

Deep End

by James Graham Ballard, 1930-2009

Published: 1961
in »New Worlds«



They always slept during the day. By dawn the last of the townsfolk had gone indoors and the houses would be silent, heat curtains locked across the windows, as the sun rose over the deliquescing salt banks. Most of them were elderly and fell asleep quickly in their darkened chalets, but Granger, with his restless mind and his one lung, often lay awake through the afternoons, while the metal outer walls of the cabin creaked and hummed, trying pointlessly to read through the old log books Holliday had salvaged for him from the crashed space platforms.

By six o'clock the thermal fronts would begin to recede southwards across the kelp flats, and one by one the airconditioners in the bedrooms switched themselves off. While the town slowly came to life, its windows opening to the cool dusk air, Granger strode down to breakfast at the Neptune Bar, gallantly doffing his sunglasses to left and right at the old couples settling themselves out on their porches, staring at each other across the shadow-filled streets.

Five miles to the north, in the empty hotel at Idle End, Holliday usually rested quietly for another hour, and listened to the coral towers, gleaming in the distance like white pagodas, sing and whistle as the temperature gradients cut through them. Twenty miles away he could see the symmetrical peak of Hamilton, nearest of the Bermuda islands, rising off the dry ocean floor like a flat-topped mountain, the narrow ring of white beach still visible in the sunset, a scum-line left by the sinking ocean.

That evening he felt even more reluctant than usual to drive down into the town. Not only would Granger be in his private booth at the Neptune, dispensing the same mixture of humour and homily—he was virtually the only person Holliday could talk to, and inevitably he had come to resent his dependence on the older man—but Holliday would have his final interview with the migration officer and make the decision which would determine his entire future.

In a sense the decision had already been made, as Bullen, the migration officer, realized on his trip a month earlier. He did not bother to press Holliday, who had no special skills to offer, no qualities of character or leadership which would be of use on the new worlds. However, Bullen pointed out one small but relevant fact, which Holliday duly noted and thought over in the intervening month.

„Remember, Holliday,“ he warned him at the end of the interview in the requisitioned office at the rear of the sheriff’s cabin, „the average age of the settlement is over sixty. In ten years’ time you and Granger may well be the only two left here, and if that lung of his goes you’ll be on your own.“

He paused to let this prospect sink in, then added quietly: „All the kids are leaving on the next trip—the Merryweathers’ two boys, Tom Juranda (that lout, good riddance, Holliday thought to himself, look out Mars)—do you realize you’ll literally be the only one here under the age of fifty?“

„Katy Summers is staying,“ Holliday pointed out quickly, the sudden vision of a white organdy dress and long straw hair giving him courage.

The migration officer had glanced at his application list and nodded grudgingly. „Yes, but she’s just looking after her grandmother. As soon as the old girl dies Katy will be off like a flash. After all, there’s nothing to keep her here, is there?“

„No,“ Holliday had agreed automatically.

There wasn’t now. For a long while he mistakenly believed there was. Katy was his own age, twenty-two, the only person, apart from Granger, who seemed to understand his determination to stay behind and keep watch over a forgotten Earth. But the grandmother died three days after the migration officer left, and the next day Katy had begun to pack. In some insane way Holliday had assumed that she would stay behind, and what worried him was that all his assumptions about himself might be based on equally false premises.

Climbing off the hammock, he went on to the terrace and looked out at the phosphorescent glitter of the trace minerals in the salt banks stretching away from the hotel. His quarters were in the penthouse suite on the tenth floor, the only heat-sealed unit in the building, but its steady settlement into the ocean bed had opened wide cracks in the load walls which would soon reach up to the roof. The ground floor had already disappeared. By the time the next floor went—six months at the outside—he would have been forced to leave the old pleasure resort and return to the town. Inevitably, that would mean sharing a chalet with Granger.

A mile away, an engine droned. Through the dusk Holliday saw the migration officer's helicopter whirling along towards the hotel, the only local landmark, then veer off once Bullen identified the town and circle slowly towards the landing strip.

