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AUTHOR'S CHOICE 3

HARRY HARRISON, Ed.

Author's Choice 3

EDITED BY HARRY HARRISON
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HARRY HARRISON, Ed.

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INTRODUCTION

While the *Authors' Choice* volumes do not pretend to give a true or complete history of the field of science fiction, the first two in the series were historical to a great extent. Not only did the best of the current authors appear in them, but I made some attempt to capture stories and comments from the greats of SF whether they were still actively writing or not. I was partially successful in this; some writers have vanished and could not be found, others had died, others were not available. This resulted in a representational if not complete look at the science-fiction field by all of the best authors obtainable. We had fun, the stories were good and the comments offered a bit of insight into the creative process.

Now, in the third volume, we are doing the same thing —with a big difference. Here are the new writers, the modern writers, the up-to-date writers, the vibrating present and the hopeful future of science fiction. (I am carefully not saying "young," as you may have noticed; there are three beards visible on the contents page and two of them gray.) Here is what modern science fiction is all about.

It is not about New Wave since that is a nonsense term. The best of experimental science fiction is presented here, most of it from that nursery of the new, *New Worlds,* including a story and comment from Mike Moorcock who started the whole thing sizzling when he edited that magazine.

I have been very loose in my dating as to what is "new" and have exercised my personal and idiosyncratic taste as

to what is good. In the past few years I have been doing a great deal of editing, which means a great deal of reading. I have edited two anthologies of new stories, that is, stories published in these books for the first time. I have also edited the annual year's best volume of SF, which entails reading *everything* in the short lengths, which at times can be a little like a writer's task in hell. Then I have edited magazines, which means I read through everything submitted unsolicited through the mails, called the "slush pile" by editors with good reason. All of this, besides producing magazines and books, has given me bloodshot eyes and a tendency toward alcoholism.

It has also produced this anthology. All of that reading and soul searching has stiffened up my already firm opinions about what is good and bad SF. Here is what I know:

I know that the *New Worlds* influence is a Good Thing, no matter how much the Edgar Rice Burroughs mentalities writhe and moan at anything better than pulp action and hack writing. While at the same time I know that these newer experimenters can be self-indulgent, sloppy, dull and downright unreadable when they turn all the taps on. But bully to them for trying.

I know that The Girls are a leavening influence on our field and I wish there were more of them practicing the art. That they sink into sickening whimsy at times—what has been unkindly called the kitchen-sink and toilet-brush school of SF—cannot be denied either. So what? Worse crimes have been committed. It is a pleasure to have them here, and you will see some of the best represented in this anthology.

I know that the old dogs can still teach the young pups some good tricks. A reader who did not know the ages involved might very well pick writers like Davidson and Masson as the physically youngest in this anthology. Guess again. Not the oldest dog but by far the trickiest is Aldiss, who is again represented here. With reason. Brian

is a major contemporary writer who happens to do a lot of his work in science fiction. Mainstream's loss is our gain.

This is not—repeat *not*—a complete selection of all the writers I wanted to see here. A second volume could be easily filled, and this one is already longer than planned. What it is is a good cross section of the best writers working today, along with their comments on how they go about their task. The selection of writers has been mine and mine alone. I have been able to do these volumes only through the long-suffering aid of my Berkley editors, Thomas A. Dardis and Donald R. Bensen. I admire their courage, and thank them, for giving me an absolutely free hand in doing these books.

Harry Harrison

SOBER NOISES OF MORNING IN A MARGINAL LAND

Brian W. Aldiss

The late Bertrand Russell and a friend were discussing the Ten Commandments. Russell claimed that they should always be prefaced by the sort of remark one sees at the top of an examination paper: "Not more than four to be attempted by any candidate."

It is in a somewhat similar mood of caution that I approach the task of saying anything about my story Sober Noises of Morning. *Not that I regard it as of quite as much import as the Ten Commandments, but I would not want it to be regarded as examination material, or its readers as other than candidates for enjoyment.*

What, you may well ask, has all this to do with Didcot power station and Cymbeline's horse? A good question, the answer to which will emerge.

I wrote the story mainly for my own enjoyment with certain limited objectives in mind. My involvement with change was to be manifest once more; I would show how attitudes to imprisonment and inquisition might change, and how the idea of a one-party paternalistic state might come to seem less intolerable than we now regard it in our totalitarian century. In this connection, I would also show how a whole new way of consciousness might emerge. It is impossible to depict a new way of consciousness directly, although I did make a gesture in this direction in Barefoot in the Head, *but much can be done by implication.*

Now you begin to see the connection with Cymbeline's horse.

I also determined to work up my feeling—it could hardly be honored with the term "theory"—that stories are better, more substantial, if they have two or more layers of narrative. Different time layers are best, because they give immediate dimension to the story. Old-fashioned examples of this strategy can be found in late Victorian and Edwardian short stories, where the main narrative is framed as a story told by a circle of acquaintances round a fire; H. G. Wells's The Time Machine *shows traces of this tradition, which was brought to perfection and complexity in Michel Butor's* L'Emploi du temps, *translated into English as* Passing Time. (*Let us not drag Proust into the discussion, in case we accidentally reveal our own modesty of achievement by comparison!*) *My attempt at this layering is represented by the interpolated* précis, *which, though they may begin somewhat obtrusively, eventually provide correlatives between the two antagonists. They also lend a sense of detachment from the involvement we instinctively feel with the action—any race of men enjoying a new way of consciousness would feel detached from our primitive behavior!*

Our primitive behavior is represented in the story by a hunt. Every story is an expression of the hunting instinct; we could not get through even such a civilized entertainment as Tristram Shandy *without a nose for the quarry. Which brings us almost to Cymbeline's horse.*

The hunt livens up Sober Noises. *It is all meant to be pretty sober and cerebral, but the setting, somewhere in the lost miles of Asia, is there to counteract too much abstraction. Not that abstraction isn't deliberately built into the scene itself. I live in a landscape packed with detail and often prefer to holiday fictionally in a barer place. Incidentally, for influence-hounds, it might be said that the films of the Hungarian director Miklos Jancso provide*

magnificent examples of the sort of barer place I'm thinking of.

As for the landscape in which I live. From my study window I can see, in one direction, the White Horse Hills on which Cymbeline (I promised we would get to him soon) carved a marvelous abstract horse in about A.D. Nil to mark the extent of his kingdom. In the other direction, I am within an ace of seeing—fortunately pines intervene in the nick of time—Didcot power station. These two great objects create a sort of enigma between them. They seem to represent not the continuity but the dis-*continuity of history. I can fill in all—ha,* something*!—of what came between them in historical terms from my own knowledge and from books . . . but so much for knowledge. The imagination, on the other hand, falls between two stools.*

The imagination does not make sense of the two objects in juxtaposition; it refuses to recognise a relationship. Either object is comprehensible enough in its own terms. In terms of visual attraction, too, both have their points; the horse is marvelous in its shorthand symbolism, while the power station too, especially in dramatic storm-lightning, dominates the plain with some grandeur. But together! Comprehension and aesthetics sink out of sight. The objects are not complimentary; they are not even opposed; they just fail to belong in any one scale of values—though of course we recognize both as expressions of man's creative spirit, etc., etc. Such words mean nothing before reality.

Fiction can engage itself in exposition or in the creation of mystery. Most science fiction of the traditional type has elected to engage in exposition:

> The future and all its laws were hid in night.
> God said, Let Heinlein be!, and all was light!

But the creation of enigmas could be defended as simply rendering to nature that which is nature's. That is what

I imagined I was doing in my novel Report on Probability A, *and some critics seem to have found it enigmatic enough. The accompanying story is a compromise: it may have enigmas in it, but it is just a simple piece of exposition. I haven't ventured to put the Didcot power station in it—or Cymbeline's horse, for that matter. Life is complicated enough.*

The introduction is finished. The readers go away, perhaps under the impression that Cymbeline's Horse is a nineteenth-century cavalry regiment. I think to myself: There's a subject for a story for Authors' Choice 4, *if Mr. Harrison will have me back again: the horse and the power station! Isn't this the way the* SF *I believe in is going?—away from the nursery-clear stuff and toward baffling relationships, the only sort of relationships that present themselves in actuality. Haven't I admitted to compromise, and should I not purge myself next time with something uncompromising? Something totally lucid yet inexplicable . . . figures moving on a plain, a tabletop . . . silence, sunlight on huge buildings. . . .*

I go away, and think about Bertrand Russell instead.

—Brian W. Aldiss

At four o'clock in the morning, the Interrogator left me. His assistant unshackled the pinions from my ankles and switched off the two arc lights which had been pouring brightness into my face. They dulled, gloomed, died.

The assistant helped me to my feet and guided me out of the room, up the stone stairs into the wide hallway, where the old smell of sulphur lay thick, and up the bare

wooden staircase to my room on the first floor. I staggered to my bed as he left, fell upon it.

Précis: In the lizard hours of night, the conscious and unconscious gesture are one.

For a long while, I lay where I was, my legs straggling over the side of the bed with my feet touching the floor. My face had been beaten. Its swellings extended the irregular contours of my head to infinity in a contradictory way. One burning cheek was lodged against the high ceiling, while the tender area below my eyelids encompassed a place where there was birdsong. And was there not lingering but firm music—Khaldy by a courteous violin—playing in some flooded cavern where my heart beat?

A stretch of time that I thought of as $2n(x - me)^2$ passed, threshing past my mattress like a wounded snake. Its conclusion was the signal for me to struggle to my feet and go to the window.

I sat in the wicker chair there, holding on to the sill, looking out at the submerged forms of darkness through the pane. The wooden sill was deep-set and worn with age and use, like an old human face. The window had wooden interior shutters, nailed back so that they never closed. Their sickly pale blue-green paint was blistered. The window was of two equal parts which had been intended to open outward. They were nailed closed. There were metal bars outside the window.

The window had weathered changes of season and regime; once it had welcomed guests in a hotel—now it guarded prisoners. Once, visitors came to take the malodorous waters of the spa. Now they drank more bitter medicine.

Précis: Eye and windows remained sealed with reason.

Perhaps I slept by the window. The Interrogator was not there again, but he had his allies in my psyche who spoke for him when he was away.

"You know what I am holding in my hand?"

"No."

"What does it look like?"

"Looks like paper."

"Then—what is on this paper?"

"Writing?"

"Whose writing?"

"If you let me look, I might have a chance of answering."

"*Whose* writing?"

"Mine."

"It's your diary for yesterday. You know you are ordered to write a thousand words every day. There are only nine hundred and six words here. Why?"

"I ran out of words."

"We can slow your circadian rhythms again."

"No!"

"Read me what you have written."

He handed me the page and I stumbled over my shaggy handwriting.

"You remember various things without knowing what it is you remember. Like being reunited with someone you loved. You love. Or not being reunited. Anonymous sort of longing to have her dear embrace. One embrace. Dear one embrace. In the sill it's all written there's really nothing to captivity, perhaps I'm freer here than at home by staring at this piece of wood. I have written it before and I can think of my wife, looking out of that other window at her talking to some other man. The baker perhaps it was we paid him once a week. Her legs in the little pale courtyard with green bushes I forget their name. It twined up the side and that was my dear moment of happiness to look at her and see all I had to leave. She in that colossal

city maintaining herself. But isn't it also an empty time or we find ourselves by separation. I mean this is only today but there is another place we all know of where it's not just today and where these things like separation and punishment and pain don't belong. A place here nowhere supernatural right on this sill of closure. . . ."

It was a memory only. Time had passed. What I thought I said I might have said the day before; or I might say it today. Perhaps I wrote the same thing every day in the delirious margins of torture.

There was some water in the pitcher on the sill. I sipped it, let it flow through the silt inside my broken mouth.

Précis: Memory is an abnormality of mind, mind an abnormality of body. These abnormalities become central to the human predicament and must be taken advantage of.

Shapes were forming outside the windowpane as dawn came in. People and things stirring. A dull lantern moved below my window burning, a broken syllable in the infinite languages of shade. A strange thrill breathed along the nerves of my backbone. Another day on the endless Earth, people rising from their beds, bundling into clothes, going out about their work, breath acrid from the blanketed night. Natural and social orders combining. Servants and soldiers always the first to rise. These would be servants, their tread below my barred window. In another hour, they would bring me breakfast and bathe me and dress the night's damage.

Beyond the panes, a brief dawn wind rose. Untrimmed trees formed an avenue from the back of the hotel through the neglected garden down to the lake. They stirred. I did not stir. I remained slumped where I was, my chin against the rough grain of the sill.

My heart beat. That was enough.

As my weary senses returned, I began to think again of

escape. I had escaped from Petrovaradin; I could escape from Tillch. Today I should escape.

Précis: Axial rotation. New day's diet of plans.

Something of the cold outside filtered through the window and soothed my throbbing head. My senses drifted into regions where I could not follow. Semihuman figures moved through a substance much like daylight. Dimlight. Noiseless through trees. Their crouching stance. Pushing a kind of boat out on to a well-oiled river. Campfires. Low fortresses surmounting stone-littered hillocks. Pots, a few dogs, half-cooked meat, the two sexes. Teeth, limbs, antique gestures of love and warfare, a bronze breastplate. A robed figure on its knees, singing.

When I roused myself again, the light was flowing in outside and I could see the mountains. They still wore their mantle of snow, although another Asian summer was about to visit the plain. Sober noises of morning round the old spa. A dull glitter on the lake showed where the sky was reflected. When they brought me here, ice had been thick on the lake. In the unkempt gardens, dead leaves still lay, stale against new flowers, decay and growth being one and the same thing. Soon the three horsemen would ride out. I roused myself to watch.

On the locker by the bedside lay paper and pen. For once I wished to complete my day's quota of words, my task. I took them up, moved to do the magic act, to make a pale imitation of reality with twenty-six juggled letters.

Finally I wrote: "All art." I crossed it out. "All arts." Yes. "All arts try to recreate one dawn."

Was it true? Which dawn?

"Beyond my horizons stands the One State. Its streets cover most of the inhabited globe. I am of it. It is of me. Man made it to rule mankind. Can we revolt from it . . . if perhaps it is the best arrangement? My little family is

one unit. My children are only children, may be killed by others, may kill others. The One State is poised toward." How could you put it? "Toward possible futures."

Seventy-three words. I rested. I intended to write true, but all words are lies because they can only represent one of many levels of being. As I did every day at dawn, I began to weep, confronted by the vast lethargies of Asia.

Précis: Only in movement is there real representation.

The three riders rode forth boldly into the new day. I heard their ponies before they came in sight. The stables lay somewhere along to the left, hidden from my eye. Hooves sounded on the courtyard. Then they came into sight and headed toward the lake, spurring for a path that lay to one side of it.

The men wore sheepskin hats, leather jackets, black wool trousers. They had short rifles slung across their backs. They were guards. Somewhere out on the perimeters of the plain they would do duty all day, returning at nightfall. They could never be seen from the grounds of the hotel except when they rode out or back. I never saw their faces, expect in the evening. Then the faces were featureless, or marked merely by moustaches or sidewhiskers.

The kitchens were along on the right, out of sight from my window, in a low and separate building. The sun rose over the mountains, and soon enough I heard the tread of maids outside in the long corridors, where the smell of sulphur springs lingered like old drains. Other doors were being unlocked, other prisoners were being tended, men I never saw. A key turned in my lock. Maids came through the outer room, swung open my double doors, appeared with trays and steaming towels and bandages, smiling at their eyes and lips. Old ladies bent on being kind.

It was another day at Tilich.

Précis: Everyone has an occupation. It is a law, and the Law.

There was cherry jam for my breakfast with the fresh rolls and butter and coffee. None of it synthetic, but I was accustomed to that by now. Even the One State had not yet been established long enough for perfect uniformity. In this part of Kazakhstan, a state of mind—nothing established itself.

After my bath, I was as usual exhausted. This was the hour when I sank into sleep, never wakening till noon. I returned to my room, but with no intention of resting; today, I was going to escape.

In the giant stone bathroom where, during an older dispensation, patients had wallowed and taken the spa waters, a row of iron fire buckets hung from staples in the wall. I had discovered that the staple bearing the last bucket of the row was loose. Working secretly for several mornings when the maids were away, I had dragged the staple out. It was L-shaped, the longer arm almost a third of a meter in length, and suitably heavy. The bucket I pushed out of sight behind one of the giant baths.

I had already threaded into my mattress a stolen length of rope. This I now brought forth, knotting one end onto the bracket.

My two bare rooms were very high. Across the inner doors, before the spa failed, a curtain had hung: I imagined it rich and ample and velvet. It had gone—how long ago I did not know, for time had an uncertain pulse in Tilich. But the old rail on which it had hung was still in place. By pushing my bed over, and standing on the brass bar at its head, I could dislodge the curtain rail; this I had ascertained several weary days ago. Now I got it down and caught it before it struck the floor.

Précis: Everyone has an occupation. The individual and not the State should decide if the occupations are meaningful.

My bed went back in place. I moved my wooden chair into the outer chamber and climbed onto it with the curtain rail. High above my head was a trapdoor in the ceiling. I pushed it with the end of the rail.

It did not budge.

My head hammered. Some small thing started moving inside my mouth. I had to sit down, burying my face in my hands. All this had happened before, hadn't it? Was not this some archetypal activity? Something was always locked out of somewhere. . . .

The reflection gave me strength. I went over to the wooden sill where my paper lay. I wrote on it, "Something was always locked out of somewhere." Was it full of meaning—or meaningless? I stuffed the paper into my pocket and climbed back onto my chair.

This time, I managed to move the trapdoor. With great effort, I swung it back, revealing a black hole.

Now I painstakingly put the rail and the chair back in place.

I stationed myself under the trap and whirled my rope. The crude hook swung upwards.

At first I missed, nearly braining myself, bringing down flakes of plaster, each of which I scrupulously put in my pocket. At last, I got the hook through the hole above me. It held firm when I tugged.

Now was the most arduous task of all. The climb. First I rested and drank water, splashing some on my forehead. Then I began to swarm up the rope.

For some time while—$2n(x - me)^2$—I lay with my feet dangling before I had the strength finally to drag myself into the false roof. My shoulders and head pained me. But

I drew my rope up and closed the trapdoor. The door was a flimsy piece of wood. Before I laid it in place, I stared down at my room, made alien by a new perspective. Home! A pang went through me. Safety lay there! Always these departures!

Rends in the lining under the tiles gave me plenty of light to see by. A uniform pattern of beams stretched on either side. Winding my rope round me, I started walking to the left, in the direction of the stables.

It was curious to pass the other trapdoors. Below each a prisoner lay, recovering from his meed of punishment.

At the far end of the roof, I stopped, sat down, and rested by the last trapdoor. I opened it. Below lay an upper landing with stairs leading to the ground floor. Everything a dull white or gray. A maid was slowly climbing the stairs, an old woman with white apron over black dress, her shoulders bent. I suppressed a wish to call to her.

As soon as silence fell, I swarmed down the rope. It was impossible to dislodge the hook. The first person to see the rope dangling there would give the alarm. I ran down the wide and curving stairs.

Précis: There is no departure, only a symbol of departure. Our comings and goings are lost in a larger thing.

The stables were there all right. My bruised face would betray me as a prisoner instantly. There were men striding in the courtyard, but they were not near enough to bother about me. I turned in at the stable door.

The smell of hay and horses and leather. The night guard had yet to return; the stable was empty of men. Two ponies stood at the end of several empty boxes. In the One State, there were no horses: Beasts of burden were synthesized. I had watched real horses being ridden often enough

—in solids. I saw saddles hanging by a wall but knew not how to attach them to the animal.

On one saddle lay a sheepskin cap of the type the guards wore. I rammed it onto my head and went to the nearest pony. A mouse-gray beast with fawn belly and long tail, probably of Mongolian ancestry. I spoke to it, untied its halter from an iron ring. What confidence! All the while, I listened for cries of alarm from outside.

Pulling the pony out, I stepped onto a wooden block and climbed on its back. I had its halter and its mane to cling to. I dug my heels into its side and it made smartly for the door. We moved into the courtyard. Turning, I clouted its rump.

It began to move faster. I called to it, kicked its stomach. We were going across the courtyard. Someone called to me in friendly fashion, a man with a sack over one shoulder. I waved!

The horse put its nostrils up and began to canter toward the plain! Somehow I held on, half-crouching on its back. Now it was galloping! I yelled at it in excitement—strength was in me, flowing from the horse. Its muscles stretched and contracted, its fine legs wove under it, its neck arched, its head went forward, its mane blew in my eyes. Still I yelled! Under our feet, the ground sluiced like falling grain, and we were away!

Précis: With a green fuse of joy, parasites devour their hosts. It is their act of worship.

Ah, that ride, and the sound of air in my lungs, in the beast's lungs! The motion itself was a whole thing, the traveling complete in itself as I hung on. I managed to look ahead through my rattling eyeballs. There lay the lake, bearded by brown reeds. There lay the path to the plain, fringed by birch trees—and then no trees, perhaps

no more for a hundred miles, then only the plain, the tawny plain continuing eastward flat to the foot of the mountains. And on the plain—near, near!—three black fluttering blobs. The night guard coming home!

Précis: Things Asian.

If I could evade the guards. . . . Beyond them, the plain, the eternal destitute plain, the plain where hoof and foot and tire would never make permanent imprint! As we bounded forward, I saw on it only one feature—a shed or sheds, decrepit, distant. A guardhouse? An abandoned copper mine? Beyond that, westward, the Kyzyl Kum, the Red Desert, the Turanian plain, the Aral Sea—freedom of the cruelest kind, freedom to fall at last with one's cheek in the abrasive planetary grit!

Not that I questioned my motives at that hastening moment. All escapes are escapes from self, from obligations, destinies. All escapes are versions of captivity. In me was growing the thing I most wanted to avoid—true liberty!

So I dashed haphazard toward the three mounted men.

Précis: He begins to see. There is only self to escape from, and self can be changed.

I had no weapons. Nor could I control the animal I rode. I had dropped the end of the halter. I merely hung on, and we rushed to the sound of our own drum toward the approaching guard. They whistled, signaled, leaned forward in their saddles, moved as one with their ponies, unslinging their weapons from their backs. I merely hung on!

Among the sparse trees my mount galloped, swerving as it went, in fright or delight. I was slipping lower round its sweating back. Suddenly my hold was gone. I cried out. I fell.

I was tumbling among rough hummocks of grass. Picking myself up. Running. Swerving. Bounding. Dodging. Alive as a plunging stag.

—At such moments of crisis, you're at peace inside. You're whole. All of you works together in unison, like a machine, like man-and-horse. Even if you know you can't win!—

For they were thundering down on me. Riding with feet, legs, bodies, their arms and hands occupied with their rifles. The trees protected me. I heard the whistle of their darts about me as I ran for the lake, for the reeds. The birches protected me, their slender peeling trunks, silver, white, silvery-gray, tan, light brown, dark. I blundered among them, I and the three riders, all allied in a strange ritual of hunt.

One of the riders had broken ahead. He reined, aimed. Halting, I looked up at him, raising my arms about my face.

A confrontation. Beneath his shaggy hat, his brows in a line, his eyes ruled beneath the line. His mouth set in purpose. A tribesman from the Steppes—I knew at once by the form of his face, its width, its cleverly mounted cheekbones. As he nimbly swung his rifle up at me, I leaped at him as a wolf might leap. He fired.

My slipping fingers caught at his pony's withers, then fell away.

Then there were only glimpses of the wooden laths and sacking of a saddle and the muddled texture of ground as they carted their prey back to the sad hotel.

Précis: As he says, a ritual. The ritual of the hunt. Goes right back to before the human tribe discovered fire. The excited rumpus through the trees. Old blood pouring through contemporary veins. Little enough of us has emerged from prehistory.

Stripped naked, examined for injuries. Taken in an armored van from the hotel to one of the isolated huts west of the lake, where special prisoners are kept. Made to drink some hot liquid. Whatever drug had been in the dart the rider fired at me, it left me without ill effect. I was feeble but clear-minded as servants quitted the room and I sat on a polished wooden bench.

The room was bare except for a wide desk, behind which two men sat looking at me, and a computer-output terminal behind the desk at a separate table.

The faces of the two men were known to me. One was a pale small man with a soft-textured face and gray eyes. His manner was mild and inoffensive and he had a nervous habit of clearing his throat as if about to speak. He was merely a witness, as required by State law. The other man was my Interrogator. A touch of Mongol about his eyes and cheekbones; by contrast, his nose and lips were full. An unlikely mixture and I had found his character, during the long hours of interrogation, a similarly unlikely mixture. Part sadist, as befitted men of his persuasion, yet not without imagination—an intelligent man who enjoyed inflicting hurt.

He said, "So, 180, the guard saved you from getting lost. Where would you have gone, had we let you go?"

"I don't know."

"Home?"

"I don't know."

"Or had you some romantic idea of living in the wilderness?"

"I don't know."

"Living with a nomadic tribe for the rest of your days, maybe?"

"I don't know." I spoke with my head down, furious still. The reek of the pony was still strong on my garments.

Précis: Men locked in antagonistic roles secretly abet each other.

A baton lay on his desk. I had seen it before. When he picked it up, I flinched involuntarily but continued to reject his questions. The end of the baton glowed red hot. He caught me lightly with it on one of my facial bruises. I could feel an unsuspected system of nerves light up and I began to shiver, perhaps as much with weariness as pain.

The Interrogator rose and walked slowly about the room, studiously glancing down at the stone flags as he paced. Behind his back, he clutched the baton.

"Now, 180, when you escaped, you took with you a piece of paper which is now in our possession. Witness, will you read what the prisoner wrote on that paper?"

The Witness picked a crumpled sheet of paper from the desk. He cleared his throat. He began to read. " 'All arts try to recreate one dawn. Beyond my horizons stands the One State. Its streets cover most of the inhabited globe. I am of it. It is of me. Man made it to rule mankind. Can we revolt from it . . . if perhaps it is the best arrangement? My little family is one unit. My children are only children, may be killed by others, may kill others. The One State is poised toward possible futures. Something was always locked out of somewhere?' "

He was silent. The Interrogator still paced up and down.

I said. "A disconnected train of thought. Maybe I have it all wrong."

"You question the functioning of the State?"

"I was questioning my own functioning."

"You have every right to question the State. It is there to serve you as much as you to serve it. You are not at Tilich because you are a traitor."

We were silent. The room was whitewashed. The shad-

ows were gray. I remembered how I had run through the trees after falling from my gray pony. The pallor of the trees, the boldness of uncolored things.

"180, do you recall why you are here?"

I did not answer.

"You are here because you paid for it, paid for a month's course of suffering. Right?"

I nodded.

"Why did you need it?"

"We've been over all this."

"Why did you need it?"

"Some are born with the y-chromosome, which gives them criminal tendencies. I was born with the K-chromosome; I have a tendency toward guilt."

"So that punishment is a therapy for you?"

"This place used to be a spa." Miserable attempt at a joke.

Précis: Of the many tendencies and traits in a man, few—sometimes none—work on behalf of the individual. Even the drivers are often the driven.

" 'All arts try to recreate one dawn.' What did you mean or intend to mean by that?"

"I'm not a writer. I may remember in another dawn."

A sight of the baton. "What do you think you intended to mean?"

"I've been trying to work out what I am. What people are. What you are."

"And?"

"Perhaps—this is an old-fashioned view . . . perhaps all society is a psycho-drama. We're . . . acting something out. Something we don't comprehend."

"Religious?"

"Huh! No, antireligious, I suppose. Antihuman. I can't explain it, but I've had glimpses of it here. . . ."

A long silence. The smell of the pony was like a color or a face seen a long time ago, perhaps when standing at the top of a flight of steps.

"Do I have to remind you that you have only three more days before your month is up and you are returned to your family in One State City?"

"I've lost track of time. Is it only three more days?"

"Is that why you tried to escape?"

I hung my head. He came and stood in front of me. I was trembling again. "I wanted to think. . . . You can't really think in the City, with a job of work and a family. . . ."

Précis: I believe that at this point 180 was questioning me, rather than vice versa.

"You have to go back to the City, unless. . . . This is the second time you have volunteered for a spell of punishment. Very few volunteer a second time."

With an effort, I raised my eyes to his. In my ears was a great uproar, the accompaniment of a flash of insight. "But you did!"

He smiled! "I did. . . ."

Then he turned and left the room. As he went, a curt gesture to the Witness. The Witness rose and followed him.

I lay back against the wall and closed my eyes. Suffering, mortification, was it a way to understanding? Did I understand? How much did I understand? Were they just offering me a job?

At length, I rose and went over to a small window, of which there were two. Outside the window was a sloping roof, beneath which a guard sheltered. Beyond was nothing but the plain, the flat and dusty plain, dominant factor in life at Tilich. The mountains in the distance. Meaning-

less. Insoluble. Eternal. As transitory as everything else. Take your pick.

Précis: When someone begins to wonder what "meaningless" means in terms of human lives, he is coming to understand the question of what human lives mean.

On the hard bench, I slept comfortably until a maid with a tray of lunch woke me, I recognized the woman. Her face was wrinkled and her hands were puffy. As she set the tray down, she said, "Red wine today, 180."

"Thank you."

"A pleasure." Was it really a pleasure for her to do this menial work? Why should it not be?

I ate without thinking, and drank the wine. When my lunch was finished, I returned to the window and looked across at the mountains. Far in the distance, I could see one of the mounted guards.

While I was standing staring, the Interrogator returned.

Précis: Speech. Human contact. Lunch. Red wine. Mountains. Plain. Place in order of importance. Possible question for next interrogation course.

The Interrogator had no baton. Nor did the Witness accompany him, but I saw he switched on a recording instrument as he entered. He came and sat down on my bench.

"What do you know of Jesus Christ?"

"He was a man who died about thirty-seven centuries ago."

"He wanted people to pretend less to each other. He established a religion, once forbidden, now almost extinct. Did you know that?"

"I suppose I must have known it once. Isn't there a nursery rhyme about him?"

"In the course of the last ten centuries, the One State has made many mistakes. Mankind always makes uncertain progress. One of those mistakes—not necessarily the gravest—lay in ignoring the diversity of humankind. That has been remedied. Once on a time, a man with your craving for punishment would have sought it through antisocietal channels because no other channels existed for its assuagement. Now the State is remedying another of its mistakes—or let's say its short-sightedness."

He looked askance at me. "If I tell you what it is, you may not wish to go home to your family. You may not wish to leave here."

I sat down on the bench beside him. "What is it?" I did not look at him.

"The State recognizes that human consciousness is changing. That a quantal step is being taken by the human animal. That we are coming into a period when more and more individuals—finally the whole race—will . . . evolve into a being with a greater capacity for consciousness."

The word eluded me. Then I got it out in a whisper. "Supermen?"

"It's not a term I would use. We know there are different levels of awareness. Not just the conscious. The below-conscious as well, with more than one level. They are merging into a new integrated consciousness."

". . . And the State wants individuals with such awareness to be on its side. . . ."

"It wants to be on their side."

My awareness throughout this conversation was expanding in a totally strange way. It exhilarated me. I rode through our sentences as if through sparse trees, seeking the true scent. Was every conversation the shadow, greatly diminished by distance, of bygone ancestral hunts on which life depended? If so, could discourse have other

than shadow quarries? Or could it be that in among the verbal shadows a real new goal lay in the ghostland of this psychic chase?

Could we have found it?

Here, in Tilich?

And where else, simultaneously?

Never to be suppressed?

As I saw he read the mistrust in my eyes, I said, "Who can trust the State?"

He spread his hands in one of his rare gestures. "Not even the State itself. But over the centuries, it has built safeguards to its own power."

"Which it could smash. . . ."

"180, none of us forget that once there were centuries of bloodshed when the old Age of Religion met its close, when the One State crushed and obliterated Capitalism, Christianity, and Communism. Since those terrible times, the State has learned not to demand the loyalties the cruel C's demanded—loyalty is the most dangerous of all human attributes. The State has grown enough—so I, one of its servants, believe—to encourage a consciousness greater than its own."

Could we really have stumbled through the last of the psychic forests? Even as I posed the question to myself, I could perceive that its answer lay buried in the strata of the future. First, many smaller questions had to be asked —the chase was far from over.

"May I ask, Interrogator, what role you play in all this?"

"A humble one. Such 'spas' as this have existed for many generations. They take care of the State's misfits. Equally, misfits have to run them. That is the actual level on which we meet, you and I. Only comparatively recently was it realized that men with a new awareness would naturally be misfits in society. So the State knew where to go to

find such men. . . . And it knew it had a forcing ground ready for them.

"We form part of a small but growing nucleus, you understand."

Précis: He asked questions. But not the obvious one. He saw the obvious answer. From this point on, I considered that 180 had graduated. He is what he believes himself to be. For completeness' sake, the rest of his statement is appended, together with my précis.

He rose. I did the same and we stood looking at each other. I recalled the mounted guard, bearing down on me with his slanting eyes steady behind the rifle.

"I shall leave you now, 180. You have plenty to think about. You will be escorted back to the hotel very shortly. Do not forget that one thousand words will be expected of you as usual. What you have written so far has been restored to your room. Till we meet again!" He gave a curt bow and left.

Alone, I stood staring at the stout wooden door set in the whitened stones of the wall. That man—did he imagine himself some kind of superman too? Did he imagine I would work with him?

Already, I saw how living would be altered, and man's world with it, when the new dizzy spans of awareness were used and acknowledged. But there would still be a place for the old antagonisms. Like the plain outside, they could never be made fertile. My Interrogator remained my enemy although he had brought me to the pitch of recognizing my own potential. He smelt of torture and midnight sulphur. Hatred was all I had for him.

Précis: He forgets for the moment that even the plain knows its summer and its winter season.

One of the house guards came and escorted me back to the hotel. I sank down on my bed, falling immediately into a deep sleep.

Précis: His brain reshuffled its generations of evidence.

When I roused, I went across to the tap in the outer chamber and dashed cold water over my head. Still battered. My mirror showed a distortion in the familiar outline of my face. And my eyes? Knowledge is no more visible than air. My walk, the breath I drew—these told me.

Darkness had fallen. Of the wilderness of garden, nothing was left. But in the sky, low down, bars of light, the lees of day, still stood. This day! Dark gray sky, bright lemon line of light. In the other direction, the mountains still unextinguished. I switched on my small table lamp and began to write by the wooden sill. What I put was: $2n(x - me)^2$. The jest from my fevered period.

Beneath it I wrote: "Living had to be on the textbook level. Now the directions have all been read. Throw away the book. Change metaphors. Life and art become one. The performance goes on but now players, critics, and audience unite on a wider stage. Abandon metaphors. Live them."

Over that paper I sat a long time. Paper no longer held the answer.

I climbed back onto my bed and slept again.

My interrogations began at two in the morning. At two, the usual grim guard came to awaken me. I dressed and went with him. The long corridors were silent and in darkness—he carried a lantern. As always before, in that dreadful repetition, we went downstairs. The old lovely smell of sulphurous waters. In the hall, he turned in a different direction from his accustomed one and led me out of the front door, past the armed guard.

He carried the lantern above his head. Instinctively, I looked up at the blank windows with their lines of bars, half-visible.

We went to the stable. Men were smoking there, drinking quietly, playing dice, before a small fire in the saddle room. I was handed over to an officer.

The officer gave me a heavy cloak and a woolen hat. A pony was already saddled. I was helped into the saddle. A groom led me to the stable door. He gave an ironic salute.

Grasping the reins, I urged the animal forward and we clip-clopped easily over the courtyard.

Once out of the shelter of the buildings, I was aware of a keen night breeze, coming with ice on its breath. A thin moon shone overhead. The plain was featureless. Limitless. I rode. The animal and I were one.

It was on such a night and such a night . . . countless countless nights, that men went forth, solaced by movement for the division in their own minds, as night was divided from day. In the new order arising, movement would still have value.

Précis: Movement. Change. Fluidity. Hitherto they have been contained in unmoving man-forged forms. Soon the forms will begin to move. Not only will we know ourselves. We will see that all the lost generations of ignorance were caused by a protective fixity. Barriers were set up. We no longer fear infinite knowledge. The barriers are going down.

I could ride to the end of the plain if I wished. Never return. I did not wish. To know that the possibility existed was sufficient. Soon I would ride back to the hotel, fortified by the symbolism of this gallop (just as the directors of the hotel well knew I would). Now I understood why I had written the message for myself, "All arts try to comprehend one dawn."

And I was riding in that dawn! Made mysterious by night and distance, an echo of my steed's drumming hooves came to me as we headed rapidly back toward the cluster of buildings.

PHOG

Piers Anthony

In late 1963 I gave up professional writing to undertake teacher training. This was because I had earned only $160 in my first full-time year of writing, and this did not seem adequate to support my family even in the style to which we had become accustomed.

In early 1964 I suffered the so-called teaching internship, in which I taught twelfth-grade English classes at a local high school under the supervision of the regular instructor. This was certainly an education—and I hope the students learned something too.

Know something? I hate grammar! *I hated it back when I was flunking it as a teen-ager myself, and I hated it as a 29-year-old practice teacher when students kept asking me technical questions I couldn't answer, and I hated it after I had mastered it thoroughly. Do* you *know what a predicate adjective is? If you do, I hate you too! Now* I *know what it is, and I hate myself. But let's not dwell on grammar, lest I be forced to say something unkind about the abomination.*

Next to that, I hate spelling. As it happened, I was a slow starter, and had to skip fifth grade to catch up, and it seems as though every word in the world was on the list I missed in that grade. For years I reminded myself that spelling ability has no relation whatsoever to intelligence. But that was scant consolation when I had to grade spelling papers. You might think I would be embarrassed to

have the students see me looking up words in Twenty Thousand Words *so as to correct their papers. Yes indeed! But after grading several hundred papers with 20 words apiece, I began to remember some of those spellings, and today I am actually (according to a* Reader's Digest *self-graded quiz) a better speller than average. I hate myself for that, too. Every so often I wonder whether I am less intelligent than I used to be. There is something basically decent about an original speller, and it's a shame to be corrupted into conformity with the masses. Distrust, I say, anyone who can spell "technique" without flinching.*

So there I was, sunk in the muck of grading spelling papers one day in spring six years ago, and naturally my flaccid brain was hammering at the bony portals of my skull, crying for respite. In this instance each spelling word had to be used in context, and that made grading even more tedious. You'd be amazed how many people can spell a word correctly when on their mettle, but revert to old habits when actually using it. Some of those contexts were pretty far out, too.

One word's sentence—I don't even remember which one, and I tell you there's no correlation between memory and intelligence, either!—happened to mention fog. "The fog came in at an odd technique"—something like that. That started my mind on a mist of fancy. Suppose there were this fog, that had some magical or deadly property. People would be afraid to enter it or even to touch it, because . . . (the sound of a death-agony scream).

Terrific! I love fog. (I was born not far from London, England, if that explains anything.) But how could mere fog kill, and where could it exist without being dissipated by man? A tale lay there quiescently.

Ultimately, of course, I left teaching and returned to writing, where grammar and spelling don't matter. But the story that began with that spelling paper remains as evi-

dence of my dereliction as a paper-grader. Here, misspelled (naturally!), is my story of a deadly fog.

—Piers Anthony

Mat's eyes widened in shock. He was young; he lacked a foot of the height of manhood; but his mind assessed the situation immediately. A moment only did the spell of the monstrous mists hold him in thrall; then he gave the alarm in the most natural and effective manner: He screamed in terror.

His sister Sal, next born, jumped up, clutching the bright stone she had been playing with. It was a strange flat fragment, diverting them both until this instant, for it showed a hand inside when she picked it up—a hand that went away when she set it down again. And sometimes it flashed blindingly, rivaling Phoebus himself. But it was forgotten now as Sal too saw the horror that was upon them both. Her scream joined his.

Nearby, a gray-whiskered man came joltingly awake, kicking up dark sand as he scrambled to his ancient feet. He was the children's grandfather, their only surviving relative. He was too old, now, to be a worthy guardian; never before had he been lulled to sleep this far within the shadow zone. Somehow the hot safe sun had pacified his fears, putting him off guard—while Phoebus quietly withdrew, shielded by closing mists above, and left the three of them prey to their own carelessness.

His rheumy eyes took in the crying children and the encroaching horror behind them. Already Phog surrounded their position on three sides, sparing only a dwindling har-

bor of land—an opening they could not hope to pass in time.

"The fjords," the old man cried. "There is no other way!" Grasping each child by the wrist, he lumbered toward the nearest rift.

Sal came willingly—an openminded innocent who would one day be a lovely woman. Mat held back, frightened by vague tribal taboos. "The fjords are forbidden," he whimpered.

The man had no patience with superstition. He cast loose the boy's hand. "Then wait for Phog. Your father did."

Mat looked behind him. The shape was within a hundred paces, silently consuming the distance between them. Its surging hunger was manifest. "Wait for me, Progenitor!"

The fjords were deep erosion-gullies through which the hot winds gusted. Water spumed in some, in ever-shifting patterns, cutting new channels and filling in the old with rocky debris. It was a dangerous region, shunned by most people; but the hazards would also put Phog at a disadvantage. The sharp cliffs would hinder it; the winds would tug at its fringe and tear painful rifts; the turbulent waters below would wash at its tumbling substance, dissolving it. Phog, mindlessly determined, would waste its impetus filling the deep chasms, building itself up to stretch into the farther clefts, bruising itself and wasting time.

Even so, escape was not certain. Their only real hope was to avoid it long enough for Phoebus to return.

Phoebus and Phog waged perpetual war, on this forgotten colony of Man. Phoebus, the shining sun, was lord of the dessicate plain, burning down in stationary splendor, driving back every living thing. Phog was guardian of the shadow, denizen of ice and glacier, cover for the dread phogRunner.

Between these powers of light and shadow was a nar-

row strip of habitable territory, a buffer zone, where rain might fall and green plants grow. Here the tribe foraged for wild grains and fruits and dug into the ground for tubers; here were clear springs for water, and animals for fur. Neither Phog nor Phoebus exercised total influence; and here a furtive, timid tribe could live—waiting, waiting for rediscovery.

"Stay close by me," the old man commanded. "Do not touch Phog!" He led the way down the first gully, sliding on the grit and sand.

Mat hesitated again, at the brink; but behind him Phog closed in, towering, noisome. He clambered down, no longer in doubt.

Phog reached the fjord, gathering and rising up at the edge. It spilled over and rolled down the incline in horrendous blobs. It was cutting them off from the deeper, safer center of the gully!

"Past it!" They stumbled over the loose stones.

A foaming section wrenched free and descended, silently obscuring their escape. Sal screamed and swerved, the last to pass, but in time. The dark mass settled in the bottom, filling it up as more piled on from above. There would be no return this way.

Another cloud appeared ahead. Together, front and rear, the ugly bulks expanded, isolating their section of the gully. Above them a beating wall of soiled cloud loomed, a mighty wave just beginning to fall. . . .

"The side!" the old man gasped, scrambling up himself.

They reached the top of the ridge between chasms, spattered by a foul shower of froth as the silent wave collapsed behind. From this height the extent of Phog's advance was evident. The solid mist was everywhere, already overflowing on either side. Only Phoebus could save them now—and Phoebus was hiding. There was nowhere to run; the gully ahead ran parallel to the front, and the farther wall was too steep to ascend in time.

Mat's bright mind was prodded to desperate inspiration. "The water!" he shouted. "Swim under—if we can—"

They galloped down the slope, trying to beat Phog to the deep clear water pooled at the lower end. Water extended throughout the fjords a few thousand feet farther down, eventually unifying in a passive lake. If they could reach this first inlet in time, they'd have a chance.

A narrow grey pseudopod blew across their path, cutting them off from the water. It took on the brownish tinge as it thickened. They pulled up before it, dismayed; sometimes Phog almost seemed to strike with intelligence. This, for it, was a strategic masterstroke. They were trapped.

There was no alternative. The mottled burgeonings were almost upon them, bringing inevitable doom. "Through it," the old man quavered. "As quickly as you can. There may be no Runner near. . . ."

Concealing his own terror from the children, he plunged into the noxious wall. There was an eddy about him; then he was out of sight, as Phog sealed itself again.

Mat drew up short, unable to make that plunge. Sal, seeing him hesitate, lost her own courage. Their fear of Phog was too great to permit voluntary contact. Behind them a dirty mass slid over the rough slope; in a moment it would settle and draw them under anyway, but they could not move.

