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A crazy alien

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## Short Stories

*Natural High*

By Chuck Rothman; Art by Peggy Ranson

Page 4

*Newport's World*

By Doug Franklin; Art by Alan Gutierrez

Page 12

*At the Shadow of a Dream*

By Howard V. Hendrix; Art by David Deitrick

Page 24

*Ladies' Choice*

By Barney Curren; Art by Lori Deitrick

Page 32

*The Motel 6 Fugue*

By Karl G. Schlosser; Art by N. Taylor Blanchard

Page 38

*Dear Froggy*

By Patricia Anthony; Art by Cortney Skinner

Page 46

*The Committee to Re-Elect the President*

By Jan Lars Jensen; Art by Carol Heyer

Page 84

*In Love with Multi-Woman*

By Brooks Peck; Art by Allison Fiona Hershey

Page 92

*When in Bzook ...*

By Alan Kirk; Art by Larry Blamire

Page 98

*The Legend in Pursuit*

By Dan Persons; Art by Jon Foster

Page 102

*Two by Two*

By Chet Gottfried; Art by Larry Blamire

Page 108

*Enchantment*

By Catherine Mintz; Art by Robert Pasternak

Page 114

## Departments

*Cover Illustration* by David Menehan

Page 1

*From the Bookshelf*

Page 59

By Janice M. Eisen

*Books*

Page 64

By Darrell Schweitzer

*Our Alien Publisher*

Page 69

By A Crazy Alien

*Editor's Notes*

Page 70

By Charles C. Ryan

*What If? — Science*

Page 72

By Robert A. Metzger

*Classifieds*

Page 77

*Through the Lens*

Page 75

By Susan Ellison

*Aborigines*

Page 80

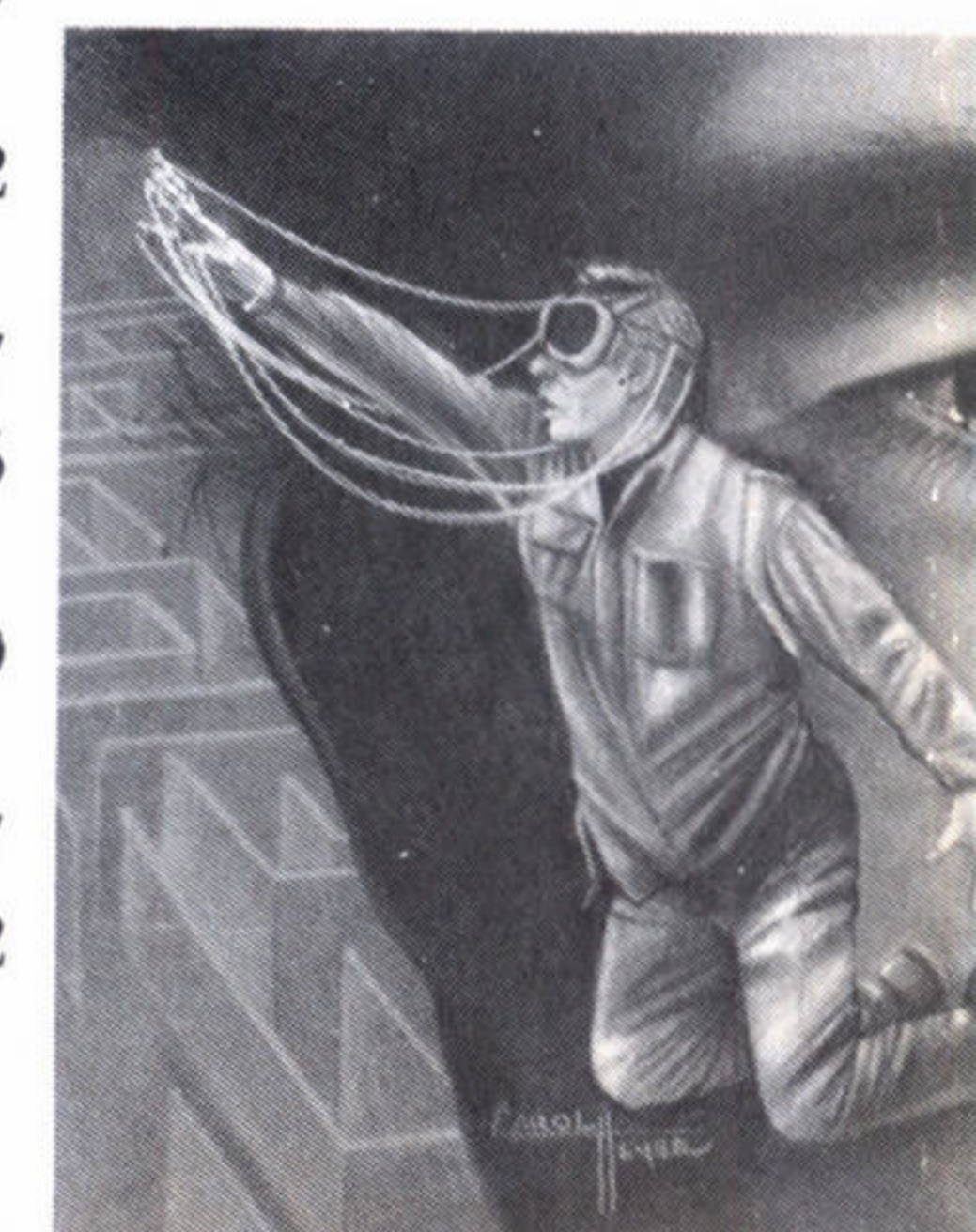
By Laurel Lucas

*Boomerangs*

Page 107

*Boomerang Awards*

Page 112



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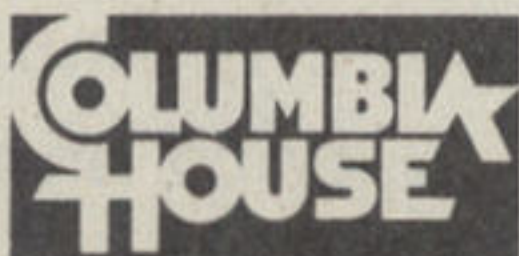
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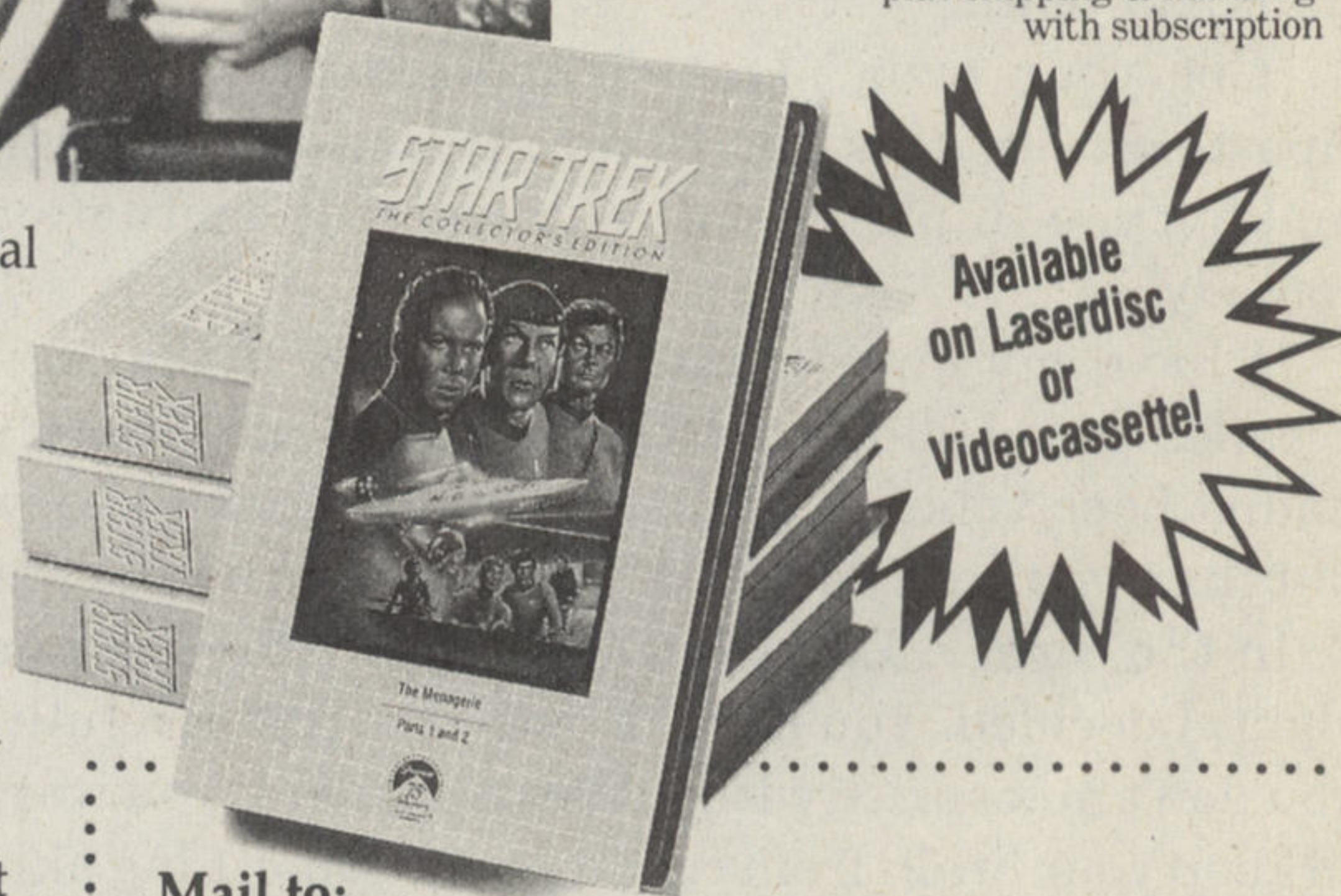
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# Natural High

## By Chuck Rothman

### Art by Peggy Ranson

Larry was having fits again, so we kicked him in the head a few times until he calmed down. Third time this week, and I was beginning to get sick of it.

I was feeling pretty good. I hadn't had a scream-jag in about four days, and the hallucinations seemed to be over. Although, I thought, staring out the window at the flat landscape of green plants, blue dust, and purple sky, you never can be sure, can you?

"Hey, Tom," Marylu shouted at me. "Get me some lunch." She wore a shimmering pink blouse and tattered pants, ones that even the squidfaces couldn't stand.

"Get your own," I said, amused at my witty riposte. Sprice does that to you, among other things, making you think the entire universe is a situation comedy.

"I have my own," said Marylu, and if the logic escaped me, I didn't let that concern me. Marylu hadn't been sober in ages. She left the room angry, but that would no doubt dissipate as soon as she ate.

In the corner, Larry began to moan. Served him right, I decided. You have to use this stuff carefully; you don't mix sprice with albion root, not if you want to keep your brain from turning into something akin to a carrot.

Which, I reflected, was probably why he used the damn stuff. At least a carrot doesn't have to think about things.

"Safe sex," Sharon murmured, so I knew she was coming down. It was about time. It really bothered me that she used wowie so much. She should have had more self-respect than that.

Of course, I shouldn't talk.

The shop bell rang. "Tinkle, tinkle, little bell," I muttered.

"The squidfaces can go to hell." Larry was at least coherent enough to reply. He lay on the floor, coughing in the bluish dust.

I looked around. Marylu was too far gone to be any good, and Larry probably couldn't stand up yet. Sharon would probably offer to screw a dead bruiserbug, male or female, if one were available, and that had gotten Dwain in enough trouble,

I supposed I was the sanest of us all right then. I went through the curtain and into the shop.

The darkness of the store was a relief, its long junk-filled aisles soothing. Dwain was by his win-

dow, quiet as usual.

A fat squidface was pawing among the scraps of metal, plastic, and toenail parings on the sale table, plunging his left grabber arm deep into the boxes. His central eyestalk stiffened the instant I entered.

"Put it back, creature with arthritic earflaps," I said in glorpan, or at least in the pidgin we'd developed the past three years, "or your descendants will suffer from generosity." Damn aliens would try to steal anything not properly guarded. It was considered impolite not to try.

He snuffled several times through his right nostril and his eyestalks nearly turned themselves into knots, but I ignored the protestations of innocence.

"We don't take any *bullshit* here," I said. "Put it back."

The glorp stopped the gestures, then put a piece of blue plastic, the top of a pen or stylus most likely, back on the sale table. They are attracted to plastic. Their civilization, such as it was, had never developed anything like it. It was like landing in America in 1900 — advanced enough so we weren't treated as gods, yet without the technology to be any help at all.

"*Bullshit?*" he asked, his nostrils twitching and eyestalks separating into parallel lines.

Curiosity. I had accidentally lapsed into English. But how do you explain the concept to a creature who looks upon excrement as a form of art? "A unit of exchange. Used by our politicians."

His eyestalks bent at right angles; his earflaps lay flat against his squidlike head, the rough equivalent of a nod.

"You come here to buy something, or just to steal, half-son of a dying blarit?" It was the worst insult I could come up with on short notice, not particularly imaginative, but I was still too wired to think of anything better.

The eyestalks stiffened with respect. It's considered good form to abuse your customers around here, and their language was filled with elaborate forms of shopkeepers' insults. We were grateful; it was one of the reasons we managed to survive. It was damn easy to be rude to creatures that looked pretty much like pale green four-legged squid with eyes at the end of their tentacles — only uglier.



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Between our Earth insults translated into glorpan, and our genuine dislike for our customers, we did all right financially.

"I wish to buy ..." The eyestalks searched the room rapidly, as though if he didn't find anything, he'd lose — nostrils, or earflaps, or mouthparts or something. Certainly not face; you can't lose what you don't have.

"That," the glorp said.

Damn. He had pointed his eye at one of the few intact remnants of the ship we still had: the radio. It still worked, although we had to connect glorp batteries to replace our own long-dead ones. I didn't know exactly what it was doing on display and made a mental note not to have anyone do any restocking while the drugs were working. But the last thing I wanted to do was get rid of it.

"You can have it for free," I said. "It's a gift."

You could tell the glorp was shocked by the way his mouthparts made tiny figure eights.

Good. It would keep him from pushing any further. When a glorp wanted something, it was impossible to dissuade him, so you had to nip any interest in the bud. But glorps are very suspicious of anything they get for free, and gifts are the ultimate insult. They'd die rather than spit at you without getting something in return. It didn't matter what it was: a transaction had to take place.

I thought for a moment the squidface was going to storm out, but instead, it stopped. "You only want to stop me from purchasing," it said. "Four hundred sultas."

I cursed myself for being so stupid as to let a squidface catch onto my game. "No sultas. You may have it as a gift, unevolved dango slime."

His eyestalks made rapid circles; I always resented being laughed at that way. "Five hundred."

"I will not accept your filthy sultas, creature whose eyestalks are tied in granny knots. It is a gift."

The glorp wasn't buying — or, rather, he was. "Seven thousand."

Just my luck, a millionaire. "Not —"

"Ten."

A voice screamed in my head to listen. We could run the shop for a year on that, maybe two, if we used some of it to buy stock.

He could sense he had me hooked. No more bids. He just waited, eyestalks stiff, earflaps uplifted.

I sighed. Talk about an offer you couldn't refuse. "Let's see your — probably fraudulent — sultas."

He pulled the diamond-shaped coins from his pouch. I took them gingerly. They were warm and still slimy with his secretions. But they looked real.

I sighed. "It's yours," I said.

The eyestalks made a few lazy circles. A smile.

I watched as he left the shop for the killing sunshine, telling myself I was only being sentiment-

tal. It's not that the radio picked up anything; it'd be another fifty years before Marconi's first broadcast would finally reach this galactic backwater, and the glorps had barely discovered electricity. And it wasn't like there'd be any rescue mission; we knew the day we left Earth that we were on our own. But it still felt like we were losing our last link with home. Sometimes we'd just listen to the static, pretending it was tuned to some old broadcast.

But I guessed we'd have to find another way to get our entertainment.

Dwain moaned from his spot by the window, and I went to get a watering can.

The full rays of the blue-white sun were streaming onto his foliage, bright enough to bring him to consciousness. The mossy green fungus that covered his body had flattened itself to catch all the energy.

He was nearly half plant now. A hell of a punishment. Dwain hadn't known he was fondling that female's genitals, and he was stuffed to the ears with spruce, but it was our first month here and we were all too spaced to explain anything, even if by some miracle we could have known glorpan by then. But the laws against such a thing are damn strict. The glorps may know little about electricity, but they're whizzes with plants and genetic engineering. The fungus was their standard punishment. They say eventually the greenery will die, but Dwain was overdue already. There was no telling if he'd ever be back to normal.

I splashed water on his feet, trying not to think of them as roots. His eyes flickered open, the mossy lids moving upward to reveal the only part of him that was still undeniably human. His face seemed bearded, only the beard was green, and his torso was covered with small pink flowers. A tiny yellow fly buzzed from one to the next, pollinating.

A flicker of interest passed over Dwain's face. "Tom?" he asked, the words badly garbled by the flora in his mouth.

"Yes, Dwain?" I had the urge to shave off the greenery, but they had warned me it would probably kill him. We just kept him in the shop and let him get just enough sunlight to survive, but not too much, so that the fungus didn't take over too quickly.

"When do we leave for Earth?"

I slapped him.

It was like striking a lawn, and I was immediately ashamed. "Sorry, kid," I murmured. "Just ... just don't say it."

Dwain showed no sign he felt anything. "I'm trying, Tom. I'm trying hard."

"I know you are, kid."

His eyes shut. The sun had gone behind a cloud.

I left the shop, disgusted with myself for selling the radio, and for the way I had treated Dwain. I needed some spruce. A lot of it. Now.

The next few hours strobed by in flashes of lucidity amid the blackouts. I recalled drawing a picture in the dust and admiring the deformed stick figure as though it were worthy of Michelangelo. There was a memory of balancing barik beans on my nose, and a vague recollection of the smell of singed hair.

When I came down, I found myself on the floor under an old yellow blanket.

Sharon was a half meter away. She was naked, so I knew she was still on wowie.

She moaned, pulled a strand of peach-colored hair away from her eyes, and opened them. At one time, I would have called them beautiful. Now they were patriotic — so much red amid the blue and white that you'd think Betsy Ross got her color scheme from them. Still, none of this was really her doing. All the food here had some kind of psychoactive effect. It was either get stoned or starve.

"I'm cold," she said hoarsely.

I tossed the blanket to her, and she snuggled beneath it. "Thanks," she said. "God, I feel awful. What was I — no, don't tell me. I'd rather not know."

I shrugged. "I couldn't tell you, anyway."

The store bell tinkled.

"Tom?" Sharon said.

"Yes?"

"I think I'm pregnant."

I sat up in an instant. "What?"

"I haven't kept perfect track, but I think I'm two months late, maybe more, and when I wake up I feel like there's an earthquake in my stomach."

"Hell, that's the way I feel all the time around here." But this wasn't a time to joke. "When did it happen?"

"How the hell should I know? I've hardly been coherent."

"None of us has been." Funny, it was the last thing I'd have expected to happen to her. The past few months she had been sticking with wowie. It turns your libido into high gear, but your genitals never get the message; they just sort of go numb. It's easier to have sex with a turnip.

"Tom," she said, her voice going soft. "For what it's worth, I think you're the father."

That made me feel funny. "How do you know?"

"I don't. It's just . . . I know it can't be anyone else." She looked at me. "Do you remember?"

I thought about lying, but just shook my head. "No. Sorry."

She accepted it without reaction. "What should we do?"

"Damned if I know." I rose and checked to be sure I was dressed. I was, although I wasn't quite sure if the clothing was mine or Larry's. "I thought we agreed we shouldn't let this happen."

"Don't say it as though I planned it."

"No, I don't mean that." She was more upset about

this than she wanted to let on. "But we certainly can't raise a kid here." Hell, we didn't even know if he'd be born OK. With all these damn drugs, any kid could end up a worse vegetable than Dwain.

"What should we do?"

"Who knows? If Marylu were sober, we might try an abortion, but we don't have the right equipment or —"

"Oh, I got them old coathanger blues," Marylu sang, loudly and off key. I hadn't heard her come in, and it was obvious her inhibitions had been eaten away by ploosh or something. "My boyfriend left me in the family way, the right-to-lifers took my options away, so I'm digging in the closet near my shoes, 'cause I got them old —"

"God damn it, Marylu, shut the fuck up!"

She looked at me for a moment as though I had interrupted her play, then skipped out of the room, still humming.

I looked at Sharon. She was crying. "I'm sorry. She didn't know what she was —"

"It's not fair!" Sharon shouted. "When you crash land you're supposed to end up on a deserted planet and play Robinson Crusoe, not one with a civilization and cities and money and electricity and toilets, but everything's drugged and you miss Earth so much it hurts, and the thought of having a child ..." She couldn't go on and broke into tears.

I held her for awhile. It felt good and familiar, and I began to think maybe she was right about me being the father. As she calmed, I got up and got her an aploid. It contained trunk, and if there was anything she needed right now, it was to calm down.

She looked at it for a long time. "The baby," she murmured.

"You're going to have to eat," I said. "And nothing's harmed us yet. It will be OK."

I could tell she was thinking of protesting, but she took the gray-green fruit, biting through the soft skin and into the purplish meat. A sweet smell, like apple blossoms in spring, filled the air.

She sighed. "Thanks, Tom."

I stayed with her until she dropped off to sleep, then got up and went into the shop, wondering how long I could go before I had to appease my stomach.

Three days later, Dwain began to bear fruit, small cherry-sized lumps of green that smelled like sugared sweat. Larry said to leave them, and I guess it made some sense — I had visions of the apple-picking scene in *The Wizard of Oz* — but it still made it harder to look at him. Dwain hadn't spoken in days, and it looked like the fungus wasn't ever going to begin dying off. We were beginning to wonder if he'd ever be human again.

I was sweeping up just after we made that decision when the glorp returned with the radio. "Another," he said.

I thought for a moment he was joking or stoned, but glorps could give a judge sober lessons, and none of the crazy food around here had the slightest effect on them. I didn't want to deal with him, but I had no choice. Marylu was the only one with me, sitting in the corner, staring at the wall as though she had never seen anything like it before.

"We don't have another, one who would kill his ancestor with deathnuts."

The glorp's eyestalks quivered; evidently he had never heard that one before. "This merchandise is inferior."

"No warranties," I said. "Stop befouling my shop, eater of cooked meat."

"Inferior. Fraudulent," shouted the glorp in a voice like a duck farting on a rainy day. "Makes voices."

"I don't care ... voices!"

"Garbage words," said the glorp. His nose twitched in disgust. "Return my sultas or be buried without the courtesy of death."

Voices. *Earth* voices. It had to be; the glorps hadn't invented radio yet. An exploration party. "Of course," I said, "our customers must be satis — ... uh, dipped in cold plant sap." I opened the cash drawer.

It was empty.

I tried to keep a poker face. "How many sultas was that, now?" Where the hell could the money have gone?

"Fifteen thousand." The eyestalks were circling like buzzards; the bastard somehow knew I needed that radio.

"You will get six, creature with a single father." I figured I could still talk him down to ten, but I had to find the goddamn coins.

"Twenty."

Damn. "Let me ... examine it. For a short moment, that's all. I can maybe make repairs and we can both be happy."

"Want my sultas."

Arguing with a glorp who's made up his mind is like arguing with the wind. You might even think it's listening, but it'll still do whatever it pleases. "Look," I said, so desperate I had to resort to the truth. "I need the damn thing for a little while. I swear that if you let me have it, I'll give you everything in the store and never bother you again."

The eyestalks and earflaps drew away from me and I realized my mistake. "Sell you everything, I mean. Sell it to you." God, don't let him think I offered him a gift.

It was too late. "Where are my sultas? Or must the authorities assist me?"

I sighed. The last thing I needed was to end up like Dwain. "I don't have them right now."

"No sultas?"

"If you give me some time ..."

"Then you don't get this." He lifted up the radio.

"No," I screamed, trying to leap over the counter to him. But I was way too late. The radio smashed to the floor, then the damn glorp began to jump on it. Its case popped open and the circuits shattered on the floor.

The glorp was thorough. By the time he was done, none of the circuit boards was even recognizable as electronic equipment.

I stared at the green plastic confetti as the glorp stormed out of the shop.

"What was that?" Marylu asked languidly as she stared at a small spot on the wall.

"The cavalry," I murmured, moving the remnants of our hope around with the toe of my shoe. "They're not coming."

"Tom?"

It was Larry, smiling at me through an open window. Dully, I went over.

"Look at this," he said.

I glanced down at a patch of bluish dirt. Ten bright, shiny, thousand-sulta pieces lay there, gathered together into a pyramid.

"Nice," I said. "Real nice."

Larry was appalled when he finally came down. He stayed on only one drug at a time from then on, and took most of the shit jobs — dusting the dried glorp dung, sweeping the floor, picking up the nodules that fell off Dwain and tossing them outside.

In my lucid moments, I'd try to work on the radio. It gave me the illusion that I was accomplishing something, at least. But all I knew about radios was what I learned in high school, which consisted mainly of plugging in components, not trying to figure out how to fix them. I was an administrator, in charge of organizing the expedition, and knew a great deal about delegating tasks and all sorts of other things that were useless right now.

The others were no better. Dwain was a biologist — ironically, a botanist. Marylu was the expedition's psychologist and doctor, Larry was a cook (which may have been why he tried so many exotic combinations), Sharon a mathematician. Not the best choices to colonize a planet, but the people with more useful skills hadn't survived the crash.

So none of us could do very much. The circuits were smashed, and there was no way to fix them. I could have substituted other circuits, only we'd sold off most of the parts. The glorps liked the way they looked, and paid top sulta, so they were scattered around the planet. It would cost a fortune to buy them all back, even if we could locate them.

I pushed the mess away. Maybe we didn't need a radio after all. Anyone from Earth who saw the goddamn world would want to land as soon as they saw the lights on the night side. Any expedition



would stop here as a matter of course.

But a planet's a pretty big place. There was no guarantee they'd land anywhere near us, or find out we were here.

If the radio had been working ... God, I'd been stupid.

I was beginning to feel hungry, and was in the mood to eat as crazy a combination as I could stuff down, just to go off on a spree for a few days and not have to think.

"Tom!"

It was Marylu. She came into the shop, looking frightened and almost sober, which would have been the first time in God knows how many months.

"Tom, it's Sharon."

I instantly became alert. "Sharon?"

"She's trying to kill herself."

"Oh, God," I whispered.

"This way," Marylu said, leading me outside.

The sun was brutal. You can usually get burned in ten minutes, and I guessed it would take a lot less today. Larry, hailing from Texas, was almost used to it, but even he could only stand the radiation a half hour at a time.

Sharon lay in the flat leaves of the native ground cover, near the front of the store, among several green fronds I'd never seen growing here before. She was crying, and from the sound I don't think all the spree on this world could have cheered her up. In her hand were several bright red deathnuts.

"How long has she been here?" I asked.

Marylu shrugged. Her pupils were dilated despite the brightness, and I knew her sobriety would last only a few minutes longer. "I just found her," she said, obviously fighting a growing apathy. "You'll have to do something."

I felt in over my head. "God damn it, Marylu. You're the psychologist. You should know what to do."

She turned petulant. "I've *tried*. You don't understand the pressures I've been through."

"Pressures? God damn it, you're *stoned* all the time. What pressures?"

"You think I don't *know* I have an addictive personality? Even back on Earth, it was a battle each day. And here ... Tom, I can't fight it. Not here. Maybe not anywhere." I could see for the first time just how much she loathed herself for falling into the trap. "Don't you think I wish I could keep myself from becoming ... this?"

"All right," I said. She was too close to the edge and there was no point in giving her a shove. "I'll try to handle this."

I pushed past her. "Sharon? It's Tom. Maybe you'd better —"

"Don't try to stop me, Tom." She put the nuts in her mouth.

"Don't bite," I screamed. I had seen what they

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could do. We used to spread them around to get rid of the local vermin — sort of hairless mice the size of terriers. I saw one of them eat a deathnut once. As soon as it crunched through the thin shell, it convulsed for about forty seconds, and its carcass began to putrefy almost before it was done.

“I’m sorry, Tom,” she said, her voice garbled by the poisonous nuts. “It’s best.”

A crazy part of me wanted to tell her not to talk with her mouth full and spit them out, but it was a good chance she’d only swallow. “No,” I said, mouth dry in sympathy. “It’s not. We can’t give in to this. We can’t roll over and let it win.”

“But it *has* won, Tom.”

“No. Not yet. Not as long as we’re alive, and still thinking at least part of the time. We’re intelligent, and intelligence always finds a way to cope, just as long as you don’t give up. We just have to keep trying.”

She paused thoughtfully, and I thought maybe I had gotten through to her. Then she clenched her jaw. “Goodbye, Tom.”

“God damn it. No! Don’t do this to me!”

“To you?”

“Yes, to me. I ... we ... God damn it, I love you!”

She was definitely surprised by that. As a matter of fact, so was I. “We need you, Sharon. I need you.”

I guess it sounded like the truth. Maybe it was. Whatever the reason, she spat out the deathnuts.

I helped her get up, and took her arm to guide her back through the odd-looking fronds now sprouting up around the shop.

A glorp was inside, standing next to Dwain. His eyestalks stiffened immediately.

Another thief. Somehow, I didn’t much care. “Get out, *squidface*.” I used the English.

“I wish to make a purchase,” he said.

“We’re closed,” I said. “Inventory.” I looked at Sharon. I liked the way she smiled at me. I decided I was probably the father. Or, at least, I wanted to be.

“Please.” It was a very odd word to hear from a glorp. “Let me buy ... anything.”

Well, hell. “What do you want, then?” Let him pick something and get out of my hair.

His eyestalks looked around the room, then pointed at the sale table. “That,” he said, picking up a piece of blue plastic, the top of a pen or stylus.

It was then that I realized this was the glorp who had smashed the radio. If the creature had any teeth, I’d have kicked them down his throat. But his ear flaps were curled, his nostrils flared, and his eyestalks undulated in a series of sine waves. I’d never seen that combination before, and was curious to know what it meant.

“Well, purchaser of infertile dung?” I asked. “That’s ten thousand sultas.”

He made a few sweeps with the stalks, the sign

for no, though for some reason the gestures seemed more clumsy than I had ever seen. “No sultas. Something more valuable. Unique. These.”

He pulled something from his pouch. There, in a plastic bag — we had sold the last of those a year ago — was a collection of solid-state circuitboards, nearly everything we had sold to the glorps to buy their goddamn food in the first place. He had evidently gone around the city collecting then, probably spending a fortune in sultas to buy them all back. And somewhere among them there would be the parts to repair the radio ...

The eyestalks drooped. “Not enough?”

“Not from the likes of you, one who defecates nothing of value,” I said, keeping enough presence of mind to stick to the formalities.

The glorp was definitely relieved; his nostrils relaxed to their greatest extent. His eyestalks made rapid circles. I had never seen a glorp so happy.

There was more to this than met the eyestalks. Glorps are not stupid. They don’t often make horrendous trades.

“Is the insult revenged, then?”

“Insult?”

“The ... gift.” His earflaps drooped in shame as he said the words.

Well, to give a gift *was* a tremendous insult. But what gift?

Then I understood. He had left us the radio — *without taking any sultas!* It was, technically, a gift. Maybe it was worthless to me, but a glorp was supposed to have at least tried to make me pay for the junk. Now he had to spend a fortune to save his status.

I nodded, not caring that he didn’t have a clue what the gesture meant. “It has been revenged.”

The glorp was relieved. His eyestalks were making circles so fast he looked ready to lift off. I’d never seen a glorp laugh so vigorously. If I didn’t know better, I’d have said he was drunk.

He placed the pen top in his pouch and started out, still laughing. Three steps from the door, he collapsed. His eyestalks continued to circle, drawing sketches in the blue dust.

He *was* drunk.

I had no idea how that could happen. What in this world ...

And I remembered where he was when we came in. Near Dwain.

Several of Dwain’s fruit lay on the floor.

An odd thought came to me. I bent down to pick up one of the small green balls. It was soft, giving slightly beneath my touch, like a perfectly ripe plum.

“Tom? What’s happening?”

“I’m not sure.” A crazy idea was jelling in my brain, and I had to shake my head to remind myself I wasn’t junked to the gills. “I keep thinking of

something."

"What?"

Well, maybe if I said it, we could have a good laugh and forget about it. "It made him stoned. Maybe it will make us sober. Go get Marylu."

"Marylu?"

"Sure. She's the worst. Let's see if it works on her."

She gave me a fishy look. "All right," she said. "But Marylu goes first. Not you."

I nodded, thinking, remembering the last thing Dwain had said before he went mute. *I'm trying.*

You have to keep on trying. Intelligence always finds a way to cope. And if the intelligence is part plant, it will cope in a plantlike way.

"Here," Sharon said, towing Marylu by the hand, practically running into the shop, relieved to see the fruit was still in my hand. "Now," she said, scooping it up and handing it to Marylu. "Try this."

Marylu, vacuously agreeable, did as Sharon asked.

Well, the first bite didn't kill her. Neither did the second. She swallowed the fruit, first spitting out a few small brown seeds.

We waited.

The next ten minutes were the longest I'd ever lived through. Any changes were so gradual that we couldn't be sure if anything was happening. Marylu's giggles contrasted with the sound of the glorp sliding sloppily on the floor.

But, slowly, Marylu's eyes seemed to focus. After fifteen minutes, the empty smile was gone. After twenty, her eyes seemed like they finally remembered how to focus. After thirty ...

"Oh, God, Tom," Marylu said. "Thank you. Thank you for saving me from that."

I shook my head. "Thank Dwain."

**T**he ship is on its way. It's too close to go lightspeed, so they won't land for three months, but we can make it.

We're all sober now. Dwain's fruit seems to counteract the other drugs for a week or so.

Dwain himself is beginning to look like he's finally changing back to a human being; I think the main reason it took so long was because he was working on a way to help us out. The greenery is fading and he's beginning to take on his regular color. He's already beginning to be conscious an hour or two a day.

By the time we're rescued, no one will believe the truth.

Of course, we worried at first about our supply of fruit. But once we realized what the fronds growing around the shop were, we understood. Dwain had taken care of that, too. The seeds in the damn things love the soil and sun, and we'd been sweeping tons of them outside, into perfect places to take root.

Natural High

They shot up in no time.

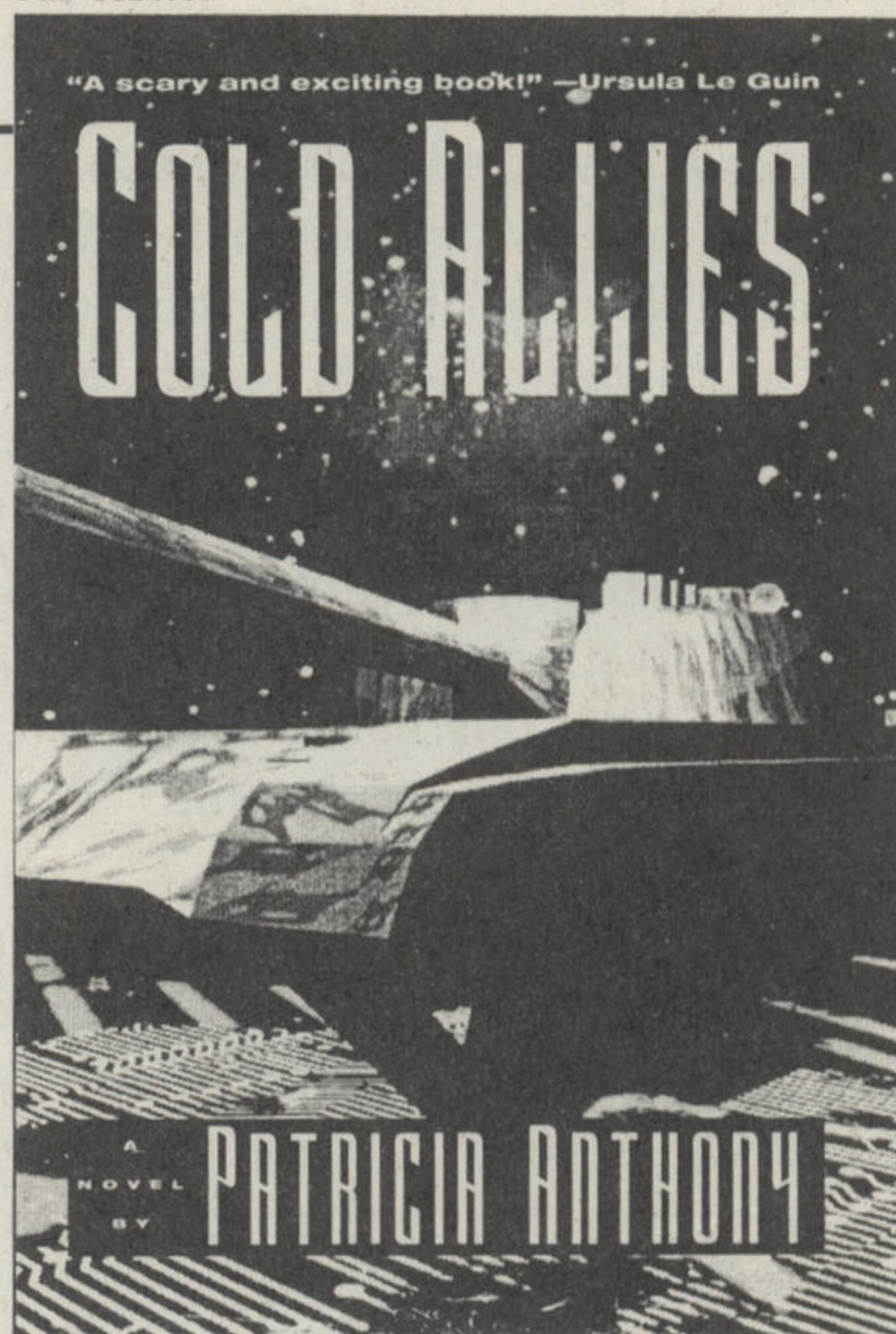
We even have a few extras. We've been selling them to the glorps. A taste of their own medicine.

As for Sharon, Marylu managed to give her a basic checkup. The baby's doing all right. We're keeping our fingers crossed, but I'd bet a glorp's earflap that he's going to be fine.

Or, as Sharon says, *she's* going to be fine.

The ship has radioed that they have champagne on board. The captain has offered to pop it open for us as soon as they land.

I appreciate the thought, but I think we're going to pass on that. □



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(Please note that Pat's first novel, *Conscience of the Beagle*, scheduled to be published by First Books, has been delayed at the author's request. It is now scheduled for publication this summer.)

# Newport's World

By Doug Franklin

Art by Alan Gutierrez

From a distance, Newport's World looked like a typical outer-belt snowball, a poor prospect for uranium. But the asteroid smelled like uranium to the *Buck-Dancer's Choice's* particle detector. After the last washout, Blue Heron was not going to argue. All they had found on that rock was radium and a scattering of low-grade uranium sulfate. They would have lost money trying to refine the ore. Heron had picked that rock out himself, so there was no blaming it on anyone else. At least Captain Cole would take the heat if this prospect did not pan out.

"What do you make of it, Blue?" Cole asked.

Heron shook his head, flipping through different sensor channels. "It's massy for a snowball, and I'm picking up some alpha particles. The flux varies; it could be an exposed node of uranium."

"Can you get a fix on it?"

Heron dropped out of real time and integrated his readings into a three-dimensional model of the asteroid. He studied the puzzling image for a few moments before replying. "There's more variance than can be accounted for by the rock's rotation."

"In other words," Cole said, "no."

Heron shrugged. He could not change his instrument readings. "Maybe someone has already established a base. These traces look a lot like an active mining operation."

"Listen to the expert," Cole said. "I checked the records. Newport got run out years ago, and it's been deserted ever since."

Heron shut up. He was tired of the sarcasm, but he was just going to have to ride it out. Either he would prove his worth to the *Buck-Dancer's* crew, or he would find a berth on another mining ship.

"All right," Cole said to the bridge crew. "Let's haul up and anchor down at one of the poles. We'll see if we can eyeball the ore in person, since our remote sensing specialist can't spot it for us."

Across the clustered consoles, the ship's engineer caught Heron's eye and shrugged. Greg had been on the *Buck-Dancer's Choice* since the ship was commissioned and was seldom the target of Cole's scorn.

Cole switched on the intercom. "All hands secure for high acceleration. Report your status."

The *Buck-Dancer's* crew of sixteen sounded off as they made ready. It did not take long to account for everyone.

"Stand by for acceleration," Cole said over the intercom.

A rumbling vibration came from the stern as the fuel pumps turned over. The propellant passed through the motor's electric arc with a bang, and Heron was pushed back into his seat as the ship began to accelerate. A flicker of motion on the rock caught his eye, but the weight of acceleration slowed him down. By the time he had zoomed in on the spot, it had rotated out of sight over the horizon.

One long burn killed their relative velocity and left the *Buck-Dancer's Choice* hanging a few kilometers above the asteroid's heavily-cratered north pole. The less time the motor was lit, the less likely that someone would observe them and come to visit later. Mining was a hard business, full of abandoned camps and plundered claims.

"Looks like we're not the first ones to check this place out," Heron said. The wreckage of another ship was strewn across the crater floor. "You want to stay here, Captain?"

"Is the wreck radioactive?"

"Slightly," Heron said. "Not enough to be the source of what I was picking up, though."

"What do you think, Linda?" Cole asked the ship's medic. "The radiation will help conceal our reactor emissions if anyone scans the area."

Linda glanced over the readouts. "Our shielding can handle these levels. Anyone who goes outside will have to wear a shell."

Cole nodded. "I can live with that. Go ahead and fire an anchor, Blue."

Heron aimed the *Buck-Dancer's* coil gun at a clear area near the wreck and squeezed the trigger. A puff of dust marked the hit. Seismic data flowed back up the anchor line, and his model of the asteroid began to fill with a blurry representation of its internal structure.

A deep regolith of pulverized rock covered the asteroid and gave it a radar signature similar to that of a snowball. Underneath the dust was a hard rock core. Shadowy lines within the core could have been fracture planes from asteroid impacts or the signature of extensive underground facilities.

He put the analysis on the net so the others could see it. "Just what was this Newport character doing out here, anyway?"

"Some kind of robotics research," Cole replied.

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D. A. Torrey

KERON

"The footing looks good; take us in."

Heron shrugged and turned on the anchor line winch. The ship jerked as the line came taut. Then they began to settle slowly towards the surface, aided only slightly by the asteroid's weak gravity.

"Greg," Cole said, "I want you and Heron to explore that wreck after we touch down. We might get some useful salvage out of it."

Heron's shadow was crisp on the asteroid's powdery regolith. He scooped up a handful of the dust. It consisted of finely pulverized silicates. He let the dust trickle through the stainless steel fingers of his shell's manipulator and then straightened up. The floor of the crater was pockmarked with a rough grid of conical pits.

"You think the ship crashed here?" he asked Greg. If the ship had broken up before it hit the asteroid, it might explain the pits.

The engineer shook his head. He looked like a lobster in his shell, soft meat inside ceramic armor. "No, its basic structure is pretty much intact. It was stripped after it set down."

"Claim jumpers," Heron said.

"Could be. What do you make of these pits?"

"They're hotter than average," Heron said, "but I can't figure out why."

"Of course not," Cole muttered over the radio. There was muted laughter in the background. Heron recognized Linda's voice and felt himself blushing. The bastards never let up.

Greg ignored the comment. He slid a set of digging tines down his shell's forearm and locked them into place. "Let's have a look underneath."

The engineer's tines scooped deeply into the regolith. He levered the blades out of the dust. Attitude thrusters on his shell's shoulders flared to counteract the torque and keep his feet on the surface. The arc-jet thrusters produced a hiss of static that was clearly audible on the radio.

Something that looked like a mechanical sperm was caught between two of the tines. A root-like tail writhed slowly below an angular head. Greg brought it closer to his face so that he could see it better. The tail cracked like a whip and hit his shell just below its faceplate. There was a searing flash of light as the shell's radiation shielding discharged.

"Shit!" Greg shook the thing out of his tines. It started burrowing back into the dust.

A burst from Heron's crest laser cut the thing's head in two. The tail spasmed once before it seized up. Heron's faceplate superimposed a bright glow of alpha particles over the robot's interior. He rolled the larger half over with his foot, careful to stay clear of the tail. It looked like a nuclear battery inside.

"How's your suit?" Heron asked.

"Shielding is coming back up," Greg replied after

a moment, "but I've lost a couple of rings where the ceramic chipped. Pressure's holding steady."

Pressure was not as critical as shielding. Both men were wearing skinsuits inside their shells. If a shell lost pressure, the skinsuit automatically sealed to protect its occupant, but a skinsuit did not offer any protection from radiation.

"It could be some kind of mining robot," Cole mused. "The tail could extract uranium from the regolith and concentrate it in the head."

"We'll take a look in the wreck," Greg said. "There may be more of them inside."

"I don't want you both going inside," Cole said. "The hull will cut our radio link, and if you didn't come back out we wouldn't know what the hell happened. Heron, your shielding's tight. You check the ship and lay an optic back to Greg so he can relay your telemetry to us."

The wreck had gone down on her side. She had roughly the same layout as the *Buck-Dancer's Choice*, a hundred-meter cylinder with the main engines at one end and the glassed-in bridge at the other. Cargo pods and fuel tanks ringed the cylinder's midsection.

A hole the size of a small truck had been ripped in the wreck's side; titanium plate had been peeled back like foil. Heron pulled himself through the opening. Fiber optic spooled smoothly off a reel mounted on his shell. The thin line spiralled back to Greg, waiting on the ground beside the ravaged hull.

"How's the picture?" Heron asked.

"Clean on my end," Greg said. "Captain?"

"We're recording," Cole said.

A broad corridor of destruction led towards the stern of the ship. Whatever had ripped through the ship had not bothered with the niceties of bulkheads and hatches.

"It looks like someone drove a bulldozer through her," Heron muttered.

"She was a miner, all right," Greg said. "Check that spectrometer on the wall above you. We're in her lab."

Heron moved slowly through the wreck, panning his shell's camera over the carnage for the sake of the *Buck-Dancer's* crew. There was not much left worth salvaging; with the exception of a few instruments like the spectrometer, most of the ship's gear had been stripped out. All that was left was a tangled mess of wiring and ducts.

"Hold it," Cole said. "What was that over to your right?"

Heron turned to look, then focused his headlights on a combat shell wedged between a locker and a desk. A hole had been melted in its back, exposing the core of its fission reactor.

"It looks like most of the core is gone," Heron said, puzzled. The room should have been flooded with

radioactivity, but the emissions from the shell were minimal.

Heron squatted down and heaved the shell over. Its faceplate was hazed with frozen air and blood crystals; he could not see the suit's occupant. He pulled the shell's emergency release, and the top hatch popped up a centimeter.

"The frame's twisted," he muttered. He jammed steel fingers under the edge of the hatch and levered it up the rest of the way, bending the rim in the process.

"Sweet Jesus," Linda said softly.

Heron clenched his teeth to keep his bile down. The shell's occupant had been baked alive. His tongue had swollen out of his mouth from the heat, and the lenses of his eyes had congealed and burst from their gelatinous sacks like milky-white marbles.

"It would take a couple of minutes to burn through a shell with a standard crest laser," Greg observed analytically.

"What kind of person could do that to another human being?" Linda wondered aloud.

"All right, Blue," Cole said. "Let's move on. The salvage team will haul out the body."

Heron swallowed and backed away from the corpse. He could feel his heart beat against the claustrophobic constraint of his shell. He nervously checked the status of his laser before moving on.

The trail of destruction stopped at the wreck's engine room. Heron's faceplate painted a residual glow of radioactivity over broken fittings and severed mains.

"The reactor's gone," he said.

"I guess you were right, Blue," Greg's voice came over the fiber optic. "Someone came and jumped them. Took their ore and their reactor and ran."

"Yeah," Heron said, thinking about the shadowy lines under the surface of the asteroid. "I suppose so."

Back inside the *Buck-Dancer's* cafeteria, Greg and Heron huddled over bulbs of burnt coffee. They had not bothered to take off their skinsuits; the work day was just beginning, and they would be going out again soon enough.

A salvage team suited up in the adjacent ready room. Ceramic plating scraped and clanked as the miners wormed into their shells and tested motor circuits. Cole watched critically from the doorway, arms folded across his chest.

"We're ready to go," the team's foreman said over the intercom. In her shell, Harriet towered almost a meter over the captain.

"Listen up," Cole said. The clanking ceased. "I want you to be careful over there. Buddy up and stay in contact with each other. Bug out at the first sign of trouble. I don't want to lose anyone."

Behind their faceplates, the miners nodded soberly.

"All right. As of now, you're on hazard pay. Take your time and do a good job."

There were a few grins at that; hazard pay was set at double-time. Cole sealed the door and joined Heron and Greg at the scarred plastic table.

"You bet I'll take my time at that rate," one of the miners said, forgetting that their radios were keyed to the intercom circuit.

Someone else chuckled. "Damn straight."

"Decompression in five seconds," Harriet said, cutting off the rising chatter. "Speak now or rest in peace."

Heron shifted his chair so he could see the monitor mounted on the cafeteria's bulkhead. It held a fish-eye view of the miners as they tramped through the *Buck-Dancer's* mobile equipment bay, past rows of parked ore handlers and exploration vehicles. Frequent pressure cycling would have created a maintenance nightmare, so the bay was usually left open to vacuum.

"Are you going to need more seismic data before we can start hauling rock?" Cole asked. Heron turned away from the monitor, caught off guard.

"The map we got off the anchor shot was pretty blurry," Cole continued.

"Yeah," Heron said, thinking about the anomalous signature, "blurry." He cleared his throat. "A blast at the south pole should do it."

Cole shifted his gaze to Greg. "Go ahead and take the drill truck. And keep Blue from hurting himself, all right?"

Greg nodded impassively and pushed himself away from the table. "If we're not back in a couple of hours, send out the cavalry."

Heron followed Greg into the ready room, tossing their empty bulbs down the washer chute on the way. The ready room's door shut behind them with a ratcheting sound.

"I'm going to have to fix that thing," Greg said for what seemed like the hundredth time.

Heron did not bother to reply; there were a lot of things on the *Buck-Dancer* that needed fixing, and a noisy door was at the bottom of the list. He pulled his skinsuit's hood up over his closely-cropped head and settled its mask over his face. "I'm ready."

Greg triggered the air pump. Heron's skinsuit tightened to compensate for the loss of pressure as the pump's high-pitched whine faded into silence. The heavy door at the end of the ready room slid upwards with a faintly-felt vibration.

They hauled their shells from the ready room over to the drill truck, parked near the bay's main exit. Weak sunlight slanted in through the open door, barely competing with the overhead lights. They strapped the shells into the drill truck's open bed and climbed into the cab. Heron's skinsuit relaxed

its protective grip as the cab pressurized, and the vents in his mask opened. The air in the cab was cold and smelled faintly of oil.

He booted the truck's autopilot and selected their destination. Sunlight slipped through the cab as they backed out of the equipment bay. Heron engaged the autopilot. The main rocket motor hissed into life, and dust billowed beneath them as the exhaust stream hit the regolith. The truck accelerated away from the surface on a course for the far pole.

The truck's elliptical orbit took them over the terminator, a rough line that split the asteroid into light and shadow along its equator and brought every bump and crater into sharp relief. Greg had dozed off, and Heron was so deep in his thoughts that he did not immediately notice the missile tracks rising towards them from the surface of the asteroid.

Then the motion caught his eye. He stared at the faintly-glowing tracks in confusion, then reached over and flipped on the truck's radar. Stealth was a fine concept, but he wanted to stay alive. The collision alarm promptly sounded, jolting Greg awake.

"What's happening?" he asked. "Are we under attack?"

"Sure looks like it," Heron said. He disengaged the autopilot and tumbled the truck ninety degrees so its nose pointed at the missiles coming up on their flank. Then he waited, watching as the gap between the truck and the missiles narrowed.

"Maybe we should do something about it," Greg suggested.

Heron nodded, his lips moving silently as he counted off the distance.

"Now," he said, and he lit the truck's motor with the throttle wide open. The plane of their trajectory rotated towards the radar tracks and then passed safely above them. There was no way the missiles could change course now with the speed they had built up. The collision alarm fell silent as the tracks receded behind the truck.

"It's a mistake to try to run away from an intercept," Heron commented. "That just gives an attacker time to respond."

He scanned the console for more signs of trouble. Radar was showing some movement on the surface near the launch site. He levered the truck's telescope out of its recess in the hull and swiveled it around to look at the launch site. A thin cloud of dust obscured the surface of a deep crater.

"Something's down there," he said.

"No shit," Greg said grimly.

Another volley of missiles rose from the crater's mouth. Their exhaust lit the dust cloud in shades of yellow and orange. Heron was ready to take evasive action, but, motors still firing, the missiles arced

back down towards the surface of the asteroid. Cotton-ball puffs of dust marked their impact points.

"I don't get it," Heron said. "They didn't come anywhere near us. They didn't even try."

"Do we have enough fuel to reach the launch site?" Greg asked.

Heron glanced over at the engineer in surprise, then looked the console over. They were too far past the launch site to reverse course, but they could extend their present orbit and come down by the launch site after they'd overflowed the pole.

"We've got plenty," he said. It was a cheap maneuver.

"I want to come up on them low," Greg said. "Minimum profile."

Heron shut down the truck's radar and programmed the course into the autopilot. "You're sure about this?"

"You said it yourself," Greg said. "The biggest mistake you can make in this game is to give your enemy time to respond."

Heron engaged the autopilot.

They landed a kilometer from the launch site, safely over the horizon. The landscape seemed hushed when they went outside to get into their shells. The darkness gave Heron the creeps, and he heaved a sigh of relief when his shell powered up.

He unlatched the reel on his waist and plugged its fiber optic line into Greg's shell. "Ready when you are."