Eight o'clock, Holliday noted. His interview was at 8.30 the next morning. Bullen would rest the night with the Sheriff, carry out his other duties as graves commissioner and justice of the peace, and then set off after seeing Holliday on the next leg of his journey. For twelve hours Holliday was free, still able to make absolute decisions (or, more accurately, not to make them) but after that he would have committed himself. This was the migration officer's last trip, his final circuit from the deserted cities near St Helena up through the Azores and Bermudas and on to the main Atlantic ferry site at the Canaries. Only two of the DEEP END 237 big launching platforms were still in navigable orbit—hundreds of others were continuously falling out of the sky—and once they came down Earth was, to all intents, abandoned. From then on the only people likely to be picked up would be a few military communications personnel.

Twice on his way into the town Holliday had to lower the salt-plough fastened to the front bumper of the jeep and ram back the drifts which had melted across the wire roadway during the afternoon. Mutating kelp, their genetic shifts accelerated by the radio-phosphors, reared up into the air on either side of the road like enormous cacti, turning the dark salt-banks into a white lunar garden. But this evidence of the encroaching wilderness only served to strengthen Holliday's need to stay behind on Earth. Most of the nights, when he wasn't arguing with Granger at the Neptune, he would drive around the ocean floor, climbing over the crashed launching platforms, or wander with Katy Summers through the kelp forests. Sometimes he would persuade Granger to come with them, hoping that the older man's expertise—he had originally been a marine biologist—would help to sharpen his own awareness of the bathypelagic flora, but the original sea bed was buried under the endless salt hills and they might as well have been driving about the Sahara.

As he entered the Neptune—a low cream and chromium saloon which abutted the landing strip and had formerly served as a passenger lounge when thousands of migrants from the Southern Hemisphere were being shipped up to the Canaries—Granger called to him and rattled his cane against the window, pointing to the dark outline of the migration officer's helicopter parked on the apron fifty yards away.

„I know,“ Holliday said in a bored voice as he went over with his drink. „Relax, I saw him coming.“

Granger grinned at him. Holliday, with his intent serious face under an unruly thatch of blond hair, and his absolute sense of personal responsibility, always amused him.

„You relax,“ Granger said, adjusting the shoulder pad under his Hawaiian shirt which disguised his sunken lung. (He had lost it skin-diving thirty years earlier.) „I'm not going to fly to Mars next week.“

Holliday stared sombrely into his glass. „I'm not either.“ He looked up at Granger's wry saturnine face, then added sardonically. „Or didn't you know?“

Granger roared, tapping the window with his cane as if to dismiss the helicopter. „Seriously, you're not going? You've made up your mind?“

„Wrong. And right. I haven't made up my mind yet—but at the same time I'm not going. You appreciate the distinction?“

„Perfectly, Dr Schopenhauer.“ Granger began to grin again. He pushed away his glass. „You know, Holliday, your trouble is that you take yourself too seriously. You don't realize how ludicrous you are.“

„Ludicrous? Why?“ Holliday asked guardedly.

„What does it matter whether you've made up your mind or not? The only thing that counts now is to get together enough courage to head straight for the Canaries and take off into the wide blue yonder. For heaven's sake, what are you staying for? Earth is dead and buried. Past, present and future no longer exist here. Don't you feel any responsibility to your own biological destiny?“

„Spare me that.“ Holliday pulled a ration card from his shirt pocket, passed it across to Granger, who was responsible for the stores allocations. „I need a new pump on the lounge refrigerator .30-watt Frigidaire. Any left?“

Granger groaned, took the card with a snort of exasperation. „Good God, man, you're just a Robinson Crusoe in reverse, tinkering about with all these bits of old junk, trying to fit them together. You're the last man on the beach who decides to stay behind after everyone else has left. Maybe you are a poet and dreamer, but don't you realize that those two species are extinct now?“

Holliday stared out at the helicopter on the apron, at the lights of the settlement reflected against the salt hills that encircled the town. Each day they moved a little nearer, already it was difficult to get together a weekly squad to push them back. In ten years' time his position might well be that of a Crusoe. Luckily the big water and kerosene tanks—giant cylinders, the size of gasometers—held enough for fifty years. Without them, of course, he would have had no choice.

