

The Man Who Never Came Down

and other stories

Dale R. Gowin



**Luminist Publications
P.O. Box 20256
Minneapolis MN 55040 USA**

The Man Who Never Came Down
and other stories

by Dale R. Gowin

Cover art by Michael Orr

© 2008 by Luminist Publications
All Rights Reserved

Contents

The Man Who Never Came Down	1
Goodbye to Ram's Gulch	17
Phantasmagloria	21
A Shooting Star	36



the man who never came down



"What do you mean, *never come down*?"

"Just that. It's a one-way trip that never ends."

Stanley Randall said, "You mean it causes irreversible brain damage, right?"

"Not damage," said the man in the trench coat. "Change. It reconfigures your brain's operating system. It's an evolutionary accelerant."

"Change... permanent?"

The man nodded. "There's no antidote. You can't put this djinn back in the bottle."

"But it's like a psychedelic...?"

"In the sense that a bottle rocket is like the Space Shuttle. With acid, you can kiss the sky for a few hours. With Eternity, you achieve escape velocity."

Never come down...

A shiver ran up Stanley's spine. This had to be it. His months and years of searching were over. Now he would know if the rumors were true.

"Just one dose will do all that?" he asked.

"Nobody ever needs a second dose of Eternity."

With trembling hands Stanley pulled the roll of bills from his pocket and started counting out the outrageous sum the man had named. The man watched him with a tight, humorless smile.

"You don't want to do this," he said.

"Yes I do," said Stanley. He squared the stack of bills on the café table and pushed it across.

"Are you quite sure?" the man asked.

"I am."

The long coat swirled as the man stood, sliding the bills into his pocket. He pulled the brim of his hat low over his forehead. "Follow



me," he said.

Stanley followed the stranger through the crowded café and into the street. A misty rain turned the glare of the streetlights into a shimmering haze. The man strode quickly through the crowded street and Stanley hustled to keep him in sight. Past two blocks packed with restaurants and bars the man led him, then they ducked into a narrow alley. Behind a dumpster, the man turned to face a brick wall, and he pressed his hand against it. Stanley shook his head to clear a sudden feeling of dizziness. As he stepped closer he saw the man was actually fitting a key into a lock in a small wooden door, which opened silently inward into darkness. As Stanley followed him through, a light flared and he saw a long, narrow flight of stairs with a single door at the top.

Behind the door was a small room furnished with a folding chair and a card table. The only light was from the single bulb that dangled over the stairway. The man moved into the shadows and Stanley heard a cupboard door open, then the man turned and placed a small wooden box on the table. He lifted the lid.

A single large capsule was in the box—half red, half white. Randall squinted; the pill seemed to be surrounded by a pulsing aura of light.

He reached a finger toward it, then paused. A tingle like a slight electric shock ran through his hand and up his arm.

"How fast does it come on?" he asked.

"Fast," the man said, his voice a sibilant serpentine whisper.

Stanley took a deep breath. This was it. The end of the quest that had led him halfway around the world, through dangers and degradations untold, in search of the ultimate high.

The pill vibrated and throbbed in his hand like a living thing.

He placed it on his tongue.

Stanley Randall spun on his heels in a blaze of rainbow light on the rolling deck of the floor and began

wading out through the cascading waves of color toward the door. The waves rose up and crashed about his head, impeding his progress and distracting him with their lemonade and peppermint flavored mists. Pulled back by a swirling dark eddy of purple, he was suddenly shoved forward by a brilliant current of sun-yellow.

The door loomed ahead, its knob pulsing like a heart.

Good, he thought. *It worked.*

He clasped the buzzing knob and turned: the door slid silently, smoothly open. He lifted his foot and stepped through the doorway...

...somehow the stairway had disappeared, and in its place Randall saw something red and wet that stretched out flat before him. It looked like a tongue. It *was* a huge tongue, pulsing soft and warm beneath his naked feet.

Suddenly he realized he was naked from head to toe. A warm breeze caressed his skin.

Looking up, he saw that the giant tongue led (and was being drawn) into the biggest mouth he had ever seen—the mouth of a reptilian creature—instinctively he called it a dragon. Long, sticky stalactite and stalagmite teeth stood like stone columns as he entered the dark cave of flesh.

He started to recoil in fear, but before any reaction could register he noticed that the quivering flesh had become hard and cool beneath his feet: it was not flesh at all, but stone. Out of the darkness before him a red light flickered, revealing that he stood on a narrow stone bridge that spanned an abyss of leaping flames, looking like giant blades of grass stirred by a breeze, but red, and hot. He sweltered in the heat, sweat dripping down his brow.

He walked forward, and in a moment the stone bridge began to arch upward. Soon he was high above the lake of fire, marching like a beetle across an arc of the midnight sky.

At first he could see only a few feet ahead, but gradually as he walked the murky dark began to lighten into a purple twilight.

He heard a dull, rumbling, throbbing sound from somewhere ahead and below that made the stone bridge vibrate—some kind of tribal drum-beat, rhythmic but gro-

tesquely slow. The sound increased incrementally in volume as he advanced until soon it was a thundering roar and the world shook with each deafening beat. Standing at the apex of the arched bridge above the lake of fire, the massive sound assaulted him:

R a a h h h h WHOMP!

R a a h h h h WHOMP!

R a a h h h h WHOMP!

The sky was black above him, but in the distance it brightened into blue above a protruding peninsula at the bridge's far end. The land seemed to gleam in phosphorescent hues of yellow and green. He headed for it. As he descended the slope, the booming drum-beat gave way to another vibration, below the normal auditory spectrum—a buzzing/throbbing “noise” that he felt in his flesh and bones. It grew stronger as he approached the landing.

Ahead, a low hill was covered with cool green grass, and beyond that a valley was covered with brilliant wild flowers of every hue. Sweet spring sunlight shone down from a smiling sky. A line of evergreen trees sprang up on each side of the pathway as it curved around the hillside.

Following the path through the thickening grove, he came to a high fence of black iron beams entwined in a Celtic pattern, with a wide gate standing open. Beyond the gate he saw a garden of huge flowers planted in neat rows. As he approached he saw that they were as tall as he was; some were over his head. Their colors were so deeply hued, they made his eyes water with their intensity. Green, purple and pink shades were distributed randomly among the leaves, stems and blossoms of the huge flowers, and some vibrated with colors entirely new to him. The sub-noise vibration became suddenly much stronger as he passed the gate; it seemed to emanate from the flowers.

He was drawn by an inexplicable, irresistible attraction to approach one of the huge flowers. It began to bob and weave as if in a breeze as he stood before it, although he felt none. He reached out a tentative finger and touched a red petal—

—a massive electric current slammed though him. For an instant his color perception drained away and all the world was black and white.

He jumped back: his vision was normal again, and he felt unharmed.

Somewhat rattled, he turned back to the path—and looked into the eyes of a very strange creature that must have crept up silently behind him. About human-high and roughly human-shaped, its form was constantly changing and transforming at blinding speed. For a split second it had the face and body of a lion standing erect; the next second it had the curved beak and sharp talons of a bird of prey; then goat hoofs and curling ram's horns. It metamorphosed into a man-sized squirrel, a bear, a gorilla, a humanoid with ten-foot leathery bat-wings... Only its eyes remained steady, unchanging. They hovered in the midst of a shimmering flesh-storm and blinked with awareness.

The creature opened its shimmering-changing mouth and spoke in voice that resonated with the sub-audible flower vibration:

“Welcome-elcome-elcome to the Garden-arden of Electric Bliss-trickbliss.”

“Uh... thanks,” said Stanley Randall.

“Please-ease enjoy-oy-oy your stay-ay-ay,” the shimmering creature twanged.

Stanley Randall stood before the shape-changer on the narrow pathway among the too-bright giant flowers, and took a deep breath. A veteran of many deep hallucinogenic voyages, he knew that keeping a calm center was important. Breathing was the key to staying in the calm eye of the hurricane. He remembered his mantra. To the gently blending imagined sounds of sitar and softly played tablas, he chanted mentally as he breathed: *...turn off your mind, relax and float downstream [it is not dying]...* All stress and worry dissolved softly and sweetly as the high-energy peace of the *om* vibration flowed through him.