"Where are you?" the voice came back, muffled. "Come, come, before it is too late—"

This time Sal answered the summons, squeezing her eyes tightly shut, holding her breath, and jumping blindly for the terrible wall ahead. It seemed to pulse and quiver with hungry anticipation. Mat, thrust into action at last, grasped her fleeting hand and dove in after her.

He had taken no breath. The choking mist of Phog's substance stifled him, burning his lungs and making his eyes smart. He coughed involuntarily, inhaling more of the foul gloom. But spurred by fear he pressed on, now run-

ning ahead of his sister and drawing her with him. He had known she would get lost, on her own; she was brave enough, but not always sensible.

The run was interminable. Phog held them back, smearing cold grease on face and hands, dragging against the body with the muck of nightmare. Sal cried out, a scream of pain and fear. "Come *on!*" Mat gritted, knowing they dared not delay for a stubbed toe. They were almost through; they had to be.

She screamed again, piercingly. Abruptly, horribly, her grip became flaccid; her hand was torn from his grasp as she fell. The Runner had come! Terrified, Mat spurted ahead.

He was out, crashing into his grandfather. They stood together, transfixed by fear.

Minutes passed. The haze above parted; the sun brightened. Phoebus returned, saving them from a difficult swim. But Sal did not emerge.

Phog reared back, pulling together, recoiling from the direct rays. It could not face the sun. A putrid stench rose from it as its outer fringe was scorched; it retreated, seeking shade. Man and boy watched with rapt revulsion as it heaved back from the gully, back from the fjords, sucking itself in like a bulbous stomach.

On the cleared and glistening ground they saw the bones of Sal, broken and twisted and almost clean of blood. Beside them was a single print: the taloned spoor of the phogRunner.

The old man muttered incoherently, the dirty tears dribbling down his face. Mat's eyes were fixed on an object half-hidden by matted hair. It was the stone—the shining stone—that she had treasured. It flashed with the light of Phoebus, a glittering eye, watching him, condemning him to unutterable grief and shame: he who had held her hand, who could have brought her to the edge, to safety, so close, so close . . . and instead had bolted in panic.

"Phog comes!" the old man exclaimed.

Mat looked up, stroking the light growth of beard on his cheek, his pulse leaping in anticipation. The confrontation was at hand, here at the spot Phog had routed them so long ago and driven them to misery in the fjords. Here at the place of the colored and shining stones a second trial of strength was due.

His hand rested on a crude stone structure, a box fashioned from heavy blocks, open above with a fibrous mat inside, hanging between two slanted surfaces. Gently, lovingly, his supple fingers traced the rough contour of the edge, as his eyes traced the approaching menace. There was a tremble in those fingers; a doubt in those eyes; but Mat stood firm.

For a moment his gaze flicked anxiously back over the row of structures extending beyond the horizon, each bearing its facing slabs, each set just so, just exactly so. His breath came rapidly; would the strange weapon he had forged from his dead sister's delight actually defeat Phog?

The ghastly billows came, death-gray, malefic, streaked with sordid brown. Corpulent blisters pushed out, expanded, sagged ponderously and were reabsorbed. Not a sound issued from within that sinister mass; only the belching odor emerged to panic the waiting men.

One hundred feet: a mighty bulge slimed over the ground, four times the height of a man, quivering jellylike as though it sensed its prey. Progenitor's bony body echoed that movement in sympathetic vibration. Mat's gorge rose, fouling his throat as he fought for control over his emotions. He had captured Phoebus in the stone, bringing him far across the plain, winging from surface to surface; but would this tiny spark from the sun's domain daunt Phog?

Seventy-five feet: Terror lashed his mind, convulsed his muscles; muscles hard from the hauling of great slabs.

"Now! Now!" the old man shouted, his voice a high-pitched wail. Mat gulped, shaking from head to knee, but held himself from action. He yearned to yank the curtain away—the curtain that held back the fierce sunlight chained in this final relay; but for the sake of the test he dared not unveil this light too soon.

Fifty feet: The impalpable stuff of Phog bubbled and swirled, exhaling digestive vapors. Mat's eyes smarted; his nostrils pinched together in vain attempt to filter out the alien gas. Behind him, Progenitor coughed and racked, unable to call again.

Mat's hands gripped the warm stone spasmodically—and did not act. Suppose, somehow, Phoebus had lost his strength; suppose the light only angered the monster. . . .

Twenty-five feet: Phog loomed, as tall as the distance between them, curling up into a deadly hood. Phoebus was far far away, beyond help—except for the caged beam. Somewhere inside the awful shroud, uncaged, the insatiable Runner slavered. If the weapon failed—

Mat acted. Hands now fumblingly eager lifted free the fiber shield. Suddenly there was a brightness; a coruscating beam stabbed out and struck the ground ahead. It was a ray of the sun, blinding in the gloom, harnessed by tireless labor during Mat's last foot of growth.

He took hold of the balanced stone, tilting it up. The beam followed, reflecting from the polished surface and marching along the ground, up and into Phog itself. Now—

Phog sizzled and folded into itself, trying to escape that burning light. But the darting lance played over its surface, vaporizing the rank mists wherever it touched.

To one side and the other Phog continued its advance; but before that implacable shaft it retreated, wounded, dribbling dismal white droplets. It was unable to attack.

"It works!" Progenitor cried. "We have defeated Phog!"

Mat answered him with a smile, allowing the old man his share of pride. Victory was sweet indeed.

The light failed.

Phog rolled back, facelessly gloating. Feverishly Mat cast about, seeking the malfunction, but there was none. The reflectors were in order, yet the beam was not coming in.

He looked up to see Phog fifteen feet distant, offering a putrescent embrace. Within it—were there malevolent eyes?

The beam snapped on. Phog recoiled furiously. Had the phantom shape within been singed? He kept the light fixed on one spot, drilling a hole in the wall before him, while his mind pondered the meaning of that brief cessation. Would it happen again?

The malodorous veil crept up around the beam, leaving a harmless tunnel. Phog was accommodating itself. Quickly he switched the light to another place.

The glow died. Phog sucked together and reached for him. Fifteen feet. . . .

"Someone is cutting off the relay!" Progenitor cried.

Of course! The tribesmen knew nothing of the careful mechanisms spanning the plain. They would be out searching for food, wandering carelessly between the pylons, intercepting the invisible channel of light.

Anger flushed Mat's face. He had held Phog at bay, had tasted victory over the killer of men—only to be defeated by other people's ignorance. The beam flicked on and off again, as though to flaunt his impotence, and Phog crept up to a hungry ten feet.

"We must go," he called, forgetting the deference due his ancestor. But at the lip of Phog there was no time to stand on ceremony. They ran.

The banks of solid mist were far beyond their position. They were at the nadir of a deep cleft, carved by the light. Phog threatened momentarily to fill in from the sides, cap-

turing them. Even as he ran, Mat made a mental note to provide for the protection of his flank, perhaps with additional relays, if he escaped this time.

Progenitor was puffing hugely, blowing out his white whiskers as he ran. Mat saw that the oldster could not maintain the pace for long. Yet there was no effective or honorable way to assist him; he *was* the grandfather. If only the beam were reliable, they could make a stand—

Phoebus returned, overhead, and suddenly they were safe. What determined the comings and goings of the high wisps that shrouded it and let Phog come? He would have to study this—

Progenitor collapsed by a relay, exhausted. In the distance Mat observed the tribesmen returning, meandering along the line of relays. Rage blotted his sight for an instant; then he began to think.

When the people arrived there was a pile of stones beside the pylon, buttressing the path of the beam but not interfering with it. "Cross here," Mat told the incurious people. "Climb up the rocks, so; then jump over to the other side and step down."

They looked at him and at the steps transcending empty sand, uncomprehending. "Phoebus is here," he explained. "We must keep it safe, to battle Phog." But he saw that he was making no impression. They knew nothing about his beam of light, or the principles of reflection he had devised to control it. They had no interest in anything except hunger and immediate danger and occasional ancestry of infants. Not one of them would consider standing up to the awesome enemy. Docile and timid, they had abdicated the courage and intelligence of Man. Progenitor had warned him of this.

Mat picked up a ragged stone. "If anyone fails to use the steps," he said, "I will smash this against his head."

The nearest man looked at him. The man was larger than he and older. Mat's bravado deserted him. He did not

want to fight; he longed to drop his weapon and flee—as he had from Phog. He was one of the Tribe; he had no courage. If the man crossed the beam. . . .

A girl was watching him, one he had not noticed before. Something about her bothered him; she seemed familiar. Then it came to him: she was the age his sister would have been.

Shame overcame his dread. The ghost of Sal mocked him in this girl's eyes. Not again would his cowardice sacrifice her body to the Runner. Not again would the bloodless bones rise to haunt his memory.

Mat hefted the stone with new purpose. He pointed to the crude stile surmounting the path of the beam. Apprehensively, the man obeyed.

After that, so did the others. It was plain that they did not understand the ritual of treading over nothing; but they gave way to his greater determination. They did the easy thing; they backed down in the face of a threat, as always.

Never again would he be like them.

Last to navigate the stile was the girl. "You're so brave," she said, smiling at him. "My name is Jul."

Three relays marched across the land to converge upon the battlefield of shining stones. The plain was pocked with the marks of their excavation, for the rocky formation had tilted deep into the earth, as though to hide its splendor. Many tribesmen had labored under Mat's direction to bring up the flat slabs and cleave them apart to reveal the brightness inside; many fingers of growth had passed while they rubbed and rubbed to accentuate that shine with fine fibers and make the surfaces ready for Phoebus.

Two mighty structures stood at the terminus, each as high as a man could reach. Each comprised two columns bearing a great stone crosspiece, and the two arches faced

each other to form a two-sided cube visible for many thousands of feet. Each column was fashioned from highly glossed stones tilted this way and that, and above the cross-pieces were perched more polished fragments.

High mists shrouded the sun. "Phog will come," Progenitor said, excited. He was feeble now, too old to forage for himself. He would have died some time ago, had Mat not made the tribesmen bring him food. But the man's advice was valuable; only he and one other really understood what Mat was trying to do.

Abruptly he lifted the protectors from the two relay boxes near him. Immediately the bright light leaped forth, illuminating the spaces between the columns and forming a glowing cage in the dust. The effect was magical; but Mat well knew that the shafts of Phoebus traveled from stone to stone in fixed pattern, and would go astray if even a single reflector were out of place. Many times had he gone hungry while he struggled with the balance, tapping the surfaces into place, only to have others jarred out of position. The final adjustment had been interminable—but the cage was ready.

"Phog!" Progenitor announced, shivering. Increasing age had not added to his courage. He watched the distant bank with familiar horror.

Mat dropped the curtain on the relay to his right, and the four shimmering walls blinked out. He doused the left, and the fainter bars forming a roof between the cross-pieces vanished. Somehow the cage did not show up well unless there was much dust, and the dust was low, usually. But the test had been successful. "Place the bait," he said.

His attention was distracted by an approaching figure, while the old man struggled with the carrion. Jul was running toward them, her dark hair flying back in pretty tangles as she bounced. She had matured considerably.

Mat turned away, keeping his attention on Phog. Progenitor dragged the meat to the center of the cage area

and retreated, panting. It was a task he had insisted on doing alone.

Phog approached from one side, Jul from the other. "Are you going to fight it?" she demanded needlessly.

Mat kept his eyes clear of her beauty. "Go away," he said. He knew she would not.

Phog arrived. The stench of it blasted out ahead, sickeningly. It swirled around the stone pillars and smirched the bait, burying it in thick scum. It reached across the gap toward them.

"Not yet," Mat said tightly.

Phog advanced almost to their station. The three stood, fascinated by it as always, but no longer panicked. They knew the power dammed in the relays, as the tribesmen did not; this time they stayed to conquer, not to run.

The menacing bladders distended the filthy surface, no less loathsome for all their insubstantiality. The corrupt froth washed almost at their feet.

"It comes! It comes!" Progenitor shouted.

There was a whirring within; a thump from the direction of the cage. Mat yanked away the curtains.

The fierce beams leaped to the mirrors, slicing through the murky shape immediately. For the first time they saw the actual progress of the light, as it sprang from corner to corner, vaporizing the reluctant mist between and climbing in a quick spiral. In a moment Phog withdrew in agony; but it left a block of its substance behind, snared by the bright enclosure.The trap had been sprung.

The isolated mass hissed and shrank as Mat unveiled the third relay and played its beam upon the interior. "We have you now, killer of children!" he cried. Eagerly they watched for the exposure of the scabrous monster that had to lurk within.

The cube of filth sagged into amorphous lumps. The choking stink of it filled the air as it puffed into a bubbling residue. At last it was gone, revealing—

The untouched carcass.

"But it was here," Jul said. "We heard it."

Mat stared in confusion. The Runner *had* been present; the spoor was there. But it had not touched the meat.

"It needs live food," Jul said. "A—a sacrifice."

He should have guessed! Furious, Mat looked at the sky. The upper vapors were thinning; Phoebus would return soon, and their chance would be gone.

Too much hung on this encounter. He could not wait for another opportunity. It would be nearly impossible to bring a live animal to the enclosure at the exact moment Phog came, and keep it there untethered. Tied, the animal would jolt the stones, disturbing the delicate alignment necessary for the cage. He had to act now, while the Runner was watching.

Mat picked up the weapon he had fashioned to cow the tribesmen: a long pointed stone fragment. He doused the beams.

Jul clutched his arm as he stepped forward. "No," she cried. "The Runner will kill you!"

He shook her off. "Progenitor—you must unveil the beams. Take care that you release them together, or it will take flight as it did before."

The ancient looked at him, comprehending what he intended. Phog was already invading the vital spot, forgetful of its recent misery there. Somewhere—was there a whirring?

"No!" Jul cried again, throwing herself before him. "You are brave, you are a leader. No one else can drive back Phog."

He sat her aside, more gently this time. "I will kill the Runner if I can," he said. "Only living flesh will lure it into the cage. Then—Phoebus will not let it escape."

Still she clung. "Not you, not you!" She flung back her head defiantly. "I have no strength, no courage. This only can I do—"

Phog loomed over them, casting out its wispy tentacles. But for the moment Mat forgot it, discovering almost too late what courage was.

This girl—this lovely woman the age of Sal—was asking to sacrifice herself to the Runner, that he might live. He had shunned her as the reminder of his shame, as the sister he had betrayed by his cowardice, so long ago. Now he looked full into the face he had feared, and found there not a ghost but a vital passion, an encompassing love—for him.

He realized that there would after all be other times; that with patience and intelligence he could snare the Runner without risking human life.

An anguished scream rent the air.

"Progenitor!" He bounded to the control boxes, whipping free the restrictive curtains. The dazzling light speared out once more, forming the enclosure. But there was no further sound from the old man.

As Phog retreated, leaving another cube of itself pinioned in the silvery cage, Mat saw that Progenitor's death had not been in vain. There was a frenzied whirring within the enclosure of light. The Runner had been caught at last.

Not alone had Mat borne his guilt.

Let's dispense with any discussion of theme or, er, technique. They are supposed to be clear without external elucidation.

I consider myself to be a rising writer—meaning that I still receive a great many rejections, each of which is a savage affront to my ego, not to mention my wallet. Though the genesis of Phog *was humble, I do feel that it jelled well as a story. That's why you see it here. Thus it*

was with fond expectations I shipped it to a market then offering about $1,500 for short fiction of interest to men. But Playboy *rejected it. So with diminished pride I fired it to* Analog, *then paying about $200 for that length. Too bad. Hope fading, I sent it to* Fantasy & Science Fiction, *with a prospect of about $100. Tough. Finally I eased it dispiritedly in the direction of* Fantastic.

What I did not know at that time was that Fantastic *had just been sold, and the editors were no longer in the market for new fiction.*

But writers, like dogs, sometimes have their day. There must have been a vacant slot. I received $75, and Phog *appeared in the final issue under the old auspices—my fifth story to see print.*

No, the story did not win me instant critical acclaim. I was destined to remain literarily obscure. But a writer who is not obscure in the field, Roger Zelazny, later complimented me on my work. I inquired whether there was any particular effort of mine responsible for this attention. Yes: he had been impressed by Phog.

I submit that as proof: One person liked it. I hope you do, too.

—Piers Anthony

THE POWER OF EVERY ROOT

Avram Davidson

Many decades ago *(say . . . 3–1/2), an antique aunt of mine with many tremors and timors went South of the Border, and almost immediately fled North, crying that "You can't drink the water and Campbell's Soup is 50 cents a can!!!" These harsh impeachments very likely stood founded in fact, but what of them and what so? Was it to drink the water and slosh the soup that Tanta Mima had ventured forth from Union City, New Jersey, into the ancient land of Anahuac? Go know. Every year—how many? a million? let's say a million Americans delve into the southern republic: some—and I'm not even counting those who just go to Juarez to tipple tequila, or Tijuana to get laid—for fairly extensive stays of time and space. Energy and matter. Yet how little evidence of these intervisitations shows up on the scopescreen of our NatLit Dam lit. Wonder why? Surely anybody can drink water, slosh soup, tipple tequila, and get laid right in Union City, New Jersey. If no deeper desire to embrace however briefly an intensely alien culture moves us in our transborderine migrations, then no deeper effect will be seen. For it is a great error to think that Mexicans are merely easy-going Northamericans who have a little more Indian blood and Castilian as their national idiom. Even moving from Canada to the U. S. or the U. S. to Canada can involve the mover in slipping sidewise through time. Matter. Energy. Space. And Mexico v/v Northamerica is truly an alien entity. My own stay there was not quite one year long. But I have found*

the attachment of long duration. This is no silly praise, for Mexico is at least as wicked as the country it terms los E.E. U.U., it is however differently *wicked. This is because, see you,* Reality is different in Mexico *than in Northamerica. That's what this story is about, it is NOT a fantasy it is a reality. But hoo boy what a damnably different reality.*

—Avram Davidson

Carlos Rodriguez Nunez, a police officer of the municipality of Santo Tomas, sat in the private waiting room of Dr. Olivera considering his situation. Perhaps he ought not to be there at all.

Not the private waiting room in particular: It was usually empty except during the week following major fiestas, when it was likely to be much occupied by the younger sons of prosperous families who had (the younger sons) visited the Federal Capital, touring the libraries and theaters and museums and other buildings of the national patrimony . . . but never, never *las casitas*. The reason, therefore, why they were here?

"A strain, Sir Doctor. Without doubt, nothing more than a strain . . . ! Woe of me, Sir Doctor! What an enormous needle! Surely—just for a tiny, little strain?"

The physician would smile benignly, speak soothingly, continue charging his syringe with penicillin.

None of this was applicable to the police officer Carlos. In fact, it was not applicable to the younger sons of the *non*-prosperous families, who—for one thing—could only afford to visit the District Capital (or, at most, the State one) on fiestas; and—for another—did not take their sub-

sequent difficulties to a physician: They took them to the *curandero*. Carlos now wondered if he should not do the same. No. . . . No. . . . The social status of a government employee, a civil servant, might be imperiled by visiting a native herbalist and wizard. Besides, the physician's public waiting room was just that: public. Let him be seen there, word would get around, Don Juan Antonio would ask questions. Don Juan Antonio was *jefe de policia,* and it seemed to Carlos that his superior's manner to him of late had lacked cordiality. But, then, it seemed to Carlos that everybody's attitude toward him of late lacked cordiality. He could not understand why this should be. He was a very gentle policeman; he took only the customary little bites of graft; he did not hit drunks hard; he gave cigarettes to prisoners. Often.

Why, therefore, people should—suddenly, sometimes only for matters of a few seconds—change, become hideous, diabolical, when they looked at him, he could not know. Their faces would swell, become even more horrible than those of the masked *moros* of the judases in the fiesta parades had seemed to him as a child. The air would become hot; voices would croak and mutter ugly things; he had difficulty breathing, sometimes. And his head—

A large, tinted oval photograph of old Doña Caridad, Dr. Olivera's mother, glared at him from the wall. Her lips writhed. She scowled. Carlos got up hastily. Doña Caridad's unexpected and totally unprovoked hostility was more than he could stand. He had his hand out to open the outer door when the inner door opened and the physician himself stood there—momentarily surprised, immediately afterwards urbane as always. Bowing him in. Doña Caridad was as immovable and expressionless as before.

There was a formal exchange of courtesies. Then silence. Dr. Olivera gestured toward a publication on his desk. "I have just been reading," he said, "in the medical journal. About eggs. Modern science has discovered so

much about eggs." Carlos nodded. Dr. Olivera placed his fingertips together. He sighed. Then he got up and, with a sympathetic expression, gestured for Carlos to drop his trousers.

"Ah, no, Sir Medico," the officer said hastily. "No, no, it isn't anything like that." Dr. Olivera's mouth sagged. He seemed to hesitate between annoyance and confusion. Carlos breathed in, noisily, then said, all in a rush, "My head is bursting, I have dizziness and pains, my eyes swell, my chest burns, my heart also, and—and—" He paused. He couldn't tell about the way people's faces changed. Or about, just now, for example, Doña Caridad. Dr. Olivera might not be trusted to keep confidence. Carlos choked and tried to swallow.

The physician's expression had grown increasingly reassured and confident. He pursed his lips and nodded. "Does the stomach work?" he inquired. "Frequently? Sufficiently frequently?"

Carlos wanted to tell him that it did, but his throat still was not in order, and all that came out was an uncertain croak. By the time he succeeded in swallowing, the *señor medico* was speaking again.

"Ninety percent of the infirmities of the corpus," he said, making serious, impressive sounds with his nose, "are due to the stomach's functioning with insufficient frequency. Thus the corpus and its system become poisoned, Sir Police Official—poisoned! We inquire as to the results —We find"—he shook his head rapidly from side to side and threw up his hands—"that pains are encountered. They are encountered not only in the stomach, but in," he enumerated on his fingers, "the head. The chest. The eyes. The liver and kidneys. The urological system. The upper back. The lower back. The legs. The entire corpus, sir, becomes debilitated." He lowered his voice, leaned forward, half-whispered, half-hissed, *"One lacks capacity. . . ."* He closed his eyes, compressed his lips, and leaned back, flut-

tering his nostrils and giving short little up-and-down nods of his head. His eyes flew open, and he raised his brows. *"Eh?"*

Carlos said, "Doctor, I am thirty years old, I have always until now been in perfect health, able, for example, to lift a railroad tie. My wife is very content. Whenever I ask her, she says, *¿Como no?* And afterwards she says, *Ay, bueno!* I do *not* lack—" A baby cried in the public waiting room. Dr. Olivera got up and took out his pen.

"I will give you a prescription for an excellent medication," he said, making a fine flourish and heading the paper with a large, ornate, *Sr. C. Rodriguez N.* He wrote several lines, signed it, blotted it, handed it over. "One before each alimentation for four days, or until the stomach begins to function frequently. . . . Do you wish the medicine from me, or from the *farmacia?*"

Discouraged, but still polite, Carlos said, "From you, Doctor. And. . . . Your honorarium?"

Dr. Olivera said, deprecatingly, "With the medication . . . ten pesos. For you, as a civil servant. Thank you . . . ah! And also: avoid eggs. Eggs are difficult to digest —they have very, very large molecules."

Carlos left via the private waiting room. Doña Caridad looked away, contemptuously. Outside, those coarse fellows, woodcutters, the cousins Eugenio and Onofrio Cruz, nudged one another, sneered. Carlos looked away.

He crossed the plaza, vaguely aware of its smells of grilling, crisp pork *carnitas,* ripe fruit, wood smoke. His head and eyes and throat were misbehaving again. He remembered that the *Forestal* authorities had forbidden woodcutting for a month as a conservation measure and that he had meant to look out for possible violations. A toothless old Indian woman with bare, gray feet padded by, mumbling a piece of fried fish. Her face twisted, became huge, hideous. He shut his eyes, stumbled. After a moment he felt better and went on up the steps of the cov-

ered market and into the *excusado*. As always he received mild pleasure from not having to pay the twenty centavos charge. He closed the door of the booth, dropped the pills in the bowl, flushed it. So. Saved twenty centavos, spent —wasted—ten pesos. On the wall was a new crop of graffiti. *A harlot is the mother of Carlos Rodriguez N.* read one. Ordinarily he would have read it without malice, even admiring the neat moderation of the insult—by crediting him with two family names, albeit reducing one to the formal initial, the writer had avoided accusing him of illegitimacy. Or he might have remarked to himself the effects of enforcing the lowered compulsory school-entrance age: the obscenities were increasingly being written lower and lower on the walls.

But now—now—

Incoherent with rage, he rushed, shouting, outside. And almost ran into his superior, Don Juan Antonio, the chief of police. Who looked at him with the peculiar look so familiar nowadays, asked, "Why are you shouting?" And sniffed his breath.

Accepting this additional insult, Carlos muttered something about boys begging in the market. Don Juan Antonio brushed this aside, gestured toward the other end of the plaza. "Twenty autobuses of students from the high schools and colleges of the State Capital are stopping over here before they continue on to the National Youth Convention. Must I direct traffic myself while you are chasing beggar boys?"

"Ah, no, *señor jefe!*" Carlos walked hastily to where the yellow buses were slowly filing into the plaza and began directing them to the somewhat restricted place available for parking—the rest of the space being already occupied by vendors of black pottery marked with crude fish, brown pottery painted with the most popular women's names, parrot chicks, Tabasco bananas, brightly colored cane-bottom chairs, pineapples sliced open to reveal the sweet

contents, shoes, rubber-tire-soled sandals, holy pictures and candles, *rebozos, mantillas,* pear-shaped lumps of farm butter, grilled strips of beef, a hundred varieties of beans, a thousand varieties of chili peppers, work shirts, bright skirts, plastic tablecloths, patriotic pictures, knitted caps, sombreros: the infinite variety of the Latin American marketplace—he called out to the bus driver, banging his hand on the bus to indicate that the vehicle should come back a little bit more . . . a little bit more . . . a little bit—

Crash!

He had backed the bus right into the new automobile belonging to Don Pacifico, the *presidente municipal!* The driver jumped out and cursed; the mayor jumped out and shouted; the students descended; the population assembled; the police chief came running and bellowing; Señorita Filomena—the mayor's aged and virginal aunt—screamed and pressed her withered hands to her withered chest; her numerous great-nephews and great-nieces began to cry—Carlos mumbled, made awkward gestures, and that ox, the stationmaster, a man who notoriously lacked education, and was given to loud public criticism of the police: He laughed.

The crowd became a mob, a hostile mob, the people of which continuously split in two in order to frighten and confuse the miserable police officer with their double shapes and now dreadful faces. It was horrible.

Lupe's body, one was always aware, was altogether independent of Lupe's dress. It did not depend upon it for support, nor did it quarrel or struggle to escape from it, but, firm and smooth and pleasant, it announced both its presence and its autonomy and, like the dress itself, was always bright and clean and sweet. Others might doubt the fidelity of a comely wife, but not Carlos.

Lupe was the best thing about the *ranchito* Rodriguez,

but there were other good things about it—everything, in fact, about it was good. The large brown adobe bricks of the walls were well-made, well-cured, well-set in their places; the tiles of the roof neither cracked nor leaked nor slipped. *Pajaritos* hopped about from perch to perch in their wooden cages, chirping and singing, outdone in their bright colors only by the dozens of flowering plants set in little pots or cans. Carlos and Lupe never had to buy corn to make *nixtamal,* the dough for tortillas or tamales; they grew their own, and this supplied them as well with husks to wrap and boil the tamales in, and when the cobs had dried they made good fuel. There was an apple tree and a great tall old piñon which supplied them with blue-gray nuts whose kernels were as sweet as the apples. The goat had always fodder enough, the pig was fine and fat, and half a dozen hens relieved them of any need to depend upon the chancy eggs of the market women. Not the least of the *ranchito's* many amenities was its stand of fleshy maguey cactus whose nectar gave an *aguamiel* from which, mixed with the older and stronger *madre de pulque,* came the delicious and finished milk-colored drink which made it unnecessary for either Carlos or Lupe to patronize the bare and shabby, sour-smelling, fly-ridden *pulquerias.*

True, there were no children, but they had only been married two years. It was Carlos's experienced observation that it sometimes took longer than that before children started arriving, and that once they did start, they generally continued in sufficient quantity.

The *ranchito* was good; it was very, very good—but there was all the difference in the world between being a civil servant with a country place and being a peasant. Lupe's figure, with its small but lovely curves, would become stooped and stringy and prematurely old. Carlos would wear the patched, baggy cottons of the *campesino* instead of his neat gabardines. That is, if he merely lost his

job. What costume they wore, those unfortunates in the Misericordia, the great walled hospital for the mentally infirm, he did not know.

This institution, long since secularized, had been originally of religious foundation, and Carlos, remembering that, considered the possibility of discussing his problem with the local priest. He did not consider it long. True, Carlos was a believer, and wore no less than two medals on a golden chain against his strong chest. He never went to church: also true. For one thing, it was not very male to go to church. That was for women. And old men. For another, it was regarded that servants of the secular state should neither persecute nor patronize religious functions. Also, the priest, that amiable and gregarious man, might accidentally let slip a wrong word in a wrong ear. Of course it was not to be thought for a moment that he would betray the seal of the confessional. But this—this horror of Carlos's days of late—this was no matter to confess. It was not a sin, it was a misfortune. He could seek the *cura's* friendly counsel no more. That worthy man mingled much with the *caciques,* those of political importance. A single sympathetic reference to "poor Carlos," and "poor Carlos" might find himself displaced in office by a *cacique's* nephew, cousin, brother-in-law—the precise degree of relationship hardly mattered.

Not with Don Juan Antonio's warning words still in his ears.

"One more mistake, young one! Just one more—!"

Carlos blinked. He hadn't realized he'd come so far from town. Behind and to his left was the Holy Mountain, the high hill on which had stood the pyramid in pagan times, from which now sounded the discordant bells of the little church. Behind and to his right was the concrete circle of the bullring. Ahead, the footpath he had for some reason been following broke into a fork. The one to the right led to the little house of his maternal aunt Maria

Pilar, a woman of strong personality, who inclined to take advantage of his infrequent visits by asking him to mend her roof or say the rosary or perhaps both. He did not desire to see *Tia* Maria Pilar. Certainly not now. Why, then, was he here?

The path to the left, where did it lead? Eventually to the tiny hamlet of San Juan Bautista. Before that? It paralleled the railroad tracks a long while. It provided access to a well. A small river frequented by washerwomen and occasional gringo artists. Various tracts of woodland. Cornfields. And the isolated house of Ysidro Chache, the *curandero.*

Carlos took off his cap and wiped his forehead. Cautiously, he looked from side to side. Casually, very casually. Far, far off, a tiny figure toiled across the fields leading a laden burro. It was entirely possible that the burro carried a combustible—charcoal, made from illegally cut wood. Or, more simply, the wood itself. Those fellows were so bold! But it was too far away, and besides, that whole matter would wait for another time. What was immediately of concern was that no one, apparently, was observing him, Carlos.

He replaced his cap. Then, still casual—bold, in fact—he turned and took the path to the left.

Ysidro Chache was a wiry, ugly little man with one bad eye, the subject of occasional and uneasy low-toned talk. Could he see out of it, or not? Some held that he could, that, indeed, he could turn his eyes in different directions at once, like a mule. It was also remarked how popular, despite his ugliness, Ysidro Chache was among women. Not ugly ones alone, either. True, he was male. He was very male. In fact, a certain Mama Rosa, shameless, had been heard to say, "Don Ysidro is a bull, and the other men are merely oxen! And he is generous, too. . . ."

But the other men had a different explanation. "It is his charms, his love-potions," was the whispered consensus. Often, after such a conversation, more than one man, him-

self loudly and boastfully male in his *cantina* conversation, would sneak off to the lone small house in the countryside where the healer lived by himself with no steady company except a parrot reputed to be older than the Conquest and to speak all languages; as well as an odd-looking dog which could speak none. Someone, once, had been absurd enough to maintain that this dog came from a breed of barkless ones—but it was known that the man's father had been a foreigner (a Turk, or a Lutheran, or a gringo, or a Jew), and this had added to the absurdity of his contention.

It stood to obvious reason that Ysidro Chache's magic had deprived the dog of his bark in order to demonstrate how clearly he had no need of it to warn him. It was not even fierce! What ordinary person in the world would keep a dog for any other purposes? It was enough to make one shiver!

The path cut into the shoulder of a sloping hill and passed, slowly, by still sturdy though much overgrown stone walls, from the sunlight into the shadow. It was cool in the woods. Perhaps it was no more silent here, perhaps only suddenly it seemed so. Almost, he could wish for the thudding sound of an illicit axe and its flat echo. But he heard none. Only the stealthy movement of something in the underbrush. Then, suddenly, he was at the house. The ancient parrot muttered something, the dog looked up, then down, indifferently. The police officer approached, slowly, announced himself without confidence. No one answered. From somewhere came the sound of a high, weak voice chanting or crooning. The parrot scowled, suddenly became two scowling parrots, but this lasted for only an eye-blink. Carlos was encouraged rather than otherwise . . . it did seem as though the potent influence of the *curandero* and his house was itself sufficient to diminish whatever was wrong with him. He announced himself again and pushed open the door.

The house was dim (naturally, properly) and smelled

(not at all dimly) of wood smoke, herbs, rum, and a number of other things, including—recognized at once although for the first time—Ysidro Chache himself.

Who was squatting on the floor, singing his strange song, scattering his colored seeds from a painted gourd onto the floor and examining the pattern in the single thin shaft of sunlight, then scooping up the seeds to cast them down again. Abruptly his song ceased. "*Abuelita* Ana must die," he said, matter-of-factly. His voice no longer high and weak, but deep and strong.

Carlos tensed. Was the *curandero* intending—Then he remembered who *Abuelita* Ana was, and relaxed. "She has been dying for as long as I can remember her," he said. Grandma Ana, with her twenty layers of garments, her tray of pills and salves and lotions and elixirs, palms and beads and holy pictures, her good-luck charms and her patent medicines with the likenesses and signatures of grave and bearded Spanish doctors . . . and most of all, her long and thick and filthy yellow-gray and black fingernails.

Ysidro Chache nodded. "I have been keeping her alive," he said. "But I can't do it any longer. Perhaps today. . . . Perhaps tomorrow. . . ." He shrugged. "Who knows?"

"And how are you, Sir Healer?"

"I? I am very well. The Lord and the saints love me." He snickered.

Remembering that he was a policeman and that the good offices of a policeman were not despised, Carlos said, "No one has been bothering you, I hope."

The medicine man opened his good and bad eyes very wide. "Bothering *me?* Who would dare?" he said. "But someone has been bothering *you.*"

Carlos Rodriguez Nunez stared. He sighed, and his sigh broke into a sob. With his voice not always under control, he told the healer of his troubles . . . the ugly voices heard, the ugly faces seen, the pains of body and head,

dizziness, doubling of vision, unfriendliness and enmity of people, and—finally—fear that he might lose his job.

Or worse.

The *curandero's* expression, as he listened and nodded was not totally dissimilar from that of Doctor Olivera. "*Pues* . . . I don't think we have to deal here with the result of impiety," he said slowly, with a reflective air. "You're not a hunter or a woodcutter; you'd have little occasion to offend the Deer people or the Small People . . . even if you had, this is not the way in which they generally take revenge. I say, *generally*. But—for the moment—this is something we'll leave to one side.

"What then? The Evil Eye? One hears a lot of nonsense about it. As a matter of fact, grown men are very rarely the victims of the Evil Eye: it is the children whom one must look out for. . . ."

He discussed various possibilities, including malfunctioning of the stomach, or its functioning with insufficient frequency, a difficulty for which he, Ysidro Chache, had many excellent herbs. "But"—the policeman protested, "it is not that. I assure you."

Chache shrugged. "What do you suspect, yourself, then?"

In a low, low voice, Carlos murmured, "Witchcraft. Or, poison."

Chache nodded, slowly, sadly. "Eighty percent of the infirmities of the corpus," he admitted, "proceed from one or the other of these two causes."

"But who—? But why—?"

"Don't speak like an idiot!" the medicine man snapped. "You are a police officer, you have a hundred thousand enemies, and each one has a hundred thousand reasons. *Why* is of little consequence; as for *who,* while it would be helpful if we knew and could lay a countercurse, it is not essential. We do *not* know *who,* we only know *you,* and it is with *you* that we must concern ourselves."

Humbly, Carlos muttered, "I know. I know."

He watched while Chache cast the seeds again, made him a *guardero* out of shells and stones and tufts of bright red wool, censed him with aromatic gum and fumed him with choking herbs, and performed the other rituals of the healer's arts, concluding his instructions with a warning to be exceedingly careful of what he ate and drank.

The officer threw up his head and hands in despair. "A man with a thousand eyes could be taken off guard for long enough—If I turn my head in the cantina for a second, someone could drop a pinch of something into my food or drink—"

"Then eat only food of your wife's preparing, and as for drink, I will give you a little charm which will protect you for either rum or aguardiente."

Vague about the amount of his *honorario,* Chache would say only that the cost of the first visit was twenty pesos, including the two charms. He directed that the next visit be in three days. Carlos walked away feeling partly reassured and partly re-afraid. The smell of the magic infumations was still in his nostrils, but, gradually, in the vanishing day, it was succeeded by others. A haze hung over everything. Despite official exhortations in the name of science and patriotism, the ignorant small farmers, and the people of the Indian *ejidos,* whose lands ringed around the municipality had begun the annual practice of burning their fields and thickets to prepare for the corn crop. It was perhaps not the best season, this one chosen by the *Forestal,* to have forbidden illicit wood cutting and burning; it would be difficult to distinguish one smoke from another at any distance—or, at night, one fire from another. It was a season when the land seemed to have reverted, in a way, to pagan times; there was fire all around, and always fire, and not infrequently some confused and terrified animal would find itself cut off, surrounded, and would burn to death. But these offenses against, say, the Deer People, Carlos left to the offending Indios, and to the *curandero.*

Another and lighter haze hung over the town and its immediate environs. It was present twice daily, at early morning and at dusk: the haze of wood and charcoal fires which bore the faint but distinctive odor of tortillas, reminiscent of their faint but distinctive flavor, toasting on griddles. And the *pat-pat-pat* of the hands of the women making them.

Carlos had come to prefer the darkness. In it he could see no hostile, no distorted faces. Seeing fewer objects, he would be disturbed by fewer objects malevolently doubling themselves. If only at such times his irregular pains and distress would diminish as well. . . . They seemed to, a little. But a little was not enough. Perhaps the things the *curandero* Ysidro Chache had done would diminish them much. Hastily, furtively, in the gathering darkness, Carlos fell to his knees and said a short, quick prayer to *La Guadalupana.*

It was in his mind that his wife's full name was, after all, Maria de Guadalupe.

"Tu cafe," she said, pouring it as soon as he entered; hot and strong and sweet. *"¿Tu quieres una torta?"*

He proceeded cautiously with his supper at first. But although his sense of taste was distorted, imparting a faintly odd flavor to the food, it seemed that tonight his throat at least would give him no difficulty. Afterward, as she finished washing the dishes, he approached and embraced her, one arm around her waist, one hand on her breast, and thoughtfully and gently took her ear between his teeth. She said, *"¿Como no?"* as usual.

But afterward she did not, as usual, say, *"¡Ay, bueno!"*

And afterward, also, in the bitterness of failure and the fatigue of despair, turning his thoughts to other things, he had his idea.

Surely, if he were to pull off a great coup—arrest someone besides a troublesome *borracho* for a change, for example—surely this would restore his so-greatly fallen

credit with the police department, to wit, Don Juan Antonio. At least so he reasoned. He had the vague notion that the plan was not perfect, that, if he considered it carefully, he might find flaws in it. But he didn't wish to consider it that carefully; the effort was too great; there were too many voices muttering ugly things and distracting and bothering him, and besides, if he were to decide against the plan, he would have no reason for getting up. His pains were worse, and he knew he could not get back to sleep again. Therefore he should get up, and if he got up, there was nothing to do but leave the house.

And therefore he might as well try to carry out his plan.

He rose and dressed, buckled on his gun-belt, reassured himself of his flashlight, and went outside.

Dawn was yet not even a promise on the horizon. The stars were great white blazes in the black sky. He searched for Venus, hugest of all, remembering stories of how important she had been in the old religion, before the Conquest—but either she had not yet risen to be the morning star, or he was looking in the wrong place, or some tree or hill obscured her—

He did not need his flashlight yet, knowing the way hereabouts as well as he did his own house, or his own wife. He knew the very tree stump which, suddenly, unkindly . . . but, somehow, not unexpectedly . . . began to croak, "*Carlo' el loco. Carlo' el loco.* Soon you will be encountered in the Misericordia *¡Ja ja! ¡Loco Carlo'!*"

The officer drew his gun, then thrust it back. A bullet was undoubtedly of no use. "Wait," he said. "As soon as it is day and I have finished with my other duty, I will return and cut you up and pour *petroleo* on you and burn you up. Wait."

The tree trunk fell silent at once and tried to hide itself in the blackness. But Carlo knew very well where it was, and passed on, giving many grim nods as he thought of it. He strained his ears but heard nothing of what he hoped

he might. Doubtless the malefactors had done their original work kilometers away, back in the wooded slopes of the mountains. Deer poachers worked the same territory, usually in pairs, one to hold the bright light to attract and fascinate the animal, and one to shoot it as it stood exposed. One man could carry half a deer easily enough. Such poachers needed neither roads nor paths either coming or going; it was useless to attempt to catch them.

Not so, however, with the woodcutters, those thieves of natural resources and national patrimony, denuding the forested hills and leaving them a prey to erosion! The more he thought of them, the more he realized the iniquity of their crimes. Moreover, look what great rogues they were even when in town—Consider how those cousins Eugenio and Onofrio Cruz (a choice pair!) had sneered and gibbered at him only the day before, in the plaza. In fact, on reflection, not only yesterday, either. And why? For no reason. So, clearly, Carlos's previous attitude had been wrong. Woodcutters were not mere poor devils toiling hard to earn their bread, and currently forbidden even to toil by *burócratas* intent on their own devious ends; merely to confront the axe-men and issue warnings was not enough. The darkness of the woods became overshot with red, scarlet and crimson. They needed to be taught one good lesson, once and for all. *Ladrones. Hijos de putas.*

But even two men could not carry on their backs enough wood from forest to town to make it worth the effort. A woodcutter required a horse, or a mule, or, at very least, a burro. Which confined him largely to paved or at any rate beaten thoroughfares. There were at least twenty such on this side of the town, but the nearer they approached to town the more they combined, so that, for the practical purposes of the moment, there were only five to be considered. The San Benito road led into the main highway too far south; daylight would find them in the

open. The road of the old convent led past a checkpoint. A third was too long and winding; a fourth had in recent months become identical with one of the local creeks. Carlos was not very strong on arithmetic, but he felt fairly certain that this left but one road. To his surprise, he realized that he had, presumably while calculating, reached just that one. It now remained to consider exactly, or even approximately, where on that road might be the best place for his *emboscada*. Too close to the woods, the criminals might escape back into them. Too near the town, they might find refuge in house or patio. An ideal situation would be a place where the road was not only sunken but surrounded by walls on either side, not too near and not too far. Such a situation was not only ideal, it was actual, and it contained, moreover, a niche in which had once reposed an image of La Guadalupana before the Republic was secularized. Carlos snickered, thinking of the astonishment of the rogues as he sprang out upon them from that niche, pistol in hand!

He was still snickering when something seized hold of his foot and sent him sprawling.

The fall jarred his back and all his other bones. It sickened him, and all his quiescent pains flared up. Voices hooted and gibbered and mocked; faces made horns and spat at him. He lay there in the road, fighting for breath and for reason, sobbing. By and by he was able to breathe. The darkness was only darkness once again. He groped about, his fingers recoiled from what they found, then groped again and found the flashlight. He gave a long, high cry of anguish and of terror at what the yellow beam disclosed lying there in the road: the body of a man lying on its back in a pool of blood. It had shirt and pants and hands and feet, all as a man should.

But where a man's head should be, it had no head.

* * *

Slowly, slowly, the sky lightened. Mist mingled with the smoke and obscured the sun. Carlos Rodriguez N., with burning and smarting eyes, paced back and forth in the road. He had been doing so for an hour, two hours, three —who knows how long? He dared not sleep. Suppose someone were to steal the body? He had not dared return to town and report the killing, for the same reason. He had been sustained in his vigil by the certain knowledge that daylight would bring people out on the road, and that he could send one of them into town with his message— preferably one of a group of mature and respectable *ciudadanos* whose testimony about the body would be incontrovertible. But as it happened, the first ones along the road were a pair of boys taking four cows out to pasture.