„Let's give me a rest,“ he said to Granger. „You're merely trying to find in me a justification for your own enforced stay. Perhaps I am extinct, but I'd rather cling to life here than vanish completely. Anyway, I have a hunch that one day they'll be coming back. Someone's got to stay behind and keep alive a sense of what life here has meant. This isn't an old husk we can throw away when we've finished with it. We were born here. It's the only place we really remember.“

Granger nodded slowly. He was about to speak when a brilliant white arc crossed the darkened window, then soared out of sight, its point of impact with the ground lost behind one of the storage tanks.

Holliday stood up and craned out of the window.

„Must be a launching platform. Looked like a big one, probably one of the Russians'.“ A long rolling crump reverberated through the night air, echoing away among the coral towers. Flashes of light flared up briefly. There was a series of smaller explosions, and then a wide diffuse pall of steam fanned out across the north-west.

„Lake Atlantic,“ Granger commented. „Let's drive out there and have a look. It may have uncovered something interesting.“

Half an hour later, a set of Granger's old sample beakers, slides and mounting equipment in the back seat, they set off in the jeep towards the southern tip of Lake Atlantic ten miles away.

It was here that Holliday discovered the fish.

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Lake Atlantic, a narrow ribbon of stagnant brine ten miles in length by a mile wide, to the north of the Bermuda Islands, was all that remained of the former Atlantic Ocean, and was, in fact, the sole remnant of the oceans which had once covered two-thirds of the Earth's surface. The frantic mining of the oceans in the previous century to provide oxygen for the atmospheres of the new planets had made their decline swift and irreversible, and with their death had come climatic and other geophysical changes which ensured the extinction of Earth itself. As the oxygen extracted electrolytically from sea-water was compressed and shipped away, the hydrogen released was discharged into the atmosphere. Eventually only a narrow layer of denser, oxygen-containing air was left, little more than a mile in depth, and those people remaining on Earth were forced to retreat into the ocean beds, abandoning the poisoned continental tables.

At the hotel at Idle End, Holliday spent uncounted hours going through the library he had accumulated of magazines and books about the cities of the old Earth, and Granger often described to him his own youth when the seas had been half-full and he had worked as a marine biologist at the University of Miami, a fabulous laboratory unfolding itself for him on the lengthening beaches.

„The seas are our corporate memory,“ he often said to Holliday. „In draining them we deliberately obliterated our own pasts, to a large extent our own self-identities. That's another reason why you should leave. Without the sea, life is insupportable. We become nothing more than the ghosts of memories, blind and homeless, flitting through the dry chambers of a gutted skull.“

They reached the lake within half an hour, worked their way through the swamps which formed its banks. In the dim light the grey salt dunes ran on for miles, their hollows cracked into hexagonal plates, a dense cloud of vapour obscuring the surface of the water. They parked on a low promontory by the edge of the lake and looked up at the great circular shell of the launching platform. This was one of the larger vehicles, almost three hundred yards in diameter, lying upside down in the shallow water, its hull dented and burnt, riven by huge punctures where the power plants had torn themselves loose on impact and exploded off across the lake. A quarter of a mile away, hidden by the blur, they could just see a cluster of rotors pointing up into the sky.

Walking along the bank, the main body of the lake on their right, they moved nearer the platform, tracing out its riveted CCCP markings along the rim. The giant vehicle had cut enormous grooves through the nexus of pools just beyond the tip of the lake, and Granger waded through the warm water, searching for specimens. Here and there were small anemones and starfish, stunted bodies twisted by cancers. Web-like algae draped themselves over his rubber boots, their nuclei beading like jewels in the phosphorescent light. They paused by one of the largest pools, a circular basin 300 feet across, draining slowly as the water poured out through a breach in its side. Granger moved carefully down the deepening bank, forking specimens into the rack of beakers, while Holliday stood on the narrow causeway between the pool and the lake, looking up at the dark overhang of the space platform as it loomed into the darkness above him like the stern of a ship.

He was examining the shattered air-lock of one of the crew domes when he suddenly saw something move across the surface of the deck. For a moment he imagined that he had seen a passenger who had somehow survived the vehicle's crash, then realized that it was merely the reflection in the aluminized skin of a ripple in the pool behind him.

He turned around to see Granger, ten feet below him, up to his knees in the water, staring out carefully across the pool.

„Did you throw something?“ Granger asked.

Holliday shook his head. „No.“ Without thinking, he added: „It must have been a fish jumping.“

„Fish? There isn't a single fish alive on the entire planet. The whole zoological class died out ten years ago. Strange, though.“

Just then the fish jumped again.