As he steadied into calmness, it occurred to him that his last connection with the continuity of memory was as he had taken a step through a doorway toward the top of a long, narrow flight of stairs. He knew intuitively that he

had flashed into another reality-stream, and he surmised that it might be important to check in with the “home-stream” sometime soon to most effectively maintain a state of physical integrity. Of course this present reality-stream was quite spectacular, in fact shockingly amazing, an ultra-rich source of experience potential, bursting with tantalizingly complex mysteries and fraught with the promise of untold ecstasies. Still, all things considered, he should be getting back. Best to forego pleasure for the moment and follow a course of responsibility.

He decided he should express polite gratitude to the creature before him for the hospitality it had expressed—its shape-changing transmutations seemed to be speeding up into a hazy blur—but reluctantly he would decline a more extended visit at this time, while hopefully accepting a rain check, as it were, for a future occasion. At the same time, he could ask this figure for guidance back to his origin/destination.

He opened his mouth to speak. Shockingly, his voice came out in a childish squeak:

“Think thank done bloom gone how,” said Stanley Randall.

Hmmm... that didn't come out quite right, he thought. He tried again:

“How high higamus hogamus home?” This time his voice boomed out in a deep basso profundo.

Damn! That was even worse.

“What’s the meter with mat?!” he cried.

The shape-changer held up a shimmering hand/fore-leg/paw/claw and said, “*You are-uare trying-eyeing too hard-ard-ard!*” It pointed to a green-petaled flower and said: “*Touch-uch-uch!*”

Stanley hesitated, but the creature seemed insistent, so he reached out a tentative finger and, steeling himself for impact, allowed the tip of his index finger to graze the surface of the petal.

Suddenly all the world was green. The sun blazed like a brilliant emerald in a mint-julep sky. He held up his hand: his skin was green, covered with reptilian scales. The path was paved with lime-green tiles.

The creature's transformations had slowed and steadied into a reptilian humanoid shape with bulging frog-like eyes.

Stanley gazed back toward the high fence and the gate through which he had passed. The black iron of the fence now appeared to be supple green tree-limbs. Above the gate was an arch filled with ornate runes and symbols formed with twisting vines. No, it was letters of the English alphabet, appearing in mirror-reverse because he was looking at the back of the arch. Squinting for focus, he puzzled out the letters. They spelled, *Garden of Electric Bliss*. Below this, in smaller letters, he made out the words *Cerebral Light & Power Company*.

A gentle, mint-scented breeze played softly over his skin.

"Thanks," Stanley said. "I needed that."

"Blyx," the creature replied.

"What I was trying to say," Stanley explained, "is that I—ah—I'm not here; my brain is."

"Brgle blyx," the creature said enthusiastically.

"No, I mean my self doesn't know I'm... er, my body... mind..." he stopped in confusion.

The creature emitted a high, squeaky stream of laughter. Beckoning Stanley to follow, it hopped/danced/slid between the tall flowers and across the grass to a clearing overgrown with low, scruffy weeds. In the middle of the clearing was a round, rusty metal disk. It looked like a manhole cover. Stooping, the creature lifted it with his forelegs/flippers/tentacles.

"*Exit here!*" the creature chirped.

Stanley gazed into the black hole. It didn't look inviting. He hesitated.

"*In down home now!*" the being insisted.

Stretching out a tentative foot, Stanley slipped over the edge and into the dark. Suddenly he was tumbling head-over-heels down the hole. It looked like an elevator shaft. As he plummeted he saw doorways flashing by. Snatches of ordinary daily life were visible in each—a fat woman dragging a struggling boy by the ear down a busy street, a bulging shopping bag under her arm... a wild-eyed writer

hunched over a battered typewriter, overflowing ash trays and overturned coffee cups strewn around him... an old wino lying slumped against a brick wall in an alley next to a row of overflowing garbage cans... a policeman crouched behind a patrol car, a gun in his hand... a huge black bird pecking cherries from a pie that had been set in a window to cool... his father, sitting in an arm chair, his feet propped on a stool, reading a newspaper... himself, standing poised in a doorway at the top of a high, narrow stairway...

—*that's the one!* He made a desperate leap, but just missed the door and fell with a thump onto the floor beneath it.

He stood, dusted himself, and looked around.

He was on a wooden floor. In front of him was a high curtain. As he looked, it began to part in the middle and draw away to the sides. The sounds of a boisterous crowd assailed him. Someone gave him a shove from behind, and he stumbled out onto the stage, where a spotlight beam picked him out.

He had a cane in one hand and a top-hat in the other. He wore a loosely-woven grass skirt which began to slip dangerously down his hips as he danced. He tried to hold it up with first one elbow and then the other. The audience roared with laughter.

His cheeks blazing with shame, he glanced around for some props to hide behind, but the stage was bare. He was about to duck back behind the curtain when a woman, dressed in the uniform of a high-ranking military officer, entered from stage right. She drew a sword, pointed it at his chest, and shouted:

“What Freud Jung Adler thee?”

Stanley shook his head and rubbed his ears. He knew he hadn't heard the woman correctly. Something was blocking his audial neural pathways, garbling his speech recognition program. He took a deep, shaky breath, and stammered, “I—ah—I don't belong here. I was trying for the frame above—”

“Likely story!” shouted an overweight man in a business suit who had just materialized behind him. The man

chewed and puffed on a fat cigar; a cloud of noxious smoke swirled around his head. Particles of ash fell to the stage floor, looking to Stanley like a shower of tiny dollar signs. The man blew a big puff of smoke into Stanley's face, making him cough. He raised his hands to fan the air before his face, and the grass skirt tumbled to his ankles. The audience burst into loud laughter and applause.

Bending to retrieve the skirt, Stanley felt the point of a sword prodding his chest. The woman officer stood behind him. "Do you have a social superiority card?" she demanded.

He gazed back blankly.

"Just as I thought!" she chortled. "What's your identity number?"

He stood in confused silence. Suddenly the woman reached down and grabbed his left ankle, causing him to tumble backwards into the arms of two policemen who had appeared behind him. She held his foot high. He saw reflected in her mirrored glasses the number 666 tattooed into the sole of his foot.

There was a fanfare from the orchestra pit.

"The mark of the Beast!" the whole company shouted in unison.

Stanley's head was spinning. Somewhere in the back of his mind a voice (like a radio playing softly from the remote back shelves of a big warehouse) was saying *...must get ahold of myself must get ahold of...* He noted the rising wave of panic/paranoia, and willed it down. Then he made a sudden lunge backward, knocking over the two policemen (their guns, clubs and handcuffs rattling and clanking on the stage floor) and snatched a handgun away from one of them. Spinning to face the sword-wielding officer, he fired three shots at her in quick succession. Unfortunately the gun only made a soft popping noise as he pulled the trigger, and then the barrel began to wilt and sag until it pointed limply to the floor.

At this the audience began to hiss and boo. A rotten tomato flew low over Stanley's head, and another one landed at his feet. Soon the air was filled with sour cabbages, apple cores, and other vegetable debris.

Grabbing the remnants of the disintegrating grass skirt, Stanley made a dash for the curtains. Ducking backstage, he saw a large trunk overflowing with costumes. He grabbed one from the top as he ran; it was a pair of Persian pajama pants.

He wrenched open the door of a dressing room and slipped inside.

An actor sat before the mirror, touching up his make-up. He wore a sparking jewel-encrusted vest, and a silk turban was wrapped around his head. He turned to Stanley and said, "What do you need?"

"I need a place to hide!"—*from myself!* Stanley cried.

The swami stood. "Follow me," he said. Opening another door at the far end of the dressing room, he stepped out into a bustling city street.

They seemed to be in a normal mid-sized modern city, except that the pedestrians and motor traffic were all going much too fast. Cars and busses whizzed by at racetrack speed. Dignified, bullfrog-faced businessmen jerked down the street with Keystone Kops-like intensity. Women galloped by, their baby carriages banging and bouncing on the cracks in the sidewalk. Only the babies seemed normal; their eyes beamed calm Buddha-like grace.

Stanley followed the swami. They walked at a normal pace, weaving among the speeding folk like rocks in a mountain stream. Soon they dodged into an alley. The shadows were deep and they had to pick their way carefully among the rubble and refuse that littered the alley. They passed an elderly man sleeping in a pool of urine beside a garbage can, and Stanley recognized with a start the wino he'd seen from the elevator shaft.

They soon came to a short flight of steps that led down to a cellar door. A stray cat leapt from the shadows and fled as they descended. Inside, the darkness was soft and warm, and Stanley breathed more easily.