"Hang on a minute," the engineer said. He opened the explosives locker and pulled a seismic charge out. It looked like a cartoon bomb, a sphere capped with a cylindrical grip. A battery in the grip powered a shield of molecular superconductors that contained the emissions produced by the charge's plutonium core.

"Here's some insurance," he said, handing the charge to Heron. He pulled out another for himself. Heron clipped the charge to his waist with a short tether.

"All right," Greg said. "Turn off your thrusters and lock down your tines. We're going to go in as quiet as we can."

The engineer took the lead, digging the tips of his tines into the regolith and pulling himself over the surface by his arms. Heron followed, angling away from his partner until they were about ten meters apart. It was not as dignified as walking, but on a low-gravity world it was a lot faster, and it didn't require the use of thrusters.

It only took a few minutes to reach the lip of the crater that held the launcher. Heron watched, heart hammering, as Greg cautiously looked over the rim.

"All's quiet," he said after a moment. "Come on up."

The dust that had obscured the crater when they



first saw it had since settled, revealing a yawning cavern at the bottom of a roughly conical pit.

"Shoot first and ask questions later?" Heron asked hopefully. He was pretty sure he could lob a charge down the throat of the cavern. "A low-yield nuke should take care of anything that's down there."

"I want to know what we're up against before we start shooting," Greg said.

"How enlightened of you," Heron muttered. Greg glanced at him sharply, and Heron felt the heat of a flush on his face. He just wanted to be back in the sunlight at the north pole, with the *Buck-Dancer's Choice* near at hand.

"You stay here and cover me," Greg said. "The line should reach as far as I need to go."

Greg pulled himself over the lip and down towards the crater floor. The fiber-optic line snaked after him, unreeling from Heron's shell. Heron repositioned himself so he had a clear shot at whatever might come out of the cavern. Greg reached its throat and peered inside. He hesitated for a moment, then, much to Heron's discomfort, pulled himself head-first into the opening.

"Damn it, Greg," Heron said, standing up, "don't do this to me."

Silence. Heron restrained himself from looking over his shoulder. Stay focused, he thought. If something happens, it is going to happen fast.

"It looks like someone else got here first," Greg said from inside the cavern.

The cavern was full of machinery, much of it wrecked, very little of it familiar. What looked like the remnants of a coilgun littered the cavern's floor. A missile magazine hulked nearby, its loading train torn apart.

Greg eased a missile out of the magazine. Heron watched apprehensively. If it were salvage-fused, they'd never know what hit them.

"It's just like the thing that dinged my shell," the engineer said. "It has a rocket booster instead of a tail, but otherwise it's the same thing."

Heron traced the remnants of the loading train into the recesses of the cavern, which appeared to go back quite some ways. In its shadowed depths he could see other missiles in various stages of completion. Looking around the cavern, he spotted stock-

## A Long Time Ago

Before taking charge at *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, our editor, Charles C. Ryan, was the editor of *Galileo*, a science fiction magazine published in the mid-1970s. During his tenure there, he helped discover a number of new writers who have since gone on to win Nebula and/or Hugo awards, such as Connie Willis, John Kessel, Lewis Shiner, and more.

For a limited time, while copies last, you can purchase a first-edition hardcover copy of *Starry Messenger: The Best of Galileo* for \$10, plus \$2 postage and handling. (Please allow 6-8 weeks for delivery.) If you would like your copy autographed by the editor, please indicate how you would like the note to read.

*Starry Messenger: The Best of Galileo* (St. Martin's Press, 1979) features 12 stories by the following authors:

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Brian Aldiss	Joe L. Hensley
Alan Dean Foster	and Gene Deweese
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piles of components.

"It's some kind of factory," he said incredulously.

Greg set the missile down on the cavern floor.

"This is where they're built," Heron said. "They launch out of here, and then come down and burrow back into the regolith. They weren't shooting at us at all."

Greg shook his head. "I don't get it."

"That second volley wasn't aimed at us," Heron said. "It didn't come anywhere near. Maybe the first volley wasn't either. Maybe this thing," he gestured at the machinery around them, "is the mechanical analog of a plant, and the missiles ..." He hesitated, disturbed by the implications. "The missiles — and the thing we found near the wreck — are its seeds."

Greg's eyes narrowed. "You mean they replicate themselves?"

"Can you think of a better explanation?" Heron fired back. "It explains the readings I got on the way in. If each 'seed' contains uranium, then the distribution would vary over time as they disseminate."

"All right." Greg held up one hand. "For the sake of the argument, let's say we're looking at some kind of self-replicating machinery, some kind of advanced mining system. If that's the case, why aren't there more of them? If they reproduce with any frequency, these plants, or whatever you want to call them, they should've taken the whole rock over by now."

Heron nodded, relieved that the engineer saw the problem too. "That's right. They should've, but they haven't."

The engineer's eyes swept the ransacked cavern. "So ... something must be controlling the population."

Heron nodded again, thinking about the wrecked ship. Maybe it had not been the work of claim jumpers after all.

Greg cleared his throat. "Maybe we should head back to the truck."

"Fine by me." Heron moved aside so that Greg could reach the exit.

The engineer crouched below the opening and jumped upwards. Unnoticed by either man, the fiber-optic communication line that linked them together had looped around a piece of debris. The line snapped taut, jerking the engineer into a tumble before its plug popped out of his shell. His shell's communication system automatically switched back to broadcast mode, faithfully transmitting the resulting burst of profanity.

Something moved at the back of the cavern. Heron froze, his eyes straining at the darkness. The staccato cough of Greg's thrusters cut across the radio spectrum as the engineer stabilized himself.

A robot moved out of the cavern's shadowed recesses. It was easily twice as large as a man, quadrupedal, its massive forelegs clawed for digging.

Heron's faceplate painted a glow of alpha particles over its segmented torso; evidently it was powered by some kind of fission reactor.

The robot's boxy head swung back and forth as if it were searching for something. The thing's snout was fluted in the characteristic manifold of a charged particle detector. The lens barrels of its eyes twisted as they focused on Heron. He remained absolutely motionless.

"Sorry about that," Greg said over the radio.

The robot's head jerked up. Greg drifted into sight about five meters above the surface. "What's the hold-up?"

The robot reared up on its hind legs, reached clawed forelegs into the throat of the cavern, and pulled itself up into the opening.

Heron swept up the tangled fiber optic and pulled it apart in his hands. The last thing he needed at this point was to get hung up on the end of a line. He reactivated his shell's thrusters as the robot cleared the opening.

Outside, Greg was noticeably silent. Heron took a deep breath and launched himself through the opening. A snarl of static greeted him as he shot past the robot. It twisted around trying to track him and Greg at the same time.

"Head for the truck," Greg said.

Heron cancelled his forward motion and lined up on their landing site. His shell's main thrusters kicked in, snapping his head back against the padded rest. "I'm out of here."

"On your tail," Greg said.

Halfway to the truck, Heron cut off his thrusters and spun around to face back the way they had come. Motion in the distance confirmed his fears: the robot was following them. He triggered the mains again and began to decelerate. It was going to be close; while they were slowing down, the robot kept coming at a constant speed, covering the ground with a bounding gait.

They were not going to make it in time. One of them would have to get out of his shell to pilot the truck, and the robot would be on them before then. Heron glanced over at Greg. The glare of the thrusters on his back made it impossible to see his face. Heron increased his thrusters to emergency maximum and dropped out of formation.

"What are you doing?" Greg exclaimed.

"I'm going to distract it," Heron said. "Pick me up on the way out."

Greg swore, but it was already too late for him to do anything. Heron came down right in the robot's path. It slowed as it approached him. Heron checked his status display. The laser was ready to go, but he was running low on fuel.

Just before the robot reached him he jumped and tucked into a roll. He came out of the roll looking back down at the robot. It reared up on its hind legs,

watching him. Heron lined up the cross hairs and carefully shot out its eyes. A scream of static ripped through the radio as it jumped for him. Heron triggered his shoulder thrusters. The robot passed in front of him and Heron shot it, again. The beam raked its segmented belly in a glare of light.

"I'm in," Greg said. Attitude rockets flared on the sides of the truck with a radio-frequency hiss.

Heron hit the ground hard enough to bounce. He regained his feet as the robot landed. Its head swung blindly as it sampled for the alpha particles produced by Heron's shell. He took aim at its snout, but it sprang just as he fired, and the beam reflected harmlessly off its chest. He jumped again, this time a low arc in the direction of the landing site. He caught a glimpse of motion to the side and braced himself for impact, thinking it was the robot on an intercept course.

Greg braked the drill truck with a long burst from its thrusters. "Get in," he said urgently.

The robot moved so quickly it was hard for Heron to follow. It hit the side of the drill truck and tore off one of its landing legs. The truck toppled in slow motion, twisting from the impact.

"Lift!" Heron shouted.

The truck hit the ground, raising a cloud of dust. Heron moved forward into the cloud. An actinic flash of blue light lit the cloud, accompanied by a snap of static over the radio. The truck's lights went out.

The cab had been partially sheared off the body of the truck by the force of its collision with the ground. Greg sprawled across the console, maybe unconscious, maybe dead. Heron hesitated, torn between his desire to help his partner and the threat the robot posed.

Another flash of blue light cut through the settling dust cloud. Heron turned away from the cab and climbed up onto the truck's bed, now turned sideways to the surface. He pulled himself cautiously over the edge of the bed.

The robot crouched beside the truck's fission reactor. It tilted its massive head upwards, and bright tracers of molten metal flowed along the sides of its snout into the manifold's recesses. Its head dropped back towards the reactor, and the actinic light flashed again.

Heron lowered himself out of sight. They were not going to fly home. Greg's shell was still strapped into the bed; Heron released it and let it drop to the ground. He punched out the cab's back windows and cleared the ragged edges with a sweep of one stainless-steel hand. Then he pulled Greg out through the opening, careful not to rip his skinsuit.

The telltales set in the periphery of the engineer's face mask showed that he was still alive. Heron tried to stuff him back into his shell, but it was a hopeless task. He transferred the engineer's unused

seismic charge to his own belt. Then he cradled Greg's limp body in both arms, balancing his weight. He crouched and jumped, triggering the shell's boosters at the same time.

Newport's World was only twenty kilometers long, and the powered jump put them on an escape trajectory. Heron did not see that as a major problem; he was relieved to be off the surface. When they had gotten far enough away from the rock that he could see the pole where the *Buck-Dancer* was anchored, he turned his radio back on.

"Mayday, mayday. *Buck-Dancer's Choice*, we need assistance."

There was no reply. He frowned and tried again, then switched to a different frequency. But there was still no response from the ship. Something was wrong, and Heron was afraid he knew what it was. He felt sick with apprehension.

They came out from behind the asteroid's shadow. Cold sunlight washed over them. Greg stirred in his arms, then came bolt awake, eyes wide with fear.

"It's all right," Heron said. Then he brought the engineer's mask against his shell's faceplate. "It's all right. Turn on your radio."

"I think my shoulder's dislocated." Greg's voice came faintly through the speakers. His face was pale; he was probably in shock.

"We've got a bigger problem than that," Heron said brusquely, hoping to snap him out of it. "The *Buck-Dancer* isn't responding, and we're on an escape trajectory."

The engineer squeezed his eyes shut. "How much propellant does your shell have left?"

Heron checked his status display. "Not enough to bring us back."

"What if there were only one person?"

Heron hesitated, then took his friend's mass out of the equation. The numbers were marginal. "It would be a hard landing."

"Maybe break a leg, eh?" Greg smiled feebly. "Serve you right."

"Look, Greg, I don't think this is a good idea."

"Can't say I like it much myself," Greg said. "But you've got a shell and I don't, and there's not much point in both of us dying. You could get back here before my air runs out. I've got another couple of hours."

Heron bit his lip.

"Here's what you do," Greg said. He reached across his chest with his good arm and pulled the other one up against his ribs. His breath was ragged over the radio. "Get lined up, then kick me off. The reaction will cancel some of your velocity and save some fuel to soften your landing."

Heron watched the asteroid spin slowly beneath them. He could not sort his thoughts out fast

enough.

"That's an order, Blue," Greg said softly.

"Damn it, Greg, I can't just leave you out here!"

"The sooner you go, the better my chances are."

Heron took a deep breath. The engineer was right. "Okay. Let's do it, then."

"Put my feet against yours," Greg said. "We'll push off each other."

They positioned themselves foot to foot, heads pointing in opposite directions. The stars drifted lazily around them. Heron killed their spin when they came around to the right direction.

"I'll be back," he said.

"I'll be waiting," Greg replied, and Heron could see the engineer's tight smile in his mind's eye.

"On zero," Heron said. He began the count at three.

**H**eron came down a few hundred meters from the *Buck-Dancer*. He was too late; the ship was down on its side. An unpleasantly familiar growl of static came from within it. Heron looked around for cover. Someone waved at him from the wreck that he and Greg had explored. He launched himself on a low, flat trajectory, then skidded to a halt just in front of a tear in the hull.

Cole reached out and pulled him inside. He pressed his shell's faceplate against Heron's. "Where's Greg?" he asked.

"I had to leave him," Heron said. The story tumbled out of him. "We ran into a robot that looked like a big mechanical bear. It took out the drill truck and I had to jump with Greg. I didn't have enough fuel left to bring both of us back. He's on an escape trajectory with nothing but his skinsuit."

Cole shook his head grimly. "We heard your mayday, but we had our own problems. Sounds like the same kind of thing. We tried to kill it, but it was too fast. It's still inside the *Buck-Dancer*, ransacking it."

"What about the rest of the crew?" Heron asked.

"They're hiding deeper in this wreck," Cole said. "We haven't lost anyone yet."

"We're going to lose Greg if we don't fetch him back soon," Heron said. "If I could get a jeep out of the mobile equipment bay ..."

"No one's going into the *Buck-Dancer* while that thing's inside it," Cole said. "It would be suicide."

Heron stared at the captain for a moment, trying to come up with an alternative. Cole was right; in the close quarters of the ship, there was no way a man could win against one of the robotic bears. Heron had been petrified with fear in the cavern, which was probably what had saved him. Even so, the thing knew he was there. If Greg had not come on over the radio, he would have ended up like the dead man they had found in the wreck.

Cole started to turn away.

"Wait a minute," Heron said. "There's got to be a way ..."

Cole's jaw knotted, but he refrained from his usual sarcasm.

"I blinded the one that attacked us," Heron said. "But it could still tell where I was. It has some kind of particle detector that lets it home in on fission reactors."

"So we've got to blind it *and* disable its particle detector?"

"No," Heron said slowly, "I don't think so. I think we can use its particle detector to our advantage."

Cole raised a questioning eyebrow.

"Lure it out with something that smells too good to ignore." Heron unclipped one of the charges and held it up. "Something like a seismic charge with its shielding turned off. When the robot comes out, someone goes inside for a jeep —"

"And we blast the robot," Cole finished.

Heron nodded. It just might work.

**H**eron's heart pounded against his rib cage as he climbed up onto the *Buck-Dancer's* hull. He could tell by the stale taste of the air in his face mask that his skinsuit was having trouble keeping up. He felt naked without the protection of his shell, but that was part of the plan. If the robot could detect emissions from the shell's reactor, then he stood a better chance of surviving without it. And even if the skinsuit were punctured, he wouldn't suffer from decompression; the fabric would bind to his skin and confine the leak. Frostbite, yes, even hemorrhage, but at least he wouldn't strangle on his own blood.

The ship was silent. He waved at Cole, positioned on top of the wreck. Cole waved back. Harriet waited by the entrance to the mobile equipment bay. Heron took a deep breath to steady himself, then made his way down the spine of the ship.

The engine room had several portholes. Heron padded over to one and cautiously looked inside. The robot was crouched over the ship's partially-disassembled reactor. It had retracted its fore-claws to reveal a pair of hands that moved with delicate precision over the skeletal outline of another robot, built of parts gathered from the ship.

Heron unclipped a charge from his tool belt and turned its shielding off. The robot's head swung around and its eyes fixed unerringly on Heron. He sprang away from the hull. A moment later, claws the size of butcher knives punched soundlessly through the plating where he had been. The robot levered its claws and peeled back the plating.

Heron hit the ground and took off running across the crater, trying to stay low. In the periphery of his vision, he saw stroboscopic flashes of laser light.

"Come on, you son of a bitch!" Cole shouted. "Look at me!"

Heron thrust off in a different direction.

"Hah!" he heard Cole exclaim over the radio.

"You get him?" Heron panted.

"I think so," Cole said. "He's stopped, anyway."

Heron dug in his heels and came to a halt after a couple of skips. The robot was casting its head about, trying to sniff him out. It took a step in his direction. Heron turned the charge's shielding back on.

He circled around the robot, and when only ten meters separated them, turned the shielding off again. The robot's head jerked towards him. Heron lobbed the charge at its face. The robot batted at it, deflecting it down into the dust. It pounced on the spot where the charge had landed and came up with it in one hand. The ceramic shielding was designed to withstand abuse, but it crumbled in the robot's grasp.

Heron armed the remaining charge and leapt towards the robot. He landed on its back and it jerked upright. He searched frantically for a way to attach the charge's tether, but its back didn't offer any holds.

The robot levered first one elbow back and then the other, fast enough to dismember a man. Then it started to roll over. Heron jumped off; he'd had enough. He triggered the charge and rolled it underneath the thing. He had set it to detonate in sixty seconds. If he did not reach shelter before it went off, he was going to fry.

He ran for where he had left his shell.

"He's moving off," Cole said over the radio.

"Count from five," Heron said. He skidded to a halt, raising a plume of dust, then turned back towards the robot. It had already eaten the bait and was lumbering back towards the *Buck-Dancer*. The active charge was nowhere to be seen, probably buried somewhere in the dust. He swept the scuffled area with his hands until he found it.

"Fifteen," Cole said.

Heron pulled the charge's tether out straight. It looked long enough to fit around one of the robot's legs.

He caught up with the thing easily enough. His heart hammering, he reached around its back leg with the end of the tether and snapped its clip back over the line to form a loop. He yanked it tight and the robot stopped abruptly.

Heron let go of the charge and ran.

"Forty-five," Cole said. He jumped down from his position on top of the wreck. "You're not going to make it."

"Get out of the way," Heron panted. The air in his mask was foul.

Cole did not bother to reply. He swept Heron into his arms as he tried to pass and, holding him against the front of his shell, turned his back on the robot. The charge went off with a light so bright that even its attenuated reflection dazzled Heron through his

eyelids. Cole grunted as if the air had been driven from his lungs. He released Heron, his face chalky.

"Shrapnel," he whispered. His knees buckled.

There was nothing but a small, glassy crater where the robot had been. The side of the wreck that faced ground zero was white with dust blown against it by the blast. When Heron blinked, the afterimage of the blast was lurid against his eyelids.

He rolled Cole over. A small hole had been punched through the back of his shell. Frost surrounded its edges, all that remained of the air that had rushed out of the shell. Luckily, the captain had his skinsuit on. That would keep him alive if he did not simply bleed to death.

"Linda, you better get out here," Heron said. "The captain's hurt."

"I'm on my way," the medic's voice came over the circuit.

Heron popped the shell's hatch and dragged Cole out. Blood bubbled on his back, bubbled and froze into fragile crystals. Heron felt dizzy. *Blood baubles*, he thought. They spiralled down to the ground, ice shot through with sunlight, perfectly silent except for the ringing in his ears. He fumbled in his repair kit for a patch.

Linda appeared beside him. "Are you all right?"

Her voice was full of echoes. Heron wanted to tell her about the patch, but he couldn't find the breath to speak. The last thing he saw before his eyes rolled back into his head was the exhaust trail of the jeep heading out.

Heron woke up in the *Buck-Dancer's* sick bay. Examination tables hung crazily on the wall beside him. He took a breath, and cold clean oxygen burned his throat.

Linda took the oxygen mask off his face. "Better now?"

"Hell of a headache," Heron mumbled. He sat up and the scene righted itself. The *Buck-Dancer* was still over on her side, and what should have been the floor was now a wall. "How long was I out?"

"An hour or so," she said. "I had to stabilize the captain first."

"How is he?"

"He'll be under a few more hours at least," she said. "He's going to have to buy a new kidney when we get back to Ceres."

Heron felt relieved; the man had saved his life, after all. He rubbed his forehead with icy hands. "What about Greg?"

"He's trying to restore power so we can get out of here," Linda said.

"He's here already?" Heron swore to himself as he pulled off the straps that held him to the stretcher.

Linda drifted back, a concerned look on her face. "Now wait a minute ..."

Heron brushed by her on the way to the door. He

had to get to the engine room before Greg did anything rash.

The ship was noisy with crewmen repairing the damage done by the robot. As Heron went by, they exchanged glances and laid down their tools. By the time he had reached the engine room, an unnerving silence filled the corridor behind him. Harriet stepped out and blocked the doorway.

"Blue," she said, and Heron cringed inside, expecting the worst, "that was a damn fine job." She picked him up in a bear hug, and the corridor rang with a ragged cheer from the assembled crew.

"We all owe you one," she said, setting him down. "You need to get something done, call me. I'll make sure it happens."

Heron nodded, blushing deeply. The corridor came alive again with the rattle and clank of tools.

He found Greg bent over the *Buck-Dancer's* reactor and the strange machinery that surrounded it. The pose reminded Heron of the robotic bear, intent on its creation, and he had to laugh at the association.

Greg straightened up and turned around. His arm was in a sling, but otherwise he appeared to be in good shape. His scowl turned to a smile when he saw it was Heron. Then he scowled again, his good hand on his hip. "What's so funny?"

Heron shook his head. "Nothing. It's good to see you, is all."

Greg nodded slowly. "Likewise, Blue, likewise." He looked over his shoulder at the robot's skeletal construct. "It was reproducing itself, wasn't it? Using the ship as a womb."

Heron nodded. "This asteroid — it's an artificial ecosystem, with both prey and predators. So far as the bears are concerned, a ship like ours is just another parts supply, easier to get to than a seeder plant. They probably see people as competitors, to be driven off or destroyed."

"I almost hate to tear it down," Greg said. "But we need to get out of here."

Heron had expected as much. He began his argument carefully. "I agree that we've got to lift before another one comes along. But I'm not sure we should tear this one down."

Greg's eyebrows rose in a silent question.

"It used the *Buck-Dancer's* reactor as a core, right? Well, that implies that seeder plants have something like a reactor core too. If we could find them and dig them out like the bears do, we'd make out like bandits."

"Yeah," Greg said, "and so would the bears. We've been lucky so far; no one has died. But it's just a matter of time."

"Well," Heron said quietly, "if you can't beat them ..."

The crater smelled like uranium to the bear. Heron concurred, and together they moved in for the kill. The seeder plant sent up a fusillade as they tore at its shaft, but the bear was expecting this response. It dodged away when it felt the coilgun's launch field tense, and the missiles went by harmlessly. The bear tore at the shaft again, and its claws broke through the superconductive cladding with a shower of sparks. Heron shared its fierce exaltation.

Soon they were inside the main chamber. One swipe disabled the seeder launch mechanism, but when the bear turned towards the back of the cavern where the reactor was located, Heron activated the inhibitor Greg had implanted in its nervous system. The robot stopped and swung its head, looking for the source of what was bothering it. Heron keyed in a light-attraction circuit. Reluctantly, the beast climbed out of the cavern.

"We're in," Heron said. He put the robot into a dormant state and switched off its sensor feed. His projection visor cleared to reveal the *Buck-Dancer's* bridge.

"You're sure it's safe down there?" Cole asked.

Heron shrugged. "At least until another one comes along."

Cole dispatched the recovery team down to the surface.

"If they're all this easy," Greg said, "we'll have more high-grade uranium in a couple of weeks than we could get in a year, mining hard rock. We'll have to come back for the rest."

Cole nodded absently. "You know, I bet we could wipe them out. Bait them onto the surface with a reactor, then nail them with an anchor."

"Probably so," Heron said, stretching hugely in his seat. It had been a long day. "But if we leave some alive, we won't have to worry about claim jumpers moving in while we're gone."

Cole looked at him sharply, and then he laughed, shaking his head. "You know, Blue, I didn't think you had it in you."

Heron smiled to himself. It was all going to work out fine. He turned the bear's sensor feed on and got back to work. □

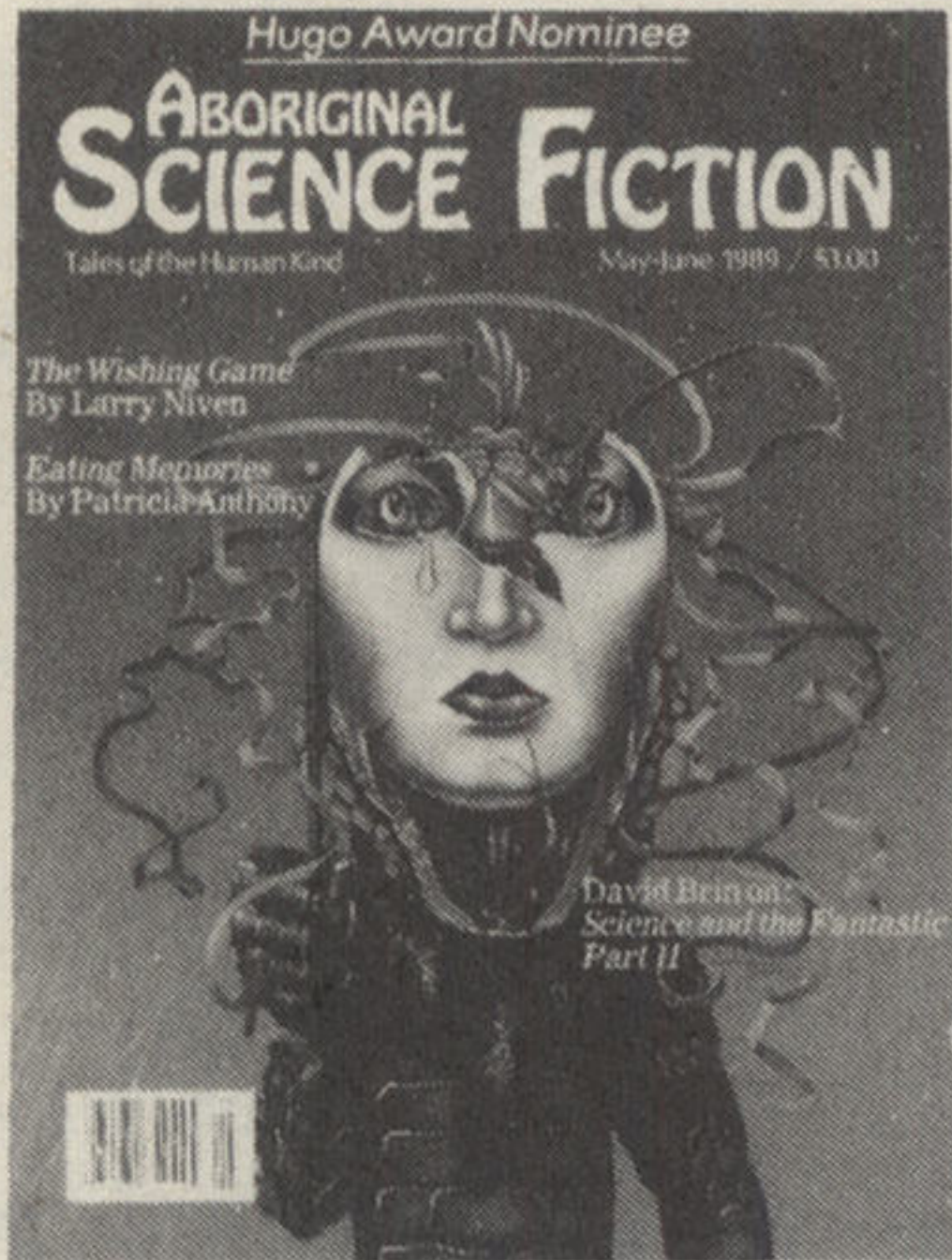
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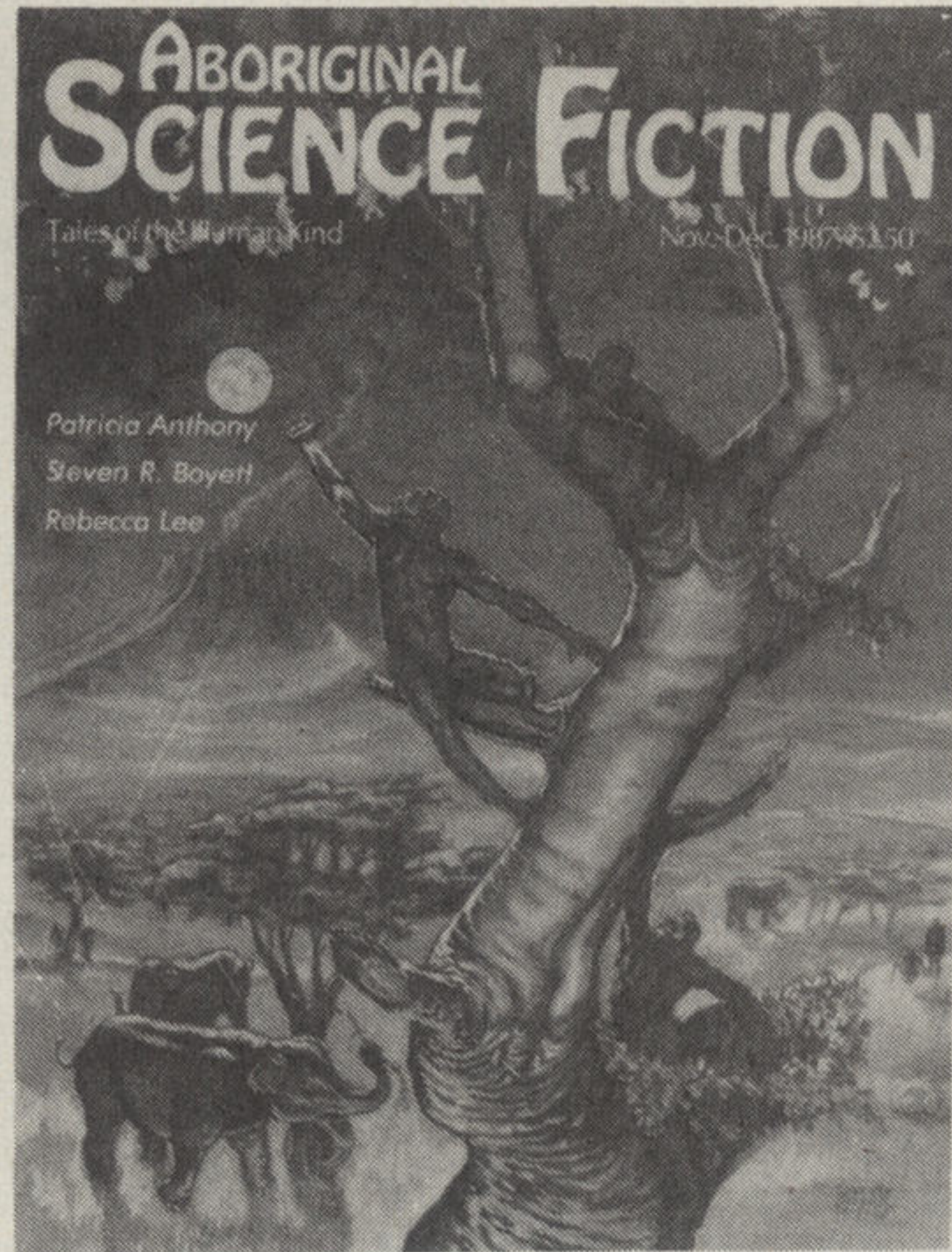
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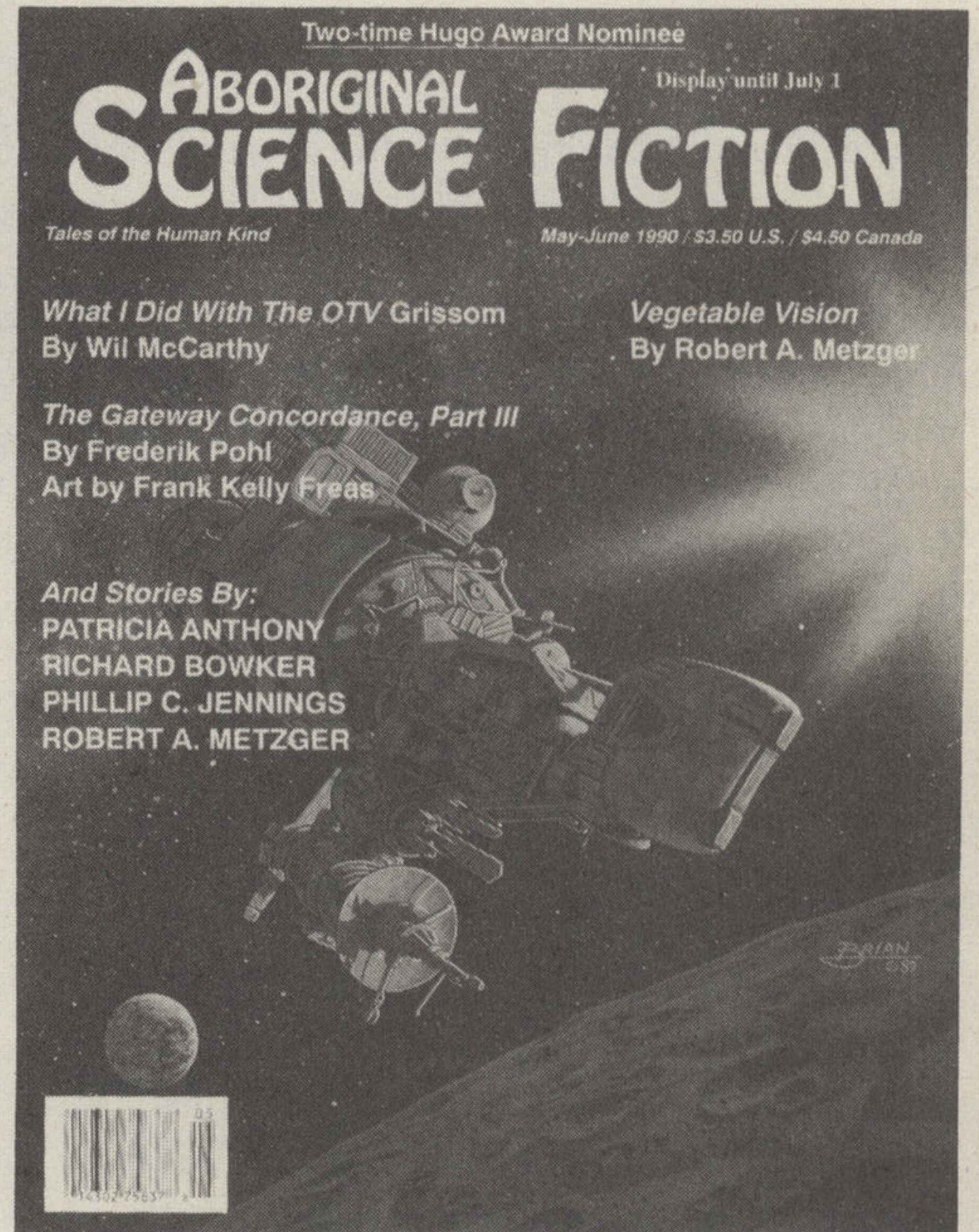


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# At the Shadow of a Dream

By Howard V. Hendrix

Art by David Deitrick

**T**urning silently in LaGrange space, the whole haborb sleeps. Standing in the midnight bathroom, I hear old-fashioned clocks ticking, my parents and brother Jack snoring, in other rooms, on other worlds, in other times. I see myself at age six, crying because I can't sleep, crying because I fear I'm the only creature left awake in all the universe. The most frightening thing in the world, this insomnia — a terrible burden, to be so awake and so alone, in haunted solitary free-fall down the well of night, growing worse the longer it goes on, the fall coming faster and faster, meters per second per second, until I fear I'll overshoot sleep completely, never rendezvous with it again, crash and burn on the surface of some planet of madness —

**S**tanding at the front of the virtual classroom, I tell my students the generally accepted definition: a black hole is the set of events from which it is impossible to escape to a large distance. The black hole's boundary is created by the paths in space-time of light rays suspended just on the edge of the event horizon, light rays forever neither captured nor free nor able to approach one another. Light like the edge of a solid shadow.

**W**ell, boys," Dad says as we walk onto the Orbital Park grounds, "what do you want to see first?"

"The fish," I say.

"The birds," Jack says.

Each of us is adamant in our choice.

"It's always this way, isn't it?" Mom says, shaking her head. "What now, Harvey?"

On the touchscreen map Dad is looking at the Park, glowing like a green sash at the waist of Habitat Orbital LaGrange's long toroid.

"According to the map, the Aquarium is on the way to the Aviary, so we'll see the fish first, then the birds —"

"Yay!" I shout. Dad tousles my blond hair, drenched very nearly white from swimming in the eternal summer of the haborb's Sunlite Pool.

"He always gets his way," Jack says, looking downcast through his dark bangs.

**A**t the shadow of a dream one dawn I bring up from sleep the image of Jack's decayed and dessicated corpse, found by a man on snohorseback

at sunset in the Martian highlands. Six months later, that is exactly how and when Jack's long-dead body is found.

Are they simultaneous — that image flashing into my mind where I lay warm in bed, even at the exact moment Jack is freezing to death on the side of the highest mountain in the Solar System? Is it a genuine prescience, or do I only retroactively focus on this one among many similar death scenarios running through my worried mind at that time?

**E**ach member of a virtual (particle/antiparticle) pair must seek out its partner and annihilate with it, I tell my students. However, at the Schwarzschild radius of a black hole, one virtual particle may fall into the black hole and become a real particle, in which case it no longer has to annihilate with its partner. The remaining virtual particle may then become real as well, escaping from the vicinity of the black hole into infinity in the form of Hawking radiation.

My virtual students rarely ask questions. Mostly they take in what I say, without asking what it might mean or wondering about larger implications. Perhaps the larger implications are in my mind alone. I envy them.

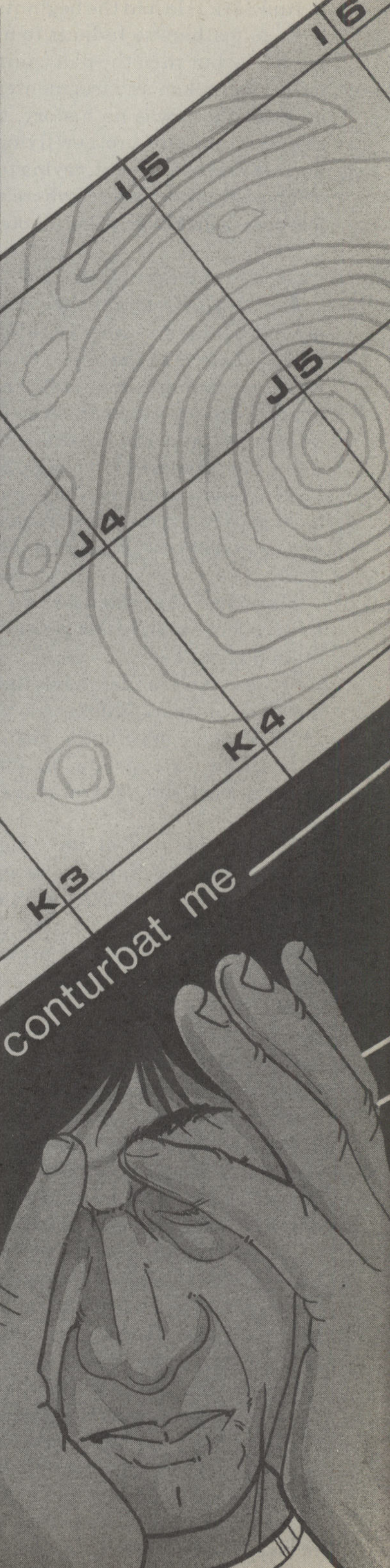
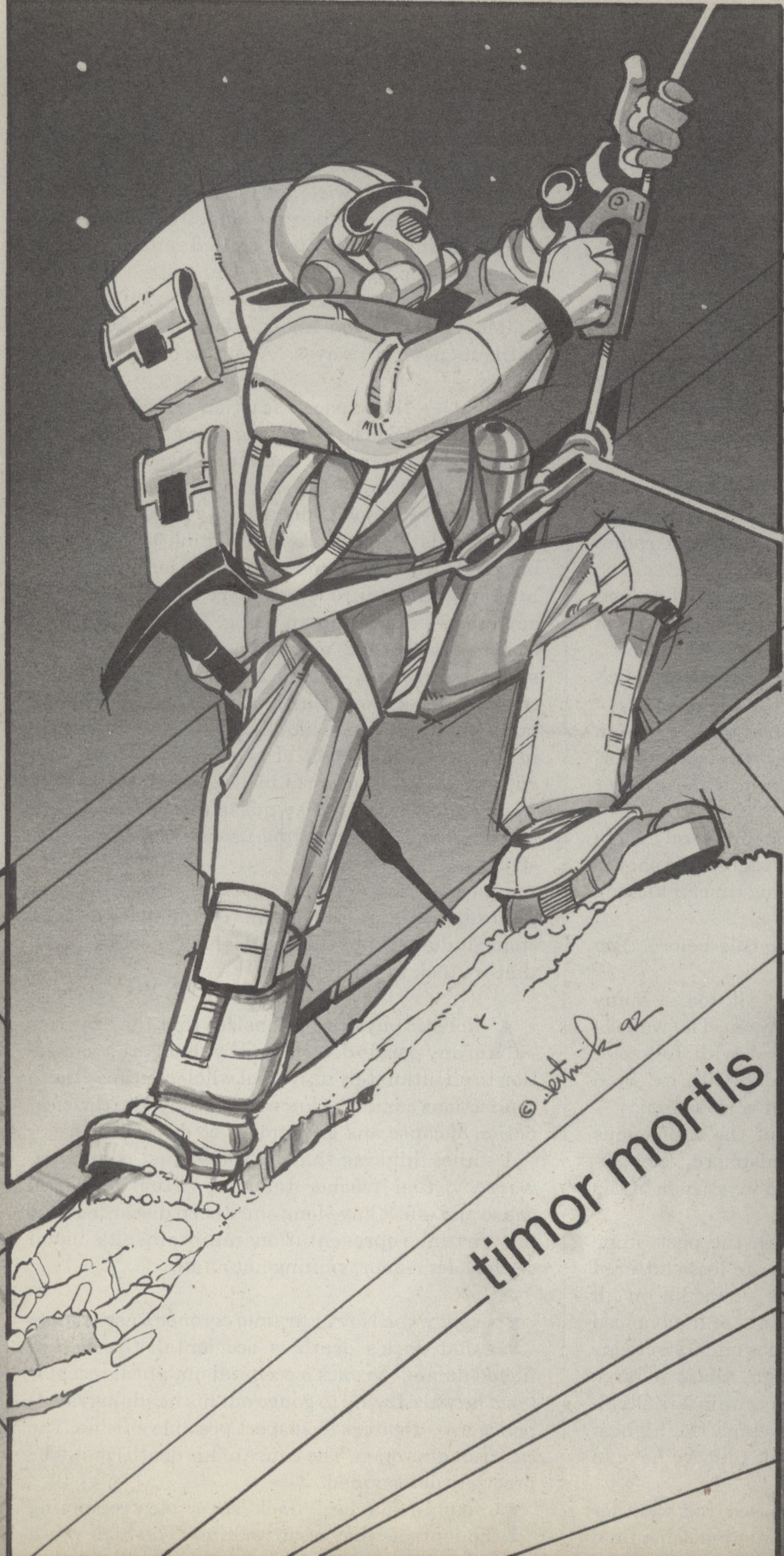
**I**f indeed it was a prescient flash, if I'm not just seeing patterns that aren't really there, then somehow the flash must have come — is still coming — from Jack, even if he has disappeared beyond the event horizon of the grave.

**T**imor mortis conturbat me," twelve-year-old Jack says, reciting death words in a dead language, the learning of which our parents believe will help broaden us. So that we won't end up weather-observers for GAIA, the Global Atmospheric Information Administration (like Dad), or Orbital Food Service workers (like Mom).

**I** move from firmament below to firmament above, from fish to fishbowl-helmeted astronauts to astronomy to majoring in the space sciences to a career of research and teaching in astrophysics. I pretend it makes sense, looking backward.

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timor mortis

conturbat me

© betnik 22

0

K3

K4

J4

J5

I5

I6

And Jack? He had the beginnings of a story. From birds to feathers to Indians to history and political science — but then the plot thinned like bird bones, too easily broken and fragmented. Where there was no story there was no history, there could be only madness and my brother flying with it, over the horizon and out of sight, trying to live like an Indian on another, colder world, where alien snow falls like feathers, softly, softly, for all eternity.

**Y**ou're damaged! Defective!" Mom screams at us after the Orbital police have released us from jail. With others we refused to leave the Park for our homes at curfew; the police tried to remove us but we all went limp. Annoyed, the officers of the law did not spare to slug and shockprod and tangleweb us. We are tired and hurting and just want to go to sleep, but Mom will have none of that.

"No," she continues, "my children would never have gotten arrested! You're not my sons — you're damaged embryos, ruined by too much space radiation!"

She slams shut the door to our sleep cell at last. In the silence of the room we can hear Mom and Dad talking about us.

"I just can't understand this unnatural rebelliousness of theirs," Mom says with a loud sigh.

"Well, their upbringing has been different from ours," Dad says, trying to play the conciliator. "They're part of a generation raised in space, after all."

"That's the root of the whole problem!" Mom shrills in her best finger-pointing tones. "We should never have left Earth to live in this tin can kicking around the sky!"

"Now, honey, we've been over this before. You remember what Earth is like —"

We tune it out. We've heard it all, too — many times. Warily I gaze around the room. The walls of Jack's half, besides being covered with full-color holos of birds of prey, are crowded with external memory media of various sorts on various topics — history mostly, anthro studies of the indigenous peoples of Earth's western hemisphere, the "Indians," as well as the culture and mysticism of the other Indians, the ones in Asia.

Jack's obsession is largely with the past, mine largely with the future. My walls are less cluttered but more wide-ranging than his — media on all aspects of space travel, and physics, and advanced technology, surrounding a few holos and flatscreens of exotic fish. Both of us, though, share a large flatscreen of the great Martian mountain Nix Olympica. We both want to go there, climb the highest mountain in the solar system. But first we have to get out of the 'borbs.

I stare at Jack. His eyes are closed, but whether in sleep, or meditation, or just watching some final

scenes on the eyelid screens from that KL 235 we took in the Park hours ago and are only now coming down from — I cannot tell. He's getting harder to talk to all the time, growing more inward and shy and backward. He's been spending a lot more of his time mind-altered lately, on KL or designer teonacatlolds or pleasureplugged — balancing his mind on the "high wire," as he calls it. Even in his usual plugstate he's become something of an info-diver, delving deeply into a limited range of arcane subjects, keeping to himself. Unhealthy. I remain an info-surfer, darting everywhere.

"Mom's right, you know," Jack says suddenly, without opening his eyes. "About us being damaged embryos."

"What — that space radiation crap?" I ask incredulously. "You're forgetting something, big little brother: I was born on Earth and lived there till I was two. That's why I'm shorter than you are —"

"No, no — I don't mean it that way," he says, shaking his head vigorously. "Think about it in a bigscreen way. Something happened long before any humans came into space. We're all damaged embryos — every human being. We're so defective at birth we've had to build secondary wombs to support ourselves — clans, tribes, nations, corporations. We've screwed Earth up so much we've had to build habitat orbitals like LaGrange, metal wombs in the sky. Mom's right: it is a tin can — a tin can with an embryonic world inside. Another artificial womb, and the jacks they put in our heads at birth are umbilicals for plugging us into the social construct ..."

I look at him oddly, wondering if this burst of philosophizing is the latent result of the "safe, space-industry pharmaceuticals" (as advertised) that we took in the Park.

**A** holistic physics emphasizes that the behavior of any part is determined by that part's connection to an ultimately universal whole. Because these connections cannot be known precisely, the classical notion of cause and effect must be discarded.

I smile, thinking that, in the virtual classroom, where virtual teacher talks to virtual students, cause and effect have long since been discarded. But my virtual representation maintains its usual serious demeanor, smiling not at all.

**D**espite the Novy Laramie coroner's assurances that Jack's death is accidental, the self-inflicted damage to Jack's occipital umbilical receptor (as if he were trying to gouge out his headplug) leads police investigators to suspect possible suicide. The case remains open. The cause of his death cannot be precisely determined.

**I**t explains a lot," Jack says, electropenning thoughts as they occur to him. "The high youth

suicide and aircar accident rates here in the haborbs, everything.”

“What do you mean?”

“If society is a second womb, then suicides and accidental deaths are spontaneous abortions, while socially sanctioned wars and executions are willful ones. That’s what all the controversy was about in the last century: whether women individually should be allowed to do inside their wombs what men for millennia had been doing collectively inside the womb of patriarchal society.”

I shake my head, disturbed by the notion that maybe my younger brother is either brighter or crazier than I am.

“Sounds like the KL is talking, bro,” I say at last. “Either that, or you’ve been studying too much of that history. Whichever, don’t let Mom and Dad hear you say this stuff.”

**T**o die, to sleep —” Jack says, reading *Hamlet* in *Hamlet* in our family time because Dad thinks our teenschool is culturally limited. “To sleep, perchance to dream — ay, there’s the rub, for in that sleep of death what dreams may come, when we have shuffled off this mortal coil, must give us pause ...”

**E**instein says no signal can travel faster than the speed of light, so it is impossible that the measurement performed on one member of a particle pair will instantly determine the direction of the other, which may be light years away. Bohr, though, contends that the two-particle system is actually an indivisible whole and cannot be analyzed as though made up of independent parts, no matter what the distance separating the particles. Regardless of distance, the two particles are always linked by instantaneous non-local connections — influencing one another rather than communicating with each other. Einstein’s view of reality — that there are things-in-themselves, independent, spatially separated, and determined elements and events — is incompatible with the interconnected and interdependent universe of quantum theory, that bright busy emptiness where no thing exists as the thing-in-itself but only in relation to everything else.

I pause and look at my simulated students then, hoping for some small epiphany, some minor appreciation of the elegance and beauty of such a universe. Perhaps the sign is too subtle for my eyes to see.

**B**e just and deal kindly with my people,” Jack says, reading words attributed to Chief Seathl, “for the dead are not powerless. Dead, did I say? There is no death, only a change of worlds.”

**N**ow I am as afraid of falling asleep as I was once afraid of not falling asleep, because the dream, the dream rises again and again: Jack and I flash instantly into the void, fluorescently glowing, ethereally unreal angels holding hands. In that instant our handclasp is broken and we are spun about, back to back, face to face, back to back. The universe underneath my feet becomes abruptly more real, the stony surface of a dead world, the edge of a mountain trail, but my angel wings are gone and I find myself sealed in a fishbowl-helmeted white spacesuit. Jack spins rapidly away, reaching out to me with the beak-masked face and winged arms of an eagle dancer. We should not be able to see each other, but somehow we still can. As we fall away from each other I feel myself becoming more solid, real, self-contained in all my nightmarishly different kinds of indifference.

Jack has already disappeared.

**T**he possibility of a correlation between quantum interconnectedness and parapsychological phenomena has been discussed for many years, but whether these “influences” could ever be reliably recognized as information-transfers of course remains open to question.

A few students nod their heads — of course, of course.

**C**ollect incoming message from Jack Harmon of Habitat Orbital LaGrange to Harvey Harmon of Honolulu, Hawaii,” an artificially intelligent voice says from my vidjack link. “Will you accept the charges?”

I nod. Jack appears, the same old lost eyes, new-found beard.

“How are things at the U of LaGrange?” I ask him, waiting for the lightsecond pause in his response.

“Still in LaGrange,” he says heavily. “No second birth yet, for me. You were lucky to get out and down as early as you did. Sharp move, transferring down the well to University of Hawaii. Wish I’d pulled it off.”

“Thanks. Don’t worry, you will.”

Jack nods. He looks distracted somehow.

“I’ve been inputting some of the physics media you left up here when you moved down the well —”

“Really? Making any sense of it?”

“In my own way, yeah, I guess I am.” He shrugs. “I try to put it into a metaphorical framework so I can get a grip on it. Black holes, for instance. Karl Schwarzschild described the event horizon only a year after Einstein’s general theory of relativity was published. You know what ‘Schwarzschild’ means in German?”

“No, I can’t say I do.”

“It means ‘black shield.’ I thought of that and this whole knights-and-ladies chivalric thing sprang

into my head. See, the dragon inside the cave of the event horizon holds prisoner our damsel, the sheltering womb of our theories, our constructions of reality." He looks confused for an instant, but recovers. "Or maybe it's the other way around: maybe it's the damsel who holds the dragon prisoner, after all."

"Interesting idea," I say, genuinely interested, "but probably just a coincidence. To say there's some hidden connection between the name of the discoverer and the thing discovered — that's pushing it. Seeing patterns that aren't really there, you know?"

A strained silence opens between us.

"Sort of a paranoid delusion, huh?" Jack asks with an odd laugh. "Maybe. But I still think the event horizon, the radius of the black shield, protects those who remain outside the dragon's lair from having to face whatever it is that happens inside. And the black shield does nothing at all for the hero who falls into the Conqueror Worm's hole."

I do not like the way the conversation is tending — an underlying sexual-something to it that Freud can probably smell in his grave. Next Jack'll be talking about his shyness and inability to get dates. I don't want to deal with it, so I steer the conversation in what I hope will be a different direction.

"Still planning to come visit me down here this summer?"

"Yeah. Count on it. We'll climb some mountains, right?"

"Whatever mountains are left on Earth."

"I'll be there."

**T**hings derive their being and nature by mutual dependence," Jack says, quoting the words of the mystic Nagarjuna. "They are nothing in themselves."

**O**n Mars I scan the investigative documents on the discovery of Jack's long-dead body. The reports detail how the genetically-engineered microbes of the manufactured Martian ecology have done their degrading work on his corpse; they describe how the frontier police, when they arrive, have to shovel his remains into a body bag; the police describe the "minimal animal damage" to the corpse, contending sagaciously that the population of larger vertebrate scavengers is not yet well established on Mars. Yet all the information, all the details, all the police report superficialities make only for more of the ashes and dust of words, drier and deader than the ashes and dust his corpse becomes upon cremation.