Or one boy taking two cows. It was no longer possible for Carlos to be sure if he were seeing single or double. One boy and two cows. Two boys and four cows. One body with no head. Two bodies with no heads. The sky was gray and cold and the treacherous sun feared to show itself. Eventually he was satisfied there were two boys, for one of them agreed to run back with the message and Carlos could see him running at the same time he could see the other boy drive the cows off the road so as to get them past the body. Life or death, the cows must eat. The boys were out of sight, the cattle, too, and someone was shouting, still shouting, had been shouting forever. With a shock, he recognized his own voice, and fell silent.

Flies began to settle on the blood and on the body. Very soberly, very tiredly, Carlos observed the corpse. He did not recognize it. It looked neither familiar nor strange; it looked merely at rest, with no more problems. It didn't even seem so odd any more—one had heard before of murderers removing the heads of their victims in order to destroy or at least delay identification. . . . Rest. And no problems. How long would it take the boy to get back to town?—and how long for Don Juan Antonio to arrive?

And then? And what then? Would he commend Carlos? Curse him? Discharge him? Arrest him? Commit him?

The man's arms and legs began to tremble. He tried to repress the tremors, failed, seated himself on a stone, placed his back against the side of the roadside wall, placed his revolver in his lap, and without volition or premonition immediately fell asleep. His head jerked back and he jumped forward and upward with a cry of alarm, thrusting his hands forth to catch the revolver. He did not catch it, neither did he see it fall, neither could he find it. His shout and motion startled the flies and they rose from the drying blood with an ugly, thrumming buzz. Carlos pitched forward onto his hands and knees, stared stupidly at the dark pool with its blue lights. The blood was still there.

But the body was gone.

Everything whirled around and around, and Carlos whirled with it, staggering along the road with arms outstretched to keep from falling. He had slept, after the hours of keeping awake to guard the body in the darkness, he had fallen asleep in the earliest daylight! Now he was worse off than ever, for now Don Juan Antonio knew there was a body—and how would Carlos be able to account for its loss? Weeping, sobbing, cursing, stumbling along, he knew that he could account for that no more than for the loss of his revolver. He was certainly doomed.

Unless—Unless—he provided another body, so no one would know the difference.

Below him he saw the railroad tracks. Half-sliding, he descended the slope and ran along the rails. He knew who had, who *must* have done this to him! Who else but the woodcutters, those thieves and sons of harlots? Why else but to take revenge upon him for his intended capture?—and to prevent his ever doing so! But he would show them, now and forever. They had incited the entire *poblacion* against him, but he would show them. . . . He

came to a switch and just a short distance away was the equipment shed of the maintenance crew, with its weathered inscription: *This Edifice And Its Entire Contents Is The Property Of The Republic.* With his shoulder skewed around he burst it open, seized up the first grass-machete he saw, and rushed out again. Had he time? Would he be in time? Would Don Juan Antonio have been awake? Been elsewhere? How soon would he start out? Carlos prayed for time to stand in between Don Juan Antonio and the barbarous plot of the woodcutters.

And luck was with him. The mists parted as he came back over the slope and there down below was a man leading a burro laden with wood. Cautiously and carefully, so shrewdly that he was obliged to smile to himself and to stifle his own laughter, Carlos approached bent over and on crouching knees. The burro approached, the burro passed, Carlos rose to his feet and darted forward on his toes. The machete swung. The body fell, spouting blood. Carlos kicked the fallen head like a football, watched it drop into the underbrush. He threw the body over his shoulder and ran and ran and ran and ran.

"Carlos," said Don Juan Antonio. "Carlos! Do you hear me? Stop that! Stop that and listen to me! Do you hear—"

"No use, *jefe,*" said his assistant, Raimundo Cepeda. "It's the shock—the shock. He won't come out of it for a while."

Don Juan Antonio wiped his face with an impeccably ironed and cologne-scented handkerchief. "Not he alone . . . I am also in such a situation. Dreadful. Horrible. People do not realize—"

"Poor young man," sighed the elderly jailor, Uncle Hector, shaking his head. "Only consider—"

Don Juan Antonio nodded vigorously. "By all means let us consider. And let us consider the whole case. Thus I reconstruct it:

"We have that precious pair, the coarsely handsome cousins Eugenio and Onofrio Cruz. Ostensibly and even occasionally woodcutters. On the side—drunkards, when they had the money; thieves . . . and worse . . . when they had the chance. Partners against the rest of the world, fighting often between themselves. Last night they go out to cut wood, illegally. And on the way back a quarrel breaks out. Who knows why? For that matter, perhaps Eugenio merely decided on the spur of the moment to kill Onofrio. At any rate, he *does* kill him, with a blow of his axe. Then, to conceal the identity of the corpus, with the same axe he decapitates it. And returns to his hut, carrying the head. Also, the defunct's wallet.

"Once there, the thought occurs to him that he should not have left the body. With daylight coming, it will soon be found. So he prepares a pile or pyre of wood. With all the burning of fields and thickets, one more smoke will hardly be observed. Should anyone smell anything, they will assume it to be a trapped deer. And he goes back to gain the body. But meanwhile the police have not been idle. Officer Carlos Rodriguez Nunez is not only up and around, but he has also located the corpus and is guarding it. Eugenio conceals himself. By and by the sun begins to rise, the little brothers Santa Anna approach, and Carlos sends one of them with a message to me. But the child is, after all, only a child; he doesn't go to the right place, wanders around, time is lost. Meanwhile Carlos, content that all will soon be well, sits down and falls asleep. Erroneously," he added, with emphasis, "but—understandably. Understandably.

"Out from his place of concealment creeps the criminal murderer Eugenio Cruz. He steals both Carlos's service revolver *and* the corpus, loads it on the horse which he had brought with him and also concealed at a distance, returns to his hut. There he decides that he has not enough wood to incinerate the victim. So he conceals the corpus

inside the hut and goes out for more wood. Meanwhile the unfortunate and valiant Carlos awakens, disovers his loss. By dint of the faculty of ratiocination so highly developed in our police, he deduces who the killer must be and where he must have gone. He tracks him down, securing, along the way, a machete. He confronts the arch-criminal. He kills him. Again, I must say: erroneously. And again I must say: understandably. Doubtless the murderer Cruz would have attempted to escape.

"At any rate, this second slaying is witnessed by the much respected citizen and veteran of the Revolution, Simon-Macabeo Lopez—"

The much respected citizen and veteran of the Revolution, Simon-Macabeo Lopez, snapped his sole remaining arm into a salute, and nodded solemnly.

"—who had risen early in order to go and cultivate the piece of land granted him by a grateful Republic. Veteran Lopez immediately and properly proceeds to inform me, arriving at the same time as the little brother Santa Anna. The police at once move to investigate, and we find—that which we found. A body here, a body there, here a head, and there a head, Carlos in a state of incoherent shock. So. Thus my reconstruction. What do you think of it?"

There was a silence. At length the assistant head of the police said, "Masterful. Masterful."

"Thank you."

"It is such a reconstruction, so neat, so lucid, so full of clarity, as is usually to be met with only in the pages of criminal literature. But . . . *señor jefe* . . . it is not the truth. No, I must say, it is not the truth."

Don Juan Antonio snapped, "Why not?"

Cepeda sighed, gestured to the unfortunate Rodriguez. "Because, *señor jefe,* you know and I know and almost everybody in town knows why. That bitch, that strumpet, Lupe de Rodriguez, was cuckolding poor Carlos with the cousins Eugenio and Onofrio Cruz, too. One man was not

enough for her. And Carlos was blind to all."

"Truth," said the jailor, sighing.

"Truth," said the veteran, nodding.

"Truth," said the other policemen, shaking their heads, sadly.

Don Juan Antonio glared. Then his expression relaxed, and he lowered his head. "It is the truth," he said, at last. "Ay, Carlos! ¡Woe of me! ¡Hombre! The husband is always the last to learn. For weeks, now, I have scarcely been able to look him in the face. Why, the very honor of the police was imperiled. How the railroad men were laughing at us. Mother!

"So, my poor Carlos—You finally found out, eh? *Nevertheless!"* Don Juan Antonio all but shouted at the others. "It is my reconstruction which must stand, do you agree? Carlos has suffered enough, and moreover, there is the honor of the police."

"Oh, agreed, agreed, *señor jefe,"* the other officers exclaimed, hastily and heartily.

"We may depend upon the discretion of the Veteran Lopez, I assume?"

The old man placed his hand over his heart and bowed. "Securely," he said. "What Carlos did may have been, in some sense, technically illegal; I am no scholar, no lawyer. But it was natural. It was male."

"It was male, it was very male," the others all agreed.

Don Juan Antonio bent over, took the weeping Carlos by the shoulder, and tried to reassure him. But Carlos gave no sign of having heard, much less understood. He wept, he babbled, he struck out at things invisible, now and then he gave stifled little cries of alarm and fright and scuttled backwards across the floor. The chief and the others exchanged looks and comments of dismay. "This commences to appear as more than temporary shock," he said. "If he continues like this, he may finally be encountered in Misericordia, may God forbid. You, Gerardo," he directed

the youngest officer, "go and solicit Dr. Olivera to appear as soon as convenient. He understands the techniques of modern science . . . Take no care, Carlos!" he said, encouragingly. "We shall soon have you perfectly well. . . . Now. . . . There was something in my mind. . . . Ah, Cepeda."

"Yes, Sir Chief?"

"You said, '. . . with Eugenio and Onofrio Cruz, too.' *Too.* Who else? Eh? What other man or men—I insist that you advise me of their names!"

Rather reluctantly, the assistant said, "Well . . . sir . . . I know of only one other. Ysidro Chache. The *curandero.*"

Astounded, first, then outraged, then determined, Don Juan Antonio arose to his full height. "The *curandero,* eh. That mountebank. That whoremonger. That charlatan." He reached over and took up his cap. "Come. We will pay a call upon this relic of the past. Let us inform him that the police have teeth. Eh?"

The jailor, old Hector, shook his head vigorously. The even older veteran of the Revolution put out his hand. "No, no, *patron,*" he said, imploringly. "Do not go. He is dangerous. He is very dangerous. He knows all the spirits and the demons of the woods. He can put a fearful curse upon you. No, no, no—"

"What!" cried Don Juan Antonio, scornfully. "Do you think for a moment that I put stock in such superstition?" He stood brave and erect, not moving from his place.

Old Hector said, "Ah, *patron.* It is not only that. I, after all, I, too, am a civil servant. I do not— But, sir, consider. The *curandero* knows the power of every root and herb and leaf and grass. He is familiar with each mushroom and toadstool. Consider, consider—a single pinch in food or drink (and what man has a thousand eyes?)— Consider the result of such poison! Sterility, impotence, abortion, distortion of vision, paralysis of the throat, imag-

inary voices, dizziness, pain, swelling of the eyes, burning of the chest and heart, hallucinations, wasting away, insanity, and who knows what else? No, *patron,* no, no."

"He traffics with the devil," old Lopez muttered, nodding.

"Hm, well," said Don Juan Antonio. "This commences to sound like a matter for the priest, then, would you say?"

"Securely, the priest! If not, indeed, the bishop!"

Instantly the chief of police returned his cap to its place. "Obviously, then, it would be unfitting for a servant of the secular Republic to mix in such a matter. I thank you for calling this to my attention. We shall not dignify the old fraud with our presence."

His eye at that moment was looking out the window. He seemed startled. "Speaking of the—Heh-hem. Did I not mention the good priest? Look." The good priest was indeed at that moment crossing the plaza, his technically illegal cassock covered by an unobjectionable overcoat for most of its length. Preceding him was his sacristan, bearing the small case in which, all knew, were carried the vessels for the administering of the last sacrament.

"Hector—do me the favor, go and inquire, who has died?—and then go and see what is keeping the doctor. ¡Ay, Carlos, hombre!"

Hector trotted out. A moment later he returned close enough to call a name before proceeding to the physician's office.

"What did he say?" Don Juan Antonio inquired. "Who?"

"Sir, *Abuelita* Ana. You know, the—"

"What?" Don Juan Antonio was surprised. *"Grandmother* Ana? Who would have expected it? She had been dying as long as I can remember her. Well, well, well . . ." His mouth still astonished, he lifted his right hand and slowly crossed himself.

THE DEEPEST BLUE IN THE WORLD

Sonya Dorman

It was a small, bowl-shaped vase of a deep blue. The feminine curves fitted between the palms of her hands as she carried it. She wore old shoes, an old but neat skirt, a ragged blouse. All that she carried with her was the vase, between her palms. The vase was perfectly empty.

"Here we are, darling," the Matron said to her, pushing the girl into the long, high-roofed dormitory. Bands of sunlight from the tall windows in the old-fashioned building slid across the child's shoulders, illuminating her braids with streaks of honey and auburn. Two girls at the far end of the room were seated together on one bed, playing some game. The Matron guided the new child to an unoccupied bed, covered with a worn but spotless chalk-white spread. There was a small wooden stand with two drawers beside the bed, and hovering over it, the girl's hands held the vase, moved it into a beam of sunshine to burn deeply blue, and then into shadow. Finally, she put the vase down, sat on the bed, and clasped her empty hands in her lap.

"Girls," the Matron called to the other two. "Here is Anna."

They turned to look at Anna, neither hostile nor friendly, nor yet neutral. Anna remained looking at her own hands, which were slim with dark skin at the knuckles and yellow callus on the palms.

"Girls," the Matron repeated, with a warning note. They got up and came over, with bland, incurious faces.

"Hello, Anna," they said.

At this moment, there was a tremendous roar outside and the two girls, and Anna also, turned to look between the heavy frames of the windows at the rocket that sprang up from the space field beyond a far wall. The sky was a pure color like the flame from burning alcohol, and the rocket bored upward and disappeared leaving behind it the torn air, the stunned ears of the listeners, and three young faces broken open with longing and loss.

"Yes, you can see them go up all the time," the Matron said with false cheerfulness. "I'll leave you to get acquainted. The others will be in soon from the school."

When she had left the long room and closed the heavy door behind her without a sound, Anna looked up at the other two. The faces had closed, all three of them, but the standing girl who had slanted brown eyes in a small, sweet face, leaned down to the new girl, and asked, "Where?"

"Mars," Anna said. "Last week on Mars."

Gangly and blonde, the other girl was balanced on the edge of beauty, but not ready to move into it completely. She turned her face away. "My Daddy's still in orbit," she said. She was proud; the pride was like a knife edge in her voice which she couldn't discipline yet as she did her features.

The brown-eyed girl said, "I'm Lupe. How old are you?"

"Fourteen," Anna said, and looked at the empty blue vase.

"Then you won't be here more than a year," the blonde one assured her. "I'm almost ready to go. I'll be fifteen in another month. Lupe's your age."

"Where are you going?" Anna asked.

The blonde girl smiled and at once her face matured into real beauty, cool and proud; a woman's face. "To the marriage bench."

"Right away?" Anna gasped.

"No, silly," Lupe said, sitting down beside her. "Conny has to go to the other school for a year first. Don't you know?"

"I don't know anything," Anna admitted.

Conny shrugged. She went to the window and leaned, one palm against the shatterproof plastic pane. Nothing was to be seen out there but the walls of huge buildings, and above, the sky into which their fathers had vanished. In the distance there was suddenly the sound of younger voices.

"The little ones will be in soon," Lupe said. "We're the oldest."

Conny had turned back, and was looking curiously at the blue vase. She moved one hand, as though to touch it, and Anna leaped from the bed crying some word of defense and fear. "All right," Conny said to her, "all right. I didn't mean anything."

Lupe pointed toward it. "From Mars?" she asked.

Anna bent her head. "No," she whispered. "No, he brought it back for my mother from the Plains."

"She married again?" Conny asked.

Anna's head bent further, the brown braids hanging forward over her shoulders. "No."

"She has to," Conny said, in a hard voice.

Anna answered, "I know. But she hasn't."

Lupe said, "If she's under thirty-five, she has to. Or she'll go to prison."

"She went," Anna said. "She went this morning, when they came for me."

"It isn't fair," Conny said, lifting Anna's face with one hand and looking angrily at her. "Our mothers had to marry again right away, why shouldn't she? The wars eat up our men, we have to make more men. What right has she got?"

"She chose," Anna shouted, slapping Conny's arm away from her. "She had the right to choose."

Again there came the tremendous and stunning explosion of sound from the space field, and the three girls turned to the windows. In profound silence they watched the warship rise into the fierce blue sky and disappear toward battle. Lupe swallowed. Conny pushed her blonde hair back from her cheek. Anna put her palms softly cupped on each side of the vase, and warmed it.

The heavy dormitory door swung open and a crowd of younger children entered the room, talking and laughing together. One was crying, her face dirty and wet, and the others jostled her, pushed and pulled, swarmed like puppies in a pen. The Matron came in and sorted them out briskly, sending the tearful child to the infirmary, the others to a rest and quiet playtime on their beds.

When she had them settled, she came to the older girls. "All friends, now?" she asked happily. "I'm sure you are. Lupe, you'll help Anna to find her way around today, please. Conny, they want you in the upstairs Office."

"Me?" she cried, bursting into light. "Am I ready? Now?"

"I don't know anything about it, darling," the Matron said. "I don't suppose you're ready yet, you haven't had your birthday. But they want to see you."

Without a backward look Conny walked rapidly down the room, through the open doorway, and then they could hear her galloping up the stairs toward the Office.

Lupe looked frightened. "They won't take her yet?" she begged the matron.

"I don't think so, darling." The Matron shook her head. She went out of the quiet room and when she closed the door the silence became deep and resonant, as though each child were holding her breath. Those who had been playing put down their games. The ones who had been lying down to rest, sat up. They waited intently on their beds, in two rows; all sizes, shapes, colors, from five to

fifteen. Twenty girls stared out the western windows where the lowering sun blazed through and almost blinded them. The ground, building, windows, children, the air, shook in the blast. The ship leaped past their vision upward, and disappeared.

Gradually, they went back to their play. Lupe was still sitting on Anna's bed, and when Anna finally sat down, too, Lupe touched her arm with gentle fingers. "We'll be friends," she said. "We're the same age. Maybe we'll go in the same group to the marriage bench."

Anna turned her face away to look at the dark blue vase. "Maybe," she said.

A girl of ten, with a chunky body, came slowly over to them, and walking down the narrow space between Anna's bed and the next one, she thrust her head forward on a long neck and stared at the vase. "Hey," she said. "That's a nice color."

"Yes," Anna agreed.

"Can I touch it?"

"No."

The younger girl looked at Anna with an expression of mockery and sadness mixed. "Special, huh?" she asked.

"It's mine," Anna said.

The child asked, "Where?"

"Mars."

"Mine got his right here. The ship blew up while they were fueling. Never even blasted off. Right here, you can see from the window."

Anna closed her eyes. "How can you look?" she whispered.

"I'm supposed to look, you know. Why do you think they put us right here? We're conditioned. I've been here four years, I'm used to looking. You will be, too. You count fifteen men for every ship that goes up, one ship every half hour between dawn and dusk, you count the

sons your mother has, and the sons you'll have after you go to the marriage bench a couple of times. That's the conditioning."

"You better go back to your bed," Lupe said to the child. "I don't think you wanted to talk about it, your first day here."

"Oh, I don't even remember the first day, any more," the child said. She gave a backward glance at the vase. "It is a nice color," she said. "I think it's the deepest blue in the world." After a pause, she said, "I have four brothers. I'm going to have four sons."

"Go on, now," Lupe said, giving her a gentle push.

The child lingered, looking from the vase to Anna, and back to the vase. The wooden stand had nothing on it but the vase, no toys or pictures, no war medals, like the other stands. "Don't you have anything?" the child asked in a shrill voice. "No books or clothes or medals? Just the vase?"

"Just the vase," Anna said.

Turned instantly into a savage little creature, the child backed away. "Then your mother's in prison," she shouted. "She wouldn't go to the marriage bench again, she's in prison, she chose to go, you haven't got anything."

A rustling went around the room as the other girls turned to look, to listen, to appraise Anna. "Prison." "She chose," they hissed. "Prison." "Anna hasn't got anything." "Who let her keep the vase?"

Anna grabbed the vase, even in desperation taking care to handle it gently, and holding it between her small breasts she doubled up protectively and hid from them. She was so bent over that she had to breathe into the vase, and with her eyes closed she breathed very gently, filling up the empty dark blue space with her breath which immediately overflowed the bowl shape and poured out

again through the narrow neck. She could feel the round shape warming with her hands but was too frightened to move, and remained bent over, breathing endlessly into the dark opening and feeling her own breath rise up and flow back over her face.

A gong suddenly began to vibrate through the long room and the children got off the beds as the Matron opened the door. "It's supper time," Lupe said to Anna.

Anna raised her head, and sat back on her heels.

"Come on," Lupe said. "You don't want to miss supper. I'll take you downstairs with me, I'll show you."

Anna shook her head.

In a more businesslike voice, an imitation of the Matron's briskness, Lupe said, "Now come on. You have to eat, you aren't allowed to miss meals unless you're sick. You'll feel better, too."

"No," Anna said, "I don't want anything."

Kindly, gently, Lupe coaxed her, pulling at her arms, and her wrists, which were crooked round to hold the vase against her body. "Anna, please, come on, they've all gone down to supper. There won't be any more ships going up from this field until morning, there's nothing to watch until six o'clock. Anna, please. We're the same age, we can be friends, I'll speak to the Matron and we can go to the marriage bench together."

Anna opened her eyes and sat up straight, her mouth hard, and white at the corners. "I choose," she said distinctly. "I choose prison." She raised her voice and shouted it. "I choose prison. I won't go to the marriage bench, I won't have any sons, I won't watch the ships go up, I choose prison underground for the rest of my life like my mother."

Lupe had been sliding gradually away from her in revulsion, trembling, frightened. She walked backward several steps, unable to take her eyes off Anna, off the vase

that Anna held against herself, almost colorless in the deepened gloom.

The Matron came in quickly through the still open door and said, "Girls, you're late for supper—" she broke off. "What is it?"

"I choose prison," Anna said, quietly putting the vase down on the wooden stand and turning her back on it.

"My God," the Matron said. "Oh child, you don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes I do. Underground, working fourteen hours a day, and I can never come up again, but that's what I choose. I'll go now."

"You can't go now," the Matron said. Completely flustered, she kept making pushing motions with her hands, and then pulling motions, as if to draw Anna toward her. "Silly child, you don't know what you're talking about," she approached Anna as she spoke. "Poor child," she said. Then she turned, and said, "Lupe, go right down to the dining hall, please."

Lupe went away. The Matron walked to Anna, still making the disturbed motions with her hands. "Anna, you can't choose now."

"I have a right to choose," Anna said between her teeth.

"Indeed you don't, silly girl," the Matron said. "And when you may choose, you certainly won't want that, you don't know what you're talking about. Don't you know you can't make such a choice until you have been to the marriage bench?"

Anna's lips moved but she couldn't make the words into a sound. The lights automatically came on, in a row overhead, and Anna and the Matron both blinked to accustom their eyes to the change. "Not now?" Anna asked at last. "I can't even choose? I don't have any choice?"

"No. Not until you've been once to the marriage bench.

It's a good thing, really. The law protects you. You'll find out it's a good thing, later on."

Anna rushed away from her, bumping into a bed, and ran down the aisle between the rows of narrow white cots. She ran through the hall, down the broad stairways, one flight, two flights, past the noisy dining hall, past the nursery, past the barred gates of the infirmary, down another flight to the great entrance lobby, to the main doors. Anna pounded against them in her panic, and, finding them secure, she crumpled down on the floor.

Behind her, the elevator doors opened and the Matron stepped out and came to her. She bent over with a little grunt, and lifted Anna to her feet. "Silly child," she said, "we don't get many like you." The girl's body was almost limp in her arms.

"Up we go," Matron said, supporting her in the elevator. The doors closed soundlessly and they began to rise up the long shaft. "We'll get you to bed, and you'll have a good sleep. You don't know what you're talking about, to want to go down into the factories and foundries, and perhaps even to one of the fueling stations, for the rest of your life. You'll grow up and go to the marriage bench like all the good girls. It's what a nice girl wants to do."

She firmly trundled Anna down the aisle between the white beds. When Anna sat down, unresisting, the Matron went for a cup of water, and coming back with it she took out of her pocket a pill bottle. "Two," she said cheerfully. "Just swallow them down, and you'll forget your worries."

Anna swallowed them, with a little water. "Now you'll get a good sleep," the Matron said, pulling up the small pillow and giving it a punch or two to soften it. "The first day here is not easy for everyone," the Matron said. "But I know you want to be a good girl."

When she had gone, Anna lay down, her head turned to one side, and stared at the vase. It was a deep blue, and

seemed to be filled with an endless deep space, but it was perfectly empty. Anna closed her eyes.

Writers are automatic recording machines. Even though the recording process is mostly subliminal, now and then we have the experience of being very conscious that some phrase or anecdote has fallen with a crash into our creative well, and is sending out continual ripples.

So it was when my friend Carolyn told me an anecdote she'd heard while on a visit to Israel. It was about a woman, a displaced person, who arrived at a kibbutz with nothing but the clothes she walked in, and a vase which she carried. Color and shape of the vase weren't specified, but as the image of this woman crashed down into my story-making area, the vase became the shape and color of one I already owned and treasured. The phrase "displaced person," has always struck me with terror. To be displaced, as though the universe no longer accepted one, what could be more terrible?

Somehow, from that phrase, from the formless, colorless vase which contained nothing, but was her only possession, from the combination of feelings: terror, pity, loss, I began to build something. I'm sure that in this particular case, I was forced to construct something against the emotional disturbance that was aroused in me.

Just how these things combined to bring out a story of the future, concerning young girls not yet women but faced with women's decisions, I can't explain. Though there really isn't such a gap between the displaced person and the abandoned child; to me they both represent nearly the ultimate in loss.

What will we do with the war orphans of the future?

We haven't resolved the problem with those of the present, and in this country we scarcely recognize that the problem exists. It does, though.

When women refuse to send their men to war, when they refuse to be blinded by the phony glory of marching columns, when they refuse to be rewarded with a gold star for the death of sons, then maybe there won't be any more fighters.

—*Sonya Dorman*

O YE OF LITTLE FAITH

Harlan Ellison

This isn't my most particular special favorite story; I have two of those: Pretty Maggie Moneyeyes *and* At The Mouse Circus. *But it* is *a favorite. And one that hasn't been reprinted very much, which makes it just right for our purposes here. How it came to be written is a singular wildness, and I'll tell you about that in a moment, but first it should be explicated precisely why, of all the stories I've written, this one should have been chosen as an "authors' choice."*

The answer, of course, is that it embodies some special aspect of the total world-view of the author; no other kind of story could ever be chosen by a writer to fulfill such a purpose. And very often, in selecting just the right story (within the necessary limitations of this anthology), a writer may not consciously know why he chose the one he did, save that it pleased him in some secret way he wanted preserved in a special showcase. In such cases flummery reasons for having made the choice are offered—and more often than not they serve as well as the real reasons. For the real reasons are buried in the unconscious. Luckily for me, the reasons why O Ye of Little Faith *is a favorite are fairly apparent and I can set them down with some felicity.*

When I was a little boy, growing up in Painesville, Ohio, there was a pretty little girl (whose name has long since passed from memory) who was a Seventh Day Adventist, who thought that, because I was Jew, and there

were hardly any other Jews in the town, and none of my age, and she'd never known any Jews, and she believed myths like Jews grind up Gentile babies and use them to make matzohs for Passover, *she had to save my soul. I was young and relatively easy to hurt, and one day when I was legging it home from Lathrop Grade School, down Mentor Avenue, the little girl followed me, flapping copies of* The Watchtower *and* Awake *at me. "You're doomed!" she cried. She said it several times. (Truly, I think she was suffering more from a prepuberty lech for my even-then incredible body than from an excess of religious fervor, but let us not confuse the issue.) "You're doomed!"*

To be perfectly honest, not only was I terrified by the fanaticism of her approach (as I am by fanatics of all stripes to this very day), but girls per se *turned me to pudding. I fled from her.*

She ran after me, waving those damned tracts, and howling, "You're doomed! You're a heathen! You'll be burning in hell because you aren't a child of sweet Jesus, and you'll beg for water on your tongue and I won't give you any because I'm a Christian and you ain't!"

Which pretty well summed up the postures and delights of the Judaeo-Christian ethic for me, for many years thereafter.

And yet, as I've grown older and more incredibly wise, I've spent some considerable time musing theologically. Chesterton and Aquinas and Chardin have held my interest for brief spells, and it now becomes apparent that in some grotesque and morbid fashion, I am something of a religious man. Now do not hurl huzzahs to Yahweh or Elohim, or any of that crowd for my miraculous salvation; I didn't say I believed in either God or religion. I said I was maybe a religious man. I don't know what that means. All I know is that a good many of my stories in the past few years have been concerned with God, gods, heavenly considerations and hellish consequences. Critics of my

work, academicians whose credentials and conclusions I would be a twit to question, have found in my stories symbolic and allegorical references to the religious condition that stagger me.

I had no idea I was writing that kind of stuff.

The most obvious manifestation of this religiosity is a series of stories I've been writing in which I've tried to create a pantheon of gods for today. No more the rain god or the savior, these are the gods of smog and neon, the machine god and the god of the freeway. O Ye of Little Faith *is one of these. It borrows an idea from my ancient mentor, Lester del Rey, in questioning what becomes of old gods when they no longer have acolytes, are no longer believed in.*

This story, and the others in the roughly defined group, are my attempts to reconcile the world I see around me with all the bullshit I was fed about God and religion as a child, and in some small way to answer that little girl in Painesville, many years ago, who swore I was doomed. She may have been correct; I may be *doomed, but not because I didn't read* The Watchtower. *And frankly, I can think of infinitely groovier things to do with little Gentile girls than grinding them up for matzohs. But, I'm older and infinitely wiser now.*

Onward. . . .

How this story came to be written.

It was at the 1966 West Coast Science Fantasy Conference (called by many the Westercon) held in San Diego. They had drawn a thin lot of goods to be auctioned off to support the expenses of the convention. To add to the books, cover paintings and manuscripts, the directors of the convention decided to auction me off. Now usually this means the highest bidder gets an hour of the auction item's time. It's a little weird-sounding, if you don't happen to be a science-fiction fan, but fans are also a little weird, and they've been doing this number for years, auctioning off

Silverberg and Robert Bloch and me and hosts of others, so we all take it pretty much in stride now. And it lifts the ego to see yourself bid higher than one of your fellows. It's sick, but it's heady.

To spice up the auction of myself, I announced from the platform that for that hour I would write a short story of no less than three thousand words, at a typewriter placed there in the middle of the throng in the central convention hall, using the name of the high bidder as the name of the hero of the story; in addition, the high bidder who won me could select three words, any *three words, which I would integrate as pivotal elements of the story; and further, the high bidder would receive from me, when the story sold, ten per cent of the sale price (of the first serial publication).*

The bidding was pretty heavy, because I happened to be the Guest of Honor at that convention. The winner was a relatively whey-faced youth named Larry Niven. You may have heard of him. Turns out he's a fine SF writer. But at that time he was still hacking out a reputation for himself.

Well, Larry won me with a bid of fifty or a hundred bucks . . . something like that. I don't recall the exact amount at the moment. And he gave me the three words:

prognosticator
polyp
minotaur

and someone hauled in a battered old office machine and typing table, and a ream of paper, and I sat down and started typing.

Funny thing about me. I dig working amid chaos. Give me a party, and I'll sit down in the middle of the melee and write happy as a horny in a harem. Time whipped past, I wrote page after page, and people came and took the

pages as they steamed off the typewriter and Scotch-taped them to the walls of the convention hall, in sequence, and lines of fans sidled around the room, reading O Ye of Little Faith *as fresh as it came from my head. When I started writing the story, I didn't even know what I was going to write. I just started it and it* went. *I had the image of Niven being stalked by the minotaur and that was where it began. How he got there, why he was trapped in another place, what it all meant . . . that came later in the writing as the first sequence lengthened.*

And here's the dumb part about me. So involved was I in the actual godlike act of creating (*I sometimes see myself, when I'm writing, as a Herculean figure sitting on a mountaintop, pounding out bolts of lightning on an Olympian typewriter as big as Everest*), *that I forgot a minotaur is a bull-headed man; I wrote the minotaur as a horse-bodied man. And that's a centaur, as everyone knows. And here's what's dumb about everyone else: The story has been reprinted several times, and no one ever caught the discrepancy between the description of the creature as a centaur, and my calling it a minotaur.*

For this publication, belatedly, I've altered the designation. But what you read as a centaur—started out as a minotaur. I didn't mean to cheat on the rules of the game, I just got too busy to think them out properly. Mea culpa. *But not* maxima.

The story sold first to a men's magazine, Knight. *But I included it in my hardcover collection,* Love Ain't Nothing But Sex Mispelled, *before it appeared in* Knight. Knight *paid me two hundred bucks, and I gave Larry Niven ten per cent of that, which was twenty dollars. So it cost him thirty bucks to have me write this story.*

I've gone on at considerable length here, not only because Harry said, "Write as much as you want," but because I think all the bullshit that goes down before and during the writing of a story is important; not only for the

writer himself, so he can try to understand how and why he comes to a piece of fiction, not only for his readers so they will know the stories come from some human need and from some human place, but for other writers, who are endlessly curious about the working habits and emotional states of their brothers.

Writing is a holy chore. It is—particularly today, when everyone is shouting and so few are listening—the only organism of quiet communication left to us. The illiterate vocabulary of the punch in the mouth and the bullet in its breach carry too many arguments. In the soft moments when we huddle alone with our thoughts, we turn to words by other men; and there, in that moment when men choose to reason, we can reach them.

It is a heavy responsibility. I write this introduction so you will know that none of us who write take it lightly. If there are gods, and if they have tally records, they will take this into consideration. It may be our only passport into heaven.

—Harlan Ellison

Niven felt for the rock wall behind him. His fingertips grazed the crumbling rocks. The wall curved. He prayed that it curved. It *had* to curve, to go around the bowl in which he was trapped, or he was dead. That simply: He was dead. The centaur advanced another few feet, pawing the red-dust earth with hooves of gold now dulled by a faint dusty crimson patina.

The creature's small gimlet eyes were as red as the ground it stomped. Half-man, half-stallion, something out of a child's fable, it stepped carefully toward him, and he

had the wildly incongruous thought that the beast's face might have been a double for John Barrymore. Only the little red eyes destroyed the comparison. Red and angry; not merely with volcanic hatred but with something else . . . something primeval, something saved from a time before men had walked the Earth, when the centaurs and the minotaurs and their fellow myths had ruled the world.

And now, somehow, in some inexplicable fashion, Niven —a man with no particular talents—had been thrown crosswise and slantwise through universes into a place, a time, a continuum (an Earth?), where the centaur still roamed. Where the centaur could at last have his full revenge on the creatures that had replaced him. It was the day of reckoning for *homo sapiens.*

Niven backed around the bowl, feeling the dirt of the wall crumbling in his fingers as he felt behind him; in his other hand he brandished the rough wood club he had found underfoot as he ran from the beast. He let it droop in his hand a moment, the weight of it difficult to keep at the ready for very long. The centaur's face of frenzy glowed with heat. It leaped. Niven swung the club with a bunching of muscles that sent him whirling half-around. The centaur dug its hooves in deeply and ground to a snorting halt, two feet in front of the flat-arc swing of the club. Niven spun around completely and the club struck the wall and shattered to splinters.

The centaur's half-growl, half-snort bore traces of triumphant amusement as it exploded behind the dark-haired man, and Niven felt young sweat come to his back. The impact of the blow against the wall had sent a tremor through his entire body; his left arm was quite numb. Yet it had saved him. There was an opening in the wall, an opening in the rock wall of the deep valley bowl, an opening he would not have seen backing around the wall. Now there was a scant hope of staying alive.

As the centaur gathered itself for a leap that would send

its gigantic body plunging into Niven, the man slipped sidewise, and was inside the mountain.

He turned then, and ran. Behind him the light from that weird place—vaguely blue and light-mote-laden—faded and was abruptly lost as he caromed around a sharp turn in the passage. It was dark now, pitch absolute dark, and all Niven could see was the scintillance of tiny sparks behind his eyes. Suddenly he found himself longing to see even that light behind him, that snippet of blue and cadaverous gray in a sky that had never been roof of any world *he* had known.

And then he was falling. . . .

Suddenly, and without any sense of having moved, between one step and the next, he plunged over a lip of stone, and was falling. Down and down, tumbling over and over, and the walls of moist slippery stone reeled around him, unseen but cold, as he tried to grab some small hold.

The tips of his fingers skinned away from friction, and the pain was excruciating, for a long moment, but was lost in an instant as the shriek tore from his throat and he plunged, landing painfully on his shoulders and the back of his neck: the impact threatened to snap his spine; down into a depth of water black and viscous and bottomless that closed over him, filled his mouth with foulness, blinded him; dragged into the grave-chill body of a moist lover terrible in her possessiveness, jealousy and need.

Vapors of night. Echoes of never. Niven thrashed in a whirlpool vortex of total unawareness. Memories—released from a crypt beneath his conscious mind—escaped, gibbering, rushed in a horde into his skull. He was back in the old soothsayer's shop. Had it been just a few minutes before finding himself trapped by the centaur? Merely a few minutes ago when he had stood in the prognosticator's shop in a Tijuana back alley, a tourist with a girl on one arm and a wisecrack on his lips? Had it been only that

long ago, a matter of seconds, or a sometime *long ago,* when darkness had parted and swallowed him—as he was now being swallowed by these stygian waters?

Huaraches, the sign had said, and *Serapes.*

Berta stared at him across her Tom Collins. He could not look at her. He toyed with the straw in his cuba libre. He whistled soundlessly, then bit the inside of his lip absently. He looked off across the Avenida Revolución. Tijuana throbbed with an undercurrent of immorality and availability. Anything you might want. A ten-year-old virgin—male or female. Authentic French perfume minus the tariff. Grass. Smack. Peyote caps. Bongo drums, hand-carved Don Quixotes, sandals, bull-fights, jai-alai, horse races, tote-board betting or off-track betting, your photograph wearing a sombrero sitting astride a weary jackass. Jackass on jackass, a study in dung. Strip shows where the nitty-gritty consists of the pudenda flat out on the bar-top for convenient dining. Private shows with big dogs and tiny gentlemen and women with breasts as big as casaba melons. Divorces, marriages, tuck-and-roll auto-seat covers. Or a quick abortion.

It had been lunacy for them to come down here. But they'd had to. Berta had needed the D&C, and now it was over, and she was feeling just fine thank you, just fine. So they had stopped for a drink. She should be resting in a motel halfway between San Diego and Los Angeles, but he knew she wanted to talk. There was so much to talk *about.* So now they sat in the street cafe and he could not talk to her. He could not even look at her. He could not explain that he was a man trapped within himself. He knew she was aware of it, but like all women she needed him to come only far enough outside himself to let her share his fear. Just far enough that he could not make it. She needed him to verbalize it, to ask for—if not help, then companionship through his country of mental terrors.

But he could not give her what she wanted. He could not give her himself.

Their affair had been subject to the traditional rules. A lotta laughs, a lotta passion, and then she had gotten pregnant.

And in their mutual concern, something deeper had passed between them. There was a chance, for the first time in Niven's life, that he might cleave to someone and find not disillusionment, derangement and disaster, but reality and a little peace.

She had arranged the abortion, he had paid for it, and now they were together here, as she waited for him to speak. Voiceless, imprisoned in his past and his sense of the reality of the world in which he had been *forced* to live. Niven knew he was letting her slip away.

But he could not help himself.

"Jerry." He wanted to pretend she had not spoken, knowing she was trying to help him get started. But he found himself looking up. She wasn't beautiful, but he liked the face very much. It was a face he could live with. She smiled. "Where are we going, Jerry?"

He knew what he had to answer to please her, to win her, but he said, "I don't know what that means."

"It means: There's nothing artificial or unwanted holding us together any more. *Or* holding us apart. What do we do now?"

He knew what he had to answer to please her, to win her, but he said, "We do whatever we want to do. Don't push on me too hard."

Her eyes flashed for an instant. "I'm not *pushing,* Jerry, I'm inquiring. I'm thirty-five and I'm unattached and it's getting frightening going to bed alone without a future. Does that seem rational to you?"

"Rational, but unnecessary. You've got a few good weeks left in you."

"It isn't funny time for me, Jerry. I have to know. Have you got room in your world for me?"

He knew what he had to answer to please her, to win her, but he said, "There's barely room enough in my world for *me,* baby. And if you knew what my world was like you wouldn't want to come into it. You see before you the last of the cynics, the last of the misogynists, the last of the bitter men. I look out on a landscape littered with the refuse of a misspent youth. All my gods and goddesses had feet of shit, and there they lie, like Etruscan statuary, the noses bashed off. Believe me, Berta, you don't want into my world."

Her face was lined in resignation now. "Unraveling the charming syntax, what you're telling me is: We had a good time and we made a small mistake, but it's corrected now, so get lost."

"No, I'm saying—"

But she was up from the curbside table and stalking across the street. He threw down a bill on the tablecloth and went after her.

She managed to keep ahead of him. Mostly because he wanted to give her time to cool off. As they passed a narrow side alley he pulled abreast of her, and taking her arm gently was allowed to draw her into its shadowed coolness. "All it takes is believing, Jerry! Is that so much to ask?"

"Believe," he snapped, the instant fury that always lay beneath the surface of his charm boiling up. "Believe. The same mealymouth crap they tell the rednecks in the boondocks. Believe in this, and believe in that, and have faith, and holy holy you'll get your ass saved. Well, I *don't* believe."

"Then how can any woman believe in *you?*"

It was more than anger that forced the words from him. It was a helplessness that translated itself into cynical ruthlessness. "I'd say that was *her* problem."

She pulled her arm free and turning without really seeing where she was going, she plunged down the alley. Down a flight of dim steps, and on again, a lower level of the same alley. "Berta!" he called after her.

Huaraches, the sign had said, and *Serapes.*

A shop in a dingy back alley in a seedy border town more noted for street-corner whores than for wrinkled and leathery tellers-of-the-future who sold huaraches and serapes in their spare time. But he had quickly followed her, trying to find a way out of his own inarticulateness, to settle the senseless quarrel they were having and salvage this one good thing from a past filled with broken glass. He wanted to tell her his need was not a temporary thing, not a matter of good times only, of transitory bodies reaching and never quite finding one another. He wanted to tell her that he had lost all belief in his world, a world that seemed incapable of bringing to him any richness, any meaning, any vitality. But his words—if they came at all—he knew would come with ill-restrained fury, with anger and sharpness, insulting her, forcing her to walk away as she now walked away.

He had followed her, down the alley.

And the old, wizened, papyrus-tough Mexican had limped out of his shop, bent almost double with age, like a blue-belly lizard, all alertness and cunning, and had offered to tell them of the future.

"No thanks," Niven had said, catching up to her at that moment.

But she had tossed her head, defiance, and had entered the shop, leaving him standing in the alley. Niven had followed her, hoping she would turn in an instant, and come out again, and he would find the words. But she had gone deeper into the musky dimness of the shop, and the old prognosticator had begun casting the runes, had begun mixing the herbs and bits of offal and vileness he averred were necessary for truth and brightness in the visions. A

bit of wild-dog hair. A strip of flesh from the instep of a drowned child. Three drops of menstrual blood from a whore. The circular sucker from the underside of a polyp's tentacle. Other things. Unspeakable, nameless, foul-smelling, terrible.

And then, strangely, he had said he would not tell the future of Berta . . . but of Niven.

There in the fetid closeness of a shop whose dimensions were lost in dusk, the old Mexican said Niven was a man without belief, without faith, without trust, and so was damned; a man doomed and forsaken. He said all the dark and tongueless things Niven had never been able to say of himself. And Niven, in fury, in frenzy brought on by a hurricane of truth, smashed the old man, swung across the little round table with all the strength in his big body, clubbed the old man, and in the same movement swept the strange mixed ingredients from the filthy table, as Berta screamed—from someplace far away.

And in that instant, a silent explosion. A force and impact that had hurled him out of himself. In that timeless, breathless instant Niven had been there/not-there. He had somehow inexplicably been moved *elsewhere.* In a bowl, in a valley, in a land, in a time or place or somewhere facing a centaur. A creature of mythology, a creature from the past of man's fables.