He sat heavily on a sack of flour, but it immediately became a dog that growled and squirmed under him. He stood quickly and leaned against a wall, but splinters of wood pricked his skin, and he straightened up. A deep voice from his center whispered, *Don't rest. Can't rest.*

Must stay alert. He knew with a flickering wisp of intuition that this advice was critical, but weariness weighed against it.

The swami had disappeared. Stanley walked slowly through the dark cellar, looking for clues that might trigger the memory of whatever it was he was urgently looking for.

A glimmer of light from a niche in a back wall caught his eye. Stepping closer, he saw a dirty urinal, a tiny sink, and a dented and dusty vending machine that offered pocket combs, miniature flashlights, key rings, and pornographic booklets. Instinctively checking his pockets for coins, he suddenly realized that he was once again wearing his own worn denim jeans and jacket.

A rat darted out from the shadows and he followed it around a corner and through a dark hallway, then into a darkened banquet hall. Three long tables were laid with ornate china and silver, but everything was covered with a thick layer of dust. He walked the length of the room and exited through a set of swinging doors, but instead of finding a kitchen, he found himself standing at the entrance of a church sanctuary. Before the pulpit a clergyman stood, leafing through a huge Bible in the dim, unlighted chamber.

Stanley walked up to him and cleared his throat. The clergyman looked up over his spectacles, his eyes inquisitive.

"Can you tell me where I am?" Stanley said, struggling to enunciate the words properly.

"Come back on Sunday," the minister said, and bent back to his text.

"But—I—"

The preacher looked up. "Yes?" he said, his tone revealing slight annoyance.

"I've lost my reality focus," Stanley said desperately.

The clergyman sighed and closed his Book with a snap. He took off his glasses, folded them and stowed them in a pocket of his robe. Then he stepped down and placed his right hand on Stanley's left shoulder.

"I'll pray for you," he said.

Stanley closed his eyes.

Instantly he dissolved into a swirling, churning sea of light. His field of vision expanded to 360°. Patterns played around and through him: cubes, pyramids, multi-dimensional parasolid shapes moved into and out of each other with soft, slick clicking and popping sounds. He felt his essence expanding, flowing outward to infinity... no border... no self... no shore...

He opened his eyes. It was the flashing shape-changer who stood before him once again, its hand/foreleg/wing touching his shoulder. They stood together on a high hill overlooking a town. The sky was bright red. Now it was blue. Alternating. Tempo increasing.

"What's happening to me?" Stanley moaned.

"You am in-out up-down whiz-m-gynched," sang the creature in a high vibrato.

Choking down a scream. The flashing sky.

The trees alive with sentient energy, each sending high a telepathic *hello*. The grass winking crinkly-sweet, crushed and bleeding green beneath our feet. The rushing wind blowing through him with knowing breaths, billowing out his chest like a sail... the summery wind tasting yellow-brown in its delight, sounding like tinkling tickling chimes as it plays his tactile xylophone... time clocking around his head like mechanical bird-wings...

The shape-changer now fluctuating faster than sight, black/white, black/white... within each black a million million stars, the endless empty body of space and all the aeons of time... within each white the exploding big-bang brilliance of the fiery core of every atom/sun...

Beneath the feet of Stanley Randall the cloud/ground grew misty and far away.

"Who-why live-die you-I?" he cried, straining with all his strength to forge words mighty enough to frame the exploding meaning within-without him, appealing to the spectral shape-changer as a drowning man might grasp at floating straws.

"Red-blue," color-said he-she slowly-quickly while rising-falling through the air-water-fire. Touching-blending, they laugh-cried happy-sad, one all-seeing truth-being.

"STOP!" cried Stanley Randall.

Immediately, all over the world, busses and trucks slammed to a halt, rubber tires screeching and smoking on blacktop, sliding sideways into ditches and barns.

All clocks stopped, frozen in mid-tick. Skip-ropers halted in mid-jump, some stuck in the air above their stationary ropes. Families eating dinner halted in mid-bite, swallows stuck in their throats.

Above Stanley's head, birds halted in mid-flight and raindrops poised motionless in midair.

Stanley Randall walked alone through a motionless world.

Walking down the street, he saw cars locked in place, their drivers staring blankly forward. Through a car window he saw a man and woman facing each other, their mouths open in simultaneously stifled shouts. In another, a driver was frozen in the act of stubbing out a cigarette in an ash tray, one eye gazing up at the street under an arched brow.

He passed an obese man wearing plaid trousers held aloft by taut suspenders over a food-stained tee-shirt, his eyes frozen in a lustful stare at a young girl leaning from a school bus window.

Rounding a corner, he saw a dog balanced forever on three legs before a fire hydrant.

He saw a youth caught in the act of stealing an apple from a fruit stand... a bone-thin elderly man stuck forever searching through the contents of a rubbish can... a mother frozen in the act of hard-slapping a crying child.

Looking through the window of a house as he passed, Stanley saw a group of young children, their eyes glued to a television screen on which an animated commercial played on in one long endless flicker.

Through another window he saw two men locked in time over a chessboard, the steam stationary above their coffee cups.

Through a third window he saw a middle-aged couple caught in the act of lovemaking. Looking closer, Stanley saw that they were his parents. He stopped, trembling in shock. His mother lay back, her mouth open in a gasp of

ecstasy, her back arched above the couch, her fingers splayed against the floor. His father clasped her nipple between his teeth. His erection, nearly buried in her, gleamed purple in the shadows of evening.

I am dying, sang the mind of Stanley Randall.

As he stood, gripping the window sill in white-knuckled hands, tears began to trickle down his cheeks.

Once started, they came faster, like a summer cloudburst, and sobs wracked his body. But the tears, as they fell, began to wash away his skin. He placed a finger on his face and felt a hole, felt his cheekbone clean and cold. He watched his fingers melt and run like popsicles in the sun, his arms and chest become fluid and flow down to where a puddle of him began to form on the sidewalk... and in a few moments all of him was a puddle on the sidewalk in the silent town outside his childhood home.

A drop of rain fell into his sentient puddle-self.

Another drop, then more, and soon a torrent fell, and he was washed away in a thousand different directions—each drop of him sentient and whole. Some of him flowed into the gutter and down through a sewer grate, through underground channels and finally out into a pond, where frogs and insects thrived in blessed motion... some of him seeped into the soil, becoming one with the soil-flesh of the Earth, our planet-mother, and up into the roots of grass and weeds and trees... some of him washed out onto the concrete and tar of the street to await the mysterious metamorphosis of evaporation in the sunlight.

A thousand mental voices of Stanley Randall cried out in fear and wonder, in nameless joy and hopeless hope... *too far apart, we're gone away into the All... we'll drift from I to death, yet live in dream...*

...and consciousness faded slowly out, to be replaced by rest...

...and sleep...

—*what? where? how?!*—a thousand mental voices cry as, rising into form from shapeless dream, his sundered self is yanked awake with merciless speed. *Are we I?* The maelstrom asks itself as light, lines, planes and images

become real, become here-now, tilt into balance and topple into the grip of gravity...

Stanley Randall was shaken awake by a thundering, resounding crash, and he nearly lost his equilibrium and fell down the whole flight of stairs.

Catching himself with both hands against the rough plaster of the stairwell wall, he breathed hard for a moment. He tasted the wall with his tongue and spat out mildew-flavored dust.

Slowly, sweat-drenched, heart pounding, he found his balance and stood.

Turning, he saw.

He was at the top of the narrow stairway, standing just outside the doorway of a little room with a card table and an empty wooden box. The man in the trench coat and cowboy hat stood back in the shadows, watching him. It was too dark to see, but Stanley imagined an ironic smile on the man's gaunt features.

He was at the top. He had taken a single step.

The whole trip had taken place between the instant he had lifted his foot and the instant that foot had connected with the first stair.

I'm very stoned, thought Stanley Randall.

Quite a trip, another equal voice of him chimed in. *When I come down...*

Across time and space, the eyes of the trench coat-clad stranger gleamed out like pinpoints of fire, and his head gave a tiny shake of negation.

—not come down?

—peaking forever?

—no antidote? no cure?

Like a warm red beam, the stranger's telepathic voice came floating out... *you knew... you chose...*

Stanley Randall sat heavily on the top step. *We knew, we chose*, his many inner voices sang.

He ran a hand through his sweat-damp hair. His eyes fought to make out the bottom of the stairway; it seemed to be dwindling with distance amidst the accumulating colors.

He had to climb down there—how many steps? fifteen? twenty?—then he could go outside...