They do not capture Jack's essence. Not at all.

**W**hen I can get time off from grad school and Jack can get away from college and the 'borbs,

we climb mountains all over the Earth and, once, on the Moon. We tour Antarctica Global Park during its seventy-fifth anniversary celebration, visit Korczak Ziolkowski's Crazy Horse Memorial and the ruins of the Rushmore Heads nearby. Raised in the 'borbs, we can never get over the inside-outness of Earth, the tops of its mountains and vast panoramas of sky most of all — the frightening, terrible, irresistible beauty of the open heavens.

Everywhere around the parks and the mountains the ocean of humanity laps and breaks, but Jack still manages to find deserted places. Even in the midst of BALAAM, the Bay Area Los Angeles Aztlán Metroplex stretching from Northern California to well south of Mexico City — even amid that human sea surrounding the Sierra Nevada, Jack still finds himself facing the knee-breaking lung-wracking challenge of Shepherd's Pass, alone.

I do not go with him to where the trail rises sharply from desert through forest to alpine meadow to the second still higher desert of mountain moonscape. I do not have the time or inclination to climb it, especially not his way: no hiking augments, no lift boots, no gravlapse backpacks, no fractal topographic route imagers, no solarsheet electric tents — nothing. Maybe he thinks he's some kind of reincarnated indigene, but not me.

"You'll be back in exactly three days, okay?" I say to him as he gets out of my aircar at the trailhead. "Rakugo Motors may call this an aircar but you know it's not a flight-capable transport. The roughness of the terrain here and the steepness of the trail means there's no way I can follow your path in this thing. So don't be late. You've got to catch the midnight shuttle out of Edwards, and our schedule's tight enough already."

"Right. I'll be here."

I watch him hike steadily toward the red tongues of sunset licking among the clouds and mountain-tops like fire on the ramparts of a besieged castle. When I can no longer see him I lift lightly off in my aircar and move away in a long slow traildusty swing to the south.

**A**s nearly as we can ascertain, I tell my students, the universe is itself paradoxical: the symmetrical product of asymmetry, possessing no boundary but completely self-contained.

**O**n the third day following, my aircar settles in a cloud of dust near the trailhead. Jack is not there waiting, but I am. Two hours later, he still has not appeared.

I sit in my car and pump soothing music through my headjack, but after three hours I get out and begin hiking up the trail in the gathering dark.

"Jack!" I shout. "Jack! Jack!"

I shout it until I'm hoarse, gaining only echoes for

my trouble. Eventually I drive into Lone Pine and call the spacelines to cancel his flight.

One of my faculty colleagues at the university, an anthropologist, tells me of the Indian shaman's "flight amid innumerable jewels of light moving through limitless space." I tell her that sounds curiously like a description of quantum mechanical fluctuations. She is pleased. The subatomic flux, with its instantaneous creation/destruction of matter/anti-matter particle pairs, seems to her an appropriate locus for the fecund soil of eternity — with all its dualities, its dreams of heaven and nightmares of hell.

Link up the well to Mom and Dad, to tell them Jack hasn't come back in from Shepherd's Pass and will probably have to take a later shuttle. I expect Mom to go into her usual overprotective hysteria, but she is surprisingly calm.

The deputies in the sheriff's office in Lone Pine inform me that they can't initiate any search procedures — not even a headplug fix — until the subject is at least twenty-four hours late for his scheduled rendezvous. I drive out through the desert darkness again, to the base of the Eastern Sierra walls, lights on, eyes open, hoping to see him.

Nothing. Eventually I end up trying to sleep in

my vehicle — an activity for which it is clearly not designed. Just as I pass into sleep, I think, Jack, if you're still alive, I'm gonna kill you for putting me through this.

Late the following morning I take one last hike up the trail, looking for him. I scabble up broken stone into trees and mountains as far as I can go, call and call his name until I can call no more. Finally I can only stand there, panting hard, watching and waiting.

All unexpectedly Jack appears. He is sunburned, his hair streaked lighter from time spent in depleted atmosphere closer to the sun. His clothes are tattered and trail-grimed and torn into feathery shreds on his arms and back. Through lips cracked black and bleeding by sun and wind he is smiling like a happy idiot. As he approaches me his stride is victorious, his eyes gleam as if unending ovations are ringing in his head, cheers and applause that only he can hear.

"You're eighteen hours late," I say, anger restrained only by relief at seeing him again.

"I know. Sorry. I took a wrong turn somewhere and ended up sleeping at the edge of a kilometer-deep gorge —"

"Good thing you didn't roll over."

"But it was great, Harv!" Jack says, and begins to jabber about lying down in mountain meadows like

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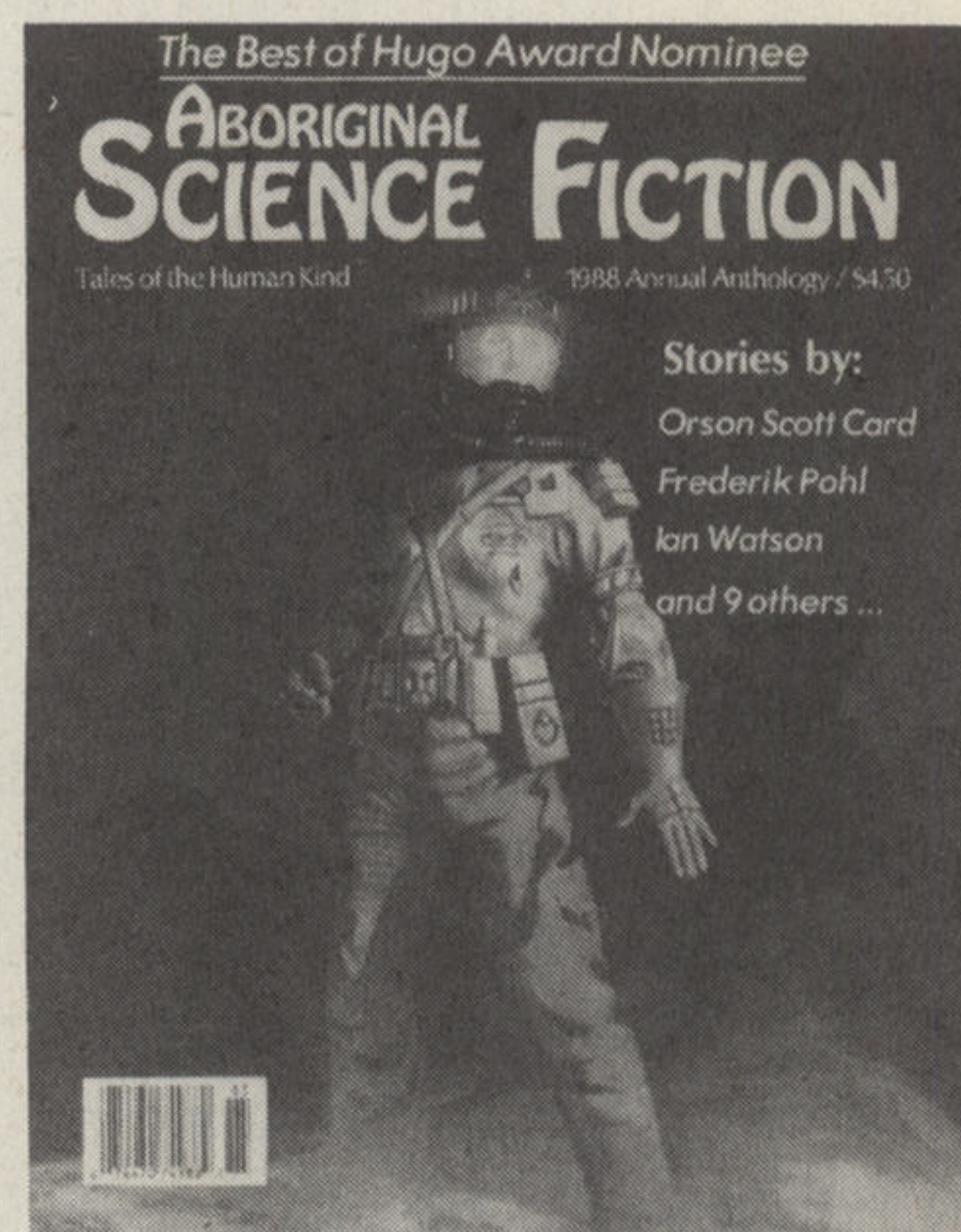
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God's front yard, about streams meandering through islands of natural rock garden, and always "a sky you want to fall up through and disappear into." I can see he's happy, happy as he's ever been, happier even than on KL or teonacatlolds or high-wired. My anger evaporates, cools.

"Come on," I say. "We've got to get you to a shuttle."

He nods. We walk down the trail in the late morning light, stopping to rest in a spot beside two lodgepole pines, one of which — shorter but growing on a slightly higher spot of ground — is in robust health, while the other, tall and spindly, is slowly, almost secretly, dying.

We stand up again, then walk in silence down the trail.

**T**he Martian frontier police, believing they've seen Jack recently, refuse to allow us to list him as a missing person. No law says you have to call your mother, or your father, or your brother, if you're an adult, if you have free will.

Months pass. We worry from a great distance.

**B**y definition (I tell my students made of light) the event horizon is that zone which forms around the star because no signal can get away from it to communicate any event to the outside world. One of the strange upshots of quantum theory, however, is that the Schwarzschild radius and event horizon may be in some sense "breachable." If the connections between particles are not signals in the Einsteinian sense, then the Schwarzschild radius ceases to be a barrier, for what is a "horizon" to events is not necessarily a "horizon" to influences.

**I**t's this," Jack says, calling longlink from Earth, from the Georgetown School of Interplanetary Studies, where his mind and his graduate school career in poli-sci are both blowing apart. "They're damping me through my demons — my DMNs, the dorsal and median raphe nuclei in my brain. Through the jack they put in my head when I was born. The jack they put in everybody's head. My head is not my head, your head is not your head anymore. It's OUR head. Occipital Umbilical Receptor, that's what they call it. You think the acronym was an accident? A coincidence? Not a chance. Got to keep the schizophrenic heads together and socially tracked. The white lab coats with the white lab masks and the unmelting eyes don't make mistakes.

"They're putting KL 235 in the cafeteria food here to make me sink uncontrolled telepath into the massmind, the cultural macroorganism. But I'm fighting them. I know they're scanning this call, big brother, but I don't care. Their power is growing, but I've gone starburst. Full telepath visionary. You're under the silver forcefield of my psychic

protection, so you can be heard, your message can get out, you can communicate — and they can't get you. The silver mirrorball reflects all the watching eyes, and you're inside it, beyond all harm."

He speaks all of this in a rush on the vidphone, "his eyes bright with the light of a supernova fleeing its own collapse into a black hole," as I will describe it later. Only later. At the moment I cannot describe anything.

**I** do not think my students hear the note of loss I cannot keep from my voice when I tell them that, as a star collapses and a black hole forms, a very large amount of information about the star must inevitably be lost. No, the programming of my virtual representation doubtless screens that note out, smooths it over. But even if they could hear it, could they possibly understand?

**M**utants," Jack says from a paylink somewhere in the city he calls Washington Dead Cats. "Victim heroes. Yeah. But most mutations aren't beneficial to the individual with the trait. Die out. Killed off. Jesus. Gandhi. Martin Luther King. Winona Walking Bear. Victim heroes of the evolving human organism.

"People here have dreams in which I die, big brother. Wish fulfillment. But my dreams counter them. They come true. Stop me before I dream again."

**W**hether these "influences" could ever be reliably recognized as information-transfers of course remains open to question.

That is what I tell them, class after class.

**O**nce Jack moves to Mars, it is easier to forget his collapse at the Georgetown School of Interplanetary Studies. Everything seems to be okay again. He gets a job out there, finishes his Master's degree, in History, at University of Mars. He starts work on his Ph.D.

I go on with my life. I meet and marry Noriko. Despite speculation to the contrary, Jack makes it to the wedding — a tense affair, though Jack doesn't register it that way. He doesn't say much, doesn't seem to register much of anything. He seems "dumbed down," unfocused, out of touch — or, more precisely, beyond reach somehow. The light in his eyes has retreated to an unreachable spot.

Watching him, I worry. A perverse image flashes through my head — Jack dead and afloat in some dark sea, while a terrible abyssal fish, a mobile piece of night all jutjaws teeth and hunger and temptation, tears at his feathered breast again and again, though it never reaches his heart.

The abyssal fish has my face.

It is possible, however, that that information is not really lost. Perhaps it becomes transferable in a more ethereal fashion. Perhaps it too moves via transcendental connection, a "higher wire" than we might otherwise suppose.

Do my students care? If it's going to be on the test ....

But then something goes wrong. Jack quits school, quits work, disappears into the back-country around Nix. He escapes from the cage, slips out of the social support net, breaks free of the womb. He stops communicating, falls beyond reach, digs out his social umbilical in blood and gore from his skull and staggers away. He has nothing to say to anyone, no one has anything to say to him.

The snohorse the man rides is genetically engineered to withstand the rigors of the developing Martian ecology and climate. So are the flora and fauna about them, also the stock for which the two ride the range, tend the fences, bring in strays — which must be brought in, for despite the engineers the strays cannot stand alone in the cold of Martian highland winter.

The rider is a pureblood Sioux. My brother is a stray found too late.

When the coroner from Novy Laramie calls longlink from Mars, my mother's first words on hearing of the death of her second son are, "Was it suicide?" The fact that she who first brought Jack into this world should also be the first to learn of his leaving it is a sad symmetry. Perhaps dimly aware of such symmetries, the coroner assures her that as far as he can tell the death was accidental.

Well, this must be costing you a fortune, big brother. 'Big Brother' — get it? From an old book meant as a warning but taken as a blueprint. Keep thinking against them. I know you need dreams, so I'll send you some."

I must stop thinking like this. I've got responsibilities, Jack. Classes and exams and articles to publish for tenure review. This is not a good time for me to go crazy. I can't let myself get sucked into your paranoia, your mad panic, your singularity. Your story and my story are not the same. I'm not an imposter playing myself. I'm still alive, dammit, and I know what's real. Don't send me your dreams.

It may be that this approach — of breaking the "problem of the universe" up into bits and creating numerous partial theories — is all wrong, I tell my students, hoping to raise some murmur of question, some flash of critical thought in them. If everything in the universe depends on everything else in

some fundamental/ transcendental way, it may be impossible to achieve a full solution by investigating parts of the problem in isolation.

At the news of Jack's death, I'm never able to cry — at least not while I'm awake. I am of course expected to go on teaching my classes as if nothing has happened. To my virtual self, nothing has.

And I do go on, but differently. To say that in the last wallet holos I have of him, Jack's eyes — made more prominent by the thinness of his face, the tightness of the skin on the skull — are brown and soft, something about them suggesting faraway vistas from which the seer has never completely returned, the eyes of a vision quester, a sufferer through ordeals, a minddiver who has plummeted to the far depths of madness and left some part of himself "over there"; to say that Jack's hair — also brown, moderately long and unkempt, and receding a bit in that shape called a widow's peak — fringes the forehead of a troubled thinker; to say that his thick brown mustache and beard frame cheekbones and eyebrows that for all their prominence can still add no solidity to the ghostly soft lostness those eyes confer on the entire face, making it the visage of an alcoholic young priest, a gently stoned Rasputin, a shaman who has lain too long in a land of eternal ice and winds that carve canyons in the soul — to say all of that and more, to call to mind even his words, is still to say too little. In the end it too can possess only a sort of police report superficiality, for everything I can say and show must dance with awkward, uncertain, and incomplete steps outside the event horizon of his singularity as a human being.

So hard to let go, so grant me one last dream, before we sleep: I look up and Jack, bearded and winged, gestures for me to follow him, toward a sun that is a flaming flower opening outward and outward across the sky, a blossom of ten billion years. I fall up after him, into the dark heart around which the blossom burns, the center where ever-greater depths and darknesses reveal themselves to us. Stars flow past, the heart of a galaxy, an unimaginably dense cluster of suns, faster and faster until there is only flight and light, pure flight amid innumerable jewels of light moving through limitless space —

Sleep — sleep always comes at last, like a man in rags or tattered wings, thought to be lost, but discovered descending from unimaginably high mountains, bearing a pack full of dreams and smiling, smiling like applause that never ends. □

# Ladies' Choice

By Barney Curren

Art by Lori Deitrick

At sea, Day One: Miami has vanished in our wake. The Caribbean stretches seamless to the horizon, a primordial stretch of azures and greens. Leslie and I are at the railing, pretending to be mesmerized by it all. We're wearing our white linen cruise costumes; extravagant neck-concealing scarves billow in the breeze. The two of us are trying to pass as a pair of Amphibs. Leslie's idea. I'm not sure we can pull it off the entire week.

There must be three hundred passengers on board, virtually all of them Amphibs. Most are families with Hermaphroditic youngsters on a Gender-Setting ritual. The rest seem to be Gendered couples on what my species used to call a Honeymoon. Leslie undoubtedly knows what they call it now. I must remember to ask her.

I lean against the rail and appear to be admiring our luxurious vessel. Actually, I'm Amphib watching. The eye-poppers are the exhibitionists in open-collar shirts, flaunting their gills. Fleshy pink-and-white grooves slant laterally just above the collarbone, fluttering with every breath. They're in the minority, though. Most of these folks are still more or less in the closet: necks remain covered, collared. Deck shoes hide the telltale webbing between toes.

"Dale! Stop staring," Leslie hisses. We're not six hours from port, and you can still sense that undercurrent of anxiety among the Gendered adults. The Hermaphs, that's another story. Packs of them frolic about the ship. They're all impossibly lovely, too. It's like being besieged by a swarm of fairies, or angels. Leslie, of course, adores them. I see them and I smile, but I cannot deny the atavistic jealousy that comes when presented with a newly evolved species, quite possibly superior to one's own.

We encounter the first undisguised Primates bundled up in deck chairs towards the stern. It's a dotty old septuagenarian couple, waving merrily at every passing Amphib — an inter-species welcoming committee. It's the sort of attitude Leslie is expecting will take root in me by the time the cruise is over. Once we're back in the land where savage Primates still rule the roost, and the timorous Amphibs are the ones doing the passing.

Not to do so is to lose her; this I know. I have five and a half days to arrive at my decision.

Sunset at sea. The captain's supper, first seating. Leslie has landed us at an "A" table, to the right of the dais. No exhibitionists here; everyone's neckwear is firmly in place. Turns out the network anchor, Dana Dennoit, is an Amphib (no huge surprise) on this cruise with his spouse. That's him at the head of our table.

The male to my right introduces himself as Adrian Meecham. He's an interior design specialist here with his spouse and their eldest Hermaph for a Gender-Set. Tall and slim, of course, but there's an androgenic masculinity here you don't usually associate with Amphibs. Now he wants to know what I do. "Personal service industry," I murmur. The truth would blow my cover. I'm a commodities broker — working the pit of the Exchange with the rest of the beasts, jostling and shouting for the lowest buy, the highest sell. One-on-one competition for serious money: not your typical Amphib occupation.

The big surprise is sitting across from Leslie. Stanley Maxveldt, Ph.D., Clinical Anthropology — and unabashed Primate — travelling alone. Here obviously to study Amphibian puberty rites firsthand. Recognition of this triggers a general feeling of malaise about the table, which I am obliged to share. Secretly, I'm tickled. At the end of the meal Maxveldt pushes back, lights a huge cigar, and regards me with a twinkle. I wish I knew what he's thinking.

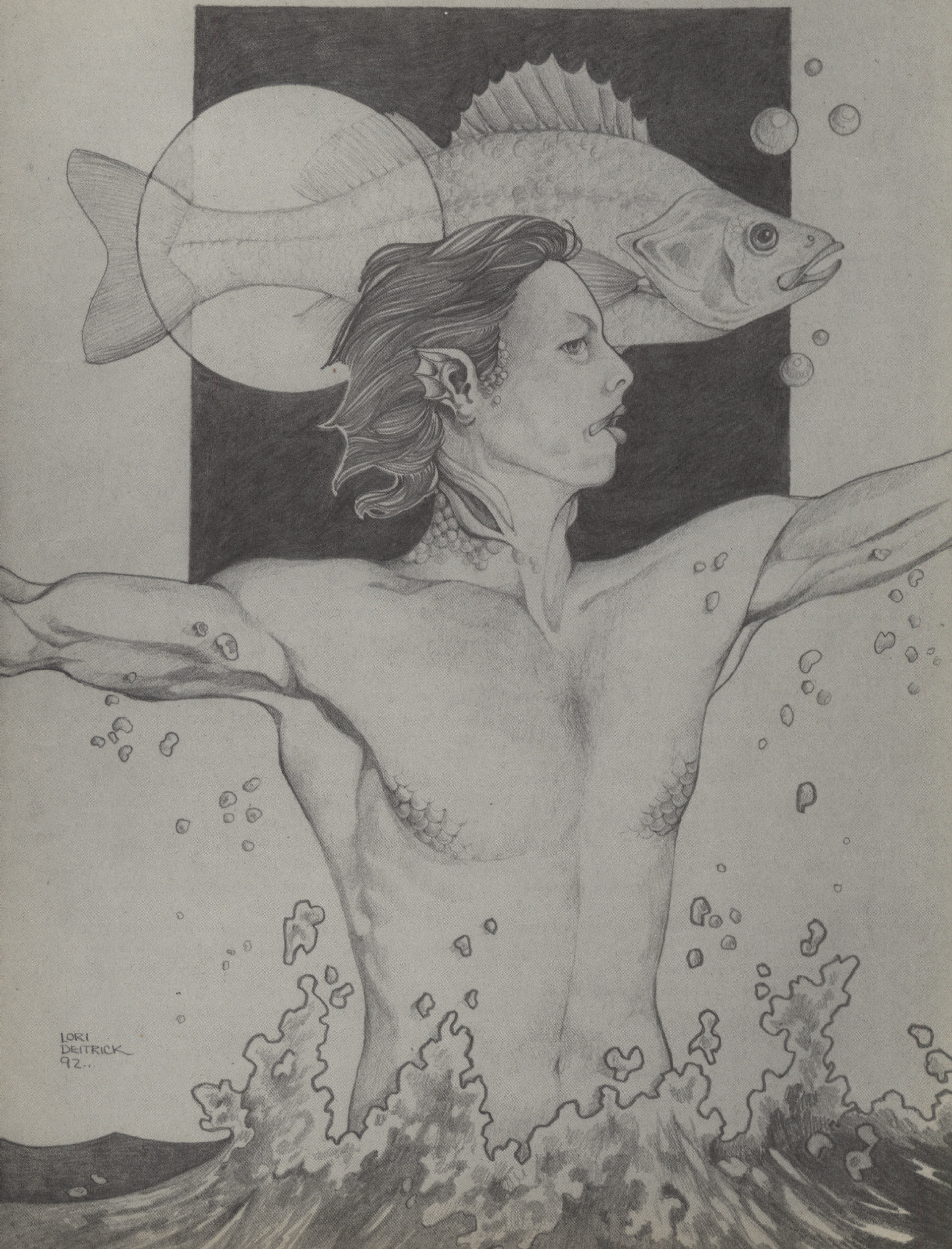
Midnight at sea. Leslie and I in our stateroom, post-lovemaking. "What do you think," she asks me, "so far?"

"So far? So good." There: appropriately non-committal and ambiguous. The way she is with me, too often. Her emotions are as mysterious as her allure. I wish I knew what drives my imagination about this woman. I want to marry her. I want to father her children. I can't believe I'm having these thoughts, but I am. Leslie is 31, three years older than me. *She's* the one who's supposed to be pressing for a ring, babies. But she isn't, she doesn't. Whenever I start talking about — us — she treats it like a joke. Like I can't really mean it.

This cruise — it's her cruise, actually. A freebie for having booked about five zillion Amphib excursions through the travel agency she manages.

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*Celebrate an 8-night Rite of Passage through the sunny Caribbean aboard the elegant SS Regal Prince.* That's the line that winks and says it'll be an all-Amphib Gender-Set festival. So she tells me. She should know.

**D**ay Two: in port at St. Thomas. Leslie has gone off with Dana Dennoit and spouse to shop the village. Most Gendered passengers are off the ship, as well; packs of Hermaphs continue to roam the boat deck, but the pairing off has already begun. From the gym I hear the *thwack* of a handball slamming the wall. Adrian Meecham, of all people. I ask if he could use a partner and he surprises me by saying yes. We play for twenty-one, Amphib style: the first man to make his points — loses. Amphibs are co-operators, not competitors, so the best performance is making sure your partner gets a ball he can't miss.

The game goes on forever: pit, pat, pit, pat. Meecham rallies the ball back into my palm so I barely have to take a step. Finally I get fed up, knock off a series of shots he can't return, and lose. "You just wore me out towards the end, there," I say, extending my hand in congratulation. He nods and shakes, but there's some steel in his grip. I actually think he's chafed at not making the shots.

Not, I tell myself, your generic Amphibian.

**D**ay Three. In port at St. Johns, Antigua. Leslie out again, gone with some of her travel clients.

Hermaphs now more than half paired. What luck! I happen upon Maxveldt, alone on the boat deck. I ask after his plans for the evening. He smiles at me.

"Same as yours, I am sure. Catch a glimpse of the Gender-Setting around the pool at midnight." He touches a match to another of his huge cigars, sucks on it luxuriantly. "Don't worry. Even Gendered adults have been known to sneak a peek."

"Even"? Why do you say 'even,' doctor?"

"Relax. None of the others has picked up on you. I, however, am expert. Ten years' clinical research, dozens of published articles — I'd better know the difference. As for them, they're not that focussed. And besides, your, uh — wife? — is an exceptional mimic. One of the best."

"Leslie has worked with them for years. She's a travel agent. She books these cruises." I pause, stare. "And — not my wife."

"Ah," Maxveldt adds neatly. He's constructing some hypothesis about the two of us, and this latest fact fits just where he wants it. He's exasperatingly smug, yet I can't help playing along. I want to know what he's thinking. "And she will ... not be with you tonight."

"I don't think so. We haven't talked about it."

"No, no, no: I said, she *will not* be with you tonight. That would be disastrous to your own —

pairing. Trust me. Your bond is not yet sufficiently strong." Wreathed in cigar smoke, his little eyes gleam mischievously. Maxveldt reaches into his vest pocket, presses a small white capsule into my palm. "Muddle this with her first cocktail this evening, then return to your stateroom directly after dinner and make love to her. She'll sleep like a babe until dawn. You can join me here on the boat deck, but make sure you arrive no later than eleven o'clock. See that little steel structure overlooking the pool? That's the paint locker. It's fitted with a one-way mirror. And I have the keys."

His offer is intriguing, yet all this cheerful premeditation gives me a chill. What makes him so cocksure I'd be interested in spying along with him?

It's at this precise moment that a pairing of Hermaphs wanders past. They're locked into one another's eyes, oblivious to the world.

"Eleven o'clock it is," I tell Maxveldt.

**D**ay Three, evening. At sea. I slip from bed, whisk on my clothes. Leslie sleeps — as Maxveldt promised — like a babe. The decks are silent, eerily vacant. Amphibs have a strong sense of group manners, and it's bad form for a Gendered adult to be out and about tonight. Correction: to be *seen* out just now. I feel the pressure of invisible eyes from all over.

As I approach, the steel door to the paint locker swings open a crack. I'm inside immediately. It's stuffy and tight and stinks of Maxveldt's cigar.

"Welcome to Eden," he smirks. "Beginning momentarily. They're just now starting to arrive."

Turquoise lights refract up through the pool's still waters, illuminating Hermaphs beginning to crowd the perimeter. Each is a couple, clinging tightly to one another. They wander by entranced, yet with an odd instinctive grace. Now a tiny crystal splash: the first pair has slipped into the pool. They dart back and forth like tadpoles: sleek dark forms illuminated from below. Now another and another — their entry into the water so instantaneous, so random it's almost impossible to sight — until the pool is filled with four or five pairs.

"Capacity," Maxveldt murmurs. "Community instinct prevents new pairs from entering now, until one of the couples emerges." Of course, he is right. From the shallow end one dark and gleaming pair slips out and stands away from the crowd, stroking and fondling one another. Their movements remind me of two people simultaneously applying suntan oil to one another.

Others emerge, are replaced. The pool has grown murky, clouded. Excess seromucin that accompanies the hormonal exudate, Maxveldt explains. "Specialized corticoids, unique to this new species. During the submersive exchange they're re-absorbed through the epidermis with exposure to air.

That's what the stroking and smoothing's about, as the new couples help speed the absorption."

"They don't look any different to me," I say.

"And won't, for a while. Early manifestations of Gender won't appear for at least five months." Maxveldt glances sideways at me, watching to see how I'm taking this. Clearly I'm a Case Study under his observation as well. "The Gender-Setting instinct is pleasure-driven, like copulation, but only happens once in life. Even tomorrow, none of them will know whether its destined Gender is male or female. By the time they develop secondary sexual characteristics and mate for reproduction they'll have spent the largest part of their lives as Genderless co-operators. The result is that male-female split is nowhere as pronounced as it is with ... us.

"You might call it the excision of the homicidal tendencies that have taken our own species to the brink of mass extinction. A Darwinian advancement that makes ones like us — the pre-evolved. Bit of a hurtful concept, no?"

"Not to me," I tell him. "I'm not a species. I'm Dale Gordon. Whether the animal I happen to be is still going to be around a century after I'm dead, well, that's someone else's concern."

Maxveldt gives me his nod of smug approval. "An ... enlightened attitude," he allows, in a way that suggests he doesn't believe a word. "But hardly what I'd expect of someone who's passing himself off as one of *them*."

"This was Leslie's idea, as I told you."

"And why should that be?" Maxveldt asks. Close to half the Hermaphs have emerged from the pool and are completing their Gender-Set.

"They're her customers. Her career. She's been passing for years. On a vacation like this she would have to ..."

"So then you engage in this charade only to satisfy *her*. And what are you looking to get out of it?"

He knows precisely, yet he wants me to say it in words. All right. "Doctor Maxveldt, I want to marry this woman. I want to fill her with recidivist children. No, I can't explain it, I don't know why I'm thinking like this ..."

"Normal pheromonic response, typical of our species. And you're what? Twenty-eight? Thirty? Working in some high-pressure competitive field?" I tell him. "Well, then. You're climacteric to mate and reproduce. Involved in your own ritual of courtship, presenting your display for her selection."

I struggle to keep my voice under control, whispering, "It's always been my choice to make, in the past." Around the pool the Gender-set has now been accomplished. Couples are dissolving into the darkness.

Maxveldt regards me with a merry twinkle. "That's how we males would choose to interpret it, Ladies' Choice

but don't you see? It's always Ladies' Choice. Always. We strut, butt heads, posture, assume positions of dominance. But ultimately it's always ... the male presents, the female selects. That is, until our successors the Amphibs capture the majority. Then it will no longer be the same."

He cracks the dogs to the paint locker. The two of us slip silently aft towards our staterooms.

His door comes first. I step inside for a moment and ask the question that's always puzzled me. "Doctor Maxveldt, how was it possible Amphibs just suddenly — appeared?"

"Because that's how evolutionary change eventuates. Like a butterfly from a cocoon. Something happens. Something snaps. That's where all the post-Darwinian anthropologists missed the boat! There's no smooth curve."

"How long ago did they begin to appear?"

"Seventy years ago. And all over. Our American Midwest, especially. Suddenly, *there they were*. By now that first generation's been pretty well investigated by evolutionary anthropologists. Problem was, no one ever thought to investigate the genetics of *their* parents, the pre-Amphib Primates. We do know that the vast majority died unusually young. But that generation is now lost to us. These little beggars are awfully closemouthed about their genetic heritage. What I'm doing is searching for pre-evolved Primates who might give birth to an Amphib, expanding the gene pool spontaneously."

"Do you think there are such individuals?"

"I am certain of it."

"And you believe that all Amphibs are now completely and finally evolved?"

"Nothing is ever 'completely and finally' evolved. Consider ourselves."

"What I mean is ... this cooperativeness, this resistance to competition. Might that somehow change?" I'm thinking particularly of Adrian Meecham.

"It might, but it's not likely. Right now, it's the signature of the species. However, there might be human beings, Amphib parents capable of putting a new spin on the gene pool."

"It's something I'd be interested in knowing more about myself," I tell him.

"They have inside information I haven't been able to ferret out," Maxveldt says. "Perhaps you might be able to help."

**D**awn at sea: Day Four. Leslie awakens refreshed. "I had the most marvelous *dreams* last night," she enthuses. Her eyes sparkle. Maxveldt must have included a euphoric in his concoction — thank you, doctor!

The sun is over the boat deck by the time we reach the breakfast buffet. Not a Hermaph in sight, but over here, the Meechams and the Dennoits. I

obediently fetch fresh coffee for our group. Leslie is radiant.

Amphib conversations are excruciatingly discreet. Each struggles to be the most accommodating of the group. Upon our arrival the two couples are discussing "lovely cities" of the Midwest ("lovely" meaning spots where the Amphib ghetto is becoming a majority).

Leslie and Dana Dennoit agree that Chicago remains far less than lovely but appears to be "improving." I hover with extra rolls and marmalade from the buffet. Serving them all is easier than participating in these discussions.

Adrian and Robin mention that their child, Rowan, was "out late" last night. That means they're acknowledging the Gender-Set. Leslie exclaims delightedly, proposes the six of us stroll the beach together when we anchor at St. Lucia this afternoon. I am smiling fixedly and nodding and beginning to fret whether even Leslie is worth an entire lifetime of this brittle civility. The resident brute in me lusts to do something unthinkable. Instead I return to the buffet and top up everyone's coffee.

**W**e are informed by the Dennoits that the Lanskys — the elderly deck chair-bound Primates — are both terminally ill, cancer, and that this cruise is their own personal, well, "valedictory" is the term Dana chooses to use. We all bow heads soberly, ritual acknowledgment of our own ultimate superiority as a species, especially once we manage to demographically outflank all those unstable, violence-prone, competition-mad Primates. Leslie gazes in my direction with cool regard, mixed with admiration. The thought of making it through three more days practically engulfs me.

**S**t. Lucia has come into view, off the port bow, and we proceed out to the promenade deck for the view.

Shuffleboard in progress ahead. The first visible pair of newly-Gendered children sliding discs down the deck in concert with (wouldn't I know it?) Maxveldt himself. He looks like some crackpot Teddy Roosevelt, all glinting eyes and tombstone teeth. One of the youngsters belongs to Adrian and Robin; they meet and embrace. What, I am asking myself, are the odds of this run-in?

The "game," thus far, has consisted of oozing discs into three equidistant locations at the opposite end of the court. More an activity than a contest. Maxveldt drags his shuffleboard paddle like a lazy janitor dragging a push broom.

The child's name is Pat — sexually ambiguous, as are all Amphib names. Like Robin or Adrian or Leslie. Dale, for that matter. Pat's partner is Sidney. The two of them titter self-consciously, surrounded by us grownups. Maxveldt circulates like a satellite

behind our backs as we congregate, goofy and inoffensive, outside the loop.

None of us is prepared for what happens next. Leslie's down, she's on the deck, she's in pain. Maxveldt kneeling next to her mumbling foolish apologies. It takes a moment to piece together what happened. She must have stepped backwards, tumbled over his shuffleboard paddle. Her ankle's already begun to swell alarmingly.

"Stupid of me!" Maxveldt stammers. "Don't try to put weight on it, we'll have it checked out at the infirmary. I'll make sure of it — I'm a doctor!"

I slip an arm under her back and under her knees, start carrying her towards the infirmary. It occurs to me that this carrying of an injured female may not be appropriate to Amphibia. I don't care. Besides, I feel Leslie being stirred by this — atavistic old Primate female sexuality.

In the little inside cabin with the red cross on the door, Maxveldt imperiously shoos off a pair of Amphib nurses, prepares to examine Leslie himself. "Just the patient and myself, if you don't mind," he informs the group of us, and closes the door. For only a fraction of a second am I outraged; then I realize how he is protecting the both of us. Once her deck shoe is removed, the unwebbed toes exposed, so is our cover. I'm developing a grudging admiration for the man.

**D**ay Four: early afternoon, anchored near St. Lucia. The X-rays have shown it's a sprain, nothing more, but serious enough to require at least 24 hours of bed rest. The ankle's been medicated and wrapped, and Maxveldt has arranged to have her transported back to our stateroom.

Amphib etiquette dictates that, since Leslie cannot join us, the outing be canceled. The pristine beach gleams off the bow; most of the youngsters have gone ashore on the launch and can be seen frolicking the length of the beach.

I peek in on Leslie, then wander down to the gym. Once again, here's Adrian. Working out. Secretly furious at being restricted to shipboard? If I hadn't met his webfoot child, noted the family resemblance, I'd swear he's passing. Just like me.

I suggest a match and he takes me up on it, just like that. I experience this urge to test him. Something Maxveldtian is welling up inside. I start out the first few minutes playing it straight, whacking it back to him. Doing my best. A point apiece comes of this. Then I pull off a shot that's just barely beyond his reach. He reaches, misses, goes to his knees.

"Honor you," I call out. He missed the return: he gets the point. Now he's serving and after a few whacks he dumps it close into the wall. I go at it and *slam* it back: it shoots by him inside the line. Not even close. "Honor two," I say, and serve. Two pitty-

pats later he lays down a slam of his own. This time I'm on my knees as it slashes past me.

"Honor *you*," he barks. The way he says it "Honor" doesn't seem the appropriate word.

The battle's joined. This is getting interesting. *Thwop! Whap!* He's good. Better than I am. Also more devious. Now I'm ahead 11-3 and I'm not about to be embarrassed that way. I might be doing better if I weren't thinking so hard about genetics. Who *were* this guy's parents, anyway?

Now *he's* ahead, 15-13. I can hear the flutter of his gills beneath his scarf as he pants. His upper torso is drenched with sweat, as is mine.

But now he really turns it on and, try as I might, I keep falling ahead. 17-14. 19-15. 20-15.

Match.

He reaches out his hand to congratulate me — for "winning" the game. All I can do is laugh.

"What's your background?" I ask him. "Mixed?"

He nods. "Father's side. You the same, I suppose."

"You're not alone," I say.

**D**ay Four, dusk. Lights winking on along the beachfront and about the ship. Maxveldt and I sharing a whisky in his tiny stateroom.

"Ah, to the missing link," he enthuses, and we drink up. "This is precisely the information I've been seeking, Dale, and I wouldn't have accomplished it without you."

"Don't forget, it's only my interpretation," I remind him. "Amphib mother, Primate dad. Or maybe the other way around. But I didn't ask any more about it. If I had, he'd have gotten suspicious."

"Never mind. Atypical behavior pattern, distinctive musculature (which I noticed myself at our meals together) — what else could 'mixed' mean? He's young enough, chances are good both birth parents are still alive." Maxveldt all but licks his chops at the thought. "I can track down his hometown from the ship's registry. You have brought me the best news of anytime in my life, young man. And now I suspect I may just be able to do the same for you."

"Just tell me that Leslie's ankle is going to be all right."

"I'll tell you more than that." Maxveldt's eyes gleam. "She's quite smitten with you, is my first report. Pheromonal compatibility, all that. I spent most of the afternoon with her in the infirmary. Told her nothing about the two of us, Dale. Only that I recognized the both of you passing from the first day out and that I intended to keep your secret and was sure none of the other Amphibs has the slightest idea.

"As for the x-rays, these might intrigue you." He shuffles through the pile of papers on his desk, withdraws a pair of black negatives. But the x-rays aren't of her ankle.

They're of her head.

I look them over, meet his eyes with a baffled look. "The neck!" he says impatiently. "Circling the second and third cervical vertebrae."

There's sort of a cloudy collar midway between bone and the skin of her neck. It is an encirclement of subcutaneous cartilage.

Vestigial gills.

"She doesn't know. But she does, I imagine, *suspect*," Maxveldt offers, "which is why she's been so elusive. Which is why — this cruise. With you. This passing for Amphibs. You see, there's an anthropological reason why she passes so easily. My question to you is, are you ready for what your own children may turn out to be?"

I think about this, but I also think about my afternoon with Adrian Meecham. The handball match. The both of us black with sweat and going for broke.

If the gene pool can be expanded, altered, the new species has the potential of ... *improvement*.

"I still want her, Doctor Maxveldt."

**A**t sea, last night out, seventy miles southeast of Miami. We're at the cruise-end dinner dance, bathed in sparkling lights. I hold Leslie close and move gently; her ankle has improved enough that she can dance, though only the slowest, torchiest numbers. She is lovely in an off-the-shoulder black number, a fragile pink silk muffler wound demurely about the throat and trailing past her left scapula. Black tie for me.

The entire "A" Seating's up and on the floor just now: parents, newly Gendered children. A celebration for all of us, since each has attained some rite of passage since departure a week ago.

Even Leslie and I have done it. We've passed. And it is especially easy to do so right this moment. In dances like these cooperation is natural. Exhilarating.

Equally exhilarating is my career financial picture. Without having to relinquish my brokership, I'll be enrolled (with Leslie) as a principal in Maxveldt's long-term study. As he readily admits, his bid for anthropological immortality. The seed funding alone is in the mid-six figures; the study could last for more than a generation.

For my undercover work to date he's promised a considerable tax-exempt chunk, up front. Plus extra for every "significant" child we propagate.

Leslie will learn of all of this in time, but not right now. For I have presented and for the while, at least, it is still hers to choose.

The orchestra breaks into a slow and dreamy piece, full of brassy sax posturings. It's an old, old tune, and as I guide her among the Amphib couples the name finally comes to me.

"Strangers in the Night." Ah, inspired. □

# The Motel 6 Fugue

By Karl G. Schlosser

Art by N. Taylor Blanchard

The fear hit Anderson as soon as his eyes opened. The generic curtains, the cheap clock-radio sitting on the nondescript nightstand, and the Gideon Bible — he recognized none of it. *Where the hell am I?*

Peter Anderson pushed away the fear growing in his belly. Panic wouldn't serve him now. He needed answers. He'd built his whole life on that principle.

He sat up in bed and discovered the hangover that had been lying in wait. The pain cheered him in a way, for it gave him something to focus on other than the terrifying sense of displacement.

*Go with what you know*, he told himself. *Come on, be rational.* Hangovers meant drinking. Drinking probably meant a weekend or vacation. Perhaps he'd been trying to forget some deeper pain. However, that still didn't explain his presence here. *Where?*

First things first. He threw back the covers that smelled slightly of disinfectant and chlorine, then stumbled into the bathroom. He didn't switch on the lights; he didn't need them. Faucets and towels seemed to reach for his hands. Artificial light would be intolerable in any case.

This was a Motel 6. A glance at the paper-wrapped glasses on the counter told him that much. Which one? While he hadn't placed himself yet, Anderson's stomach knew that he'd been drinking boilermakers. With Kentucky bourbon.

He let the shower steam away the worst of it, then reluctantly shut off the water and dried himself with the rough towels. He moved with more confidence now. *Stick with the basics. Pretend that you have a cold. Get dressed, get ready for work. Act like you know what you're doing.*

Opening the closet, Anderson found two nondescript black nylon bags, one large and one small. The smaller bag contained six items: toothbrush, toothpaste, floss, electric razor, hairbrush, and generic ibuprofen. All the items were relatively new.

He brushed his close-cropped blond hair, shaved, and removed the last vestiges of the boilermakers from his mouth. His reflection revealed a dark tan and — despite the hangover — gray eyes with absolutely white sclera.

In the second nylon bag, he found underwear, socks, jeans, and a blue oxford dress shirt. The clothes (which all fit) had been wrapped in laundry paper. He finished dressing.

Anderson's growling stomach told him that he hadn't eaten for a long time. He slipped on his boots, pausing to examine the high gloss on black leather. The smell of polish invoked an image of an old Hispanic man and stained rags. *Where had that been?* The shine was still fresh.

A denim jacket lay draped across the foot of the bed. He put it on and left.

Bright, clean sunlight lit up the coffee shop. A small bell jingled as he pushed through the second set of double glass doors. He stood by the sign that read "WAIT HERE TO BE SEATED" until one of the waitresses noticed him. "Don't mind that, honey," she called out from behind the counter. "Just take a seat."

"Anything nonsmoking?" he asked. His voice sounded like it belonged to someone else.

"As long as you don't light up, it's nonsmoking." She barked a laugh and the cook behind the grill shook his head. It sounded like an old joke.

Before sitting down, he patted the jacket's pockets until he found the reassuring lump of a wallet. *That happened once, losing my wallet on a date....* Anderson turned the coffee cup upright in its saucer. The waitress ambled over and filled the cup to the rim. "How did you know I don't take cream?" he asked, offering her a grin.

"You didn't move the dispenser. Didn't touch the sugar, either." Her name tag read MARGE.

"Well, Marge, what can you recommend for a hungry customer?"

She rocked back on her heels. "You want bacon or sausage?"

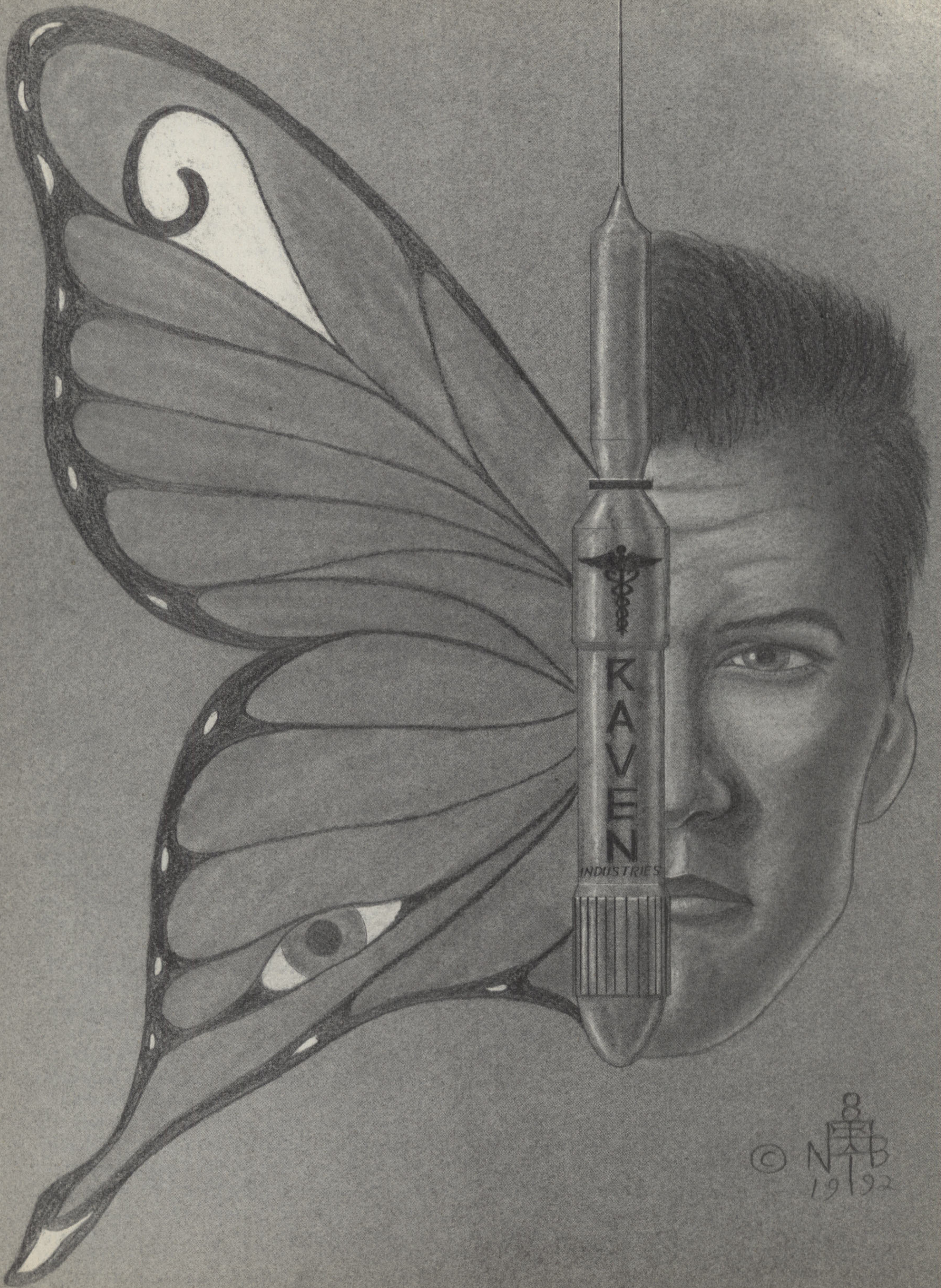
The image of greasy meat nauseated him. "Neither," he replied. Marge looked at him as if he'd just confessed to selling children. "It's just that a pig saved my life once," he added hastily. "I can't bring myself to eat them." Marge relaxed.

"Well, I'll throw in an extra muffin for y'all, then. You just wait here and I'll bring you something special."

"Sounds good," Anderson said. As the waitress turned away, he lowered his voice into a conspiratorial whisper. "Can I ask you a question, Marge?"

She measured him for a moment. "I suppose."

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"I've been trying to place your accent, but for the life of me I can't figure it out. Where were you born?" He stared into her left eye to focus her attention.

"Just down the highway, near Waco." She favored him with a smile full of possibilities, then turned to greet a new customer.

*Texas. That's not right.* Anderson wasn't sure where he lived, but Texas was far off the mark. *I must be on vacation, then. Visiting someone, maybe.* Who did he know in Texas?

He sipped the bitter, life-giving coffee. *Thank God for invading European explorers and cash-crop economies.* The caffeine evaporated some of the fog from his thoughts. He finished the cup in one long, steady swallow, then looked out into the parking lot. Two semi-trucks, a motorcycle, and a Honda Civic populated the otherwise empty lot. As he watched, a man climbed down from the cab of one of the trucks and yawned.

In the buttoned pocket of his jacket, Anderson located a plastic-covered key stamped with the Honda logo. *Only one key? That's right — it fits all the doors, trunk, and ignition.* He had always appreciated the simplicity of that design.

Under all the dirt, the Civic was sky blue.

"Here you are, honey." Marge set a glass of orange juice and an enormous plate in front of him. Scrambled eggs, tortillas, honeydew melon, and two corn muffins threatened to overflow the dish. While she refilled his coffee, he split a muffin and spread a generous helping of butter over the inside. The aroma was heaven: it tasted even better. He sighed his contentment.

By the time Marge checked on him he had eaten everything, using one of the tortillas to soak up the last crumbs. The waitress shook her head. "You look like you haven't seen breakfast since last week."

"Not one this good," he admitted.

"Like anything else?" Marge rested her hand in her apron pocket, near her pad.

Anderson withdrew his wallet and found a twenty, which he tucked under the napkin dispenser. "I'd like to sit here a while if you don't mind."

"You can sit there all day," she replied. "Of course, I may have to put someone in the booth with you at lunch." She gave another barking laugh, but didn't take her eyes off the money. She gave a slight shrug, picked up his plate, and returned to the counter.

Anderson emptied his jacket pockets on the table and examined each item. Wallet, memo pad, pen, and car key. The wallet held \$140 in twenties, an ID card, and a photograph of a woman. The bills were fresh and clean, as if they'd come from an automated teller. *But I don't have a bank card.* He opened the memo pad. Several pages had been torn out. Scrawled on the top sheet was a name: "Daniel H. Brown." The name triggered a sharp memory.

The heat wave had driven Anderson into the tiny bar to seek shelter in a cold beer. Daniel Brown had bumped into Anderson by accident and promptly apologized. When Anderson had taken a seat in a darkened corner, Brown had invited himself along.

Mr. Brown was short and round, almost a caricature. His long sideburns emphasized his thinning hair. Small, almost pudgy hands punctuated his long-winded sentences. Anderson said little. When he looked behind Brown's words he saw someone who needed a good listener. So Anderson accepted the second beer that Brown bought, settled into his seat, and listened.

At the end of their conversation Anderson looked into that place two inches behind the other man's left eye. In a moment of silent searching, he discovered Brown's emotional linchpin — a murky childhood trauma — and opened a connection there. It might take weeks or months, but Brown would integrate the formerly suppressed memory. Anderson rubbed his eyes to ease his sudden headache. Then he silently asked Brown for some traveling money. Brown excused himself, used the bar's ATM, and gave Anderson \$200 without exactly knowing why.

He had waited until Brown finished his drink, then instilled a strong feeling of peace in the man before sending him on his way. Then he had ordered the first of many boilermakers.

*Did I write myself a note?* On a hunch, Anderson wrote Brown's name again. The handwriting matched. The pad felt wrong — his hands ached for a keyboard. He tore out the paper with Brown's name and piled the pieces in the ashtray.

The wallet yielded nothing beyond the ID card and the photograph. No credit cards or business cards, not even a list of phone numbers. The ID card had two magnetic strips across the back and a fingerprint verifier. Anderson recognized himself in the holographic picture. His hair was shorter. He wore an expensive-looking suit. RAVEN INDUSTRIES was stamped across the top:

PHARMACEUTICAL RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT.

Anderson, Peter G., Ph.D. Clearance Level Blue. ISI-50.

*Okay, so I'm on vacation.* An organizational chart flashed behind his eyes. Within Raven Industries there were nine security access levels from white to blue. The number that followed the color was officially referred to as the Individual Supervision Interval. Employees called it The Leash. Anderson's Leash required him to report every 50 weeks. Once a year. He couldn't recall making his last report.

The photograph captured a young woman with thick, black hair styled in creative disarray. Her eyes, cool and green, evoked a smile from Anderson.



A surprisingly small nose and thin-lipped mouth drawn into a habitual smirk completed the face. On the back of the photograph, written in bold pen strokes:

To Peter,  
All my love  
— MJ

Anderson ran names through his head. *Mary, Martha, Meredith?* He pressed fingers against his temple, willing more information to surface. Nothing happened. He left the coffee shop, checked out of the motel, and loaded up the car.