For a few moments, standing motionless in the half-light, they watched it together, as its slim silver body leapt frantically out of the tepid shallow water, its short glistening arcs carrying it to and fro across the pool.

„Dog-fish,“ Granger muttered. „Shark family. Highly adaptable—need to be, to have survived here. Damn it, it may well be the only fish still living.“

Holliday moved down the bank, his feet sinking in the oozing mud. „Isn't the water too salty?“

Granger bent down and scooped up some of the water, sipped it tentatively. „Saline, but comparatively dilute.“ He glanced over his shoulder at the lake. „Perhaps there's continuous evaporation off the lake surface and local condensation here. A freak distillation couple.“ He slapped Holliday on the shoulder. „Holliday, this should be interesting.“

The dog-fish was leaping frantically towards them, its two-foot body twisting and flicking. Low mud banks were emerging all over the surface of the pool; in only a few places towards the centre was the water more than a foot deep.

Holliday pointed to the breach in the bank fifty yards away, gestured Granger after him and began to run towards it.

Five minutes later they had effectively dammed up the breach. Holliday returned for the jeep and drove it carefully through the winding saddles between the pools. He lowered the ramp and began to force the sides of the fish-pool in towards each other. After two or three hours he had narrowed the diameter from a hundred yards to under sixty, and the depth of the water had increased to over two feet. The dog-fish had ceased to jump and swam smoothly just below the surface, snapping at DEEP END 241 the countless small plants which had been tumbled into the water by the jeep's ramp. Its slim white body seemed white and unmarked, the small fins trim and powerful.

Granger sat on the bonnet of the jeep, his back against the windshield, watching Holliday with admiration.

„You obviously have hidden reserves,“ he said ungrudgingly. „I didn't think you had it in you.“

Holliday washed his hands in the water, then stepped over the churned mud which formed the boundary of the pool. A few feet behind him the dog-fish veered and lunged.

„I want to keep it alive,“ Holliday said matter-of-factly. „Don't you see, Granger, the fishes stayed behind when the first amphibians emerged from the seas two hundred million years ago, just as you and I, in turn, are staying behind now. In a sense all fish are images of ourselves seen in the sea's mirror.“

He slumped down on the running board. His clothes were soaked and streaked with salt, and he gasped at the damp air. To the west, just above the long bulk of the Florida coastline, rising from the ocean floor like an enormous aircraft carrier, were the first dawn thermal fronts. „Will it be all right to leave it until this evening?“

Granger climbed into the driving seat. „Don't worry. Come on, you need a rest.“ He pointed up at the overhanging rim of the launching platform. „That should shade it for a few hours, help to keep the temperature down.“

As they neared the town Granger slowed to wave to the old people retreating from their porches, fixing the shutters on the steel cabins.

„What about your interview with Bullen?“ he asked Holliday soberly. „He'll be waiting for you.“

„Leave here? After last night? It's out of the question.“

Granger shook his head as he parked the car outside the Neptune. „Aren't you rather overestimating the importance of one dog-fish? There were millions of them once, the vermin of the sea.“

„You're missing the point,“ Holliday said, sinking back into the seat, trying to wipe the salt out of his eyes. „That fish means that there's still something to be done here. Earth isn't dead and exhausted after all. We can breed new forms of life, a completely new biological kingdom.“

Eyes fixed on this private vision, Holliday sat holding the steering wheel while Granger went into the bar to collect a crate of beer. On his return the migration officer was with him.

Bullen put a foot on the running board, looked into the car. „Well, how about it, Holliday? I'd like to make an early start. If you're not interested I'll be off. There's a rich new life out there, first step to the stars. Tom Juranda and the Merryweather boys are leaving next week. Do you want to be with them?“

„Sorry,“ Holliday said curtly. He pulled the crate of beer into the car and let out the clutch, gunned the jeep away down the empty street in a roar of dust.

Half an hour later, as he stepped out on to the terrace at Idle End, cool and refreshed after his shower, he watched the helicopter roar overhead, its black propeller scudding, then disappear over the kelp flats towards the hull of the wrecked space platform.

