

COMMON TIME

a radio drama by Scott Selden

adapted from the short story by James Blish



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*“Everything that we see is a shadow cast
by that which we do not see.”*

- Martin Luther King, Jr.

*“Time is the substance I am made of.
Time is a river which sweeps me along,
but I am the river;
it is a tiger which destroys me,
but I am the tiger;
it is a fire which consumes me,
but I am the fire.”*

- Jorge Luis Borges

“Reality is not what it used to be.”

- John Carpenter

NARRATOR: A tall man stands in a frozen thicket unable to recall the journey that summoned him. Snow flurries shroud him in gossamer, obscuring all that lies beyond the wooded grove. He cannot feel- he cannot remember- and that is when he realizes he is dreaming. Identical passages surround him on all sides, fading into mist. He departs, stumbling, and soon discovers a fallen elk laid strewn in the snow, bleeding, crimson hissing as it steams. The man kneels to examine the wound- it pains him to see a creature like so, even if it is a dream, and he wonders why he is being shown such things.

Foreboding tones bellow.

NARRATOR: The dreamer senses the presence of another and looks up to find himself staring back at him, watching from a distance. It certainly looks like him- but its skin is more sallow than the faded brown of his youth. This other is considerably older as well, its eyes wrapped in wrinkles and limbs shrunken compared to stronger days. Peering into those eyes he found them expressionless, meaningless, as if born of the void, and the dreamer experiences cold for the first time. This apparition of a possible future fills him with dread and he shrinks away from the silent figure, falling into swirling snow...

Howling gusts recede, gradually shifting into the processed HISS of recycled air.

GARRARD: Don't move.

NARRATOR: That was the first thought that appeared to Garrard's mind when he awoke, and perhaps it saved his life. He lay where he was, strapped against the padding, listening to the round hum of the engines... That in itself was wrong- he shouldn't be able to hear the overdrive at all.

Aside from his sudden consciousness everything appeared to be normal. Garrard's starship, the DCF-3, had achieved interstellar velocity and he was still alive- travelling at over twenty-two-point-four times the speed of light.

Garrard took a measure of comfort in that. On both previous shuttles when the overdrive should have cut in, the resulting residual image displayed the appropriate Doppler shift which accounted for the slipspace moment predicted by Haertel. The trouble was not that Brown and Cellini hadn't spurred ignition- it was that neither of them had ever been heard from again. They had both been excellent engineers- intelligent, resourceful. The best their project had to offer. Whatever destroyed them could be equally mundane or complex but it remained a mystery.

Very slowly Garrard opened his eyes- his lids felt terrifically heavy. As far as he could judge from the pressure of the bed pressed against his skin, gravity was normal- nevertheless moving his eyes seemed an almost impossible task. After long concentration he urged them fully open: instrument panels sat directly before him extended above his diaphragm. Still, without moving anything but his pupils- and those only with the utmost patience- he checked each variable.

Velocity was normal. Temperature, thirty-seven degrees Celsius. Air pressure optimal if a bit compressed. Fuel supply constant. Gravity one gee. Calendar- stopped.

He studied the time closely, though his eyes seemed to focus very gradually. There was no doubt about it- the digits recording time were motionless.

Machinery rumbles.

NARRATOR: Garrard listened to the humming- it was even and placid, and not very loud... But it disturbed him deeply. The overdrive was supposed to be inaudible, and transmissions from the first two vehicles featured no such hum. The noise did not interfere with its operation nor indicate any apparent failure- it was simply an

aberration he could not account for. And Garrard did not intend to draw another breath until he discovered what it was.

Incredibly, he realized for the first time he had not in fact breathed *once* since he first awoke. A flash of panic urged him against his restraints but the strange paralysis which had affected his eyelids seemed to include his entire body, for the impulse was gone before his muscles responded. And the panic- poignant though it had been in an instant- turned out to be wholly intellectual. He observed that his failure to breathe in no way discomfited him; it was just there, waiting to be explained...

Temptation to move was strong- a simple turn, a twist of the neck- but Garrard fought it back. He had been awake only a short while, half an hour at most, and already noticed multiplying abnormalities. There were bound to more- hidden alterations more subtle than those- but others required movement first.

And breathing.

POCK.

NARRATOR: It was a soft, low pitched noise, rather like a cork coming out of a bottle.

It seemed to come from an area just right of the control panels. With great concentration he slowly guided his eyes in that direction but found nothing that might have caused the sound. The ship's temperature showed no change, which ruled out any heat noise from contraction or expansion. That was the only possible explanation he could imagine.