The colors swirled; the walls breathed rhythmically.

...and deal with the street, the traffic, the cops and con-men and clowns...

His field of vision began to curve as through a convex lens.

...he had to find his way through the maze of the metropolis, the markets where our lives are weighed out like meat and our minds melted into molds like metals...

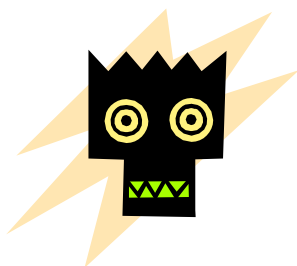
Beyond the periphery of his vision spirits were beginning to dance and gape, pulling faces, making urgent gestures; when he turned to look they danced away, blending back into the shadows.

...I'll make it home; somehow I'll make it home and then I'll be OK...

He sat still for a long time, breathing deep, remembering his mantra, until his heartbeat was slow and steady. Then Stanley Randall stood on the second step from the top of the stairway and lifted his foot—

—but somehow he stood not on the stair-step, but on a swaying footbridge miles above a yawning chasm where a river flowed through cliffs of rock like a silver snake. Ivy-covered rope was in his hand. The icy mountain wind blew back his hair and raised gooseflesh on his neck. High in the pale blue sky a lonely hawk circled lazily. The sun was low above the snow-capped peaks.

Oh no, the many inner voices of Stanley Randall in a mighty chorus cried, *here we go again...* ☹



Goodbye to Ram's Gulch



The old man sat on the bridge and watched the yellow and green machine take another bite out of the hillside.

The machine belched greasy black smoke as it backed and turned, tangled tree roots dangling from its gape-toothed jaws, tractor-bands sliding in the fresh gravel.

The sun was hot on the old man's back. A line of sweat traced a track through the caked dust on his forehead and disappeared into his scraggly beard. His faded denim shirt stuck to his arms and shoulders. He stared down between his knees to where the sad remains of Carter's Creek flowed into the shadow under the bridge. His legs swung in the air, toes wiggling to catch a stray breeze if one should happen along. The rainbow-stained water swirled away, no fish darting through it now as he remembered they had before. None of those sticky green plant things in it either anymore. Just a kind of grey, flat sheet sliding by beneath him between grey-white banks of some crusty concrete-like substance.

A stale, slightly foul odor drifted up from the dead water.

The old man's mind was tired and dried out and lined with little cracks and fissures like the white chemical substance that lined the travesty of Carter's Creek.

In the cracks, if he could look deep between their lines, were memories. In their deep shadows the green glades of Ram's Gulch still lived, beams of sunlight danced through the foliage, wildflowers and briar brambles grew in chaotic profusion across the wide meadows where the sound of birdsong rose up around the crabapple trees. Carter's Creek came down from the falls above the bluff to pools where you could



find catfish and trout and wide-mouthed bass, on down through the cattails where you could hear strange church choirs of fat bullfrogs serenading the new moon. And if you were very quiet and very lucky, you could see a doe leading her fawns down to the water's edge, and a sly-eyed red fox slinking through the shadows, and strange brown creatures that some damn schoolbook has a name for smiling their ancient wisdom eyes in the cool noon.

The old man held the memories at bay like so many hungry dogs come to hound him, forced them back into the cracks, sat on the dusty bridge in the hot sun.

The constant grumbling growl of the tractor rose and fell as it ate its way into the underlying rock, the grey rock to be loaded on the trucks and hauled down the gravel cutaway, to be milled into gravel by General Rock Crushing Company, to build new highways into new green hillsides.

Black diesel smoke spumed into the grey air from the shining steel smokestacks of a new long-bed Mack dump truck, its paint and chrome still fresh, reflecting the harsh brilliance of the afternoon. The driver leaned from the window of the truck and the old man heard him shout something above the roar of the engines, and the sun glinted on his mirror as the truck lumbered out. He saw the lettering, "General Rock Crushing Co.," on the green door panel. He watched as the tractor disgorged huge mouthfuls of the living forest into the truck bed until it heaped and overflowed with loose rock and soil and fragments of green. The truck coughed and lumbered out, its giant tires squelching through the mud where the sludge had backed

up and clogged the drainage pipe that swallowed the remains of Carter's Creek.

The old man drew a shaky breath, squinted against the sun, coughed, felt in his shirt pocket and pulled out a Camel, lit it and flicked the match into the grey water.





There were bears in Ram's Gulch when he was a boy.

Funny how the memories would seep out from their cracks if you didn't watch them, the old man

thought. Weaseling out like the sludge that seeped up from the bruised and broken ground where gravel fill covered the ancient creek bed.

A footpath had wound its way through the woods. He'd spent many long afternoons wandering in that green labyrinth in the lazy days of summer, returning in the evening with his face stained purple from the juice of wild berries. He had sought solace and tasted peace in the mystic shade of the tall pines, cool and deep on the hottest August afternoons. He'd come with friends to look for Indian arrowheads, and sometimes they swore they saw war-painted braves disappearing into the shadows, biding their time until the intruders from across the sea would be gone and they'd be one with the ways of their ancestors once more.

The jaws of the giant shovel were closer to him now, and the rumbling engine caused the wide planks of the bridge to vibrate beneath the old man's legs.

In another day or two, nothing would be left of the green hills of Ram's Gulch.

Nothing would be left but the great grey gravel pits stretching as far as the eye could see, from horizon to horizon.

The old man felt something stirring deep within him, some kind of deep coiled madness of mingled rage and pain and hopeless despair that threatened to rise up and swamp him like a boat caught in the storm.

Maybe, he thought, he would get up and walk down the gravel road to the trailer that housed the division office of General Rock Crushing Company. Maybe he would demand to see the foreman, a fat man wedged behind a desk with the stub of a cigar clamped between his teeth.

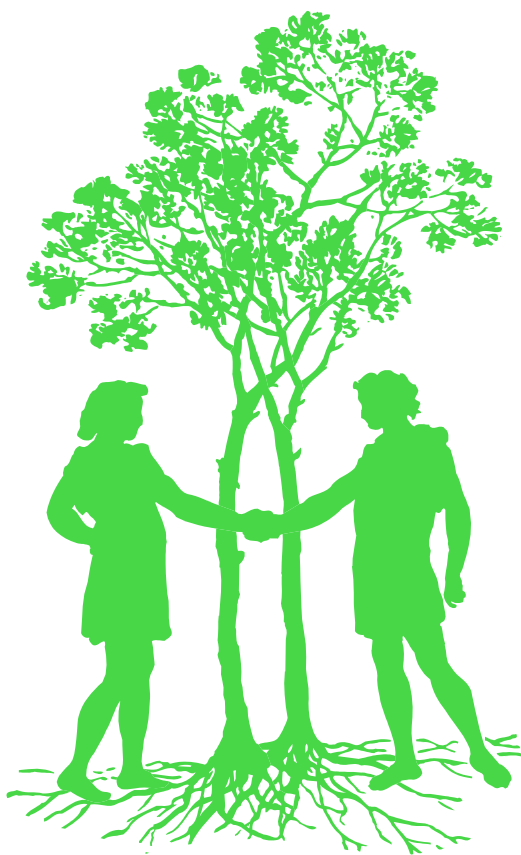
Maybe, the old man thought, he would stand before the

foreman's desk as the trucks loaded with the living bones of Ram's Gulch rumbled by, and he would open his mouth, and the black bilious rage would erupt from his soul, and he would give voice to the myriads of living spirits that are banished forever from their green home where for a million years they have lived in harmony and peace....

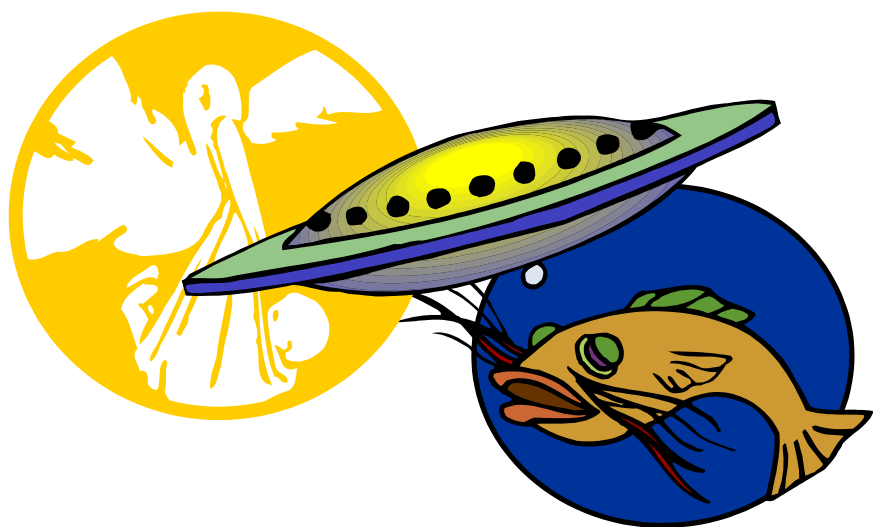
His hand trembled as he flicked away the ash and drew in a lungful of thick blue smoke.