Huaraches, the sign had said, and *Serapes.*

Facing a live centaur just a moment ago. Facing the creature that had left the world before there had been a name to fit the men that Niven had become. A god without worshippers, this centaur. In a world that did not believe, facing a man who did not believe.

And in that instant—like the previous instant of truth—Niven was *all* the men who had forsaken their gods. Who had allowed the world to tell them they were alone; and believed it. Now he had to face one of the lost demigods.

A demigod who now sought revenge on the race of Men who had devised machines to banish them from the real world.

Down and down and down into the waters of nowhere Niven plunged, all thoughts simply one thought, all memories crashing and jarring, all merged and melded and impinging upon a dense tapestry of seaweed images.

His breath seemed to clog in his throat. His stomach bulged with the amount of water he had swallowed, with the pressure on his temples, with the blackness that deluged him behind his eyes. Niven felt memory depart and consciousness at once returning—and leaving. He was coming back from the past to awareness, only to let it slip away finally as he drowned.

He made feeble swimming motions, overhand movements of arms that had sensation only by recall, not by his own volition. He moved erratically in the water, as thick as gelatin, and his movement toward the bottomless bottom was arrested. He moved upward through the water now, and saw a dim light, far ahead and above him.

An eternity. There. Toward it he struggled, and when he thought it was ended, he reached a ledge. He pulled himself toward it, and the dark water seeped through him till he was limp and dying. Then his head broke water. He was in an underground cavern. He spewed out mouthfuls of warm, evil-tasting water.

For a very long time he lay half on the ledge, half in the water, till someone came and pulled him up. Niven lay there on his stomach, learning to live again, while the one who had saved him stood silently waiting. Niven tried to get to his feet, and he was helped. He could not see who the man was, though he could feel a long robe in the dimness, and there was a light, a sort of corona that seemed to come dimly from the man. Then together, with the man supporting him, Niven went away from there, and they

climbed for a long while between walls of stone, to the world that was outside.

He stood in the light, and was tired and sad and blinded by things he did not believe. Then the man left him, and as he walked slowly away, Niven recognized the beard and the infinitely sad eyes and the way he was dressed, and even the light.

And Jesus left him, with a sad smile, and Niven stood alone, for another time that was long, and empty.

Once, late that night, he thought he heard the bull-ram horn of Odin, ringing across his dim, shadowed land, but he could not be sure. And once he heard a sound of something passing, and when he opened his eyes to look it was a cat-headed woman, and he thought *Bast,* and she slipped smoothly away into the darkness without saying a word to him. And toward morning there was a light in the sky that seemed to be a burning chariot, Phaëthon the charioteer, Helios's burning chariot, but that was probably the effects of the drowning, the hunger, the sorrow. He could not be certain.

So he wandered. And time passed without ever moving, in the land without a name, and *his* name was Niven, but it was no more important a name than Apollo or Vishnu or Baal, for it was not a name in which men believed, it was only the name of a man who had not believed. And if gods and demigods cannot be called back, when their names have been known, then how can a man whose name was *never* known be called back.

For Berta, god had been Niven; but he had not given her an opportunity to believe in him. He had prevented her from having faith in him, and so there were no believers for a man named Niven, as there were no true believers for Serapis or Perseus or Mummu.

Very late the next night, Niven realized he would always, *always* live in this terrible Coventry where old gods

went to die; gods and demigods who would never speak to him; and with no hope of return.

For as he had believed in no god . . .
No god believed in him.

BY THE FALLS

Harry Harrison

It is perhaps presumptuous of me to include a story of mine in this volume, but I do have the excuse that I did have a number of letters from readers about the two earlier volumes in this series and more than one suggested that I use a story of my own next time. And the publishers don't mind. However all this is just an excuse; I am a writer as well as an editor and watching all the boys Do Their Thing in print has made me most envious. I want my ins as well. Here they are.

This is a mood story. When I began it I had very little idea where it was going—unusual for me since I normally plot quite tightly and cannot begin a story until I know what the end will be. By The Falls *is totally different because I wanted to capture a strong emotion that I had experienced.*

When I wrote this story I was living in California near the Mexican border, a secluded spot with sagebrush, roadrunners and jack rabbits in the back yard. After dark a soothing silence descended that lulled one to blessed sleep. Until the cars came down the hill. The hill, called Suicide Hill locally—with good reason—had no traffic at all when we bought the house. The road down the hill led only to tomato fields. But, in the true California tradition, the tomato fields became tract houses and cars appeared in growing numbers. The hill is steep and straight and our house is the one at the bottom. The speed limit is 25 mph which is completely ignored by the machine-age morons

who come down it like dive bombers. (One of them who veered off the road, drunk of course, went through a telephone pole, a 12-inch tree, a 14-inch tree, then uprooted a 30-inch tree before rolling upside down into the front lawn. He was doing at least 80 mph.)

That is the scene. A summer's night, quiet as death, so silent you can almost hear the stars scratching across the sky. Joan and the children asleep, one last scotch and soda to relax the limbs and so to bed. Windows open and nothing except warm air and silence coming in. Sleep approaches, the body relaxes and sinks into that strange moment when it is neither awake nor asleep yet is part of both. Synapses are unhooked, the limbs grow limp, sleep engulfs.

When into that moment of peace a sound intruded. The hum of a distant bee on the hill above that grew instantly to a shrill whine of an overstrained motor. In a second the gearbox screamed to its top pitch, then moaned down and started again as it was kicked into a higher gear. Again. And again. And all the time growing louder, higher, screaming, roaring, lights in the window, an explosion of sound. Coming right at me.

I awoke. Well I didn't really wake up, rather I found myself about six inches in the air, muscles quivering, heart going like a triphammer, eyes wide and staring. Lights tore across the blinds, the machine of death roared by—and I dropped back to bed covered with sweat.

And possessed of a vision. Before retiring I had been thinking about an article I was preparing and about the role of giantism in SF. Drowned giants, mile-high mountains, supersize fish, the themes are familiar. This relationship must have been in my thoughts because the vision I had did not contain an automobile. Instead, sharp and clear in an instant, I saw a great, wide, black, gigantic waterfall descending upon me. Even after I awoke I could still see this falling mass of water and examine it from all

sides, it was that clear. And my heart still pounded and I was wide awake and possessed of strong emotions, far from sleep.

That was it. Coin for the writer, instantly transmutable. Holding to the vision and the terror I thought about plot, characters and such until I finally went to sleep. In the morning I remembered the entire thing, including the emotion, and sat down and typed this story with that emotion *there all the time. The form the story took was modern. If I had written it say ten years ago I might have done a story about a real waterfall on a distant planet. (Ahh, those distant planets, how handy they are.) Now I did not want to. I had been reading a lot of the newer writers and admired their experiments, the liberation of the medium that they exercised. Could I do a story of this kind? Established writers—Brian Aldiss is the name instantly associated with the thought—have worked in the newer forms and led the way. Why not I? Have a go. Here is a great big symbol with emotion attached to it. What could I do with it? Make it stand for many things. The people above the falls could be the American Negro, or all of us who need aid. Read into it what you will—it is all yours now. I have passed on the symbols that were part of my life and now they are a part of yours.*

—Harry Harrison

It was the rich damp grass, slippery as soap, covering the path, that caused Carter to keep slipping and falling, not the steepness of the hill. The front of his raincoat was wet and his knees were muddy long before he reached the summit. And with each step forward and upward the con-

tinuous roar of sound grew louder. He was hot and very tired by the time he reached the top of the ridge, yet all of his discomforts were instantly forgotten as he looked out across the wide bay.

Like everyone else he had heard about The Falls ever since he had been a small child, and he had seen countless photographs, and films of it on television. In spite of all this preparation he was still not ready for the impact of reality.

It was a falling ocean, a vertical river—how many millions of gallons a second did they say went by? It stretched out far into the distance across the bay, its farthest reaches obscured by the clouds of floating spray that rose about its base. The bay seethed and boiled with the impact of that falling weight, raising foam-capped waves that crashed against the rocks below. Carter could feel the impact of the water on the solid stone as a vibration in the ground, but all sound was swallowed up in the greater roar of The Falls. This was a reverberation so outrageous and overpowering that his ears could not become accustomed to it. Though they became numbed from the constant impact, the very bones of the skull carried the sound to his brain, shivering and battering it. When he put his hands over his ears he was horrified to discover that it was still as loud as ever. As he stood there, swaying and wide-eyed, one of the constantly changing air currents that formed about the base of The Falls shifted suddenly and swept a wall of spray down upon him. The inundation lasted only a few seconds but it was heavier than any rainfall he had ever experienced, had ever believed possible. When it passed he was gasping for air, so dense had been the falling water.

Quivering with never-before-experienced emotions, Carter turned and looked along the ridge toward the gray and water-blackened granite of the cliff, and to the house that huddled at its base like a stony blister. It was built of

the same granite as the cliff and appeared no less solid. Running and slipping, his hands still over his ears, Carter hurried toward the house.

For a short time the spray was blown across the bay and out to sea, so that golden afternoon sunlight poured down on the house, starting streamers of vapor from its sharply sloping roof. It was a no-nonsense building, as solid as the rock against which it was pressed. Only two windows penetrated the blackness of the front that faced The Falls, tiny and deep they were like little suspicious eyes. There was no door here, but Carter saw that a path of stone flags led around the corner. He followed it and there, set into the wall on the far side away from The Falls, was a small and deep-sunk door. It had no arch but was shielded under a great stone lintel a good two feet in diameter. Carter stepped into the opening that framed the door and looked in vain for any knocker upon the heavy, iron-bolted timbers that formed it. The unceasing, world-filling thunder of The Falls made thinking almost impossible and it was only after he had pressed uselessly against the sealed portal that he realized that no knocker, though loud as cannon, could be heard above that sound. With this thought in mind he lowered his hands and tried to force his mind to coherent thought. There must be some way of announcing his presence. When he stepped back out of the alcove he noticed that there was a rusty iron knob set into the wall a few feet farther along. He seized and twisted this, but it would not turn. However, when he pulled on it, although it resisted, he drew it slowly away from the wall to disclose the length of chain that was attached to the back of the handle. The chain was heavily greased and in good condition, which was a fair omen. He continued to pull until a yard of chain emerged from the opening and then, no matter how hard he pulled, no more would come. He released the handle and it bounced against the rough stone of the wall. For a few instants it

remained there until, with a jerky mechanical motion, the chain began to be drawn back into the wall and the knob was once more resting against its surface.

Whatever device this odd mechanism actuated seemed to perform its desired function. Less than a minute later the heavy door swung open and a man appeared in the opening. He wordlessly examined his visitor while Carter did the same.

Here was a man who was very much like the building and the cliffs behind it. Solid, no-nonsense, worn, lined and graying now. But he had resisted the years even as he showed their marks upon him. His back was as straight as any young man's and his hands, knob-knuckled as they were, had a look of determined strength. Blue were his eyes and very much the color of the water falling endlessly, thunderously, on the far side of the building. He wore knee-high fisherman's boots, plain corduroy pants and a boiled wool, gray sweater. His face did not change expression as he waved Carter forward into the building.

When the thick door was swung shut and the many sealing bars shoved back into place the silence possessed a quality of its own. It was not the absence of sound that Carter had known elsewhere, but a positive statement of no-sound, a bubble of peace pushed right up against the very base of the all-sound of The Falls. He was momentarily deafened and he knew it, but not so deaf that he did not know that the hammering thunder of The Falls had been shut outside. The other man must have sensed how his visitor felt because he nodded his head in a reassuring manner as he took his coat, then pointed to a comfortable chair set by the deal table near the fire. Carter sank gratefully into it as the other turned away, to return a moment later with a tray bearing a decanter and two glasses. He poured a measure of wine into each glass and set one down before Carter, who nodded gratitude and seized it in both hands to steady their shaking. After a first large gulp

he sipped at it while the tremors died and his hearing slowly returned. The other man went about the room on various tasks and when Carter heard his approaching footsteps he realized that he was very much recovered. He turned and nodded.

"I must thank you for your hospitality. When I came in I was . . . shaken."

"How are you now? Has the wine helped?" the man said loudly, almost shouting, and Carter realized that his own words had not been heard. Of course, the man must be hard of hearing. It was a wonder he was not stone deaf.

"Very good, thank you," Carter shouted back. "Very kind of you indeed." The man nodded in return, smiling slightly. "My name is Carter. I'm a reporter, which is why I have come to see you."

"My name is Bodum, you must know that if you have come here to talk to me. You write for the newspapers?"

"Only the biggest." Carter coughed: the constant shouting was irritating his throat. "And I of course know you, Mr. Bodum, that is I know you by reputation. You're the Man by The Falls."

"Forty-three years now," Bodum said with solid pride. "I've lived here and have never been away for a single night. Not that it has been easy. When the wind is the wrong way the spray is blown over the house for days and it is hard to breathe and even the fire goes out. I built the chimney myself, there is a bend part way up with baffles and doors. The smoke goes up, but if water comes down the baffles stop it and its weight opens the doors and it drains away through a pipe to the outside. I can show you where it drains, black with soot the wall is there."

Carter was looking around the room while Bodum talked, at the dim shapes barely seen in the wavering light from the fire, and at the two windows set into the wall.

"Those windows," he said, "you put them in yourself? May I look out?"

"Took a year apiece, each one. Stand on that bench it will bring you to the right level. They're armored glass, specially made, solid as the wall around them now that I have them anchored well. Don't be afraid, go right up to it. The window's safe. Look how the glass is anchored."

Carter was not looking at the glass but at The Falls outside. He had not realized how close the building was to the falling water. Perched on the very edge of the cliff there was nothing to be seen except the wall of blackened wet granite to his right and the foaming maelstrom of the bay far below. And before him, above him, filing space, The Falls. All the thickness of wall could not cut out their sound completely when he touched the glass with his fingertips he could feel the vibration of the water's impact.

The window did not lessen the effect The Falls had upon him, but it enabled him to stand and watch and think, as he had been unable to do on the outside. It was very much like the peephole into the flames of a furnace, or even a window into hell. He could watch without being destroyed, but the fear of what was on the other side did not lessen. Something black flickered in the falling water and was gone.

"There—did you see that," he called out. "Something came down The Falls. What could it possibly be?"

Bodum nodded wisely. "Over forty years I have been here and I can show you what comes down The Falls." He thrust a splint into the fire and lit a lamp from it, then, picking the lamp up, he waved Carter after him. They crossed the room and he held the light to a large glass bell jar.

"Must be twenty years ago it washed up on the shore. Every bone in its body broke too. Stuffed and mounted it myself."

Carter pressed close, looking at the staring shoe-button eyes and the gaping jaws and pointed teeth. The limbs were stiff and unnatural, the body under the fur bulging in

the wrong places. Bodum was by no means a skillful taxidermist. Yet, perhaps by accident, he had captured a look of terror in the animal's expression and stance.

"It's a dog," Carter said. "Very much like other dogs."

Bodum was offended, his voice as cold as shout can be. "Like them, perhaps, but not of them. Every bone broken I told you. How else could a dog have appeared here in this bay?"

"I'm sorry, I did not mean to suggest for an instant. Down The Falls, of course. I just meant it is so much like the dogs we have that, perhaps there is a whole new world up there. Dogs, and everything, just like ours."

"I never speculate," Bodum said, mollified. "I'll make some coffee."

He took the lamp to the stove and Carter, left alone in the half darkness went back to the window. It drew him. "I must ask you some questions for my article," he said, but did not speak loudly enough for Bodum to hear. The article, everything, was forgotten as he looked out at The Falls. The wind shifted, the spray was blown clear, and The Falls were once more a mighty river coming down from the sky. When he turned his head sideways it was just like looking across a river.

And there, upstream, a ship appeared. Large, a great liner, with rows of portholes. It sailed the surface of the river faster than ship had ever sailed before and he had to jerk his head to follow its motion. When it passed, no more than a few hundred yards away, for one instant he could see it clearly. There were people aboard it, hanging to the rails, some with their mouths open as though shouting in fear. Then it was gone and there was only the water, rushing endlessly by.

"Did you see it?" Carter shouted, spinning about.

"The coffee will be ready soon."

"There, out there," Carter cried, taking Bodum by the arm. "In The Falls. It was a ship, I swear it was, falling

from up above. With people on it. There must be a whole world up there that we know nothing about."

Bodum reached up to the shelf for a cup, breaking Carter's grip with the powerful movement of his arm.

"My dog came down The Falls. I found it and stuffed it myself."

"Your dog, of course, I'll not deny that. But there were people on that ship and I'll swear—I'm not mad—that their *skins* were a different color from ours."

"Skin is skin, just skin color."

"I know. That is what *we* have. But it must be possible for skins to be other colors, even if we don't know about it."

"Sugar?"

"Yes, please. Two."

Carter sipped at the coffee: it was strong and warm. In spite of himself he was drawn back to the window. He looked out and sipped at the coffee—and started when something black and formless came down. And other things. He could not tell what they were because the spray was blowing toward the house again. There were grounds in the bottom so he left the last sips and put the cup carefully aside.

Again the eddying wind currents shifted the screen of spray to one side just in time for him to see another of the objects go by.

"That was a house! I saw it clearly as I see this one. But wood perhaps, not stone, smaller. And black as though it had been partially burnt. Come look, there may be more."

Bodum banged the pot as he rinsed it out in the sink. "What do your newspapers want to know about me? Over forty years here, there are a lot of things I can tell you about."

"What is up there, above The Falls, on top of the cliff? Do people live up there? Can there be a whole world up there of which we live in total ignorance?"

Bodum hesitated, frowned in thought, before he answered.

"I believe they have dogs up there."

"Yes," Carter answered, hammering his fist on the window ledge, not knowing whether to smile or cry. The water fell by, the floor and walls shook with the power of it.

"There, more and more things going by." He spoke quietly, to himself. "I can tell what they are. That—that could have been a tree, and that a bit of fence. The smaller ones can be bodies, animals, logs, anything. There is a different world above The Falls, and in that world something terrible is happening. And we don't even know about it. We don't even know what world is there. . . ." He struck again and again on the stone until his fist hurt.

The sun shone on the water and there was a change, just here and there at first, changing and shifting.

"Why—the water seems to be changing color. Pink it is, no *red*. More and more of it. There, for an instant, it was all red. The color of blood."

He spun about to face the dim room and tried to smile but his lips were drawn back hard from his teeth when he did.

"Blood? Impossible. There can't be that much blood in the whole world. What is happening up there? WHAT IS HAPPENING?"

His scream did not disturb Bodum who only nodded his head in agreement. "I'll show you something," he said. "But only if you promise not to write about it. People might laugh at me. I've been here over forty years and that is nothing to laugh about."

"My word of honor, not a word. Just show me. Perhaps it has something to do with what is happening. . . ."

Bodum took down a heavy Bible and opened it on the table next to the lamp. It was set in very black type, seri-

ous and impressive. He turned pages until he came to a piece of very ordinary paper.

"I found this on the shore. During the winter. No one had been here for months. It may have come over The Falls. Now I'm not saying it did, but it is possible. You will agree it is possible."

"Oh yes, very possible. How else could it have come here?" Carter reached out and touched it. "I agree, very ordinary paper. Torn on one edge, wrinkled where it was wet and then dried." He turned it over. "There is lettering on the other side."

"Yes. But it is meaningless. It is no word I know."

"Nor I, and I speak four languages. Could it have a meaning?"

"Impossible. A word like that."

"No human language." He shaped his lips and spoke the letters aloud. "Aych . . . Eee . . . Ell . . . Pea."

"What could *HELP* mean," Bodum shouted, louder than ever. "A child scribbled it. Meaningless." He seized the paper and crumpled it and threw it into the fire.

"You'll want to write a story about me," he said proudly. "I have been here over forty years, and if there is one man in the entire world who is an authority on The Falls it is me.

"I know everything that there is to know about them."

THE COMING OF THE SUN

Langdon Jones

Mr. Harrison has asked me to comment on the new British SF, the movement that has come to be known as the "new wave." On the face of it this is a reasonable request. The Coming of the Sun *was an early new wave story; I have edited one anthology of the new wave and appeared in about six others; all my stories, with one exception, have first appeared in the vehicle of the new wave, the magazine* New Worlds, *and I have been involved editorially with* New Worlds *for about six years. But in point of fact I don't really know what the new wave is. In writing I have been doing what, for me, seemed to be right. In editing I have been concerned with getting good work.*

However I'm not trying to pretend that things haven't been happening in science fiction in recent years. Certainly younger writers are using the imagery of SF in a completely different way, and have discarded the restrictive conventions that have in the past given SF its identity, and at the same time have ensured that it would never be really good. But I do not see how all these writers can be classified under one label, especially now that the disease seems to have gained such a hold across the Atlantic.

Labels, like slogans, have a certain limited use. But they are both simplifications, and there comes a time when simplification is no longer required. There is a great diversity in the field at the present time, in ideas, presentation and quality.

In other words, I do not believe there is anything homogeneous enough to be called simply the new wave. There are many writers working in many directions, some of them more successfully than others.

I do not believe, either, that The Coming of the Sun *is really SF. I do not believe that Thomas M. Disch, John Sladek or Pamela Zoline write SF. I don't believe that the Jerry Cornelius stories are SF. I don't even believe that the anthology I edited for Hutchinson,* The New SF, *is SF! Certainly all the writers mentioned above are appearing in SF anthologies, probably because they tend to write more short stories than the average "mainstream" writer, and the SF field offers a larger outlet for short stories. But there is a tendency for the "new British SF" to appear in book form without any label at all.*

With this enormous diversity of aims, it is difficult for me to talk about this kind of story, as Mr. Harrison has asked, but I will try to talk about general aspects of modern "speculative" writing, before going on to this particular story.

The most obvious thing about this kind of writing, and the thing which seems to horrify most readers of conventional science fiction, is the fact that the linear narrative ceases to play such an important part. This gives rise to the oft-repeated and tedious "beginning, middle and end" protest (although J. G. Ballard did *actually write one story without these attributes!). A result of the conventional narrative being weakened or discarded altogether is that the structure of the story may become infinitely more complex, from the basic form itself to the sentence structure. The new writers are now using, as a matter of course, devices that for a long time have been generally used in poetry—extreme compression, resonance, association, and so forth. They are using language in the way that I think it should be used; not trying to destroy its color in the way that some of the conventional SF writers do, but to utilize*

those rich veins of association and resonance that it carries.

Another effect of this refusal to depend on the linear narrative is that the stories can work more easily on more than one level. There can be a whole range of symbolic sub-levels. Symbolism, too, is a somewhat tricky subject. Many people, when trying to work out the "meaning" of this kind of story, attempt to locate the symbols and "work them out." As an interesting academic pastime this is fair enough, but it can reduce fiction to the level of a crossword puzzle. Much "new SF" is not deliberately allegorical—the symbols are supposed to work purely through association. The reader stopping to work out what they mean, for many writers has the effect of totally destroying the effects they are trying to achieve.

What I have been describing has been happening in general fiction for some time. But I do not think that it has happened before so consistently and with such a large number of writers. This kind of writing is not for the literal-minded (very little fiction is), but it should be able to tap those responsive areas which are common to nearly all of us.

To turn specifically to The Coming of the Sun, *this is the central story from a trilogy of short stories called* The Eye of the Lens. *It was written during a time of great confusion, and having written conventional science fiction up to this point, I found that working on the story was like trying to hack a path through impenetrable jungle. The set was begun in 1966, and it took fifteen months to complete the trilogy of about fifteen thousand words. The first part of* The Coming of the Sun *to be written was* Black Wave . . . , *and the whole things was generally constructed in a piecemeal way that I had never used before, nor ever have since. Fortunately friends who had asked to read it were enthusiastic about the story (although one girl I knew was advised by a friend who had read the story not*

to have anything to do with me ever again!), and this helped in that it showed me that what I was trying to say was actually coming through, something I was far from sure of at the time.

In the original story, the section Soleil de Sang, d'Oiseaux *consisted of excerpts from Oliver Messiaen's text to his choral work, the* Trois Petites Liturgies. *Both the text and the music had a powerful effect on me while I was writing the story, and in fact helped me to solve a problem that was holding things up at that time. When it was written, I got in touch with the publishers who were the agents for Messiaen in this country. They politely asked me to send them the story, which I did. Within a short period I received my typescript back again accompanied by an extremely chilly letter telling me that they didn't feel inclined to forward the story to Messiaen.*

Shortly after this I was due to travel up to the Oxford Festival where Messiaen was due to appear, and interview him there. I thought that this would be a good opportunity to ask Messiaen about the story, but found, disconcertingly, that the interpreter was a member of the firm with whom I had been corresponding. I decided to brazen it out, and before we saw Messiaen I mentioned the trouble I had been having. "Oh. That was you, was it?" I confirmed that it was, and asked why the story seemed to have had such an effect. The only response I could get was, "After all, it is *a sacred work."*

While I would hardly call The Coming of the Sun *a "sacred work," it is very much concerned with religion. While a large part of the last story is an attack on the church, much of* The Coming of the Sun *is concerned with genuine religious experience. Schizophrenia is possibly our most popular religion.*

The story was needed for an anthology, so the publishers approached Messiaen, who refused to give permission for the quotations to be used, on various reasonable

grounds. However it was disappointing not to be able to use this text, as this meant that a lot of rewriting was necessary—not just of this section—and it meant also that I had to substitute another story for the anthology. Also the Messiaen text had a strange and appropriate atmosphere —a mosaic of colorful imagery, fervent and serene at the same time. It would not be imitated, and so although I have left in a couple of Messiaen's lines, I have shortened this section, and have tried to make it work in a different way.

There are many quotations from other people in this story; again this is something I hadn't used before and haven't since. There are references to or quotations from Robert Schumann, Gian-Carlo Menotti, Shakespeare, the Bible and Rene Char, among others. There are also musical associations.

The reason I have chosen this story for inclusion is that it was, as well as being my first piece of speculative fiction, the first story of mine to say anything worth saying. It also caused me generally more trouble than any other story I have attempted. It is interesting too that it seemed to get such strong reactions from those who disliked it. I have since been made to feel like a social pariah by some of those people who have been offended by those of my stories which have an explicit sexual content, but this story, without much sex at all, seemed to achieve the same effect.

The first idea came when I was watching the television news, and heard of a fire in a mental hospital, in which several patients in padded cells had been burned to death. Apart from finding this a particularly horrifying idea, I began to speculate on how this destructive fire was interpreted in the patients' fantasies, and that was the beginning of the story.

—Langdon Jones

Cellar Fire

Rudolf opened the cellar door, spilling light into the dim chamber. He walked carefully down the wooden steps, the yellow light shining on his bald scalp. He coughed as fumes from the dormant paraffin-fired boiler caught at his throat, and as he reached the bottom of the steps he muttered slow obscenities.

Normally Michael would come down here with him to supervise this preparing of the boiler, but Michael couldn't make it this time. He was in the hospital after being attacked by someone. Rudolf smiled to himself and a silver line coursed down his chin.

Rudolf was tall, but stooped. All his movements were slow and deliberate and accompanied by gruntings and pantings as if each one cost him supreme effort or pleasure. A pink scar traced a smooth curve over the surface of his shaven head, as if following the sutures of the skull beneath. He was dressed in a formless garment of rough gray cloth. In his mind there was very little, save for a general hatred of a world that had done him some unspecified wrong. His hatred was generalized, directed toward tables, chairs, walls, as well as people.

His life was here. His past was now far buried, and his half-formed thoughts swirled about his skull like mist rising on a marsh.

He shuffled across the room to the cans of paraffin. "Bastards. . . ." he muttered to the cans, as he bent to pick one up. If he was capable of liking any place, then he liked it here in the cellar. He liked the wet brick walls, the dark corners; he liked the cobwebs and the wooden boxes

stacked in the far corner; he liked the silence and the electric light bulb which swung on its flex, swaying the room back and forth beneath his feet. He liked the smells of the cellar, the smells of mustiness and decay.

He moved to the boiler with his can of paraffin swaying in his hand, and lowered the can to the floor. He unscrewed the fuel cap on the pump and inserted the funnel. Bending down slowly, he lifted and tilted the can, watching the blue liquid bubbling down the vortex of the funnel. When the can was empty he threw it, smiling, into the corner, enjoying the clanging sound it made. Michael wouldn't have allowed him to throw the can. He primed the boiler, and when the pressure was up, pressed the green button. A glow came into life behind a small square of glass and a chugging sound began. There was a flash, a bang, and the boiler fired, a jet of flame appearing behind the glass. He enjoyed looking at the fire; that was why he had come down here without supervision, to press his nose, as he was doing now, against the glass and to watch the potent flare jetting and roaring.

After a while he became tired of looking at the flame, and turned once again to the collection of cans in the corner. He shuffled across, his ragged clothes trailing on the dirty floor. He unscrewed the cap of one of the cans, and drew in, his nose pressed into the can, the oily softness of the paraffin's odor. Then he raised the can slowly above his head, in both hands, and inverted it so that the liquid fell in a broken stream, splashing onto the floor, soaking the bottoms of his trouser legs. He felt an unusual excitement, and breathed in deeply.

When the can was empty, the floor was swimming with liquid. He looked at the other cans; they reminded him of policemen. He didn't like policemen; a vague freak of memory told him that policemen didn't believe in Jesus. He went to the other cans and, one by one, he twisted off the caps, and threw them about the room. There were about thirty

cans, and they stood at his feet, their round mouths open in surprise. He was like a king, and they stood at his feet like subjects. He felt happy.

He kicked at them, and one fell over, bubbling away its life.

"Bastards. . . ."

He picked up one of the cans and swung it round, creating a transient parabola of blueness that sparkled in the light and then sprayed both him and the room. His skull was throbbing, and something began to grow in his throat; he had to gasp for breath. His big hands clenched and unclenched at his sides, and the breath whistled through his teeth. He picked up another of the cans, held it upside down and deliberately sprayed his feet. He threw its corpse away, and as it bounced into the corner shouted, "Clatter!"

He had no memory of feeling like this before. Actually he had, many times in childhood, and he had last felt it in a woodyard between the thighs of an anonymous woman.

He picked up another can, emptied and killed it, and threw it away. Another. Another. He strode among the cans, kicking, pushing aside, growing in stature all the time. The smell of paraffin was strong in the air now, and he gloried in the odor, filling his chest with its stickiness.

When all the cans had been emptied, he stood with his feet in the paraffin, beating his chest with a large hand, his scar bright red and appearing to glow in the dim cellar light.

An idea began to grow in his mind. He found that he was shaking with excitement. A stirring began in his groin, and he put out long and clumsy arms, wanting to embrace anything. He walked over to the boiler and picked up a metal rod that had been standing nearby. His throat was nearly blocked now, and his body was constantly shaken by small shudders.

He plunged down the rod and smashed the thick glass. The flame was free, to breathe!

For a while he watched the flame, smiling at it, then he abruptly bent down and ripped a strip of cloth from his trouser leg. He dipped it into the paraffin until it was soaked. He suddenly found tears filling his eyes. He lowered the cloth on to the roaring flame, and through the tears saw it burst with dancing fire that was reflected a million times to become a universe of light.

He wiped his eyes and, while he could still see, threw the flaming cloth into the center of the floor. For a while, nothing happened, but suddenly the fire widened and widened, from a drop, to a pool, to a lake, to a sea of fire. He felt a rising and a swelling, and as the fire grew, so did he. Fumes were in the air, and the cellar was lit with a brightness that it had never known before. It was hot, and as the fire came closer to him, hotter.

At the end he stood there, arms and legs outstretched, erect and potent, shouting with happiness at the flame, his friend and creation.

Finally he knew the glorious pain of self-immolation.

In the Lounge

Light comes through the French windows and splashes warmly across the parquet floor, reflecting into the far corners of the room. Near the window is a grand piano, and a man sits at it, dressed in rough gray clothing. On his face is a look of complete involvement in what he is playing; his eyes are half-closed and he sways his head from side to side. His hands rise and fall, jerkily and mechanically, and he plays a constant series of random and dissonant chords.

Also in the room, sitting in armchairs facing each other, are two people: a man and a woman.

JOHN: Are you sure you feel all right this morning, Mary?

MARY: Yes thanks, John, fine; it's just that poor Robert sitting there makes me feel a bit depressed. (They both glance at the pianist.)

JOHN (to the pianist): Good morning, Eusebius!

PIANIST (turning quickly and speaking swiftly and angrily): *Florestan!*

MARY (shivering): Oh! I hate this place!

JOHN: Well, I don't think you're alone in that. I think we all hate it—even the ones who don't know anything.

MARY: Yes. So many of them don't understand, but you can sense that they feel fear, just the same as us.

(She glances at the piano again.)

One, two, three, four. . . . I wonder how many chords he plays each day? I wonder whether he enjoys it, or whether each note is a torment.

JOHN: And there's Colin, every day, curled up in the bathroom, his hairy legs in front of him like a trembling shield. It's like living constantly in some kind of disaster area.

MARY: Yes, a moment after the disaster has occurred; there is the same feeling here of mute horror, just like the first few seconds after an accident.

JOHN: The Hindenberg falls in smoking ruins by breakfast time; at lunch the Titanic meets its end, and Christ is crucified by dinner time.

MARY: Oh, I wish I could *leave!*

JOHN: How can we? There's no way out for us past the eyes of authority. Two mistakes have been made, we are forgotten, and here we shall remain until we're too old to care any more. . . .

MARY: Oh, please don't! The whole thing depresses me so much. Let's go out somewhere; would you like a walk in the garden?

JOHN (preoccupied): Yes . . . yes . . . in a while.

(Mary suddenly inclines her head and sniffs at the air.)

MARY: John—can you smell something?

JOHN (vaguely): What?
MARY: It's almost . . . as if something's . . . burning.
JOHN: I saw . . . two dogs once . . .
MARY: John—I'm sure there's something burning! I think we should get out!
JOHN: . . . two dogs in the street . . .
MARY: Perhaps it's just a bonfire.
JOHN: . . . not doing anybody any harm. . . .

A Scene in the Street

The scene is a medium-sized suburban shopping center. Fairly heavy traffic is moving past, but there are not many people on the pavements. Outside one of the shops, a grocer's, the shopkeeper is talking to two women shoppers.

There are two dogs padding about the pavement, sniffing each other. The shopkeeper looks disapprovingly at the dogs, and then turns his bright attention back to the women. One of the dogs makes an attempt to mount the other, but then drops back to all fours again, and they continue to move about from one side of the pavement to the other.

The grocer is a tall man, and he prides himself on his friendliness toward his customers. He had a hard time when he was younger, trying to establish himself, but now he is the owner of a thriving shop, and is able to spare the time to chat with his young housewives. Also he is not sure about one of the women with whom he is talking. She has only been here for a short time, and she seems to be exceptionally friendly. He wonders if, one day, she might be good for a turn. He is beginning to develop a paunch, but is rather proud of it, and likes to rest his hands on it.

The smaller of the dogs again mounts the other, and they begin to copulate there on the pavement. The grocer and the housewives see this copulation out of the corners of their eyes, but the housewives carry on talking brightly.

The grocer, however, is annoyed. He sees the behavior of the dogs as an annoyance, almost as an insult. The ladies are, for a moment, talking to each other.

The grocer seizes this opportunity, walks over, and gives the dogs a kick.

However, his boot strikes only the male dog. The animal is spun round so that he is facing away from the female, but is still in her. As the grocer walks back, the dog screams in agony. Its twisted penis is still congested with blood, which now cannot escape. A permanent erection now binds him fast to the female in an agonizing union. The female dog is frightened and begins to run, dragging the male backwards.

The grocer and the ladies, embarrassed, try not to notice, and carry on their conversation.

The screams of the trapped dog become even more pitiful as the creature is dragged away swiftly by the female. The level of sound in the street drops as people become aware of the suffering dogs. People turn to watch as the creatures disappear down the street.

The grocer is very embarrassed, and more than a little angry.

In the Courtyard

He found himself alone in a dark courtyard. He had been there for a long, long time. He remembered sunlight and contentment, but now his world was filled with his desire for escape.

To his right, curving down to the dark tarmac of the yard was a wind vent, its black throat yawning in air noisily. It was a silver structure, square in outline, and he kept away from its mouth. The yard was in shadow, made even blacker by the sunlight above. The sun never reached down here. On three sides black buildings rose in the air, and loomed beside and behind him, but on the fourth, a

long way above, sunlight broke across the wall like glass, and splintered a rude balcony with light. At the balcony was a door, and he knew that behind the door was a small chamber, big enough to accommodate the small staircase that led through the manhole to the grassy field above.

All around the courtyard were the corpses of small animals, and in the far corner lay a crazed donkey, a silver spoon buried in its neck, ready for someone to come along to scoop out a mouthful of melting flesh. All about the donkey were flies, feeding off its craziness, and it gave to the world its fetid odor without shame or pride.

Fire escapes jutted blackly above him. He clawed back the life bulging in his throat. A shaft of black brick, a basic buttress, sloped from one side of the courtyard to the other. In this enclosed place it was like a beam from some black and dusty sun. He leaned against a wall, and brick crumbled under his twitching fingers. In front of him was a steel ladder that reached up to the balcony, but he was scared to climb. There was everything to lose.

But now the odor of burning oil reached his nostrils, and fear for his life came to him. He must leave!

He grasped the rungs of the ladder and began to climb. But he could not; his feet would not respond to him. He fell back, almost screaming.

There was a movement above him on the balcony. It was a slim Jewish girl. She was shouting something down to him, but he couldn't hear what she was saying.

"I can't hear you!" he called, but she indicated her ears and shook her head sadly. He realized that she was deaf. She reached down to him with an imploring expression on her face. He realized what he must do. He began to climb the ladder again, but found it now a little easier. As he climbed toward her, she strained her hands down to him. As their flesh closed in contact he felt a wild crackling strength coursing into him. He climbed over the railing and onto the balcony, she helping him. Once over, he

stood and looked into her large, dark eyes, still holding her hands.

"You saved me," he said.

"No, you helped me as well. And I haven't saved you; you can't beat geometry."

"I couldn't hear you, down there."

"I know. I've been in a very similar place."

He looked back over his shoulder. The yard, from up here, was much smaller than he remembered it. The donkey, far below, twitched his tail with mad contempt.

"I shall never go back there," he said. "And I shall never leave you."

She smiled. "You will. The answer is written in the very curves of space, the geometry of time. Kiss me."

The power from her was welling through him, and his body floated with the breeze that blew about. He took her in his arms, and pressed his lips gently against hers. She was warm in his arms and his mouth; he closed his eyes, and let his body sing the song they had begun.

And then she was gone.

There was nothing. He turned wildly, his arms flailing the air. As he turned he slipped, and fell back into the yard. But he fell slowly, descending like a feather into darkness. He sprawled on the cold tarmac, sobbing into the dust.

He got up on his knees and stared at the balcony, which swam in his gaze. There was another woman there, and as he watched, her hair changed color, her features flowed like treacle into new combinations of line and form. Sometimes she seemed old, sometimes she was young and fresh. Each time she reached down to him, but he could not hear what she was saying; he couldn't reach up to touch her hands. Sometimes she was too weak to lift him; sometimes she just looked at the sky; sometimes she reached for someone else whom he could not see. Once she was sad

and beautiful, and he rushed for the ladder, but she didn't see him, and was lost in contemplation of her own feet.

"I remember a neater arrangement than this!" he called to her.

Time danced like fireflies across his brow. He sensed the years falling, brown skeletal leaves of age, and he put out his hand to brush them as they fell.

And all the time he could feel the ground shaking and the angry fire nearing him for its revenge. . . .

Finally her features changed again. Above him stood a girl with blue eyes and with pale musicians moving in a procession through her mind.

"Help me!" he called to her. "I *NEED YOU!*" just realizing that he did.

Her mouth began to move anxiously, but a second after her lips moved, a cracked voice spoke a foreign tongue into his ears. The sounds she made brought agony to him.

"Go!" he shouted. "Go away!" He ran to the other side of the courtyard to escape the pain she was causing him. She began to grow transparent, fading into nothing. Just before she disappeared he realized that he could understand what she was saying.

But now all was bright; the fire was coming to claim him.

In the Lounge

All is unchanged, John and Mary still sit in their facing chairs. Robert still plays the piano like an automaton. There is a strong smell of smoke in the air.

JOHN: The strange thing about this place is that no one really knows anything about anybody else. None of us has past lives. We are all here, living in the immediate present with nothing at all behind us. Perhaps we were all created here; perhaps there is nothing outside at all. Perhaps this

whole place is the only thing in the universe, and that what we see from our windows is nothing but a backdrop painted to deceive us. I often worry about this, you know. In fact the other day I put my arm through the bars over my window, right up to the shoulder, but I didn't touch anything.

MARY: I had a terrible dream last night.

JOHN: Mary—I'm sure I can smell smoke.

MARY: I dreamed I had a husband. . . . I dreamed a past life for myself.

JOHN: I'll swear there's something on fire.

MARY: I dreamed a complete past. . . . I dreamed love and pain and death and friends and enemies.

JOHN: I think we should see what is burning

MARY: I dreamed that I fed from my husband. When he loved me I would draw sweetness and strength from his body. He would enter my body with his, and my soul with his. He would move inside me, shaking me, and my body would respond, and twist and turn to receive the power and the love of him. This was my dream: He is loving me. *This is me!* I feel, *this responsive mindless creature is me! Everything else is false.* I cling to him, my fingers pressing into his back. My head is moving from side to side, but all I can feel is him in me and my body responding to his power. He penetrates my bowels, my chest, my eyes; he is everywhere in me, there is nothing but him. I call his name out into the world, but the world is him, and he is moving in me. Our bodies stiffen in one. I strain up to him, and his body grasps rigidly down to me. And then there is nothing but the soundless explosion to which I abandon myself.

And then we are both quiet. His face is on the pillow by my shoulder, and his weight presses me down.

I didn't tell you about my husband, did I? He is a very big man. When he was younger, he was powerful and muscled. He is still strong, but now the flesh of middle age

swells his belly. He is heavy on me as we lie there, but I do not care. Nothing matters but the strength I have drawn from him. He is quieter than usual, and so am I. I lie, staring up peacefully at the ceiling, illuminated by the bedside light. I stroke his shoulder, and decide eventually that he has gone to sleep. I will give him a few minutes before I wake him. His weight is now uncomfortable, but I vow to endure it for a while until I am forced to disturb him. (Mary's voice is gradually getting higher, and a light of hysteria is coming into her eyes.)

His shoulders feel cold, and I pull up the blankets to cover them. And then . . . and then I try to wake him. I push his shoulder gently, but he does not wake. I smile indulgently, and push again a little harder. The flesh gives under my hand, but he does not respond. I call his name . . . again . . . and then I smell it. The smell of death. (The last part of Mary's story is screamed out.)

I smelled the death of him in that bed. Have you ever read in the papers, "He died in his sleep"? I was pinned under him. I tried desperately to get him away from me. I hit his shoulder again and again, but I could not get a response from him. I tried to escape from under him . . . he was still in me . . . but I could not. I cried and screamed and tried to force life back in. I held his face up, and saw his dead eyes. His eyes stared at me like a dead fish's eyes. His face was distorted in a terrible twisted smile.

I tried to push his head away, but it fell back on to my shoulder, giving me a dead man's kiss—cold saliva on my flesh. I remember that I felt now nothing but a terrible revulsion for him. I must try to escape . . . I must unjoin myself from him. I remember that I twisted and turned, moving my hips as if I were loving this crushing body. I strained myself, careless of myself, saying something, I forget what. And at last his dead prick no longer touched my body. I couldn't get from underneath him. . . . I put my hands under his corpse and tried to lift it off . . . but

even with the strength of panic I couldn't do it. Time went past. His flesh cooled. I cursed him, I jerked and twitched under him. . . . I remember spittle drooling all over my face, and I remember calling and crying and punching and groaning . . . but his weight pinned me flat on the bed. And I remember that at last someone heard my screams and came . . . and they brought me here! HERE! THEY BROUGHT ME HERE!

(Mary begins to scream and writhe in her chair. John is not looking at her, but is talking quietly to himself. The pianist continues to play his chords.)

The Burning Clock

It is an American wall clock. Its case is made of wood, square, with two supporting columns that rise from the bottom to the top. A large arch of glass is in front, and two side panels form gothic curves. The face and mechanism is supported behind the front arch, at the top, and the pendulum, with a large, flat brass bob, hangs almost to the bottom of the case.