Garrard closed his eyes- a process just as painful and difficult as it had been to open them. He tried to visualize what the calendar looked like when he first emerged out of anesthesia... After he formed an accurate picture, Garrard opened his eyes again.

A second had advanced. The sound had been the *calendar* accurately keeping time.

It was motionless again, apparently stopped. He did not know how long it took the digit to shift- the change must have been imperceivable or completed when his gaze was averted... But it moved. Above all else the calendar had moved.

Which meant Garrard must discover how long it required to move again.

And so, he began to count.

GARRARD: One-one-thousand, two-one-thousand, three-one-thousand, four-one-thousand-

NARRATOR: Garrard had only gotten that far when he descended into hell. First and utterly without reason a sickening fear flooded his veins, becoming more and more intense. His bowels began to knot with infinite slowness, his whole body became a field of small spasms- not so much shaking him as subjecting him to pulsing tremors, making the skin ripple erratically beneath his uniform. Against the hum another sound became audible- a nearly subsonic thunder which seemed to grow inside his head.

Aural convulsions reverberate like some terrible drum.

NARRATOR: Still the fear mounted and with it pain. He felt himself beginning to bend, a motion he was absolutely powerless to stop.

It lasted for hours.

At the height of it, Garrard's mind- even his very personality- was washed out entirely. When reason at last began to trickle back and return over the burning desert of primitive emotion, he found that he was sitting upright with the control panel thrust aside. His clothing was wet with perspiration which refused to evaporate, and his lungs ached, though he could still not detect respiration.

With grim determination, Garrard began to count.

GARRARD: One-and-seven-hundred-one, one-and-seven-hundred-two, one-and-seven-hundred-three, one-and-seven-hundred-four, one-and-seven-hundred-five, one-and-seven hundred-six, one-and-seven-hundred-seven-

NARRATOR: He took care to establish the counting as an even and automatic process which would not cease at the back of his mind, no matter what problems he considered alongside it or whatever emotional typhoons might interrupt him. He was beginning to understand, but he needed an exact measurement to put that understanding to use.

Of course there had been speculation about the possible effect of the overdrive on the subjective time of the pilot, but none of it amounted to more than theory. Since both the ship and the pilot were part of the same expression in Haertel's equation, it had never occurred to anyone that the pilot and the ship might be keeping different times. The ship was keeping ship-time- it would arrive at the nearest star system in ten months. But the pilot was keeping Garrard-time- and it was beginning to look like he wasn't going to arrive at all.

GARRARD: Seven-thousand-forty-two, seven-thousand-forty-three, seven-thousand-forty-four, seven-thousand-forty-five, seven-thousand-forty-six-

NARRATOR: At the count of seven-thousand and fifty-eight, the seconds digit began to shift.

POCK.

NARRATOR: It required several more minutes to resolve and later still, the sound came to him. Working backward he produced the mathematical equivalence he wanted: one second in ship-time was two hours in Garrard-time.

Had he really been counting for what was to him *two hours*? Just how long it was going to be struck him with stunning force... Time had been slowed for him by a factor of seventy-two-hundred. Which meant he would reach his destination in what was to him-

GARRARD: (whispered) Six thousand years.

NARRATOR: Garrard remained motionless for a long time after that, bathed in sweat that refused to cool. There was, after all, no reason to hurry. There would be food and water and air, sure- but there was no mechanism to infinitely refurbish Garrard. After six thousand years there would be nothing left but a filmy dust on the data terminals. His corpse might outlast him awhile since the

ship was sterile, but eventually he would be consumed by the very bacteria he carried in his digestive system. Garrard was, in short, to die before the DCF-3 barely left. And when- *if*- after twelve thousand Garrard years not even his bones would return.

The chill that coursed through him lasted an enormously long time. Suppose this effect of time dilation was only mental? That the rest of his body might be keeping ship-time? Garrard had no reason to believe otherwise. If so he'd be able to move about in ship-time too. It would take months to complete even the simplest task sure, but he would live if that were the case. But his mind would arrive six thousand years older.

Insane.

POCK.

NARRATOR: Another second gone by, another two hours. It was certainly longer than a second but it felt less than two hours.

Nothing moved. Nothing changed. It was the fact that he could not detect respiration that convinced him at last his body had to be keeping ship-time, otherwise he would have died from oxygen deprivation. That assumption also explained the trials of emotion he had suffered: when he had observed that he was not breathing

he felt a flash of panic and tried to rise. Long after he had forgotten those impulses, their electrical currents had inched their way from his brain stem to the receptors and muscles involved and the actual, physical panic intervened. The resulting adrenaline sent him into a spiral- obviously he was going to have to be careful with impulses of any kind, so moments of fear and gloom would have to be regulated constantly. It would be those that would plunge him into four or five, or perhaps even ten Garrard-hours of emotional inferno.