„Come on, let's go! What's the matter?“

„Hold it,“ Granger said. „You're getting over-eager. Don't interfere too much, you'll kill the damn thing with kindness. What have you got there?“ He pointed to the can Holliday had placed in the dashboard compartment.

„Breadcrumbs.“

Granger sighed, then gently closed the door. „I'm impressed. I really am. I wish you'd look after me this way. I'm gasping for air too.“

They were five miles from the lake when Holliday leaned forward over the wheel and pointed to the crisp tyre-prints in the soft salt flowing over the road ahead.

„Someone's there already.“

Granger shrugged. „What of it? They’ve probably gone to look at the platform.“ He chuckled quietly. „Don’t you want to share the New Eden with anyone else? Or just you alone, and a consultant biologist?“

Holliday peered through the windshield. „Those platforms annoy me, the way they’re hurled down as if Earth were a garbage dump. Still, if it wasn’t for this one I wouldn’t have found the fish.“

They reached the lake and made their way towards the pool, the erratic track of the car ahead winding in and out of the pools. Two hundred yards from the platform it had been parked, blocking the route for Holliday and Granger.

„That’s the Merryweathers’ car,“ Holliday said as they walked around the big stripped-down Buick, slashed with yellow paint and fitted with sirens and pennants. „The two boys must have come out here.“

Granger pointed. „One of them’s up on the platform.“

The younger brother had climbed on to the rim, was shouting down like an umpire at the antics of two other boys, one his brother, the other Tom Juranda, a tall broad-shouldered youth in a space cadet’s jerkin. They were standing at the edge of the fish-pool, stones and salt blocks in their hands, hurling them into the pool.

Leaving Granger, Holliday sprinted on ahead, shouting at the top of his voice. Too preoccupied to hear him, the boys continued to throw their missiles into the pool, while the younger Merryweather egged them on from the platform above. Just before Holliday reached them Tom Juranda ran a few yards along the bank and began to kick the mud-wall into the air, then resumed his target throwing.

„Juranda! Get away from there!“ Holliday bellowed. „Put those stones down!“

He reached Juranda as the youth was about to hurl a brick-sized lump of salt into the pool, seized him by the shoulder and flung him round, knocking the salt out of his hand into a shower of damp crystals, then lunged at the elder Merryweather boy, kicking him away.

The pool had been drained. A deep breach had been cut through the bank and the water had poured out into the surrounding gulleys and pools. Down in the centre of the basin, in a litter of stones and spattered salt, was the crushed but still wriggling body of the dog-fish, twisting itself helplessly in the bare inch of water that remained. Dark red blood poured from wounds in its body, staining the salt.

Holliday hurled himself at Juranda, shook the youth savagely by the shoulders.

„Juranda! Do you realize what you’ve done, you—“ Exhausted, Holliday released him and staggered down into the centre of the pool, kicked away the stones and stood looking at the fish twitching at his feet.

„Sorry, Holliday,“ the older Merryweather boy said tentatively behind him. „We didn’t know it was your fish.“

Holliday waved him away, then let his arms fall limply to his sides. He felt numbed and baffled, unable to resolve his anger and frustration.

Tom Juranda began to laugh, and shouted something derisively. Their tension broken, the boys turned and ran off together across the dunes towards their car, yelling and playing catch with each other, mimicking Holliday’s outrage.

Granger let them go by, then walked across to the pool, wincing when he saw the empty basin.

„Holliday,“ he called. „Come on.“

Holliday shook his head, staring at the beaten body of the fish.

Granger stepped down the bank to him. Sirens hooted in the distance as the Buick roared off. „Those damn children.“ He took Holliday gently by the arm. „I’m sorry,“ he said quietly. „But it’s not the end of the world.“

Bending down, Holliday reached towards the fish, lying still now, the mud around it slick with blood. His hands hesitated, then retreated.

„Nothing we can do, is there?“ he said impersonally.

Granger examined the fish. Apart from the large wound in its side and the flattened skull the skin was intact. „Why not have it stuffed?“ he suggested seriously.

Holliday stared at him incredulously, his face contorting. For a moment he said nothing. Then, almost berserk, he shouted: „Have it stuffed? Are you crazy? Do you think I want to make a dummy of myself, fill my own head with straw?“

Turning on his heel, he shouldered past Granger and swung himself roughly out of the pool.