Flames have just caught at the bottom of the case, and the watching man leans closer to see better. The wood at the bottom of the right-hand column is beginning to char. The flames have caught quickly, and begin to reach up the sides of the clock. The fire also burns at the base of the clock, and a discolored patch can be seen on the "floor" through the front glass. He looks at the burning column on the right. Varnish has peeled off all the way up, and the whole column is now burning fiercely. There is a crack, and the side glass splinters. The back of the clock has now caught fire.

Suddenly a flame appears inside the clock, as the baseboard burns completely through. The flames engulf the pendulum bob as it swings gently to and fro. Now flames are rising inside the clock and, for a while, the clock re-

sembles a glass case of fire. Then the fire outside the clock gains a better hold, and abruptly the front glass cracks. Half of the glass falls to the floor and shatters; the other half clings to the blackening wood. Now the bob can only be seen as it emerges from the fire at the extreme ends of its swing; it can be seen now that parts of the pendulum are glowing red. Although the hands, which he can just distinguish in the flame, are not pointing to the hour or the half, the clock begins to strike. The clock strikes twelve, and then goes on.

The baseboard falls to the floor, trailing smoke behind it, and smolders there. The striking of the clock is becoming erratic; the strokes are irregular, and slowing. The front part of the clock swings open on its hinges, the warping of the frame freeing it, and the remainder of the glass crashes down. The flames are concentrated at the top of the clock now; the pendulum is a glowing shaft of red. The clock's striking mechanism seizes, and the sound stops. The pendulum is now moving under its own momentum, and its arc is diminishing; the clock is now like a burning skeleton.

Metal drips down from the interior of the clock mechanism in bright, hurried drops. The clock is now completely still, only the flames dancing over its surface. He moves round to the side of the clock, and sees its cogs, warped and glowing. The sight disturbs him. It is as if the flames are the only moving things in a petrified universe. Great calcified images loom in his mind, and he presses the back of his hand to his teeth to subdue his fear.

But then he sees that the clock has not burned at all; it is just that the intense heat has caused it to stop.

Three Catatonic Stories

A man runs across the room, fear glinting in his eyes. In the corner, curled up like a slug, is the naked body of a

man called Colin. Beside him is a sheet of paper. The man picks up the paper and reads:

1. A man is sitting at a table. The surface in front of him is supporting a large block of gold, on a red silk cushion. Lying on the table beside the nugget is a sharp silver knife. The man licks his lips and rolls up his sleeves with delicacy. Then he puts out his hands, grasping the knife with one and holding the block with thumb and forefinger of the other. The gold is pure, and much softer than gold usually is. Its outside surface has a dull gleam. The man picks up the knife, and brings it deliberately to a point above the block. He lowers it to the dull golden surface and carefully draws it across, scoring a straight bright line across the top. For a few seconds he holds the knife poised, regarding his work critically. Then he brings down the knife again and draws it across once more, but this time with more pressure, slicing through the gold as if it were butter and exposing the bright gleam of its inner surface.

He neatly bisects the block, and, with the knife, moves the two pieces apart. This is the moment of consummation. A few heavy seconds pass. Then he puts down the knife, with gold adhering to its blade, and picks up one of the sections of the golden block. His lips are full and wet; he parts them and pushes in the gold. He licks the moist gold from his fingers.

FIRE

2. There is a plain. It is dark in color and absolutely flat, like the polished top of a table. There is an impression of depth about the plain, and it gleams faintly.

In the center of the plain, standing like a passion translated into stone, is a cathedral. At this distance the cathedral cannot be seen in detail, but its general shape, the light on its windows, can just be made out.

A man is riding a motorcycle across the plain, at high

speed. The plain is intensely cold, and the temperature is dropping by the minute. The man is trying to reach the cathedral before the cold is enough to cause his consciousness to fail and make him plunge to the ground. The roar of his engine echoes from unseen obstacles. He rockets across the ground, nearing the cathedral swiftly. Soon the shape of the building is towering over him, and he throttles down, gradually slowing. He overshoots the cathedral and circles it, its features flashing past him in a jumble of gray stonework.

On his second circuit he turns in and travels through the door, right into the nave. Inside, the cathedral is very spacious and warm. Light comes in and makes the stone warm and sensual with its stained-glass colors. About three-quarters down the cathedral nave is the altar. The rest of the floor space is empty, save for a few benches cluttered in the center.

The man turns his motorcycle to the right, and travels slowly down one side of the nave. The sound of the engine comes booming back at him from the high roof. He circles the nave, the light turning his flesh into a shifting sequence of color and texture. As he twists the throttle control his engine noise becomes higher and rises to a recognizable note. The engine backfires, and the tremendous report echoes into a continuous sound. The stonework throws back throbbing reflections of the engine noise; it is as if all the sound he has made since entering the door is still winging about from one side of the building to the other. The air brushes his face, and he speeds up, dipping his machine at the corners. The note of his engine rises still more.

And abruptly there is something else in the air. A disturbance shudders in the nave. A response—a conflict. Still faster he travels, flinging his motorcycle round the nave. The note of the engine rises in a roar.

And suddenly he has it.

His engine note hits one of the harmonics of the basic resonance frequency of the cathedral, and all the air in the building begins to vibrate in a sympathetic resonance.

As he speeds round, he coaxes the sound from the depths. The air shudders deeply, louder and louder, until the cathedral-note has been completely evoked, and the deep shuddering is almost unbearable. Now he knows he will never leave the cathedral. As he cycles round, holding the throttle steady, he begins to laugh, an activity that is noiseless in the great mass of vibrating air, his motorcycle sound lost in the giant organ note of the building.

On the plain, the cathedral sounds.

FIRE BRIGHT

3. A man is born, whose body is constructed in such a way that positive space exerts a tremendous pressure on his cellular structure. He may only obtain a lessening of these sensations by standing in front of large mirrors, when positive space is balanced to a degree by the residual pressure from negative space. By placing two mirrors, one each side of him, both facing inward, the balancing of tensions affords him exquisite relief.

One day the pressures become intolerable, and he tries to escape them by leaping into a full-length mirror. He becomes trapped, merged with his "negative" image. He is forced to hang motionless, caught in the interstices of positive and negative space, at the point where the two intersect. He doesn't have the strength to move himself; the powerweight ratio permits him only to move one finger. This he does often, projecting it into normal or negative space, but each time the finger is two-dimensional, and the stresses are immense.

He hangs, trapped in a glacier of force.

FIRE BURN BRIGHT

The man puts down the paper and turns to the fetus beside him, but now in his eyes there is an expression of lost despair. He speaks without conviction. "You must come

with me—we must escape." The door at the end of the room blossoms into orange light. ". . . must come with me . . ." says the fetus, ". . . must escape . . ." A faint hint of urgency and panic comes into the man's voice. "Come . . . quickly!" "Come . . . quickly!" Tongues roar into the room. The man turns, ignoring the hunched form on the floor, and begins to scream, in a high, childish voice. He drops to his hands and knees and begins to wail like a baby, beating his fists on the parquet flooring. It is very warm in the room.

Black Wave, Take Me Away with You

Flat and polished tables of black glass—head of flutes shrilling like Cocteau's opium pipes—wide gray façade "Charing Cross Hotel" through rain going in distance and past—sun drips blood into a sea of tears making the green one red . . . weave your bandages of gold—flat façade, wide and gray filled out with deperspectived spaces—bully-shouldered perverts take each other sexually, and us —men sob in the lavatory—paraschizophrenic moves walls and time by psychokinesis—Eusebius plucks dead chords from the piano, crying—the walls weep with memories of you—time-men lurk round corners waiting for more time to destroy—locked in the washroom, naked people cry out as ice water jets their flesh, fiercely—dirty old men communicate telepathically with God—my own legs tremble before me with beautiful fear—rimed with blue glory they await the coming of the sun. . . .

Smoke comes from the sky like a scent of lemons—I am coming—I am coming. . . .

Soleil de Sang, d'Oiseaux

It is quiet in this house behind my windows
My Jesus, my universe of silence and bells

There is only more windows; layers of glass
Throw to me the lance of love, my Love
And I can look out through the layers of glass
Make of yourself a cauldron for my heart
See the slow flower garden and the ghosts of love

Give me the red and the green of your love
Inside this house it is very quiet
Rainbow of love, desert of love
Like a cave and I am here
Your golden pillars are singing to me
I am here in a cave in a house behind glass

They slowly swing, the bells of the depths
And I am falling apart and dying
Do not wake me: it is the time of the bird!

Events in Hell

Time sinks wells into my brain—sutures hum with electrical circuits—Russian death machines wing wide barrels and project electrical rays into my eyes—faces, fatty, broken and degenerate strain at the sun's glory—fantasies of life crackle among dendrides—an old man masturbates his death-tool and spits white glory at the sun—morons concentrate on the intellectual promise of a piece of wood—my head is a gramophone horn sounding music-hall songs out to the stars.

Dead Book Images Spin in My Mind Like Snow

Book jackets fall spinning to my floor—God rises in me like a vapor from snow—the sound of my voice echoes in levels of light—a rainbow of love to the vision of your face—Give me the thirst of your love; the tumescence of your love.

Motorcycles ride across the plain of snow—black mosquito squadrons of desire—The snow lies on my soul like the seal of your name—Send your motorcycles to me—Give me the red and the green of your love—my man, my woman, my child, my God.
Levels of consciousness hide your bells in light—Sound waves of glory put my soul to flight—The sun of blood is trembling on the bleeding snow—The colors of your love flux in a brilliant flow—Your core of acquiescence swells in me—Dead images are floating on the sea.
Book jackets are trampled by jackboots—a dead web stretches across the swelling surfaces of dead water—the smiling, deep surfaces—they welcome the laxness of my new body—they hide their bowels in night—they clasp soft hands under me and receive my weakness—I see your light far above me, your sun, your blood—but I feel the warmth of their embrace, the kiss of their foul water-skin touches my lips—Your snow is burying me, and your sun is burning my flesh—My ears are blinded by the melody of your light—Their web is enfolding me, and I can't escape its mesh—My body is sighing in a velvet field of white—I am dying for you—your bells, your colors, your heart—your heart is red and it pulses like the sun—the clangor of your sunlight strikes my eyes like metal—book images stir dust in my brain—I die for your colors, your name.

Catatonic Sun, Fill My Valleys

Sun-mist, you are in me
Sun-fire, my fetus fills me with heat
Sun-death, your touch rests on my body
Sun, you are drying my leaves—my foliage moves under your hand
Sun, you are piercing my womb

Sun, my mouth is full of you
Sun, you are burning away my heart

Red Piano

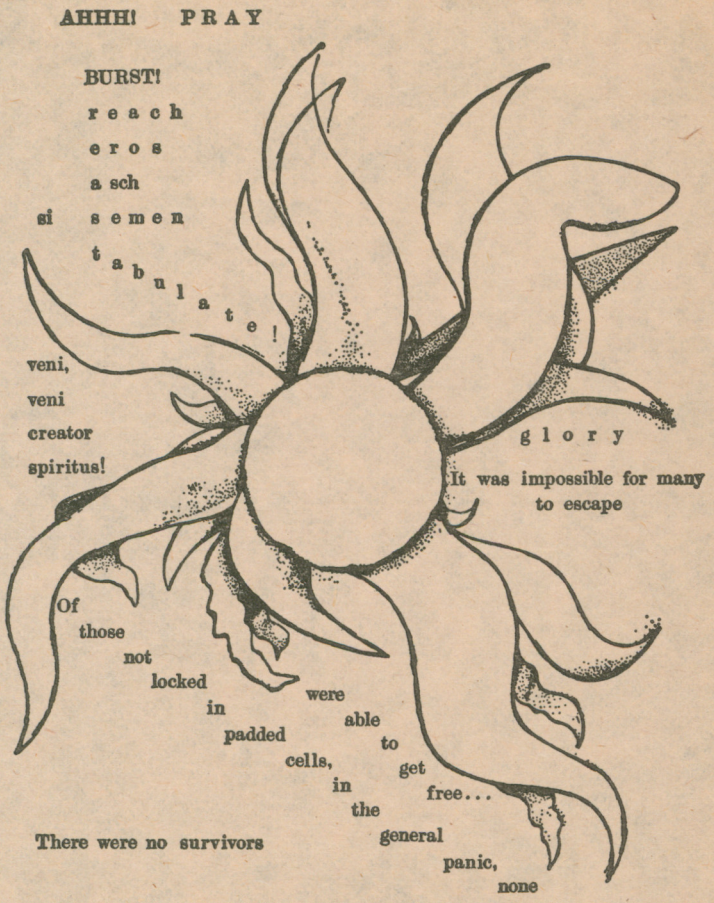
Across the room the red piano is playing—piano of pain —Florestan plays desert chords, and the flame-piano answers with cracks like a cannon. Strings curl over him like a benediction.

This Is Sun

This is sun
Sun is blood
And the bone, gouged and crackling
Sun is the laughing of a pretty woman
and the voice of a great multitude
Sun is semen
Ejaculated in a spurt of blood
Sun is dust and the memory of old wounds
Sun is water in the softness of flood
Sun of the waters, here am I
I await you
This is Sun

Sun!

We are here sun sun glorious we wait for your rays to lick us with tongues sun we call on you bring your anger to bear on our flesh clean us with your venom sun magic sun-spear of deadly passion sun take us into your burning embrace sun potent sun glorious to join sun sun sun for the end of burning the concerted rush to your condensed sun-energy bloom for us sun unfold sun like a glowing rose and wrap us in your burning petals. . . .


AHHH! PRAY
BURST!
reach
eros
asch
si semen
tabulate!
veni,
veni
creator
spiritus!
glory
It was impossible for many
to escape
Of
those
not
locked
in
padded
cells,
were
able
to
get
free...
in
the
general
panic,
none
There were no survivors

THE FALCON AND THE FALCONEER

Barry Malzberg

Depositions taken after the event:

ROMANO, CHAPLAIN: The ways of the Deity are imponderable; the more intricate and vast the universe becomes to us, the more imponderable they must be. This is the kind of thing which must be understood; it has taken me forty years to learn it, and I cannot emphasize sufficiently how basic the point is. There was a time, I understand, at the advent of institutionalized science and the emergence of the rational ethic, when it was thought that the further and further we went, the more we learned; the longer we voyaged, the more the mysteries would dissipate until finally, ultimately, there would be a time when knowledge outweighed mystery totally and everything was controlled. It was only within the last few centuries, I think, that we began to realize it worked the other way; that we learned only to play out our madness and insufficiency on a larger canvas; that space-drive and the colonization of the galaxy only meant that the uncontrollable had larger implications. At least, this is what I insist. Therefore, I feel no sense of guilt at what happened on Rigel XIV; it was not my responsibility. I did all that I could, of course, to discourage the disgusting adventure, but how much influence does a chaplain really have, particularly with men who have had almost to deny God to get where they are? I don't like this testimony any more than you like taking it, gentlemen, but one must face facts. In a difficult age, you must abandon preconception, pos-

ture, even hope, and do things in a difficult way. I have found this a life-sustaining rationalization.

Certainly I cautioned against it. I said to Williams the moment I heard about it and was able to gain access to him, "Captain Williams, I urge you to put an end to these plans. They are sacrilegious, they are abrupt, they are irrelevant, and they might even be actually dangerous. We should celebrate Christmas in the hallowed fashion, or we should not celebrate it at all, but we are not in any way directed to make a spectacle which can only be apostate. Besides, some of the more irreverent may be led to make remarks and come to conclusions which could only be justified under the circumstances. The idea of the crèche is bad enough, but populating it with living figures is even more disgusting. Besides, the atmosphere here is absolutely intolerable, and the men will be forced to don heavy spacegear if the ceremony takes any time whatsoever. And the Rigellians, while certainly affecting creatures in their own way, are unfortunately not of an appearance or manner which should be included in any serious religious ceremony. Aside from all the jokes which have been made about their physical aspect, they smell badly and they have a foul sense of humor."

Williams didn't listen, of course. There was no way he could. By the time I had managed to secure an appointment with him—a chaplain, as you are finding out, has very low rank on these survey teams—it was only two hours before the ceremony. There was no time to cancel, even if he had been disposed to do so anyway, which he said he was not. He said my ideas were laughable. He said that I was looking at things in a totally didactic and sentimental fashion. He said that the men in this far-flung outpost needed their entertainment any way they could get it, sex to the contrary, and that the fact that they had wanted to have a Christmas pageant indicated that they might even be able to make something serious out of it, along

with the other parts. He got up and paced excitedly and finished off a bottle of whiskey, which he said he was drinking in his quarters to celebrate the occasion, and then he threw me out, politely, saying that he had to get ready for the ceremony himself since he had been enlisted to play the part of a Pharisee, a very great honor. I came in without hope and I left without despair. There was nothing that I could do. To the best of my ability I had stated my warning. Beyond that it could not be my responsibility.

As to the grievous events which followed and which resulted in all of us being here, I have nothing to say about them. I could have predicted it. We voyage further and further into the darkness, only to see the universe cleave and shriek under us. Of course. Of course. I furnished what moderate spiritual counseling that I could, and as far as the ceremony itself is concerned, I saw nothing of it. All that happened I derived only at third hand. You need only take it up, then, with those that were there. Why bother me, anyway? I realize that you need a religious expert to make a deposition, but I simply cannot help you, gentlemen, I have my own problems.

HAWKINS, BOTANY TECHNICIAN: Well, I guess lucky is the word for it. It could have been me. I was originally scheduled to play the role, only I changed my mind at the last moment, and they slipped Cullings in. Boy, was I horrified when I saw what happened to Cullings! It was like everything that was going on was happening to me, only I wasn't there. I ended up with a small role, tending one of the donkeys, which was bad enough under all the circumstances.

The reason I backed out at the last moment was because of Dr. Romano, the team chaplain, and I really appreciate everything that he did for me now, although I wasn't happy about it then. Just when the rehearsals were beginning, Dr. Romano came up to me and said he

wanted to talk to me when I got a chance, and because I didn't want to get in any trouble—he was an officer, after all—I went to his room later on and we chatted a bit. He said he knew from looking up my record that I came from a religious background and under all the circumstances he wanted to know how I got involved in something like this. I told him that the reason I had volunteered to play the Child was exactly *because* of this religious background of mine; I had always taken this seriously and had had a good upbringing and taking the role I did was like I was making a contribution to what I believed in. But then Dr. Romano explained to me that it wasn't so much of a religious thing as an apostasy, he called it, because the thing was being done only for entertainment and spectacle and not because most of the people involved believed in it at all, and I began to understand what he was trying to say to me. He said that in any situation at any time you were going to find people who were going to play upon faith and use its appearance rather than its meaning for purposes of their own, but the thing the truly religious man learned to do was to recognize it and avoid it. *Fight it with all his heart's might,* Dr. Romano said, or something like that. So I backed right out of playing the role; I felt bad about it, of course, because they had already fitted the garments for me and arranged things my way, but knowing what a fool I had almost been taken for, it was a guaranteed thing I wasn't going to do it. I took one of those small, supporting roles instead, and they slotted Cullings in because he was kind of the same size as I was and they didn't have to make too many changes. Actually, Cullings was happy to do it; the way it worked out it was a kind of an honor to play that role, which was another one of the reasons I was unhappy. But when I saw the way it worked out, I started being grateful, and I haven't stopped being grateful to this day.

No, of course I didn't understand what was going on there. What was there to understand? Who could know? How could it get over to us? It was just a game, a kind of game we were playing in that damned place because we were so bored and the natives there were so anxious to please and because Christmas was coming on. If it happened to me in some other way in some other place, I still wouldn't know what was going on. But it won't happen because I'm getting out of the service; my enlistment would have been up a week ago if it hadn't been for this hearing; and no matter what you do to us, I'm never going out there again. Even if I'm kept somewhere for thirty years. Because you reach a point when you finally reach a point, you know what I mean? I didn't know Cullings well at all; he was just a guy. There were a lot of us out there, you know; it was like a good-sized town and everybody had their own jobs and fitted in with the people who were working around them. I was sure sorry to see what happened, though.

XCBNMJY, NATIVE: The trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised incorruptible for behold I tell you a mystery we do not sleep but we shall all be changed in a moment in the twinkling of an eye at the last trumpet (transcript becomes illegible).

WILLIAMS, COMMANDER: I'll tell this as simply and straightforwardly as possible, and then I'll have nothing more to say. I think that a court of inquiry has been called on this sad incident is disgraceful. There is absolutely no reason for it, and were it not for the fact that certain elements of the bureaucracy felt their own positions to be obscurely threatened by the events, this never would have occurred. They're merely trying to hang us so they won't be touched. I was always a straightforward

man, and I speak the truth. This is one of the hazards of command. What do those hacks and clerks know of responsibility?

Sure, I okayed the pageant. Rigel XIV is a dismal outpost, one of the worst assignments in the survey corps. The terrain is lousy; the view is impossible; the climate is intolerable; and to top it all off, the atmosphere, which seems perfectly benign on first exposure, turns out to kill you if you're exposed to it for more than thirty minutes. That was found out by trial-and-error, of course, a long time ago.

It's a lousy detail and the best types don't generally end up there; most of us didn't have a connection of any sort, or we wouldn't have been on the post in the first place. In my case, they were out to nail me for that mess on Deneb X years ago, where they still think I was responsible for the survey missing the uranium deposits. There's no truth in that at all, but they've been after me ever since.

The only saving grace of the assignment is the natives. Friendly little beasts; stupid as hell, of course, and almost ineducable, but cooperative. They can learn the language after a fashion, and they can be taught to perform simple tasks, but I do not believe that this in itself indicates human intelligence. Too, they look like asses, and it may just be my xenophobia, but nothing that looks like an ass can earn my respect.

But they're pleasant creatures, they make ideal pets, and even a man in the heaviest gear can ride on them for hours. They have an amazing tolerance and they're curious as hell in the bargain, so one way or the other I guess that you could say that it is possible to establish some kind of a relationship with them. I don't want to get into this business of telepathy at all; I know that it's being discussed here, along with all those other mysterious powers they're supposed to have. I never saw any evidence of it, and I should know. And the whole history of the sur-

vey, which I know as well as anyone, shows that there's never been any trouble between them and us. They just function on their own level.

I heard about the idea of the pageant only when it was presented to me by a group of the men. Hawkins, one of the botany detail, was the spokesman, more or less, which I found surprising because Hawkins has always struck me as a kind of nonentity, one of those civil servants who make up the bulk of these teams, doing their jobs with all the efficiency and imagination they might possess if they were working in a huge bureau back here. I suppose certain things are timeless after all, but Hawkins was really enthused. I had never seen so much life in the man.

"We want to have a Christmas pageant," he said. "We can build a crèche right outside, and the men will take the various roles, and the Rigellians can be the donkeys in the manger and the sheep on the fields. The idea is to reenact the Nativity and give us all something to think about in our pasts or back home. We want your permission to go ahead and build the crèche."

"I don't understand," I said, which I truly didn't. "Do you mean to say that you're going to assign the various roles of the story to people in the crew and just go through with this thing outside, in that terrain?"

"Exactly. We all kind of worked it out on our own, the engineers and the science detail. We think something should be done for Christmas. We didn't always live out here, you know."

"But what's the point? Why all the enthusiasm?" and indeed, Hawkins and the others were trembling with interest; I had never seen the men so involved. "And what's the point of it?"

"It's kind of a tribute to our history. To what we are as men and where we used to be and what we once wanted to believe and where we are going. It's a reconstitution of myth within a contemporary framework, an infusion of

dreams into the reality so that in the blending the two, dreams and reality, must be known together."

"That's a strange way to talk," I said. "I don't believe I've ever heard you talk like that before."

"We kind of worked it out beforehand," Hawkins said and looked at the floor. "Is it all right? Can we go ahead and do it then?"

"I don't even know if you need my permission. This would come under recreation which you are permitted on your respective schedules. I suppose it would take place inside the project?"

"Well, no. We wanted to go outside. There's a nice depression, only a few hundred yards from here where the crèche can be set up, and we kind of thought that it should be in the open air. I can't explain why, but it seemed nicer that way."

"And these roles? You've already selected the people to play them? Won't there be some embarrassment about—uh—some of the assignments?"

"I'm going to play the Infant," Hawkins said. "And the others will fall into place." He pointed to the three who had come with him. "They're going to be the wise men, of course."

Of course. Well, I had no objection. I told him so. It wasn't my place to comment on it one way or the other; a commander's duties are very strictly outlined under the general code, and they do not involve intermingling with the crew on projects or recreation of their own choice which does not interfere with duty. The idea struck me as being a little strange, of course, immature and a bit preposterous, but as far as I was concerned, that was none of my business.

"You can have your pageant," I said. "I wouldn't advise abusing the natives, though, in the performance."

"Oh, not at all," Hawkins said. "They're kind of the key to the whole thing. The pastoral element and so on. We'll

treat them very carefully. Actually, they're quite excited about the idea. It will enable them to know us better."

That's as far as I went with it. It sounded a little crazy, of course, but men tend to get crazy on these expeditions anyway; it's a kind of fringe benefit. I know some who have invented variations of chess and others who have papered their barracks, ceiling to floor, wall to wall, with pictures of various anatomical parts; I know more than a couple who progressed from serious alcoholism to madness during a run. This is what is going to happen inevitably when you set out to colonize the universe: men have to do it, men have to occupy it, and men are going to bring what they are along with them. The idea of having a pageant was no more insane than my conviction, during my second tour of duty on Campa I, that I was regressing to an apelike state due to boredom and would be able to write the first logical autobiography of a subhuman species. You have to go along with this kind of thing.

When I learned that Hawkins had bowed out and Cullings had stepped in, it was of no interest to me; and when I was invited and went, it was only a way of showing the men respect and killing a couple of hours. I didn't like what happened, of course, and in a general human way I feel kind of responsible, but there was no way that we could know. How could anybody know? Besides, in the long run, it probably won't make any difference anyway. Cullings, I understand from people who knew him, was a sullen, non-religious type; maybe the experience will do him some good. On the other hand, I don't like this kind of inquiry, and I have nothing more to say.

STOCK, PSYCHOLOGIST: There is a perfectly rational explanation for what happened, but you will not obtain it from many of the others, particularly not from Williams, whom I diagnosed early on as a rigid, repressed, anal-oriented paranoid whose fantasies were an enactment

and rationalization of his basic, latent homosexuality. Of course, my job is to deal more with alien psychology and social relationships, but that doesn't prevent me from making judgments.

You have to do something to keep the intellect alive, after all: these aliens—most of those I've encountered and particularly the bastards on the Rigel survey—are little better than vegetables, and there's hardly much stimulation in working out group patterns and social interaction on a survey team because anybody who's on these is half-crazy in the first place and then they proceed to get crazier. By the time I got wind of the pageant and the way it was going, it was my best opinion that Cullings, Hawkins and the whole batch of them had regressed to a subinfantile state where they were using magic and mysticism as a way of warding off any kind of threat; they were even below the polymorphous perverse stage. I could catch that right away by the peculiar details of the pageant which they insisted upon—the relationship of the Madonna and child in the feeding position, the way that the aliens were grouped just around, the use of special straw for the crèche . . . all of this was sheer compulsiveness. And the fact that a big, hulking man like Forrest was playing the role of the Madonna with little Cullings added another element to it. The implications were fascinating; it was the first truly interesting thing that had happened to me since I signed up for this cursed project. But then again it could get a thoughtful man scared.

Several things scared me: in the first place, as I began to make my investigations, then quietly checking here and there, I found that nobody would really own up to having originated the idea of the pageant. "It just kind of came up one day and we got to work on it" was what I heard time and again, or "a lot of us just realized that it would be a honey of an idea." The sudden imposition of a mass-obsession without clear, individual origin is one of the sur-

est indications that something is going on. I didn't like it.

I'm aware that it's been brought up now that the idea might have originated with the aliens who were using their telepathic ability to plant it in the crew so subtly that the crew thought it came out of their own heads. It would be a good explanation, but it doesn't make a pack of sense: these aliens are idiots in every possible regard; they are animalic not only in appearance but in behavior, and the fact that they have a low mimetic ability and are thus able to stimulate language is no clue whatsoever to intelligence. No, the men got this up on their very own—mass-psychosis if it ever happened—and what happened to Cullings was totally their responsibility.

When you take a group of hacks, boobs, oafs and civil servants, set them up on a bleak outpost somewhere near the center of hell—otherwise to be known as the outer arm of the Milky Way—leave them to their own devices sans sex, sans organized recreation, sans the inner resources to make things come out their own way, and when this group of men ends up raving religious fanatics who perform a strange rite out of which comes death, disappearance and madness . . . what other explanation do you need? It is not so much that I am an excessively rational man . . . but after all, how far afield does one have to go? The simplest explanation is the right one; I learned that a long time ago. The simplest explanation is the right one here. I will not cooperate with this inquiry any further, and I care little what happens to me as a result of it.

MARTINSON, CREW: Well, I'll give you a simple account, as best as I can remember. I don't know why you're asking me; all those other guys who testified would be much better able to do it than me. I'm just a simple athlete. Haven't you heard? I'll just stick to the facts. The rehearsals went pretty well, although the time when Cullings and Hawkins switched roles set us back a little. The whole

point was not to make a mockery of it. I was playing one of the people in the inn; I had only one line which was after the innkeeper said no room I was supposed to get up and say "But what of the child?" Just that, "But what of the child?" It was the key to the whole scene, but there was so much else going on that nobody listened.

The aliens worked into it just great. They not only played the animals, there were plenty left over to be in the tavern as well. There was nothing peculiar about them playing human roles; we just took it for granted. They really worked into it and they were good actors, too.

So, the night we did it, it went just like the rehearsals, all the way up to the end, when things changed a little. What we were supposed to do, as I recall, was simply to group around Cullings and look at him, and then the floodlights that we had set up would be switched off, and that would be the end of the thing. Cullings looked very peaceful; he took the role seriously. All during rehearsals, as soon as he stepped in, he was saying that he felt for the first time as if he had truly discovered himself. Recovered himself? Maybe; I forget.

But when the lights were supposed to go on out, they didn't. I have no idea what happened; maybe somebody at the controls wasn't there. Anyway, the lights just kept on glaring and there were the whole bunch of us, standing on the straw, most of us in robes and some of us sitting up on the Rigellians.

The words? Yeah. You want to know those. I don't know who it came from, one of the donkeys, maybe mine, maybe another, and they said Thou Art My Own Beloved Son; I beckon unto thee and we art conjoined forever. That was all. The voice sounded pleased.

Cullings . . . he began to shake.

He shook and shook and then he was drooling and slobbering and crying. It wasn't like the rehearsals at all; it was as if he was having a fit or something, and he began to

scream things like "I see, I see" and "What is going on here?" and "The thieves, they double-crossed me!" and it didn't sound like his voice at all, it was so strained and high-pitched. Then he started to throw himself around on the straw. Like epilepsy. Only more interesting.

The whole bunch of us were just so stunned that we didn't even go in to pick him up or try to help him. We just stared. It was kind of frightening because we hadn't counted on it, you see; we were just going to shut off the lights and go back to the ship and have a few drinks. And sing the old carols. All of a sudden, we have a situation. He was twitching and jerking like mad, Cullings; it was like he was trying to stand up but he simply couldn't make it. He would get to his knees and then it would happen again.

And then, of course, he said those words.

Well, of course, I was upset. Cullings wasn't exactly a close friend, but I knew him and when you live in close quarters with a guy, you tend to get involved. I was very sorry to see what had happened to him, but there just wasn't a damned thing I could do. There wasn't a damned thing anyone could do; we just stood there like a pack of fools. And the asses. After a while, when we realized that it was over and yet it wasn't going to stop, someone said that we might as well get back to the ship and have a few drinks anyway. Nobody wanted to touch Cullings, although someone suggested we drag him over there. We just couldn't bear to. So we left him there surrounded by the donkeys and we went back. Midway into the ship we saw the floodlights get cut, and then we went inside and got really stoned. All that I know is that Captain Williams said we should all leave the planet immediately, and that was some operation, you can imagine, with over half of us staggering drunk, trying to work on the ship. But we got it off, and we got back here in good shape, and then all of a sudden we found ourselves with this court of inquiry and

like that. I don't know what's going on. I have great sympathy for Cullings, though. I sometimes think about what he must be doing now. If anything. But I try not to think about these things at all.

PETERS, FIRST SECRETARY: I think that the evidence, based upon what we have heard and upon the "statement" of the alien, is pretty conclusive. Incidentally, that alien is going to die if we don't get him back there soon. We cannot simulate their environment; there are things about it we don't understand.

It is really conclusive, and I don't think there's much point in going on further. Our decision to make is simple: do we go back to Rigel XIV or don't we? Since I can see no basis for our returning other than to reenact a continuing madness. I think we should stay out.

I think we should stay out of a lot of places, I really do. There are forces in this universe which we are not meant to understand, and our attempts to make them conform to our vision of rationality can only make us cosmic clowns to far more than the Rigellians if we keep this up. I think that the Bureau will carefully have to review all of its procedures and policies now and that we are in for a period of regrouping and terrible reappraisal.

As for what may happen in the decades to come, this is something that we cannot possibly ascertain. Whatever happens, it is something that we will have to live with. I can only trust that religiosity for them, as it was for us, proves to be a localized phenomenon.

And I call upon the mercy of this court; I do not think that charges should be filed against the deponents. What did they know? What do we know? In similar circumstances, we would have done the same. We are that kind of people. Give them desk jobs and let them alone.

We cannot make a Civil Service adjunct of the universe. I think that this, at least, is pretty clear.

LAST WORDS OF CULLINGS, ABSENT: *My God, my God, 32 years to go—*
But I'd rather be getting crocked at the Inn!

Christmas stories have precedents in science fiction; there is something about the nature of the form itself which ties into a cheerful iconoclasm or toward a restructuring of myth. This story (hopefully accomplishing both) has rather honorable precedents in the field, precedents which go back as far, anyway, as Arthur C. Clarke's The Star.

But perhaps this one is something of a different direction because the inconoclasm of the story manages, for once, to tie rather neatly into that particular view I've had of the space technology for some time . . . that that technology is forcing us to meddle increasingly in areas which we are not equipped metaphysically to understand and that the end outcome of a technological creed which would hold the universe as readily systematizable as the instruments in a high-school shop class can lead only to disaster. We shall see.

The particular background of this story if anyone out there is interested (I am always interested in the genesis of another writer's published story; it holds for me both the lure of scatology and that primal insight into the suspicious world of publishing not to be cheaply yielded in any other way) is that Edward Ferman, the editor of Fantasy & Science Fiction *suggested that I do a Christmas story for him; I responded by giving him the full plot of this story within thirty seconds over the desk. I was then faced with the problem of going back and writing it, a problem now magnified because ninety-five percent of the work I have*

published was written in such a way and at such a speed that I literally did not know from sentence to sentence what was coming next. This is fine for my inferential manner but it was hard to make inferential something which I knew too well already and I had to back off on the story by throwing away an entire draft before I finally got it. It is now somewhat murkier than it has any right to be but exists in this version to the best of its possibilities. Win one, lose one.

It is a pleasure to appear again in a science-fiction anthology even though—I make no bones about this—I am not really a science-fiction writer and all but three or four of my thirty published stories in the field were written and received in a fashion which put them outside the category. This is a loss—I like science fiction very much—but also a gain; I think immodestly that I am helping to push this field to a level of literacy it deserves and better take that literacy from whence it comes. Win one, the man said, lose one.

—Barry N. Malzberg

THE TRANSFINITE CHOICE

David I. Masson

Can Man, this presumptuous parasite on the Solar System, override the mechanics of his destiny?

Something went wrong with the five-mile linear accelerator. The public were no wiser when the press, radio, and TV had given their impressions of what the official spokesman's interpretation of what the atomic experts' version of their own suspicions was. By 1980 they were still arguing about it.

All Naverson Builth knew about it was that one moment he was standing by at the first of a new series of experiments and the next moment he was lying on his back and that the hall was completely deserted. Moreover, it seemed to have acquired a number of new gadgets and machines, and a different coat of paint. There was dead silence. The hall was lit, but rather dimly.

Naverson tried shouting. He discovered that he was all right and eventually got to the doors. They were locked. He went round to the communication phone. The phone was not there. There was no trace of it or its connections.

He was still shouting and banging on the doors when a huge metal arm came out of nowhere and picked him up. About twenty feet up it pulled him through a hinged opening and deposited him on a floor which he could not recall existing at that height and place. A long jointed prong approached him and felt all round him, while his arms and legs were held back by clamps. It clicked disapprovingly

and folded up. A metallic voice spoke from the roof. It said: "Namplize."

"Who the hell are you, and what the hell do you think you're doing with me?" shouted Naverson. "I was working in the hall and suddenly I find myself all alone. What've you done with the phone, and what are these machines pulling me about for? How long have I been here, anyway?"

"Namplize."

"Don't you speak English, then? Who the hell are you?"

"Namplize."

"Parlez-vous français? Qu'est-ce que l'on fait alors dans cette galère?"

"Namplize."

"Govorítye li vy po russki? . . . Türkiyizce konushurmusunuz?"

"Namplize-urnlay."

"Habla Usted español . . . Parla italiano?"

"Namplize-farce."

"Sprechen sie Deutsch? Um Gottes Willen, was ist hier los?"

"Namnadrissplize."

"To hell with you. I can't understand a word you say."

Silence.

The clamps tightened on his limbs and another long prong approached. It had a tiny mirror or window near its end, and an opposing pincer-pair alongside. It felt its way into his overall pockets and pulled out and appeared to inspect various objects from them. Finally it got hold of a typed envelope addressed to him. It scanned this slowly all over, both sides, upside down and sideways as well as right way up, including the postmark (which for once was legible). Then it returned the envelope to the pocket, and folded up. The big arm, still clutching him firmly, swung him up into a recess in the wall, tidied his feet in, and a

door slid shut. The recess shot up like a lift, stopped, a door slid open on the other side, and he was blinking at a small room dazzlingly lit. In it was a little old man with shaven poll, in a pale blue tunic, apparently seated at a console with stops and levers. He was facing the recess, and just taking a swig from a curiously shaped flask, which he set down on the floor. Naverson clambered stiffly out, feeling his legs and arms.

"Now what the hell is all this? Who are you, and what are you doing in this plant? I've never seen you before here and you seem to have been monkeying about with the machinery."

"Suzzdummuvspightchplize," said the little old man gently but firmly, staring at Naverson. It was the same voice.

"I don't understand you. *Ne comprends pas. Verstehe nicht. Ya ne ponimáyu. Anlamiyorum. No capisco. No entiendo.*"

"W-atplize." The old man pressed a switch and called downwards: "Undrowda, hooh srigh. Nannriggig. Paarurwclurz. Paarurwimvlup, nammprax navverrazawn boughillut un paarurw-rawtung, prundatt prax wennawnsimtaow! Nattgurwuzzuzdum . . . Sregjunzplize."

A metallic voice cackled up at him. He pressed a button. Metal arms gripped Naverson. A little pang on one earlobe. Unconsciousness.

Naverson woke up in a swirl of mental confusion. Clamps were being peeled from his skull, which had been shaved. He was naked, lying on a couch. A few attendants, about half of whom (to his horror) appeared to be women, were studying charts and manipulating knobs. The room was even smaller than the last, and brighter. The temperature was about 80 degrees F. He found that he was able to understand the speech of those about him, on the whole, though some of their nouns and even verbs

were strange. The attendants were dressed in one-piece translucent suits which covered most of their faces, but were transparent at the eyes.

"Where am I?" he said, or rather he said "Waayaa?" (*Where here?*) in the speech of those around him, but the intention was the same and we can transpose from now on. *But let no one suppose that ours is more than a free translation . . .*

"In glossopsychic center," said a voice behind his head, which proved to be that of a young man standing there. "You seem from year approximately one, nine, seven, two. Trouble in subquark domain probably switched you here, linear accelerator, year two, three, four, six. Linguistic shunt achieved. Skill, please."

"Skill? Elementary particle analysis."

"Perhaps try utilize. . . . Suit ready here, on please."

Naverson slipped into the translucent suit, which was evidently made to measure.

"Hungry," he said.

Ten months later, months of intensive education, found him in a post with the new world-government department of Direct Parameter Control ("Drik Premda Kindrurw"). Naverson thanked his stars. The world population was now some four millions of millions and the lot of most persons under the relentless pressure of their own increasing numbers was unenviable. Confined to a small cabin (with every mod. con.) in continent-wide multistory warrens, which only stopped at the sea and the mountains, they and their children "educated," supervised and entertained by giant television screens, compulsorily sterilized after their second child, fed on piped algal infusions, never seeing natural daylight except when drafted for their one year's open-air hard labor in every five of their first thirty adult years, the great majority had little to live for and nothing to die for. When children grew up (at 24,

owing to the low diet) they had to find a new home, and the population computers assigned them one in a new block built at a new level above the old flat roofs, or in a marginal section nudging the nearest foothills. Roof blocks, however, were few, being difficult to construct because so many interfered with the air-transport and interplanetary roof-termini and the solar energy collectors. Such colonies as Mars and Venus and Luna could support were negligible.

Only the more active and enterprising workers such as the sea farmers, and the higher brainworkers, had more freedom of movement, space, and occupation, and more choice of food. Naverson, at Direct Parameter Control, was one of those. Whether it was the undoubted genius with which he had started (he was a postgraduate of dazzling promise in the late 1960's), or the stimulating effect of the accident, or that of the cerebral pummeling he had sustained at the glossopsychic center where they had imprinted in him understanding of the language, or all three, his examiners found him really capable of appreciating all the relevant advances from A.D. 1972 to 2346 in subatomic, subelemparticle (quarkic), subquark and hyposubquark physics. He discovered that the glossopsychophysiologist (who naturally knew nothing outside his own sphere) had been wrong in attributing his time-shunt merely to subquark events—it could not be due to anything grosser than hyposubquark phenomena. . . . The little old man he never saw again; he was, in effect, night watchman at the old accelerator, nowadays automated.

Most of Naverson's new colleagues, in any case, came equally fresh to the ideas of Direct Parameter Control, or DPC as it was coming to be known. A formal introductory oration, or "Pip" (i.e., *Pep*) as it was called, ran somewhat as follows:

"Now sports, DPC takes over where complex gross physical control too costly or too imperfect. Momently we

feel our way, but expect expand into many subdepartments. Statistical assemblages normally poor fields, molecular operations good, genetic material best; organisms and small living groups fair. Usual attack via subquark domain. 'Direct,' misnomer. Shunting quarkwise, subquarkwise, affects parameters. Each subdepartment to have for hyposubdeps.: Parameter Assessment, Research, Application, Public Relations. In practice many of you will work in several. General questions?"

In a few months Naverson found himself assigned to the budding subdep. of Aging Control (AC, "Adjung Kindrurw"). His role finally settled into that of a researcher, with excursions into Application and PR.

"See," he was explaining to a friendly pubhealth man two years later, "geriatrics failed, unable increase life expectancy over 18 percent, active life over 12 percent. Direct parameters now target. Relevant parameters in aging show in three quasi-dimensions as variety of helix. Organism enters at conception on broad base, spirals upward on time axis at constant gradient, and inward as on a cone/dome towards literal *point* of death, on slope peculiar to itself."

"Why spiral, why not straight line?"

"Straight line no end. Cyclic returns of the spiral correspond cyclic effects of internal/external environment, for instance annual. Comparative circumference length corresponds comparative subjective and physiological time."

"You mean, long long hours of infancy?"

"Exact. Childhood hours pass like adult weeks, years flash by more and more swift toward old age, healing times meanwhile lengthen; hence spiral inward, circumference shortens. At zero diameter zero circumference, healing infinitely slow, subjective time infinitely swift, death. . . . Width of individual's life's base and general slope of cone go with genus, species, variety, genes. Also affected

by conception environment, gestation, radiation, disease, accident. Mild radiation shrinks diameter, disease tilts cone in domewise, accident pushes dome in flattish; recovery swells it out. *Cylinder* up time axis would mean immortality!"

"How twenty-second century would have welcomed this!"

"Yes, you mean when computers assessed individuals' health factors yearly, produced graphs and percent chances different death-causes different years ahead?"

"Exact. Tense cigarette smoker aged 20, for instance, given choice 5 percent chance die senility at age 80, 25 percent death lung cancer age 60, 30 percent bronchial 50, 25 percent coronary 40, 10 percent gastric cancer 35, or 5 percent vehicle accident 25. Panics, suicides, druggery."

"Now seek directly affect viability, prolong life, cheat computer!"

"What classes personnel?"

"Managers, directors, government chiefs. Later top brainworkers?"

"How attack?"