Rummaging around in the glove compartment, he found an AAA Navigator disk, which he slipped into the Honda's feeder. He programmed the destination for Waco and released the wheel.

*Why not? I've never been to Waco.* That was important, somehow. To stay away from his usual haunts. Give the impression he lacked direction and purpose. *Give the impression to whom?* He glanced in the rearview mirror, but saw nothing except empty road.

The radio offered static for a few miles until a country-and-western station broke through. Anderson didn't care much for that kind of music, but it helped fill the silence.

Tipping back his seat, he darkened the windows and listened to steel guitars.

In the dream, her name was Marina Janov....  
"I don't understand what's wrong!" Marina had pulled her hair back behind her ears in a habitual gesture. "We inject the rats, they run the maze. Fine. We give the drugs to chimpanzees, but no change. Why?"

"I hate to remind you, but we're dealing with a much higher order of brain function," Anderson said. They had been dating for just over a month, and he couldn't keep the smile out of his voice. For the first time in his adult life, he had fallen in love.

"You *never* hate to remind me, Peter," Marina replied. "You are so good at it. But that is not the problem. Computer simulation says it is not, and should not be. Therefore, is not!"

Anderson noted that under stress, Marina's English was the first victim. "Perhaps we should try my approach," he said calmly.

"Oh, now we're going to teach the chimpanzees to drink coffee all the time?" Marina said with mock anger. "This is what you learned at Johns Hopkins?"

"That was a joke for the office party," he said. "Look, the drug doesn't work on primates."

"At the moment," she added.

"At the moment," he said. "We could bind the drug with acetylcholine or another neurotransmitter. Perhaps a synthetic specifically designed to breach the blood-brain barrier."

"I'm not sure, Peter. It would mean a lot of back-

tracking," Marina said.

"Let me worry about that. I'm in charge of this project, not you. So if anything happens, I catch the flak."

"Can I have your office?" she asked.

In the end, they tried it his way. Anderson assembled dozens of new computer models that combined the drug in its present form with a variety of neurotransmitters. Marina tested the more promising combinations on the lab animals.

Anderson grew impatient. While he hadn't told anyone, this was his final research project. He'd stashed away enough money to buy back his employment bond. Getting out of Raven would be a more delicate matter.

He'd have to accept an identity change and Corporate surveillance to ensure his silence. At least he owned a respectable percentage of Raven's more successful patents. He could barter those for Marina's freedom as well.

After 20 years, Anderson'd had enough. He wanted to settle down somewhere, grow a beard, and teach molecular chemistry to smart-ass graduate students. He wanted *out*.

The Honda's manual controller buzzed insistently. Anderson raised his seat from the horizontal and took the wheel. He was still 10 miles outside of Waco, just within the range of municipal road jurisdiction. In a few minutes, he passed an aging Greyhound bus and spied a gas station. It was an older station, offering only gasoline, so he continued until he found a place that sold ethanol. The Honda was equipped with dual fuel systems, but he preferred to run the cleaner fuel. In California, you had no choice.

He pulled up to a pump and set the meter to cash. The attendant was a little surprised. While the clear fuel filled the tank, Anderson stepped into the station's phone booth and punched in an inquiry. Several 800 numbers appeared. He touched the first one.

Two rings, then: "Motel 6, may I help you?"

"Hello. I'm coming into town for a night or so. What's available?"

"Just a moment, sir," replied the clerk. There was a sound of tapping keys. "Single or double?"

"Single. Near the coffee shop, if possible."

"Well, I've got a couple near the front, but the coffee shop's been closed all week. Hurricane damage, you know."

Anderson shook his head. The hurricane must have occurred during his memory lapse. "I see, thank you." He cut off the connection and dialed the next number. *A hurricane. Jesus, what else did I miss during my fugue?*

The second Motel 6 boasted a heated pool, swimsuit optional, and a coffee shop that served prize-

winning chili. Anderson booked a room.

He washed the last thousand miles of dust from the windows and left.

**T**he intelligence drug was an old project, Anderson thought ruefully. *At least two other firms had better teams and more money assigned to it.* Why had he been so worried? All he wanted to do was get out of Raven. Get away. Turn his back on all the insane politics and undeclared war between corporations.

But he couldn't leave the project unfinished. That wasn't his way. As soon as they let him turn over his notes, he'd call it quits. If only he could beat the side effects....

**B**y the time he reached the motel, dark, heavy clouds had converged on Waco. Warm, moist air clung to him. Anderson gave the clerk \$80 and collected his key. The room was located around the corner from the pool, adjacent to the road. That didn't bother him. Once he had been a light sleeper, but nothing disturbed him now.

After opening all the windows, he fetched his luggage and jacket from the car. Then he called the desk.

"This is Mr. Anderson in room 210."

"Everything all right down there?"

"Fine, fine." Anderson cradled the phone on his shoulder while he pulled clothes out of his bag. "Is there a laundromat near here?"

"Not exactly, sir. I do have an agreement of sorts with the dry cleaners down the street. If you look in the bathroom, there's a canvas bag. Just set that outside your door and I'll have José run it down there."

"That would be fine. Thanks." He hung up the phone, gathered up his spare clothes, and deposited the laundry bag outside his door. Then he slid the deadbolt shut and wedged a chair under the knob.

*I'm tired*, he thought as he stripped down to his shorts. The breeze dried the sweat on his chest and back. *I'm trying so hard to get back to where I was, but it doesn't seem to matter.*

He sat on the edge of the bed and debated sleep. It couldn't hurt. He stretched out on the queen-size mattress and closed his eyes. In a minute he was deep asleep.

...lifted a vial of the drug from the new batch on his desk, fitted it with an injector, and dropped it into his pocket. He was sure the animals wouldn't fall into comas this time. He'd bet money on it.

The outer door of his office slid open, and McGuire, a Raven security guard, stood in the rectangle of light from the corridor. A collapsible Israeli assault rifle lay cradled in the crook of his arm.

"Dr. Anderson," McGuire stated, "we have to

leave."

"Now? But I need to —" In two fluid movements, the guard stood over him and clamped a large hand on his upper biceps.

"Now." He lifted Anderson out of his chair without effort. "Matsusika has compromised our borders."

Anderson moved under his own power. *Matsusika. Damn.* "It's a suicide run, isn't it?"

"Probably." McGuire hustled Anderson through the outer office, pausing to drop proximity grenades near each station. If someone entered the area without a Raven ID badge, the office would be incinerated.

As soon as they cleared the hall, the guard pulled Anderson behind a planter. A hidden door opened onto a staircase. McGuire led the way down; Anderson followed close behind.

When they reached the last step, automatic lights flickered on, revealing the clean white walls of a blast shelter. A pair of desks, a couch, and a tiny kitchenette filled most of the room. "Here," said McGuire as he pulled a Raven ID card from his pocket. "Your old card is dead. Validate this one and put it in your pocket."

As Anderson pressed his thumb into the card, he asked, "Where's Dr. Janov?"

"Bathroom, one level above." McGuire touched a tactile feedback pad on his chest. "She's with an escort. Moving this way."

"What about us?" Anderson pocketed the ID. The picture was terrible.

The guard touched his chest again. "We'll evacuate this entire area and do a very quick search. If we don't find Matsusika's team, we'll core dump and level."

"But we've got experimental subjects in there! Two years' work!"

The guard turned and looked at him. For a moment, Anderson glimpsed compassion in the other man's face. "I'm sorry, but you know the drill. And don't tell me any more, I'm not cleared."

Marina appeared at the foot of the stairs. A female guard followed close behind. "Peter!" Her half-zipped skirt threatened to trip her.

"Marina! Over here!"

She hugged him briefly, then stepped back and scowled. "I knew I should have worn pants today. But this blouse doesn't match anything else."

Red blossomed on her chest an instant before Anderson heard the shot. Heavy hands slammed him to the floor. A figure in Matsusika body armor appeared from behind one of the desks. He brought a rifle to bear on Anderson.

Return fire from the Raven guards roared in his ears. He tried to tear open Marina's blouse, but the guards sat on top of him, shielding him with their armored bodies.

There was a brief pause as fresh clips were

slammed home. In that moment, the ground rocked as the proximity grenades tore through the lab above.

Anderson hugged Marina close to him. The assassin's bullet had torn through her left ventricle. "It's okay," she stammered. "I will... be fine. It is... not so much blood."

She had died before the company's paramedics arrived.

The room was nearly dark when he opened his eyes. A faint orange tinge against the drawn curtains reflected the last minutes of sunlight. He squeezed his eyes shut, wishing the memories were less painful. At least he *could* remember. She was so beautiful ....

After a shower, Anderson glanced at his steamy reflection. His brief nap had softened the harsh lines of his face. When he smiled, he saw the young researcher that Marina had married.

He dressed with care, touching up his face with the razor. He wanted to look good tonight. After slipping on his boots, he glanced through the guest information pamphlet by the phone. According to the pamphlet's map, there were at least a dozen bars within walking distance. He choose one at random.

When he opened the door, a slip of paper fell from the frame. It was Raven stationery:

YOUR BEREAVEMENT LEAVE WILL EXPIRE  
IN SIX DAYS. CALL IN WITH YOUR STATUS.

He pocketed the note and left.

The Kicking Twin Mules didn't fit the pamphlet's description of a "family dining and drinking establishment," but it felt right. The owner

had taken a very large bar and partitioned off a small number of tables and booths in the hope of snagging some dinner business.

Anderson ordered quesadillas, chili con carne, and ears of sweet steamed corn. He ate everything, washing it down with a large bottle of Mexican mineral water. He sighed. *No Perrier here*. Dessert was an immense piece of strawberry shortcake.

By the time he pushed the last plate away, the bar's regular patrons had filled the semi-darkness of the dance floor. There was no bandstand, but someone had dropped a roll of silver dollars into the CD jukebox. The music nearly overwhelmed conversation.

Not that it mattered to Anderson. His telepathic range had increased since the last fugue. He skimmed the thoughts of the patrons at the next table without effort. Beyond that, he had to concentrate. No one interested him, so he left a twenty on the table and walked into the bar proper. He handed another twenty to the bartender.

"Wadda ya need?"

"Beer," Anderson said.

The bartender, a bearded man who weighed at least 250 pounds, handed him an ice-cold Budweiser and tugged open the cash drawer of an antique register.

"I'll run a tab," Anderson said. The bartender handed him his change.

"Read the sign, friend. No tabs."

He collected his beer and found a table bisected by one of the subdued spotlights. The table afforded him a good view of the other patrons. Several people passed by, but no one took a seat at the tables on either side of him.

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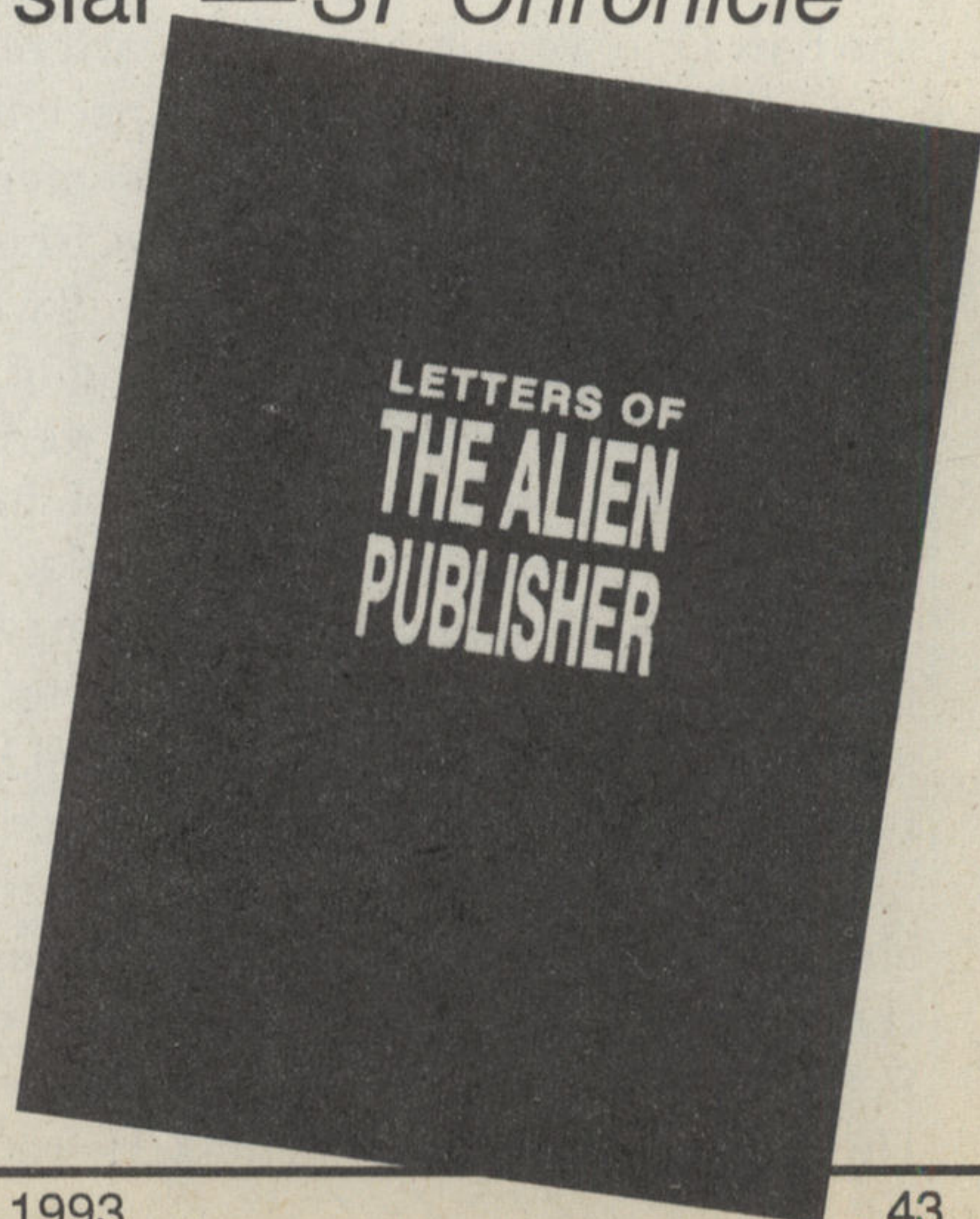
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The events of the past eleven months rested behind his eyes, arranged in neat, almost alphabetical order. He shuffled and dealt those memories like a Vegas dealer. Flip. His first meeting with Marina. Flip. Selling his condo in Laguna Niguel. Flip. A wonderfully silly coffee mug — a gift from Marina — that sat at the edge of his desk. Flip. Injecting himself with the drug.

After Matsusika's botched raid, there had been little chance for continued funding for the project. Not after Raven read his report and totalled up their losses. No. He had been given a bereavement leave then, with an option of heading another research team upon his return.

It had been so easy. As the paramedics took away Marina's lifeless form, he had dug his hands deep in his lab coat and found the injector. A few minutes later, he'd dropped the empty injector into the smoking remains of his office. What did he have to lose?

He was totally unprepared for the emergence of his paranormal abilities. One day, while having lunch with an old friend, he discovered that he knew exactly what she would say. Not general subjects, but the precise words.

Then the fugues started. After Anderson consciously exercised his paranormal skills, he entered a mild coma. The first fugue had lasted only a few hours, but they increased in duration until they peaked at nearly 80 hours. He'd barely escaped total dehydration that time.

Each time he used his new skills, they grew stronger. As his body grew accustomed to the strain, the fugues diminished.

As soon as he dared, he left Los Angeles. If Raven suspected his success, they'd resurrect the experiment and *never* let him go. How much would people pay for telepathy? How many more people would die because of it?

He raised his index finger and a waitress brought him another beer. He took a swallow and scanned the bar. One woman caught his attention.

She stood at the bar in unconscious mimicry of thousands of movies and advertisements. Anderson saw through the façade with ease. She had recently escaped from a failed marriage. Two of her vertebrae were fused in the beginning of osteoporosis. The last fifteen years of her life were compressed and blurred by an assembly line job in Dallas turning out cheap televisions for Canada.

When she looked directly at him, Anderson felt the full weight of her loneliness. He winced, then smiled. She accepted delivery, added her own, then tossed it back.

Calmness settled over him, shutting out the clamor of his thoughts. He shut his eyes, relishing the moment. If he pushed himself too hard, the fugue would close over him like dark water. Not yet. He had to deal with Raven first. He retreated as she

walked toward his table.

"Hi. Can I sit down?"

"Sure." Anderson opened his eyes. "Be my guest."

She eased herself into the chair opposite him. "I'm Mary." *Mary Weinberg née Halley. Born in Wichita and educated at A & M, where she met her future husband. Got pregnant, married, dropped out of school, and had a miscarriage, all within six months.*

"Alex." He didn't extend his hand. Neither did she.

"Why are you sitting here by yourself, Alex?"

"No one wanted to join me until now, I guess," Anderson said. He glanced around. "I'm not the only solo tonight."

"But it's different with you," Mary replied. She tapped manicured nails against her wine glass. Anderson could see the glue points for the artificial tips.

"What do you mean?"

"I've been watching you," she said. "I watch everyone. When people come in, they like to sit at these tables first. Later on, they squeeze into the bar or lean against that wall over there. But you're surrounded by empty seats. Everyone seems to veer away at the last second."

"You've done a lot of research, I see," Anderson said.

"I'm writing a book." She lied. *She had always wanted to write, but was afraid of failure.* "What about you?"

"Taking a leave from work," he replied.

"It must be nice to have a choice," she said. Then she turned and caught the eye of the waitress, who brought her a glass of white wine.

Mary raised her glass. "Cheers."

"Skål."

Anderson noticed that she didn't close her eyes when she drank. They were deep green, like Marina's. His own grief surfaced for a moment, gasped for breath, then sank beneath the waves again.

On impulse, he reached for Mary's hand. It was warm. He gave it a quick squeeze.

"What was that for?" she asked.

"For luck. For your book. It's not easy to create something in your life .... There are too many people who'd tell you to put away your dreams."

"You're right," Mary said. "I've put a lot of things away. Not any more, though." She took a drink and smiled. Anderson looked behind the smile and was surprised at the intensity of her feelings.

He had found a friend.

The headache hit him hard and fast. He reached for his beer, missed. "Damn."

"What's wrong?"

"Day's catching up with me. Too many hours on the road." The pounding in his head almost drowned

out his voice. "I've got to get back to my room."

She considered his words. "Well, if you're that tired, I guess you better go." Through the haze, Anderson saw her disappointment.

"It's not like that, really," he said quickly. "Here." He handed her the memo pad and pen. "Give me your number. As soon as I sleep this off we'll get together."

She scribbled her name and number. "Call me Saturday. We can have a drink or something."

He stowed the pad and pen carefully in a jacket pocket. "I'll call as soon I can, Mary. I promise," he said. "Get some writing done." The pain in his head dropped into his neck. With an effort he sent a final probe into her and boosted her self-confidence.

"I'll talk to you later," she said.

"Bye."

Anderson stumbled out of the bar and leaned against the door, breathing heavily. He took another breath and headed down the road.

By the time he reached the motel he could barely see straight. He found the right hall, then counted doors until he came to his room. With his eyes closed, he unlocked the door and slammed it behind him.

He kicked off his boots and fell into bed. After a moment, he rolled over and fumbled for the phone. He dialed a number from the guest pamphlet.

"Hey there, this is Eddie's Liquor."

Anderson barely heard the woman on the other end. "Do you deliver? I desperately need a six-pack."

"I heard that right. Where y'all at?"

"Motel 6, Room 210," he said.

"There's a ten-dollar minimum charge for deliveries. Did'ja want anything else?"

"No." He hung up the phone. While he waited, he wrote himself a note: *Tender your resignation*. There would be a lot of hassles and research restrictions, but that no longer mattered. He was finished with the suits. Let them think him a failure and a broken man — it would make his departure easier. As an afterthought, he scribbled another line. *Call Mary*.

Less than five minutes later, there was a knock at the door. Anderson heaved himself out of bed and took the bag from a short man with a crew cut.

Anderson handed over a ten, then shut the door.

He settled himself on the bed and opened the first beer. Drank it without tasting it, then opened another.

*Something wonderful is happening, Marina. I wish you could see it.* He put down the empty beer can and crawled under the covers. *I am a caterpillar earning his wings one day at a time.*

Peter Anderson entered the fugue, dreaming of sublime blue skies. □

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# Dear Froggy

## By Patricia Anthony

### Art by Cortney Skinner

Lionel always said the plain muslin dress was lone a parlor maid might wear on her afternoon off. Had he known Iona was wearing it with company in the house, he certainly would have made her change. But Iona was one whose rebellions were quiet; and so, to forestall any arguments, she'd taken early breakfast in her rooms.

The morning dew of the meadows outside the manor was dense. Where her hem brushed the grass, it came away wet. In her left hand she clutched a small cheesecloth bag; her right was occupied with her walking stick. Every few yards she paused and studied the ground to see if she could spy any tracks of *gastropodae*.

The night before, the revelation of her interest had spawned great derision and some shudders. Lionel's huge-bellied uncle Edward, a veteran of India, had scowled and asked why Lionel could not manage to keep his wife from tramping the fields. Dowager Lady Darcy, visiting from the neighboring manor, had lifted an incredulous eyebrow and wondered whether snails weren't something more to be banished from the garden than collected. Rosanna Powell, the widow of Lionel's younger cousin, had asked in her superior way if Iona could find a more agreeable pastime, such as pressing flowers.

The fact was that she could not. And had the guests known the entire truth of it, a truth she also carefully hid from her husband, they would have been stricken speechless. Iona studied the reproductive cycle of gastropods, not for any salacious knowledge, but for the science itself.

She moved towards the opposite shore of the lake, whisking past fat spiders who dangled patiently in their webs. The forest was a jewelbox: the fog pearlescent, the dew-burdened leaves diamantine. As Iona studied the depths of the untouched woods, a thrush trilled in the gloom. She stepped into the shadows, shouldering her way past two young ash trees.

Suddenly the air was illuminated as though a pale match had been struck in the darkness. Disoriented, she took a moment to notice the trees were gone. In their place was a small, white room where an unlikely creature sat, peering at her from a chair.

She had never before experienced a swoon, but perhaps, she thought, this was what other women saw when consciousness faded and the mind disar-

ranged itself.

The atmosphere was hushed. Apart from the chair and the creature, the room was barren, aglow in soft, parchment light. Hand held to her throat, she backed up the way she had come.

Within an instant the atmosphere darkened. She was in the forest again, the two ashes and the thick spring woods behind her. For a moment she stood there, stunned. By the evidence, she hadn't experienced a swoon at all, but a mutiny of her imagination.

Creeping around the saplings, she inched into the woods. The forest was aromatic with the sweet scent of loam, the sour pungency of leaf rot. There was no gnomish creature sitting astride a plain chair, no otherworldly room. She might have continued her search for *polygyridae*; but, reminding herself that timidity was unconscionable in a researcher, she turned back and entered the small opening between the ashes.

The change in the lighting was breathtaking. She blinked and then blinked again as she caught sight of the being in the room.

He was improbable in a humorous way, rather more amphibian than man. Placed to either side of his flat, brown-gray face were two inquisitive eyes which at her entry closed and then slowly opened, like a morning glory welcoming the sun.

A less well-bred woman might have screamed. Iona did not. "I do beg your pardon," she murmured.

Those sad, intelligent eyes shut briefly, the lids wrinkled and dry as a bird's.

"As I don't believe in goblins or trolls, you must be a figment of my imagination, sir," she said, feeling childish and silly talking, as it were, to the air.

He opened his eyes as though in inquiry.

"I am, to put it bluntly, delusional," she said, detached from both the statement and the occurrence as though she were speaking through another's lips. "But it is in a scientist's nature to question, even though he plumb the horrifying depths of his soul and discover his own Mr. Hyde."

Of course this was her own Mr. Hyde, she told herself. The room reminded her of the spartan rooms of her beloved Kyoto, that strange land where paper walls blushed with brittle light. The creature astride the chair might have been her own rough



SKINNER

self, a specter which was comfortable only in the small confines of its own imagination.

"Quite nice," she told the being playfully, deciding to face her own insanity head-to-head rather than flee from its terrors. Indeed, the room *was* nice. It was free from the excessive ornamentation and damask-curtained gloom of England, more elegant and bare than the conceit of British pseudo-oriental decor. "But, if you will forgive me for saying so, you have need of a window."

She glanced around the bare walls again, and her eyes snagged on the sight of a small square — how could she have missed it? — that opened onto gray sky.

She walked up and looked through, her tightened throat ensnaring her breath. Outside the window it was raining, the drops dimpling a bamboo-lined lake. Across one slender arm of the pond a lacy bridge arched, and from somewhere, faint and distant, came the discordant tinkling of wind chimes.

"How lovely," she said with a sigh. "How magical the mind can be. This is quite like the Gardens of Perpetual Happiness which lie outside the palace of Emperor Mutsuhito."

It was like, yet not like. The flowers near the lake were a bit too colorful, the bamboo a sight too perfect. No, this was not the real place, but the magical garden in her memories.

Swiftly she turned away, tears wetting her eyes. How unbearable, how unbelievably sad. She'd come to look for snails and had instead found herself, her entire universe carried on her back.

"Please do come again," the creature said.

She turned towards him, surprised.

"I see that you are ready to leave. I wish you would come again. It is so lonely for me."

She studied him. His gentle voice rang in her head even though she hadn't seen him open his mouth. No need of that, of course. The thoughts, the words, were her own.

"Naturally I shall come again," she promised him.

How could she not? The boundaries of her loneliness were paper-thin, the atmosphere within bright and cramped, with room only for herself and her caged aspirations. Hefting her walking stick, she strode through the far wall, exited between the ash trees, and, specimen bag quite empty, made her way to the house.

By the time the butler had met her at the door, she had nearly put away the feelings of strangeness. Catching sight of herself in the glass, her cheeks high-colored from excitement, her blond hair blown wild by the wind, she hastened to straighten herself as best she could and, reminding herself of duty, inquired after her guests.

"Sir Edward is up and about as befits a soldier," Haverty told her, his black, twinkling eyes belying the solemnity of his tone. "And Mrs. Powell has slept

late and has taken her breakfast in her rooms."

She had started up the stairs when he called after her, his voice now strained with timidity, "Madame? I've taken the liberty of informing cook about your interest."

On the steps Iona turned, painfully aware of her sodden dress, her wet shoes. One part of her was anxious to return to her rooms and the ministrations of her chambermaid; another part was trapped by Haverty's words.

"She encounters snails in the herb garden, madame," the butler told her, all vestiges of his early smile vanished and a fearful apprehension taking its place. Haverty's hand fidgeted at his coat and then lifted to his dark hair as though trying to neaten its already brushed perfection. "I have informed her that she is to save all interesting specimens she finds. I hope that is to your liking."

"Thank you," she replied absently, her gaze flicking around the hall, anxious that she might, in her disheveled state, meet Uncle Edward, or worse, Rosanna Powell.

"Cook has them ready for you, if you'd care to see them."

Curiosity besting her, Iona came down the stairs and followed Haverty into the kitchens. The tweeny was polishing silver at the table. By the stove, cook was in command of an army of boiling pots, her sleeves pushed up on her thick, floury arms. When Iona entered with Haverty, the woman wiped her hands on her voluminous apron and smiled. "Got some snails for you, missus," she said. "Cooked them up for you as Haverty ordered, so they'd be clean and all and not nasty when you puts them with the others."

Iona took the silver tray that was handed her. Cook had painstakingly boiled and cleaned at least a dozen specimens of *helicacea*, the common white garden snail.

"I'll get you more," Cook offered. "There's plenty about."

"Yes, of course," Iona told her. "I'm quite pleased." And she was pleased, she realized. The pair had accepted her pastime, although it was obvious they did not quite understand the point. She stood in her kitchen, bedraggled from her hike, and was overwhelmed by the gentleness of her servants' attentions.

"The master has gone off with Sir Edward," Haverty told Iona in a conspiratorial whisper. "I'll call the chambermaid to come up to you presently."

She felt her cheeks burn. Of course the servants would be aware of the dissension her scientific interests had caused in the house, but she didn't care for their knowledge to be tossed in her face. Without another word, she spun on her heel and, toting her platter of *helicacea*, hurried upstairs.

Later that day she brought her embroidery to the



withdrawing room and sat with Sir Edward's pinched wife and Lionel as they listened to Edward's tedious rendition of the manliness exhibited at some battle or another.

"That is work more befitting a woman, my dear," Edward said abruptly, pausing in his description of the red tide as it descended on rebellious natives.

Iona glanced up from her sullen jabs at the cloth. Sir Edward's beard was trimmed into obedience, his great mustaches waxed and tamed. He was staring at her, his gaze critical and edged, as though he feared his own mousy wife might catch some of Iona's mutiny and he might have to single-handedly put it down.

"It is agreeable," she said cautiously, aware of her husband's dark, warning look. "But not altogether challenging."

Edward harrumphed. "Men have challenges. The call of battle and such. Women need none other than bearing children and raising them properly."

Iona's face grew hot. "We have not been so blessed," she told him.

"Perhaps if you'd not spend your time poking and prodding in the grass," he told her, resting his clasped hands comfortably on the bulge of his waistcoat, "you would discover that blessing forthcoming."

Lionel glanced from his uncle to Iona, his expression stony; and much later, after a boring dinner conversation which was conducted uncompromisingly by Edward and not much lightened by Rosanna Powell's Mosaic handing down of the laws of fashion, Iona repaired to her rooms.

As she was sorting through her collection of exotic Eastern shells and deciding what to do with the dozen or so cook had given her, Lionel knocked at her door.

"Put them away," he snarled. "And while my uncle is here pretend to be a dutiful wife."

She swung around on her dressing stool to regard him. "I should think I do more than pretend," she told him.

"Put them away, I tell you!" He crossed the carpet to her, his tall body in a threatening stance. "By law all that you have is mine. Should you forget that, I'll gladly take them from you."

Meekly she slipped the tray back into a drawer, afraid he would exhibit one of his rare, but violent tantrums. He had never forbade her the studies before, but should he wish to, he clearly had the right. When she glanced up she saw him contemplating her in the mirror, the stern expression gone and a simpering one taking its place.

"Just for a while, Iona," he said. "Just while the guests are here."

She nodded and rose, thinking that he would leave. He did not. As she turned, his arm encircled her waist and his lips sought the solace of her neck.

She stiffened for a moment in his embrace, hoping that tonight he should find his manhood and not blame her for the failure. The argument ended as all their disagreements had, smothered by Lionel's needy and despairing groan.

However peevish Lionel might be about her studies, Iona knew promises were meant to be kept. The next morning she arose before the sun, dressed in a plum gown that was slightly out of fashion, put on a pair of scuffed boots, and walked out to the lake.

Before she reached the forest and the twin ashes, she had the chance to wonder whether she had achieved sanity and the odd creature of her imagination might be gone.

As she slipped through the space between the trees, she saw the being sitting as he had sat the day before, plumped in a chair in the plain white room, his somber eyes drawn to her face.

Part of her wanted to flee, but curiosity engaged her. Thinking to see how far her madness might go, she walked past him to the window and looked out. In the Garden of Perpetual Happiness it was still raining. Fat, yellow chrysanthemums dipped their heavy heads in the force of the shower.

Whatever the creature was, she realized, symbol of her aspirations or guardian of her conscience, he was not much of a gentleman. He had not risen as she had entered, and he did not bother to offer his seat.

She turned, and her skirts nearly toppled an empty chair just behind her. It was a wondrous thing, of a brilliant white which seemed not to have been painted on, but which was part of the integral structure itself, like the pale of milk glass.

She sat and faced the creature, who was gazing at her with interest. "Are you comfortable now?" he asked. The hands clasping the arms of the opposite chair were slightly webbed, the digits altogether too long and thin for relaxed study. His skin in places was bubbled up like hardened foam.

Before she had a chance to reply, he told her, "I am not what you think. And I am older than you imagine."

"Imagination," she answered sweetly, "is ancient."

He glanced away. Through the window came the dripping, liquid music of the rain and the heavy perfume of flowers. The creature looked sorrowful there, dressed in his tight, white suit, and she reminded herself that grief and loneliness, too, were as primal as imagination.

"Does it please you?" he asked. "What I have made for you in the window?"

"Yes. But then you would know it does." Inquisitively, she ran her hand over the slick arm of her chair and then up the warm white wall.

"It is not paper," he said.

She paused in her study of the odd room and met his gaze.

"I see that you wish it to be paper, but I hope this will do."

"Why?" she asked.

He lifted that great head in apparent query. "Why what?"

"Why do you wish to please me? Is it because I have not been pleased in so many years?"

He looked down at his legs, spread presumptively and casually apart. "No. It is because I have not been pleased in such a long time and I wish you to come back."

He looked so downcast that she laughed. "O, dear Froggy. May I have leave to call you that? For it is altogether what you remind me of. My dear sir, I can see you are my shell, made of my very warp and woof. Where I go, you go. Why look so forlorn when I carry you with me, except that perhaps my mind is forlorn as well?"

"Look through the window," he said.

After a pause for confusion she rose and looked out. The Gardens of Perpetual Happiness were gone, and in their place was a harsh, red-lit land where a bloodshot and angry sun peered down onto low apartments. Startled, she leapt back.

"Do you see?" he asked.

She whirled to face him. "Of course I see," she said with a frightened gasp.

His magnificent head lowered. "No, you do not. But I perceive you are anxious to get home, and I will not stay you."

She walked to the blank wall, and as she did, she heard his low, desperate plea behind her, "Please. Do come again."

The next day was stormy, the wind lashing the branches of the laurels outside the French doors of the withdrawing room. She and Lionel and their subdued guests sat before the fire nudging a recalcitrant and dying conversation, Iona thinking of Froggy.

The following morning dawned sparkling and fresh, but, before she could quit the house, Lionel reminded her she was due for a day of good works and should call on the farm families. She might have asked Rosanna Powell to accompany her, but the woman was still abed. She asked Sir Edward's wife instead, and to Iona's surprise and regret, the woman accepted.

Adeline was so frightfully shy that she looked about to bolt from the trap. Her nervous hands clutched and plucked at the side of the carriage. The carriage was just approaching the gates when Adeline, a rare glint of mischief in her eye, leaned across the seat and whispered, "Your butler cuts a handsome figure."

The *butler*, had she said? Iona was not certain for a moment that she'd quite understood.

"Oh, Lionel is all right, as far as that goes," Adeline added pensively. "But he's too old and much too British for my tastes. A bit smooth-faced and weak about the eyes. But Haverty is young and possessed of a dark, gypsy charm. You are a lucky one, my dear."

So shocked was she that Iona failed to do the proper thing and draw away. Instead, she accepted the woman's presumption with wide and startled eyes.

"Yes. Quite comely," Adeline added, "and I can plainly see that he is smitten with you."

Iona sat frozen, her hands clasped in her lap. Adeline cast her gaze wistfully to the road where oaks grew to either side at stern attention. "How I do miss the wars," she said softly. "And all the virile young Ghurkas."

For a moment Iona searched for a pleasant reply, then gave up the effort and sat in rigid silence. At the farmhouses she handed out cakes to the children and jars of chutney to the wives, all the time grappling with the shocking nature of Adeline's confidences.

Iona had known adolescent fantasies of romance, of course. Then the cage of her arranged marriage had snapped closed. During her wedding night's awkward and hurried deflowering she'd begun to suspect that there was wisdom in her mother's whispered injunctions. Iona had closed her eyes, endured, and thought, with limited success, of England.

When she and Adeline rode back to the manor house it was Haverty, not the footman, who came out to hand her down from the carriage; Iona had the harsh thought that Adeline might be right, and that the butler had indecorous ambitions. She discovered that, after all those years of marriage, she had them, too. Some scandalous part of Iona cherished the firmness of Haverty's gloved hand in hers. She was aware, for the first time, of the strength in his shoulders and the fit of his trousers at the joint of his legs.

Fleeing from her thoughts, Iona raced up the steps and paused, turning in time to catch the simpering glance from Adeline and the answering discomfort in Haverty's lowered gaze.

Soon after luncheon Iona made to repair to her rooms, but exited the French doors instead and went straightway to Froggy.

"So sorry I was detained," she blurted as she walked through the wall.

Froggy glanced up, a sparkle of amusement in his eyes. "But you *did* come," he said.

She crossed to the window, where the Garden of Perpetual Happiness was being washed by the rain. Casting her mind back to the puzzle of the red,

dreary land she had seen during her last visit, she was not aware of Froggy's quiet approach until he grasped her fingers.

It was not Froggy she thought of in that instant, but Haverty. Haverty and his wide, sympathetic smile. Instantly she drew back, slipping her hand from his.

He let her go. "I did not mean to alarm you," he told her. "I simply meant to show you I was real. Look out the window, please," he said.

She looked. In the ruddy light of a foreign sun tenements sprouted thick and round as mushrooms. Grotesque frog-shaped forms darted through the bruised and purple shade.

There were more beings like him. Someplace.

Froggy left her side, her stunned gaze following him. When she peered again out the window, the rain-swept gardens were there.

"So," he said, sitting down and leaning forward over his knees expectantly. "As I sense your thoughts, I see that you begin to understand. I, too, am a scientist. I, too, went out on exploratory expeditions. I was left here by my fellows a great long time ago."

She did not wish to believe him, but the scene out the window had given her no choice. It was detailed, very real, and unlike anything her own mind could have conjured. The blood suddenly drained from Iona's cheeks. She was fighting for breath, her lungs struggling against her whalebone stays. Her head swam and she flung her hand out to the chair.

"Are you all right?" he asked solicitously. "You

aren't dying, by any chance?"

"No," she sighed, dropping into the chair carelessly, her taffeta skirt crinkling. She looked up at him. Not a creature of her own imagining, then. Froggy was a being far stranger than that.

"Tell me about yourself," he urged, settling himself back into his chair. "Tell me why you are lonely."

She cast about for a response, but the answer itself was so huge that it made up the whole of her mind. There was no distinctive place where loneliness was and all the rest was satisfaction.

"As you have already perceived, I am a naturalist," she began, lifting her chin as though defying him to refute her. Yes, she thought. A naturalist. And the specimen of a lifetime was sitting opposite her, his webbed hands absently caressing the smooth cloth at his chest.

"I study gastropods; snails in particular." How odd, she thought, that she would think of her pastime first and her position second. "I am married to Lionel Whitstone who owns the land you live on."

A glitter of humor came to his eyes. "Well, after all, it is not as though I take up much room."

She laughed. The formal stiffness left her back, and she slumped with an unladylike posture in her seat. He was a charming creature, her Froggy. Not sour like Lionel sometimes could be; not lost in his element like Haverty. No, Froggy was very much his own man, as easy in his surroundings as a bullfrog on a lily.

But perhaps not a he, she thought, her brows knitting together in confusion. There was no hint of

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a bosom on his chest to be sure, but a furtive glance at his tight trousers assured her there was no bulge there, either.

"I am both," he told her pleasantly.

"Pardon?"

"Both male and female at the same time."

Iona fought her embarrassment. She was a scientist, after all, and had studied the hermaphroditic *pulmonata*. For a difficult moment she searched for a proper response. "How ... convenient for you."

He quirked his head to the side. "At times. Is it because you are not both that you are lonely?"

"I shouldn't think so," she told him earnestly. "And you have stated that you are lonely, as well."

Poor, abandoned, lost creature, she thought, her own solitude grown suddenly paltry. How long had he been separated from home? And how comfortable could he be in this yellow-lit, alien place? She lowered her gaze and, from the corner of her eye, caught a glimpse of the watch pinned to her dress. Nearly four, she realized with a start. Lionel would be beside himself.

Froggy met her apologetic look with a knowing, jaded one of his own. "Given a choice in the matter," he told her, "it is best to be both, I think."

As soon as Iona arrived at the house she fled up the stairs to change. Entering her rooms, her eye swept over her terrarium, the tracks of *polygyridae* painted across its glass. Then her gaze caught the exotics placed on a shelf above. She stood for a moment, entranced by their beauty, afternoon tea quite forgotten.

The shells of the English snails were mostly all of a kind, but the Eastern ones were banded with color, complex as pagodas. She took one down and, lifting it to the window, gazed inside. Through the chamber, more delicate than any porcelain, glowed a gentle, kindly light like the light in Froggy's rooms.

How long must Froggy have been trapped in that place, a two-dimensional spot between three-dimensional trees? He had told her time was not for him what it was for her, yet space must not be alike, either. Her mind played back the scene of the red-skied land in the window, a sight which for her was a nightmare, which for him must have been dear. How different they were, she thought. And in the confines of their existence, how alike.

When Lionel burst in without knocking, she nearly dropped the shell. His face was high-colored from fury, and his hands were clenched into fists.

"Where have you been?" he demanded. "Sir Edward has noticed your absence."

She lifted the shell carefully to its place and turned to her dressing room. "I will change immediately."

Behind her there was a horrendous, splintering crash. She whirled. Lionel had struck the terrarium

from its base. Sand and snails and bits of glass lay strewn across the floor. He raised his boot and brought it down. Snails died under his feet, their lives crushed out with a gritty, broken-eggshell sound.

"There," Lionel said. "Perhaps you'll tend to me now, rather than to your snails. Perhaps then, if you become a real woman, I can —"

There was a sharp knock on the door and the chambermaid's voice on the other side, raised in alarm. "Missus? Are you ill?"

"We're quite all right," Lionel shot back.

Iona could hear the tap-tap of the maid's boots as she beat a hasty retreat down the hall.

"I'll have Haverty clean out the rest," Lionel said, his affronted gaze lifting to the shelf of exotics and then dropping with gratification to his handiwork. "And you will get dressed and come down to tea. Be pleasant, for God's sake."

Her lips parted. A lone tear dropped from her eye, leaving a moist, warm trail down her cheek. "Why?" she asked numbly, her voice barely above a whisper.

He glanced up at her, a hint of guilt in his gaze. "Sir Edward knows of many opportunities for investments. He is well-placed in London society. I am surprised that you have not realized the benefit. It would be in the best of both our interests that we —"

In a moment of glass-clear lucidity she realized that Lionel had dared to do the unforgivable and that, like the crushed snails, her life would never be mended. "Why take from me my only pleasure?" she cried.

He jerked his head back as though slapped by an unseen hand. For a giddy instant she thought that Froggy had reached out through his pocket in the world to strike him. "I would think you get your pleasure from tending a home, from ministering to me," he told her firmly. "And for once I would remind you of your place."

With that he whirled and stamped out, leaving her beached on the broken-shelled, sandy shore of her ambitions. It was a while before she was able to compose herself. When she was calm she blotted the tears from her face, dressed in a suitable gown, and went out her door.

In the hall she met Adeline who, at her approach, hastened to hide a medicine bottle in the folds of her skirt. Perhaps realizing she had been caught, she gave Iona a simpering grin. The woman's eyes were slightly glazed, her mouth a bit too slack.

"Laudanum," she explained thickly. "For the palpitations, you know. They are all waiting for us downstairs, I suppose, but I felt the need for a little strengthening." At that divulgence she tittered rather too loudly and hid her mouth with her hand.

Slipping her arm in Iona's, more to steady her stride, Iona gathered, than from any show of friendship, Adeline walked downstairs to the

withdrawing room.

A fire had been lit. The two men were seated, apparently trapped in one of Rosanna's tirades on the frivolities of the young. The trio glanced up as the two women entered and Iona caught the sharp, accusatory glance Sir Edward gave his wife. Loosing her arm, Iona watched as the woman fell, rather too awkwardly, into a chair.

The conversation strained for a moment and then broke free, fraudulent and light-hearted.

It was well after dinner that Iona had the courage to enter her rooms. The floor had been cleaned; the shelf that had once housed the exotics was vacant. She swept her hand along the wood, feeling the places they had once been, her fingers sensing their cool, fragile ghosts all lined up in a row.

A while later Lionel came in, approached her rather too roughly and was injured when she did not respond. He soon left, possibly, she thought, as much out of fear of his failure than from any rebuff on her part. She undressed and lay under the covers, thinking at first she would never sleep, but at last falling into a drowse and dreaming of sun-shot forests rising at her back, the trees tall as cathedrals, light as air.

A sound woke her. She roused and crept to the door. In the flickering of the gaslamp which had been lowered for the night, she caught sight of a figure making its way down the hall.

Haverty, she thought at once, her cheeks draining of blood. He must be making his way to Adeline. But then the figure turned and the gaslamp lit the face. No. Not Haverty to Adeline, but Sir Edward to Rosanna Powell.

She heard the old general's furtive knock, heard the squeak as the door was opened, watched him disappear. Poor Adeline and her Ghurkas and her laudanum, Iona thought as she made her way back to bed. The woman had fashioned for herself a dark, heavy shell, one strong enough and thick enough to protect against the grinding, pressured seas of her husband.

Iona did not sleep again that evening. Hours later, just before dawn, she heard Rosanna's door open and heard quiet steps retreat down the hall. A few minutes later Iona arose. Earlier than the parlormaid to their duties, earlier than cook to her post, she dressed and went down the stairs to the door.

Haverty caught her there, his face stark even in the kind glow of the candle. His hair was mussed, and he had put his coat and trousers on hastily over his nightshirt.

"I heard a sound," he said by way of apology. Then his gaze grew troubled and he blurted, "Are you quite all right?"

"Yes. Of course," she told him stiffly, hoping that he would not wake Lionel. "I couldn't sleep and  
Dear Froggy

thought a morning walk might settle me."

"I'm so sorry about the terrarium," he said, his expression more than solicitous. "The pretty shells aren't cast away, though. I've saved them for you in case the master should change his mind."

"That is very kind," she murmured, torn between the shocking implications of his disobedience and the utter generosity of it.

"I have them in my room, all wrapped in cloth so they shan't break. They are quite attractive. With your permission, I should like to take them out occasionally and look at them myself."

In the luminosity of his eyes she thought she caught a glimpse of fond words and heart-breaking questions. It would be best, she knew, to leave them mute. Muttering a short agreement, she walked out into the humid morning air.

On the steps she turned. Haverty was standing, still gazing at her cryptically. "Thank you for saving them for me," she said.

He nodded. After a moment of what seemed to be vacillation, he quietly shut the door.

**Y**ou are sadder today," Froggy said.  
She strode past him to the window, not bothering to respond.

The scene in the window brought her a counterfeit peace. Rain pebbled the glassy surface of the pond. The chrysanthemums bloomed in their rocky borders, all unchanged.

"How long?" she asked and turned around.

He must have sensed her weariness, for the room had grown suddenly larger. A red chaise longue lay like a stripe of blood in a corner near his chair.

He must have also understood her question. Her mind to him was not a painting in a locked house, but a bas-relief on an outside wall. Therefore, when he did not answer, she knew he had simply chosen not to. "You're very tired. Come and sit down. Tell me all that makes you sad. Telling of sadness takes the sting away."

"Why did your people leave you behind?" she snapped, her tone more irritated than she had planned. She didn't sit. She refused to. It was enough that she complied with Lionel's every wish.

Froggy regarded her somberly. "Will you not come and talk? Must you stand there glaring and tight-fisted?"

The words made her aware of her defiant stance. With an effort she unlocked the muscles in her back and eased her fists open, brushing idly at her skirt as though she could whisk away her misplaced anger.

"Dear God," she said in a grim undertone. "I think it is all that can be asked of life that one go through it a harmless creature. To please people is not only a futile undertaking, but it makes one subservient and eventually weak."

When she glanced at him this time he seemed to be smiling at her, although his large mouth was in its usual expressionless line.

"Do not dare to find amusement in my sorrow, sir," she cautioned.

His large eyes widened even further. There was no iris, no white, only a jet blackness that went on and on, like the unchanging gardens outside his room. "I was merely wondering if it would be advisable of me to try to please you when you appear to want to spurn all pleasure-givers."

"I am a pleasure-giver!" she shouted. "Have I not tried, against my nature, to be a dutiful wife? Although, God knows, Lionel rarely has the ability to take his pleasure of me." She bit her lip on the shameful admission and whirled to face the window again. "That can be fortunate, of course. At least his impotence saves me from the disgrace of his adultery."

To her back the silence grew, companionable, but questioning.

"I am —" she began and paused. What she needed to say seemed so vulgar that she only went on with the greatest of efforts. "I am quite comely," she muttered. "We are so unlike it is possible that you have no idea of that. Lionel saw only my beauty; and my father, who was dismayed by my unsuitable bookishness, thought hapless, sport-loving Lionel a good match. It was only later my husband would suspect my spirit rebelled under his rule. And, because he is a simple man with uncomplicated thoughts, it took Lionel years to discover the worst: that I was merely an imitation of a woman; I have no interest in fashion or child-rearing. By then, of course, it was too late."

She turned to Froggy with a wry expression. "In my own way, you see, I am a hermaphrodite, too."

He patted the chaise longue in invitation. She ignored him.

"Why should your friends leave you?" she asked. "Did they have no choice in the matter? Had you angered them?"

He tipped his head to the side. "It was altogether unavoidable. Now, come sit down and rest. Not for my sake, but for yours. Although I must admit it would please me not to be the focus of your irritation."

She came forward grudgingly and lay down. Sleepily, she gazed at him, and an astounding idea wriggled through the dense earth of her consciousness. "I think you are dead," she told him.

He closed his eyes, the wrinkled lids shuttering in either surprise or pain.

"That was the unavoidable circumstance, was it not?" she asked softly. "The visit must have been a long, long time ago, long enough so that no people saw your expedition. Otherwise there would have been stories. There would have been myths. How

long have you been alone, Froggy?"

Sleep was overwhelming her. For the first time she was aware of the quality of air in the room. It was stuffy and warm, like a long-closed greenhouse in summer. Her eyes fell closed and she opened them with an effort.

She must have been dreaming, because Haverty was standing before her, his gloved hands clasped before his waist.

"Haverty?" she whispered, but he did not answer. He did not even seem to have heard. She attempted to rise and couldn't.

Because it was a dream, she forgot about Froggy watching, forgot about the gulf between Haverty's station and her own. She watched in fascination as he took off his gloves, coat, and shirt and laid them on the empty chair.

He came to her, his dark eyes larger and blacker than she had remembered. He touched her breast. She arched her back, her body rising to meet him as warm bread to the heat. His palm slid down and down, drawing in at the nip of her waist, flowing out at the swell of her hips.

When the hand reached her thigh, she looked into his eyes and saw, in their darkness, something alien and infinite. Terrified, she sat bolt upright. Haverty was gone. In his chair Froggy sat, studying her.

She stood, arranging her skirts, her face tight with embarrassment. "You go too far, sir," she said, "to manipulate me as you have. Are you so lonely that you seek a voyeur's solace? I am not an experimental creature to be poked and prodded and spied upon."

"I merely gave you what you wanted."

She brushed obstinately at her clothes as though to erase the memory of Haverty's able hands, but need still clung to her, persistent and painful as a burr. "You mistake me."

"No," he said, shutting his eyes briefly. "I think I do not."

She whirled on him, but in that instant reminded herself of what he was and how easily he might misjudge her. "Do not confuse that which I want with that which I will accept," she told him in a stern but moderate tone. "This was ill-done."

He seemed discomfited. "Will you please come again?"

Froggy had again picked through her scattered thoughts as easily as a nanny plucking strewn toys from the floor. She hadn't until that moment realized she wanted to get away, and hadn't foreseen that returning would be difficult.

"I will try," she told him quietly.

"I would do anything for you, make concrete your every express wish, if you would only return." He took on a fearful, woebegone look.

"I really will try," she promised.

Outside the ageless sanctuary of Froggy's room it was storming. Rain was coming down in sheets. By the time she made it out of the forest she was soaked, and by the time she reached the lake she was shivering.

On the road hard by the lake a carriage was waiting. There Haverty stood, a blanket over his head. When she saw him, Iona halted in shock and could not believe he was real until he splashed his way over the wet grass and lifted the blanket over her.

"How did you know where to come?" she asked, raising her voice to be heard above the wind's rush.

He was standing without the protection of the blanket and was already soaked. His hair hung down miserably on his forehead.

"The grooms can see from the stables," he replied, pointing towards the low barns. "They remark that lately you always go the same way."

Froggy. Fear for him lumped in her throat so that she could scarcely breathe. Perhaps someone would stumble onto the passage between the ash trees and discover him. He would be studied. His immaculate, timeless room trampled with mud. Her fear for him came as a surprise, and she was struck by the novel idea that she was not so much a scientist as a simple questioner — her answers precious only to herself.

Haverty was making frantic motions towards the carriage as though he wished to take her arm but dared not. When she finally took his direction he seemed relieved.

"Tell no one else," she cautioned him as they picked their way through the meadow.

He glanced up, his gaze startled.

"Tell no one where I go."

The startlement left him and an injured suspicion took its place. "As you wish, madame," he said, lowering his eyes.

They rode in uneasy and hurtful silence back to the house.

Lionel did not remark upon her disheveled state, but merely gave her a sullen glance from under his grizzled eyebrows. Iona hastened to her room and changed, the maid having all she could do to make her wet hair presentable.

When she was finally composed, she went down the stairs and was caught by the sounds of an argument in the library.

"I should ask where she goes," Sir Edward said in a tone as blustery and chill as the weather.

Lionel's reply was even. "She is not your wife."

"Indeed, she is not. Were she, I would thrash her. It's good for a woman, you know, just as it benefits a high-strung horse. She has mannish ways, Iona. Possibly that is the reason she has not given you an heir."

"What?" Lionel sounded distracted, afraid. Then

suddenly his voice seemed to clutch at the hope his uncle held out to him. "Oh, yes. Certainly. Yes."

"When I was a general, I would brook no disobedience from my subordinates," Edward said. "Compassion merely softens resolve. And a real man needs stiff-backed determination. Ask her what really interests her in the woods. Ask her, too, how the butler knew where to find her and why he went, rather than sending a footman."

There was the soft sound of footsteps on the carpet. Someone poked viciously at the fire, toppling a log. "Damn," Lionel said quietly, and Iona couldn't be sure whether he had cursed at the fire or at herself.