The sun beat down on the old man's head. The metal monster throbbed and groaned. The air was heavy and unmoving, thick with diesel smoke and dust.

"Goodbye, Ram's Gulch," the old man said. ☯



Phantasmagloria



1

—one blue eye opening—

One I opening blue, with shock into air, into light. With shock into cold, from warm into hard, cold, abrupt—one rocketing rainbow from red into blue across the new sky. Into swirling mass of space insanely mixed with form. Spaces of empty cold color sweeping between, away from soft warm island home. Out too suddenly from the dream, one red self smashing into cold blue dawn...

Thunder roar and boom! I am a thing of crystal glass and ice as I react by freezing small, shrinking in, but I can't find the path back to the glistening void where one was together in blissful notime, now stretched too far! lost! away from the center.

O splendid myriad arching pain! Marble horizonless ceiling of expanding death, I rise to become you!

Fluid bride of my being, I sink in joy and horror to merge into the palpitating dance... to flash out through endless galaxies of fire... to flow into fertile valleys of union...

2

—reaching selfness far and farther from no center except all existence; exploring living golden void, each atom aware, yet always in touch, in total communion-flux with *home* where Life is generated and maintained. Drawing selfness home to *herenow* as the energies (*yesno inout up-down*) start to build and grow, start to change and flow...

Cosmic Magnet sucking energies away from *herenow* towards glisteny-shiny particles which buzz and crackle, flash and glow as conflict (attraction/repulsion) quickens the pulse of existence: flashfeelings ecstasy/doom as IT comes nearer... now IT is moving twisting warmness coldness with swirls dark and body-smelling [*memory burst Earth-plane shock, then gone*] as climax approaches: each cell makes ready: each cell in tense anticipation of terror/delight unknown: sounds distant changing from heavenly choral music to sudden screams & shouts all voices all inflections high low soft loud increasing to pinnacle—TOUCH-TASTE-FEEL-THINK—*now!* all self-energy pulling too fast, zapping through vortex, inverting, emerging—

3

One blue eye opening, then the other, and the obstetrician gazes into the mirror as he washes his hands. He has peeled off his latex gloves and the sleeves of his white gown are rolled up past the elbows.

Feeling the cold water on his hands awakens him. He is tired.

Too hot in here, even with the air-conditioning on. Sweat under his arms. A little nervous.

He turns off the cold water, dries his hands on a paper towel, then looks into the mirror again, catching his eyes watching him from behind the glass with a knowing gleam... when he looks right at them they behave normally, of course. *You need a shave*, they tell him. *It's the middle of the night; got up out of a sound sleep, didn't stop to shave. Look kind of grimy and disheveled, bags under eyes.*

The doctor shrugs as he slips off the white gown and tosses it into a laundry bin. He takes his jacket out of the closet and, as he walks out through the swinging doors,

takes out a cigarette and feels for matches. Feels four pockets and finally finds them in a jacket pocket. In the elevator he lights up, draws a deep lungfull of smoke, starts to relax.

Footsteps echoing down the long, empty corridor. The night receptionist at the desk by the door is overweight, maybe fifty, sloppy even in her starched white uniform. As he passes she looks up from her *True Confessions* magazine, gives him a cold stare, her face a contour map of wrinkles. Suddenly her mouth opens and [*he goes into a dream*] a cloud of black smoke burps out and spreads quickly through the room and circles around him, instantly shutting out all until his field of vision is only blackness. Startled, he stands still looking around wondering *have I gone blind?* but inwardly, secretly knowing that he has just momentarily gone into a dream and that when he returns to normal maya stage reality he won't remember.

Then out of the dark night or primordial void a spot of light seems to awaken, dim as if seen from a great distance, and as he focuses his attention on it it grows as if coming closer and in seconds expands into a sphere of some highly radiant substance, perhaps some translucent metal? and as it shimmers before him a square door appears and slides open. There in the opening he sees a woman standing, her long hair a radiant blonde blowing as if in a stiff wind around her naked body. Behind her there is a source of light that is quite too bright for the doctor to look at and he averts his eyes, shielding them with a hand on his brow.

It is all too fast for emotional reaction to deal with so the doctor stands blank and dumb as the vibrating light hums around him. There he stands before the glowing orb. He knows the woman will speak even as she does: her voice is similar to the Mormon Tabernacle Choir if played at ridiculously too high a speed: she says, "*Come with me.*"

In quick tiny glances the doctor looks at the radiant woman who stands, arms extended, palms open indicating welcome.

His eyes watering flashing intense pain he steps forward. Eyes closed tight both hands pressed into eyeballs

he steps up to the woman and feels her hand touch his elbow vibrating like electric shock and she guides him into the orb-ship but now the light is so intense that he feels that he is in the heart of flame, the furnace, he is melting. The woman is speaking but no longer can he discern words, he is melting running liquid, becoming a pool on the translucent floor. He is like moth in candleflame but he melts, actually loses form as pain greater than imaginable experience washes him loose from his self-image. Legs dissolve, hips liquefy, neck and head sink into feet and the doctor feels himself rippling electrically at the shining woman's feet. But the heat in shining orb center is too intense to maintain liquidness and he begins to vaporize, his essence rises up in wisps and forms a gaseous cloud that clings sentient around the naked knees of the woman with still-blowing hair who, he sees, is smiling a calm evil smile of conquest.

Now his body is vaporized completely and he has a sense of wholeness, but looking down (as he can now look in all directions, 360 degrees simultaneously) he sees a kind of rancid odious sludge from which he has risen. But this does not concern him for he is now suddenly engulfed in a dimension of sensuous awareness far transcending any previous ecstasy. In fact it is as if the heat-light-pain of a second before has been instantly transmuted into equally intense pleasure.

Clinging to the round thighs of the golden woman, goddess of sun, the depth of her skin is like a symphony and he is engulfed in attar of roses. Flowing up around her wide hips pubic thatch of fine-spun gold pink depths moist and vibrating calling deep with the authority of sense. Soft skin stretched tight over ribs and spine (heart beats) breasts rise proud nipples erect red soldiers salute, neck of vibrating ivory lips of fire tongue dances with teeth eyes infinite bright exploding vacuum. Orgasmic release through merging pansensory circuits. Blown past love he circles engulfs and worships her enters her becomes her blood pumping through dark electric veins.

Gradually cloud-self resumes form, and the doctor stands quivering before her, naked and dripping cool perspiration, his feet few inches above floor.

She is talking and as the humbuzz subsides he hears and understands... *"...watching your planet as, well, a sort of hobby... actually, you see, you only exist, your planet only exists as a byproduct of our lovemaking, molten planets spinning out from our passion ejaculatory droplets cooling as fire becomes air and water earth. Nine cooling in space soon to dry and blow off, space dust to the stars. But now let me introduce you to..."*

Turning, she leads the doctor back into a hidden room in the orb-ship; throwing back a curtain she reveals a control room: a screen shows a pulsating galactic map, a maze of switches dials meters. Standing facing the screen is a man, tall, massive hands folded resting on naked buttocks, gazing meditatively outward. The man turns: whitehot radiance dances from him: he is the source of the light of transmutation, the sun radiates from his genitals the milky way his hair he combs back with fingers crushing stars, his feet rest on ocean and land. He smiles greeting benign divine grace.

"...his name of course you know is AUM RA, radiant home the source the center... fly out from our sun center home in this our flashing orb ship spinning out in search of sport, we locate those of your tiny kind who are energy-ripe for the game of revelation..."

Then still speaking the radiant woman moves across the control room floor to where He stands and reaching out His hand He draws her to Him clasping radiant embrace they merge into a single supernova center.