"Three possible: widen cone base, steepen cone side, flatten spiral pitch. First trying widen cone base (conception); small animals. Subquarkwise. Subradiate parental gonads. Hope ready selected managerial-caste parents in year."

"What percentage time-increase?"

"First 10 percent age increase? Hope later cumulative 5 percent increase each generation from single dose, if trick findable."

"Useless *general* population, longer life unendurable!"

In any case it was not to be. Research on the "cone-base" method produced feeble flies, overgrown tadpoles, foetuslike mice, subinfantile baby monkeys after long gestations. The mouse mothers and monkey parents that

survived the pregnancies neglected their offspring; those grew up socially twisted, and lived their 110 percent lifespans a misery to themselves and a torment to their mates.

Builth, now head of the subdep.'s Research branch, was switched to cone-angle steepening, on which the Paremeter Assessment boys had now a full picture. Five years later he had the answer in the subquark domain: a tiny transmitter of subquarkons embedded in the pituitary as early as convenient, which would send its infinitesimal products through the organism and in a few weeks, it was expected, would affect genes and somatic plasm of every cell in the body, after which the transmitter was left in to function for life. No cumulative effect on later generations was possible this way, however.

Unfortunately they found that in 40 percent of higher-animal experiments a psychopathic personality was induced if the transmitter was implanted in infancy. Implantation in adult life gave rise to mosaic effects, so that some cells persisted in aging normally, and in up to 30 percent of higher-animal individuals tried, these mosaics reduced the organism by its middle age to a distressing degree of malfunctioning, of which fits and cancers were only two of many manifestations.

"Sports," said Naverson Builth formally to his research team, "now must try parameter three: helix gradient. DPC's Director agreed switch our PA sports to gradient month ago."

"But this means hyposub!" called out Eck.

"Exact! hyposubquark transoscillation necessary basis. . . . No harm start these lines now, sharpen our tools against Parameter Assessment verdict day."

Two years later the PA boys came up with the answer: all the known physical world was subject to the same pitch or "gradient," the natural rate of time. Its connexion with entropy was complex, but the basic rate was fixed.

It took eleven more years, years in which Naverson

lived, slept, and ate helix gradientry, before his hyposubdep. found their answer: *infra*-hyposubquark shunts were the only hope, for the fundamental structure of time lay in the i-h-s-q domain. Some amazing things came to light as a result of their researches. Mank Showk (Domenico Zhukov) was chatting to Naverson one day.

"Sole reason we cannot see/hear Past is, recession-velocity *c*, therefore its signals undergo transfinite red shift, arrive with zero energy."

"What about Future?"

"Not in being. Continuous creation of Time, expansion from zero-volume Present. Or conversely, Present advances into Future with velocity *c*."

"Explain: whither?"

"Fourth space dimension. A moment 8 1/2 minutes ago is one astro-unit away along fourth dimension. A moment one year ago is one light-year away along it."

"Then we shall never explore Future or Past?"

"Not on supra-i-h-s-q levels. Not on any practical level probably, and not at all without 50 years' grind."

"And no professional motive or money in present world conditions."

In fourteen further years, with Naverson now in graying middle age, the solution was found, after a fashion: the experimental rats, surrounded by the palladium coils, were pushed into a 0.01 percent flatter gradient, as assessed by computer. . . . They simply vanished; they ceased to intersect with the rest of the known universe except instantaneously, and therefore imperceptibly. . . .

"Flatch!" called the Director on the visiphone to his opposite number in Population; "our AC sports have hit a Wunkun for you." A "Wunkun" was the current term for a rewarding disaster, an ill wind that blew somebody good, an ugly duckling that was somebody's golden-egg-laying swan. The name derived from the name of the head of the century-old expedition round Venus that had shattered

half the planet's surface, destroying itself in the process, and in so doing had made the planet landable-on and ultimately habitable.

"Out with; I'm suicidal now: Earth's only three generations from standing-room. Riots, virus epidemics increasing monthly. Like the twenty-first-century crash, but no solution this time."

"Visit, please: security."

"Right; in 15 minutes till 45 minutes convenient?"

"Make 20 till 60."

"Non-poss.: 20 till 50?"

"Right."

When Flatch Bemp (i.e. Flotsham Bassompied) landed from Sahara, the DPC Director, Kulf (pronounced "Kulluf") Gren (i.e., Kinloch Grattan) had a shot of lysergibenzedrine ready for him. "Now," said he, "I call Nevzen Bewce, dedicated man—he explains quick."

Naverson Builth appeared in the secure internal visiphone screen.

"Nev, this Flatch Bemp, Director Population."

Naverson nodded, a subservient greeting in those days. Flatch twitched his left eyebrow.

"Population may have use, your gimmick. Explain it."

Naverson explained that, depending on the degree of shunt, any gradient desired could be given to the organism.

"Steeper, too?" asked Flatch.

"Steeper too—ages *quicker;* flatter slower."

"How many gradients total?"

"Infinite. Only limitations precision of infra-hyposubquark gadgetry operation."

"In practice?"

"Say 10^5 flatterwise, 10^8 steeperwise. Technically possible also produce zero gradient or negative gradient, respectively eternal life and regression to infancy (backward time), humanly pointless. 10^5 flatter but positive."

Flatch spread his hands outward, an outrageously extravagant gesture in that crammed and pressed world, but warranted by the moment and encouraged by his boost from the 1.-b. shot.

"Eureka! How apply shunt?"

"Chamber of coils. Any age."

"Size limit? Get in several together?"

"Say 70 meters cube; 34 times 10^4 cubic meters."

"Get crowd in then?"

"Possibly. Tell you in year perhaps."

"Eurekest! Select families from volunteers, promise lebensraum, shunt off, divide world population by 10^5 at least! Extend top privileges to all here, heaven on earth!"

A vast grin spread round his face. . . .

"Understand, moment security, silence, death penalty."

"Rest of team?"

"Temporary silence to lower echelons. Eh, Kulf?"

"Right. You are Project X now. To remain here, Flatch?"

"Exact, best remain here, channel to me via you, Kulf."

"Right."

It took two years to establish the intra-coil limits. They worked on elephants and on sequoias (complete with roots), also on families of zoo bears, and goats (most land animals were in zoos or labs, except farm animals too precious to waste). The practical limit proved to be a 97-meters-diameter sphere. The gradient-density limit worked out at 10^5 X 2 channels for the "flatter" gradients, and over 10^7 for the "steeper" ones. Flatch Bemp found ethical objections to sending people into a gradient with a shorter life-span, and again to extending the life-span beyond 300 years (besides, how many would ever volunteer for outside these limits?). So he was obliged to be content with the least flat of the flatter gradients, which meant under 10^4 channels. Still, to propose to divide the

world's present population by nearly ten thousand was to give it a glimpse of hope.

"If we can take them at that rate!" murmured Naverson.

"Does Flatch know what we'll send into?" twanged Mank.

"Fowp's best theoretician. He and Eck say each gradient manifestation same multigrade reality, gross physical world same in each. Just ensure good population density shot in, enough specialists, hydroponic equipment, soil-bacteria cultures, ultrasonic crumblers, algae, fish spawn —build up civilization in three generations."

"Fully voluntary basis, Kulf," said Flatch, two rooms away. "We'll appeal worldwide time-gradient emigration. Plenty volunteers, tough pioneers, independents, claustrophobes, crowd-haters. Ask full details. Computers assess potentialities, eliminate misfits, compose suitable shunt-manifolds, balanced gradient-populations. Details to include preferred life-span—of juveniles: parents to fit in or stay behind. Can't give a tenner, a twentier and a fiftier same gradient and expect all three live same length!" He chuckled fatuously.

Linked batteries of computer complexes worked out time-logistics and densities so as to give the minimum of hardship. Meantime Naverson's boys (he was now in charge of the whole subdep. X) had built a series of Shunters, one for each desired gradient. Human bulk transport was easy and they preferred not to disperse the project at this stage; besides, the emergent migrants were best concentrated in one spot whence they could fan outward and where they could hold pioneer councils.

The emigrants were duly selected and shot off into the unknown. A rate of 10,000 a day was achieved, which exceeded Flatch's own logistics-researchers' forecast by a factor of ten, but was still an insignificant offset to the birthrate. Four years later, years of intense negotiation

and effort, one thousand batteries of Shunters were up and the rate (improved for each) now totaled thirty world-million a day. Eventually Naverson, a prematurely elderly man at seventy, had 7,000 million leave each day through 30,000 batteries, dispersed over the margins of the habitable globe, a rate which might be expected to drain off nearly the current birthrate-excess. It was a real achievement to have reached this "plateau," thought Naverson.

The Shunter-complexes were nearly all sited on poorly populated highlands away from the warren edges, where vast reception camps could be set up and where the migrants, when they passed through, would be able to survey the lowlands as they held their first councils. The scenes in the gigantic Reception areas—as each accepted family with its minimal goods was admitted, documented, inoculated, made up on basic rations, weapons, tools, camped on its bench for two days, was rechecked for infection, was herded on, passed through, was corralled in the polygonal eight-story intra-coil chamber, and, with some 20,000 other individuals, a herd of goats, and a lot of equipment, shot off into the unknown—would have electrified an Eichmann, at such an *Endlösung* to end all *Endlösungen.* But it was a *Dies Irae* minus the wrath. The countless hosts arrived, if not actually singing, at any rate chattering, to stream through their gates, not of pearl, but of palladium; and if they held hands as they saw the last of this continuum, that was only to be expected.

Naverson, on whom the strain of the great operation was telling, had a curious dream about this time. He was talking to Flatch (who was already dead in fact) and saying: "We are attenuating local world-line reality, riddling it, fractionating it. Previously 10^4 gradients dense, so to speak. Now only one. Emigrant populations burrowing structure. Won't survive 1/10,000 rarefaction much longer."

"Nonsense!" said Flatch and at that moment, the whole

inhabited surface-region of Terra comploded, like a termite-infested building. Naverson woke up with pounding heart, sweating, dry-tongued, to hear the visiphone alarm calling. It was "morning," but he had slept in.

"Nev!" said the figure of Misk Howla (Flatch's successor; today he would have been Méthexis Ulvelaej). "Nev! Something up. Unexplained population figures, not down enough. A lot of illegal squatting empty marginal dwelling-spaces. Have they all come back?"

"Impossible," said Naverson; then he paused. "Check births, origins, genes if necessary, computerwise."

"Why?"

"Check first."

Ten days later the computer complexes gave up their answer: up to 15 percent of the world population (concentrated near the new dwelling-spaces on the warren margins) were unexplained, with no known origin. Their gene-type percentages gave a picture which was partly identical with that of the local population, but partly composed of puzzling variants which, or in proportions which, the computers were quite unable to match.

"Know why, Misk?" whispered old Naverson to the young Population Director in the dazzling privacy of the Directorial office, lit by real sunlight through real glass on the edge of a warren by the Ahaggar Mountains. "Know why? The other gradients aren't void or uninhabited: they are full! Just like us, more or less, probably. Our time-universe is only one among millions, perhaps infinite number. *They've* hit on *our* method approximately same time-point."

Misk, an impulsive man, jumped through the window, 278 stories up.

Naverson, who knew Misk's staff well now, took over Population's end of the problem and in another week had further details: The immigrant-sending gradients were all steeper; there were several thousands of them known to be

sending at the moment, though rates and numbers were likely to increase. The sending chambers were not identical with his own, or in the same places, but created new populations in similar marginal areas. The immigrants had found themselves in a populous world where they had been expecting an empty one; however, they had made the best of a bad job and being enterprising, broke up their chamber-stories, scattered, infiltrated the mass, occupied vacant cells in the warren margins, and had evaded detection for some years.

Three months later a series of strange short-lived virus epidemics, beginning near the Alpine and Rocky Mountains margins, seized 60 percent of the American and European population, and killed 25 percent of those they struck. In spite of the television propaganda, the survivors blamed the "invaders," and any unvouched newcomers to a warren district were butchered from then on, including the children. Later, actual Shuntee batches were found by out-labor gangs, sometimes still in their multistory capsules, and a fight to the death would ensue with such weapons as came to hand. Naverson pictured the same fate fallen and befalling, and to befall, his own shuntees. . . . At 75, he had reached retiring age. Worn out, he died, a disappointed man, in the gray winter of 2395 a few months later, leaving the Worlds to struggle with their monstrous burden.

In February A.D. 2021 in the same continuum, just before the Second World Famine, the newscasts were full of the death of Naverson Builth, the brilliant young researcher struck down by a once-famous accident at the great accelerator, who had lived on in a permanent coma for 49 years, kept alive by modern medical science. . . . It was *his* reality which had been fractionated by infra-hyposubquark shunt.

I wrote this story about 1966. I would like perhaps to have picked Traveler's Rest, *written earlier, but that has been so much anthologized it must take a vacation. Or* Lost Ground, *but Harry Harrison has already anthologized it and for this volume it is over length.* The Transfinite Choice, *however, symbolizes some of my misgivings about man's future, and is a good example of my personal approach to realism, plot, and incident, my interest in time, and my treatment of language.*

I've made a lot of use of time as a medium in various stories, but the medium is not *the message.* Traveler's Rest *may be really about the life and death of man, and* Lost Ground *about the tyranny of the emotions. Both are pieces of mythmaking, my favorite kind of SF.* The Transfinite Choice, *a more straightforward story, is about the vanity of human effort. Though conceived as a* jeu d'esprit, *a light-hearted exercise, it is an essay in the inescapable-fate tradition which is as old as folklore.*

Realism: Apart from satire, I have always felt one should ideally present things as they really are (or might be) instead of diluting them, varnishing them, or transposing them into contemporary terms. (Of course one has *to compromise a bit.) This is why I couched* A Two-Timer *in seventeenth-century English, made so many coinages for* Traveler's Rest, *re-englished and re-environmented* Take It or Leave It *in detail, and ultra-re-englished and resubatomized the story you have just (I hope) read. In this sense the medium (words)* is *the message (actuality). When I encounter some eighteenth-century forecast of (say) the year 2000 which never really gets off the eighteenth-century ground, some twentieth-century story about the far future filled with space-opera versions of present-day American society, or accounts of "aliens" who speak and think like human gurus, con men or commissars: except in enjoyably tongue-in-cheek stories, I feel acutely queasy, or, as you used to say, "sick to my stomach." As a*

writer, I cannot aspire to the blind-'em-with-science triumphant detail of a Blish or the terrific self-effacing industry and bitter human knowledge of a Kornbluth, but I try instinctively to present a surface which will suggest that I live in whatever world I am portraying.

Some writers go for realism by constructing their plot itself out of genuine scientific possibilities. I prefer to fashion plot out of the dreamlike compelling intuitions that come to me, often, when actually writing my early drafts. The end is implied in the beginning or in the setting, in this story and four or five others. An ironically circular plot gives me a certain satisfaction. Some of the twists of plot, by the way, unforeseen by the characters here (and elsewhere) might in real life have been no surprise to an informed observer; one hopes that, like Desdemona's non-opportunity for adultery in Othello, *the snag is overlooked while the story is moving. (As to the final comment in this story, you are at liberty to think that Naverson suffered fission into two selves, one four centuries or so ahead of the other, or that the life of the future self was a continuous dream in his medically perpetuated coma.)*

Those "spiral gradients" and the three attempts at aging control are not to be taken too seriously as science, still less the discovery that time involves movement at light-speed along a fourth space-dimension—independently arrived at, by the way, by John Brunner. (I like throwing in savory garnishings like this.) The life-spirals up a cone from birth-base to death-tip came from my natural tendency to imagine processes or relations in visual or diagrammatic terms.

Language: This had to be made comprehensible to Naverson Builth by putting him through a bogus brain operation, and to the reader by mostly paraphrasing it, apart from touches of the "real" thing. For make no mistake: Four centurues ahead, if men speak English at all it will be an "English" we could never follow. If you don't

believe me consider the English of Shakespeare and the Authorized Version of the Bible. Though sanctified and familiarized by long usage and skillful actors they are losing ground, the Bible to modern versions. Elizabethan and even later satire or religious controversy often make no sense to a noninformed modern reader. Their words do not mean what they seem to mean, and their elliptical allusions and assumptions refer to a world that has passed away. Rapid speech of A.D. 1600 or so would be hard indeed to follow today, not least because of the sound values, which are as strange as those of a "deep" dialect or pre-mass-media rural England.

My occasional examples of "real" twenty-fourth-century sound values were carefully worked out by extrapolating from serious linguistic forecasts for a century or so ahead. Then again, the assumptions and background of the twenty-fourth century will be such as we cannot well imagine and could never follow if we heard the speech; take this, and the possible effects of having English as a world speech used by many nations, and you will realize that by then, "English" will be full not only of metaphors and allusions but also of new entities, new verbs, new turns of speech, quite alien to us; most of all this I had to skip in order to get on with the story line (unlike Take It or Leave It, *where I could shirk almost nothing that may come a mere thirty years ahead), though I was able to slip in a Wunkun and a whole series of subatomic worlds. But the telegraphic syntax is what seemed natural to a battery-fowl existence and anyway an obvious extrapolation from the curve of increasing succinctness and brusquerie during the last four centuries. (There is also the curve of development from picturesque earthiness to generalized and abstract constructions—run backward in* A Two-Timer.)

More lately I have turned to satirical SF. My pessimism about man's use of science is already clear here, though a

bit exaggerated for the story. What is less evident is my hopelessness about man himself. This is because I still had then remnants of a touching faith in human altruism and cooperation. Lately I have seen many specimens of humanity, often without public outcry, outdo in cynicism, egoism, greed, brutality, viciousness, corruption, or sheer idiocy, anything that could be imagined in satire. This is true for all colors, nations, ages, incomes and political creeds—only the manifestations differ. And in the great world of public action, often, right no longer seems to exist, only a choice of wrongs. Yeats's words "The best lack all conviction, and the worst / Are full of passionate intensity" are a thousand times more true than when he wrote them. I am afraid the Gadarene swine are accelerating downward past signal velocity: They can no longer be overtaken by the word.

—David I. Masson

THE TANK TRAPEZE

Michael Moorcock

Stories of this kind tend to be built up, like most stories, layer by layer. Basically the form used is that of the dramatic scene with the dull "link" episodes removed and the themes demonstrated rather than brought out in boring explication. Bob Sheckley told me a while ago that he had decided that what bored him must therefore bore the reader and so he decided to leave out anything which bored him. Of course, I'd admit that what I've left in might bore the reader, too. . . .

One keeps working at this sort of story until the structure feels right (and in this it's rather more like doing poetry or painting). There is certainly no rejection of structure but there is a tendency to reject traditional methods of plot development and distracting rationalizations which, in more conventional kinds of SF, tend to take the attention away from the essential subject of the story.

In The Tank Trapeze *I wanted to write about Czechoslovakia and Russian imperialism but my experience, as an Englishman, is of British imperialism and so I set the major part of the story in Burma (which allowed for overtones of American imperialism and Japanese imperialism, too)! Although there are different "levels" to this story, I hope it can be read without undue interpretation and enjoyed for its surface effects if nothing else. The main influences on my Jerry Cornelius stories are probably Dashiell Hammett and J.L. Borges, though J.G. Ballard, Ronald Firbank and William Burroughs are also there, I think.*

Most of the Cornelius stories mean a great deal to me and involve concerns which move me emotionally as well as intellectually but I've selected this particular one—the third I wrote—because it has not as yet appeared in an anthology, and because it is probably one of the most "approachable" of the seven or eight I have so far written. Also it was not originally intended for publication in New Worlds *but went in because of the failure of certain manuscripts originally scheduled for that issue to turn up on time, so I'm glad to see it appear in another form. On one level I hope that the brutality of some of the incidents in the story mirrors the brutality of the Russian invasion of* Czechoslovakia *(which has had more than its share of brutality since its birth as a nation). On another level I hope that it gives perspective on similar acts of brutality (British in the Far East, American in Vietnam, Viet Cong in Vietnam etc.) which happen every day in the world. I'll wind up these fashionable statements by adding that on a third level the story is meant to show that we are all capable of such brutality.*

Running through the story is the question of time and the nature of identity—questions which must always arise when considering the problems of history and the human condition. The aim in a story of this kind is to concentrate all these themes into the shortest possible length and still retain readability. I hope I've managed to do this and that you'll enjoy the story for its comic effects as well as for its more serious undertones.

—Michael Moorcock

01.00 hours. Prague Radio announced the move and said the Praesidium of the Czechoslovak Communist Party re-

garded it as a violation of international law, and that Czechoslovak forces had been ordered not to resist.

* * *

Perfection had always been his goal, but a sense of justice had usually hampered him. Jerry Cornelius wouldn't be seeing the burning city again. His only luggage an expensive cricket bag, he rode a scheduled corpse boat to the Dubrovnik depot and boarded the SS *Kao An* bound for Burma, arriving just in time.

After the ship had jostled through the junks to find a berth, Jerry disembarked, making his way to the Rangoon public baths where, in a three-kyat cubicle, he took off his brown serge suit and turban, changing into an elaborately embroidered Russian blouse loose enough to hide his shoulder holster. From his bag he took a pair of white flannels, soft Arabian boots and an old-fashioned astrakhan shako. Disguised to his satisfaction he left the baths and went by pedicab to the checkpoint where the Buddhist monk waited for him.

The monk's moody face was fringed by a black "Bergman" beard making him look like an unfrocked BBC producer. Signing the safe-conduct order with a Pentel pen that had been recharged in some local ink, he blinked at Jerry. "He's here today."

"Too bad." Jerry adjusted his shako with the tips of his fingers, then gave the monk his heater. The monk shrugged, looked at it curiously and handed it back. "Okay. Come on. There's a car."

"*Every gun makes its own tune,*" murmured Jerry.

As he headed for the old Bentley tourer parked beyond the guard hut, the monk's woolly saffron cardigan billowed in the breeze.

* * *

02:15: All telephone lines between Vienna and Czechoslovakia were cut.

* * *

They drove between the green paddy fields and in the distance saw the walls of Mandalay. Jerry rubbed his face. "I hadn't expected it to be so hot."

"Hell, isn't it? It'll be cooler in the temple." The monk's eyes were on the twisting white road.

Jerry wound down the window. Dust spotted his blouse but he didn't bother to brush it off. "Lai's waiting in the temple is he?"

The monk nodded. "Is that what you call him? Could you kill a child, Mr. Cornelius?"

"I could try."

* * *

03.30: Prague Radio and some of its transmitters were off the air.

* * *

All the roofs of Mandalay were of gold or burnished brass. Jerry put on his dark glasses as they drove through the glazed gates. The architecture was almost primitive and somewhat fierce. Hindu rather than Buddhist in inspiration, it featured as decoration a variety of boldly painted devils, fabulous beasts and minor deities.

"You keep it up nicely."

"We do our best. Most of the buildings, of course, are in the later Pala-Sena style."

"The spires in particular."

"Wait till you see the temple."

The temple was rather like an Anuradhapuran ziggurat, rising in twelve ornate tiers of enameled metal inlaid with silver, bronze, gold, onyx, ebony and semiprecious stones.

Its entrance was overhung by three arches, each like an inverted V, one upon the other. The building seemed overburdened, like a tree weighted with too much ripe fruit. They went inside, making their way between pillars of carved ivory and teak. Of the gods in the carvings, Ganesh was the one most frequently featured.

"The expense, of course, is enormous," whispered the monk. "Here's where we turn off."

A little light entered the area occupied chiefly by a reclining Buddha of pure gold, resting on a green marble plinth. The Buddha was twenty feet long and about ten feet high, a decadent copy in the manner of the Siamese school of U Thong. The statue's thick lips were supposed to be curved in a smile but instead seemed fatuously pursed.

From the shadow of the Buddha a man moved into the light. He was fat, the color of oil, with a crimson fez perched on his bald head. His hands were buried in the pockets of his beige jacket. "You're Jeremiah Cornelius? You're pale. Haven't been out east long. . . ."

"This is Captain Maxwell," said the monk eagerly.

"I was to meet a Mr. Lai."

"This is Mr. Lai."

"How do you do." Jerry put down his cricket bag.

"How do you do, Mr. Cornelius."

"It depends what you mean."

Captain Maxwell pressed his lips in a red smile. "I find your manner instructive." He waved the monk away and returned to the shadows. "Will it matter, I wonder, if we are not simpatico?"

* * *

03.30: Russian troops took up positions outside the Prague Radio building.

* * *

In the bamboo bar of the Mandalay Statler-Hilton Jerry looked through the net curtains at the rickshaws passing rapidly on both sides of the wide street. The bar was faded and poorly stocked and its only other occupants, two German railway technicians on their way through to Laos, crossed the room to the far corner and began a game of bar billiards.

Jerry took the stool next to Captain Maxwell who had registered at the same time, giving his religion as Protestant and his occupation as engineer. Jerry asked the Malayan barman for a Jack Daniels that cost him fourteen kyats and tasted like clock oil.

"This place doesn't change," Maxwell said. His Slavic face was morose as he sipped his sherbet. "I don't know why I come back. Nowhere else, I suppose. Came here first . . ." He rubbed his toothbrush moustache with his finger and used the same finger to push a ridge of sweat from his forehead. Fidgeting for a moment on his stool he dismounted to tug at the material that had stuck to the sweat of his backside. "Don't touch the curries here. They're murder. The other grub's okay though. A bit dull." He picked up his glass and was surprised to find it empty. "You flew in, did you?"

"Boat in. Flying out."

Maxwell rolled his sleeves up over his heavy arms and slapped at a mosquito that had settled among the black hairs and the pink, torn bites. "God almighty. Looking for women?"

Jerry shrugged.

"They're down the street. You can't miss the place."

"See you." Jerry left the bar. He got into a taxi and gave an address in the suburbs beyond the wall.

As they moved slowly through the teeming streets the taxi driver leaned back and studied Jerry's thin face and long blond hair. "Boring now, sir. Worse than the Japs now, sir."

* * *

03.45: Soviet tanks and armored cars surrounded the party Central Committee's building in Prague.

* * *

From the other side of the apartment's oak door Jerry heard the radio, badly tuned to some foreign station, playing the younger Dvorak's lugubrious piano piece, "The Railway Station at Cierna nad Tisov." He rang the bell. Somebody changed the channel and the radio began to play "Alexander's Ragtime Band," obviously performed by one of the many Russian traditional jazz bands that had become so popular in recent years. A small woman in a blue cheong sam, her black hair piled on her head, opened the door and stepped demurely back to let him in. He winked at her.

"You're Anna Ne Win?"

She bowed her head and smiled.

"You're something."

"And so are you."

On the heavy chest in the hallway stood a large Ming vase of crimson roses.

The rest of the apartment was full of the heavy scent of carnations. It was a little overpowering.

* * *

03.47: Prague Radio went off the air completely.

* * *

The child's body was covered from throat to ankles by a gown onto which intricately cut jewels had been stitched so that none of the material showed through. On his shaven head was a similarly worked cap. His skin was a light, soft brown and he seemed a sturdy little boy, grave

and good looking. When Jerry entered the gloomy, scented room, the child let out a huge sigh, as if he had been holding his breath for several minutes. His hands emerged from his long sleeves and he placed one on each arm of the ornate wooden chair over which his legs dangled. "Please sit down."

Jerry took off his shako and looked carefully into the boy's large almond eyes before lowering himself to the cushion near the base of the chair.

"You've seen Lai?"

Jerry grinned. "You could be twins."

The boy smiled and relaxed in the chair. "Do you like children, Mr. Cornelius?"

"I try to like whatever's going."

"Children like me. I am different, you see." The boy unbuttoned his coat, exposing his downy brown chest. "Reach up, Mr. Cornelius, and put your hand on my heart."

Jerry leaned forward and stretched out his hand. He placed his palm against the child's smooth chest. The beat was rapid and irregular. Again he looked into the child's eyes and was interested by the ambiguities he saw in them. For a moment he was afraid.

"Can I see your gun, Mr. Cornelius?"

Jerry took his hand away and reached under his blouse, tugging his heater from its holster. He gave it to the child who drew it up close to his face to inspect it. "I have never seen a gun like this before."

"It's a side product," Jerry said, retrieving the weapon "of the communications industry."

"Ah, of course. What do you think will happen?"

"Who knows? We live in hope."

Anna Ne Win, dressed in beautiful brocade, with her hair hanging free, returned with a tray, picking her way among the cushions that were scattered everywhere on the

floor of the gloomy room. "Here is some tea. I hope you'll dally with us."

"I'd love to."

* * *

04.20: The Soviet Tass Agency said that Soviet troops had been called into Czechoslovakia by Czechoslovak leaders.

* * *

In the hotel room Maxwell picked his nails with a splintered chopstick while Jerry checked his kit.

"You'll be playing for the visitors, of course. Hope the weather won't get you down."

"It's got to get hotter before it gets cooler."

"What do you mean by that?" Maxwell lit a Corona from the butt of a native cheroot he had just dropped in the ashtray, watching Jerry undo the straps of his bag.

Jerry upended the cricket bag. All the equipment tumbled noisily onto the bamboo table and hit the floor. A red cricket ball rolled under the bed. Maxwell was momentarily disconcerted, then leaned down and recovered it. His chair creaked as he tossed the ball to Jerry.

Jerry put the ball in his bag and picked up a protector and a pair of bails. "The smell of brand-new cricket gear. Lovely, isn't it?"

"I've never played cricket."

Jerry laughed. "Neither have I. Not since I had my teeth knocked out when I was five."

"You're considering violence, then?"

"I don't get you."

"What is it you dislike about me?"

"I hadn't noticed. Maybe I'm jealous."

"That's quite likely."

"I've been aboard your yacht, you see. The *Teddy Bear.*

In the Pool of London. Registered in Hamburg, isn't she?"

"The *Teddy Bear* isn't my yacht, Mr. Cornelius. If only she were. Is that all . . . ?"

"Then it must be Tsarapkin's, eh?"

"You came to Mandalay to do a job for me, Mr. Cornelius, not to discuss the price of flying fish."

Jerry shrugged. "You raised the matter."

"That's rich."

* * *

04.45: Prague Radio came back on the air and urged the people of Prague to heed only the legal voice of Czechoslovakia. It repeated the request not to resist. "We are incapable of defending these frontiers," it said.

* * *

Caught at the wicket for sixteen off U Shi Jheon, Jerry now sat in his deck chair watching the game. Things looked sticky for the visitors.

It was the first few months of 1948 that had been crucial. A detailed almanac for that period would reveal a lot. That was when the psychosis had really started to manifest itself. It had been intensifying ever since. There was only a certain amount one could do, after all.

* * *

06.25: Russian troops began shooting at Czechoslovak demonstrators outside the Prague Radio building.

* * *

While Jerry was changing, Captain Maxwell entered the dressing room and stood leaning against a metal locker, rubbing his right foot against his fat left leg while Jerry combed his hair.

"How did the match go?"

"A draw. What did you expect?"

"No less."

"You didn't do too badly out there, old boy. Tough luck, being caught like that."

Jerry blew him a kiss and left the pavilion, carrying his cricket bag across the empty field toward the waiting car that could just be seen through the trees.

* * *

06:30: Machine-gun fire broke out near the Hotel Esplanade.

* * *

Jerry strolled among the pagodas as the sun rose and struck their bright roofs. Shaven-headed monks in saffron moved slowly here and there. Jerry's boots made no sound on the mosaic paths. Looking back, he saw that Anna Ne Win was watching him from the corner of a pagoda. At that moment the child appeared and took her hand, leading her out of sight. Jerry walked on.

* * *

06.30: Prague television was occupied.

* * *

Maxwell stared down through the window, trying to smooth the wrinkles in his suit. "Rangoon contacted me last night."

"Ah."

"They said: 'It is better to go out in the street.' " Maxwell removed his fez. "It's all a matter of profits in the long run, I suppose." He chuckled.

"You seem better this morning. The news must have been good."

"Positive. You could call it positive. I must admit I was

beginning to get a little nervy. I'm a man of action, you see, like yourself."

* * *

06.36: Prague Radio announced: "When you hear the Czech National Anthem you will know it's all over."

* * *

Jerry hung around the post office the whole day. No reply came to his telegram but that was probably a good sign. He went to a bar in the older part of the city where a Swedish folk singer drove him out. He took a rickshaw ride around the wall. He bought a necklace and a comb. In Ba Swe Street he was almost hit by a racing tram and while he leaned against a telephone pole two *Kalan cacsa* security policemen made him show them his safe conduct. It impressed them. He watched them saunter through the crowd on the pavement and arrest a shoeshine boy, pushing him aboard the truck which had been crawling behind them. A cathartic act, if not a kindly one.

Jerry found himself in a deserted street. He picked up the brushes and rags and the polish. He fitted them into the box and placed it neatly in a doorway. A few people began to reappear. A tram came down the street. On the opposite pavement, Jerry saw Captain Maxwell. The engineer stared at him suspiciously until he realized Jerry had seen him, then he waved cheerfully. Jerry pretended he hadn't noticed and withdrew into the shade of a tattered awning. The shop itself, like so many in the street, had been closed for some time and its door and shutters were fastened by heavy iron padlocks. A proclamation had been pasted on one door panel. Jerry made out the words *Pyee-Daung-Su Myanma-Nainggan-Daw*. It was an official notice, then. Jerry watched the rickshaws and cars, the trams and the occasional truck pass in the street.

After a while the shoeshine boy returned. Jerry pointed out his equipment. The boy picked it up and walked with it under his arm toward the square where the Statler-Hilton could be seen. Jerry decided he might as well follow him, but the boy began to run and turned hastily into a side street.

Jerry spat into the gutter.

* * *

06.37: Czech National Anthem played.

* * *

Anna Ne Win moved her soft body against his in the narrow bed, pushing his legs apart with her knee. Raising himself on one elbow he reached out and brushed her black hair from her face. It was almost afternoon. Her delicate eyes opened and she smiled.

He turned away.

"Are you crying, Jerry?"

Peering through the slit in the blind he saw a squadron of L-29 Delfins fly shrieking over the golden rooftops. Were they part of an occupation force? He couldn't make out the markings. For a moment he felt depressed, then he cheered up, anticipating a pleasant event.

* * *

07.00: President Svoboda made a personal appeal over the radio for calm. He said he could offer no explanation for the invasion.

* * *

As Jerry checked the heater's transistors, Maxwell lay on the unmade bed watching him. "Have you any other occupation, Mr. Cornelius?"

"I do this and that."

"And what about political persuasions?"

"There you have me, Captain Maxwell."

"Our monk told me you said it was as primitive to hold political convictions as it was to maintain belief in God." Maxwell loosened his cummerbund.

"Is that a fact?"

"Or was he putting words into your mouth?"

Jerry clipped the heater back together. "It's a possibility."

* * *

08.20: Pilsen Radio described itself as "the last free radio station in Czechoslovakia".

* * *

A Kamov Ka-15 helicopter was waiting for them on the cricket field near the pavilion. Maxwell offered the pilot seat to Jerry. They clambered in and adjusted their flying helmets.

"You've flown these before," said Maxwell.

"That's right." Jerry lit a cheroot.

"The gestures of conflict keep the peace," murmured Maxwell nostalgically.

* * *

10.00: The Czechoslovak agency Ceteka said that at least ten ambulances had arrived outside Prague Radio station, where a Soviet tank was on fire.

* * *

When they had crossed the Irrawaddy, Jerry entered the forest and headed for the shrine. He had a map in one hand and a compass in the other.

The atmosphere of the forest was moist and cool. It would begin to rain soon; already the sky was becoming overcast. The air was full of little clusters of flies and mosquitoes, like star systems encircling an invisible sun, and in avoiding them Jerry knocked off his shako several times.

His boots were now muddy and his blouse and trousers stained by the bark and foliage. He stumbled on.

About an hour later the birches began to thin out and he knew he was close to the clearing. He breathed heavily, moving more cautiously.

He saw the chipped green tiles of the roof first, then the dirty ivory columns that supported it, then the shrine itself. Under the roof, on a base of rusting steel sheeting, stood a fat Buddha carved from local stone and painted in dark reds, yellows and blues. The statue smiled. Jerry crawled through the damp undergrowth until he could get a good view of the boy.

A few drops of rain fell loudly on the roof. Already the ground surrounding the shrine was churned to mud by a previous rainfall. The boy lay in the mud, face down, arms flung out toward the shrine, legs stiffly together, his jeweled gown covering his body. One ankle was just visible; the brown flesh showing in the gap between the slipper and the hem. Jerry touched his lips with the tip of his finger.

Above his head monkeys flung themselves through the green branches as they looked for cover from the rain. The noise they made helped Jerry creep into the clearing unobserved. He frowned.

The boy lifted his head and smiled up at Jerry. "Do you feel like a woman?"

"You stick to your prayers, I'll stick to mine."

The boy obeyed. Jerry stood looking down at the little figure as it murmured the prayers. He took out his heater and cleared his throat, then he adjusted the beam width and burned a thin hole through the child's anus. He screamed.

Later Maxwell emerged from the undergrowth and began removing the various quarters from the jeweled material. There was hardly any blood, just the stench. He shook out the bits of flesh and folded the parts of the

gown across his arm. He put one slipper in his right pocket and the other in his left. Lastly he plunked the cap from the severed head and offered it to Jerry.

"You'd better hurry. The rain's getting worse. We'll be drowned at this rate. That should cover your expenses. You'll be able to convert it fairly easily in Singapore."

"I don't often get expenses," said Jerry.

* * *

10.25: Ceteka said shooting in the centre of Prague had intensified and that the *Rude Pravo* offices had been seized by "occupation units."

* * *

Waiting near the Irrawaddy for the Ka-15 to come back, Jerry watched the rain splash into the river. He was already soaked.

The flying field had only recently been cleared from the jungle and it went right down to the banks of the river. Jerry picked his teeth with his thumbnail and looked at the broad brown water and the forest on the other side. A wooden landing stage had been built out into the river and a family of fishermen were tying up their sampan. Why should crossing this particular river seem so important?

Jerry shook his umbrella and looked up at the sound of the helicopter's engines. He was completely drenched; he felt cold and he felt sorry for himself. The sooner he could get to the Galapagos the better.

* * *

11.50: Pilsen Radio said: "The occupation has already cost 25 lives."

* * *

He just got to the post office before it closed. Anna Ne Win was standing inside reading a copy of *Dandy*. She looked up. "You're British, aren't you? Want to hear the Test results?"

Jerry shook his head. It was pointless asking for his telegram now. He no longer had any use for assurances. What he needed most at this stage was a good, solid, undeniable fact; something to get his teeth into.

"A Captain Maxwell was in earlier for some money that was being cabled to him," she said. "Apparently he was disappointed. Have you found it yet—the belt?"

"I'm sorry, no."

"You should have watched where you threw it."

"Yes."

"That Captain Maxwell. He's staying at your hotel, isn't he?"

"Yes, I've got to leave now. Going to Singapore. I'll buy you two new ones there. Send them along." He ran from the post office.

"Cheerio," she called. "Keep smiling."

* * *

12.28: Ceteka said Mr. Dubcek was under restriction in the Central Committee building.

* * *

Naked, Jerry sat down on his bed and smoked a cheroot. He was fed up with the east. It wasn't doing his identity any good.

The door opened and Maxwell came in with a revolver in his hand and a look of disgust on his fat face. "You're not wearing any damned clothes!"

"I wasn't expecting you."

Maxwell cocked the revolver. "Who do you think you are, anyway?"

"Who do you think?"

Maxwell sneered. "You'd welcome suggestions, eh? I want to puke when I look at you."

"Couldn't I help you get a transfer?"

"I don't need one."

Jerry looked at the disordered bed, at the laddered

stockings Anna Ne Win had left behind, at the trousers hanging on the string over the washbasin, at the woolen mat on the floor by the bed, at the cricket bag on top of the wardrobe. "It would make me feel better, though." He drew on his cheroot. "Do you want the hat back?"

"Don't be revolting, Cornelius."

"What do you want, then, Captain Maxwell?"

"Justice."

"I'm with you." Jerry stood up and reached for his flannels. Maxwell raised the Webley and Scott .45 and fired the first bullet. Jerry was thrust against the washbasin and he blinked rapidly as his vision dimmed. There was a bruise five inches in diameter on his right breast and in its center was a hole with red, puckered sides; around the edges of the bruise a little blood was beginning to force its way out. "There certainly are some shits in the world," he said.

A couple of shots later, when Jerry was lying on the floor, he had the impression that Maxwell's trousers had fallen down. He grinned. Maxwell's voice was faint but insulting. "Bloody gangster! Murderer! Fucking killer!"

Jerry turned on his side and noticed that Anna Ne Win's cerise suspender belt was hanging on a spring under the bed. He reached out and touched it and a tremor of pleasure ran through his body. The last shot he felt hit the base of his spine.

He shuddered and was vaguely aware of the weight of Maxwell's lumpen body on his, of the insect-bitten wrists, of the warm Webley and Scott still in one hand and the cordite smell on the captain's breath. Then Maxwell whispered something in his ear and reaching around his face carefully folded down his eyelids.

(All quotes from *The Guardian,* August 22, 1968)

BORDERED IN BLACK

Larry Niven

The tiny figure waited patiently in the *Overcee*'s airlock while men moved up an escalator ramp. Lean and sandy-haired, the figure was clearly Carver Rappaport, though a red beard now masked half its face.

Turnbull, waiting below the ramp, suppressed growing uneasiness. Something was wrong. The *Overcee* had been within the solar system for days. Why hadn't the men called in?

And where was Wall Kameon? The airlock would have held both men.

Rappaport rode the ramp down, not walking but standing like a commuter. Was he sick? Seen closer, his beard was ragged, unkempt. He reached bottom, and Turnbull saw that the square features were set like cement.

Rappaport brushed past him and kept walking.

Turnbull ran after him and fell into step, looking and feeling foolish. Rappaport was taller, with longer legs, and where he was walking Turnbull was almost running. He shouted over the background noise of the spaceport, "Rappaport, where's Kameon?"

Like Turnbull, Rappaport had to shout. "Dead."

"Dead? Was it the ship? Rappaport, did the *ship* kill him?"

"No."

Turnbull's ship had not failed them, then. He said, "Then what? Is his body aboard?"

"Turnbull, I don't want to talk about it. No, his body

isn't aboard. His—" Rappaport ground the heels of his hands into his eyes, like a man fighting a headache. "His *grave*," he said, emphasizing the word, "has a nice black border around it. Let's leave it at that."

But they couldn't, of course.

Two security officers caught up with them near the edge of the field. "Stop him," said Turnbull, and they each took an arm. Rappaport stopped walking and turned.

"Have you forgotten that I'm carrying a destruct capsule?"

"What about it?" For the moment Turnbull really didn't understand what he meant.

"Any more interference and I'll use it. Understand this, Turnbull. I don't care any more. Project Overcee is over. I don't know where I go from here. The best thing we can do is blow up that ship and stay in our own solar system."

"Man, have you gone crazy? What *happened* out there? Did you—meet aliens?"

"No comment. —No, I'll answer that one. We didn't meet aliens. Now tell your comedian friends to let go."

Turnbull let himself realize that the man wasn't bluffing. Rappaport was prepared to commit suicide. Turnbull, the instinctive politician, weighed chances and gambled.

"If you haven't decided to talk in twenty-four hours we'll let you go. I promise that. We'll keep you here till then, by force if necessary. Just to give you an opportunity to change your mind."

Rappaport thought it over. The security men still held his arms, but cautiously now, standing as far back as they could, in case his personal bomb went off.

"Seems fair," he said at last, "if you're honest. Sure, I'll wait twenty-four hours."

"Good." Turnbull turned to lead the way back to his office. Instead, he merely stared.

The *Overcee* was red hot at the nose, glaring white at the tail. Mechs and techs were running in all directions. As

Turnbull watched, the solar system's first faster-than-light spacecraft slumped and ran in a spreading, glowing pool.

. . . It had started a century ago, when the first ramrobot left the solar system. The interstellar ramscoop robots could make most of their journey at near lightspeed, using a conical electromagnetic field two hundred miles across to collect hydrogen fuel from interstellar space. But no man had ever ridden a ramrobot. None ever would. The ramscoop magnetic field did horrible things to chordate organisms.

Each ramrobot had been programmed to report back only if it found a habitable world near the star to which it had been assigned. Twenty-six had been sent out. Three had reported back—so far.

. . . It had started twelve years ago, when a well known mathematician worked out a theoretical hyperspace over Einsteinian fourspace. He did it in his spare time. Ergstrom considered the hyperspace a toy, an example of pure mathematics. And when has pure mathematics been anything but good clean fun?