POCK.

NARRATOR: There now, that was good. That had been two Garrard-hours which had passed without much difficulty. Now if he could really settle down and adjust to this kind of schedule the trip might not be as bad as he feared. Sleep would absorb a large portion of the journey and during his waking life he could perform all kinds of creative thinking. During a single day of ship-time Garrard could think more than any philosopher on Earth might during an entire lifetime.

Not that Garrard expected that he would remain logical. The possibilities were still grim and scant... But there were opportunities as well.

He felt a moment's regret that it hadn't been Haertel rather than himself who'd been given the chance. The old lady would have certainly made better use of her time than Garrard could.

POCK.

NARRATOR: The clock tick seemed more cheerful. He even felt fairly safe now.

POCK. POCK. POCK. POCK.

NARRATOR: Garrard yawned, stretched, and stood.

Emergency signals ring shrilly.

NARRATOR: There were certainly more problems that needed coping but- but he just moved. **He had just moved.** More than that he had performed a complicated task in real time with his body. The micro-time in which he'd been living in had worn off only a few objective minutes after the ship slipped into overdrive and the anesthetic had failed him. The intellectual torture- with its glandular counterpoint- had come to nothing.

Garrard was once again keeping ship-time.

He lay back in bed, too relieved and too mixed up to relax. No singular emotion satisfied him and for a time he simply drifted like that.

How could something so transient have killed Brown and Cellini? They were stable persons- more stable by his own estimation than Garrard himself- yet he emerged where they had not. Was there more to it than this? And if there was, what could it possibly be?

POCK. POCK. POCK. POCK. POCK.

NARRATOR: At his elbow the calendar continued to ping. The ship was quiet and unchanging. His breath came and went in natural rhythm. He felt light and strong.

PCK PCK PCK PCK PCK PCK PCK PCK PCK-

NARRATOR: The calendar ticked faster and faster. Minutes were already sweeping past the next half hour. Seconds blurred into invisibility. The calendar swirled as time fled yet the ship did not change- it stayed rigid. Inviolable. Invulnerable.

PCK PCK PCK PCK PCK PCK PCK PCK PCK-

NARRATOR: When even the days tumbled at such a speed that Garrard could not read them he discovered once more that he could not move and although his body seemed to flutter like that of a hummingbird, nothing coherent was coming through his senses.

The room was dimming, becoming redder. That Garrard did not die completely was due to the purest of accidents, but Garrard didn't know that- in fact he knew nothing at all for an indefinite period of time. He never had a chance to recoil as the lights flickered low and a foreign mist sprung up from the floorboards, seeping in. He remained blindly still as an oily fog clouded the entire vessel, vapors crawling and spreading in low gravity. He couldn't feel the mist consume his arms and legs- and he couldn't have known what occurred when the lights went out.

Sirens dissolve into silence.

NARRATOR: Until there was light- and with it being. As Garrard awoke and his eyes adjusted, he found himself in an opaque corridor of unknown origin or material. His uniform was intact- as was he. The walls for lack of a better term were smooth featureless planes stretching endlessly in both directions.

As he peered at one terminus and then another, he realized each spanned forward in an infinite loop without end.

Which one to choose?

Would choice even matter?

His boots tap sharply in the solid chamber.

NARRATOR: Twenty yards of identical segments pass without discernible difference until-

An electronic wail of STATIC shrieks as a CHORUS of indecipherable human voices erupts, repeating abstract phrases while frequencies disintegrate.

NARRATOR: Garrard grips his ears but it doesn't help- pain emerges screaming into his brain. Wet matter spills between his fingers and he quickly finds blood. The tunnel is so bright now he can barely see his surroundings.

Cruel and monstrous screams coalesce in the sonic maelstrom, blurring with distortion.

NARRATOR: Three black pyramids hover midair, glittering like smooth obsidian. Their dimensions are perfect and each side is identical,

no larger than a playing card. They spin in perfect arcs.

Garrard cannot trust what he sees or feels. He summons all that he can to focus on the objects. He cannot verify if they are real or imagined... and decides that it doesn't matter.

BAEDEMUNG: (feminine) How do you hear?

