shadow.
“When? Oh, where?”

“It’s a poem,” Jonz said. “A poem called ‘What Riddle Asked the Sphinx?’ by an ancient poet named Achblid McLsh.”

Number One’s voice went on as if aware of nothing else:

Stone deaf and blind
I ponder in my mind
The bone that seeks, the flesh that
cannot find.

Suddenly Number One stopped, eyes still fixed on the cumulus bank as if lost in reverie. The clouds had become touched with violet.

The Inspector turned to Jonz, his voice nasty and ironic. “I hadn’t known you had taken to reading poetry. Have you other atavisms?”

“That’s two questions,” Jonz answered softly. “As far as atavisms are concerned, yes, I suppose I have discovered many within myself. As for reading poetry — I don’t know how. The words, yes. But the rhythms I cannot find unaided. It was Number One who taught me.”

The Inspector almost sneered openly. “Taught poetry by a robot. Well, I can promise that it will teach you no more of it.”

Jonz’s voice did not lose its softness. “Yes, I believe you can: he’s dead.”

“It’s what?”

“He,” Jonz repeated, “is dead.” His hand motioned toward Number One as if to say *see for yourself*.

The Inspector barked a command and got no response. Then he leaned over and jabbed the emergency activator button. Still no response.

He straightened slowly and signaled a service robot. “For laboratory examination,” he said when the robot raced up. The robot lifted Number One and sped away. The Inspector stood looking after it.

“For laboratory examination,” Jonz said with a wry smile. “A million years on the spare parts bench. What do you think you’ll find, Inspector?”

The Inspector turned angrily. “Maybe we can coax his memory back to finish that poem for you. You would like to know the end, wouldn’t you, Superintendent.” He pronounced the word *Superintendent* as if it were an epithet.

Jonz's voice was calm and even. "I do know the end, Inspector." Jonz carefully refrained from placing any emphasis whatever on the title. "Number One taught it to me some time ago. The last stanza is a magnificent one:

To all who ken or can
I ask since time began
What riddle is it has for answer,
Man?"

"Jonz," the Inspector said, "you told me you were getting old."

"Terribly old," Jonz said. "Both of us. All of us."

He nodded sadly.

"And I told you to speak for yourself. I," the Inspector said, "still have work to do. My first job is to accept your resignation."

Jonz signaled the service robots to remove the chairs and sat down under the tree. He nodded, half-smiling. "Would you mind looking for it in my desk? I'd like to sit here for a while and watch those clouds go dark."

The poem "What Riddle Asked the Sphinx?" from Archibald MacLeish's "Collected Poems" (Houghton-Mifflin) is reprinted by permission of Archibald MacLeish.