. . . It had started ten years ago, when Ergstrom's brother Carl demonstrated the experimental reality of Ergstrom's toy universe. Within a month the UN had financed Project Overcee, put Winston Turbull in charge, and set up a school for faster-than-light astronauts. The vast number of applicants was winnowed to ten "hypernauts." Two were Belters; all were experienced spacers. The training began in earnest. It lasted eight years, while Project Overcee built the ship.

. . . It had started a year and a month ago, when two men climbed into the almost luxurious lifesystem of the *Overcee*, ran the ship out to Neptune's orbit under escort, and vanished.

One was back.

Now his face was no stonier than Turnbull's. Turnbull

had just watched his work of the last ten years melt and run like quicksilver. He was mad clean through; but his mind worked furiously. Part of him, the smaller part, was wondering how he would explain the loss of ten billion dollars worth of ship. The rest was reviewing everything it could remember about Carver Geoffrey Rappaport and William (Wall) Kameon.

Turnbull entered his office and went straight to the bookshelf, sure that Rappaport was following. He pulled out a leather-bound volume, did something to the binding and poured two paper cups full of amber fluid. The fluid was bourbon, and it was more than ice cold.

Rappaport had seen this bookcase before, yet he wore a faintly puzzled frown as he took a cup. He said, "I didn't think I'd ever anticipate anything again."

"The bourbon?"

Rappaport didn't answer. His first swallow was a gulp.

"Did you destroy your ship?"

"Yes. I set the controls so it would only melt. I didn't want anyone hurt."

"Commendable. And the overcee motor? You left it in orbit?"

"I hard-landed it on the Moon. It's gone."

"That's great. Just great. Carver, that ship cost ten billion dollars to build. We can duplicate it for four, I think, because we won't be making any false starts, but you—"

"Hell you wouldn't." Rappaport swirled the bourbon in his cup, looking down into the miniature whirlpool. He was twenty to thirty pounds lighter than he had been a year ago. "You build another *Overcee* and you'll be making one enormous false start. We were wrong, Turnbull. It's not our universe. There's nothing out there for us."

"It *is* our universe." Turnbull let the quiet certainty show in his politician's voice. He needed to start an argument—he needed to get this man to talking. But the cer-

tainty was real, and always had been. It was humanity's universe, ready for the taking.

Over the rim of his cup Rappaport looked at him in exasperated pity. "Turnbull, can't you take my word for it? It's not our universe, and it's not worth having anyway. What's out there is—" He clamped his mouth shut and turned away in the visitor's chair.

Turnbull waited ten seconds to point up the silence. Then he asked, "Did you kill Kameon?"

"Kill Wall? You're out of your mind!"

"Could you have saved him?"

Rappaport froze in the act of turning around. "No," he said. And again, "No. I tried to get him moving, but he wouldn't— Stop it! Stop needling me. I can walk out any time, and you couldn't stop me."

"It's too late. You've aroused my curiosity. What about Kameon's black-bordered grave?"

No answer.

"Rappaport, you seem to think that the UN will just take your word and dismantle Project Overcee. There's not a prayer of that. Probability zero. In the last century we've spent tens of billions of dollars on the ramrobots and the *Overcee,* and now we can rebuild her for four. The only way to stop that is to tell the UN exactly why they shouldn't."

Rappaport didn't answer, and Turnbull didn't speak again. He watched Rappaport's cigarette burning unheeded in the ash tray, leaving a strip of charred wet paper. It was uncharacteristic of the former Carver Rappaport to forget burning cigarettes, or to wear an untrimmed beard and sloppily cut hair. That man had been always clean shaven; that man had lined up his shoes at night, every night, even when staggering drunk.

Could he have killed Kameon for being sloppy? —And then turned messy himself as he lost his self-respect. Stranger things had happened in the days when it took

eight months to reach Mars. —No, Rappaport had not done murder; Turnbull would have bet high on that. And Kameon would have won any fair fight. Newspapermen had nicknamed him The Wall when he was playing guard for the Berlin Nazis.

"You're right. Where do I start?"

Turnbull was jerked out of his abstraction. "Start at the beginning. When you went into hyperspace."

"We had no trouble there. Except with the windows. You shouldn't have put windows on the *Overcee.*"

"Why not? What did you see?"

"Nothing."

"Well, then?"

"You ever try to find your blind spot? You put two dots on a piece of paper, maybe an inch apart, and you close one eye, focus on one dot and slowly bring the paper up to your face. At some point the other dot disappears. Looking at the window in overcee is like your blind spot expanding to a two-foot square with rounded corners."

"I assume you covered them up."

"Sure. Would you believe it, we had trouble finding those windows? When you wanted them they were invisible. We got them covered with blankets. Then every so often we'd catch each other looking under the blankets. It bothered Wall worse than me. We could have made the trip in five months instead of six, but we had to keep coming out for a look around."

"Just to be sure the universe was still there."

"Right."

"But you did reach Sirius."

"Yes. We reached Sirius. . . ."

* * *

Ramrobot Number 6 had reported from Sirius B, half a century ago. The Sirius stars are an unlikely place to look for habitable worlds, since both stars are blue-white

giants. Still, the ramrobots had been programmed to test for excessive ultraviolet. Sirius B was worth a look.

The ship came out where Sirius was two bright stars. It turned its sharp nose toward the dimmer star and remained motionless for twenty minutes, a silver torpedo shape in a great, ungainly cradle studded with heavy electromagnetic motors. Then it was gone again.

Now Sirius B was a searing ball of light. The ship began to swing about, like a hound sniffing the breeze, but slowly, ponderously.

"We found four planets," said Rappaport. "Maybe there were more, but we didn't look. Number Four was the one we wanted. It was a cloudy ball about twice the size of Mars, with no moon. We waited until we'd found it before we started celebrating."

"Champagne?"

"Hah! Cigars and drunk pills. And Wall shaved off his grubby beard. My God, we were glad to be out in space again! Near the end it seemed like those blind spots were growing around the edges of the blankets. We smoked our cigars and sucked our drunk pills and yakked about the broads we'd known. Not that we hadn't done *that* before. Then we slept it off and went back to work. . . ."

The cloud cover was nearly unbroken. Rappaport moved the telescope a bit at a time, trying to find a break. He found several, but none big enough to show him anything. "I'll try infrared," he said.

"Just get us down," Wall said irritably. He was always irritable lately. "I want to get to work."

"And I want to be sure we've got a place to land."

Carv's job was the ship. He was pilot, astrogator, repairman, and everything but the cook. Wall was the cook. Wall was also the geologist, astrophysicist, biologist, and chemist—the expert on habitable planets, in theory. Each man had been trained nine years for his job, and each had

some training as backup man for the other; and in each case the training had been based largely on guesswork.

The picture on the scope screen changed from a featureless disc to a patterned ball as Carv switched to infrared. "Now which is water?" he wondered.

"The water's brighter on the night side and darker on the day side. See?" Wall was looking over his shoulder. "Looks like about forty percent land. Carv, those clouds might cut out enough of the ultraviolet to let people live in what gets through."

"Who'd want to? You couldn't see the stars." Carv turned a knob to raise the magnification.

"Hold it right there, Carv. Look at that. There's a white line around the edge of that continent."

"Dried salt?"

"No. It's warmer than what's around it. And it's just as bright on the night side as on the day."

"I'll get us a closer look."

The *Overcee* was in orbit, three hundred miles up. By now the continent with the "hot" border was almost entirely in shadow. Of the three supercontinents, only one showed a white shoreline under infrared.

Wall hung at the window, looking down. To Rappaport he looked like a great ape. "Can we do a reentry glide?"

"In this ship? The *Overcee* would come apart like a cheap meteor. We'll have to brake to a full stop above the atmosphere. Want to strap down?"

Kameon did, and Carv watched him do it before he went ahead and dropped the *Overcee* motor. *I'll be glad to be out of here,* he thought. *It's getting so Wall and I hate the sight of each other.* The casual, uncaring way Kameon fastened his straps jarred his teeth. He knew that Kameon thought he was finicky to the point of psychosthenia.

The fusion drive started and built up to one gee. Carv swung the ship around. Only the night side showed below,

with the faint blue light of Sirius A shining softly off the cloud cover. Then the edge of dawn came up in torn blue-white cloud. Carv saw an enormous rift in the cloud bank and turned ship to shift their path over it.

Mountains and valleys, and a wide river. . . . Patches of wispy cloud shot by, obscuring the view, but they could see down. Suddenly there was a black line, a twisting ribbon of India ink, and beyond that the ocean.

Only for a moment the ocean showed, and then the rift jogged east and was gone. But the ocean was an emerald green.

Wall's voice was soft with awe. "Carv, there's life in that water."

"You sure?"

"No. It could be copper salts or something. Carv, we've got to get *down* there!"

"Oh, wait your turn. Did you notice that your hot border is black in visible light?"

"Yah. But I can't explain it. Would it be worth our while to turn back after you get the ship slowed?"

Carv fingered his neatly trimmed Van Dyke. "It'd be night over the whole continent before we got back there. Let's spend a few hours looking at that green ocean."

The *Overcee* went down on her tail, slowly, like a cautious crab. Layer after layer of cloud swallowed her without trace, and darkness fell as she dropped. The key to this world was the word "moonless." Sirius B-IV had had no oversized moon to strip away most of her atmosphere. Her air pressure would be comfortable at sea level, but only because the planet was too small to hold more air. That same low gravity produced a more gentle pressure gradient, so that the atmosphere reached three times as high as on Earth. There were cloud layers from ground to one hundred and thirty kilometers up.

The *Overcee* touched down on a wide beach on the

western shore of the smallest continent. Wall came out first, then Carv lowered a metal oblong as large as himself and followed it down. They wore lightly pressurized vac suits. Carv did nothing for twenty minutes while Wall opened the box out flat and set the carefully packed instruments into their grooves and notches. Finally Wall signaled, in an emphatic manner. By taking off his helmet.

Carv waited a few seconds, then followed suit.

Wall asked, "Were you waiting to see if I dropped dead?"

"Better you than me." Carv sniffed the breeze. The air was cool and humid, but thin. "Smells good enough. No. No, it doesn't. It smells like something rotting."

"Then I'm right. There's life here. Let's get down to the beach."

The sky looked like a raging thunderstorm, with occasional vivid blue flashes that might have been lightning. They were flashes of sunlight penetrating tier upon tier of cloud. In that varying light Carv and Wall stripped off their suits and went down to look at the ocean, walking with shuffling steps in the light gravity.

The ocean was thick with algae. Algae was a bubbly green blanket on the water, a blanket that rose and fell like breathing as the insignificant waves ran beneath. The smell of rotting vegetation was no stronger here than it had been a quarter of a mile back. Perhaps the smell pervaded the whole planet. The shore was a mixture of sand and green scum so rich that you could have planted crops in it.

"Time I got to work," said Wall. "You want to fetch and carry for me?"

"Later maybe. Right now I've got a better idea. Let's get to hell out of each other's sight for an hour."

"That *is* brilliant. But take a weapon."

"To fight off maddened algae?"

"Take a weapon."

Carv was back at the end of an hour. The scenery had been deadly monotonous. There was water below a green blanket of scum six inches deep; there was loamy sand, and beyond that dry sand; and behind the beach were white cliffs, smoothed as if by countless rainfalls. He had found no target for his laser cutter.

Wall looked up from a binocular microscope, and grinned when he saw his pilot. He tossed a depleted pack of cigarettes. "And don't worry about the air plant!" he called cheerfully.

Carv came up beside him. "What news?"

"It's algae. I can't name the breed, but there's not much difference between this and any terrestrial algae, except that this sample is all one species."

"That's unusual?" Carv was looking around him in wonder. He was seeing a new side to Wall. Aboard ship Wall was sloppy almost to the point of being dangerous, at least in the eyes of a Belter like Carv. But now he was at work. His small tools were set in neat rows on portable tables. Bulkier intruments with legs were on flat rock, the legs carefully adjusted to leave their platforms exactly horizontal. Wall handled the binocular microscope as if it might dissolve at a touch.

"It is," said Wall. "No little animalcules moving among the strands. No variations in structure. I took samples from depths up to six feet. All I could find was the one alga. But otherwise—I even tested for proteins and sugars. You could eat it. We came all this way to find pond scum."

They came down on an island five hundred miles south. This time Carv helped with the collecting. They got through faster that way, but they kept getting in each other's way. Six months spent in two small rooms had roused tempers too often. It would take more than a few

hours on ground before they could bump elbows without a fight.

Again Carv watched Wall go through his routines. He stood just within voice range, about fifty yards away, because it felt so good to have so much room. The care Wall exercised with his equipment still amazed him. How could he reconcile it with Wall's ragged fingernails and his thirty-hours' growth of beard?

Well, Wall was a flatlander. All his life he'd had a whole planet to mess up, and not a crowded pressure dome or the cabin of a ship. No flat ever learned real neatness.

"Same breed," Wall called.

"Did you test for radiation?"

"No. Why?"

"This thick air must screen out a lot of gamma rays. That means your algae can't mutate without local radiation from the ground."

"Carv, it had to mutate to get to its present form. How could all its cousins just have died out?"

"That's your field."

A little later Wall said, "I can't get a respectable background reading anywhere. You were right, but it doesn't explain anything."

"Shall we go somewhere else?"

"Yah."

They set down in deep ocean, and when the ship stopped bobbing Carv went out the airlock with a glass bucket. "It's a foot thick out there," he reported. "No place to build a disneyland. I don't think I'd want to settle here."

Wall sighed his agreement. The green scum lapped thickly at the *Overcee*'s gleaming metal hull, two yards below the sill of the airlock.

"A lot of planets must be like this," said Carv. "Habitable, but who needs it?"

"And I wanted to be the first man to found an interstellar colony."

"And get your name in the newstapes, the history books—"

"—And my unforgettable face on every trivid in the solar system. Tell me, shipmate, if you hate publicity so much, why have you been trimming that Van Dyke so prettily?"

"Guilty. I like being famous. Just not as much as you do."

"Cheer up then. We may yet get all the hero worship we can stand. This may be something bigger than a new colony."

"What could be bigger than that?"

"Set us down on land and I'll tell you."

On a chunk of rock just big enough to be called an island, Wall set up his equipment for the last time. He was testing for food content again, using samples from Carv's bucket of deep ocean algae.

Carv stood by, a comfortable distance away, watching the weird variations in the clouds. The very highest were moving across the sky at enormous speeds, swirling and changing shape by the minutes and seconds. The noonday light was subdued and pearly. No doubt about it, Sirius B-IV had a magnificent sky.

"Okay, I'm ready." Wall stood up and stretched. "This stuff isn't just edible. I'd guess it would taste as good as the food supplements they were using on Earth before the Fertility Wars cut the population down to something reasonable. I'm going to taste it now."

The last sentence hit Carv like an electric shock. He was running before it was quite finished, but long before

he could get there his crazy partner had put a dollup of green scum in his mouth, chewed and swallowed. "Good," he said.

"You—utter—damned—fool."

"Not so. I knew it was safe. The stuff has an almost cheesy flavor. You could get tired of it fast, I think, but that's true of anything."

"Just *what* are you trying to *prove?*"

"That this alga was tailored as a food plant by biological engineers. Carv, I think we've landed on somebody's private farm."

Carv sat heavily down on a rainwashed white rock. "Better spell that out," he said, and heard that his voice was hoarse.

"I was going to. Suppose there was a civilization that had cheap, fast interstellar travel. Most of the habitable planets they found would be sterile, wouldn't they? I mean, life is an unlikely sort of accident."

"We don't have the vaguest idea how likely it is."

"All right, pass that. Say somebody finds this planet, Sirius B-IV, and decides it would make a nice farm planet. It isn't good for much else, mainly because of the variance in lighting, but if you dropped a specially bred food alga in the ocean, you'd have a dandy little farm. In ten years there'd be oceans of algae, free for the carting. Later, if they *did* decide to colonize, they could haul the stuff inland and use it for fertilizer. Best of all, it wouldn't mutate. Not here."

Carv shook his head to clear it. "You've been in space too long."

"Carv, the plant looks *bred*—like a pink grapefruit. And where did all its cousins go? Now I can tell you. They got poured out of the breeding vat because they weren't good enough."

Low waves rolled in from the sea, low and broad be-

neath their blanket of cheesy green scum. "All right," said Carv. "How can we disprove it?"

Wall looked startled. "*Dis*prove it? Why would we want to do that?"

"Forget the glory for a minute. If you're right, we're trespassing on somebody's property without knowing anything about the owner—except that he's got dirt cheap interstellar travel, which would make him a tough enemy. We're also introducing our body bacteria into his pure edible algae culture. And how would we explain, if he suddenly showed up?"

"I hadn't thought of it that way."

"We ought to cut and run right now. It's not as if the planet was worth anything."

"No. No, we can't do that."

"Why not?"

The answer gleamed in Wall's eyes.

Turnbull, listening behind his desk with his chin resting in one hand, interrupted for the first time in minutes. "A good question. I'd have gotten out right then."

"Not if you'd just spent six months in a two-room cell with the end of everything creeping around the blankets."

"I see." Turnbull's hand moved almost imperceptibly, writing, *NO WINDOWS IN OVERCEE II!* Oversized viewscreen?

"It hadn't hit me that hard. I think I'd have taken off if I'd been sure Wall was right, and if I could have talked him into it. But I couldn't, of course. Just the thought of going home then was enough to set Wall shaking. I thought I might have to knock him on the head when it came time to leave. We had some hibernation drugs aboard, just in case."

He stopped. As usual, Turnbull waited him out.

"But then I'd have been all alone." Rappaport finished his drink, his second, and got up to pour a third. The bourbon didn't seem to affect him. "So we stood there on

that rocky beach, both of us afraid to leave and both afraid to stay. . . ."

Abruptly Wall got up and started putting his tools away. "We can't disprove it, but we can prove it easily enough. The owners must have left artifacts around. If we find one, we run. I promise."

"There's a big area to search. If we had any sense we'd run now."

"Will you drop that? All we've got to do is find the ram-robot probe. If there's anyone watching this place they must have seen it come down. We'll find footprints all over it."

"And if there aren't any footprints? Does that make the whole planet clean?"

Wall closed his case with a snap. Then he stood, motionless, looking very surprised. "I just thought of something," he said.

"Oh, not again."

"No, this is for real, Carv. The owners must have left a long time ago."

"Why?"

"It must be thousands of years since there was enough algae here to use as a food supply. We should have seen ships taking off and landing as we came in. They'd have started their colony too, if they were going to. Now it's gone beyond that. The planet isn't fit for anything to live on, with the soupy oceans and the smell of things rotting."

"No."

"Dammit, it makes sense!"

"It's thin. It sounds thin even to me, and I *want* to believe it. Also, it's too pat. It's just too close to the best possible solution we could dream up. You want to bet our lives on it?"

Wall hoisted his case and moved toward the ship. He looked like a human tank, moving in a stormy darkness lit

by shifting, glaring beams of blue light. Abruptly he said, "There's one more point. That black border. It has to be contaminated algae. Maybe a land-living mutant; that's why it hasn't spread across the oceans. It would have been cleaned away if the owners were still interested."

"All *right*. Hoist that thing up and let's get inside."

"Hmph?"

"You've finally said something we can check. The eastern shore must be in daylight by now. Let's get aboard."

At the border of space they hovered, and the sun burned small and blinding white at the horizon. To the side Sirius A was a tiny dot of intense brilliance. Below, where gaps in the cloud cover penetrated all the way to the surface, a hair-thin black line ran along the twisting beach of Sirius B-IV's largest continent. The silver thread of a major river exploded into a forking delta, and the delta was a black triangle shot with lines of silvery green.

"Going to use the scope?"

Carv shook his head. "We'll see it close in a few minutes."

"You're in quite a hurry, Carv."

"You bet. According to you, if that black stuff is some form of life, then this farm's been deserted for thousands of years at least. If it isn't, then what is it? It's too regular to be a natural formation. Maybe it's a conveyor belt."

"That's right. Calm me down. Reassure me."

"If it is, we go up fast and run all the way home." Carv pulled a lever and the ship dropped from under them. They fell fast. Speaking with only half his attention, Carv went on. "We've met just one other sentient race, and they had nothing like hands and no mechanical culture. I'm not complaining, mind you. A world wouldn't be fit to live in without dolphins for company. But why should we get lucky twice? I don't want to meet the farmer, Wall."

The clouds closed over the ship. She dropped more

slowly with every kilometer. Ten kilometers up she was almost hovering. Now the coast was spread below them. The black border was graded: black as night on Pluto along the sea, shading off to the color of the white sand and rocks along the landward side.

Wall said, "Maybe the tides carry the dead algae inland. They'd decay there. No, that won't work. No moon. Nothing but solar tides."

They were a kilometer up. And lower. And lower.

The black was moving, flowing like tar, away from the drive's fusion flame.

Rappaport had been talking down into his cup, his words coming harsh and forced, his eyes refusing to meet Turnbull's. Now he raised them. There was something challenging in that gaze.

Turnbull understood. "You want me to guess? I won't. What was the black stuff?"

"I don't know if I want to prepare you or not. Wall and I, we weren't ready. Why should you be?"

"All right, Carver, go ahead and shock me."

"It was people."

Turnbull merely stared.

"We were almost down when they started to scatter from the downblast. Until then it was just a dark field, but when they started to scatter we could see moving specks, like ants. We sheered off and landed on the water offshore. We could see them from there."

"Carver, when you say people, do you mean—people? Human?"

"Yes. Human. Of course they didn't act much like it. . . ."

A hundred yards offshore, the *Overcee* floated nose up. Even seen from the airlock the natives were obviously human. The telescope screen brought more detail.

They were no terrestrial race. Nine feet tall, men and women both, with wavy black hair growing from the eyebrows back to halfway down the spine, hanging almost to the knees. Their skins were dark, as dark as the darkest negro, but they had chisel noses and long heads and small, thin mouths.

They paid no attention to the ship. They stood or sat or lay where they were, men and women and children jammed literally shoulder to shoulder. Most of the seaside population was grouped in large rings with men on the outside and women and children protected inside.

"All around the continent," said Wall.

Carv could no more have answered than he could have taken his eyes off the scope screen.

Every few minutes there was a seething in the mass as some group that was too far back bulled forward to reach the shore, the food supply. The mass pushed back. On the fringes of the circles there were bloody fights, slow fights in which there were apparently no rules at all.

"How?" said Carv. "How?"

Wall said, "Maybe a ship crashed. Maybe there was a caretaker's family here, and nobody ever came to pick them up. They must be the farmer's children, Carv."

"How long have they been here?"

"Thousands of years at least. Maybe tens or hundreds of thousands." Wall turned his empty eyes away from the screen. He swiveled his couch so he was looking at the back wall of the cabin. His dreary words flowed out into the cabin.

"Picture it, Carv. Nothing in the world but an ocean of algae and a few people. Then a few hundred people, then hundreds of thousands. They'd never have been allowed near here unless they'd had the bacteria cleaned out of them to keep the algae from being contaminated. Nothing to make tools out of, nothing but rock and bone. No way of smelting ores, because they wouldn't even have fire.

There's nothing to *burn*. They had no diseases, no contraceptives, and no recreation but breeding. The population would have exploded like a bomb. Because nobody would starve to death, Carv. For thousands of years nobody would starve on Sirius B-IV."

"They're starving now."

"Some of them. The ones that can't reach the shore." Wall turned back to the scope screen. "One continual war," he said after a while. "I'll bet their height comes from natural selection."

Carv hadn't moved for a long time. He had noticed that there were always a few men inside each protective circle, and that there were always men outside going inside and men inside going outside. Breeding more people to guard each circle. More people for Sirius B-IV.

The shore was a seething blackness. In infrared light it would have shown brightly, at a temperature of 98.6° Fahrenheit.

"Let's go home," said Wall.

"Okay."

"And did you?"

"No."

"In God's name, why not?"

"We *couldn't*. We had to see it all, Turnbull. I don't understand it, but we did, both of us. So I took the ship up and dropped it a kilometer inshore, and we got out and started walking toward the sea.

"Right away, we started finding skeletons. Some were clean. A lot of them looked like Egyptian mummies, skeletons with black dried skin stretched tight over the bones. Always there was a continuous low rustle of—well, I guess it was conversation. From the beach. I don't know what they could have had to talk about.

"The skeletons got thicker as we went along. Some of them had daggers of splintered bone. One had a chipped

stone fist ax. You see, Turnbull, they were intelligent. They could make tools, if they could find anything to make tools of.

"After we'd been walking awhile we saw that some of the skeletons were alive. Dying and drying under that overcast blue sky. I'd thought that sky was pretty once. Now it was—horrible. You could see a shifting blue beam spear down on the sand and sweep across it like a spotlight until it picked out a mummy. Sometimes the mummy would turn over and cover its eyes.

"Wall's face was livid, like a dead man's. I knew it wasn't just the light. We'd been walking about five minutes, and the dead and living skeletons were all around us. The live ones all stared at us, apathetically, but still staring, as if we were the only things in the world worth looking at. If they had anything to wonder with, they must have been wondering what it was that could move and still not be human. We couldn't have looked human to them. We had shoes and coveralls on, and we were too small.

"Wall said, 'I've been wondering about the clean skeletons. There shouldn't be any decay bacteria here.'

"I didn't answer. I was thinking how much this looked like a combination of Hell and Belsen. The only thing that might have made it tolerable was the surrealistic blue lighting. We couldn't really believe what we were seeing.

" 'There weren't enough fats in the algae,' said Wall. 'There was enough of everything else, but no fats.'

"We were closer to the beach now. And some of the mummies were beginning to stir. I watched a pair behind a dune who looked like they were trying to kill each other, and then suddenly I realised what Wall had said.

"I took his arm and turned to go back. Some of the long skeletons were trying to get up. I knew what they were thinking. *There may be meat in those limp coverings. Wet meat, with water in it. There just may.* I pulled at Wall and started to run.

"He wouldn't run. He tried to pull loose. I had to leave him. They couldn't catch me, they were too starved, and I was jumping like a grasshopper. But they got Wall, all right. I heard his destruct capsule go off. Just a muffled pop."

"So you came home."

"Uh huh." Rappaport looked up like a man waking from a nightmare. "It took seven months. All alone."

"Any idea why Wall killed himself?"

"You crazy? He didn't want to get *eaten.*"

"Then why wouldn't he run?"

"It wasn't that he wanted to kill himself, Turnbull. He just decided it wasn't worthwhile saving himself. Another six months in the *Overcee,* with the blind spots pulling at his eyes and that nightmare of a world constantly on his mind— It wasn't worth it."

"I'll bet the *Overcee* was a pigpen before you blew it up."

Rappaport flushed. "What's that to you?"

"You didn't think it was worthwhile either. When a Belter stops being neat it's because he wants to die. A dirty ship is deadly. The air plant gets fouled. Things float around loose, ready to knock your brains out when the drive goes on. You forget where you put the meteor patches—"

"All right. I made it, didn't I?"

"And now you think we should give up space."

Rappaport's voice went squeaky with emotion. "Turnbull, aren't you convinced *yet?* We've got a paradise here, and you want to leave it for—that. Why? Why?"

"To build other paradises, maybe. Ours didn't happen by accident. Our ancestors did it all, starting with not much more than what was on Sirius B-IV."

"They had a *hell*uva lot more." A faint slurring told that the bourbon was finally getting to Rappaport.

"Maybe they did at that. But now there's a better rea-

son. Those people you left on the beach. They need our help. And with a new *Overcee,* we can give it to them. What do they need most, Carver? Trees or meat animals?"

"Animals." Rappaport shuddered and drank.

"Well, that could be argued. But pass it. First we'll have to make soil." Turnbull leaned back in his chair, face upturned, talking half to himself. "Algae mixed with crushed rock. Bacteria to break the rock down. Earthworms. Then grass. . . ."

"Got it all planned out, do you? And you'll talk the UN into it, too. Turnbull, you're good. But you've missed something."

"Better tell me now then."

Rappaport got carefully to his feet. He came over to the desk, just a little unsteadily, and leaned on it so that he stared down into Turnbull's eyes from a foot away. "You've been assuming that those people on the beach really were the farmer's race. That Sirius B-IV has been deserted for a long, long time. But what if some kind of carnivore seeded that planet? Then what? The algae wouldn't be for them. They'd let the algae grow, plant food animals, then go away until the animals were jammed shoulder to shoulder along the coast. Food animals! You understand, Turnbull?"

"Yes. I hadn't thought of that. And they'd breed them for *size.* . . ."

The room was deadly quiet.

"Well?"

"Well, we'll simply have to take that chance, won't we?"

I wrote the first version of this story with a ball-point pen, a year and a half before my first professional sale. It

was two and a half pages long. The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction *sent it back with a note claiming that my vignette was not a story, but an outline for one.*

When I tried it again three years later I kept only the central idea: the warm black coastline that turns out to be people standing shoulder to shoulder. I used my writing-school textbooks extensively; I tried several orderings of the plot; but somehow it wouldn't come right.

I was still a novice writer, self-conscious and desperate to learn. I asked advice of everyone I could think of, from Lester del Rey to my mother. I thought I was having trouble with tenses, flashbacks and the like.

It was a girl named Adrienne who pointed out the real problem. I'm squeamish.

That warm black coastline was too real to me. When I tried to make it real on paper, I suffered with Carv and Wall and the poor damned natives. I think I must have been trying to soften the horror of the situation by showing Sirius B-IV in flashbacks.

But Bordered in Black *is a horror story. I was failing the story if I did not show that crowded coastline in all its hellish detail.*

I rewrote that section, as well as I could at that stage of my career. But it hurt.

I'm still squeamish. Certain of my critics have been kind enough to point out that it affects my writing adversely; that I don't seem to have the guts to let a character go all-out, to be really heroic or really evil. Well, dammit, I'm trying. I'm trying.

—Larry Niven

AT CENTRAL

Kit Reed

I wrote this one twice, the first time as a one-idea story about the television commercial that delivers on the spot, the second time in London, to fill out a short-story collection for Faber, which means that a couple of British names (e.g., Sainsbury's) crept into the text more or less in spite of me.

I got into SF not because I have ever written anything recognizable to hard-core hardware enthusiasts as science fiction, but because SF editors (most notably Tony Boucher) were the first to accept what I do *write, fiction about the plausible-impossible, with the lines between plausible and impossible blurring so that some of my work falls into "mainstream" categories and some under the label SF.*

At this writing we are thundering into Cambodia without being sure precisely how or why it happened; the country is filling up with smog and nondecaying plastic waste; people are getting more or less accustomed to block-by-block warfare in our cities and to one writer, at least, the lines between plausible and impossible have blurred so completely that nothing any of us can invent or use in fiction seems improbable any more, and the line between mainstream and SF is blurring too, as more mainstream writers reach for terms and images to help them describe what is happening.

Almost three years ago I finished Armed Camps, *a novel about the future, which for one reason or another*

was not published in this country until 1970. At the writing, it was about the near future, in which all our cities were in a state of siege, the government chose to punish at least one dissenter on worldwide TV, and assassinations were commonplace; at the end one Utopian leader waits for his own assassination as a sort of expiation. This was before the deaths of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, before the Chicago riots and all that had followed, before Cambodia. At the moment it looks more like a novel about now. *I began by extrapolating, or fabricating, but so much of it has already come true that I'm waiting to see what else is going to come, and am already sure that whatever comes will outstrip anything I might have imagined. It's kind of scary.*

—Kit Reed

In the autumn of his sixteenth year Van fell in love with Missy Beaton on the television, and once he understood what was happening to him his life at home was not enough. It did not matter that his waking hours were filled with all the figures of his childhood; he lay in his cupboard and they still came to him at the appointed times. They were laughing, weeping or dancing, marking off the hours and half-hours as they always had, but Ma Prindle ceased to grip Van even though he had followed her from the beginning, and Cap'n Jack failed to amuse him even though he had laughed at Cap'n Jack before he even comprehended speech. The June Taylor Dancers delighted him no longer; the Pico Players were as nothing for he had waked one morning to find a change in his schedule;

Uncle Stingo would not appear, said the announcer, and in the next moment there she was.

He was not sure what it was about her that arrested him, whether it was her lithe body in the pink tunic or the flashing toes of her black tap shoes or whether it was only the fact that she was young; he could not be sure what held him but she had danced into his life with a toss of her head and now Van felt the tongue of restlessness stirring inside him, moving up and down his bones. At first he tried to ignore it, drawing the covers about him and waiting doggedly for the other shows to come in their appointed order, but no matter how he tried he could not allay the restlessness, not even when he joined the family in front of the big set in the living room, watching the food commercials and waiting while Dad put the money in and breakfast came. He found he could not eat while Missy was dancing; he could not think and he did not want to talk and so he crawled back to his cupboard, pulling the curtains so he could be alone with the postcard set on the pillow beside him; alone he would commune with Missy Beaton. Then one morning she turned and winked and improbable as it was Van knew the wink was meant for him, he knew what he had to do. Damn the war, damn the census figures and the crush of bodies in the streets; he would say good-bye to his safe cupboard, his family, his pocket TV set. He would set his shoulders and burrow his way through the crowds, he would lay people right and left if he had to—he would go to her.

The worst wrench was parting with the television; it was an old one without any of the conveniences, he had found it in the back of a cupboard and no one knew he had it. If the truth be known, no one cared. The rest of the family lived around the big set in the parlor, going to the cupboards only to sleep. Sprawled in a morass of food wrappers and leftover purchases, they watched with their

mouths open and coins at the ready, and if Missy Beaton offered anything they wanted then they would fall on the television, feeding it coins until the bell rang, and if she didn't, then there would be something else along in a minute, they never had to wait for long.

That particular day Missy Beaton was offering a hairstyle; if you bought the product you too could look like that. By the time Van passed the living room Sister was putting in a handful of coins and then one of the machines on the wall did something and Sister looked like that. In the ell his brother Louis was locked in mortal combat with the telephone; they were grappling because Louis was trying to call Uncle Ralph in California and the machine was after his money, all the money it could get. In the small room off the parlor the teaching machine ran on and on unattended; Van held his breath and scuttled past.

Of course the bell rang, somebody was trying to leave during learning hours; the bell rang and Van's mother wrenched herself away from the TV long enough to poke her head into the hallway. She said:

"Oh, it's you."

"Hi, Mom." They hadn't seen each other in several days.

"I thought you were in the cupboard."

"I was. I have to go out for a couple of minutes."

"Out? You can't go out. The streets are jammed."

"I have to see someone."

"Son, you can't be serious."

"I'm in love."

She snorted. "Don't be absurd. Come on, they're about to serve a frozen lunch."

"I don't *want* a frozen lunch." If he didn't hurry she was going to make a grab for him. "Don't you want grandchildren?"

"The census. . . ." She looked frightened. "Van, think about the crush."

The door was stiff; it hadn't been used in several years. She was breathing heavily; her eyes glazed over and Van could read what she saw; the door opening a crack, and oozing through that crack a puddle, a stream, a tidal wave of humanity, bodies spilling one over the other, bleating and squeezing, overflowing their few precious rooms. She lunged, bellowing: *You'll ruin everything* but she was in poor condition from so many years of just sitting around, consuming, and now he had the door open and now he was outside, slamming it shut before her fingers could close on him. He thought he heard her calling, Good-bye Forever as he stood against the door with his eyes shut, waiting for the crush. He hunched his shoulders and held his breath until his chest exploded and he had to open his eyes, understanding at last that there was no one in the hall. He had not been down the stairs since the family sealed itself in some eight years before and so he had to go slowly, so pained by waking muscles that he had to lie down in the vestibule. The building rose around him, tall and silent, but in the streets outside he heard or imagined he heard the unceasing rush of bodies being carried along like lemmings, with no sea in sight. Given his choice, he would have fled back up the stairs, banging on the door until the family let him in. But Missy was out there, he had to find her, and so in a minute he would open the door and launch himself, knowing exactly where he would go.

She would be at Central; the very thought gave him strength. Central towered over the city, he had seen it pictured a million times, and at Central was everything that mattered; the actors and singers and dancers all lived and worked there, so did the stars and announcers and the newscasters who followed television's roving eyes, reporting on the census, the wars, the ships which left weekly for the stars; at Central were the technicians and cameramen, the great red lights and many eyes of the vast

television network which served that part of the world. At Central were the projectors which transmitted goods from Central stockpiles to a billion hands in a matter of seconds; from Central came the machines which collected coins from the nation's billion TV sets; from Central came new packets of coins, they came from the set into the living room with the heartwarming regularity of an expected gift. Van cared little for the coins but he sensed the pulse, the heart of life itself at Central; for years he had thought about setting out for Central, for years he had been kept home only by the crush. But now he was in love with Missy and today she had winked at him; his mother would have laughed but to Van it seemed perfectly reasonable: if he could watch television then so could the great network's roving eye dart out—and light on him. So now he would open the door and hurl himself into the stream of humanity; he would lunge toward Central, which glowed on the horizon like a great green jewel. If he stumbled then he would stumble and if he fell so be it and if he died, then very well, at least he would have died on his way to something big.

He was frankly disappointed to open the door and find nobody there. The street was empty except for the cartons and wrappers which fell like soft rain from a thousand rubbish chutes; the windows had all been boarded up against the crush and they looked out like so many blind eyes; the doors were boarded over too and the rubbish chutes were the only openings on to the street. Van was distracted by a brilliant flash followed by a glare: a starship leaving; pressed close to his set, he had seen a thousand of them go, taking lottery winners to Mars and open worlds beyond. Over his head whined a rocket, going off to the war. This, at least, was as it should be. But the census, the empty streets. . . . He would not dwell on it; instead he turned left, seeing at the end of the street's canyon the green throb of Central. He began to run.

It took longer than he thought. Lincoln walked twelve miles to school, anyone who watched the teaching machines knew that, but that was in olden times. Van had tried to keep in condition by pacing between his cupboard and the living room, but he could only run a few steps; he was exhausted by so much open space. He ought to go back and tell his parents it was all right to come out; they could walk for blocks without running into another living soul. It crossed his mind that life wasn't exactly as advertised; perhaps he should have sat down and thought about it but Missy had winked and now he was on his way to her.

He wasn't sure how he would handle it when he reached Central; maybe he would need a pass to get in; maybe the guards would try to head him off, suggesting a tour of the control room or the studio, but he wouldn't be diverted by meeting Ma Prindle or Uncle Stingo or Cap'n Jack, and he wouldn't stop for the Pico Players, not even if they offered to let him be on the show. He would find Missy's number in the directory and he would go to her room and if she wasn't there he would look for her in the rehearsal room and if she wasn't there he would go on to the studio, he would fight his way through her million fans; he would pull her off the air in mid-show if he had to. He would beg her to love him or marry him or whatever it was people used to do.

He would have, too, except that there was a steel grill over the big door at Central; the TVC emblems welded to the bars kept him from seeing inside. Well then he would wait, he would rest on the steps until somebody came along—maybe Jolly and the Dreamers, on their way back from one of their camera treks through the city, or the Pall Mall Minstrels, spilling out and down the steps, heading for the nearest bar; somebody would come by in a cab or a truck, a guard would open the steel doors and Van would ask his way inside.

Another starship took off; he could see the glare in the distance.

Several rockets whistled past; Van imagined them exploding, lighting up the distant war.

The sun got lower.

At twilight something clicked and Central's outer lights went on.

Van grew faint with hunger; as dark fell he hauled himself up, clinging to the embossed TVC, trying to look inside.

Nothing.

He might have given up for the day, he might even have gone home, but he was halted by a tiny, pervasive whir, the sound of a thousand small machines coming; as he watched, the first of them came around a corner. It trundled up the steps and nudged a sensitive plate in a wall Van had taken to be solid glass. A small passage opened and the machine went inside. The whir grew until it filled the air; the machine was followed by another and another until the streets streamed with them; they flowed along and up the steps, going into the building single file. Then one misfired, landing athwart the little entrance; Van set it right and then, wedging back the plate with one of his shoes, he joined the stream inside. In the tunnel, with a thousand machines in front of him and another thousand running up his heels, Van almost despaired. Then he was in the lobby and the lobby was full of light and sound; loudspeakers everywhere gave out the organ strains that introduced Ma Prindle and there, at the end of the lobby, there was Ma Prindle on a gigantic screen. He sat and watched until he felt better. By the time he pulled himself away, the last of the little machines had disappeared. He imagined he heard a cascade of coins, going from the machines into a distant maw.

He was struck by an uncanny silence; at home he had always been conscious of the others breathing, the friction

of their bodies in their chairs. Yet here, in the heart and navel of the city he heard nothing but the metallic voice of Ma Prindle, magnified and coming at him from every wall. Uneasy, he roved the lobby, peering over the counter at the deserted information desk, tapping on a dozen different office doors. When the silence became too much to bear he threw himself down on a leather couch and fled into sleep. When he woke he was still alone and he would have given it all up, fleeing, except that Missy was beaming at him from the giant screen. He watched the swing of her hair, the intoxicating wink and when she spoke he answered back:

"I'll find you, Missy. I'll take you out of here."

Later that day he found one of the product storerooms; he watched in awe as food, clothes and drugs moved toward the transferal machines on conveyer belts, disappearing as they came under the golden rays. When, in his hunger, he snatched a chocolate bar from one of the belts, a machine replaced it without missing a beat. He took another and another, gorging until he was able to stand without trembling. He finished off with a frozen pot pie, gnawing at it slowly, and then he set out again, walking with firmer step.

On the third day he found the studios and rehearsal rooms and he wandered the corridors, feasting on the photographs of Uncle Stingo and all the rest; made brave by their names on the doors, he began tapping, trying knobs until one opened finally and he was in a studio. He shrank for a minute, thinking he was interrupting a show; he thought wildly of waving in case he was on camera: Hi Mom; the others would be surprised when he came into view on the big TV set at home. Then the silence welled up and he opened his eyes to find a membrane of dust over everything; rats ran out of the ruined plush seats and a spider wove an intricate web between the teleprompter and the microphones. The cameras stood silent as giraffes

at a taxidermist's and it reassured Van not at all that lights flickered here and there. Still the National Concert Orchestra performed somewhere; he could see it on all the monitors. He went into the control room and after considerable thought picked up the telephone. "Sorry, this line is. . . ." He pushed another button. "The cir-cuits are busy, pul-leeze hang up and dial again. . . ." "The number you have called has been dis-connect-ed. . . ."

"Hello?"

Van's mouth flooded with saliva.

"I said, hello."

"H-I. You."

"Welcome to Central, baby."

"M-Missy. . . ."

"Not Missy. Name's Bert." The voice jiggled on the edge of gaiety: "Come on down here, baby, this is where everything is."

Van scrawled madly in the dust, trying to take down the directions. He was aware of a void; in a minute there would be a click and the voice would be gone forever. "Hey," he said, "Who are you?"

"Me?" The chuckle crackled in his ear. "Baby, I'm the man."

It took him half a day to find his way; once he rested and twice he broke into supply rooms, renewing his strength on macaroons. He went in a descending spiral, so that the halls grew shorter and the stairways down shorter and the doors on each landing fewer until at last he was in the pit or heart of Central, at a final door and he gathered himself in an orgy of fulfilment and hurled himself inside.

"Bert?"

"Hiya, baby." He swung his sneakers off the table and stood, creaky and slightly bowlegged in tight white jeans. He pushed back his straw hat, revealing a face blanched by age and yet hauntingly familiar.

"Bert?"

The face began to waver. "You're just in time." Before Van could stop him, Bert burst into tears.

"Hey, Bert, don't . . . please don't. . . ." Van knew it was rude but he couldn't help squinting, trying to make out the face; he knew it. . . . After a while he made himself look beyond to the control panel and the stacks or shelves which stretched beyond, towering on every side; he took them in, noting without comprehension that each shelf was equipped with a trolley or selector which whirred busily, moving along the endless rows of cans. "Look, I. . . ." Bert was still sniffling and Van had to make him stop somehow. He said, "Where is everybody?"

"In there."

"Huh?"

"In the can, they're all in the can."

Just then the National Symphony finished and Bert did something at the controls; after a series of hums and clicks Missy Beaton came on, so close that Van must have called out her name.

He heard Bert, as if from a distance. "So that's it."

Then Bert looked at his watch. "O-oh. Rocket time." He pushed another button and as Van watched, Missy's image faded from the screen. The announcer's voice was young and firm: *We interrupt this program.* . . . Then there was a shot of a rocket going off and then Missy Beaton came back, smiling her maddening smile, and Van watched until she took her last bow and danced out of sight.