NARRATOR: A pyramid trembles with the query and Garrard's mouth hangs open, shocked. The voice seemed to manifest from everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

BAEDEMUNG: (masculine) How do you hear?

NARRATOR: Garrard points at his bloody earlobes.

GARRARD: I uh, we-they hear this way. With our ears.

NARRATOR: He did not know why he replied in such a manner, but it felt correct.

BAEDEMUNG: (fem.) We-they wooed you this wise and now you are here.

BAEDEMUNG: (masc.) We wooed there for many and many. You are the being-Garrard. We are the clinestern baedemung. With all of love.

Garrard hesitates to reply.

GARRARD: With... All of love.

BAEDEMUNG: (masc.) We hear the twin radiocles that show beyond the gift source.

We pitched being-Garrard wooed these waves and had mind to them, soft and loud alike. How do you hear?

Garrard considers the question before responding.

GARRARD: I hear Earth... But it is soft and does not show.

BAEDEMUNG: (masc. & fem.) Yes, it is a harmony. Not at first, as ours. The All-Devouring is still known there.

GARRARD: Where are we?

BAEDEMUNG: (masc. & fem.) A place between places. Much farther than you sought.

NARRATOR: The pyramids drift sideways toward an Earthen door somehow set inside the alien corridor. Garrard studies its oak panels and mundane frame, mystified. The pyramids surround the simple portal and idle at its borders. Garrard calculates he has little choice but to follow- if they wished to harm him they could have easily done so.

He pries apart the simple door and discovers emptiness within: a deep, featureless dark without light or hint of what's to come. With a forced smile he crosses through-

Soft wind spurs tall grass.

NARRATOR: And steps into a dense bamboo forest swaying under pink skies while a setting sun bathes reeds in a reddish glow.

GARRARD: How?

BAEDEMUNG: (fem.) Being-Garrard is creating just as much as we are.

NARRATOR: Humid air fills his lungs and Garrard marvels at the sensation.

Garrard inhales, enraptured.

NARRATOR: What could possibly evoke such a powerful feeling? And what was his role in the conjuring?

Garrard ambles deeper into the grove, following a well-worn path. He presses further and stone markers emerge from the branches lining his way. Engraved symbols in unknown languages cover each totem, long since decayed by the elements.

GARRARD: Have you-they met my others? The two before me?

BAEDEMUNG: (masc.) No. Being-Garrard is the first.

BAEDEMUNG: (fem.) None-many pass through this othering.

NARRATOR: Leaves rustle on the periphery and he spots crackling shadows blazing through the brush.

BAEDEMUNG: (fem.) *We* prefer caution.

BAEDEMUNG: (masc.) *We* have been hurt before.

GARRARD: Being-Garrard understands.

BAEDEMUNG: (fem.) We know. You pitch it so clearly.

NARRATOR: Garrard watches the specters dissipate, twisting light where they pass. He steps into a clearing where a second door waits, hovering over coiled roots. It features no foundation, no suspension; identical to the first. Without hesitation he crosses through and walks out directly over turquoise waves, crashing into a jade sea.

Garrard plummets into surf.

NARRATOR: Garrard struggles to find footing on smooth coral, rising into waist-high currents, more shocked than scared... And yet no shore is in sight. Alien creatures dart around Garrard's toes, curious and colorful. Garrard watches them flutter beneath the surface and sashes forward on flat coral. He glimpses the outline of a third door beneath the waves and hastens, clawing at the door's handle, straining to lift its seal.

His breath falters.

He finally manages to pry the portal loose and dives in blindly-

Air molecules SCREAM as if torn through a miniscule enclosure.

NARRATOR: Crashing onto a dusty floor in a clay cavern, soaked in brine. Rocks disturbed for the first time in centuries settle as he stands on shaky knees.

Garrard shuffles out of the cave, gawking at windswept dunes spanning the horizon. Distant storms inch their way across an utterly foreign desert. Carven obelisks pierce the clouds with unseen summits- ancient omens scattered across the waste.

BAEDEMUNG: (fem.) A vision of such as we.

BAEDEMUNG: (masc.) Degrees of what was and is. *Once* we were tall.

BAEDEMUNG: (fem.) *Once* we were strong.

NARRATOR: Arid desolation lies in every direction. Sand drifts churn and eddy, glittering in the sun.

BAEDEMUNG: (masc.) Yours are young... But your intent is now known.

NARRATOR: A fourth door appears on the crest of a dune.

BAEDEMUNG: (fem.) Let us welcome in better offerings.

NARRATOR: Garrard starts numbly toward the portal.

GARRARD: Thank you.