All this is too much for the doctor to take in and blinking shaking his head he drifts backwards out the square door of the orb-ship, out into inky void where he sees suspended in space the orb dwindling shrinking to a tiny speck then disappearing and he is alone in total night. Then night dwindles to a smoky cloud that sweeps into the gaping mouth of overweight receptionist who swallows, stares, then looks down at her *True Confessions*, reading *I Was A Topless Dancer at My Father's Favorite Bar!*, and

the doctor stands, dazed, cigarette burning in his hand. His mind in overamped shock state silently notes, *Dream, delivery room energy stress, don't remember*, and forgetting he walks out through swinging double glass doors to the parking lot.

It's starting to get light out already, stars fading, and there's a full moon low behind the highrise skyline.

4

...born... and born again yet something is not right, not normal... I think as mad storming chaos slowly resolves into the calm of sleep and thence into dream. And dreaming I find that I am I, one a unit a single self and I am sitting in a chair. There across the great empty hall I see a man's face peering out thru a square window, the window of a ticket-seller. He seems to be wearing round-flat cap, dark blue, with matching uniform shirt brass buttons, golden embroidery around cuffs and collar. Businesslike he is leafing through a big book of train schedules, peering close, adjusting gold-rimmed spectacles.

I, sitting here in chair, impulsively clear throat and call out to this fatherly authoritative man: "*Why am I here?*" my voice like a tenor sax.

He looks up, a wrinkly frown clouds him as he replies with a hint of scorn, "*You are here because you missed the train!*"

Ah yes, I do not remember but as I think of it the truth of this statement occurs to me and also overwhelming sorrow of my pathetic plight. Missed the train left behind I was sleeping when the whistle blew, awakening too late I let it pass me by. Nothing now to do but sit alone here in this station where every whisper and cough echoes reverberating, alone in the dim light with the crumpled newspapers and cigarette butts. Funny I feel like laughing and crying.

It seems that something very important to me was on that train, was it my friend? Lover? Don't know can't remember. Too fuzzy in brain can't think. Now I just sit here and watch the hands on the big clock turning and turning. Why are they going so fast? They seem to spin quicker and

quicker—now they're a blur of gray obliterating the numbers. Something is wrong with the time, it's going wild. It is night outside, now the sun rises into bright day, then evening again and dark light dark a shimmering haze. And all the while I sit here in my hard chair and watch that strange old ticket seller methodically thumbing through his book, his white whiskers spilling on the page.

Sometime later, I must have dozed off, now it's dark in here and something feels different. Straining to see, I find I am no longer in a train terminal but instead am in a small cold cell. There seem to be damp stone walls around me, and I am lying on the musty concrete floor. Straining blurry eyes I can make out the train-station clerk again but now he's wearing a gray uniform and at his belt hang rings of skeleton keys... club... gun.

I stir my aching muscles and try to sit up. *Oboy how'd I get into this one? Run afoul of the duke's hirelings the high sheriff the fuzz, man, the pigs got me... trapped can't escape.* Slowly I rise and look around.

"How long have I been in here?" I ask, but then I see that mr. jailer has ambled down the corridor and away... but my question is answered in my mind because my cell seems old and familiar, as if many years have been spent here... names and dates etched in concrete, paint on bars flaked and worn... And yet—buzzing fogginess in head makes it hard to think—it seems that I have been away, that I have felt release... *(Sometimes I used to try to climb up the bars to where that air-grate is up there, where gray light filters through; I tried to push or kick that vent shield out over and over until my fingers got cut and blistered. Eventually frustration built up and apathy set in. I don't think about anything any more except awakening when gray metal plate containing food-slop comes through the slot every day... then sink back into the universe of dream...)*

Now as I sit, spaced out into a drone of astonishment, I seem to hear from far, far away the faintest hint of sound... of a voice raised in song, a silver whisper... so faint and distant that it lingers on the very brink of audibility, merging with the fluctuations of imagination in its shallow places... it pulses slowly, becomes more clear then fades.

(something—something I should remember...)

I try to ignore it but it is the only mental stimulus available, like a bright white mark on a blank slate. It might be the voice of a young woman, a priestess singing hymns and supplications to the gods, voicing agonies and ecstasies of birth death struggle and submission. No, maybe it's the wind blowing through cracks somewhere high in the rocky dungeon walls, a chink of crumbling mortar grudgingly admitting scent-carrying outside air. I know it can't be a mosquito, flying tauntingly in circles behind my head. So haunting, so strange...

(something important... why can't I recall...?)

But I am so tired, so tired and over me is washing a ripple of warmth, comforting but also alarming, and some organic smell... so misty, so tired, my limbs are only strands of cloud in the blue summer sky slowly being blown asunder eaten by yellow-knifed sunbeams... the sound wails on, a siren, a scream of pain, an old man fallen before the claws of death... the sound oh yes and now it calls me awakeningward, merciless it whips me contracting, even as rebelling I flee to disperse, the sound is collecting me...

...until in one heartbeat it breaks and I know: the shutters are dropped from the windows of mind and I recognize the sound, I know the nature of the jail I'm incarcerated in... and it is too much: in swirling mingling horror and ecstatic insane joy I see—and as once again I am hurled over the brink and consciousness dissolves in the warm sensuous pit—I see that the bars that hold me are not bars of steel, but bars of flesh...

...and I lie screaming and kicking the air with my uselessly tiny legs, helpless in the warm sweet stench of my own defecation.

5

"Holy shit!" exclaims sweet Mother-being, holding a foot high and dipping in a tentative finger to investigate baby's soiled diaper. With deft movements she loosens pins, then carries the cloth at arm's length to a white plastic tub in the corner of the room.

It's a small room. Baby's crib sits in the center, a cube within a cube. A square window trimmed with green Kleenex curtains; baby animals frolic on wallpaper.

Mother wipes, washes, powders, cool and professional, then re-wraps baby and tiptoes out, switching off the electric light.

Shirley lives with young husband Roger in this new-built split-level suburban house, situated with its neatly trimmed lawn on a looping lane lined with identical houses lining looping lanes lacing through the fields with identical driveways where comfortable cars cruise in each easy evening, down from the new highway and the bright supermarket.

She softly closes the nursery door and walks down the hallway, down four steps to the living room where a cat sleeps curled on the carpet. It's midmorning; sunlight flashes through the picture window as a cool new Studebaker passes along the street. Yawning, Shirley clicks on the black-and-white television and reclines on the couch. The round oval face of the TV warms and blinks into life with a buzzing crackle; it's a laundry detergent commercial that fades into canned laughter and applause as a game show meanders mindlessly on.

Feeling kind of weak and sleepy, she stretches, yawns again, lets her eyes drift closed. The warm darkness swirls with comfortable dream colors...

...she drifts into dream...

...dancing firelight flickers through the trees and a cool evening breeze carries woodsmoke spice as she dances lightly barefoot along the mossy path. Her leg muscles tingle to the pull of the throbbing drums. Around a bend, the clearing comes into view—thirteen dancers leap and whirl, long blue and yellow robes swirling; nine crouching drummers ring the circle, their hands flashing into blurs; three slender teenage boys in grass skirts blow into pan-pipes and strum ukuleles as they leap and whirl. The circle parts as Shirley slips in and joins the dance. The pulse of the drumbeat quickens; she raises her voice in song:

Father Sun! Mother Earth!
From your union we spring forth!
Mother Earth! Father Sun!
In your union we are one!

Of their own accord the buttons of her clothing fly open, flashing firelight licks her sweat-damp skin. The robes of the thirteen dancers, male and female, fly open and drop to the ground. The drums beat louder, faster; flashing nude skin whirls and blurs in dizzying joy.

Father Life! Mother Death!
Consecrate our every breath!
Mother Body! Father Soul!
Heal our hearts and make us whole!

Ho! Now comes a waterfall of visionary images showering down from the sky! The spirits of the dancers rise and mingle, swirling upward like shimmering vapors of brilliant color. Together they blend into one as the laughing eyes of Pan shine forth from the leaping flames, from every leaf and branch, flower and seed, animal and bird! Even the rocks twinkle and gleam with his secret humor.

Ha! Now in a blinding flash is revealed the winking spirit light behind each sun in the celestial dance; now is shown the grin of the galaxies as they pulse and flow in their infinite timeless bliss; now the swirling spirit-dancers taste the ecstasy of outflowing seed-fire as creation bursts forth into new being. Together they rise whirling skyward toward a single gleaming Eye of blue above that slowly opens wide. Together they know the single all-seeing Eye, the single I of all life; rising together they blend and become, and the pulse of the drums flows through and between, red blood and green sap and leaping fire...