"It is not snails, my boy," said the old general in a self-righteous tone. "Surely you know women have no fascination in such things. Were you not blind, you would see the way Haverty looks at her, like a mouse on cheese."

Careful not to make a sound, Iona crept to the withdrawing room. To her dismay she saw that Adeline was there by the fire, head down in thought, poking at something in her hand.

As Iona drew near she saw that the object of Adeline's attentions was a *helicacea*, much like one of those Cook had presented her. When she sat down on a nearby settee, Adeline glanced up and met her gaze. The woman's gaze was clouded with a surfeit of laudanum.

"I was trying to see what you saw in them," she said.

Gently Iona plucked the snail from Adeline's palm and set it on her own. In the library Lionel and Sir Edward were speaking of scandals, the worst one hidden from Sir Edward's knowledge. Lionel could not admit to his own impotence, she knew; and if he must hide it, he might barter that for some other disgrace.

Given the choice, Lionel would choose to be called cuckold before being known as half a man.

With wry shame, she remembered how her body had strained toward the image of Haverty. It was not that she loved a servant. That was unthinkable. No, what needed consideration was that she was looking for something, and even desire would do.

In her palm the snail lay quiescent, snuggled in its narrow, solitary house.

"You are so pretty," Adeline told her. "I was never pretty, you know. Yet you are of such a serious mind. I quite admire you for that."

Iona lifted her gaze in astonishment and was trapped by the longing in the other woman's expression. "It is such a delicious thing to be engaged in men's studies. Tell me," Adeline said, leaning forward in desperate, second-hand interest, as though prettiness and high-mindedness might be conveyed. "What do you see in these creatures?"

Iona looked down at the snail and smiled. It had

poked its head out of its shell and had begun, shyly, to explore. "They are so like we are," she said. "So limited in knowledge, so locked up within themselves. See how their horns strain forward in curiosity —" Her voice failed her and she went silent, watching the slow, guarded creep of the snail along her palm. "And then draw back," she said, gently touching her nail to the creature's waving horns, "in imagined harm."

"So timid," Adeline said, her voice catching.

Iona glanced up to see tears coursing down the woman's cheeks.

"Yes," Iona said softly, not knowing from where the woman's sorrow sprang nor how to soothe it. "Quite timid."

There was a noise at the door, the heedless, careless noise of the men's entry. Iona looked up in surprise, meeting Lionel's rage. "God!" he shouted. "You bring that filth into the withdrawing room?"

For a moment she feared he was speaking of her suspected adultery. Then he lunged forward, snatched the snail from her hand and threw it into the fire. When Iona turned to Adeline she saw horror and grief blanch the woman's face as though she had been witness to a murder.

Without another word, Iona rose and made her way up to her room. A moment later she heard the heavy tread of Lionel's feet on the stair. He entered her room without knocking.

"Do, er, whatever you do," he said with a graceless gesture, "to prepare yourself to receive me. I will not be rebuffed as I was last night."

She stood, highly aware of the clatter of rain against the eaves, cognizant of the quality of silvered light on the carpet. She lifted her chin a little. "No," she told him. "I think not."

His face flickered through a range of emotions, possibly trying to translate her words. Had she meant, he might have wondered, that she would not rebuff him again? Or had she meant the unpardonable, that she would not receive his attentions? His expression hardened. "Put on some perfume or whatever you do to make yourself pleasant. I will wait."

"No, you will not," she said.

His face altered again, this time to a fretful insecurity. "Are you — I mean — indisposed?"

She turned her cheek away to stare into a corner of the room, wishing Lionel would leave. One of the things she loved about snails was that they were so utterly inviolate. "I simply have no wish —"

For a moment she was sure that the bedpost had somehow collided with the side of her face. As she fell against a footstool she saw that the bedpost had not been the attacker, but Lionel's fist.

She brought her disbelieving fingers to her mouth. They came away bloody.

"God!" he cried. His face was twisted into a fear-

some grimace as though he were the one in pain, and not her. "You are not the wife I married at all! Get up! Damn you! Get up!"

Unsteadily she rose, clutching the footstool.

He was glowering at her, tears in his eyes. "For years I have allowed you your little interests, yet even my generosity will not earn me your regard. God's sake! How can I understand you? How can I lie with you when you shut me out? How do you expect me to do that?"

"I do not expect —" she began softly.

He raised his fist again, paused in the glare of her steady, unflinching look, then slammed his way back out the door.

She sat on the footstool, her head in her hands, dazed by his brutality. In a while he was back, bursting in unannounced. In his fist he clutched a scarf.

"Here," he said. "I have discovered at least some of your secrets." Releasing his grip, he let the scarf flutter open. Shells dropped like hollow, heavy rain.

Her fear forgotten, she fell to her knees to gather up the exotics. His boot was faster. She watched as he crushed them one by one, their gay colors ground into pale dust.

Lionel pulled her roughly by the elbow and flung her onto the bed. The high wooden foot bruised her back. Her head hit the counterpane, loosing her hair from its pins. He was on her, pulling her skirt up, tearing at her petticoats. But his infirmity gelded him. After a frantic time of trying, he fastened his trousers and quit the room, leaving her exhausted and sore.

She did not venture downstairs all that day. The next morning when her chambermaid came to arrange her hair, the girl daubed a little powder on the bruise on her mistress's cheek and then blurted, "Master has given Haverty the sack. All the house is in disarray for it."

Iona's heart fell. Poor, loyal Haverty. Her studies had undone him, as well. Guiltily, she glanced to the girl and saw tears standing in her eyes.

"He so admired you, missus, for your seriousness of mind and all. Because of you, he taught me to read and bought me books so that I might engage him more aptly in conversation when we married." The girl's gaze dropped to the floor.

So what Haverty felt for his mistress was not love but an overwhelming respect. "I'm sorry," Iona murmured, uncertain whether the flood of emotion she felt contained a majority of relief or envy.

"And the worst of it is," the girl continued, "he's thrown out without no severance nor letter of recommendation. There'll be no posting at all for him unless he hires on in the fields or is sent to the workhouse."

"I shall write him a letter," Iona said immediately, bringing a fragile cheer to the girl's face. "And



certainly he deserves a severance. I have some means of my own saved from the monies Lionel has given me." She opened a drawer and drew out a velvet change purse, handing the maid two gold sovereigns. Then she took out pen and writing paper and inscribed a fitting recommendation.

When she opened her eyes the next morning, the sovereigns were glinting on her nightstand. Haverty's letter of recommendation was lying next to the coins, the sealing wax broken, the thick paper torn.

Iona sat up quickly, holding the blankets to her chest. The room stank of whiskey, and across the carpet sat Lionel, glass in hand, his tall body slumped in a chair.

"It is like a fire that cannot be put out," he muttered.

Sunlight trickled through a space between the curtains, igniting a stripe of blue in the carpet to stunning incandescence.

"Watching you lie there, wanting so badly to take you." He smiled a bit, his lips stretching without humor, a terrible tautness in his eyes. "It isn't that I lack interest, you know."

"I understand," she whispered.

"No," he said. His voice was bitter and hollow at the same time. It reminded Iona of a bottle emptied of some caustic poison. "So clever in all other things, and yet you have no idea." Suddenly his eyes grew glassy with memory. "I wasn't always like this. Once I had control of my virility."

She glanced in alarm at the coins, the torn pieces of the letter. "I agree it has gotten worse of late," she said in a faltering voice, "but even in the beginning there were times —"

"The guests have gone home."

To protect herself from the icy draught of his gaze, Iona pulled the covers more tightly around her shoulders.

"I've had no choice in the matter, Iona. No choice. To be so betrayed, my trust altogether shattered. Of course the chambermaid and cook have been given the sack."

When he rose she shuddered. When he came to her, she drew back.

He seemed to take no notice. Leaning over, he kissed her on the forehead. His lips were dry; his breath stank of stale liquor and sleeplessness. "You will stay in your rooms now," he said.

It seemed to Iona that he meant she would stay there forever.

Lionel's sickly melancholy pervaded the halls like the damp stench of rot. Shut in her room, Iona ached for the three loyal servants, turned out as they were without prospects; but the hurt of Froggy's absence was like a soreness deep in the bone.

Dear Froggy

She took the precaution of hiding some of her books and congratulated herself on her canniness when Lionel took the rest of them away. When he wordlessly came to appropriate her books he did not accost her; but she was alarmed at the ragged pallor of his face, the hectic madness in his eyes.

He drank a great deal, so that she could not define a moment between his sobriety and his drunkenness. The footmen and the parlormaid took to tiptoeing the halls.

For four days she remained confined, feeling Lionel's anger charge the house as electricity does a storm. His sullen rage chafed at her, wearing her down, the fickleness of his blusters seeming to pull her now here, now there, so that she had no clear idea of their ultimate direction.

On the fourth evening he retired to the downstairs sitting room, and, although she stayed awake, she did not hear him come up. He had obviously drunk himself into a stupor.

Just before dawn she crept from her room and exited into the garden. Clutching her gift to Froggy, a slender copy of Keats which she had salvaged from Lionel's ravagings, she hurried her way across the meadow. Near the lake a dark figure stepped out from behind a tree, directly in her path.

She halted, alarmed. In the gray light of dawn she recognized the tall, slender form, the hunched shoulders. Lionel's coat was unbuttoned, his hair in great disarray.

"I found him," he said, leaning unsteadily on his walking stick.

Her hand flew to her mouth. She imagined Lionel's huge, drunken ungainliness in Froggy's small room. Froggy would have met his sullen rage with curiosity and perhaps even amusement. Had they fought? she wondered. And could one do harm to such a creature?

Yes, she knew. Froggy's peace was a fragile, hushed one, like the stillness inside a bubble. Shatter that, and Froggy might fly into a thousand pieces, too.

"Did you touch him?" she shouted angrily. "Did you hurt him?"

He reached out and furiously snatched the book from her hands. Swaying a bit on his feet, he blinked at the title. "Keats," he muttered. "Milksop love poesies that you considered me too dull to understand."

The sun had gained the horizon, turning the gray morning pink. With a growl of rage, Lionel flung the book. She saw it for an instant before it splashed into the lake, its brief flight dark as a startled bird's against the sky.

"So you loved him," he said, his gaze drawn to the water.

She considered that for a moment, all desire aside. Lust was an insignificant matter, she realized

jadedly, when compared to the fierce attraction of like minds.

"Yes," she said, astonishing herself. "Yes. I truly loved him."

She knew Lionel would never allow her to see Froggy again. There would be no one who would share her delight in questions, no one with whom she could share her thoughts. Anguish, hard and brutal, thrust itself into her. Tears started up in her eyes. She saw Lionel's hand go up and flung her own out to stay him, but her gaze was so clouded with grief that she did not realize the import of his gesture until the walking stick cracked her temple.

The blow drove her to her knees.

"God!" he screamed. "Enough that you cuckold me with a clever servant! Enough that he sneaks around the woods! I see him through the window at night, a shadow among the trees! Dear Christ, I see him everywhere!"

The silver knob of the stick came down. Bright agony exploded in her forehead. Dazed, she pitched forward, grasping his trousers. Her blood splattered his legs and her own clutching, desperate hands.

She thought to explain that the creature she loved was not Haverty at all, but something so strange that Lionel should have no fear of her dalliance. Her mouth and throat moved, but all that came from her was muddy syllables and nonsensical, terrified babble.

She was being dragged across the grass now, Lionel tearing at her fingers. The stick came down again, this time across her shoulders, driving the breath from her lungs.

The cold shock of the water was like a slap. Silt oozed into her sleeve. She thrashed as he drew her deeper and fought as her face was pushed under the wet chill.

She struggled, but Lionel was stronger. Opening her eyes wide she saw light filtered through the olive-colored water. In her chest was a sharp, burning ache as though she had swallowed badly and something hard had lodged in her gullet. For a moment all there was was pain and the pellucid, greenish glow.

Then the agony wavered, dissolved, and drifted away on the current. The light grew brighter, the motes of algae burning to pale embers. What was left was a soft, blank white, a white like the beginnings of things: the stainless pallor of paper before it is written on; the white of untrampled snow.

Iona took a deep breath and turned away from her distracted contemplation of the wall. Across the pale room Froggy stood, looking out a pair of French doors.

"It's stopped raining," he said.

She put her hand to the center of her chest, feeling the absence of some forgotten hurt.

"Please," Froggy urged. "Won't you come and see

the gardens?"

As she came forward he took her arm. She glanced down at the gloved hand, the cuffed sleeve.

"That won't be necessary," she told him.

"As you wish," he replied. The hand on her arm elongated, the pallor of the gloves changing to rough brown-gray skin.

He opened the door and they walked out. In the Garden of Perpetual Happiness droplets leaked from the moist leaves. A breeze caught the wind chimes and set them to tinkling.

"Your mind is rich," he said. "There is so much wonder to choose from. You must be diligent to tell me which of your thoughts makes you most cheerful so I do not pick merely those that interest me."

Together they strode out down the damp promenade. A peacock hooted in the darkness beyond the chrysanthemums.

As they neared the crest of the bridge Froggy stiffened, his hand tightening on her arm. Noting his discomfort, she paused to look down and caught a glimpse of something floating just under the surface of the water. Terror ignited, a lump of coal in her chest. It spread its conflagration down her stomach, her trembling limbs. Suddenly it was difficult to breathe.

"Look away," he told her, his tone gentle.

Quickly she shunted her distressed gaze to the side and the masses of golden flowers.

"It's best that you don't look down."

But her horrified mind gave her no other choice. In a moment she looked again. The thing under the water was clearer now, as though it were rising from a depth, all lacy petticoat, jellyfish billows, and tangled blond seaweed. Slowly, inexorably, as though caught in the current, the thing in the water began to turn.

"There is no sense in recalling that," he said, and steered her from the edge.

In desperation, she stared upwards into the whirled, porcelain arc of the sky so that her gaze would not fall to the water and its terrifying puzzle. She knew there was something she should remember, but the close heavens made her forget.

"Does it please you?" Froggy asked, bending to her, his voice hushed and timid and oh, so wise.

"Yes," she whispered, grasping his long, nubby fingers. "It does."

All beings were ultimately alien to each other; all creatures lived isolated in their minds' small rooms. But, even so, one could reach out at times.

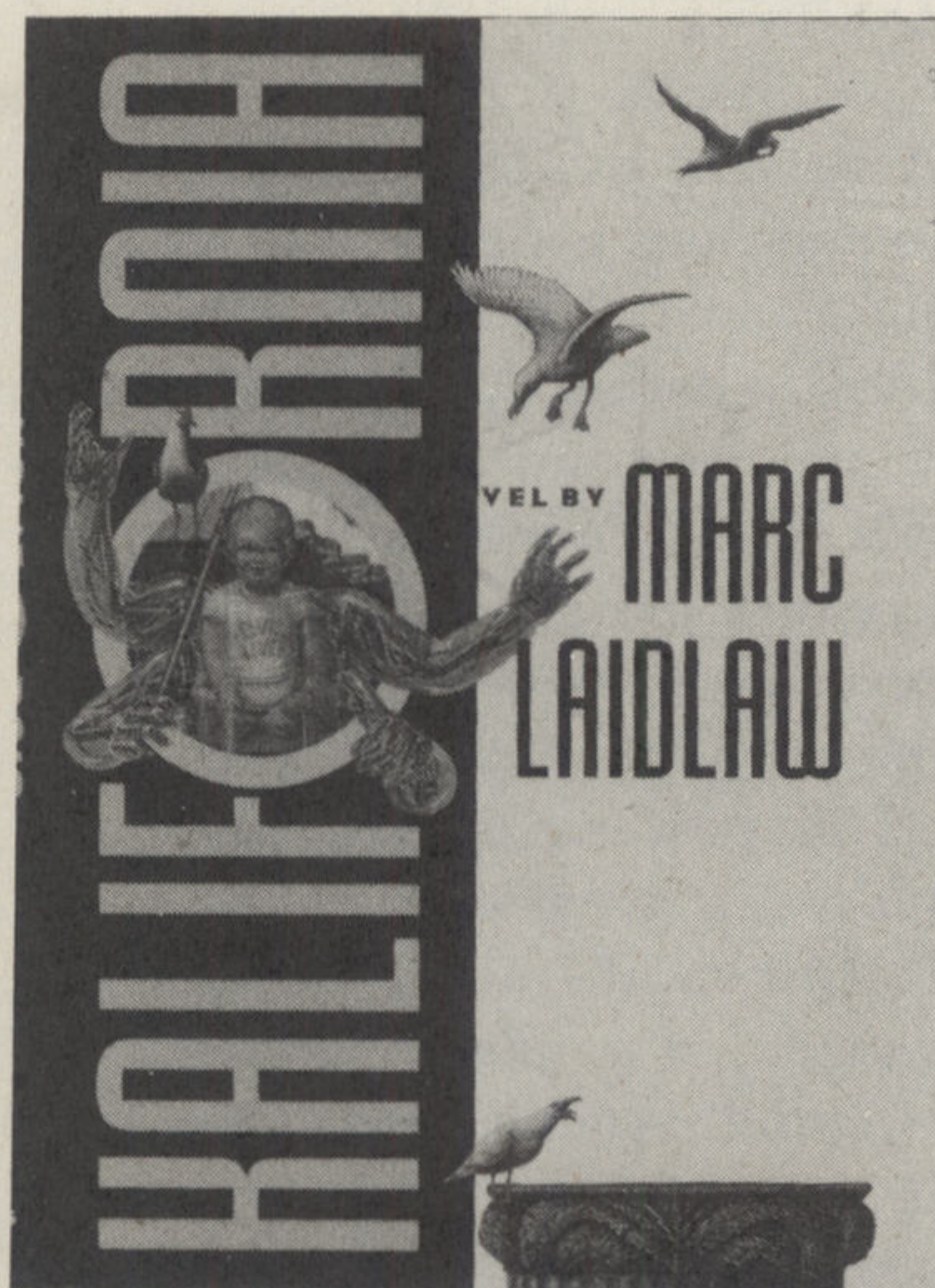
The glad truth was that even snails touched. □

# New Worlds

## *Kalifornia*

By Marc Laidlaw  
St. Martin's, 1993  
245 pp., \$18.95

Before reading *Kalifornia*, I wouldn't have thought there was anything left to satirize about California. Marc Laidlaw proves



there is in this hilarious and exciting novel.

Laidlaw portrays the flip side of William Gibson's dreary and

### Rating System

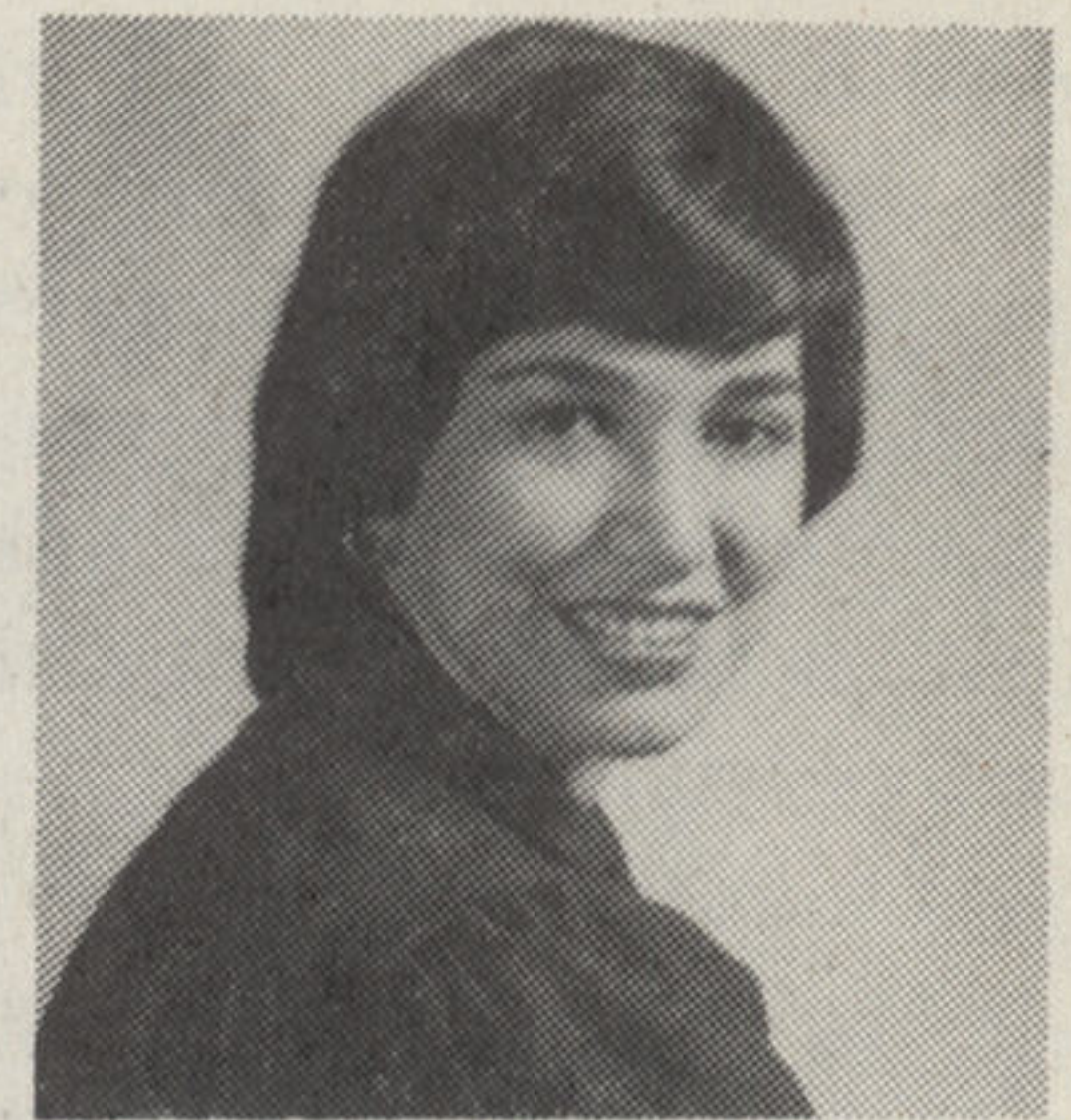
- ☆☆☆☆☆ Outstanding
- ☆☆☆☆ Very Good
- ☆☆☆ Good
- ☆☆ Fair
- ☆ Poor

deadly serious Sprawl. The book takes place in the SanFrageles megalopolis, also known as the Franchise, where people spend most of their lives tuned into wire shows, in which they experience every sensation of the actors. The biggest hit used to be *The Figueroa Show*, in which a whole family was live on the wire 24 hours a day. When the mother died in a mysterious accident, though, the family fell apart, and the only one now broadcasting is Poppy Figueroa, in her own spinoff, *Poppy on the Run*. She gives birth, live on the wires, to the first human born wired, Calafia, whose arrival is timed to coincide with California's bicentennial. Calafia is kidnapped for real, though, and soon it's up to Poppy's younger brother Sandy to rescue her from a frightening fate.

Laidlaw's future, though intended satirically, is often believable; his prediction about Wiring seems a likely use of virtual-reality technology. In addition, the book features a couple of solid characters, a fast-moving, involving plot, and lots and lots of laughs; it's one of the few everything-but-the-kitchen-sink type plots I've seen that actually hold together. *Kalifornia* is inventive, involving, and often screamingly funny; don't miss it.

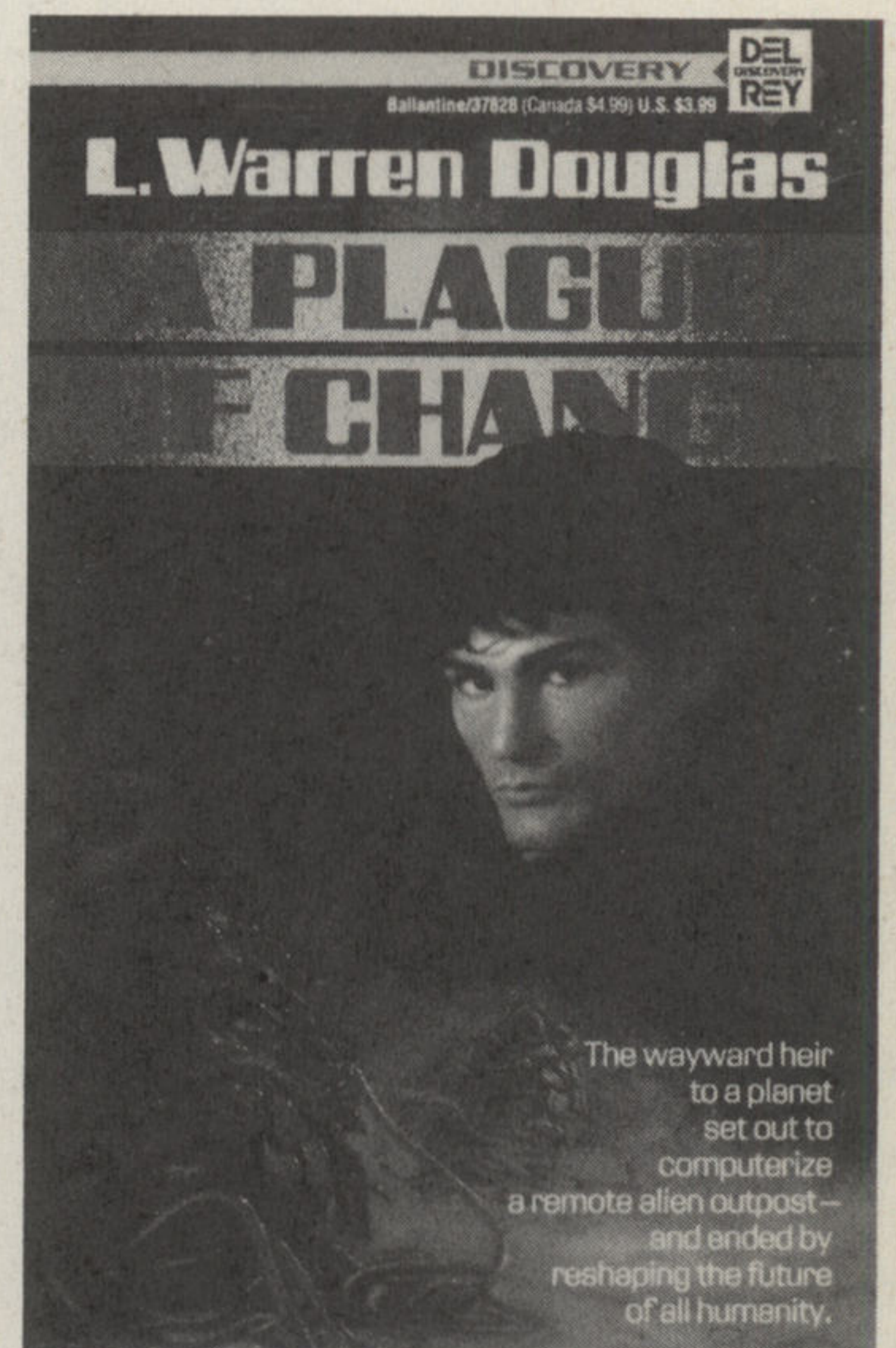
Rating: ☆☆☆☆ 1/2

*A Plague of Change*  
By L. Warren Douglas  
Del Rey, 1992  
313 pp., \$3.99



L. Warren Douglas's *A Plague of Change* is an unusually ambitious first novel. Despite some problems with heavy-handed exposition near the beginning, it has an interesting plot, and it overflows with ideas.

The plot parallels the Biblical story of Joseph. Bass Cannon, a



young space cadet and heir to a planet, has a conflict with his friends which ends with their ambushing him and selling him to a spaceship captain. In the course of trying to make his way home, Bass takes a job working for the Psatla, an alien race that, though superb at genetic engineering, must rely on humans for its tech-

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nology. As human civilization in the colony planets falls apart, Bass finds that the destinies of humans and Psatla are intertwined, and that humanity must change radically, and involuntarily, if it is to survive. The plan he implements makes him either the greatest savior or the greatest traitor in human history.

Once you get past the early sections, where expository lumps bob up on every other page, the book moves well, though there are a few technical problems related to inexperience that I wish an editor could work on with him. Because of the book's overwhelming concentration on ideas, there's not much in the way of characterization. Bass is unpleasant and one-dimensional in his obsession; the most likable character is the Psatla Swadeth. The Psatla are truly alien, and utterly fascinating. The use of Psatla language and names, unfortunately, can get confusing.

*A Plague of Change* will disappoint many readers, since it violates the SF orthodoxy of libertarian individualism. The open-minded will find ample food for thought. Is Bass a hero or a traitor? In giving up our culture, do we give up what makes us human? I'm still pondering such questions.

Douglas is a very promising new writer. *A Plague of Change* is good; if he can learn to put more emphasis on plot, and to control his tendency to lecture, his next book should be even better.

Rating: ☆☆☆ 1/2

*Mirror to the Sky*

By Mark Geston

AvoNova/Morrow, 1992

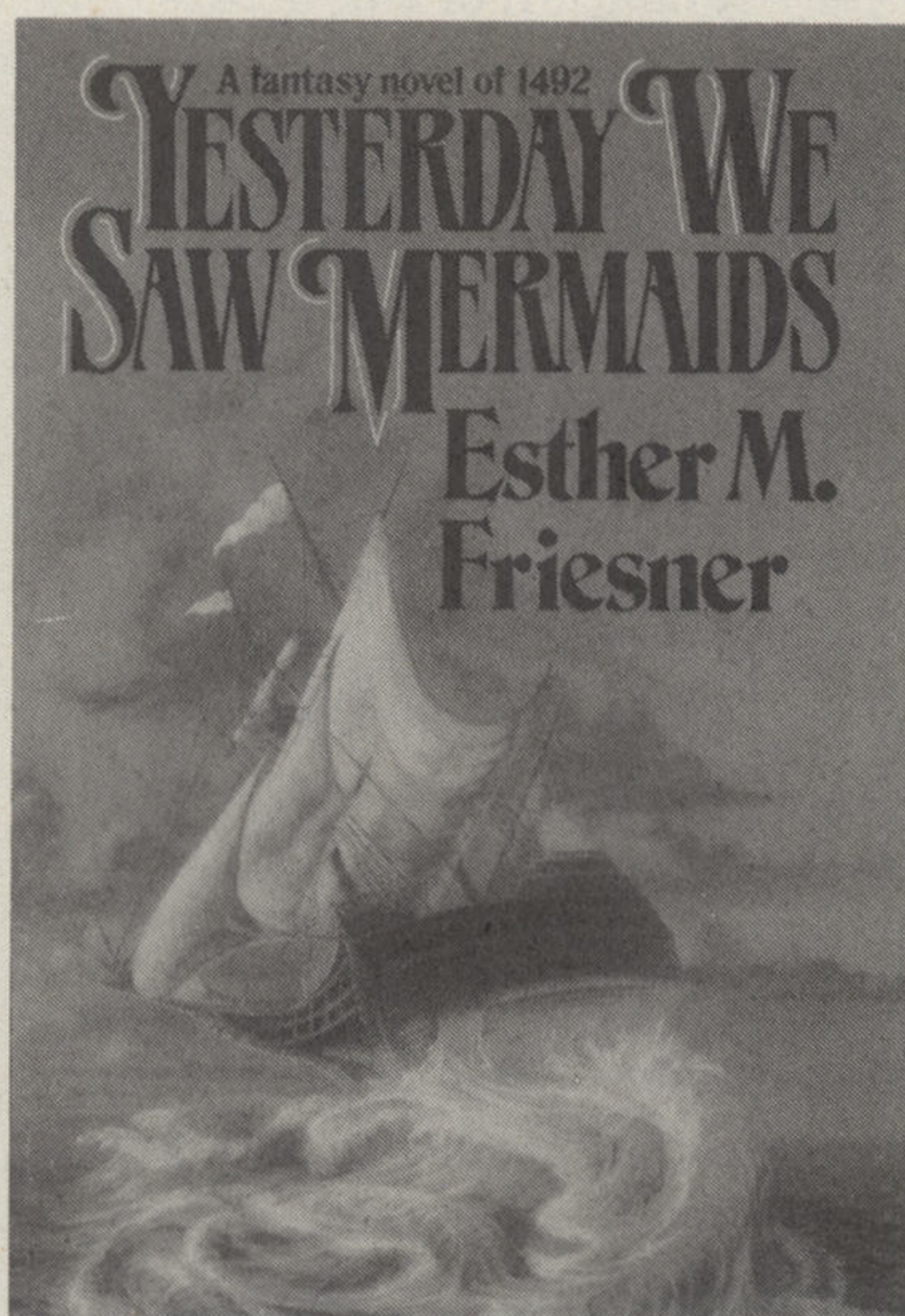
240 pp. in proof, \$20.00

Mark Geston's first novel, *Mirror to the Sky*, is an object lesson in the need for editing. It has some remarkable virtues, but it is much less than it could have been with the guidance of a good editor.

*Mirror to the Sky* is a First Con-

tact story concerning the arrival on Earth of an alien race that soon becomes known as "the gods." An effort by one of the alien envoys to improve mutual understanding through the display of the gods' art turns out to have tragic, far-reaching, and irreversible consequences for both gods and humans.

Geston's plot is fine and full of interesting ideas. I was impressed by his use of art and its involvement in politics, his portrayal of the aliens, and the turnabout in tone of the book's ending revelation about humanity's future. It is much more thoughtful and



thought-provoking than most novels.

But *Mirror to the Sky* is badly written, full of details that don't make sense, breaks in point of view, even errors in verb tense. The novel's characterization is extremely flat; the only character I came close to caring about was the alien Rane. There's no involvement, no empathy; Geston describes people's emotions, but he doesn't make us feel them. The government agents might as well be automatons, for all the feelings they seem to have about watching their world come apart. Every-

thing's described at a shallow, surface level.

The plot is interesting, but it drags toward the end. The depiction of the future Earth is questionable. Judging by the extent of climate change, we must be some ways into the future, but there's very little in the way of technological advancement, and the world is culturally backward, especially in terms of sexism.

Mark Geston is a remarkably promising author, and he makes *Mirror to the Sky* worth reading despite its flaws. I only hope he gets a thorough editing next time.

Rating: ☆☆☆

*Yesterday We Saw Mermaids*

By Esther M. Friesner

Tor, 1992

192 pp., \$16.95

The year 1492, to most people, conjures up the image of Columbus's first voyage to the Americas. But there was another momentous aspect to the year, as the Spanish Inquisition spread its terror. Esther M. Friesner, in a departure from the light fantasy she is best known for, has written a short fantasy novel that concerns both, as well as the place of magic in the mundane world.

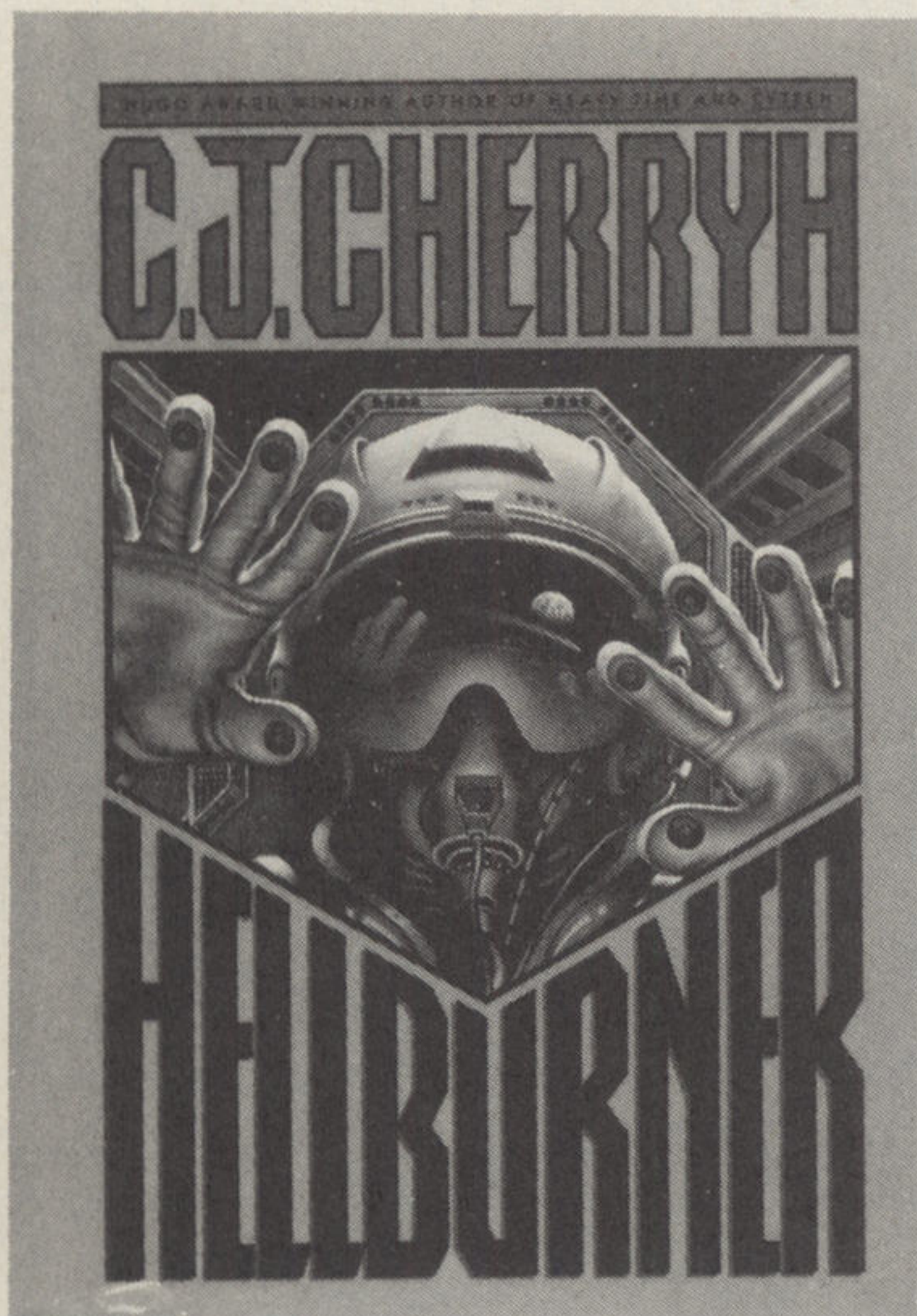
The powers of a genie have placed a cluster of nuns, their father-confessor, a Moorish woman, a young gypsy, and an enigmatic young Jewish girl on a brazen ship headed for what will soon be dubbed the New World. They are striving to beat Columbus there to help preserve the magical and marvelous kingdom of Prester John. Treachery, deceit, and faith all play their roles as the plot moves toward its inevitable conclusion.

The book is narrated by a young nun, placed in the convent against her will, despised by the others for her illegitimacy. Though Sister Ana has a deep faith in God, she is full of questions, and goes so far as to feel sympathy for Jews about to be burned. She is clever, witty,

and perceptive. This all makes her sympathetic to the modern reader.

Friesner's voice — as Sister Ana — never falters, and the book is full of believable details of medieval life which set off the fantastic aspects. The story is tragic and engrossing. The book's main flaw is its pacing; the part devoted to the voyage moves achingly slowly, while that taking place in the kingdom of Prester John moves by too fast. The ending, though, is perfect.

The novel can be taken at face value, as a fantasy, or as an allegory about the fate of the New World met by the Old World.



Either way, it is a moving story, and a worthwhile addition to the literature of this historical First Contact.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

*Hellburner*

By C.J. Cherryh

Warner/Questar, 1992

343 pp., \$19.95

C.J. Cherryh's science fiction novels can generally be classified in two groups: the thick, complex novel of science, politics, and intrigue (such as *Downbelow Sta-*

*tion* and *Cyteen*) and the shorter story of space adventure (such as *Merchanter's Luck* and *Rimrunners*). *Hellburner*, the sequel to the underrated *Heavy Time*, is of the latter type, though, as you'd expect from Cherryh, the adventure is still seasoned by plenty of intrigue.

This exciting story is set in the early days of the Alliance/Union universe, before the Company Wars, when the Company Fleet was just being formed. If none of that means anything to you, don't read this book, which can be confusing even if you've read *Heavy Time*, to which it's a direct sequel.

*Hellburner* picks up the story of Ben Pollard, a child of the Belt, who is finishing his computer studies in hopes of a cushy posting. Suddenly he is yanked away as "next of kin" to Paul Dekker, whom he reluctantly helped rescue in *Heavy Time*, whom he despises, and who is once again injured, off his head, and in desperate need of help. There's more to the summons than mercy, it turns out, and Ben and Paul are soon in the midst of a controversial new fighter program. Fortunately, their old friends Meg Kady and Sal Aboujib show up to help; now all they have to do is stay alive, find out who tried to kill Paul, and successfully fly the un-flyable *Hellburner*.

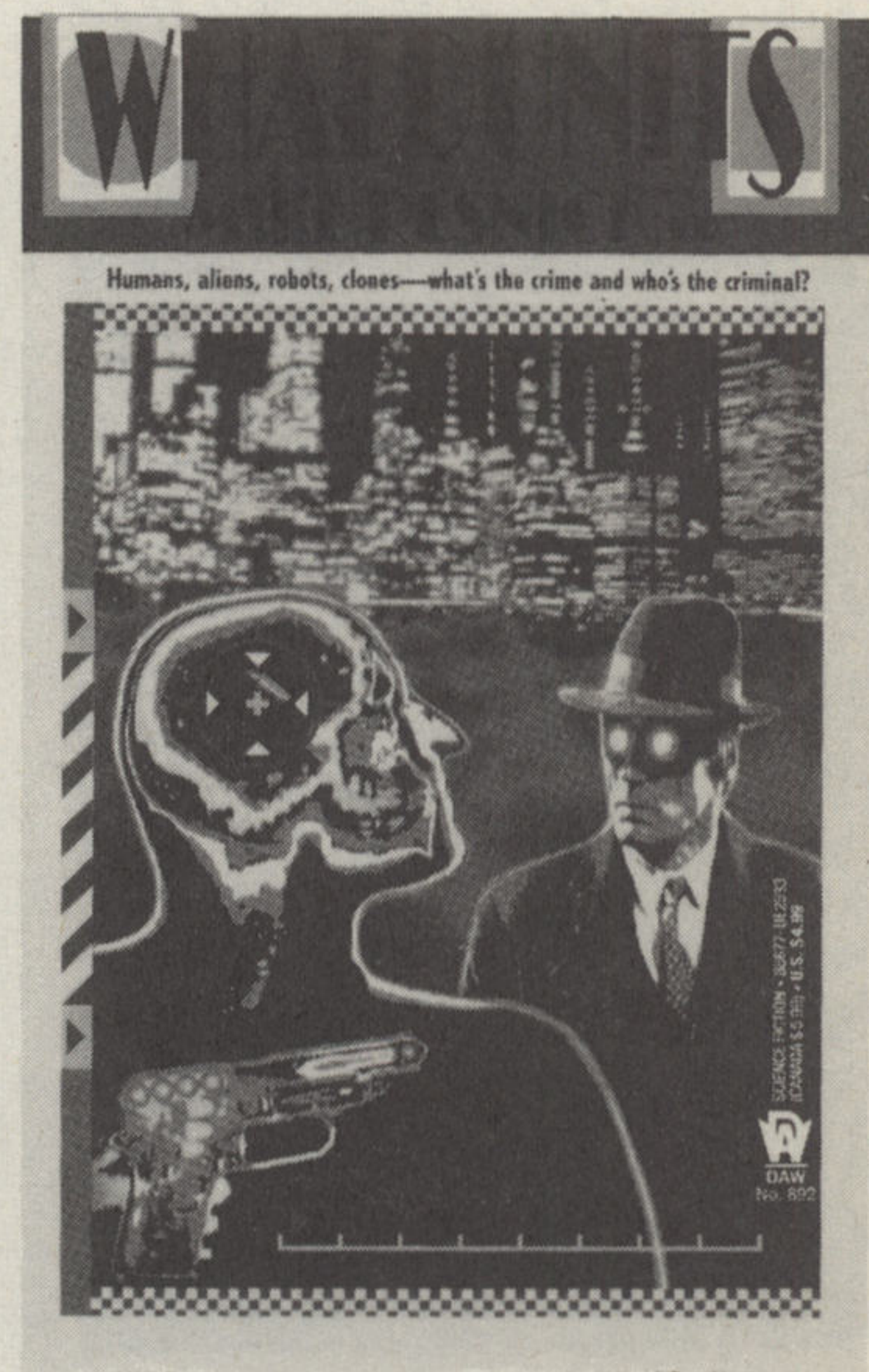
Though it centers around the new fighter ship, there's not much emphasis on hardware until the

## Moving?

If you plan to move between now and March, please notify us. It takes several weeks for a change of address to get entered into the database, and you wouldn't want to miss your next issue of *Aboriginal Science Fiction*.

The U.S. Postal Service usually won't forward copies, and destroys them, charging us 35 cents for the privilege. That's why we cannot replace lost copies without an additional fee, if you move and don't tell us.

last part of the book, but then there's enough for most nuts-and-bolts lovers, a bit too much for me. I sometimes found Cherryh's descriptions too confusing to visualize, particularly the simulator test area where the characters spend a lot of time. The book is mostly a devastating attack on the military establishment (as *Heavy Time* was on the corporate establishment), even though it takes place before things went so very wrong in this universe. The mystery pending for most of the book — who tried to kill Paul? — is resolved anticlimactically; the would-be mur-



derer is no one we care about, nor is his identity much of a revelation.

Cherryh wisely does not keep the focus on the hapless loser Paul, but mostly on Ben, who is more likable than in the previous book, though he's still a selfish bastard, and Meg, who is delightful. The ending is satisfying, tying a remarkable number of plot threads together, probably too many.

*Hellburner* displays both Cherryh's virtues — suspense, characters you care about, a good

feel for politics and economics — and her vices — unnecessary plot complications and obscurity. If you've been following her Alliance/Union tales, make an effort to catch this one; if you still haven't discovered Cherryh, go read some of the earlier books.

Rating: ☆☆☆ 1/2

#### *Whatdunits*

Edited by Mike Resnick  
DAW, 1992  
335 pp., \$4.99

The science-fiction mystery, despite John Campbell's original doubts, remains a popular sub-

puzzle story, "Dead Ringer."

A time-travel romp by Jack Nimersheim, "Cain's Curse," is a lot of fun but essentially a Shaggy Dog story. Anthony R. Lewis's "Loss of Phase" includes a delightful and unique detective but suffers from an anticlimactic ending. Ralph Roberts's "The Colonel and the Alien" is an exciting tale of intrigue, but the villain is both too villainous and too stupid. Michael A. Stackpole has fun parodying the hard-boiled subgenre in "It's the Thought That Counts," but he goes overboard in his efforts at screwball humor. "Heaven Scent," by Virginia Booth, starts out promisingly with a mysterious death in space and includes some fascinating cultural detail, but the ending is anticlimactic and left me feeling that I was missing something. Other good contributions come from Pat Cadigan, Jack C. Haldeman II, Laura Resnick, Barbara Delaplace, and Ray Aldridge.

As for the duds: "An Incident at the Circus," by Rick Katze, starts with a good idea — though its SF trappings are not essential — but fails to deliver. Bob Liddil's "Murder Under Glass" falls into the classic pitfall of the SF mystery, having the solution depend on a fact about an alien race that the reader couldn't possibly know, and cheats by depriving us of clues elsewhere as well. "Color Me Dead," by Sandra Rector and P.M.F. Johnson, is confusing. To my surprise, the usually funny John DeChancie's "Murder On-Line" doesn't work on any level (and the murder isn't even on-line).

One aspect of the book that makes it of particular interest to would-be writers and those who study writing is that, before each story, Resnick provides the original scenario given to the author. In nearly every case the writer departed from it, often substantially, and the reader can examine where and why this was so.

*Whatdunits*, though not outstanding overall, contains a few

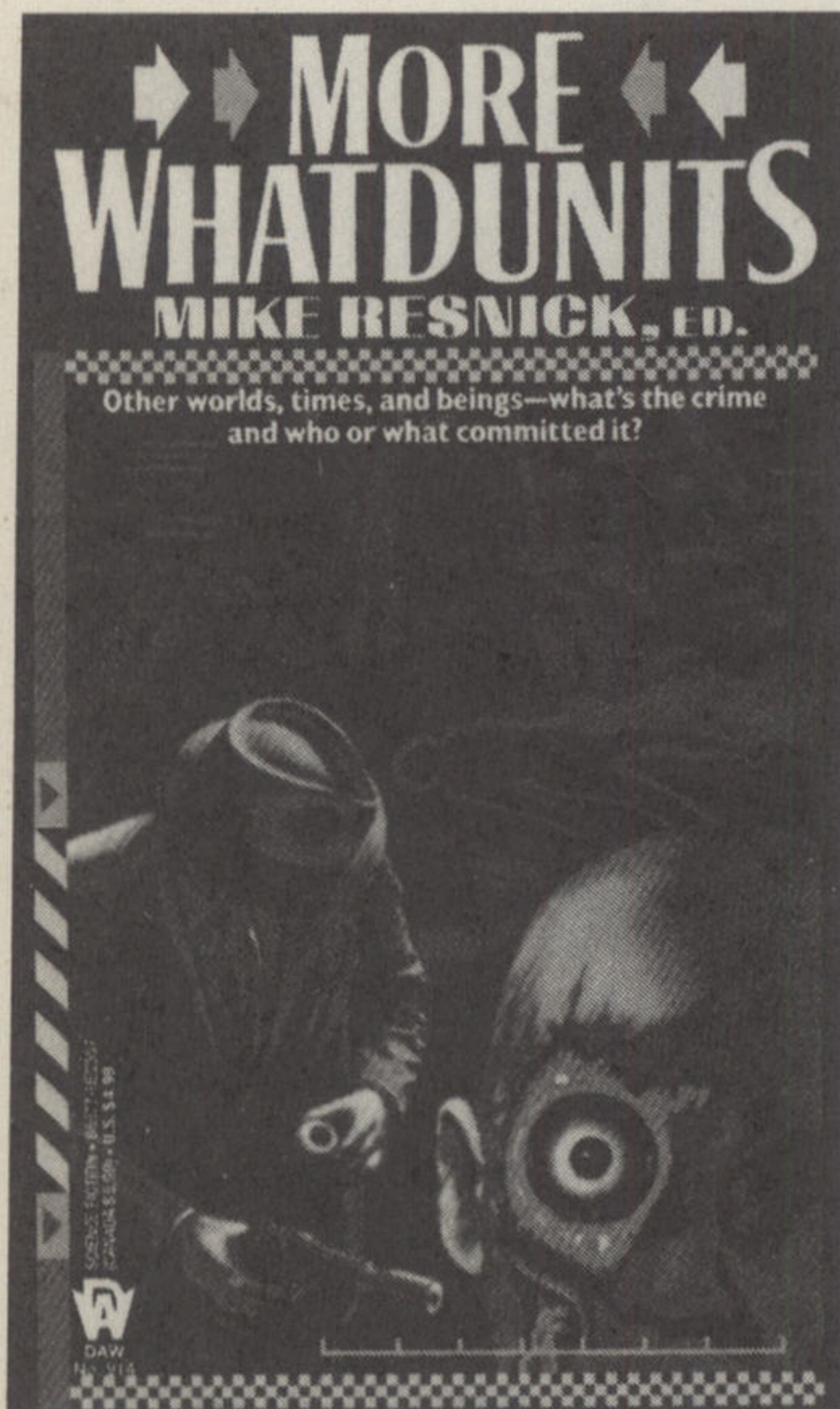
gems and is well worthwhile for anyone who enjoys SF mysteries.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

#### *Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde, Vol. 1*

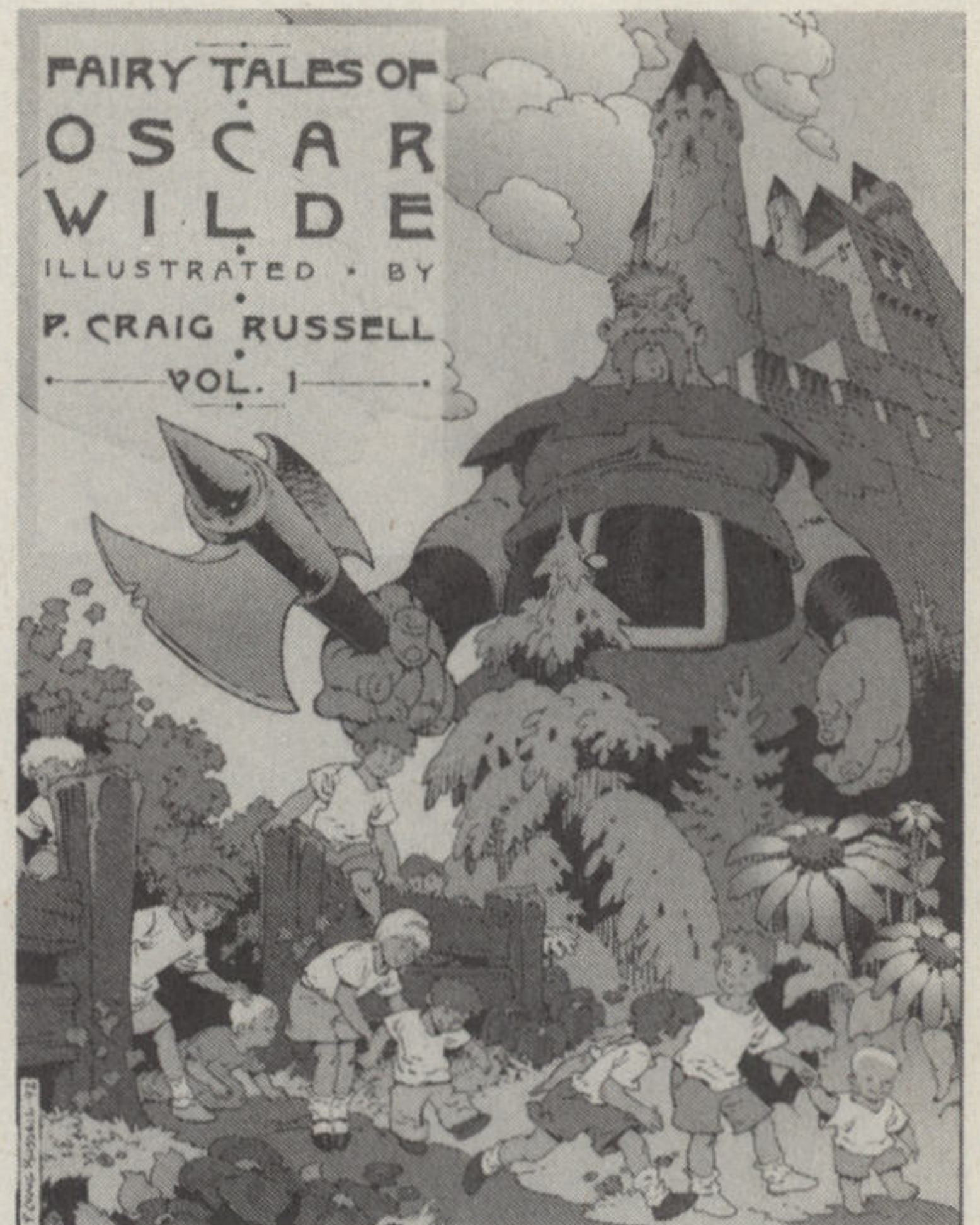
By Oscar Wilde;  
Illustrated by P. Craig Russell  
NBM, 1992  
Unpaginated, \$15.95

Until I saw this gorgeous book, I didn't know that Oscar Wilde had written fairy tales. It would have seemed out of character for that brittle wit. On the evidence of the two included in this volume, though, they are brilliant: beauti-



genre, and there's still some life in it, as witnessed by Mike Resnick's new anthology. Resnick assigned ideas to 18 authors, and the results are generally good to excellent, with only a few duds.