NARRATOR: Winds whip faster as he draws closer, climbing through frenzied currents. Garrard reaches the door and feels out its edges, eagerly plodding through- only to enter the white tunnel he initially woke inside of.

Except this section of the corridor concludes in four alabaster walls, each vibrating with sluggish ripples. Bony human forms manifest behind the amorphous barriers, pressing against the seams, and Garrard watches wide eyed as sexless imitations of people slip through, crossing the veil. As these hairless mimics stride out a light resin coats their skin- forty strong pour into the small enclosure, quickly surrounding him.

GARRARD: With all of love.

BAEDEMUNG: (masc. & fem.) With all of love.

NARRATOR: Those nearest Garrard halt within striking distance.

BAEDEMUNG: (masc.) Harmony is truce.

BAEDEMUNG: (fem.) Walk with these featurelings. Learn as you wished to learn.

NARRATOR: One of the figures offers Garrard an open palm and Garrard accepts. Thin smiles erupt across identical, eyeless faces.

BAEDEMUNG: (fem.) The beademung welcome yours in kind being-Garrard.

NARRATOR: The figures lead him toward one of the pulsing walls and several demonstrate by dipping inside the liquid plane. Garrard quickly understands- and in one shining moment, embraced by many, Garrard walks willingly into the ooze.

Pseudo-death once again consumes him.

Discordant, throaty tones assault his perception.

NARRATOR: The remnants of a dying star explode inside his mind, peeling apart nerves and imprinting sights beyond comprehension, fragmenting Garrard into many times and many places without convergence or terminus.

Splintered asteroids cast long shadows on a cratered moon. Rivers of bubbling magma course through crystal peaks beneath torn nebula. Raw star material flows from a cosmic furnace, fueling unseen depths while colliding planets render each other into a spectral array of dust.

One of Garrard's corneas ruptures, flooding his vision with crimson. He watches disconnected as sexless figures usher him again through the plasmic wall, as his body fades in and out of substance. Ancient gears in a forgotten factory connect dormant alien technology and Garrard's sense of self begins to slip. He imagines himself

alone in the white corridor, frozen under flickering lights.

Beademung stand on pebbled inlets of an unknown coast, their outlines gaunt and ephemeral. Cool sparks glimmer inside what's visible of their corporeal shades like little blue candles gathered against an eternal night. They stand watching, motionless.

Garrard's mind and body drift. An icy darkness courses through him, blooming in gut wrenching waves. He embraces a momentary loss of feeling- any escape from the blurring imagery- just wishing it would all stop...

The chaotic overture recedes, displaced by emergency instruments clamoring inside Garrard's vessel.

NARRATOR: The DCF-3's halogen lights flash over Garrard's body laid sideways, face bloodied. Nine days have passed since the overdrive's ignition, but the ship's calendar reports only seconds- a veritable success for the Project in every measure.

The ship's computer recognizes his condition and immediately deploys surgical tools, inspecting his eye. It will be weeks before Garrard wakes, and the DCF-3 trudges home, earthbound.

Ten months pass...

Sunlight bakes autumn leaves in the Palomar Valley while Garrard observes from a rocky crevice, enjoying the early radiance. Birds chirp. Insects whine. And the famous Cal Tech Observatory glitters in the distance. An ideal moment- until his phone blurts out an alert tone. Garrard frowns at the interruption and quickly mutes his device.

Garrard's military escort drags on a cigarette nearby, nonplussed by the early sun.

Armed guards. Medical exams. A growing sense of isolation. That was Garrard's life now, his waking hours spent as property of the Project's research and development division. Frequent MRI's gave him nightmares, while physics majors bored him with endless discussions of possibilities... And Haertel was often too busy constructing the DCF-4 to entertain him with a game of chess.

Most nights Garrard found himself listening to the radio alone, occupying idle hands with some kind of chore. His gaze turns to a window overlooking the backyard and settles on early constellations brandishing the night's sky.

A summer menagerie chirps and croaks in wilderness beneath the stars.

NARRATOR: An inquisitive feline nudges lawn furniture behind Garrard's unit while insects buzz in the valley. Garrard steps outside choosing a chair and pets the stray cat kindly, warmed by its temperament.

He admires the universe above, his brow furrowed with fascination and regret. He finds himself searching for something he cannot name. A sign perhaps, meant only for him.

With all of love.

Tears spill down his cheeks as he smiles. Garrard wipes them away and laughs- he and the cat are the only two available to appreciate such a view.

The vibrant din of Earth is gradually rendered mute by an all-devouring silence.

THE END