...and Roger is there, kneeling before the couch, his arms tight around her hips as the firelight dims and fades, leaving a lingering sweet heat and damp perfume of musk and ambergris to bathe their blended bodies in cooling bliss.

...and I am drawn spinning into awakening, thrust rudely from the gentle dream jungle, out once more into the sharp bright alone and only...

Splashed by a sunbeam that contains dancing rainbow-motes warming me, a smile rises out of me, warm safe happy... I giggle and drool, blowing bubbles, moving my feet in twitching jerks and circles. Flailing hand hits toe: kinesthetic click of tactile coordination. Struggling, wiggling, all is soft and heavy. Feeling the stiff white bed fabric static and dry. Warm and awake, I await the Mother-being...

A fly buzzes lazily, looping happily above me, circling just beyond flailing fingers, vibrating colors in the sunlight, jeweled eyes gossamer wings black fur... fly laughs at me stuck here giggling, winks *I see you* teasing me... then lands soft and leggy on my belly to wash its face until with a jerk I send it once more circling.

But attention is suddenly drawn from the fly as I feel vibrating through bed and floor... yes! It is the steps of the Mother-being! She has heard my silent mind-call, and now she's above me, smiling, murmuring soft sweet nonsense noises, like a rising mountain she surrounds me. Breathing in her ancient secret scent, I can do nothing but merge into her.

How deep is the Mother-being! How brown and compassionate she draws me into her, her flesh surrounds me. How the tension mounts as her huge hands lift me spinning flying through the air to her magic breast and the sweet liquid fire of nourishment flows from her to me, tight pulsing spurts of joy flowing rippling out through joined mind the link the love the violet chain binding us tight. The inner core of light reflecting out through transient forms of flesh flashes bright and clear as energy is released and we are joined back home in the timeless now. Sucking pulling drawing giving flowing, pumping in and out, the synchronized heartbeat all-surrounding.

Now, stilling, I rest in the strong arms of the Mother-being, her eyes caressing me I bask in her attention. It warms me... but what is that glinting, that twinkle in the

corner of her love, that shimmering elusive brightness... like a silver whisper calling... *awake... remember...* comes the patient restless call like an older sister reaching down a helping hand from an attic doorway dark with mystery, playmates on the cobblestone courtyard in the moonlight chanting calling *come and see* from what window lost in dissipating fog-wisps of ghostly perfume... calling to come and see the glittering treasures overflowing from the ancient chests the dragon-hoard awaiting... softly hinting comes the teasing twinkling light lost in the flowing love of the Mother-being.

But now a thick sweet warmth of tiredness descends across me and I sail as I'm carried back to my crib and laid on the tight white surface... blue and purple swirls of sleep approach like clouds pulling close around me. Down I blend into the pool of unwinding...

7

Shirley caresses the sleeping baby with soft loving fingertips, then turns on tiptoe and sneaks from the nursery, pulling the door silently tight.

In the living room a group of people are sitting in a circle on the white carpet, talking and laughing, passing a pipe around. As she joins them she says, "shhh..."—forefinger on her lips—"...the baby's sleeping."

There is an awed hush. Roger smiles and hands the pipe to Shirley as she sits cross-legged at his side. Drawing deep the sweet thick smoke, she smiles at the assembled friends. There are two couples present, young as Roger and Shirley are—early 20s—and an older single man. Cool jazz burbles from the stereo. Roger continues talking, his voice calm and slow; the others murmur and nod. He speaks of Zen, of Alan Watts, of the Buddha's eight-fold path, referring to a selection of paperback books spread out before him.

"...ceaseless transmigration through the worlds of sense and matter, till all karma is balanced in the clear shining void of Nirvana and being is dissolved in formless timeless bliss. But some rare saints, attaining after aeons, voluntarily forsake their reward in the crystallized ecstasy

unending, vowing to return to the worlds of suffering and sorrow to labor and lift till all should come into the light..."

...but Shirley's mind is floating in a quiet space; her attention is straying from Roger's chanting voice, into softer fields of dream, and she lays her head back on the edge of the sofa and drifts away...

...to a woodland glade where shafts of brilliant sunlight slice through pools of leafy shadow...

...and Shirley wanders barefoot once more along the soft earth pathway, past the giant oak, the ashes cool now in the clearing, through tangling berry-laden vines, and suddenly down a steep bank, her feet caressing sun-warmed rock, then feeling dampness as she parts the high veil of cattails at the water's edge...

The pond's wide blue expanse waves lazily in the breeze. Shirley steps out onto a fallen log, tip-toeing carefully along its length as it extends into the water, then sitting on its knobby end and dipping her feet into the cool water...

...what is that sound? ...*blip!* ...*splash!* ...*blip!* ...there, out in the middle of the pond, a figure moves through the water. A merman! He looks exactly like Roger, except that where his legs should be his skin blends into green and purple fish-scales covering a long, lithe fish-tail. He crouches just below the surface of the water, motionless, gazing up with wide bulging eyes... watching and waiting... and then a butterfly comes fluttering by, randomly dancing through the air, and Roger-fish *leaps* with the speed of a serpent striking! *Blip!* He grabs the butterfly in one hand and holds it under water. His arms move quickly and Shirley can't tell what he's doing till two seconds later he lifts his hands above the water... *splash!* ...and releases the butterfly which now flies slowly away, then back, around in a circle... then Shirley sees and her mouth gapes open in wonder, for attached to the butterfly is a tiny hook and a silvery thread. As her vision focuses in tighter, she sees three other butterflies attached to silver threads, their bodies pierced by tiny silver hooks, weighing them down; they fly in slowly drooping circles... and Roger-fish reclines beneath the rippling water, the strings held

tight in his hand. He waits... silent... then from the corner of her eye Shirley sees color flashing. Skimming low over the water comes a bird, orange and violet plumage shimmering in the sunlight. Dipping and circling the bird flies; she can see its tiny twinkling eyes as it dips low, almost touching the water, then flashes up, a dragonfly clutched in its beak, lifting high and circling away. Roger-fish doesn't move a muscle; all is still... the sun pours warm golden syrup-light down Shirley's limbs as she watches... now another bird is circling low, dipping down... redwing bluebird, yellowbeak brownfoot, flitting happily through the air... she dives down and snatches up one of the hooked butterflies. Fear flashes! Something is wrong but too late, the bird has swallowed the silver hook, deep it gashes into her tender throat, red blood on blue feathers falling... wings flail wildly and silver-blue bird-eyes cry [*I am ! I fly I die*] as Roger-fish winds the silver thread around a spool and the bird goes under, struggling in his hands, then *snap!* Its neck is broken, red blood stains the blue water, and the bird disappears into a silvery pouch. Roger-fish crouches low, scanning upward for more butterfly bait...

Shocked and afraid, Shirley edges backwards inch by inch until she can stand once more on solid land, then turns and flees back through weeds and cattails, back up to the wooded hillside. She finds the pathway again but the path seems steeper now; pebbles slide beneath her feet as she scrambles upward. Her hands grab roots and rocks; knees and elbows scratch the earth. Then she is on level ground again. She hurries homeward, feeling tired and confused.

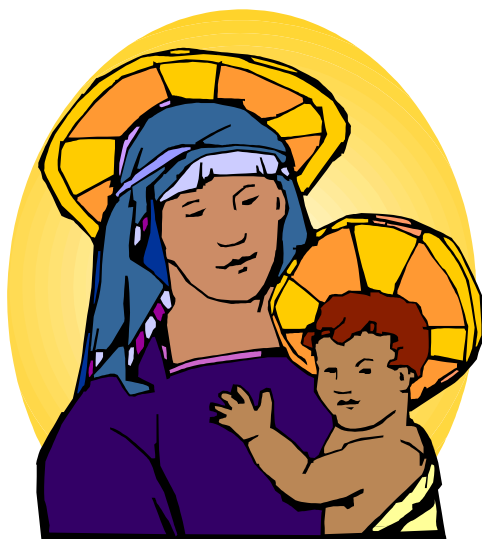
Suddenly the ground quakes and without a sound a crevice opens before her. She freezes in place, one foot on the crumbling edge, and peers down into darkness. Murky shapes seem to writhe and stir in the shadows, slowly resolving into forms... oh yes, it is Roger sitting cross-legged on the white rug, speaking softly to gathered friends. She kneels and gazes down at the warm scene, a calm fondness stealing through her veins... she tips and teeters a long moment, then slips down, plunging through dark-

ness... feels the sofa cushion behind her head as her eyelids flutter open... (*strange dream... remember? no, better not...*)

...rising awake, she forgets as her legs stretch languorously. Roger greets her with a smile as he continues speaking. He's deep into his rap, eyes wide-red, riding the hashish waves.