The best piece in the book is Roger MacBride Allen's hilarious "Monkey See," which displays the best use of footnotes I've seen in a long time. Other standouts include Katharine Kerr's psychological puzzle, "Its Own Reward," Judith Tarr's drama with a nasty, ironic twist, "Signs and Stones," and Esther Friesner and Walter Stutzman's classic



ful prose, striking imagery, a hint of wit. Adults will relish them, and may appreciate them more than will children.

"The Selfish Giant" is a traditional morality tale. The title character chases the children out of his garden where they love to play, causing it to become locked in eternal, brutal winter. It ends on a surprising (to me) religious note. "The Star-Child" is the tale of a vain, cruel boy who is made an outcast and set to roam the world in search of his mother. His quest is long and arduous, and though it ends in the expected triumph and

redemption, there is a remarkably grim postscript.

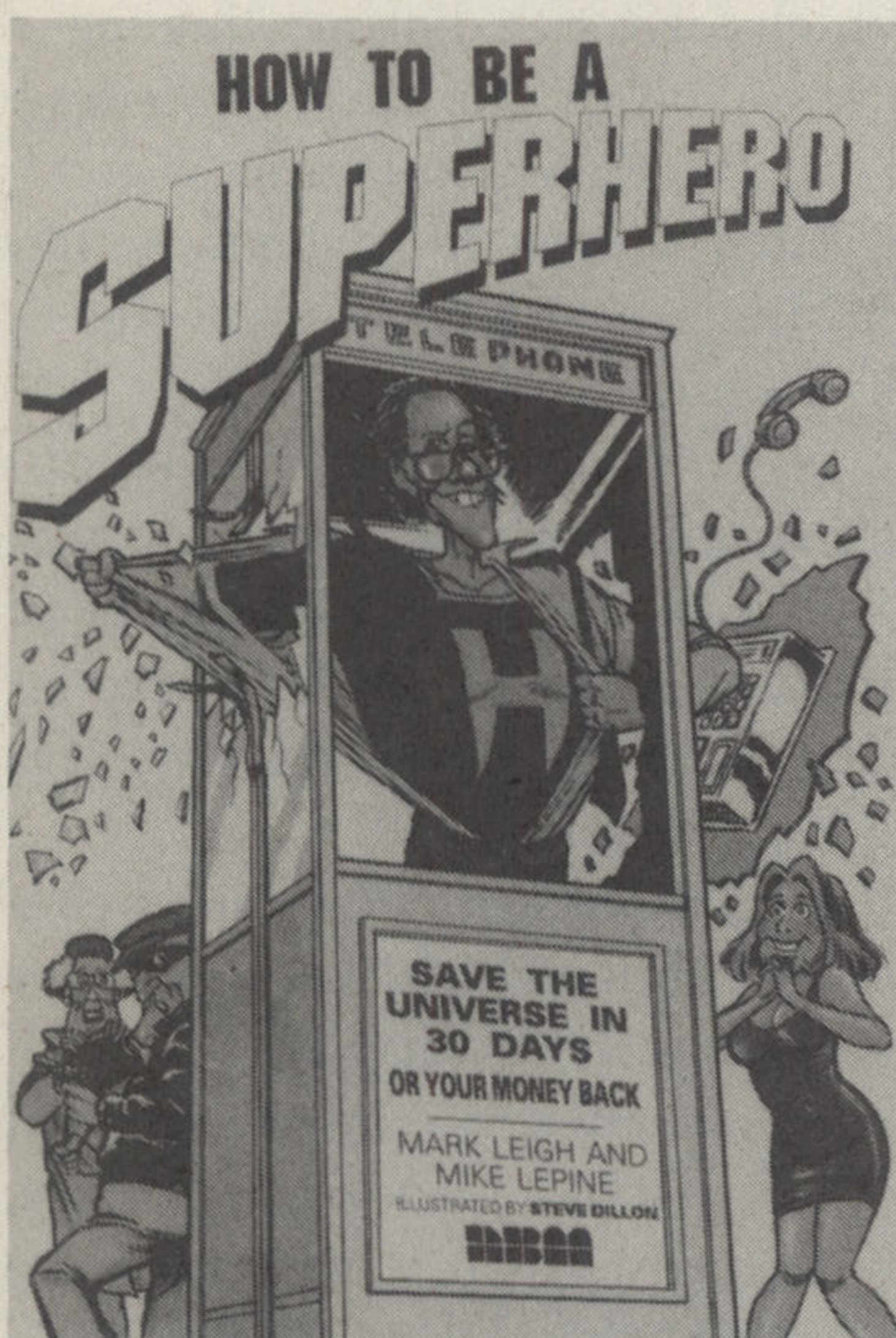
P. Craig Russell's illustrations complement the text beautifully, funny or grim as necessary, catching the spirit of the prose. I strongly recommend this book, and will be looking forward to the promised four further volumes.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆ 1/2

### *How to Be a Superhero*

By Mark Leigh and Mike Lepine  
NBM, 1992

172 pp., \$7.95



*How to Be a Superhero*, which is subtitled *Save the Universe in 30 Days or Your Money Back*, is just what its title indicates, a how-to manual, with advice on everything from how to get superpowers to how to fund your universe-saving to why Boy Wonders are a bad idea. The humor is sometimes sophomoric, sometimes hilariously on-target. The list of what superpowers being bitten by various radioactive animals will get you is alone worth the price of the book. Leigh and Lepine's humor hits the target enough of the time for me to recommend the book to anyone with at least a faint interest in

superheroes.

Rating: ☆☆☆ 1/2

### Two Volumes of Verse:

#### *What Rough Book:*

*Dark Poems and Light*  
By Keith Allen Daniels  
Anamnesis Books, 1992  
135 pp., \$12.95

#### *Dream Protocols*

Verse by Lee Ballentine;  
Collages by Richard Kadrey  
talismán, 1992  
95 pp., \$9.95

About the only thing these two books have in common is that the contents of each are labeled "poetry." The poems in *What Rough Book* are generally in traditional verse forms — that is, with rhyme and meter — and inspired, for the most part, by weird fiction, especially H.P. Lovecraft. Lee Ballentine's poems in *Dream Protocols* are free-form, abstract, surrealistic, using the vocabulary of technology and science fiction to set images whirling.

Daniels's poems are more accessible to those who, like me, don't have a great familiarity with modern poetry. However, a dictionary might be handy, since the poet likes to use abstruse words. This is not showing off in a William F. Buckley manner; the choice of vocabulary helps to set the mood.

That mood is very dark. Daniels creates eerie visions and wonders in a world of lurking horrors. Many of the poems are compell-

ing. You won't soon forget them.

In addition to the dark-fantasy poetry, Daniels has included some humorous poems, most of which are scatological. These did not appeal to my sense of humor, though I didn't find them offensive.

I have an embarrassing confession to make about *Dream Protocols*: I understood little of it. With few exceptions, I couldn't make out what the poems were about, although the imagery is striking. Richard Kadrey's collages match the poetry perfectly in that respect.

Clearly I'm not the audience for which Ballentine is writing. I was able only to catch glimpses of the visions he creates; those with a greater understanding of modern speculative poetry will probably find them stunning. □

## Guidelines Are Available

If, while reading *Aboriginal*, you get a hankering to try your own hand at writing a science fiction yarn, please send for our guidelines. Just mail a SASE (self-addressed, stamped [29¢] envelope) to our editorial address:

Aboriginal Guidelines  
P.O. Box 2449  
Woburn, MA 01888

## This is a double issue

Please remember that this is a double issue, with twice as many stories as we normally publish. Because of that it will count as two issues on your subscription, or one if you paid the quarterly rate.

We plan to publish four double issues this year, including this one.

# The Cutting Edge



I often pilfer pearls of wisdom to adorn this column, Dear Reader, for your edification. When I can, though, I am willing to admit where I got them.

This is from the introduction to Raymond Chandler's *The Simple Art of Murder*:

The mystery story is a kind of writing that need not dwell in the shadow of the past and owes little if any allegiance to the cult of classics. It is a good deal more than unlikely that any writer now living will produce a better historical novel than *Henry Esmond* ... a sharper social vignette than *Madame Bovary* ... a wider and richer canvas than *War and Peace* or *The Brothers Karamazov*. But to devise a more plausible mystery than *The Hound of the Baskervilles* or "The Purloined Letter" should not be too difficult. Nowadays it would be rather more difficult not to. There are no "classics" of crime and detection. Not one. Within its frame of reference, which is the only way it should be judged, a classic is a piece of writing which exhausts the possibilities of its form and can hardly be surpassed.

The first thought that comes to me is that if *War and Peace* exhausted the possibilities of its form, how is it that later and valid war novels — *For Whom the Bell*

*Tolls*, for example — were possible? One possible answer is that Chandler was just plain wrong. A more challenging one is that subsequent works succeeded by *changing* the previously exhausted form and renewing it.

The next thought is this: Are there any classics of science fiction, by Chandler's definition? What are the novels or stories which force later novels and stories to either be *different* or look ridiculous? I can give you a clear example from epic fantasy. *The Lord of the Rings* has, by all indications, exhausted *its* form, and that's why Tolkien's ephebes look ridiculous. Tolkien forced a change. Le Guin, Beagle, Robert Holdstock, John Bellairs, Tim Powers, and some others have, indeed, managed to evolve. The trilogy factories have not.

*The Martian Chronicles* certainly did something that could not be repeated. While Bradbury in that mode had feeble imitators, I can't think of any real successors. *The Time Machine* has yet to be surpassed and has indeed rarely been approached, but here we have to keep in mind the special circumstances: that much of the pulp SF of the first half of this century was so literarily retarded that normal evolution wasn't possible. A field which could regard *The Skylark of Space* or *The Blind Spot* as great works had a lot of catching up to do before anyone could even *think* about overtaking Wells.

But *The Time Machine* opened up more possibilities than it

closed off. Without it, we would not have had *The House on the Borderland* or Clark Ashton Smith's Zothique stories or Vance's *The Dying Earth* — all of which form the distinct lineage of Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun*, a work which I think is going to turn out to have been vastly influential, and probably a classic of the highest order.

Is this something inherent about imaginative fiction, which is untrue of realistic fiction? Is an imaginative classic like a breeder reactor, where a realistic classic is like a spent fuel rod?

Actually, I am not entirely convinced that mainstream classics possess such finality. If no one will ever produce a sharper social vignette than *Madame Bovary*, eventually society will have so changed that *Madame Bovary* is a museum piece and it's time to do it again. Had Chandler been writing in the First Century A.D., he would have said that nobody would ever produce a sharper vignette than *The Satyricon*. Quite possibly somebody has.

The difference seems to be that imaginative fiction renews itself when someone imagines something which no one has before. Realistic fiction renews itself directly from life, from changes in the real world.

My second gem of wisdom I can't accredit because I don't remember who said it. The occasion was a panel discussion at a Horror Writers of America

## Rating System

☆☆☆☆☆	Outstanding
☆☆☆☆	Very Good
☆☆☆	Good
☆☆	Fair
☆	Poor



weekend. Someone pointed out the futility of writing more and more serial killer books. Yes, Thomas Harris's *The Silence of the Lambs* revolutionized the field, but the next book to do so, to take us in a sharply different direction, has probably already been written, if not already published. We just don't know what it is yet.

This demonstrates the folly of declaring anything "the cutting edge" or the "avant garde." How can we know that a new book is going to close off possibilities or open them up or otherwise influence the way subsequent books are written until those subsequent books have actually appeared? Yes, Bill Gibson's *Neuromancer* was genuinely cutting-edge, but we didn't know it in 1984, did we? It took a couple of years.

Meanwhile we can only guess. Ignore the obvious imitations, the franchise fictions, and look for the unique and original visions. They're like scattered seeds. Some of them will take root and grow. Some won't.

Among the latest handful of seeds I find:

*Cold Allies*

By Patricia Anthony

Harcourt Brace

Jovanovich, April 1992

288 pp., \$21.95

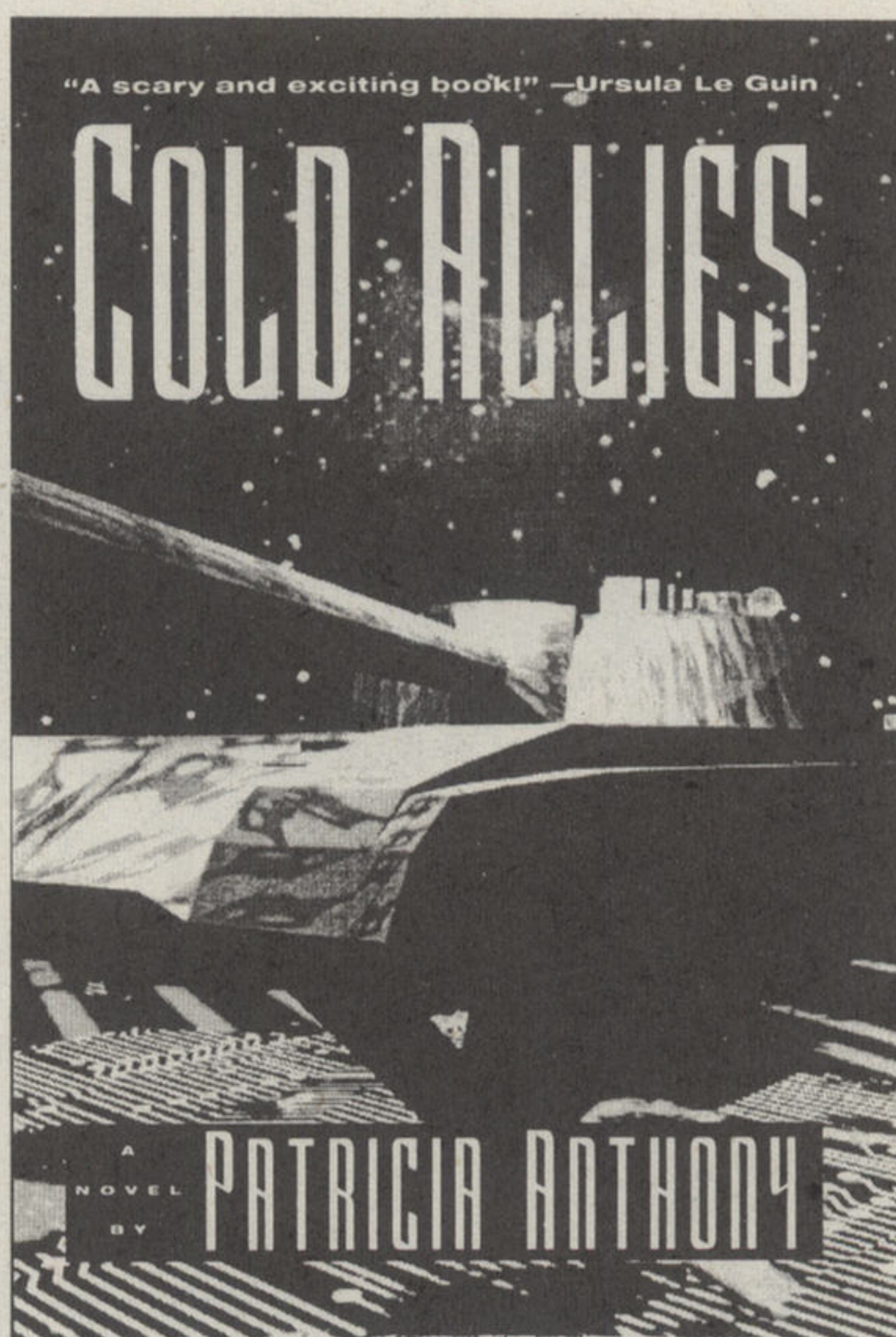
Patricia Anthony is going to be seen, surely, as the first major discovery to come out of this very magazine, *Aboriginal SF*. Now she has (I am told) *three* major novels about to hit in close sequence, two of them part of a new, very prestigious hardcover line begun by HBJ, edited by Michael Kandel. If a line can only manage four books a year and some of those are by Stanislaw Lem, and *two* novels are by a newcomer, that must be quite some newcomer.

So listen up.

*Cold Allies* is an enormously

capable first novel, not at all insubstantial, but so fluidly readable that I went through the whole thing in one sitting the night before this column was due. I am not a fast reader. I am impressed that Ms. Anthony held my interest that firmly.

The story takes place perhaps twenty years hence, when the Greenhouse Effect has done its worst. Lowlands are underwater. Deserts have spread. The entire Middle East (not to mention the American southwest and midwest) is dying. A vast "Arab" army of the dispossessed is invading



Europe in a two-pronged attack through Spain and through the Ukraine. The European Allies are losing, the Americans unable to be of major assistance, the Russians (who have benefited from the climate changes) unwilling. The narrative proceeds in short scenes and chapters from a variety of viewpoints, in the manner of a disaster novel, the *event* rather than any individual character's story being the center of attention. But weirdness slips in: blue lights, which may be UFOs, which may be universally hostile or even capable of taking sides, begin to appear on the battlefield. Some people seem able to contact the

"aliens" in dreams. A few others are even "abducted" into a dreamland built out of their own memories and desires.

It's not quite an alien contact novel or a case of "we are property" à la *Sinister Barrier*. The aliens remain enigmatic. They "fix" things. Some readers may find the ending a bit of a cheat. It's not clear that this breaks any new ground. The dream/hallucination sequences are part of that now common coin of unreality Philip K. Dick (a cutting-edge writer if ever there was one) bequeathed to the entire field. Long passages about a soldier who fights on distant battlefields by means of remote-controlled robots have antecedents as far back as Heinlein's "Waldo" (1942). But few readers will deny that this is a finely-written, well-imagined book. I object only to the occasional lapses of military discipline, as when the remote operator, in a combat situation, seems to be able to just park his machine for lunch or to go to the bathroom, and nobody else, even the enemy, ever notices.

*Cold Allies* should herald the beginning of a major career, and would establish a minor niche for its author if Ms. Anthony were run over by a truck tomorrow.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

*Outside the Dog Museum*

By Jonathan Carroll

Doubleday, 1992

243 pp., \$20.00

This one was a World Fantasy Award finalist. It didn't win. It is also the sixth published novel by a possibly *very* avant-garde writer who will be unfairly in the shadow of his first novel for some time to come. In addition to classics and cutting-edge books, there are also *unique* books, which even the author can't duplicate. Charles Finney's *The Circus of Dr. Lao* is one such. Quite possibly *The Land of Laughs* is another. Best described as a collaboration between Franz Kafka and Philip K.

Dick in an attempt to write L. Frank Baum, there is indeed nothing else like it. *The Land of Laughs* remains my choice for the best horror/fantasy novel of the past thirty or so years. Not even Jonathan Carroll can get close to it.

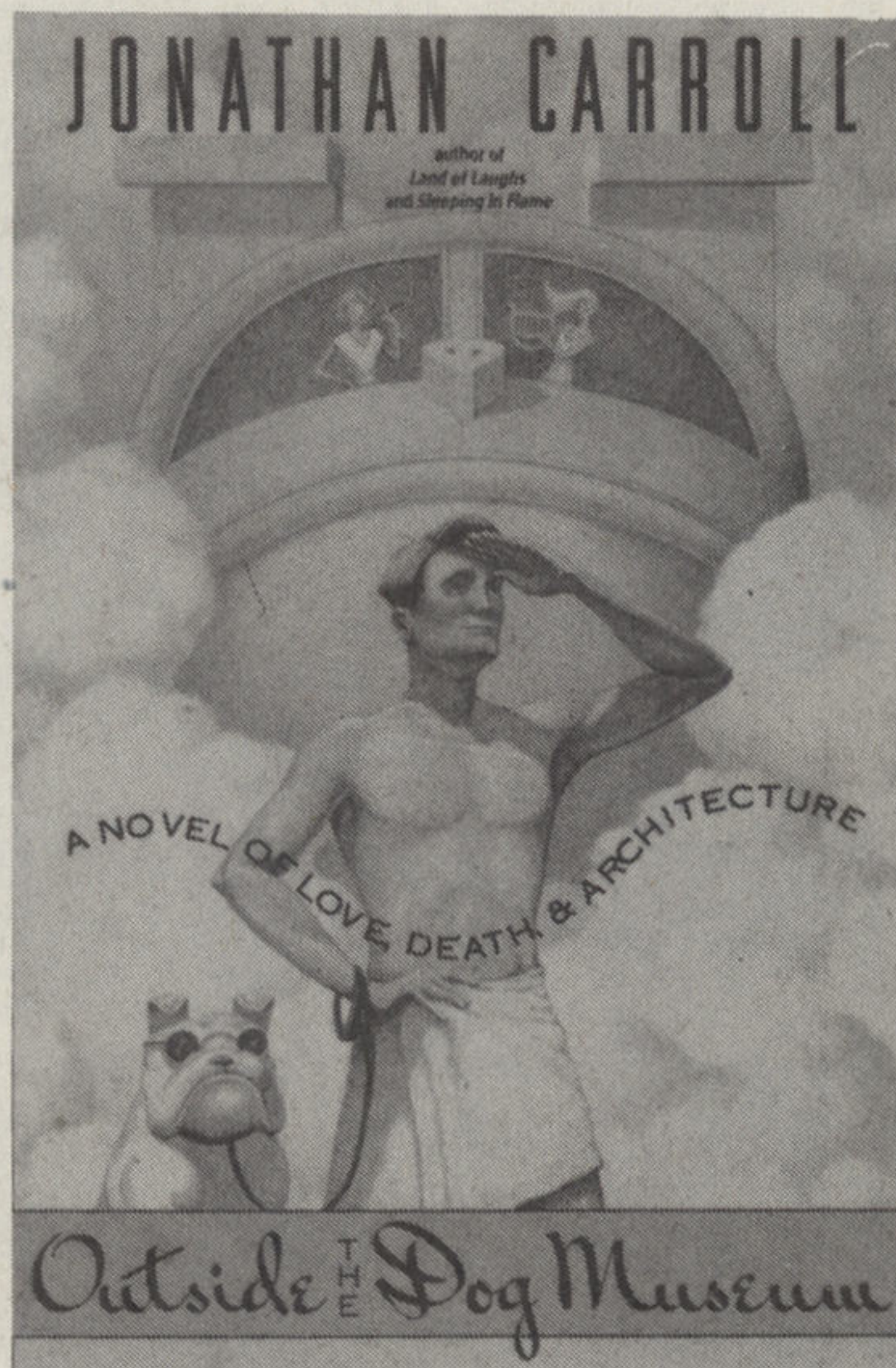
In *Outside the Dog Museum* he is at his best and worst simultaneously, polished and over-mannered, endlessly inventive and unfocussed. It would now be distinctly possible for someone to imitate — or parody — the typical Jonathan Carroll novel. You know: upper-class, artistic/sensitive/egotistical characters with funny names like Bronze Sydney or Walker Easterling. Jarring, surreal intrusions into modern life, like a Philip Dick novel only with supernatural rather than science-fictional motifs, more clever opening lines than anything since the days when *bons mots* were all the rage.

There's no denying that Carroll is very good at what he does, but this time he is just a little too glib, a little too self-indulgent. We still read him, but are not moved or gripped or particularly convinced. *Outside the Dog Museum* suffers from too many digressions, too many short sequences and not enough long and well-developed ones, as if Mr. Carroll sat down every day, wrote a few pages vaguely related to the subject at hand, and called the end result a novel. The characters tend to be accumulations of comic angst, like something out of a Woody Allen movie. That he has a villain, the evil brother of a Middle Eastern potentate, named "Cthulu" (Carroll's spelling) is certainly a mistake, just *too* cute.

On the plus side, this is one of the few Carroll novels with a well-formed ending. On the plus side, also, many of those digressions and diversions are better than the main story. There is a lot of real substance here as Carroll wrestles with profound matters. (I particularly like his explication of

the myth of Babel.) And the key to it all, the reason this *may* be authentically cutting-edge even if it is far from a perfect novel, is that it is an utterly contemporary fantasy, which captures the imaginative temper of the times better than any I've seen in a long while.

Fritz Leiber's *Conjure Wife*, for example, holds up wonderfully after all these years, but it's still very much a novel of the 1940s: a more skeptical age when people who practiced witchcraft were rare eccentrics dismissed as superstitious fools by a distinctly rationalistic majority. Therefore



much of the conflict in Leiber's story springs from the hero's refusal to believe in the supernatural.

But several occult explosions and one New Age later, it doesn't seem at all extraordinary that Carroll's architect hero, having gone somewhat maniacally mad, seeks the advice, not of a Freudian psychiatrist with a notebook, a comfy couch, and an accent, but of the sage Venasque (a character from earlier Carroll novels) who explains the meaning of life while performing casual miracles, dies, then manifests himself several times later on through a child who

hasn't been born yet, a magic dog (which also returns from the dead at one point), while everybody seems to be having visionary flashbacks and flash-forwards and the plot (our hero must build the Dog Museum for the Sultan of Saru before the evil brother can stop him) is propelled along its bumpy way by a mysterious Destiny which may be the same thing as God. Carroll's people accept the supernatural as casually as they would a new clothing style. What Carroll has done here — his major accomplishment — is to take the stuff of contemporary New Age folk belief and turn it, not into the dreary credophilia of a latter-day Marie Correlli, but into a sparkling, new kind of fantasy, even as the fantasy writers of a century ago mined the then brand-new Spiritualism and Theosophy for material.

This may well be the way that fantasy renews itself. Even when not at his best, Jonathan Carroll writes a kind of fantasy we find nowhere else.

Rating: ☆☆☆

*Fantastique*

By Marvin Kaye

St. Martin's Press, 1992

272 pp., \$18.95

Here's another undeniably ambitious book, one I'd like to read again when time allows, because it is probably just too rich for anyone to "get it" all on the first time through. It's a horror novel, sort of, a fantasy, maybe, depending on what is "real" and what isn't, wherein Carl Richards, boy wonder theatrical director, married to Diana ("Lady Di"), a famous TV star well out of his league, becomes disastrously infatuated with the mysterious Angelique, another actress whom he met one night while having what's called an OBE, Out of Body Experience, in modern occult parlance.

The central images and structure come from the Berlioz Sym-

*phonie Fantastique*, as explained by Kaye at some length in a recent interview in *Science Fiction Chronicle*. By the time things are done, the hero has descended (or dreamed of descent) into a Hell that is part Dante's, part his own. The lengthy Hell sequence in particular is a notably and intensely vivid piece of imaginative writing, firmly anchored by the completely convincing *realism* of the rest of the story. This is a book with all the classic mainstream storytelling virtues — in-depth characterizations and a well-realized setting (the New York theater scene). Kaye has both feet firmly on the ground, and *then* goes soaring.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

## GRAVITY'S ANGELS

MICHAEL SWANWICK



### *Gravity's Angels*

By Michael Swanwick  
Arkham House, 1991  
302 pp., \$20.95

I am not sure Michael Swanwick is a cutting-edge writer either, but at short lengths, at least, he is a genuine wizard, able to overcome almost any limitation by sheer technical skill, by the deftness of his prose, the often startling beauty of his images. Here we have a collection of his finest shorter works. In "A

Midwinter's Tale" he makes his talent jump through hoops: a genuinely eerie, genuinely science-fictional "ghostly" story, told by an unreliable narrator recounting what was told to him by a speaking beast whose memories are an accumulation of the victims it has devoured — human and otherwise. Viewpoints shift. The story reaches further and further back into time, gaining mythic depth, and without, almost miraculously, ever confusing the reader.

"The Feast of St. Janis" *should* seem silly and already hopelessly dated: a post-collapse America with a death cult based on the memory of — are you ready for this? — Janis Joplin. ("Janis who?" our under-thirty readers are asking.) But no, it isn't topical or dated, but remains an intriguing vision of a crazed, "savage" American society, forever unfathomable to "civilized" African outsiders. I'm sure that in a few years someone will ask Swanwick if St. Janis is entirely his own invention.

Then we come to the equally vivid and sinister "Mummer Kiss," which also reveals Swanwick to be the most outrageously unscientific writer to enter SF since Bradbury. It's an episode from his (to my mind less successful) first novel, *In the Drift*, set in an alternate universe in which Three Mile Island melted down, its radiation levels exaggerated (so a technically-minded colleague informs me) by a factor of ten to the fourth, socio-political impact making no sense at all, so that decades later the whole world is still in a state of anarchy and collapse, central Pennsylvania is a wasteland of mysterious glows and hideous mutants, and Philadelphia is a city-state run by fascistic Mummies (akin to the Mardi Gras "Crewes" of New Orleans). As *science*, this is on the level of *Doctor Solar*, *Man of the Atom* comics, but as a story, it works as dramatically as any of a

dozen Bradbury classics we know to be totally impossible.

Thirteen stories in all, with a dustjacket by that definitely cutting-edge artist, Pablo Picasso, who also appears in one of the stories as a character. Recommended.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

## Noted:

### *Jellyfish Mask*

By William Ramseyer  
By Yourself Press, 1992  
59 pp., \$9.95

This is pretty clearly a vanity-press item, the publisher and author (of a dozen previously un-

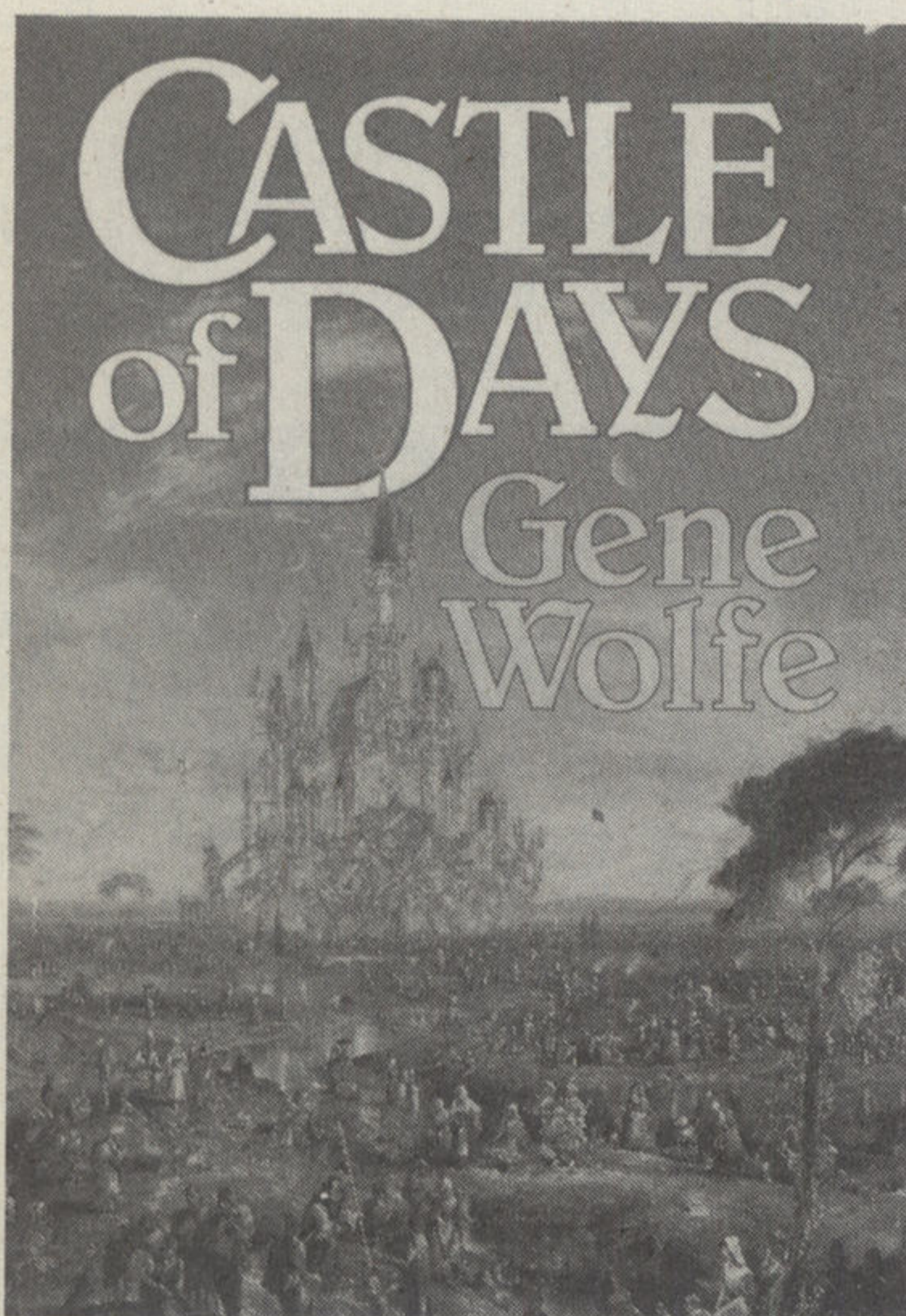


published stories) being the same, but the production values are high enough, with color illustrations, heavy, slick paper, superb graphic design, hilarious blurbs ("I wish I'd lived long enough to buy a copy." — Aleister Crowley ... "Cheered me up." — Franz Kafka), that one has to admire, if nothing else, Ramseyer's audacity.

As a writer, he shows promise. These are minimalist fictions, often surreal snappers in the tradition of Fredric Brown, rich in

black humor at their best. At less than their best, some of the stories just don't work. His prose occasionally squeals where it should sing. Grammar slips, but that may just be the proofreading. I see no reason why Ramseyer shouldn't be able to sell some of his work to professional magazines. He might also be interesting at greater length. This book could turn out to have been an important debut.

Order from Buy Yourself Press, William Ramseyer, P.O. Box



2885, Atascadero CA, 93423-2885.

Rating: ☆☆ 1/2

*Castle of Days*  
By Gene Wolfe  
Tor Books, 1992  
445 pp., \$22.95

A tripartite collection, gathering the out-of-print *Gene Wolfe's Book of Days* (short stories, many excellent, from the period 1970-79), the fabulously rare *The Castle of the Otter* (an appendix to *The Book of the New Sun*), and a hitherto uncollected mass of essays, speeches, and letters on writing, on ideas, on Wolfe's own career; all of which forms one of the best and most important *non-fiction* volumes to come out of

SF/fantasy since Le Guin's *The Language of the Night*. The stories are an added bonus. Unreservedly recommended, particularly for writers.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆☆

*Demons of the Sea*  
By William Hope Hodgson  
Necronomicon Press, 1992  
64 pp., \$8.95

William Hope Hodgson, author of *The House on the Borderland* and *The Night Land*, was a vastly unsophisticated writer, comparable in some ways to David Lindsay of *A Voyage to Arcturus* fame, in that his barely adequate or sometimes inadequate grasp of narrative art struggled desperately to keep pace with his titanic imagination. He was killed in World War I before he might have gotten better. Despite everything, *some* of his work lives and shall live for a long time. It might benefit from being translated into another language and back again, but it has a raw, primal power that does not fade.

Herewith, uncollected stories and essays, ranging from the genuinely creepy nautical story of the title to a just as genuinely silly mystery, "The Goddess of Death," which features a solution to the terror of the Walking Hindoo Idol Of Death so ridiculous that I don't want to spoil it for you.

Of course this material is a footnote to Hodgson's larger career, and is hardly the place to begin reading him, but it is, even as Hodgson was in his own way, significant, and worth preservation.

Rating: ☆☆☆

*H.P. Lovecraft: Letters to Richard Searight*  
Edited by David E. Schultz and S.T. Joshi, with Franklyn Searight  
Necronomicon Press, 1992  
90 pp. \$9.95

Richard Searight was a minor

contributor to *Weird Tales* who sold a couple of stories, then went off and did other things with his life. He contributed the *Eltdown Shards* to the Cthulhu Mythos library of imaginary "forbidden" books. None of this would merit more than an occasional mention, save that, when he got in touch with Lovecraft, he was delighted with the brilliant outpouring of wit, kindness, sensible writerly advice, and impressive erudition collected here. And now we, too, may be delighted, and reminded once again of Lovecraft's claim to being one of the greatest epistolarians of all time.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆ □

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Artist David Menehan has matted prints available of the illustration used for this issue's cover. If you would like a 11- by 14-inch print send \$25 (plus \$5 P&H) to:

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# To Be Drunk Is To Be Human



**K**ittens that grow up surrounded exclusively by horizontal stripes never learn to see vertical ones. There are some human beings who would say you can't generalize from the experience of cats to that of human beings, but there are some human beings who believe the Earth is flat, too.

Your average cat is certainly smart enough to fool a human experimenter into thinking it can't see vertical lines, but cats don't lie the way human beings do. Human beings lie for gain. Cats lie for fun. Where is the fun in walking into vertical obstacles? It might be fun if you could see the expression on the experimenter's face, but these procedures are set up with one-way mirrors and other devices to keep the subject from seeing the experimenter (the psychologists think that somehow minimizes the effect of measurement on what's being measured). No, I think that, as sometimes happens with human beings, the psychologists have stumbled on a fundamental truth. Some of them even understand it.

But they will never be able to get it across to the great bulk of humanity, which much prefers illusion to insight.

The truth I am talking about, as you well know from our reports being filed all across the galaxy, is that perception — like arithmetic, penmanship, and accent — is learned. All creatures, even artificial ones, learn their perceptions. Some of them are hard-wired with a predisposition toward certain types of perceptions (few human beings, for example, can learn to see ultraviolet light), but learning to

make use of the wiring is part of what it is to be conscious.

And, of course, consciousness itself is a perception, and it is also learned. This is an idea that the great bulk of humanity will never accept, despite their own experience of it.

It takes most human beings several years to learn to be conscious, which is why the human experience is typically characterized by the onset of consciousness at the age of four. As soon as a human being acquires consciousness, it begins telling him that it is in control of his life, his thoughts, his behavior. And he believes it. All human institutions — law, literature, science, art, politics, government, business, religion — grow out of the belief that consciousness is independent of action, that it is, in other words, something more than a bad habit of rationalizing behavior.

I suppose back in the dim reaches of human origins, there was some survival value for these creatures in telling themselves "why" they do what they do, but I can't imagine what it was. After all, they would do it anyway.

Consciousness is learned, but that is not to say it is capable of self-improvement. Most human beings lose the habit of learning in youth, and their consciousness becomes fixed, rigid, and hardened at an early age. Since the world in which they live is none of these things, every human being, sooner or later, finds himself with a consciousness that hinders rather than helps his functioning in the world. You and I, of course, would fix the problem by going to a library and trying to learn

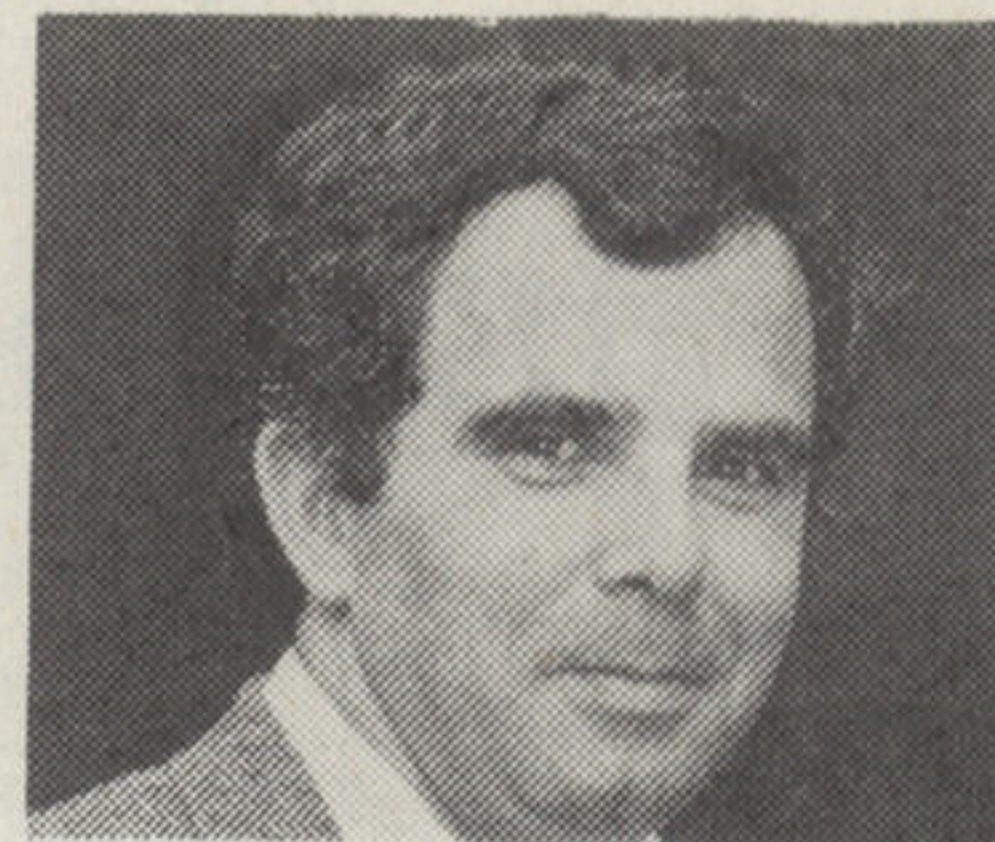
enough to change our consciousness a little. A human being goes to see a consciousness mechanic.

There are several classes of consciousness mechanics: psychiatrists, psychologists, hundreds of different kinds of therapists, social workers, clergy people, and hordes of others who aren't even licensed for either diagnosis or repair. The process of adjusting the consciousness calls for the unfortunate "patient" to expose as much of his consciousness as possible to the mechanic's inspection (the humiliation these creatures will endure in the name of good health is pretty appalling). It's a little like trying to make a car start by letting the air out of the tires. It doesn't work, but a human consciousness is so convinced it is in control of its host's life that the practice persists, to the enrichment or gratification of the consciousness mechanics. Meanwhile, human libraries fall into neglect and disrepair.

The human consciousness is the drunk who looks for his lost keys under the lamp post because the light is better there. It can only see a fraction of reality, but it has convinced itself and the person who carries it around that nothing matters outside its own tiny circle of perception.

Like most drunks, they are amusing to watch for a little while, but they become tiresome very quickly. I have been watching them for years now, and they show no prospect of sobering up. I would be grateful if you could find some way to get me home. □

# The Glass is Half Full



In the last issue I made what might have seemed a terrible confession to a science fiction audience. I said my college degree was in English literature, making me (in the minds of some) one of those fuzzy-headed liberal arts graduates.

What I neglected to mention is that I was originally a physics major, and then, as now, pursued the crystal-clear truth offered by deductive reasoning, trial-and-error experimentation and verification, and persistence in the face of impossible odds (publishing this magazine, for example).

In a very real sense, I never changed majors. We in science fiction who deal in alternate realities as if they were as mundane as a sprinkle of salt on our peas might imagine Robert Frost's two roads in the woods: physics or English?

As a child, I dreamed of being an astronaut who might just happen to have a hobby of writing science fiction in his spare time. That dream came close when I was offered a four-year Navy ROTC scholarship in 1964, only to later fail the eye exam. Later still, because my Achilles tendons had once required lengthening (at the expense of surgery at the tender age of 5), I also flunked Lyndon Baines Johnson's physical, earning a 1-Y draft status. So, upon graduation from college, I donned the dungarees and cotton shirt of the American Peace Corps, instead of the pressure suit of a F-4 Phantom pilot. Instead of napalming villages and jungle clearings along the Mekong Delta, I was drilling tubewells on the Gangetic plains of India. Instead of being shot down over Haiphong, I was

falling in love in a distant land as different from America as we are from the future offered in George Orwell's *1984*.

Why am I meandering like this? It's simple. Physics or English literature? One and the same. Each searches for the truth, using different tools, and the same governing instrument — the human mind. And each attempts to share the truth it discovers, and use it to build a better world.

Every day, every decision, every breath, we choose a different future from the one that existed before. *1984* never emerged from its literary virtual reality into the here and now, in part because it occurred in a book first.

A few days ago I had a discussion with someone who told me she had stopped reading a different SF magazine because it had changed. Earlier, she felt, it had been entertaining, full of adventure, and fun. It didn't publish "depressing" or "negative" stories.

Some of you might recall that back about 18 months ago, when coincidence put a handful of challenging stories together, we, too, received letters from some readers upset at the "depressing" stories we were publishing.

That *was* depressing. It was depressing because, like beauty, "depressing" stories are often in the eye of the beholder. Heisenberg's principle. The act of observing affects the nature of what's observed (especially for the observer). To those readers complaining, the glass we offered in the form of short fiction was half empty. Yet I never would have published any of the stories if I wasn't convinced the glasses were half full. Different perspectives of

the same thing.

Let's stick with *1984* — as depressing a book as you might find. A civilization trapped in an unending war. A government that lies to its populace through the Ministry of Truth. An official practice of invading privacy so that Big Brother is *always* watching. In the end, even though the protagonist desperately seeks love, he betrays that love rather than have hungry rats eat their way into his brain.

No redeeming social value whatsoever. Negative. Negative. Negative. A glass that's not even half-full; it's empty.

Anyone who believes that isn't much of a scientist. A real scientist tests each hypothesis for its veracity rather than forcing facts to fit a predetermined hypothesis.

*1984* was published in 1949, in an era when brutal dictatorships had just been defeated in Germany and Italy in World War II, and were on the rise in the Soviet Union and China.

But those were *other* countries. Things like that can't happen here.

Maybe. But it seems just this past year, we've learned that several major government figures have lied to us about a number of things ranging from the number of MIAs believed alive in Vietnam at the end of that war (and at the end of the Korean War), to our government's role in the Arms for Hostages deal and IranGate. Then in the 1950s there was a fellow nicknamed "Tail-Gunner" Joe McCarthy, who conducted a witch hunt for "suspected" Communists, destroying dozens of innocent lives in the process. These aren't exactly the Ministry of Truth, but they are cobblestones on the path to its headquarters.

But we don't spy on our citizens ... er, unless they happen to be presidential candidates, or unless some of our presidential candidates think it might be useful. And we don't invade privacy. Big Brother is not watching ... er, when was the last time you asked TRW or Dunn and Bradstreet to give you a printout of *their* credit file on *you*? And isn't it still accepted practice with the IRS that anyone, literally *anyone*, can drop a dime on you and suggest you ought to be audited?

Depressing and negative. Or liberating because it's true? Half full, or half empty? The simple fact is that as depressing and negative as some of these things might be, if they were kept secret, never discussed, and never commented on, things would only get worse, and much more depressing.

If no one speaks out against abuse of power and official lies, if no one rails against invasions of privacy, if no one fights government bureaucracies that attempt to trample the very citizens they are supposed to be working for, then things might get much worse indeed.

And literature — because it can present such powerful images, because it can unleash unstoppable ideas, because it is capable of making us feel pain and sorrow, as well as joy and laughter — is our microscope, our particle accelerator, our instrument for examining the universe. Through literature we can hold the universe up to an illuminating light, and we can see a small distance into that smallest of subatomic particles — the human heart.

I would have loved to have had a chance to visit the Mars of Edgar Rice Burroughs's John Carter, but I have to live with the Mars of Viking 1 and 2. One's fantasy; the other's fact. Yet, when Burroughs was writing, our facts about Mars were vague enough we could almost believe the adventurous world he created.

By the time Ray Bradbury wrote *The Martian Chronicles* we knew his world was one of fantasy, but it didn't stop our enjoyment of Editor's Notes

it, nor our appreciation of his whimsy, prose, and characterization.

Are the Viking landers' reports negative and depressing because they didn't match our fantasies? Or is their image of a Mars barren (from our perspective) and devoid of a breathable atmosphere a bright truth from which we can create even more wonderful adventures? Is the glass half full, or half empty?

And when we turn the probing light of literature inward and examine the human heart at its subatomic energy levels, do we find Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness," or Douglas Adams's *Hitchhiker's Guide*? Or is the human heart an amalgam of both?

Lois Tilton's "depressing" "The Cry of a Seagull" (*Aboriginal SF* No. 27, May-June 1991) is as much a truth pulled from the human heart as Richard K. Lyon's humorous "The Secret Identity Diet" (*Aboriginal SF* No. 35-36, Winter 1992). As I see it, it's my job each issue to provide a mix, a variety of perspectives on these scientific studies of the human or, in deference to our publisher, alien hearts. Too much sugar rots your teeth; too much salt creates wastelands.

But you might suspect I'm full of beans. The truth cannot be found or explored through literature any more than light can be pinned down as a particle or wave. You're as certain of that as you're certain that ... that ... well, that George Orwell wrote *1984*.

You may be right.

Except the book was written by Eric Arthur Blair, Orwell was a pseudonym, and it was called *Nineteen Eighty-Four* ... the numerical version was an American marketing decision.

### Boomerang Award

Last year, talking about half-full glasses, things were a bit hectic and difficult. So much so that we never got around to asking you to vote on the annual Boomerang Award — the award chosen by our readers for the best stories, poetry, and art published in

*Aboriginal*. To make up for that oversight, this year you get to choose winners for both last year and this year. The list of eligible entries is on page 112.

Speaking of awards, there isn't a Hugo Award category for Best Magazine. The only way to vote for the magazine is to vote for its editor. I wish it were otherwise.

Editors should not be given awards as such. Instead, they should be happy to bask in the glow when some of the stories, art, or books they helped publish are nominated for awards.

There are a number of good things about the Hugo Awards, but there are also a number of things which need changing to more accurately reflect the reality.

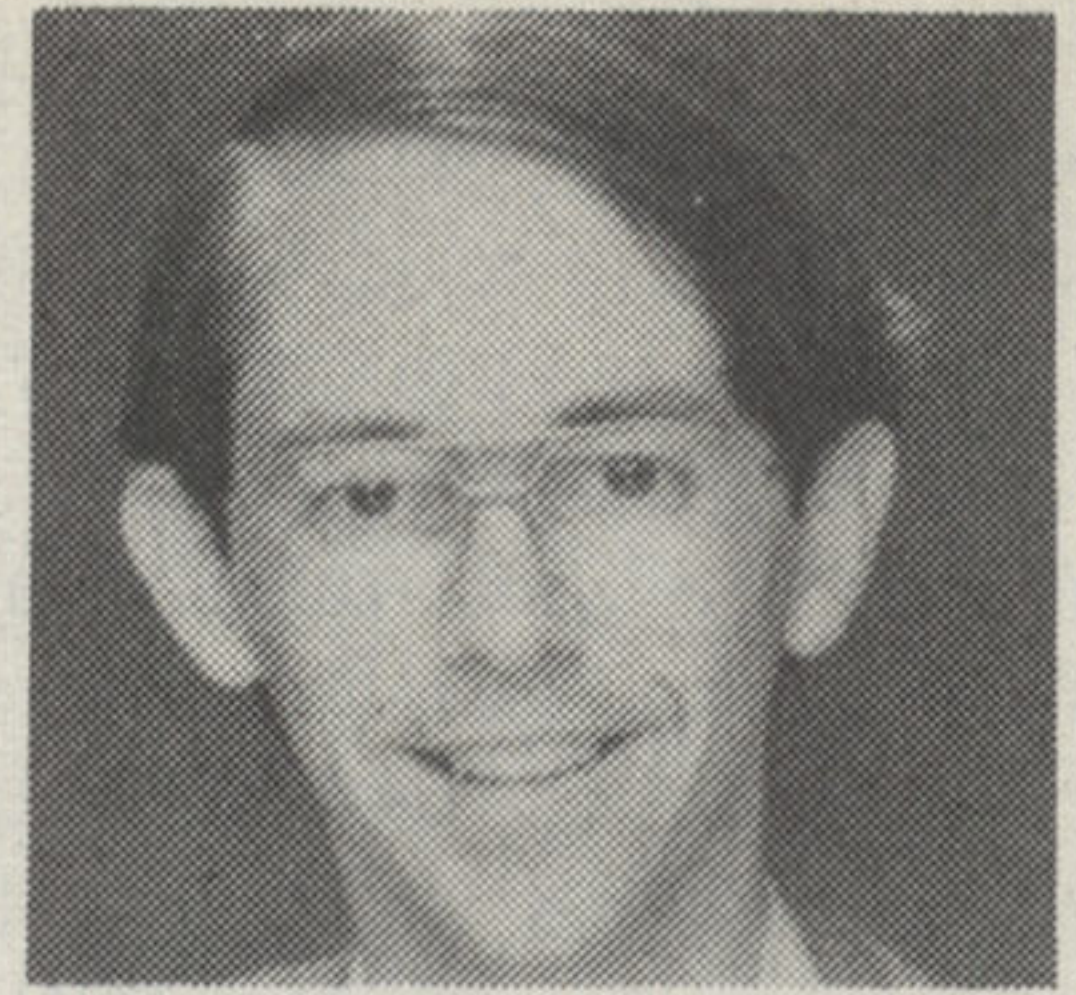
As one small example, there should be a best fiction magazine category. There should also be a small press category, rather than the current "Semi-Prozine" category (another case of a half-full glass). Something is either professional, or it isn't. The British magazine *Interzone*, for instance, is fully professional. And *Locus* and *SF Chronicle*, the field's two news magazines, are hardly "semi-prozines." In most fields of endeavor, "professional" means being paid for one's work; the circulation of the publication is irrelevant.