"Take me to her."

Bert finished with his dials.

"I want to marry her."

"Her." Bert gestured at the screen. His eyes filmed. "Look, Missy isn't exactly . . . she isn't . . ." Bert squinted at him. "I take care of Missy now, and I . . . I. . . ." He stooped, growing frailer as Van watched. "Good thing you came along. Oh-oh, census figures. Hang

on a minute and I'll be right with you. My show's next," he said. "That'll give us some time to ourselves."

Bert put on the census figures and then he passed his hand over the control panel and on a far shelf a selector whirred. In the next second Uncle Stingo danced on to the screen, young and light-footed and natty in white. Uncle Stingo did a time step; Bert did a time step and Van cried out, "Wait, oh wait," but it was too late; Bert had him by the arm and they were going through the endless stacks of tapes and on the door at the far side was Missy Beaton's name and above it was her photograph; she beamed out, lithe and promising, aglow with youth and love.

Bert was tapping. "Missy? Missy, baby."

"In a minute, Bert."

Shuffle. Drag. Shuffle. Van wanted to turn away. Shuffle.

Missy opened the door.

The black tights flapped about her old bones and the pink tutu was bedraggled now but there was enough of the old expression in her face to keep Van from screaming; she smiled, bright and friendly, and because there was something engaging, almost sweet about her, he took her hand.

"H-How do you do."

"Hello, sweetie." She tilted her head in the old way, touching his arm with a hand like a leaf. "Isn't he nice, Bert. Isn't he *young*."

But Bert was looking at Van. "So you see how it is. We're the last."

Panic fluttered in Van's throat. "But the Pico Players, Cap'n Jack, all the rest. . . ."

"All dead. All in the can."

"And the starships, and the census, and the war. . . ."

Bert grinned foolishly. "All in the can."

Van shook his head. "I saw rockets going off."

"Oh yeah, that's Sam's department. Keeps him busy."

"I saw a starship go."

"Jimmy sends them. 'S how we got the streets cleared out."

"No." Van wheeled.

Bert's voice curled after him. "We just keep things going."

But Van was already on the run.

"*Some*body has to." Bert was after him now, panting hard.

But they were too old and slow to stop him and he tore out of Missy's grasp, racing down one aisle of shelves and then another, making false turns and doubling back; he ran, gasping, mumbling, trying speeches in his throat. Missy and Bert went the straight way, shuffling into the control area just as he stepped in front of the nearest camera, screaming into the boom microphone:

"Hi Mom, Hi Dad, Hi Louis, Sister, Marty and Jack, Hi everybody out there at home. Listen, world, it's all a big fake in here, it's all been over for years and they are giving you the same old stuff over and over, it all comes out of cans. They're making up the population crush, they're even making up the war. Look, you've got to come on down and *do* something . . . we've all got to start over, you've all got to help. . . ."

Breathing defiance, he stood and waited with his back to the control panel. In a minute the nearest ones would come running; in a second all the phones would begin to ring. Bert didn't seem disturbed. He took Missy's hand and led her to a ruined leather couch. They chattered and giggled and Missy lost track of her cane and Bert scrambled after it and returned it; he presented it with a bow and she took it with a touching grin.

The Pico Players came on. The Saint Spree Singers came on. Bert brought sandwiches for him and Missy. He

offered one to Van but Van refused. He was still strung taut, waiting for the first ones to thunder into the hallways, waiting for his army to come.

He was the only one who was surprised when nobody came.

"You'll do," Bert said kindly, breaking an intolerable silence.

On the screen a starship took off. Bert brushed by Van and pushed a button; two buzzes came from somewhere.

"That's Jimmy, down at his place," Bert said conversationally. A second ship went up. "Enterprise," Bert said. "That's what makes it all fun."

Outside were no footsteps. No phones rang.

Van drooped. "Where is everybody?"

"Home. Glued to the tube."

"But I just told them. I told them and I *told* them."

"They're happy. They don't care."

Missy touched his cheek, trying to explain. "Sweetie, the machines do everything."

"Watching and buying. It's *terrible*."

Bert tossed his head. "Hell, baby, it keeps them off the streets."

"I like his manner," Missy said unexpectedly.

Bert stood off, appraising him. "I like the way you got off that announcement. I'll start training you right away . . . I haven't got too long."

Van shook his head, baffled. "All those people. . . ." He took Bert by the shoulders. "What do you *get* out of it?" He looked around as if he expected to see a new shape in the studio. "Money? Power?"

"Somebody needs me." Bert touched Missy's hand. Then he drew himself up, saying proudly: "Hell, honey, don't you see it? I have a job."

Missy sat down, patting the seat beside her. "Come and have a sandwich."

"I've got to get out of here."

But Bert wasn't listening to Van. His eyes misted and he said, "When I kick off . . . Look . . . You *will* take good care of Missy, won't you?"

Van hesitated. Missy watched him from the couch; she was so shrunken that her feet didn't touch the floor; her hair flew like white plumage. Her hands trembled and her eyes were misted too. Still she managed to toss her head gaily and she gave Van a little wink.

"You don't have to worry about me."

But Van was coming forward. "It's OK, Missy." He bowed. "I'd be happy to."

"Good," said Bert. "Now let me show you how to run the board."

THE LAST HURRAH OF THE GOLDEN HORDE

Norman Spinrad

Eastward across the Gobi, three hundred old men ride upon three hundred shaggy, wizened Mongolian ponies. The ponies, like their riders, are the tag end of a dying breed. The men are dressed in filthy, cracked, badly tanned leathers. Across their backs are strapped short Mongolian bows; swords dangle from their waists and they carry lances in their horny hands as they ride toward the sunrise.

In the dingy storefront on Sullivan Street identified as the D'Mato Social Club by the peeling green letters on the flyspecked translucent area above the black-painted area of the plate glass window that hid the cavelike interior from the view of casual assassins in the street, Jerry Cornelius, a not-so-casual (or in his own way a *more* casual) assassin, sat on a gray-enameled metal folding chair facing a gnarled old man with a Jimmy Durante nose across the cracked surface of a rickety card table. Jerry wore a carefully dated black suit, a black silk shirt, a white tie, and white boots. His black vinyl raincoat was draped across a counter which paralleled one wall of the room and which held a display of candy bars and a cardboard showcase of De Nobili cigars. Behind the counter hung a faded photograph of Franklin D. Roosevelt framed in black. The man with the Jimmy Durante nose was smoking a De Nobili and the semipoisonous smoke that he blew across the table

was clearly designed to blow Jerry's cool. Jerry, however, had expected this, and as a countermeasure kept his violin case close at hand. It seemed a draw.

"This is a big one, Cornelius," the old man said.

"Flesh is flesh, Mr. Siciliano," Jerry replied. "Metal is metal."

"Have you ever hit a cabinet-level official before?"

Jerry pondered. "It's open to doubt," he finally admitted. "I got a head of state once, but it was a benevolent despotism."

The old man chewed his cigar, much to Jerry's disgust. "It'll have to do," he said. "You've got the contract. How soon can you be in Sinkiang?"

"Three days. I'll have to change passports again."

"Make it two."

"I'd have to pull strings. It'll cost you."

The old man shrugged. "Do it," he said.

Jerry grinned. "My motto, Mr. Siciliano. Who's the contract on?"

"Mao Tse-tung's heir apparent."

"Who's that these days?" Jerry asked. The situation in China had gotten somewhat muddled.

"That's your problem," Durante-nose said.

Jerry shrugged. "And my cover?"

"Arrange it yourself."

Jerry got up clutching his violin case, ran his hand through his great bush of blonde natural, retrieved his raincoat, took a De Nobili from the counter, and said with an evil smirk: "Don't say I didn't warn you."

The railroad train consisted of a locomotive, a sealed boxcar, three flatcars and a caboose. The boxcar contained one ton of (uncut?) heroin. The open flatcars held three hundred members of the People's Army of China armed with machine guns, protected from the elements by

the thought of Chairman Mao. The caboose held the negotiating team. The locomotive was a diesel job.

"You'll be working with the Russians on this, Inspector Cornelius," Q said. "Our interests happen to coincide."

Jerry frowned. The last time he had worked with a Russian, he had contracted the clap. "I don't trust those buggers," he told Q.

"Neither do we," Q said crisply, "but it's the only way we can get you into Sinkiang. You leave for Moscow on Aeroflot in the morning."

"Aeroflot?" whined Jerry. Christ, those Russian stewardesses! he thought. "I get airsick on Aeroflot," he complained.

Q glared at Jerry firmly. "We're getting the family plan discount," he explained.

"But I'm flying alone. . . ."

"Precisely."

"Dramamine?"

"If you insist," Q said primly. "But the Bureau frowns on foreign substances."

"My mission?" Jerry asked.

"Catch the Chinks and the Maf in the act. Bust them."

"But we have no jurisdiction."

"Hence the Russians," said Q. "Use your head, Cornelius."

"They have no jurisdiction either."

"You're not that naive, Cornelius."

"I suppose not," Jerry said wistfully.

According to the thought of Chairman Mao, the village was an anachronism: one hundred and fifty-three fleabitten nomads, along with their animals (mostly diseased horses and threadbare yaks) encamped in a cluster of leather yurts on the margin of the Gobi. From the correct point of view, the village might be said not to exist.

From this same point of view (as well as from several others) the three hundred old men who galloped in from the wastes of the Gobi might also be said to be nonexistent. Nevertheless, the nomad encampment had a certain reality for the old warriors; in fact an archetypal reality stretching back in a line of unbroken tradition from the days of the Great Khan and his Golden Horde still burning clearly in their ancestral memory to the misty and arthritic present.

Village. Burn. Pillage. Rape. Kill.

Outside the umbrella of the thoughts of Chairman Mao, the old barbarians existed in a happier reality of simple, straightforward traditional imperatives.

Therefore, unmindful of the fact that the village was an anachronism, the old warriors, in the time-honored tradition of the Golden Horde, rode into the encampment, slew the men and children, made a pass at raping the women to death, slaughtered the animals, burned the yurts, and continued to ride eastward, secure in the knowledge that they had fulfilled another quantum of their timeless destiny.

A long concrete runway broke the monotony of the Sinkiang wastelands with the more absolute monotony of its geometric perfection. At right angles to the runway, a railroad spur wandered off toward the horizon. From the viewpoint of the pilot of the C-5A approaching this three-dimensional nexus, the runway and the railroad spur formed a T with a finite bar and an infinite upright. If anything, the pilot thought this sloppy. It is likely that he did not fully comprehend the thought of Chairman Mao; a more erudite man might have appreciated the symbolism.

"It is a clear demonstration of the cynical perfidy of the Chinese gangster element enshrined behind the façade of the Maoist clique, Comrade Cornelius," Commissar Krapotkin observed genially, drawing a glass of tea from the silver samovar and handing it across the table to Jerry.

Krapotkin was a short barrel of a man who wore his double-breasted Mod suit like a uniform. Perhaps it is a uniform, Jerry thought, as he took a spiked sugar cube out of his mother-of-pearl pillbox and inserted it between his teeth. The Russians were doing their best to be hip these days and it was hard to keep up.

As Jerry sipped tea through the sugar cube between his teeth, Krapotkin lit up an Acapulco Gold and continued to make small talk: "While they gibber and squeak their anti-Soviet obscenities in Peking, they deal with the worst gangster element of the decadent capitalist society by their back door in Sinkiang, which, by the way, is of course rightfully Soviet territory."

"I wouldn't call the Maf the *worst* gangster element of decadent capitalist society," Jerry observed mildly.

Krapotkin produced a metallic sound which Jerry tentatively identified as a laugh. "Ah, very good, Comrade Cornelius. Indeed, one might argue that the distribution of heroin, contributing as it does to the further corruption of the already decadent West, is an act which contributes to the long-range progress of the working class."

"But providing the reactionary adventurist regime in Peking with hard American currency does not," Jerry rejoined.

"Exactly, Comrade! Which is why my government has decided to cooperate with the American narcs. Once the Maoist clique has been exposed in the act of selling heroin to the Maf, we should have no trouble totally discrediting them with progressive elements throughout the world."

"And of course the Mafia will be discredited as well."

"?"

"The Maf is essentially a patriotic organization like the KKK or the Loyal Order of Moose."

Krapotkin roached his joint. "Enough of the pleasantries, Comrade," he said. "Are you prepared for the drop?"

Jerry fingered his violin case. "My cover?" he inquired.

"You will be a Mafia hit man assigned a contract on the heir apparent to Mao Tse-tung," Krapotkin said. "Our agents in Palermo have uncovered just such a plot."

"The real hit man?"

Krapotkin smiled. "He has been disposed of, I assure you."

From a certain viewpoint, Jerry reflected, Krapotkin was right.

Not 90 seconds after the C-5A had taxied to a halt with its tail facing the juncture of the rail-spur-runway T as if preparing to fart along the track, the great doors in the nose opened like the petals of an aluminum flower, a ramp was lowered, and a black Cadillac disgorged, pulling a house trailer of grandiose proportions and Miami Beach Gothic design. The C-5A continued to disgorge Cadillacs like a pregnant guppy, each one pulling a trailer larger and more rococo than the last.

Something less than three hundred old men galloped haltingly across the wastes of Sinkiang on faltering ponies. A dozen or more of the Mongol warriors had burst blood vessels in their tired old brains from the excitement of the last massacre. The blood was running thin. Where once the steppes had echoed to the pounding hooves of the Golden Horde as the whole world trembled before a tide of barbarians that filled the field of vision from horizon to horizon, now there was naught but an expiring handful of decrepit savages. *Sic transit gloria mundi.* The spirit was willing, but the flesh was practically moribund. The survivors envied those few of their comrades lucky enough to have died a warrior's death sacking the last village in an endless chain reaching back to the glory days when the villages had names like Peking and Samarkand and Damascus.

But something—call it pride or manly virtue—kept the

pitiful remnant of the Horde going, riding ever eastward into the sunrise. Perhaps it was the hope that somewhere on the endless steppe there still remained a village large enough (but not *too* large) to bring them all the glory of death in one last gory, triumphant, final massacre. Flailing like tattered battle flags in their befuddled old brains the simple imperatives which shaped their lives and hopes and destinies: Village. Burn. Pillage. Rape. Kill.

Jerry Cornelius, still clutching the violin case, stood alone in the gray wasteland and watched the Russian helicopter disappear into the slate-colored sky with a certain sense of foreboding. You just can't trust those Russians, he thought. Now where was the car?

To the east was a large boulder. Behind it, and not without a certain sense of relief, Jerry found a late model black Cadillac sedan, well-waxed and shiny. So far, so good.

Inside the car, Jerry found his new persona. Doffing his clothes, he assumed the persona: a black pinstriped suit with pegged pants and thin lapels, a white button-down shirt, a white tie, a diamond stickpin, pointed black Italian loafers, argyl socks, a box of De Nobilis, and jars of black shoe polish and vaseline, with which he gave himself a Rudolph Valentino job, atop which he affixed a green porkpie hat with a leopard-skin band. Thus accoutered, and with a round toothpick in his mouth at a jaunty angle, he sealed the car, turned on the air conditioning, and set out across the wasteland.

Only when he discovered that the radio would bring in nothing but Radio Moscow and that the tape library contained naught but Tchaikowsky did the full extent of Krapotkin's treachery become apparent.

As the train hove into sight of the rail-spur-runway junction, the soldiers of the People's Army were able to

contain cries of awe, amazement and dismay only by diligent application of the thought of Chairman Mao.

For there in the depths of Sinkiang was, considering the circumstances, quite a decent facsimile of Las Vegas. A semicircle of trailers rimmed a large kidney-shaped swimming pool. Done up in pastels, sporting picture windows, and sprouting numerous extensions, wings, and breezeways, the trailers resembled the lower or casino floors of Las Vegas hotels. Complex mazes of cabanas, beach chairs, bocci courts, pavilions, greenhouses, handball courts and pigeon coops which filled the interstices between the trailers completed the illusion. Behind the semicircular Las Vegas façade towered the tail of the C-5A, reminiscent, somehow, of Howard Hughes and all that his shadowy persona implied. Parked among the spectral casino hotels were an indeterminant number of black Cadillacs.

Around the pool, waiters in red tuxedoes served tepid Collinses to fat men in sunglasses stretched out in beach chairs, warming themselves with complex arrays of sunlamps. Starlets in bikinis paraded their pinchable asses by the poolside.

The officials in the caboose immediately called for the reserve train which had been parked fifty miles down the track in anticipation of such a necessity.

Approaching his destination from the south, Jerry Cornelius spotted a cluster of pagodas, huts and barracks, among which huge billboards had been erected bearing immense portraits of Mao, Lenin, Stalin, Enver Hoxha, and other popular personalities of the People's Republic of China. Everything was festooned with calligraphy like a wedding cake. Intermittent strings of firecrackers exploded. Hatchet men chased each other through the winding streets. Soldiers of the People's Army performed calisthenics. The sharp syllables of Chinese dialects filled

the air like razor blades. Gongs sounded. Paper dragons danced in the streets. Perpetual twilight hovered over the scene, which, upon closer inspection, proved to be constructed of balsa wood, rice paper and papier-mâché.

Warily, Jerry swung the Cadillac wide of this Chinese version of Disneyland and circled toward the tail of a C-5A which dominated the landscape. Soon reality (such as it was) changed and he found himself on the outskirts of what appeared to be a suburb of Las Vegas: the lower stories of casino hotels mounted on wheels and parked in a semicircle around a huge kidney-shaped pool, facing the Chinese apparition across the chlorinated waters.

Having spied a heavily guarded boxcar behind the façade of the Chinese reality, Jerry was not surprised to see a dozen thugs with machine guns guarding the C-5A. The $50,000,000 must be on the plane.

For a moment, Jerry parked the Cad along the Orient-Vegas interface, playing at pondering his next move.

Shortly, he drove on into the Mafia camp, parked the Cadillac next to a fire hydrant outside a barbershop, and melted into the scene with barely a ripple. Yes indeed, this was his kind of town!

Eastward across the wastelands, here and there a rider dead on his horse, a scroungy pony faltering under its rider, the spirit burning brighter as the blood thinned as if their ancient flesh were ectoplasmating into naught but the weathered parchment-dry quintessence of tradition-cum-desire, the desperate determination not to die a peasant's death, the image of the Final Massacre burning its forelorn hope into the backs of what was left of their arteriosclerotic brains, the husks of the Golden Horde doddered onward, ever onward.

"Ya get da Big Picture, Cornelius?" the Rock said, sipping at his Collins as he and Jerry lay side by side in

beach chairs, sunning themselves at poolside. Jerry, dressed in neon-blue bathing suit, contrasting yellow terry-cloth robe, Japanese rubber sandals and silvered Air Force shades, had resisted the dangerous urge to order Pernod, and as a consequence was nursing a foul rum concoction. Only the presence of his violin case close at hand soothed his jangled nerves. And the sunlamps threatened to melt the shoe polish in his hair.

"I'm not paid to get the Big Picture, Rock," Jerry said, keeping in character, though from a certain viewpoint what he was saying was true.

The Rock scratched his hairy paunch with one hand and with the other, clawlike, pinched the ass of a passing starlet, who giggled appropriately.

"I like yer style, kid," the Rock said. "But doncha have any curiosity?"

"Curiosity killed a cat."

"I'm a dog man myself, Cornelius, so who gives a shit? What I say is dese Chinks have been asking for it. Just because da punks got a few H-bombs and ICBM's is no reason for them to get the idea they can burn the Maf and live ta talk about it. Yeah, after ya hit their number two *padron,* that smart-ass punk in Peking will have ta look over his shoulder a few times before he tries putting milk-sugar in our heroin again."

"Just who is their number two?"

Rock pointed his De Nobili at the empty raft anchored out in the center of the kidney-shaped pool. "Da Big Boy will make this year's deal out on da raft—neutral turf. Whatever Chink is out there with him—zap!"

"Won't the Reds . . . ?" Jerry inquired.

"Da Cads are full of heavies with choppers." The Rock grinned. "When you hit da number two, dey hit da People's Army." The Rock chucked himself under the chin with his right forefinger as if flicking a bead of sweat at the

giant posters of Mao, Stalin, Hoxha and Lenin glowering like spectral Internal Revenue agents across the moat-waters of the pool.

Jerry decided to develop a sudden hankering for Egg Foo Yung.

Major Sung passed the opium pipe across the black-lacquered table to Jerry, who inhaled the sweet smoke and fingered his violin case voluptuously as Major Sung caressed his copy of the Little Red Book obscenely and said: "Of course I am familiar with your work in England, Colonel Kor Ne Loos."

"Your English is excellent, Major," Jerry lied. "Harvard?"

"Berlitz."

"I should be reporting the honorable Heir Apparent to godlike Mao," Jerry chided.

Major Sung frowned and kicked the brass gong which sat upon the table. Kung-fu, Jerry noted warily. He revised his estimate of Major Sung laterally. "As you of course know," Sung said with an oriental leer, "the peacock often hides his egg behind an embroidered fan."

Jerry started—he certainly hadn't expected anything like this! "The dragon has been known to preen his scales before he pounces," he rejoined.

Outside the pagoda, a chorus of two hundred kindergarten students were chanting the latest Number One on the Chinese Top 40, "Death to the Violaters of the Spirit of Mao's Urine." Jerry tapped his fingers on the table in time to the catchy rhythm, which he recognized as a variation on "Rock Around the Clock."

"May I take that to imply that the pasta contains an asp?" Major Sung said. It was clearly not a question.

Jerry smiled. "As Confucius says, a fox with a dagger may behead a drunken lion."

Major Sung laughed. "As Chairman Mao has observed, the enemies of the Revolution will devour their own entrails if they can make a fast buck in the process."

Bowing and scraping, a Sergeant in a kimono entered the chamber with tea and fortune cookies.

Major Sung cracked open his pastry and read aloud: "Death to the revisionist running dogs of the Wall Street imperialists and their would-be lackies in Prague."

Jerry's fortune cookie said: "Tension, apprehension and dissension have begun."

As Jerry, in his pinstripe suit, porkpie hat, and Italian loafers, lounged against the right front fender of the Cadillac, which he had parked inconspicuously at poolside, a fat man in a flowered Hawaiian shirt and black Bermuda shorts boarded a speedboat at the Vegas end of the pool. Stuffed between his thick lips was an El Ropo Supremo Perfecto Grande. Set jauntily on his bald head was a red sailor cap on the brim of which "The Big Boy" had been embroidered in Atlantic City in bold blue thread.

As a Meyer Davis orchestra in one of the poolside cabanas struck up "Amore" and a stripper began to peel on the diving board, the white speedboat set out across the pool toward the raft.

Meanwhile across the pool, fifty soldiers of the People's Army marched back and forth bearing placards serializing the menu of Hong Fat's restaurant in severe calligraphy and psychedelic posters of Mao, Stalin, Lenin and Jim Morrison while the People's Army Brass Band played "Chinatown, My Chinatown" to which a chorus of Red Guards waving the Little Red Book sang the "Internationale" in Sinosized Albanian. To this heady send-off, an old bearded Chinese in a military tunic (with a curious if superficial resemblance to Ho Chi Minh) rowed a punt toward the raft in neutral waters.

At poolside, Jerry's trained eye picked out heavies in

blue serge suits moving unobtrusively toward their Cadillacs. They all carried violin cases. Jerry placed a bet with a convenient bookie that the cases did not contain violins. The best he could get was the wrong end of 9-4 odds.

Alone on the raft at last, The Big Boy and the Heir Apparent swapped bon mots as the strains of "High Hopes" mingled with the thin voices of schoolchildren chanting "My Mao Can Lick Your Mao" in a corrupt Canton dialect.

"Ya dirty mother, last year's dope was cut with milk-sugar."

"As Chairman Mao has observed, when dealing with corrupt mercenaries of the exploitative class, the doctrine of 'no tickee, no washee" is fully justified."

"Remember what happened to Bugsy Siegal!"

"Confucius once said that a toothless dragon does not fear the orthodontist."

Behind the Chinese Disneyland, the People's Army had placed six machine-gun nests in a circle around the boxcar of heroin.

Twenty heavies with choppers ringed the C-5A. Inside, five more heavies guarded $50,000,000 in unmarked small bills.

"Fifty million! That's robbery. You Chinks are crooks."

The Meyer Davis orchestra played "It Takes Two To Tango." The People's Army Brass Band countered with a Chinese version of *"Die Fahne Hoch."*

"As Chairman Mao has said," the Heir Apparent threatened, "I may not be the best man in town, but I'll be the best till the best comes round."

Hidden behind a façade of placards, posters, pagodas, dancing paper dragons, hatchet men, schoolchildren per-

forming calisthenics, rioting Red Guards, captured American airmen in chains, opium dens and filthy peasant huts, three hundred soldiers of the People's Army of the People's Republic of China girded themselves for a human wave attack.

"We only deal with you Commie pinko Chink bastards because you're the only mass suppliers of heroin aside from the Federal narcs that we can find."

"As Chairman Mao has said, tough shit."

Ominously, the Meyer Davis orchestra began playing "Hawaiian War Chant."

Jerry Cornelius stubbed out his roach and reached for his violin case. "The time has come, the Walrus said, to speak of many things," he observed as, out on the raft, The Big Boy gave the finger to the Heir Apparent.

"Fifty million for the boxcar, take it or leave it," the Heir Apparent said.

The People's Army Brass Band broke into "Light My Fire" as seven hundred Red Guards doused themselves with gasoline and immolated themselves while singing "Chairman Mao ist unser Fuehrer" contrapuntally, but since they were all off-key, the ploy was a failure.

"As Al Capone once observed, play ball, or we lean on you."

Jerry Cornelius opened his violin case and withdrew a violin. To the untrained observer, it appeared to be merely an ordinary electric violin with self-contained power supply, built-in amp and speaker rated at 100 watts. However, an Underground electronics expert on 150 mg of methedrene had made a significant modification: the high notes registered well into the ultrasonic and the lows were

deep down in the subsonic, while all audible frequencies were eliminated.

When Jerry tucked the violin under his chin and began to play "Wipeout," the brains of everyone within a five-mile radius began to vibrate to the beat of a drummer who was ultra-and-supersonic as well as different and non-existent. To the naked human ear, Jerry appeared to be playing "The Sounds of Silence."

Out on the raft, The Big Boy was growing quite cross as the subliminal strains of "Wipeout" inflamed cells deep within his paretic brain. "Mao Tse-tung eats shit!" he informed the Heir Apparent.

"Al Capone was a faggot, according to the infallible thought of Mao Tse-tung!"

The Meyer Davis orchestra began to play "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."

The People's Army Brass Band immolated their tuba player.

As Jerry segued into a subliminal rendition of "Heartbreak Hotel," fifty slot machines produced spontaneous jackpots, Cadillacs gunned their engines, whores' poodles howled, thirteen plate-glass windows shattered, and every starlet at poolside achieved climax. (Some of them had not come since their first screen tests.)

Hatchet men began chopping at papier-mâché pagodas. A paper dragon set itself on fire. Three hundred soldiers preparing themselves for a human wave attack began to drool and got erections. Seven hundred chanting kindergarten children achieved satori and began to devour an American flag drenched with soy sauce. A giant poster of Stalin broke into a grin and thumbed its nose at a poster of Mao.

"Mao Tse-tung eats the hairy canary!"
"The Maf sucks!"
"Faggot!"
"Creep!"
"Chink!"
"Wop!"
"ARGH!"

Salivating, The Big Boy leaped at the Heir Apparent, chomping his El Ropo Supremo Perfecto Grande to bits, and buried teeth and cigar in the old Chinaman's beard, setting it aflame. The two men wrestled on the raft, biting, spitting and cursing for a few moments, then toppled each other into the pool, which proved to be filled with crocodiles.

Pleased with his work, Jerry Cornelius began to play "Fire."

A phalanx of Cadillacs screamed around the pool and barreled into the People's Army Brass Band spewing machine-gun bullets which ripped into a poster of Mao Tse-tung, enraging a rioting mob of Red Guards who set themselves on fire and threw themselves under the wheels of the cars, causing them to skid into a balsa-wood pagoda which toppled into the pool in splinters which were devoured by the blood-crazed crocodiles who expired in agony from the splinters in their stomachs some time later.

Three hundred soldiers of the People's Army launched a human-wave attack, firing their machine guns at random.

Jerry continued to play "Fire," seeing no particular reason to change the tune.

Major Sung shrieked: "Capitalistic running dogs of the demographic People's revisionist lackies of Elvis Presley

have over-run the ideological manifestations of decadent elements within the amplifier of the pagoda!" and committed hara-kiri.

The Rock began smashing slot machines with a baseball bat.

Starlets tore off their bikinis and chased terrified hatchet men around the poolside.

The human wave reached the pool, dove in, and proceeded to beat moribund crocodiles to death with their gun butts.

A suicide squad hurled itself through the plate-glass window of a trailer and devoured the rug.

Cadillacs circled the boxcar of heroin like hostile Indians, filling the air with hot lead.

The sopping remnants of the human wave reached the trailer camp and began beating thugs to death with dead crocodiles.

Red Guards showered the C-5A with ink bottles.

Tongues of flame were everywhere.

Explosions, contusions, fire, gore, curses, looting, rape.

Jerry Cornelius began playing "All You Need Is Love," knowing that no one was listening.

Riding eastward across the wastelands on their diseased ponies, something under two hundred decrepit remnants of what once had been the glorious Golden Horde, most of

them incoherent with exhaustion, spied a great conflagration on the horizon.

Flaccid adrenals urged near-moribund hearts to beat faster. They flayed their ponies with the shafts of their spears. Drool flecked the lips of doddards and ponies alike. Their backbrains smelled blood and fire in the air.

The smells of gunpowder, gasoline, burning balsa wood and papier-mâché, sizzling flesh, gave Jerry Cornelius a slight buzz as he began to play "Deck the Halls With Boughs of Holly." The swimming pool was colored a bright carnelian, which did little to mask the chlorine odor. Bits of anodized aluminum struggled to keep afloat amid scraps of charred balsa wood and shreds of placards.

A dented Cadillac careened through a barricade of beach chairs and into a squad of Chinese soldiers beating a starlet to death with copies of the Little Red Book before sliding over the rim of the pool to sink bubbling into the churning depths.

The pillar of fire consuming the Chinese Disneyland reminded Jerry of the Dresden firestorm. Sentimentally, he began to play "Bongo, Bongo, Bongo, I Don't Want to Leave the Congo."

In a strange display of gallantry, Red Guards, hit men, capa mafiosas and Chinese soldiers joined hands in a ring around the ruined trailer camp, screaming "*Burn,* baby, burn!" in English, Mandarin, Cantonese, Italian pidgin, and Yiddish. At each *"burn"* a canister of napalm dropped from somewhere onto the conflagration.

Reduced to sentimentality despite himself, Jerry played "God Save The Queen."

Two hundred or so pairs of rheumy eyes lit up with feral joy at the sight of a great city (by current Horde standards anyway) going up in flames, at the sight of smashed cars, broken bodies, naked starlets shrieking, and a great pool of what appeared to be blood.

Weeping great nostalgic tears, the last generation of the Golden Horde shouldered their spears, whipped their ponies into a stumbling gallop and charged in a body into the fray, the image of the Final Massacre burning like a city in the fevered brains of the aged savages:

Village! Burn! Pillage! Rape! Kill!

Mongolian ponies wheezing and gasping under them, the crazed doddards reached the conflagration and found to their chagrin that there was precious little unburnt, unpillaged, unraped, unkilled.

They found a boxcar guarded by machine gunners and charged it en masse, sacrificing half their number to impale the befuddled Chinese troops on their spears and set the boxcar aflame. As a strangely intoxicating aromatic smoke billowed from the burning boxcar, the remnant of the remnant scattered, looking for more things or people to burn, rape, and kill.

A dozen of the doddards expired attempting to rape an aged whore to death, and another dozen were compelled to shamefacedly trample her to death under the hooves of their ponies, eight of which expired from the effort.

Fifteen of the Horde had heart attacks trying to beat Cadillacs to death.

A half-dozen doddards died of broken hearts when the slot machines they were torturing failed to cry out in pain.

Several of the Horde fell to devouring the corpses of crocodiles and choked to death on the splinters.

As the last Khan of the Golden Horde watched in senile befuddlement, the great silver bird issued a terrible battle cry and began to move. The doddard's bleary eyes bugged as the C-5A picked up speed, shot by him, and actually left the ground!

A feeble nervous impulse traveled spastically from his

optic nerve into his brain, and thence to his arm and throat.

"Kill!" he wheezed asthmatically, and hurled his spear at the unnatural thing.

The spear was sucked into the intake of the left inboard jet engine, lodged in the turbine, and shattered it. The jet engine exploded, shearing off the wing. The C-5A nearly completed a loop before it crashed upside down to the runway and exploded into flames.

From an aerial viewpoint, the runway and the railroad spur formed a T with a finite bar and an infinite upright, but the only living being in the area did not notice the symbolism. Riding into the sunset on his pony, his back to what in the distance seemed naught but a smoldering refuse heap, the last Khan of the Golden Horde, sole survivor of the Final Massacre, filled his dying brain with one thought, like a dwindling chord: fulfillment; Golden Horde died in glory; village; burned; pillaged; raped; killed; ancestors proud.

This thought flared brightly in his brain like a dying ember and then he went to that Great Carnage Heap in the Sky. The wheezing pony tripped over a rock, dislodging the body, which fell to the ground in a twisted heap. A vulture descended, pecked at the body, sniffed, and departed.

The pony staggered on for a few steps, then halted, its dim brain perhaps mesmerized by the glare of the setting sun.

The Mongolian pony was still standing there an hour later when Jerry Cornelius, in his pinstripe suit, porkpie hat, and Italian loafers, wandered dazedly up to it out of the wasteland.

"Here's a bit of luck," Jerry muttered, perking up a bit.

(The short-circuiting of his electric violin had seriously vexed him.)

Jerry mounted the pony, kneed its flanks and shouted: "Get 'em up, Scout!"

The pony waddled forward a few steps, puked, and died.

Jerry extricated himself from the corpse, brushed himself off, and consulted a fortune cooky he had secreted in a pocket.

"It's a long way to Tipperary," the fortune cooky informed him.

Munching the soggy rice pastry, Jerry trudged off into the setting sun whistling "Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones, now hear de word of de Lord. . . ."

I hope the story you have just read was amusing and a bit disorienting; I would consider it a failure if it wasn't both. It was an amusing and disorienting thing to write. I'm not at all sure why I wrote it and I'm not entirely sure I know exactly what it's all about. You see, though I wrote every single word in The Last Hurrah of the Golden Horde *myself, though every incident and image in the story is my own private creation, the story itself is part of a strange amorphous collaboration among many writers, or more precisely a collaboration between Michael Moorcock and each of us separately.* The Last Hurrah of the Golden Horde *is a Jerry Cornelius story. A Jerry Cornelius story is not an easy thing to pin down.*

On a moron level you could compare it to something that was done in the crummier science-fiction pulps. One writer created a basic format for a series of stories and a

lot of other writers churned them out under the same house pseudonym. Michael Moorcock has created a character named Jerry Cornelius and something more which is hard to define and a lot of other writers have written and perhaps will write Jerry Cornelius stories.

But there the relation to anything of the kind that has ever been done before ends. Jerry Cornelius stories have not been produced anonymously by a stable of hacks. In addition to Michael Moorcock's Jerry Cornelius stories and two Jerry Cornelius novels (The Final Programme *and* A Cure for Cancer, *with two more planned), writers of no mean reputation in England, including James Sallis, Langdon Jones, M. John Harrison, and Brian Aldiss have contributed stories to the Jerry Cornelius canon under their own names. Further, all of the stories have been first published in* New Worlds, *where believe me nothing appears that anyone wrote primarily for the money. Each of us had some private artistic reason to write one or more Jerry Cornelius stories. No doubt our individual reasons are as different as our individual work outside of Michael Moorcock's art form.*

On one level, the Jerry Cornelius phenomenon is Michael Moorcock's work of art. Not all the stories, but the phenomenon itself. He wrote the first Jerry Cornelius stories, setting the theme and style around which everyone else blew their riffs. In a sense, he legitimized the base pulp practice of the series collaboration and transmogrified it to a genuine cooperative art form, a writer's analogue of a jam session. Theme and variation, with the variation frequently dominating the theme.

Moorcock's avowed intention was to "create a viable modern myth figure." Jerry Cornelius, the English Assassin, the Agent of Entropy, the Psychic Vampire, the Prince of the Dark Side of Western Civilization. Moorcock is one of the most successful living heroic-fantasy writers, and certainly the least naive when it comes to the metho-

dology of giving a character the feel of mythic dimension. He knows what he is doing and how he is doing it. In Elric of Melnibone, the albino sorcerer in psychic thrall to the demon embodied in his own magic sword, Moorcock consciously created a synthetic myth figure with imagery drawn from the Freudian folklore. But Elric remained a character in a series of stories by Michael Moorcock, stories in which he had mythic dimension to be sure, but still a character in a series of stories. With Jerry Cornelius, Moorcock has attempted to carry the process one step further. In The Final Programme, *Moorcock created the basic Jerry Cornelius myth. In his Jerry Cornelius stories and in his second Jerry Cornelius novel* A Cure for Cancer, *he gave demonstrations of how that myth could be used as a skeleton around which almost any sort of story in any sort of style could be constructed. There are few consistencies in Moorcock's own Jerry Cornelius stories. Cornelius can be white or black, sometimes interchangeably. Sometimes he is an albino Negro or a black Caucasion. He frequently dies and is frequently resurrected. He is always out to maximize chaos. With the exception of* The Final Programme, *all of Moorcock's Jerry Cornelius stories have a strange illusive surface, consisting mainly of actions, emotions, memories and premonitions which are described, or better,* almost *described from weird off-angles.*

Since The Final Programme, *Moorcock has been writing his Jerry Cornelius stories as if Cornelius were already established as an archetypal figure like Oedipus or Gilgamesh or Jesus Christ, with whom he shares initials. The basic myth outlined so simply in* The Final Programme *is always the backbone of the piece, the major theme, but it is shoved into the background by the variations. By using the basic Jerry Cornelius myth as the unexamined core of the story, Moorcock frees himself to concentrate on the variations, to experiment with prose, form, surface, and*

style. Moreover, he has encouraged other writers to borrow the myth for the same purposes.

The idea is twofold. If enough diverse writers successfully use the Jerry Cornelius myth in stories of their own, it will take on all the attributes of a genuine popular myth and pass into the general culture, and Michael Moorcock will have created his work of art: not Jerry Cornelius stories, but the Jerry Cornelius myth. Not a body of work, but a mythic figure reverberating in the diverse works of many writers, perhaps in the general public psyche. James Bond. Sherlock Holmes. John F. Kennedy. Mick Jagger. Jerry Cornelius. In return for their collaboration in producing this work of art designed to transcend prose fiction, the individual writers have been offered a myth around which they can blow experimental variations useful in the explorations of their own directions, an interesting body of examples of such variations, a glimmering of what may lead to a new kind of prose fiction, and in New Worlds, *a magazine willing to publish the strange results.*

Of course you must realize that all this is my interpretation of the phenomenon. Moorcock may have a different interpretation. The interesting thing about the Jerry Cornelius phenomenon is that though it is Moorcock's creation, my interpretation of it can be at least as valid as his. Which is quite a creation on his part, in a strange way.

At any rate, what I've just given you is basically my interpretation of what Mike Moorcock is trying to do. I wrote The Last Hurrah of the Golden Horde *for quite different reasons of my own, and most people I've heard from about it find it totally different from any of the other Jerry Cornelius stories. (It is, however, not the only Jerry Cornelius story about which this can be said.) In fact, I had conceived the basic story before I knew very much of anything about Jerry Cornelius at all.*

The problem was that I had conceived of The Last Hurrah of the Golden Horde *as a film, a film that I could*

not believe anyone could be talked into actually making. Remove the character of Jerry Cornelius from the story and substitute a nihilistic narcotics agent (or even the abstract force of nihilism itself) and you'll have my original conception of the series of events in the film.

A rather strange film. A film that was a succession of images that told a story that was amusing and at the same time played with mythic images of our time—the Mafia, the Red Chinese, the Narcotics War—in conflict with each other. A film that depicted several different mythic realities in conflict with each other. A film without *important major characters, a film in which mythic images like "the Red Guard," "the Mafia," "the Golden Horde," were the only real "characters."*

Although the film idea was scarcely commercially viable —at least at the time—the idea of such a film seemed artistically sound and interesting. Yet the chance of making such a film seemed out of the question for a long time. So what I wanted to do was write a piece of prose fiction which would have the same basic effect as the hypothetical film.

This presented certain problems. A film exists as a series of visual and sound images—it feeds sensory impressions directly to the mind of the viewer through his eyes and ears, without intellectual mediation. It can involve the viewer in what is going on purely on the vividness of its images; therefore any succession of images can be a successful film if they are vivid enough and are edited creatively enough. But prose fiction works primarily on involvement, on getting the reader to feel empathy with one or more of the characters in the story, or at least on putting the reader inside the reality of the story by connecting him with the viewpoint of one or more of the characters. At least this holds for traditional prose fiction. Ballard and others had experimented with prose "fiction" that existed as nothing more than a series of prose images, but

the results, at least to me, while technically interesting, did not seem emotionally involving, amusing, or entertaining. And the piece I had in mind was designed most of all to be entertaining.

I had everything I needed to write The Last Hurrah of the Golden Horde *but a means for involving the reader in the story, for giving him access to its reality. The basic concept demanded a story without significant characters. Yet at the time, I could see no way of writing such a story and still involving the reader. If I stuck in a real human protagonist, I would destroy what I was trying to do; if I didn't, I couldn't write the story.*

It was this unresolved paradox that I was chewing over when I arrived in London and encountered the Jerry Cornelius phenomenon. At first the whole business seemed rather silly to me—perfectly capable writers borrowing Moorcock's character and elements of his style to produce stories that in the main seemed rather derivative, though a few seemed to stand successfully on their own.

But as I came to a more complete understanding of what was going on—at least in my own terms—it occurred to me that I could use Jerry Cornelius to write The Last Hurrah of the Golden Horde *precisely* because *the whole Cornelius myth was irrelevant to what I wanted to do. In the isolated context of my story, the motivations of Jerry Cornelius make no sense at all, though he is the "protagonist." His motivations are the motivations of the Cornelius myth, and the Cornelius myth plays no part in my story. By writing the story as if the Jerry Cornelius myth was a part of our general culture (which it is not at this writing), I could bury the Cornelius theme entirely and write a story that was* all *variation. Thus I had exactly the element I needed to write the story: a major character who was at once central to all the action and irrelevant to the story.*

And as I began writing this story, I discovered some-

thing else about the strange relationship between the content and style of the Jerry Cornelius stories. I understood why the surface of the stories seemed so illusive, why what was going on seemed to flicker back and forth between lucidity and incomprehensibility, why the total effect was still compelling. Moorcock and the others were assuming that their readers were familiar with the Jerry Cornelius myth; every Jerry Cornelius story but my own seemed to be a retelling of the same events in different guises, from different angles. This assumption was false, and the writers knew it, but it enabled them to give their prose the allusive quality of poetry, creating images that alluded to the core of the story without ever describing it.

It occurred to me that there was no reason why this technique could not be applied to other mythic elements: the Mafia, the Red Guard, the Golden Horde, for instance. In fact applying this technique to myths that are a part of the general culture seemed to be an improvement over applying it to a nonmyth like Jerry Cornelius. The prose of the Cornelius stories is a series of inside jokes and inside images which can only be partially appreciated by the uninitiated. But if I were to write in the same allusive manner about popular myths that did reverberate in the general public psyche, my images would hit home to the average reader, my offhand inside jokes would be generally funny.

I hope all this explains what a Jerry Cornelius story is, why I wrote one, and why mine is different from all the others. I'm sure that any of the other writers could give you a similarly idiosyncratic explanation of why they chose to experiment with a Jerry Cornelius story. In a sense, all the Jerry Cornelius stories are different from any of the others.

For anyone who may be waiting with baited breath, let me say without equivocation that I will never write another Jerry Cornelius story. I've learned whatever there

was for me to learn from the Jerry Cornelius canon by writing The Last Hurrah of the Golden Horde. *Which is not to put down the phenomenon at all. I think I've learned more about writing from writing* The Last Hurrah of the Golden Horde *than from any other short story I've ever written.*

—Norman Spinrad

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