"...so our circle of devotees rings the bell of meditation, our call echoing out among the snow-capped peaks where the Ascended Masters dwell, calling down the compassionate one who's sworn us service. Patiently and persistently we pray, continuously we call, scrupulously we scrub our karma clean, our lives one long offering on the altar of the Enlightened Ones. O Bodhisattva babe! The time has come. No cruel cross, but a comfy crib to land in this time around..."

Shirley smiles (...*remember? no...*) and eases silently to her feet, the rug caressing her toes as she slips kitchenward to start the coffee brewing. ☯



A Shooting Star

Her eyes are like sunlight through jungle glades, and her slim form is lithe like a feline beast of the forest.

I contemplate her from across the room.

She glances my way from time to time, a hint of curiosity reflected in her eyes, as if she senses my thought; otherwise she is occupied in earnest conversation with the three who stand around her.

The loud music drowns out the sound of her voice, but I watch her lips as they frame words and her hand as it gestures with graceful emphasis.

Others are talking with me, and I nod and mutter vague responses, but my mind is lost in an alcoholic haze of fantasy, far away, as she dances in and out of my field of vision.

After a while it is too much. The necktie is tight on my throat, trickles of sweat run down my armpits, the taste of liquor is stale in my stomach, and my head feels dizzy and light. I make polite excuses and fade to the patio doors and stumble out into the garden. A white marble bench beside the rose trellis looks very inviting.



Sitting and smoking, I notice the moon, gold-colored and swollen, a hair short of full, rising above the dark foliage. It is a warm, blue June night. A slight breeze stirs through the garden, carrying a mixture of sweet floral scents.

I begin to feel a strange poignance, and I can't seem to tell whether it's elation or depression. It's a pleasant confusion that rises up from the tightness in my chest and mingles with the



scent of the roses, an intoxicating cocktail of sensuous pleasure mixed with a strong draught of deprivation and garnished with a sprig of self-pity.

I lean back and close my eyes...

I have known her for only three months. Yet she has made more of an impression on me than any woman I've known for years—or at least her image has pushed all the rest out of my awareness, into the dim recesses of memory.

She came into my life inconspicuously enough, when she was assigned to the same department I worked for in the data control division of General Technologies Corporation. Her desk was four rows away from mine, on the other side of the room. She sat between me and the windows, and the morning sunlight spun an aura of gold around her, almost as if she was in glowing technicolor and everyone else was in black and white, bit part players to her starring role.

After a few days I started to really notice her. Something about the youthful spring in her step, or the defiant toss of her head and the rebellious humor in her eyes—whatever it was, it grabbed me and wouldn't let me go.

Finally I gathered my nerve and spoke to her. I seemed to come alive when her eyes locked with mine; a warm tingle thrilled through my spine; I stood straighter and breathed deeper. And I swear she felt it to—I saw the recognition in her eyes, though it lay unspoken between us.

I started spending the morning coffee break with her, and then I asked her to join me for lunch. We sat in the cool interior of the Jewish deli on the corner, squeezed together around a tiny table as the crowd surged around us. She remained cool and reserved, though appreciative of my friendship; and she made a point of prominently displaying her hand with the thin wedding band of white gold.

Her husband, she said, was an executive with an aerospace company. He was moving up the ladder to an influential position, with a salary increase that would release her from the need to work. It would mean a relocation to

the Texas branch of the company. She had never traveled, with the exception of a flight to Florida last winter, and she was looking forward to the move with great anticipation.

Somehow, instead of dampening my interest in her, the news that she was beyond my reach—that she would pass through my life like a shooting star—inflamed my strange desire all the more. Against my own will, I found myself dwelling during long sleepless nights on the movement of her muscles beneath her smooth brown skin; on the soft, yearning depth of her eyes; on the electric touch of her fingers as they brushed my arm...

"Martin!"
I come awake with a start.

She stands before me in her flowing gown, the moonlight crowning her with radiance.

"Hi, Jan," I say, feeling embarrassed and disoriented.

"I wondered if you were still here," she says, seating herself beside me. "I saw you come out this way."

I glance at my watch and see that it is nearly midnight.

"Everyone's gone," she says.

"Your husband?"

"Tom's inside. He passed out on the couch."

We're silent for a long moment. She is so close to me that I could reach out a few inches and slip my arm around her waist. Our thighs are almost touching; I can feel her warmth through the fabric.

As much as I desire to communicate with her, I can think of nothing to say. I just want to breathe in the sleepy essence of her musk, to grasp the elusive flavors that she evokes within my depths.

Finally I say, "What time does your plane leave?"

"Six-thirty," she says, gazing down at her feet as they swing back and forth beneath the bench.

In the moonlit silence I grapple with the meaning that struggles to form words. I feel like telling her that it is a rare and beautiful thing, this strange turmoil that rises between us; that seldom in this life do we have such an opportunity, to interact with such dynamic force — such force as that which lies latent, awaiting the moment of our union.

Then a cloud blows across the face of the moon, and in the darkness I remember who I am, what I have to offer someone like her with my meager pittance of an income. I remember the narrow, stale niche in the world that is my life. I remember the squabbling rabble of my siblings, the poverty and ignorance from which I sprang.

And yet—do I imagine it, or is there a yearning look of encouragement in the wistful smile I glimpse between rose-scented moon-shadows? Could it be that she really does feel this strange wild magic that vibrates between us? Is she awaiting a sign from me—a signal of confirmation—the opening of a door of intimacy...?

“Jan—” a sudden nervousness takes me; I shiver; my palms are damp with sweat “—I...”

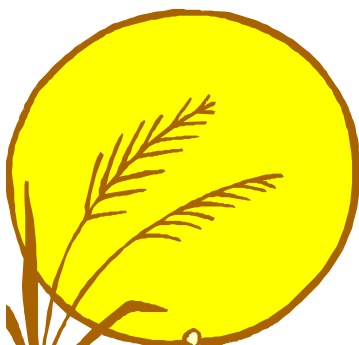
It seems that she leans slightly toward me—or is it the movement of rose-leaf shadows stirred by the breeze in the moonlight?

“I want—” I halt, realize I’m mumbling, clear my throat.

There is the sound of a door slamming and something heavy falling with a thud inside the house.

She is on her feet instantly. “I’ve got to go,” she says in a loud whisper.

I reach for her, but she is gone, her form melting like mist into the moonlight. ☾





LUMINIST PUBLICATIONS

www.Luminist.org/bookstore/



LOUISA M. ALCOTT

Perilous Play \$4.99

The Mummy's Curse \$4.99

GRANT ALLEN

Pallinghurst Barrow \$9.99

ALGERNON BLACKWOOD

A Victim of Higher Space \$4.99

Secret Worship \$4.99

A Psychical Invasion \$4.99

LORD DUNSANY

The Hashish Man and Other Stories \$4.99

DALE R. GOWIN

Word Music: A Selection of Poems \$9.99

G. A. HENTY

The Pipe of Mystery \$4.99

SANANDANA KUMARA

Am I My Dark Brother's Keeper? \$4.99

ARTHUR BENJAMIN REEVE

The Clairvoyants \$4.99

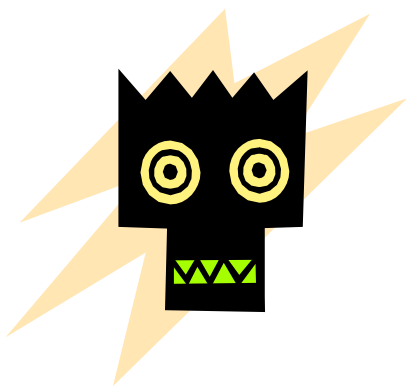
DOROTHY G. SIMS

The Wheel \$4.99

With a drug called “Eternity”...

“It’s a one-way trip that never ends,” said the man in the trench coat. “It reconfigures your brain’s operating system. It’s an evolutionary accelerant.

There’s no antidote. You can’t put this jinn back in the bottle.



With acid, you can kiss the sky for a few hours. With Eternity, you achieve escape velocity. Nobody ever needs a second dose of Eternity.”

...you may never come down.