Anyhow, all of that is up to you, the readers and voters. □

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# Was He Fuzzy?



I can remember an old movie, some English-made period piece, in which a pathetic sniffing boy, cowering under the hawk-like gaze of a schoolmaster who looks like a smile would shatter his face, is asked what is England's ultimate destiny. The boy mumbles something about military might, the inherent intelligence of the English people, trade routes, manifest destiny, and abruptly concludes that England will rule the world.

The schoolmaster shakes his head and then whacks the poor kid with a switch across the back of his head, telling him his thinking is "fuzzy." The schoolmaster agrees with the student's conclusion, but does not condone the path he used to arrive at that conclusion. The boy breaks into tears, having been dealt what was apparently a horrible insult.

*Fuzzy.*

The schoolmaster wants the student to be logical, to look at the world and dissect it chunk by chunk, piece by piece, tearing it down until each little bit, every widget and gear, is fully understood. And then the student would have *the* equation that describes the world. If England does  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $z$ , then  $a$ ,  $b$ , and  $c$  will surely follow. It is all so logical.

Well, the world doesn't work that way.

Reality is a fuzzy place, and you — I'm referring to that three pounds of gray stuff behind your eyeballs, the very stuff that is currently sucking down these words — are the ultimate fuzzy being. As you drive down the freeway, and an individual of questionable parentage and obviously impaired brain function starts to swerve into the very space that you are currently occupying, there are two courses of action open to you.

The first is to watch the vehicle close in on you and quickly deter-

mine the differential equation describing the closing distance between the two vehicles. You consider the equations involving friction — both brake pads against drums and tires against road — and then fold in the equations of synaptic delay and the required time-of-flight for nerve impulses to travel between brain and brake foot. You solve all these differential equations simultaneously and come up with the logical answer — you apply an initial 18 pounds of pressure on your brake and then increase that pressure by a rate of 2.7 pounds per second for the next 3.3 seconds, with full confidence that the swerving car will slip in front of you with a good two inches between its tailgate and your front bumper.

Or you could execute the tried and true second method. As the car moves in on you, a screaming message flashes through your brain — *too damn close!* You then punch the brake and pray that the guy in the car behind you will not end up in your back seat — a rather fuzzy approach. This second method did not require any knowledge of the inner workings of hydraulics, nerve impulses, friction between road and tire, or accurate measurements of the car closing in on you. But it *did* save your skin. Attempting to use the first method would have most likely splattered you along a few hundred feet of freeway.

You are fuzzy.

And you should be thankful for it.

Why does your brain use the fuzzy approach?

Because it's not perfect. You can't know *everything*. You can't get infinite data, perfect data, and then apply them to the universal equation of reality, which then spits out the future (let's not even talk about *nonlinear* differential equations or what would happen if *quantum* uncertainties get into the act). You

evolved in an environment where decisions had to be made based on insufficient information. Will that big hairy thing over there that you've never seen before, with the drool running from its fangs, take a bite out of you, or should you stand your ground and try to take a bite out of it?

So many unknowns.

You can't know everything that goes on, and you sure don't have to solve Newton's equations to know that getting hit on the head with a hammer will not be a pleasant experience.

We are fuzzy.

But our computers are not. They are logical. They are full of components that can do only two things — they are either on or off — they vote yes or no. In order to use them to solve a problem, to control some piece of equipment, we do our best to figure out the equations that govern whatever little chunk of the world we are trying to understand, shove in some input, and then stand back and see what those equations predict. We judge how accurately those equations modeled reality by how close the equation's outcome matches what reality dished out. If *you* had to operate like that, you'd never get out of the house. You'd probably go into brain lock as you tried to figure out the optimum way to shave or how to scramble eggs.

The logical computer-driven approach to making machines do our bidding is to come up with ever more complex equations to describe our world. The trouble is that you can't always just figure out what those equations are.

No problem.

You don't have to know the equations to get the job done.

Enter one Lofti A. Zedah in 1965, a professor at UC Berkeley, the



father of *fuzzy logic*. He introduced the concept of a *linguistic* variable, one whose values are words, rather than numbers. As an example, the linguistic variable "distance" might have the values "at the tip of your nose," "down the street," "into the next country," or "past the moon," rather than the more conventionally, logically driven values that would be measured in feet or meters. Linguistic variables are the ones that you operate with to get through the day. Zedah coupled the concept of the linguistic variable with the use of the *If-Then* rule. As an example, *if* you step off the roof of a ten-story office building, *then* you will hit the ground very hard.

So what?

At first glance this might not look so amazing, so powerful, but on closer examination you'll see what this can really do.

Let's do a little experiment. How about us building the control system for a nuclear reactor by using a fuzzy controller?

No problem.

Here's the shopping list. All we need is some uranium-235, a chunk of graphite (just carbon) to cover it with, a few movable cadmium rods to shove in and out of the graphite, and something to read the reactor's temperature with. That's it. Uranium-235 will decay if it captures a neutron, fissioning and turning itself into a barium and a krypton atom along with a lot of energy and *three* very fast neutrons. Those neutrons are moving so fast that they will pass right through our chunk of uranium without interacting with it. However, if we can slow the neutrons down, they can then be captured by a uranium nucleus, which will then cause it to fission, and once again the process will give off a lot of energy and three neutrons. That's what the graphite is for: it acts as a *moderator* to slow down the neutrons so they can be captured by the uranium atom, which then splits.

See how this works? One neutron can get you three, and three can get you nine, and nine can get you twenty-seven, and so on, and so on. If you want to make a bomb, just let the reaction run away and there you go.

This is where the cadmium rods come in. Cadmium is an excellent neutron absorber. Therefore, if the

production of neutrons gets too large, just shove the cadmium rod further into the reactor and more neutrons get absorbed — the nuclear reaction is slowed. To run the reactor requires a real balancing act. You want to generate enough neutrons to keep the reaction going (it's the energy liberated during the atomic fissioning that will heat water and run a steam turbine), but not so much that it will run away.

You need a controller.

You need something that will move the cadmium rods into the uranium to slow down the rate of fissioning or move the rods out to speed up the reaction.

What we first need to build for our fuzzy controller is a *linguistic variable*. For our controller, we'll use the temperature of the reactor core as our variable. And what values will we use for this variable? A lot of fuzzy systems use seven values (a lot more than our old binary on/off system). To designate temperature we'll use Meltdown, Hot, Warm, OK, Cool, Cold, and Frozen. That's how your fuzzy brain would view it.

Now we have to assign the values for the seven values of temperature that we've chosen. Let's use these:

Meltdown — above 1000 degrees  
 Hot — 1100 to 600 degrees  
 Warm — 650 to 350 degrees  
 OK — 400 to 200 degrees  
 Cool — 250 to 150 degrees  
 Cold — 175 to 75 degrees  
 Frozen — below 100 degrees

There are a couple of things to note here. First, the temperature range of each value is not the same — Hot spans 500 degrees and Cold spans only 100 degrees. We can make these whatever we want, whatever we find best controls the reactor.

The second thing to note is that the values overlap one another. This is important! The reason for this is that we assign a *membership function* to each one of our six values which linearly ranges from 0.0 to 1.0.

I'll give you a couple of examples to explain this one. Suppose that our reactor temperature reads 300 degrees. This is right in the middle of the OK scale, so this means that

its membership function will be 1.0 — it is purely OK. However, if the temperature creeps up to 375 degrees, this puts it 25 degrees above the minimum level of Warm. It sits within *two* values — in this case just 25 degrees within both. For a temperature of 375 degrees we would assign a membership function of 0.5 for both the OK and Warm values — it is within each of those levels by an equal amount — 0.5 in and 0.5 out. If the temperature continued to drift upward, the membership function of warm would move up from 0.5, approaching 1.0. Eventually we'd pass 400 degrees and be completely out of the range of OK, so that the new membership function would be 1.0 for Warm and 0.0 for OK.

Got that?

Good.

What we need now for our controller is our *If-Then* rule. Our rule will read: If temperature is x, then move the cadmium rods to position y, where x is one of our six temperature values, and we will now assign the cadmium rods position y.

#### Temperature Position

(x)	(y)
Meltdown	-6
Hot	-4
Warm	-2
OK	0
Cool	+2
Cold	+4
Frozen	+6

Each position represents the number of feet that the rod moves within the reactor from its neutral position where everything is OK. A negative number means further *into* the reactor, and a positive number means further *out of* the reactor. If we are in the Meltdown range, the rod will be pushed from its OK position by -6 feet (into the reactor), while if we're in the Frozen range, the rod will be pushed +6 feet (out of the reactor) to speed up the reactor.

That's it.

We're now ready to control our nuclear reactor.

Let's suppose that our reactor is on line and everything is moving along smoothly. The temperature of the uranium is 300 degrees, which means its temperature has a value

of OK. Therefore the rod is sitting at its nominal OK position in the reactor.

Great.

Then suppose that suddenly there's an accident caused when every toilet in the reactor facility gets flushed simultaneously. The resultant drop in water pressure decreases the flow of cooling water going through the reactor.

The reactor begins to heat up.

Nothing to worry about.

Core temperature jumps to 450 degrees. This means that the temperature value is now Warm with a membership function of 1.0 (it is completely within the Warm level). What does the If-Then statement tell the rod to do? It moves it in by -2 feet. This slows down the fissioning process, and the reactor cools. It soon reads 375 degrees. What does our controller do then?

From the example above, 375 degrees sat in both the OK and Warm temperature levels. The membership function for each was 0.5. So what will the controller do? How does it decide? It uses a *center of gravity* average. The OK case says the rod should be in the 0 position, while the Warm case says the rod should be pushed in by -2 feet. Since each membership function is 0.5, the new position of the rod becomes:

$$(0.5)(0) + (0.5)(-2) = -1$$

This means that the rod is pulled out an additional +1 foot from its previous position of -2 feet, putting it now just -1 foot in from the nominal condition.

You can see how this works. Every change in temperature will cause a compensating change in rod position. Soon, the rod will be back in a position where the temperature range is OK.

This was a very simple example. Besides temperature we could have been looking at additional linguistic variables such as the *rate* of change of the temperature, cooling water temperature, steam pressure, or many others. We would have then created the different values for these variables and the associated If-Then statements. When looking at all the variables, the controller would have again used the center of gravity approach to decide how to move the rod based on all the variables.

This controls the reactor.

We didn't have to understand the physics of heat transfer, nuclear reactions, fluid dynamics, or any of the hundreds of differential equations that govern the operation of a nuclear reactor.

Simple.

Is fuzzy logic being used to actually control something? The answer is a resounding yes. As I told you above, the groundwork for this was laid out by a UC Berkeley professor. But it has not been the US which has been pursuing this new approach for control. Guess who is?

Yes.

Japan.

Fuzzy chips are being made to control everything from toasters to all the trains on the Sendai Metro in Japan. Japan controls 80% of the world fuzzy market, which is expected to reach \$350 million by the end of the year. And what's next? In the nuclear reactor example, you might have been asking, how do we know how many feet to pull the cadmium rods in and out as a function of temperature? At the moment, that is determined by an *expert*, someone who knows how reactors work. The expert uses his ex-

perience to give the controller guidelines, and the controller takes over from there. However, the Japanese are working on *Neural Fuzzy Logic*. The controller *learns from its mistakes*. It attempts to control a process using rules that it makes up, and when it finds that it didn't control something, it will rewrite the If-Then statement and try it again.

This is not recommended for nuclear reactors.

Nor would it be recommended that you walk in off the street and try to control a nuclear reactor. I have one last question for you. Does *Neural Fuzzy Logic* remind you of something? Is there something familiar about setting up rules, testing them out, and then rewriting the rules based on the results of those tests? If not, I will give you a clue.

Take a look in a mirror.

For more detailed reading on this topic I suggest D.G. Schwartz and G.J. Kir, "Fuzzy Logic Flowers in Japan," *IEEE Spectrum*, July 1992, pg. 32, and, for the mathematically minded, C.C. Lee, "Fuzzy Logic in Control Systems," *IEEE Trans. Systems, Man, and Cybernetics*, Vol. 20, 1990, pg. 404. □

## Our Next Issue

The Summer 1993 issue of *Aboriginal SF* will proffer some unique points of view. Alex Jablovok shows us that a "Rest Cure" doesn't always mean you get a chance to relax. In preparation for the summer's heat waves, there is "Must be the Heat," by J. H. Ulowitz, a story that shows what happens when it gets *too* hot. And recycling takes on new meaning in "The Recyclers," by Anthony J. Howard.

"Born to be Wild" is a little time trip presented by *Aboriginal* regular Patricia Anthony, who remembers when music was a movement. *Aboriginal* contributor Greg Costikyan continues the musical theme with "Can a White Boy Sing the Blues?" and "The Salesman," by Michael P. Belfiore, adds a touch of magic to "the good old days."

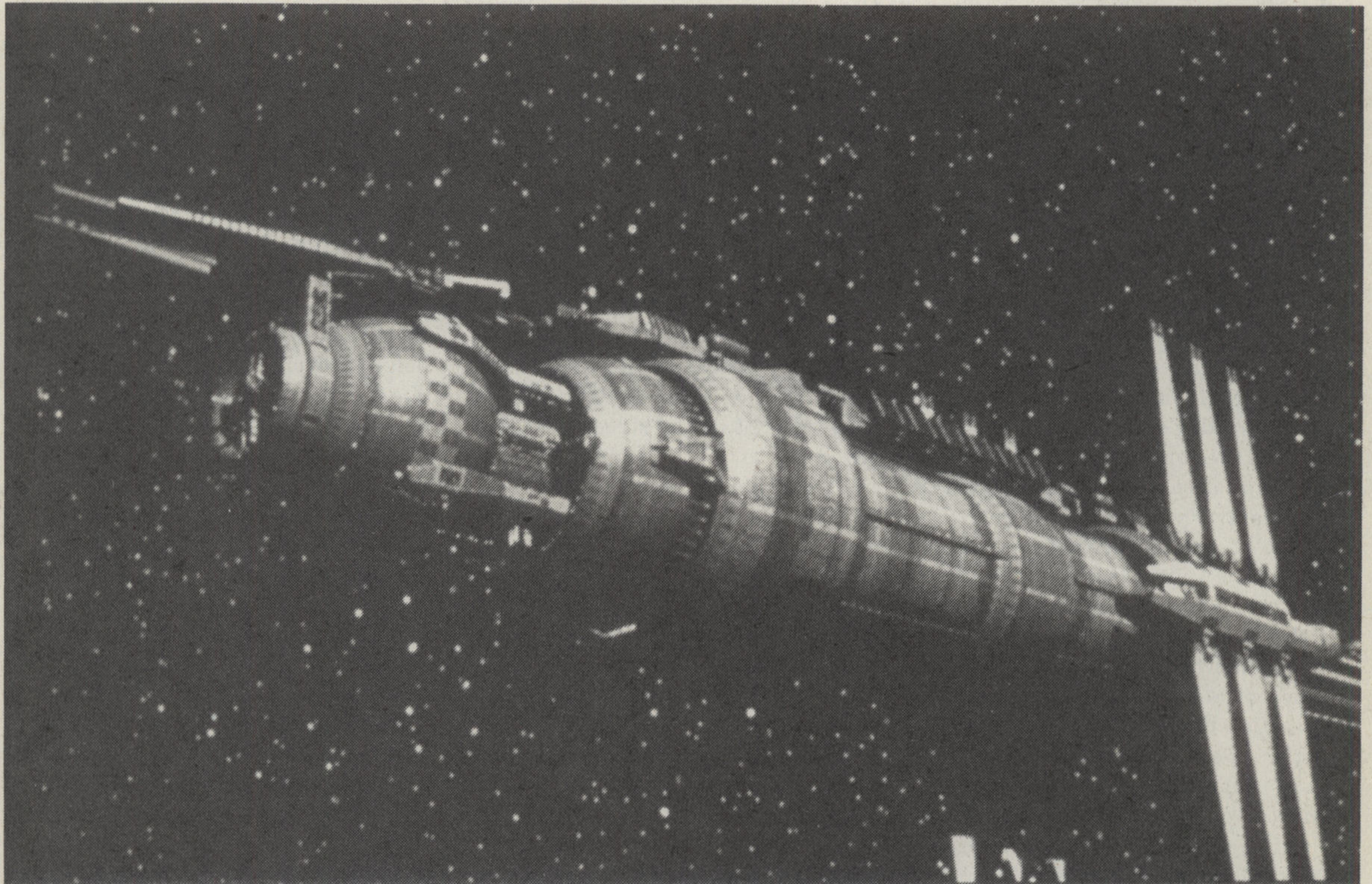
Steven M. Ford's "Healing Brother" gives us an idea of what brotherly love can mean, and Edward J. O'Connell tries to recapture love of a different sort in "Dollhouse." "The Sorrows of Your Changing Face," by Brian A. Hopkins, finds that it isn't always sweet when you have your cake and eat it too.

The protagonists of "Ghosts in the Machine," by B.C. Holmes, "Regatta," by James Glass, and "Migration Patterns," by Robert Reed, each face different dilemmas brought about by how they have chosen to travel.

"E.R.," by J. Brooke, gives a glimpse of what future emergency room personnel may face if the level of street drug wars and inner city violence continues to escalate, when even the best new medical technology can be overwhelmed.

Given space, the next issue might contain one or more of the following poems: "The Day Before," by Deborah Abshire Hobbs, "Poem from the Stars," by Wendy Rathbone, or "Spacer's Compass," by Bruce Boston.

# On the Bandwagon



Space Station Babylon 5

I may have inadvertently told a small white lie. I've found that in each column a filmmaking theme tends to surface. Last column, redoing 1950s science fiction "classics" seemed to be the bandwagon of choice. (A small aside — add *Forbidden Planet* to the list.) As an example, one of the films currently being remade was *The Crawling Eye*. My view of the venture was, why remake a forty-year-old film when there is a vast reservoir of untapped ideas available? I then said it could be a lot worse — just imagine a remake of *Attack of the Giant Leeches*!

I'm afraid I lulled you into a false sense of security. It just got a lot worse. Someone just took a hearty

swig of the tainted reservoir. In production is an original 1950s-style monster movie about a group of teenage campers who are massacred by mutant, bloodsucking ... ticks! I don't know about you, but I'm scratching just writing this column. But I suppose it could be a lot worse, just imagine ... Bite your tongue, Ellison!

## Movies

With his adaptation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* in theaters, Jim Hart's next screenwriting assignment will be Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. As with *Dracula*, Hart plans to remain faithful to Shelley's original book, portraying the Creature as

originally conceived. This time out, Francis Ford Coppola, who directed *Dracula*, will produce, with Joel Schumacher (*The Lost Boys*) directing. Coppola is currently wrapping up work in England on the screen version of Francis Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*.

With the principal filming of *Jurassic Park* completed at an estimated \$140 million, there will be no shortage of dinosaur-on-the-loose movies in the offing, although with the knife of recession slashing at the studios, expect these to be of the blue-stripe variety. Heading the list are

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*Carnosaur*, produced by Roger Corman; *Deinonychus*, with scientists creating rampaging dinosaurs; *T-Rex*, with those pesky guys in the white coats producing human-dinosaur hybrids; and *Pre-hysteria!*, concerning a boy who finds a box of living dinosaur eggs that have been stolen from their jungle nesting site. One to watch for is a Will Vinton Claymation movie of the *Dinosaur Attack!* trading cards.

This gives me a smooth segue into the subject of trading cards. You can expect the number of collector's cards based on TV and films to increase this coming year. New sets will include *The Avengers*; *Batman: The Animated Series*, to be released by Topps in the first quarter of 1993; a *Star Wars* commemorative series featuring production art from the Lucasfilm archives and new artwork by well-known artists such as Moebius; and, coinciding with the release of the film, a *Jurassic Park* trading set and souvenir magazine. (If you're interested in collecting trading cards, the subject matter runs the gamut from a *Bible* series to *Human Freaks and Oddities: Series IV*, whatever your tastes may be.)

The French fantasy artist Moebius has also co-written (along with Jackye Frysztman) and is co-directing (along with Keith Ingham) an animated feature called *Starwatcher*, originally a series of wonderful illustrations by the artist. Ridley Scott (*Bladerunner*) is the co-executive producer of the film, with conceptual music by *Chariots of Fire* composer Vangelis.

Mike Richardson, publisher of Dark Horse Comics, has announced the production of a feature film based on the Dark Horse comic series *Aliens vs. Predator*. Budgeted at \$30 million, the feature is scheduled for a late 1993 release.

One amorphous rumor floating around the industry is that New Line Cinema, which owns the rights to *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, has bought the rights to Paramount's *Friday the 13th*. The idea is that New Line will have a multi-million dollar crossover with Freddy duking it out with Jason. It could be that the bout of the century will happen in the upcoming *Friday the 13th: Part IX*. Rumors are circulating that Freddy Krueger will make a surprise appearance at the conclusion of the film, although several endings are being shot, so we will just have to

wait and see.

Trimark Pictures has a number of sequels in the pipeline. The previously mentioned *Warlock II: The Armageddon* has Julian Sands reprising his role, trying, once again, to uncreate the universe. *Hellraiser III* director Anthony Hickox will helm the sequel. Also coming from Trimark are *Philadelphia Experiment 2*, no word yet whether Michael Paré will return or if they will continue with a different storyline, and *Return of the Living Dead III*, to be directed by Brian Yuzna, the director-producer of *Bride of the Re-Animator*.

It seems only natural that Anne Rice's book *The Witching Hour* be turned from a *New York Times* best-seller into a multi-million dollar feature. Slated to direct the film of sorcery and seduction is Richard Donner (*Lethal Weapon*).

Adding to the endless supply of Stephen King adaptations is the news that Peter Yates, director of *Suspect*, will do the honors for *Needful Things*. King will not do the screenplay; that job goes to W.D. Richter, whose credits include *Brubaker*. Also in the pipeline: a film version of the King novella "The Langoliers," and his Richard Bachman book *Thinner*. The long-awaited TV mini-series based on *The Stand* is now ambiguously slated for sometime in 1993, while from the ABC network will come *The Tommyknockers*.

Suffering from Dark Knight envy is "The Man-Moth," as reported in an article from *Publishers Weekly* for August 24th, "The Man-Moth," a poem found in *The Complete Poems, 1927-1979*, by Elizabeth Bishop, has been optioned by Linda Obst and Columbia. Julie Hickson, who brought the poem to Columbia's attention, is developing a plot for the potential feature. The poem is about a nocturnal creature that scales buildings.

Mel Gibson will return to the fantasy genre with *Forever Young*, in which he portrays a 1939 test pilot who, after losing the woman he loves, submits to a dangerous cryogenic experiment and is frozen for 50 years.

## Television

Principal photography has just been completed on J. Michael Straczynski's pilot movie for the

*Babylon 5* science fiction TV series. Warner Bros. executives are reportedly extremely high on the project, which has been in the works for nearly five years. The series — which concerns a space station in the year 2257 that functions as a port of call between one human and four alien governments — promises to bring adult dramatic sensibilities to science fiction television. To that end, the show has flawed characters, a five-year saga detailed in over 200 pages of notes by Straczynski, interpersonal conflict, stories in which technology does *not* solve everything, a whole new generation of visual EFX, and the unofficial *B5* motto: "No Kids or Cute Robots EVER."

The *Babylon 5* pilot, "The Gathering," features a dream team behind the scenes. It includes: director Richard Compton (one of the primary directors on *The Equalizer* and *Hill Street Blues*); set/production designer John Iacovelli (*Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*); computer EFX by Ron Thornton (*Dr. Who* and *Highlander II*); conceptual design by Steve Burg (*Terminator 2*); prosthetics by John Criswell (*Henson Creature Factory*); visual EFX by John Stiers, (Academy Award winner for James Bond and *Star Wars*); and costumes by Catherine Adair (*Mann and Machine*). Stewart Copeland has been hired to do the music for *Babylon 5*.

Says Straczynski, "You will see things on this show that you have never before seen on television. Ever."

Harlan Ellison has been contracted to write the *Babylon 5* "manifesto," which will set the standards for the show by defining the elements required by intelligent, innovative, and original science fiction ... and indicating the dumbness to avoid. Ellison has also agreed to act as the series's Creative Consultant.

In an exclusive interview with Ellison (I refused to make lunch yesterday unless he spoke to me about this), the world-famous and easily-coerced author said as follows: "First of all, I want a divorce! Or my lunch!" Your faithful reporter negotiated, and Mr. Ellison gave us this bit of information about the *Babylon 5* "manifesto": "In the earliest stages of production on a new series, the two most important story-related documents are 'the bible,' in which the basics of the series are set forth — the *raison d'être* of the

basic plot, the 'McGuffin,' such as it might be, the core characterizations, the ethical and conceptual underpinnings, if they exist — in short, everything about the actual on-screen visuals and dramatics — and something (usually unnamed, and more often unwritten) that gives the prospective writers for the series — as well as critics and showbiz reporters like you — an insight into what the series will, and will not, do.

"Usually, this latter body of data is free-floatingly understood among the execs and members of the story unit of a series, but is almost never set down in codified, explicit terms for the benefit of, well, essentially for the benefit of outsiders. In the case of *Babylon 5*, the bible exists in exhaustive specificity. This is Joe's baby, and he's think it out completely. It is Joe's show from the ground up — the dream we all harbor, that so seldom assumes corporeal shape — and what I've been engaged to produce is, well, for want of a better term, I go to the source of *Citizen Kane*, in which Charles Foster Kane writes a 'Declaration of Principles' for his first issue of the *Chronicle*: a statement of what the newspaper will stand for, what it will be responsible for printing, what it will mean to the readers.

"I don't mean to sound highfalutin, but I cannot think of any other name for what I'm initially creating for the series that says it more clearly. Joe calls it the Manifesto, and I guess that's okay, too; but what I'll be trying to accomplish in this, well, I guess it's an essay, is a broad spectrum of criteria for what NOT to write in a modern-day TV series using the genre of speculative fiction as a base.

"A perennial problem with SF on television is that the people who come in holding the reins of power are traditionally 'culturally illiterate' about the form. They think that retelling the Adam and Eve paradigm is hot stuff. They think it's okay to warp the body of accepted scientific knowledge for 'dramatic effect' because 'well, hell, the audience won't know no better.' Mendacious and ignorant ... not to mention infinitely insulting to the audience ... which is generally better-informed and more scientifically-literate than the mamelukes who suggest the viewers are chimpanzees!

"And it's virtually impossible to eradicate this constantly-reappearing

Plague of Stupidity, because every year there is a new wave of graduates from film schools, a fresh torrent of wannabes who weasel their way into the industry, a seventh wave *tsunami* of self-styled authorities and auteurs and just plain hustlers who inundate the workplace; and they bring with them that arrogant stupidity grounded in cultural illiteracy. And so the same mistakes of *Battlestar Galaxative* and *The Starlost* are repeated again and again.

"To the end of confronting and eradicating that embolism of cultural illiteracy among those who will be coming to the series as potential writers or fans or critics, I'm writing what Joe hopes will become a standard essay — to be handed down throughout the industry the way a glossary of film shooting terms might be — that will encapsulate what one should avoid, what clichés have been done to death, what wrongheaded standard items from past SF on TV must be expunged ... and to suggest a fresh approach to each of the regular ideas employed by such shows. It'll be a Handbook for Originality, if I do it properly.

"It's a big job, and a tricky one, but Joe seems to think it's about time such a manifesto existed; so I'm the patsy in the barrel, making a run at it. Pardon the mixed metaphor.

"Now can I have my lunch? Please?"

The cast for *Babylon 5* includes Michael O'Hara (Commander Jeffrey Sinclair); Tamlyn Tomita (Lt. Commander Laurel Takashima); Jerry Doyle (Security Chief Michael Garibaldi); John Sekka (Dr. Benjamin Kyle); Patricia Tallman (rent-a-telepath Lyta Alexander); Peter Jurasic (Ambassador Londo Mollari); Andreas Katsulas (Ambassador G'Kar); Mira Furlan (Ambassador Delenn); Blair Baron (independent trader Carolyn Sykes); and Ambassador Kosh Naranek as ... himself.

*Babylon 5* airs the last week of February on the new Prime Time Entertainment Network, via an independent or Fox station near you. Check local listings for details.

After much anticipation, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* will debut in January. The series premieres with a two-hour pilot called "Emissary," written by Michael Piller, with a guest star role by Patrick Stewart as Cap-

tain Picard. Aside from the special effects, look for the tension between Sisko and Picard in the first episode. We discover that Sisko's wife was killed in the Borg attack led by Picard while under the Borg's influence. All in all, *Deep Space Nine* is sure to be as successful as its predecessor.

Fans of *The Next Generation* will soon be able to step aboard the Enterprise for themselves with a new *Star Trek* virtual reality arcade game currently in development by Edison Brothers Entertainment, Inc. The game centers will be based in malls, and players will use a helmet and an electronically sensitive glove to react to the virtual reality environment. Different scenarios will be used to keep the game interesting. Gaming environments will include the bridge, the holodeck, the transporter room, and engineering. The game centers are scheduled to open at limited sites late in 1993.

Speaking at this year's San Diego Comic Convention, *Star Trek's* William Shatner stated that his novel *Tekworld* has been optioned as a series for Canadian television. Although he has no plans to star in the potential series, Shatner, who directed *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier*, is contracted to direct a number of *Tekworld* episodes.

*Star Trek* alumnus Harve Bennett is the co-creator of a new science fiction series called *Time Trax*. Dale Midkiff (*Pet Sematary*) stars as a cop-out-of-time who must return 100 years into the past to the year 1993, where he must capture and return criminals who have used Trax (a Trans-Time Research and Experimental machine) to escape. Arch-enemy and inventor of Trax is Dr. Mordecai Sahmbi, played by Peter Donat. Look for this series early in the year.

As an indication of just how much power Steven Spielberg wields in Hollywood, his company, Amblin Entertainment, has been given an unprecedented 22-episode commitment to produce *Sea Quest* for the fall (1993) season. More on this upcoming science fiction series next time.

Collecting TV and film memorabilia can be an expensive hobby. At a recent Christie's auction, Bill Mummy's *Lost in Space* costume went for \$3,300, and one of the red and black engineer's tunics from the

original *Star Trek* went for \$1,650. The availability of TV and film memorabilia could increase (although don't expect the prices to go down) with the opening of Star Wares, a clothing store in Santa Monica. Star Wares has worked out an exclusive deal with Paramount to sell old costumes from Paramount films and TV series. On sale at the store are Robin Williams's suit from *Mork and Mindy*, Arnold Schwarzenegger's leather jacket from *The Terminator*, and several pieces from the original *Star Trek* series.

Fans of Fox's *Alien Nation* series will now be able to discover what happened to the Francisco family in a 48-page comic book released by Malibu Comics. Although the penultimate episode was aired, the show was cancelled before the cliff-hanger could be resolved. "Alien Nation: The Lost Episode" has been adapted by Bill Spangler and illustrated by Terry Pallot from the original Diane Frolov-Andrew Schneider tele-play.

While you eagerly await your next "Through the Lens" column, you might like to check out the *Space-Time Continuum* newsletter. Edited and owned by Bjo Trimble, it's chock-full of news on science fiction movies and TV shows. For subscription information, write to 2059 Fir Springs Dr., Kingwood, Texas 77339-1701. But, I will expect you back next issue!

And, finally, let me add my birthday wishes to King Kong, who turns 60 this coming year.

#### Bulletin:

The Sci-Fi Channel has announced that Harlan Ellison will join the original magazine show "Sci-Fi Buzz" as "futuristic commentator and essayist beginning the first quarter of 1993 ..."

The show airs Sunday evenings at 8:30 p.m. and is hosted by Mike Jer-rick. □

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## A Missing Aardvark?

The Alien Publisher has misplaced his aardvark. The aardvark had been seeking a companion to travel with it and the AP on the ARK. But it disappeared one night after receiving a response to its classified ad on these pages. It was last seen on the masquerade stage at MagiCon.

If anyone spots the aardvark, please contact the AP as soon as possible.

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# Is Anyone Out There?



This past Columbus Day, NASA kicked off a \$100 million program to scan the heavens for signs of intelligent life.

In the meantime, terms such as SETI and the Drake Equation (for calculating the number of civilizations in the galaxy willing and able to communicate with Earth) have fired the popular imagination, and outlets from

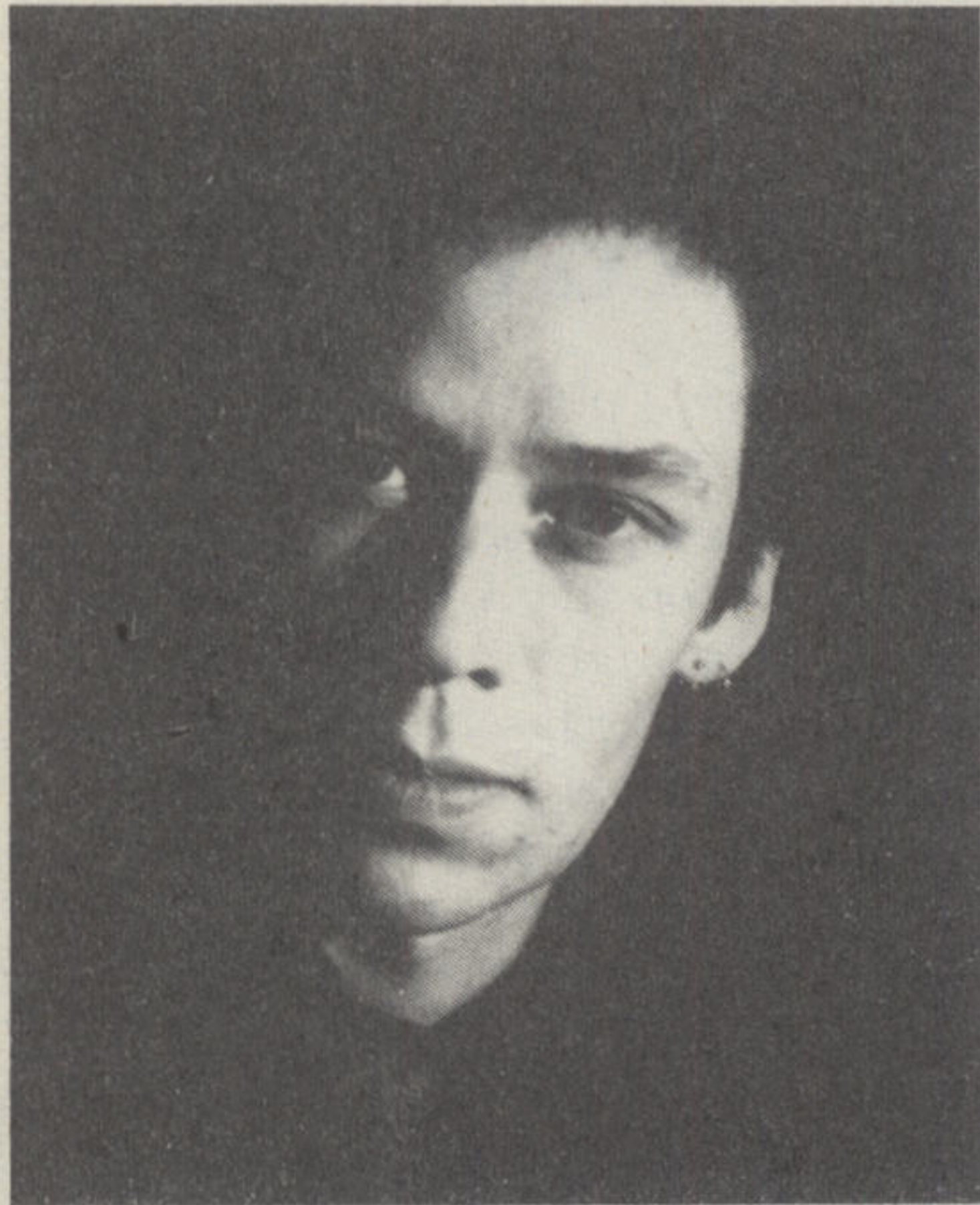
book by Drake and Dava Sobel, *Is Anyone Out There? The Scientific Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence* (Delacorte Press), I asked Drake about his contention that if we do hear from another civilization, it's pretty unlikely that there ever would be any physical contact.

"Interstellar travel would use so much resources, so much energy, that

years of labor isn't the fame — it's the growing respect he sees for the endeavor.

"I love to go to SETI meetings. I love to watch fifty people, all talented and intelligent, all working hard and discussing SETI seriously — without giggling."

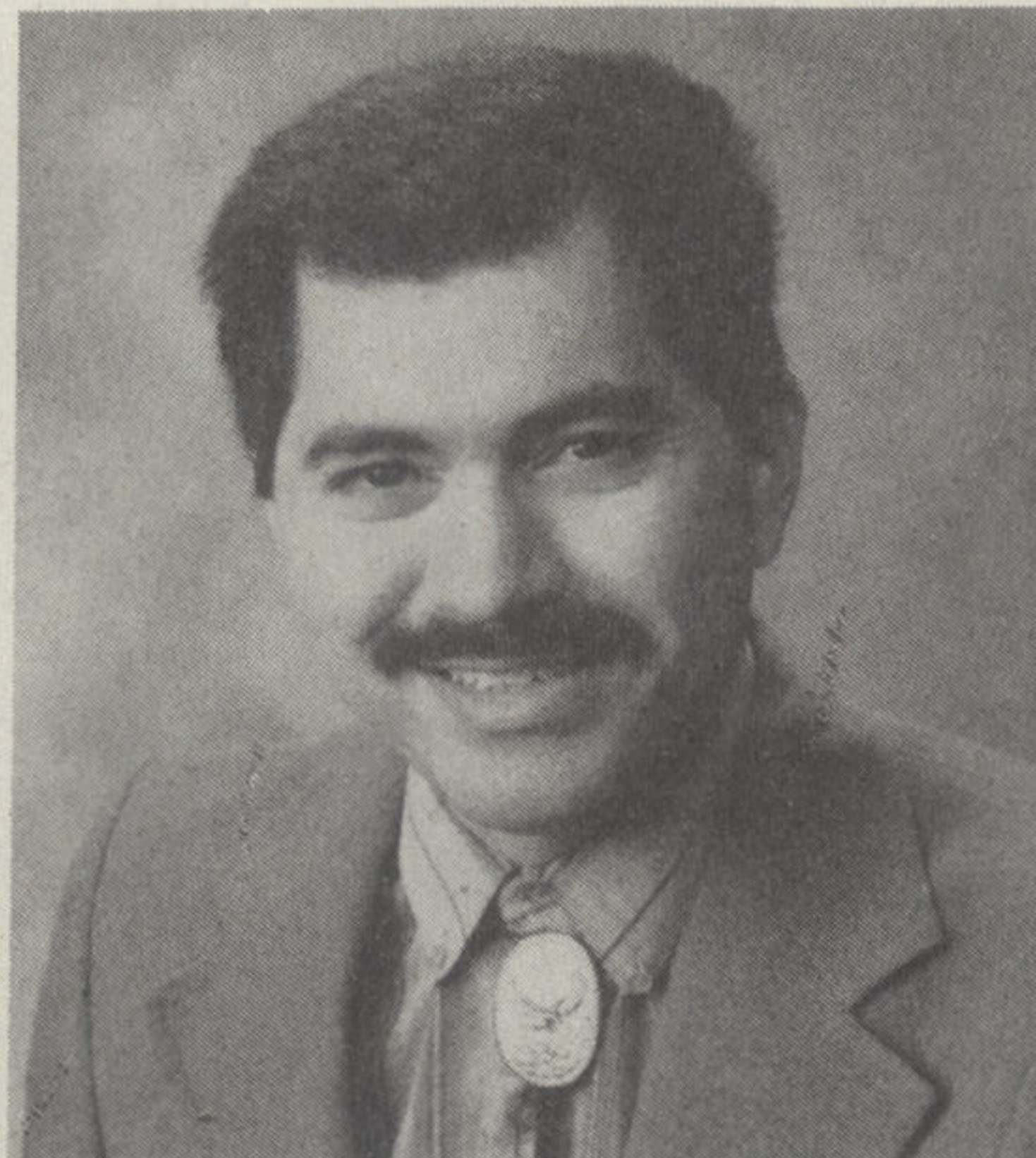
Our cover artist this issue is an *Aboriginal* newcomer, David



David Patrick Menehan

*The New York Times* to *People* magazine have introduced the American public to the man who pioneered modern search efforts, astronomer Frank Drake.

After picking up a copy of the new



Alan Gutierrez

no acquisition justifies the cost," says Drake. Without sending objects or representatives, however, two civilizations could learn much about each other through television, holograms, even virtual reality.

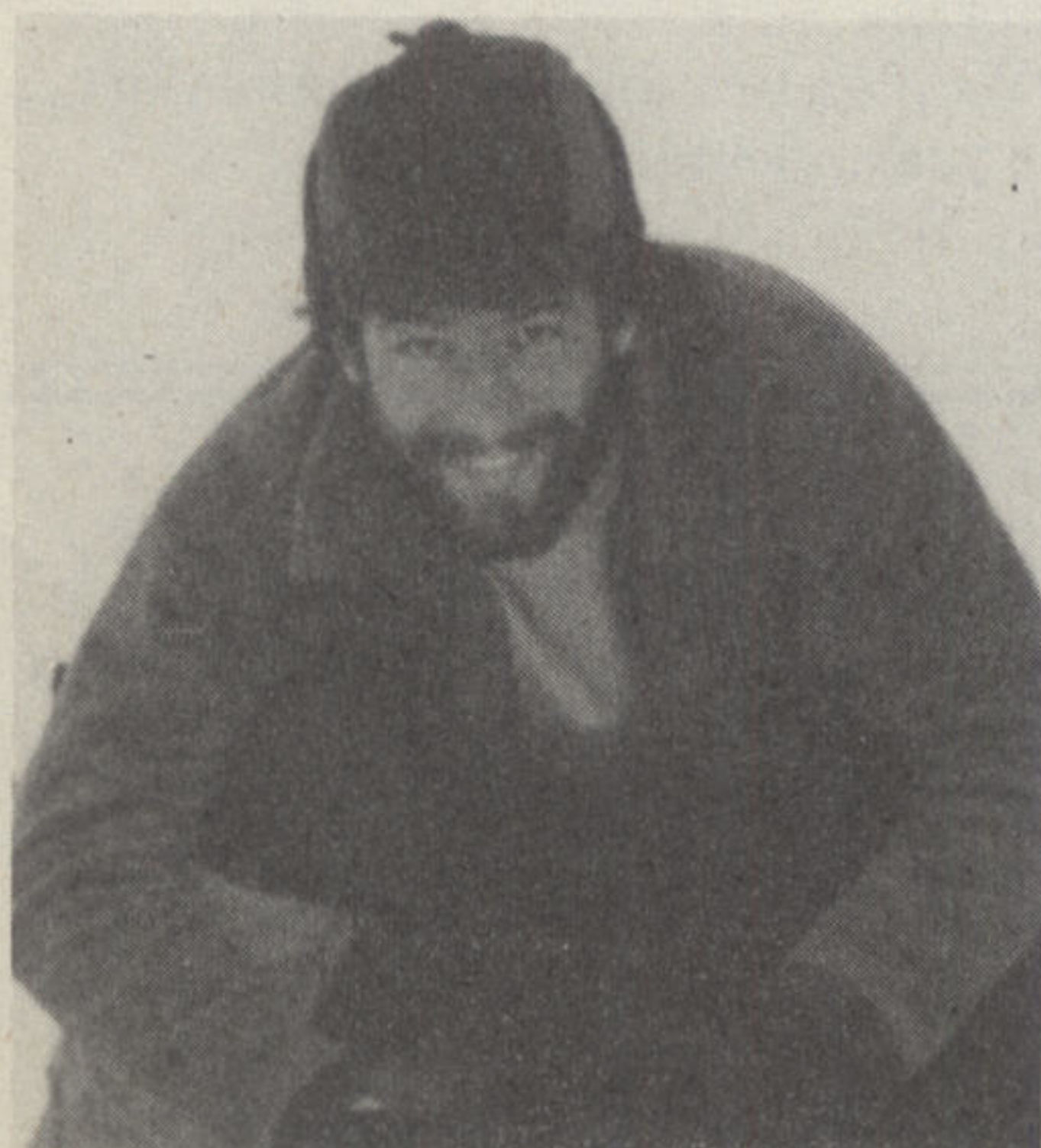
Drake's biggest reward after 30



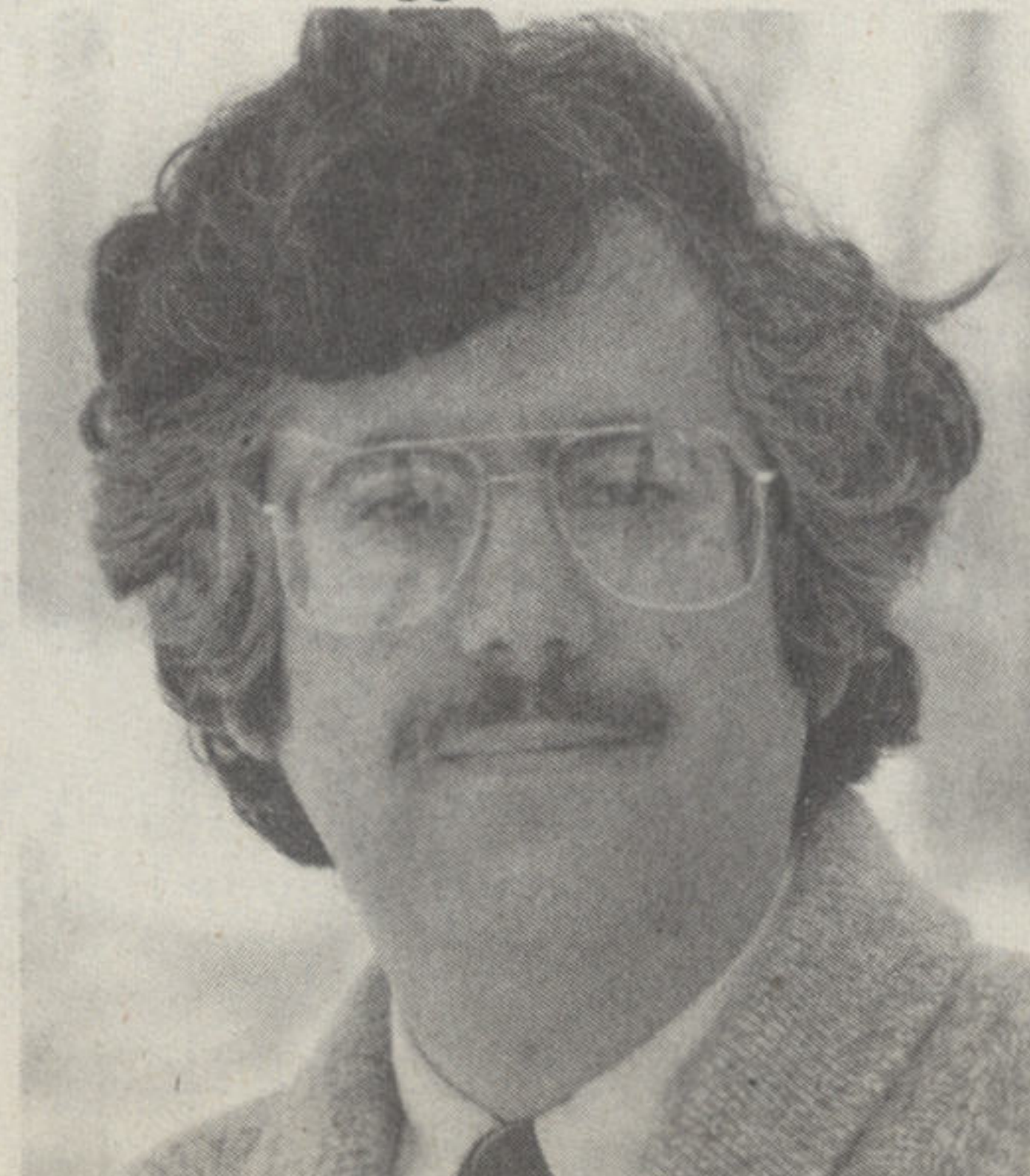
Peggy Ranson

Patrick Menehan.

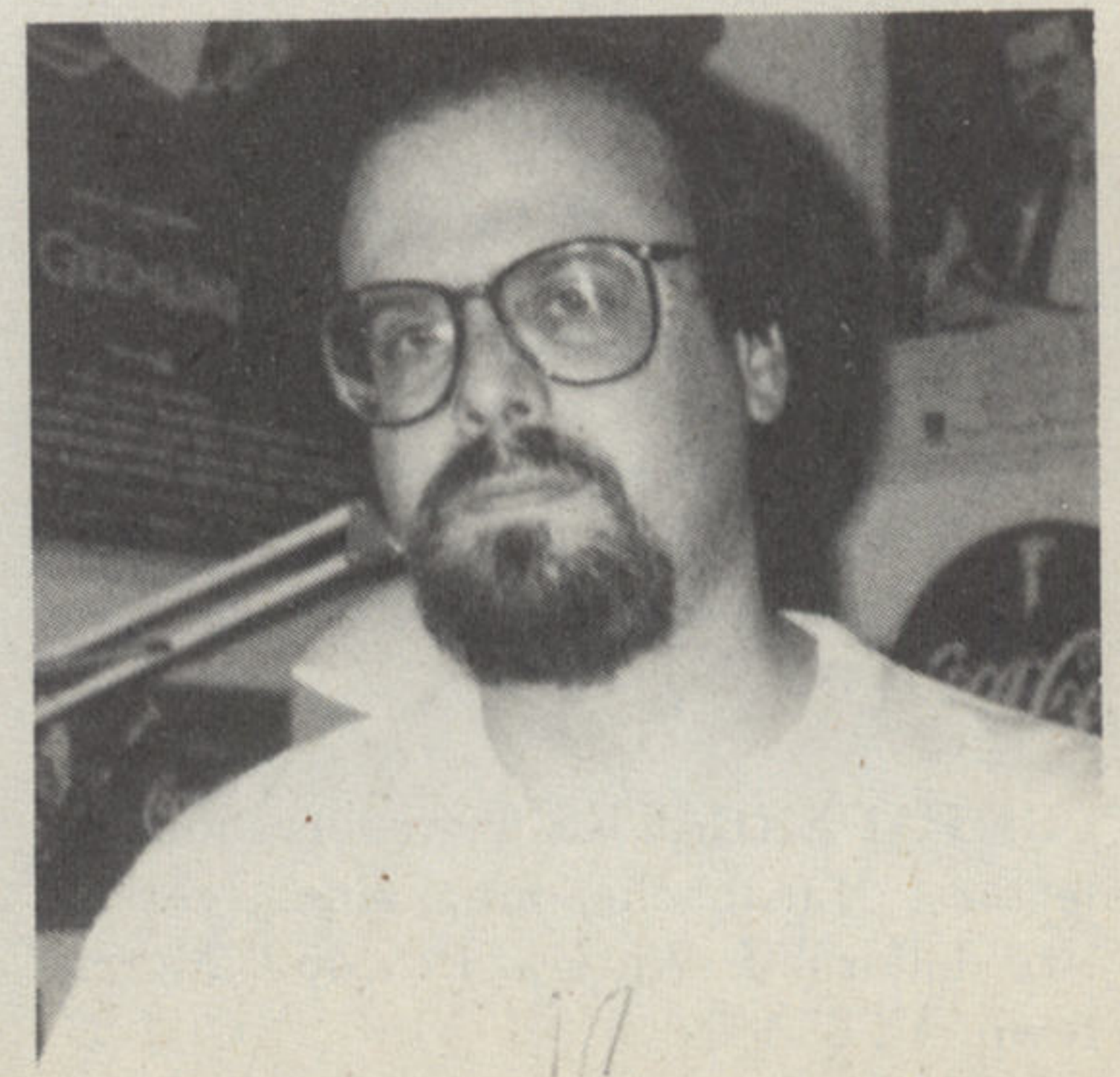
Menehan has a bachelor's degree in graphic design and illustration. He's done editorial illustrations for the *Washington Post* and the *Baltimore Sun*, game covers for Steve



Doug Franklin

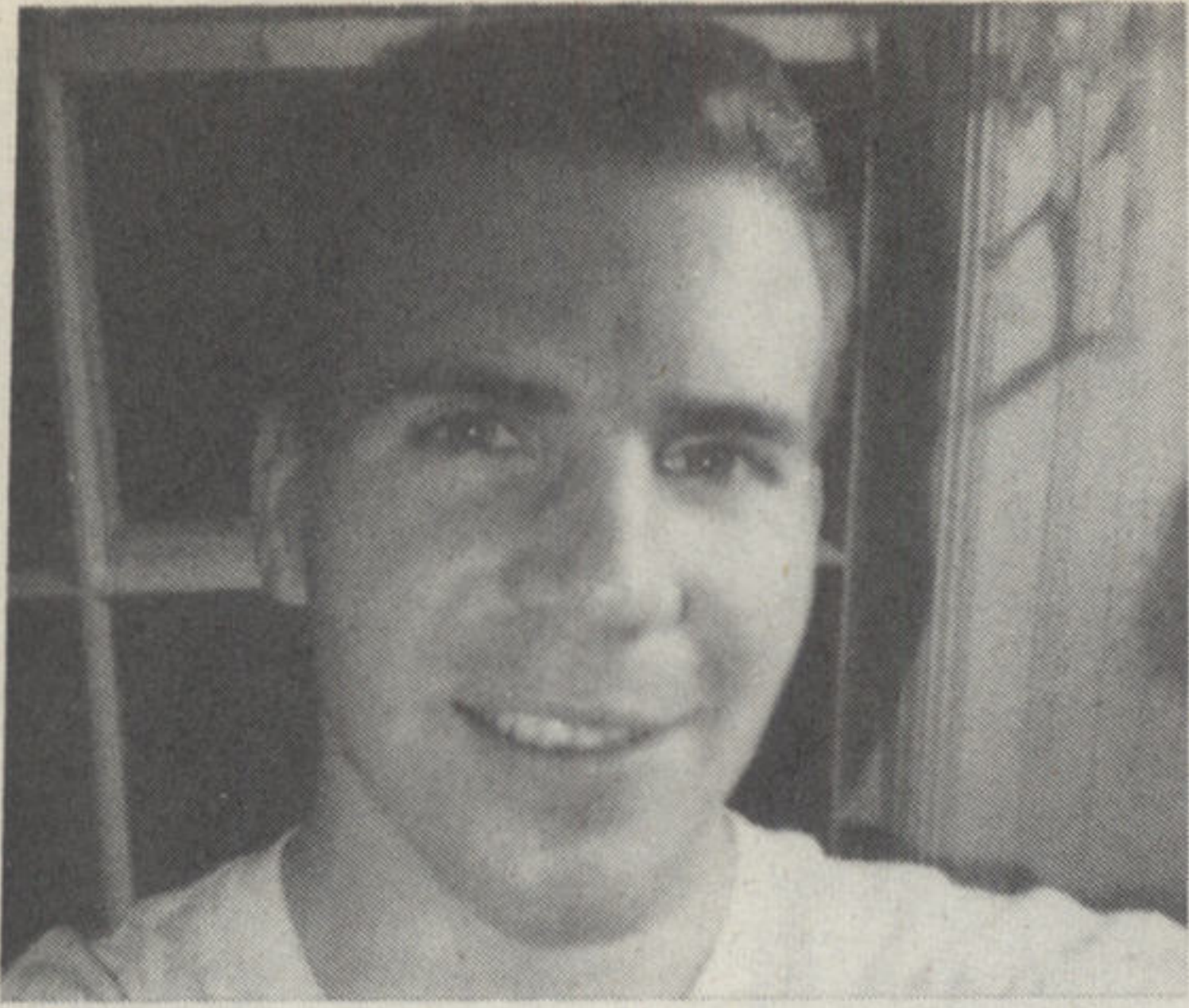


Chuck Rothman



Dan Persons





**Jon Foster**

Jackson Games and Taskforce Games, jazz record album covers and illustrations for A&P Food Co., to name some of his work.

But it is science fiction that has always been his destination, ever since growing up with a father who was an *Analog* fan. He says at a young age he got hooked on the exploits of John Carter of Mars. Then he discovered the work of Frank Frazetta and that sealed the deal.

Like bees to honey, the space miners in "Newport's World" by **Doug Franklin** are drawn to the presence of uranium on a barren asteroid. But they are not the only ones hunting for it.

Franklin, the author of "Gray Lies" (*Aboriginal* Nos. 31-32) and "The Transformative Ethic" (*Aboriginal* No. 25), is a computer consultant for an oil exploration company in Alaska.

When I spoke to him he had just come back from a two-week hunting trip. He and his stepdad, brothers-in-law, and other family members took a float plane to a remote area where the



**Allison Fiona Hershey**

family has a cabin. Franklin says the hunt was successful; his freezer is stocked for the winter.

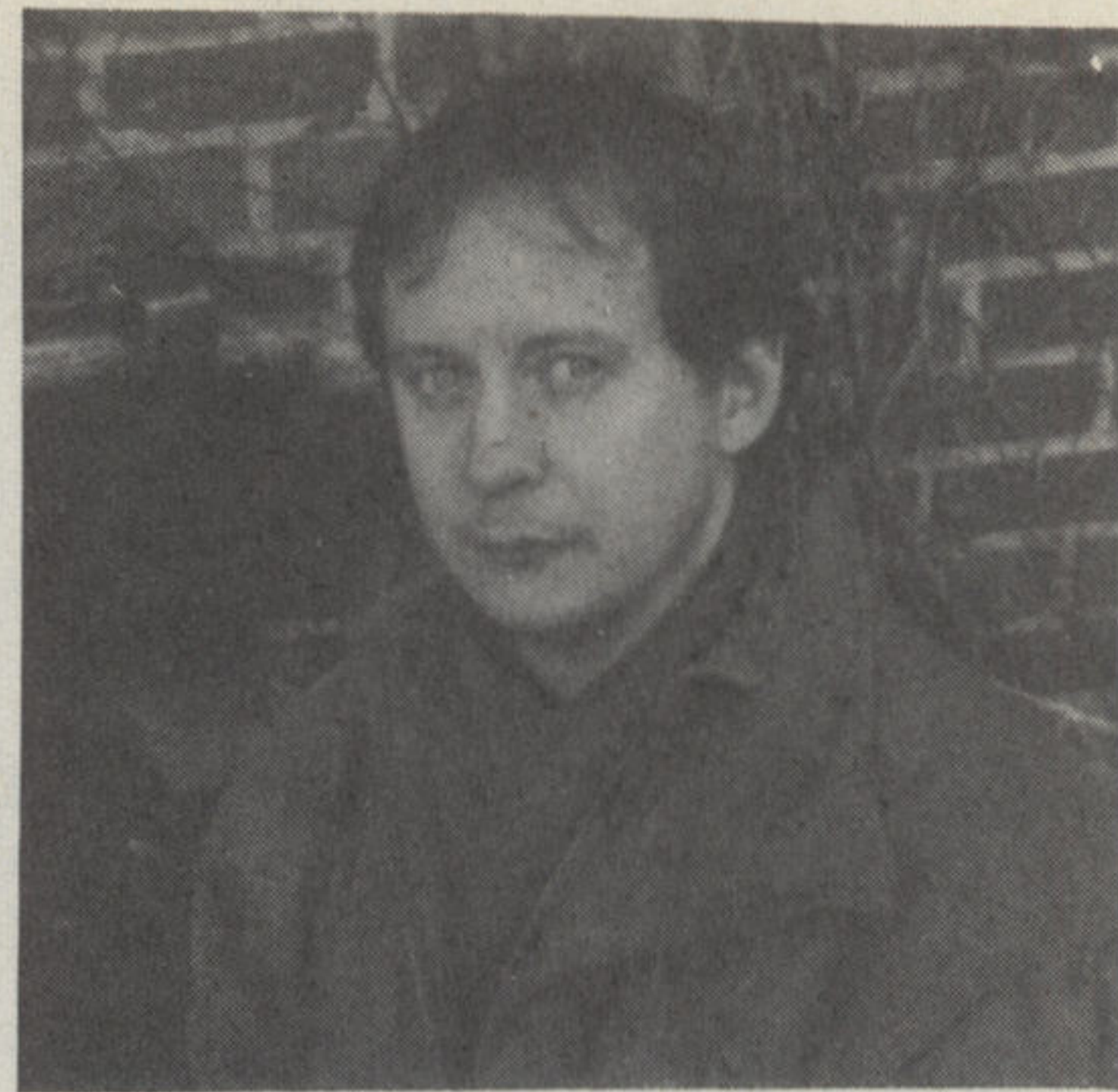
"Newport's World" is illustrated by **Alan Gutierrez**. When I spoke to the Arizona artist he was four months into a big project called *Oceanarium*, an educational book with 44 pages of illustrations for Bantam Books.

The marooned crew members in "Natural High" by **Chuck Rothman** don't get high by choice, but by necessity. What a drag.

Rothman is the author of "Something on his Mind" (*Aboriginal* Nos. 29-30) and the husband of poet **Susan Noe Rothman** ("Pardon Me for Not Speaking," *Aboriginal* No. 13).

Rothman says he was freelancing for a New York State agency and finished the 20 days of contracted work in three. But bureaucracies being what they are, he was still required to go to the workplace and sit the remaining 17 days. Near the end, bored out of his mind, he wrote "Natural High."

"I've always been proud of the



**Cortney Skinner**

story; it was my tax dollars at work," he says.

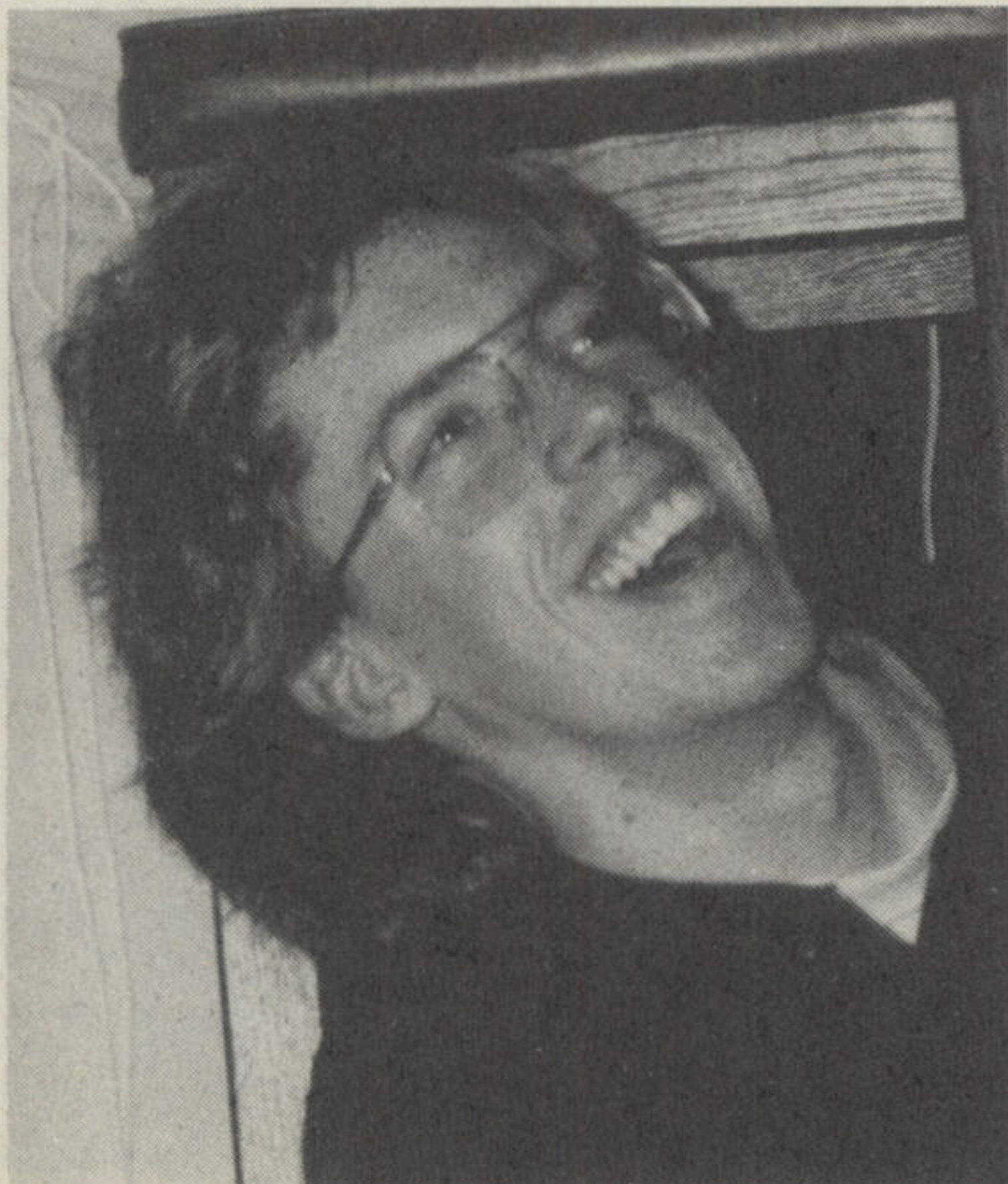
Look for two short stories by Rothman in the premier issue of *Sci-Fi Channel* magazine.

"Natural High" is illustrated by **Peggy Ranson**, who says being a "child of the '60s" she got a big kick out of the premise.

She says she's "real attached" to the art work she created for the story. When I spoke to her she had just done the by-invitation-only World Fantasy Convention art show.

With everything that superheroes are being subjected to these days, the timing of "The Legend in Pursuit" by **Dan Persons** is perfect. And how about this for a sequel: Wonder Woman fights PMS?

Persons, a senior programmer/analyst for a major metropolitan financial institution, recently sold his story "And Memory Dies" to *Pulp-house*. He also gets the credit for conceiving, organizing, and moderating a panel for Lunacon '92 titled "Ren and Stimpy at the end of the Twentieth



**Brooks Peck**



**Patricia Anthony**



**Chet Gottfried**



Larry Blamire

Century.”

“The Legend” is illustrated by **Jon Foster**, who was the cover artist of our last issue. (One of my favorite covers, since it features a reporter.)

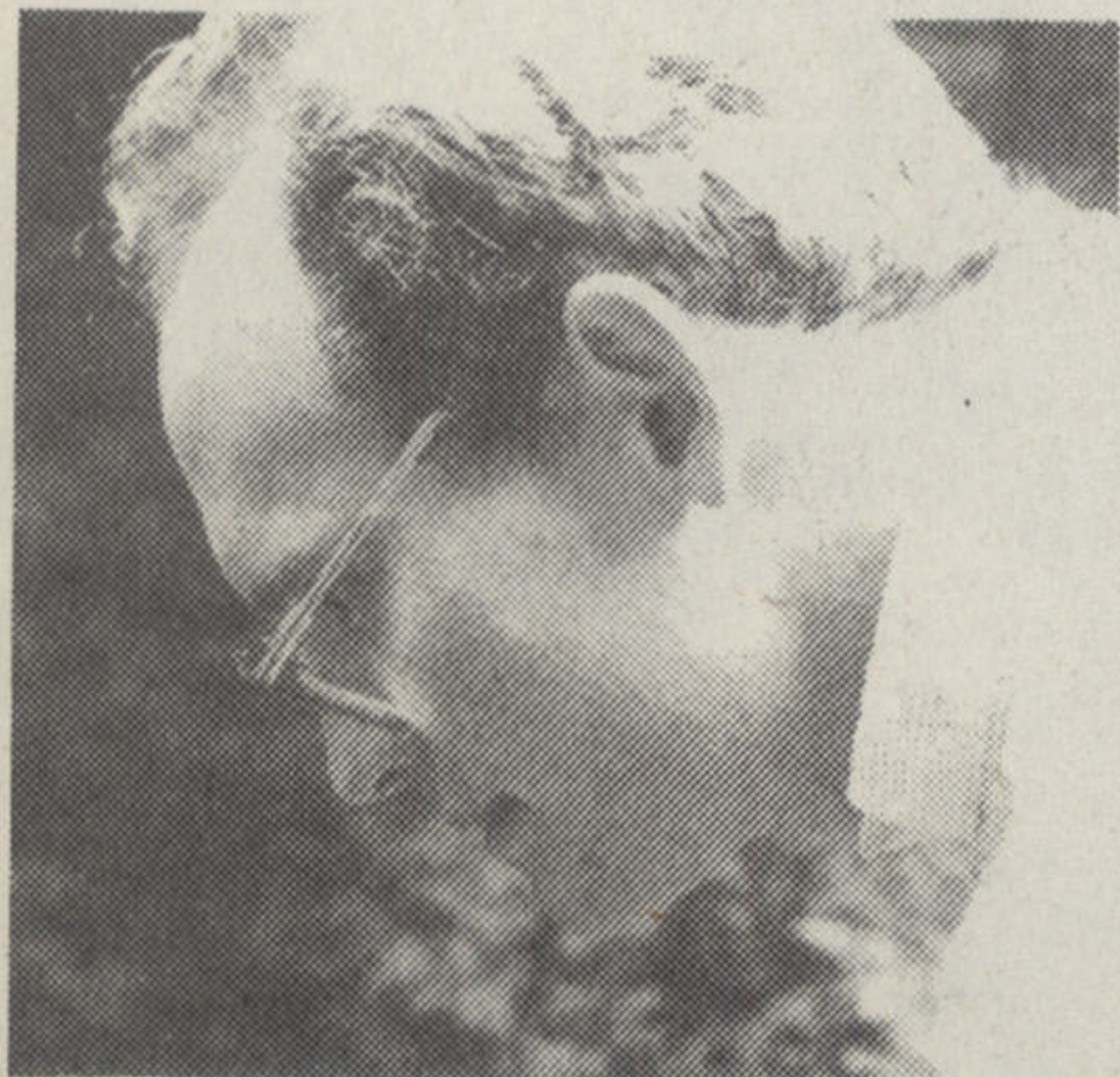
Foster, who is working on the second volume of the graphic novel *Neuromancer*, says he is real excited that he got a letter of thanks from John Randal for the illustration for “Dead Sky Eyes,” also in our last issue.

The female character of “In Love with Multi-Woman,” by **Brooks Peck**, may have her problems, but I’ll bet there isn’t a busy woman out there who doesn’t envy her a bit.

This is Peck’s first professional short story sale, but you can read another of his stories in the upcoming Jerry Pournelle anthology *Life Among the Asteroids*, part of the *Ace Endless Frontier* series.

Peck works at the foreign language lab of a university and is working on a novel that “puts a (hopefully) new twist on alien invasion.”

“Multi-Woman” is illustrated by **Allison Fiona Hershey**, who says



Howard V. Hendrix



David Deitrick

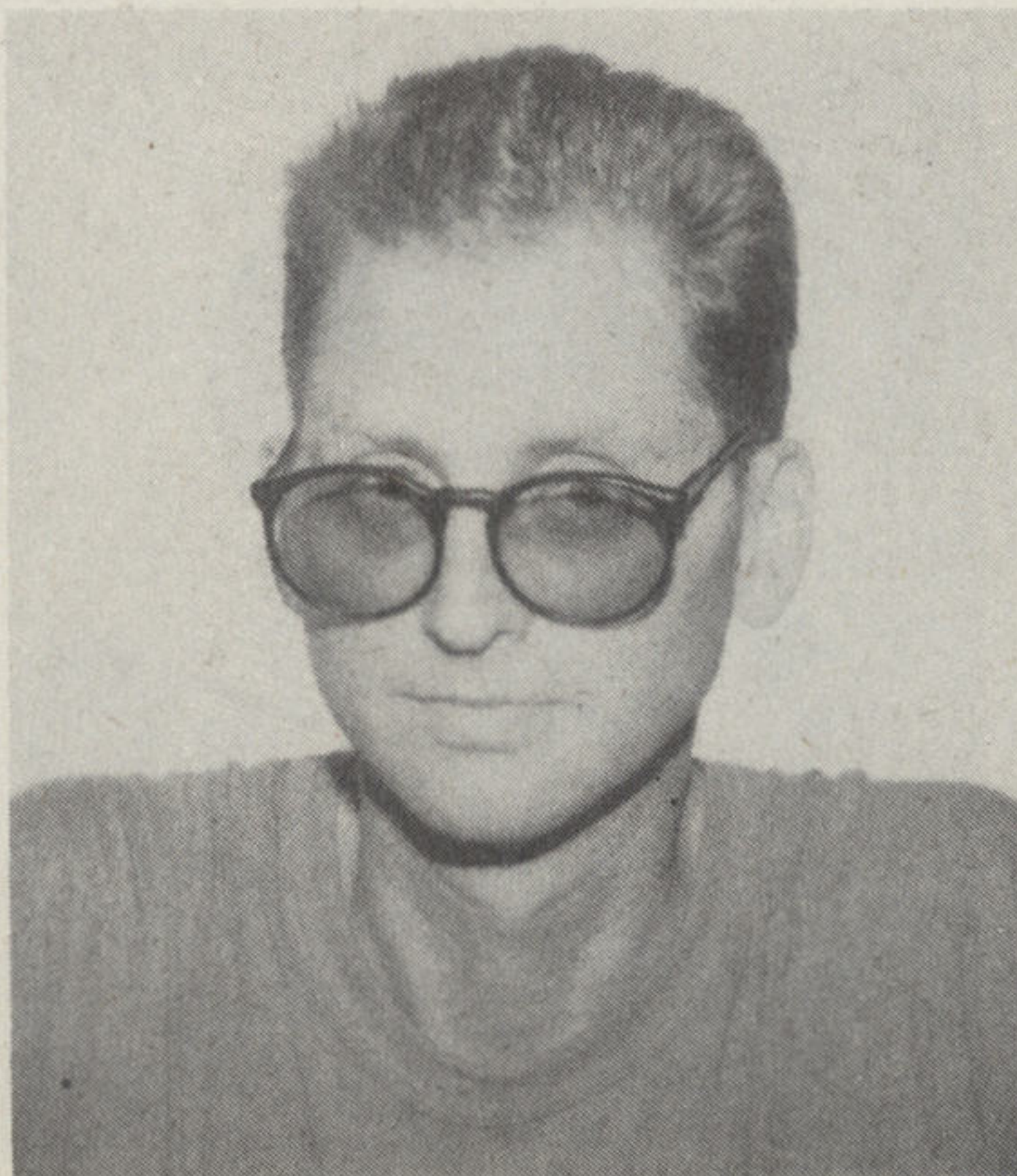
she did the art entirely on a computer using a drawing and desktop publishing program. Hershey and Menehan both say one big advantage of the computer is the ease with which you can undo a mistake.

Hershey recently did a cover for the *Whole Earth Review*.

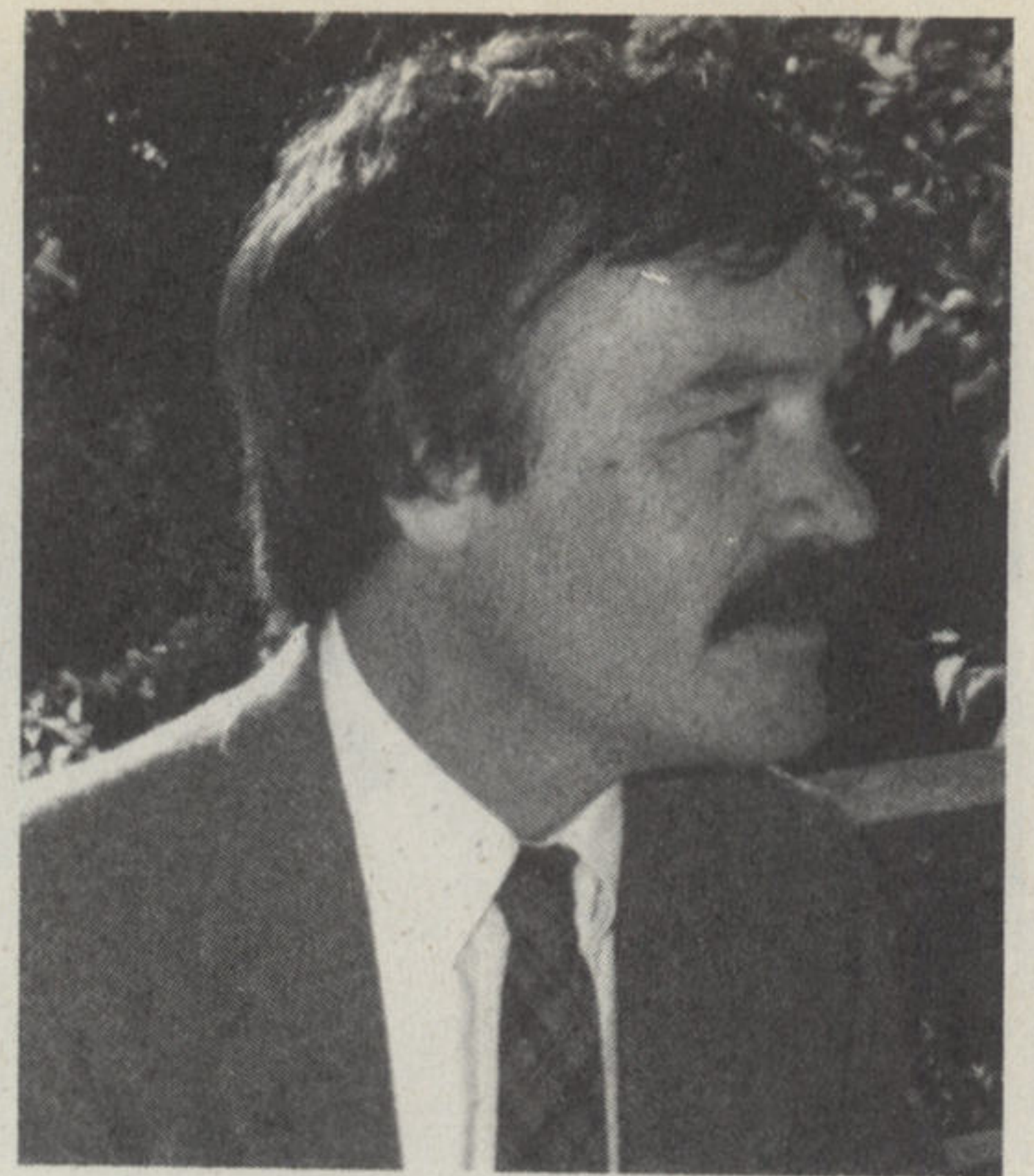
If “Multi-Woman” makes you feel inadequate, you can at least be thankful you are not living in the Victorian Age like the female protagonist of “Dear Froggy,” by **Patricia Anthony**.

Anthony was just getting over a serious ear infection when I spoke to her. She says she was very interested in the response to “Dear Froggy” in her writers’ group. The men were not entirely unsympathetic to the husband character.

“Dear Froggy” is illustrated by **Cortney Skinner**. He says he has been doing a lot of portrait commissions lately, “something I’ve always wanted to do.” He says it all started when people saw his romantic-looking portrait of a woman, titled “Spellbound,” on display at the last



Alan Kirk



Barney Curren

WorldCon.

Some of the indignities of space travel are exposed in **Chet Gottfried’s** “Two by Two.”

Gottfried designs, edits, and produces books. His latest production is a novel by Harvey Jacobs, *Beautiful Soup*, distributed by Celadon Press.

Gottfried is now working on a Faust-like novel and an SF thriller. His hobby is recreating fonts for desktop publishing programs.

“Two by Two” is illustrated by **Larry Blamire**.

Two brothers have a connection they don’t quite understand as they lead their separate lives in “At the Shadow of a Dream,” by **Howard V. Hendrix**.

Hendrix, author of “Singing the Mountain to the Stars” (*Aboriginal* No. 25) and “Doctor Doom Conducting” (*Aboriginal* No. 7), left an assistant professorship two years ago to write full-time. He has finished a novel of the year 2020 titled *Lightpaths*, and is working on a novel of the Twenty-Second Century called *A Change of Worlds*. He also writes



Lori Deitrick



**Karl G. Schlosser**

poetry and writes and produces plays.

"At the Shadow of a Dream" is illustrated by **David Deitrick**.

The aliens and humans in "When in Bzook ..." by **Alan Kirk** don't seem to have much in common — at first.

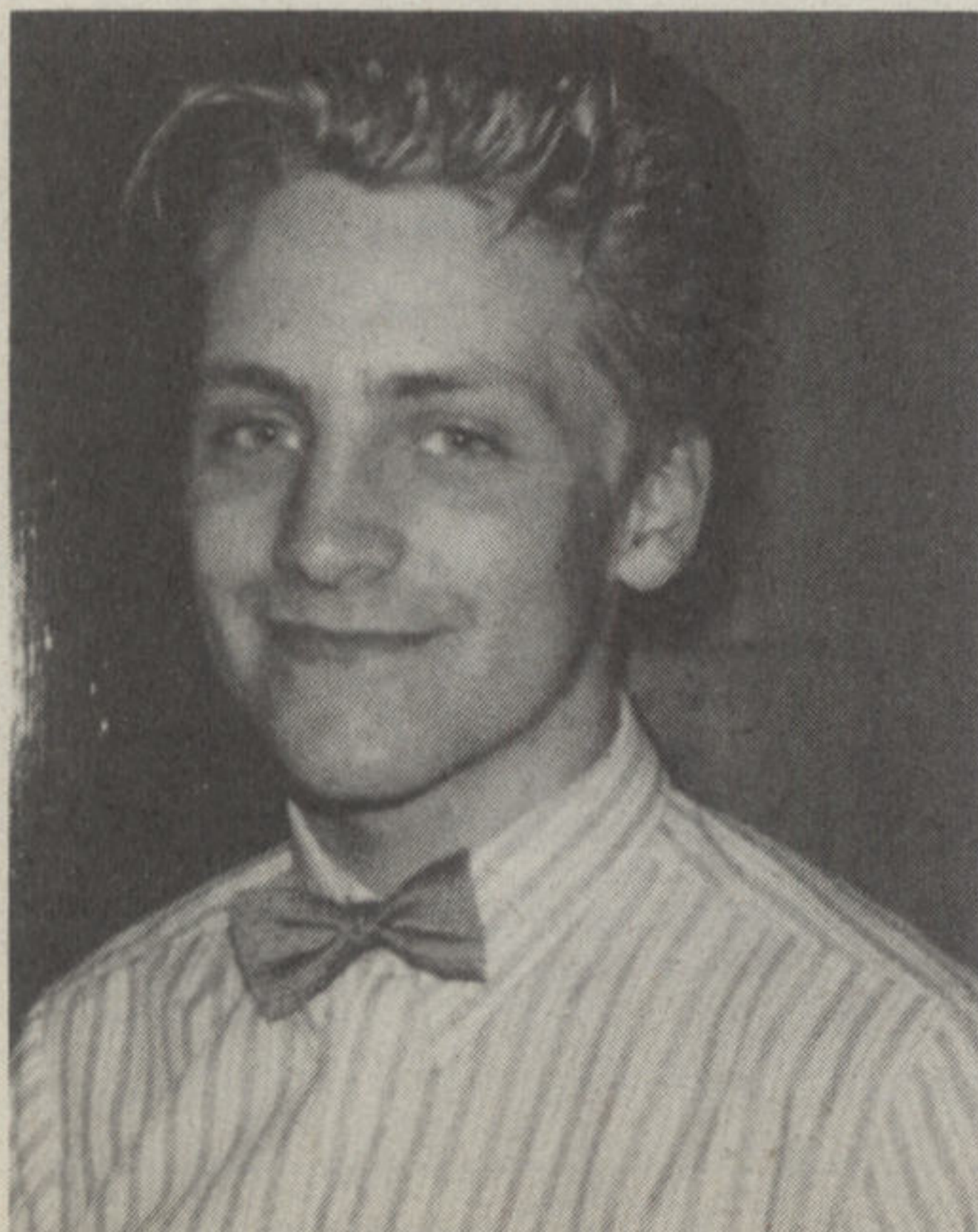
This story is Kirk's first professional short story sale, although he has sold a number of musical compositions for motion pictures, television shows, and videos.

At this writing, Kirk is engaged to be married. He says he makes his living "editing and word processing mealy-mouthed legal slop."

"When in Bzook ..." is illustrated by (who else?) **Larry Blamire**, who, at last report, was trying either to out-jump or outfight kangaroos in Australia.

The evolution of the human species is the subject of "Ladies' Choice," by **Barney Curren**.

Curren's first short story, "The Rabbi," appeared in McGraw-Hill's *Free-Fire Zone*, a collection of short stories by Vietnam veterans, in 1973. He says he got his start as a writer because he "was a poor athlete, couldn't sing, couldn't play the guitar,



**Jan Lars Jensen**

was not student body president, wanted to impress girls."

Curren, a medical journal ad writer, is working on some medically-oriented SF tales and a novel.

"Ladies' Choice" is illustrated by **Lori Deitrick**. She and her husband David were just back from SciCon in Virginia Beach when I spoke to her. "It was great fun! Everyone there was real friendly," she says.

Lori had just finished a portrait for a ladies' club of a woman, her mother, and her daughter. David was fingers deep in paint, working on what Lori called "this fantastic 3-D thing for his graduate show."

In "The Motel 6 Fugue," by **Karl G. Schlosser**, a scientist who skipped a whole lot of steps in his experiment is now trying to stay a step ahead of his employer.



**Catherine Mintz**

This is Schlosser's first professional sale, but he has had several works appear in *Midnight Zoo*, and he has completed a murder mystery called "In the Mind of a Killer."

Schlosser, a computer consultant, says he recently traced his genealogy back to 17th-Century Belgium.

"The Motel 6 Fugue" is illustrated by **N. Taylor Blanchard**. When I spoke with him, he was working on his second book cover, for a young adult novel by Robert Levy, published by Houghton Mifflin.

Watergate was just the beginning. In the alternate reality setting of "The Committee to Re-Elect the President," by **Jan Lars Jensen**, the story takes a different turn.

Jensen is working at getting his bachelor's degree in creative writing from the University of Victoria. This is his first professional sale, although

he says, "My first semipro sale was to *Deathrealm*, a short story called 'Brutal Applause'."

Jensen recently sold some fiction to *Grue* and has a novella called "When the Muzak Stops" appearing in *Midnight Zoo*. He is working on a novel about plate tectonics.

"The Committee" is illustrated by **Carol Heyer**. She was excited about having won *Print* magazine's regional design competition with the illustration she did for "The Cry of a Seagull" by Lois Tilton (*Aboriginal* No. 27). Her piece was one of 1900 selected nationwide from 35,000 entries.

Heyer is doing her first cover for *Amazing Stories*. She is also working on her next children's book, *Robin Hood*. To take the photos of models she would need for her story she assembled "a whole crowd of people" in a local park and invited the press.

Perhaps her biggest find was Robin Hood himself: her 19-year-old pizza delivery man, who happens to be about six-foot-six, with long dark hair and straight, handsome features. She says his presence attracted a large audience of girls to the park that day.

In "Enchantment," by **Catherine Mintz**, the high technology is of the warm and fuzzy variety.

Mintz is a full-time freelance writer who has published essays, book reviews, interviews, and poems, including the poem "Starlight" in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*. But this qualifies as her first professional SF short story sale.

Mintz has been on the directorate of the National Fantasy Fan Federation for a number of years and is co-editor of the fanzine *Tightbeam*. She is currently working on a series of scraperboard illustrations of Abraham Merritt's *The Metal Monster* for her portfolio of fan art.

"Enchantment" is illustrated by **Robert Pasternak**, who tells me he just got his wrist out of a cast, sold a cover to a 3-D comic book, and will have his first cover for *Amazing Stories* coming out in the spring of 1993.

Pasternak recently saw copies of a Russian magazine that published some of his artwork in 1991. He says it's tough to figure out what they are saying about him in the text, but he thinks they were speculating about whether he is related to a Pasternak named Boris. □

# The Committee to Re-Elect the President

By Jan Lars Jensen

Art by Carol Heyer

43 stood behind Gitte on the observation floor of the Motorola Building. The window before them framed a panorama of cityscape, gleaming skyscrapers so well-composed and polished they could have fit in a film-maker's backdrop of airbrushed glass. To 43, it looked as if the scene was waiting for a single, overblown special effect. He watched Gitte, who stood in combat fire stance as he scanned the horizon with a pair of binoculars.

"Here it comes," Gitte said, lowering the electric Bushnells.

43 could see it too, the zeppelin, a fifty-foot cigarillo of polished silver and streamlined fins, pivoting slowly as it descended into the trench Fourth Avenue made through the city's field of steel architecture.

This was the leg of the flight that had worried the pilot, 43 remembered. "The FAA will have my license! There could be criminal charges!"

Gitte had laughed at that, one of those controlled bursts of hysteria he squeezed off like rounds from an automatic. "If you don't do it, you won't so much as fold a fucking paper airplane again without written permission from the government."

So the zeppelin sank between the buildings and began to drift uptown, both its sides aglow with the President's grinning face; right now, countless white-collar employees would be spinning on their chairs and pulling aside their monitors to see windows filled with sections of the President's brow or nose or lips. The craft was rigged with Chromacolor screens which dissolved between his campaign portrait and a single word in red, white, and blue capitals:

## RE-ELECT

43 thought he saw a smile beneath the thick, gray hyphen of Gitte's mustache. His idea, this illegal flight of the zeppelin, and finally something was going right for the Committee.

"I don't suppose we have time to stand around and watch," Gitte said, but didn't move from where he stood. When 43 suggested they relax and at last enjoy the fruits of their labor, Gitte lifted the binoculars again and nodded against the eyepieces. Five minutes later he lowered them and asked, "You religious, 43?"

"No, not really," he said, surprised, measuring his answer, knowing he'd have to tread carefully here if he didn't want to ruin the unexpected opportunity.

"What do you remember about being a kid, 43? Your earliest memory."

"I've blocked out most of childhood."

"I can remember as far back as 1932." Gitte turned to face the field agent. "1932. I was six-years-old when I watched the *USS Akron* pass over our backyard; an airship, like the one coming our way now, but this one was big, bigger than the largest ocean liners of the time. It blotted out the sky, 43, the whole damned sky was filled with this behemoth — like nothing I'd seen before and nothing I would see again."

In the periphery of his vision, 43 could see the upper angle of the zeppelin's prow drifting across the window and slowly blocking the buildings opposite from view. "Must have made a real impression."

"I ran. Ran like a chickenshit bugger into the house and went bawling to my mother." Although he was still staring at 43, Gitte's eyes seemed to be focused elsewhere. "For the longest time, I thought I'd seen ..." He paused.

"Thought you'd seen what?"

"I ..."

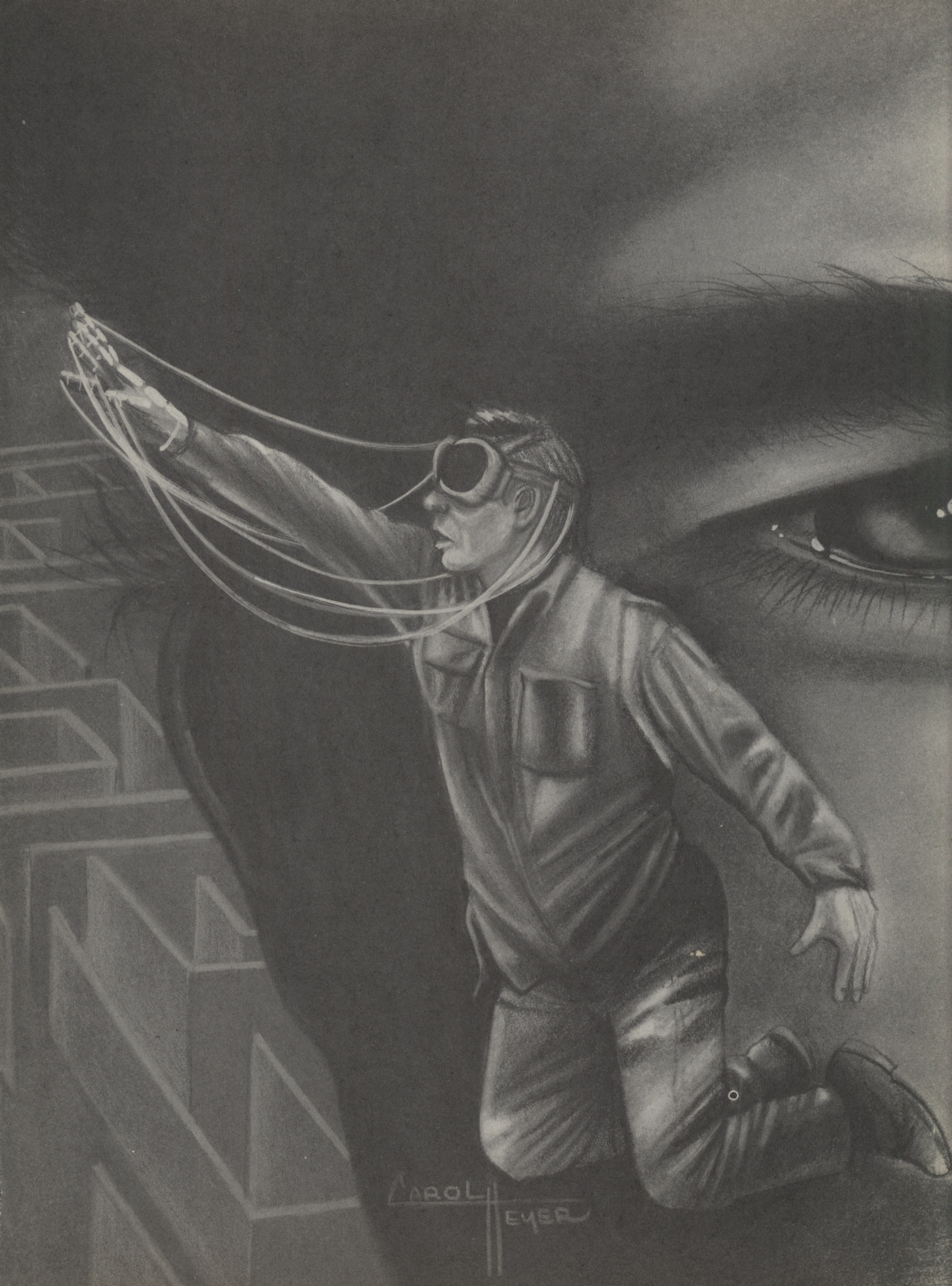
But before Gitte went any further he turned with an underwater slowness to face the window again. 43 did so as well, as though mirroring the legendary operative might persuade him to keep talking. The window was now crammed with a fleshtone likeness of skin. As the zeppelin sailed on, the skin split across the middle and gradually opened into the Presidential eye.

"What did you think, Mr. Gitte?"

When Gitte looked at him now his gaze was not only focused but acute. "How the fuck did the President's eyebrow get *underneath* his eye!?"

43 was reluctant to look, but he did, and saw that it wasn't just the President's eyebrow that had been flipped over but his whole, carefully-selected campaign face.

And there was something else.



CAROL  
EYER

The screen split across the middle, erupting with a wave of color that didn't fit into the scheme of the portrait. Flames. The fabric of the airship began to peel away in flaps and blackening margins to expose the skeletal framework beneath.

"NO!"

Gitte slammed a fist against the window, then retracted to watch with small eyes as the airship ploughed into the unyielding surface of a skyscraper across from them, section by exploding section. Buckled ribs fell away from the crash and pulled the flames toward the street far below. Then the rear end seemed to exhale with another explosion, blowing away the aft engines in a cloud of fine debris and turning the whole wreckage again before it relinquished the pretense of flight and began to simply plummet.

Incensed, grinding his teeth, Gitte picked up a chair and smashed it against the wall, then turned with the remnants in his fists, while behind him the cinder continued spiralling down from the funnel of black smoke.

"Mr. Gitte," 43 said, "I believe we have a saboteur on the Committee."

Two months earlier at the Bureau's Operations Center, 43 had watched the instructions come up in a roll from the INCOMING slot in his desktop and slowly pass through the OUTGOING slot. Shredded, burned, scrambled. He would have liked a minute to re-read the revision to his assignment; the wording was even more enigmatic than Bureau protocol required.

He pulled over his monitor on its telescoping arm and turned the dial to "F." Fleck. 43 got as far as the chairman's third secretarial ring. A Plumber came up in blue wash across the screen.

"Yes?"

"I would like to speak with Chairman Richard Fleck," 43 said.

"What does this pertain to?"

"The latest addendum to my current assignment."

"Docket number?"

"2650p."

Staccato clicking from the screen. "Docket number does not register."

"What does that mean?"

"Memorandum not listed in Official Registry of Internal Communications."

43 considered this. "Let me speak to Chairman Fleck. I want to know —"

The screen shut itself off. When he tried again he only came up with a message that read PLEASE STAND BY, accompanied by tinny Muzak. "Ride of the Valkyries." 43 knew better than to pursue the matter further. At the end of his shift the screen shut itself down, and he left the cubicle.

The hallway outside the Operations Center was alive with Plumbers, countless numbers of them, carrying black valises and bearing unreadable grins. 43 negotiated a path through arms and elbows to the dispensing machine, where he slotted in his empty tray and pressed the START button. The dispenser had a clear plexiglass front so one could watch the automatica inside as it filled the tray with pristine ammunition.

43 was watching the rows of .38 caliber shells multiply when he received the message. It came from the Plumbers — not any one of them in particular, but a single word at a time from those passing by in either direction.

"43"

"Fleck"

"waiting"

"dining"

"room"

"Hotel"

"Noblesse"

"Oblige."

The machine pumped in the last shell and rolled out his tray with a pleasant bing. 43 turned around. The hallway was the same as before, not a single Plumber paying him attention. He knew now that the memorandum was not only legitimate but a matter of internal contention. Electronic messages could be intercepted within the Bureau; Plumbers were trained to forget.

43 spotted Fleck in front of a dessert cart in the restaurant of the Hotel Noblesse Oblige. Gaunt, full of angles, impeccably dressed. The chairman was considering delicacies through dark plastic sunglasses.

"Truffle?" he asked as 43 approached.

"No."

"I understand you're having difficulty with your monitor."

"It's giving me mixed messages." 43 looked around the lobby. There were Plumbers scattered throughout the dinner crowd, which was itself rife with Secret Servicemen and personal guards in town for yet another rally.

"Let's find something we can talk with," Fleck suggested.

As they walked, 43 picked up one of the complimentary packs of cigarettes that sat on each dinner table. He opened the box and pointed it toward Fleck, who declined in favor of his own nicotine delivery system. He fit the plastic cup over his nostrils as 43 lit up.

"Easy to tell when there's a political event in town," the Chairman said. "How is the Committee's work going?"

"According to schedule. We've only begun, really, and that's why I was so —"

"Ah, here we are."

Fleck rented a Silent Parley from the front desk and the pair found a table in the lounge. The device looked like something discreet couples might order from the back pages of a direct mail catalog. 43 broke off the paper bands that declared it X-RAYED and FLUOROSCOPEd for LISTENING DEVICES, then strapped on his end of the black rubber headpiece. Fleck removed his glasses and did the same. The lounge was full of Parleys, the users staring at one another over the lengths of tubing which joined the twin masks. 43 found the hissing of Fleck's nicotine system strangely amplified by the umbilicals of black rubber. All other noise was clamped out.

"Tell me about Gitte," the Chairman said. "He trusts you?"

"As much as he trusts anyone, I suppose."

"43, what did you make of memorandum 2650p?"

"It was problematic. Apparently I'm to continue a pretense of cooperation with Gitte and his Committee, while simultaneously spoiling its work."

Hissing silence. Then: "You understood."

"But why? If the Bureau doesn't want the Committee to succeed, why sponsor its operations in the first place?"

"This is an internal matter, 43."

"Where did 2650p come from?"

Fleck rolled his eyes upward. Within the Bureau this was a familiar gesture, referring to the firmament of unseen superiors that lingered over the heads of field agents such as 43. "Do your work through Gitte. Throw him off his game plan. Get inside his head and mess around."

"That might not be so easy."

"He intimidates you?"

"Of course not."

"I realize how Gitte appears on the surface, 43, but there's a man inside there somewhere. Erode the man."

43 grabbed the release strap of the headpiece, but Fleck took his arm.

"Over the past three decades, the Committee has become something of an unseen institution. I might say the same of Gitte. Remember that, 43; you're not just working against one sub-department here, this is you against an institution."

Two months later, he found himself fully entangled in the revised assignment. *The man, erode the man*. Nothing aggravated Gitte more than seeing his carefully orchestrated plans turn to disaster, and burning the airship had been the first step in 43's efforts to quietly take him apart for good.

The day after the crash they were together again, waiting in a motel room to meet a contact from the IRS. Gitte was still fuming, and 43 decided to test the waters between them with a question that had

been left to linger: "Are you a religious man?"

"Huh?"

"That's what you asked me before the airship exploded," 43 said. "Catholic, aren't you?"

Gitte shook his head. "Conquered my fear of God years ago. Not much point to Catholicism once you've put that notch in your holster." He paused. "You have any phobias? General fears?"

"No, none really."

Gitte laughed, unpleasant. There was a rasp of a lighter, and he moved his finger over the small flame, letting it play over the knuckle. "Eastern technique for building endurance," he explained. "Seeing how long you can stand the heat. I've gone for hours." He looked at 43. "I don't think you could stand it very long."

"Why's that?"

"You got to know what your fears are, if you want to conquer them. Me, I feared God and I conquered God. I feared the rats that ran along the wharf on the Hudson, so I killed one and cooked it on a spit. Those fears are down here —" he tapped his chest with one fist — "and I can call them up whenever I need to. You got to have control over your emotions. Be able to turn them on and off. Focus."

He shut off the flame.

"You wouldn't be able to stand it for very long, 43."

As the election approached, Gallup polls put the challenger a full eighteen points ahead of the incumbent, largely as a result of the zeppelin fiasco. No doubt someone in the firmament would be pleased, but in the meantime Gitte was closing up, keeping to himself, making it that much more difficult for 43 to deal with the particulars of his assignment. The appeal of the Bureau had always been the covert untangling of a problem; this task, however, involved him at a deeper level.

The man. Erode the man.

The next step in the process occurred when Gitte rented a yacht and filled it with prostitutes as a means of luring senior Democrats into scandal and milking information from their underlings — but when the first of the quarry were led by Gitte's operatives to the marina, they found only an empty berth and tracery of oil. Cabos San Lucas. The yacht and its occupants were being held there, twenty miles offshore, until after the election.

Again, Gitte had been angry but showed no signs of wanting to concede defeat, personal or otherwise. The smoldering exterior remained in place.

Then came the inevitable Cuban exiles Gitte hired to randomly pester the families and friends of strategic persons in the Democratic campaign. Vandalized cars, rocks through windows, sons and daughters followed from school. 43 called in a favor at the Department of Immigration and had their

Special Operations Squad sent into action, picking up the Cubans one by one in nondescript Ford Interceptors and taking them for long rides down deserted country roads.

Gitte became plainly evasive after his Cubans started disappearing. 43 hated evasiveness, hated it more than ever during the week he lost track of the man's activities. H. L. Gitte didn't take holidays; 43 started to wonder what he might be able to accomplish in a week, acting on his own.

Their next scheduled meeting was a street-corner handoff of some research 43 had done into the Democrat's finances. When the pre-arranged time drew near, the crowd on the sidewalk seemed to part in two deliberate sections, like a stage curtain, revealing the vehicle as it pulled over, a tapered sphere of stainless steel. A gullwing door folded up on the RV's side as 43 crossed over to it.

"You look deep in thought," said the voice from inside.

"I was wondering what you've been doing the last few days."

Gitte leaned into the open rectangle of the doorframe and stared at 43. "Black bag job here and there. Housecleaning. Dull stuff. Is that my present?"

He held on to the stack. "What's happening, Mr. Gitte?"

"I've got him."

"Who? The Democrat?"

Gitte grinned.

"How?"

The legendary operative took the sheets from 43's hands, then leaned back and toggled the door switch. The RV was already folding him under its silver wing when he said, "Come by my house tonight. I want to tell you in private."

The house was a slate gray fortress, a hubristic piece of architecture in the spirit of Albert Speer, tinted plate-glass windows staring out at him from every wall. 43 rang the doorbell and looked into the round bulb of the monitor. It flickered to life, the face of Frances Gitte distorted by the fishbowl shape of the screen. "Who the hell are you?"

He got out his Bureau ID and showed her the number. "I work with your husband."

When she opened the door, 43 was struck by the bloodshot eyes and dark bruises of sleep deprivation which underscored them. She was wearing a housecoat, oily blond hair hanging in clumps across her face. When she stepped aside to let him in, 43 noticed that she kept to the same side of the hall, the left side of a masking tape border that apparently divided the house in two.

"Where is he?" 43 said.

She moved into a room on her side of the tape and sat on the floor. "What do you want with him?"

"It has to do with work. I'm sure you can appreciate the fact I'm not at liberty to discuss particulars of government affairs with non-civil servants."

"Work," she said, and snorted a laugh. "Work is all he's about."

"Excuse me?"

"There's no life for him outside the Bureau. When he comes home, he ceases to exist. Sits there playing with his guns, or burning his fingers — on purpose! You call that a man? You call that a life? You think I like —"

Then she sunk her head and scuttled toward the corner of the room, her eyes focused to the left of 43. Gitte. He stood at the bottom of the stairs and gave her a look that promised a repeat performance of something she hadn't enjoyed.

"Is it wrong to put someone out of their misery, 43?"

"I'd say it depends on the circumstances."

Gitte turned with military precision and gestured for 43 to follow him down the hall. They went into a small kitchen and sat in twin egg-shaped chairs before a table, bare except for a stack of papers. Gitte pulled a single photograph from the stack and passed it over. The woman in the picture was perhaps thirty years old, sleek, with wide-set eyes and dark lips. "You hire another call girl?" 43 asked.

"He got this sweet little side dish all on his own."

"The Democrat?"

Gitte nodded, greedy smile creeping into the gray bristles of his mustache.

"Not possible." 43 looked at the picture again. "The press would have been all over this. The Democrats would have had a Whip on the candidate's back so fast he —"

"They don't have the slightest clue what's going on. Never found out. The lovers have been the essence of discretion. Very sneaky. Not sneaky enough for me."

"What's her name?"

"Let's just call her Katrine X."

43 looked over, not liking the tone of Gitte's voice. "This should have been passed to the Bureau right away."

"I'm starting to have doubts about the Bureau. And I keep remembering what you said about the possibility of a saboteur being placed on the Committee."

Suspicion had been 43's cover since day one, and Gitte had appreciated the measured paranoia even when he didn't buy into it himself. *Never hurts to cast a suspicious eye.* 43 remembered the comment well, now.

"So what do you plan to do with this?" he asked.

"I've got some secure Plumbers monitoring the building where he keeps her. They're doing photo shoots and the occasional black bag job; when we've



got enough material to nail the bastard, it all goes straight to the scandal sheets. Game over for the Democrats, and the President's job is safe for another four years."

"So where does the Bureau fit in?"

Gitte didn't respond.

"You're obliged to keep the Bureau involved in the Committee's operations, through me. I don't need to remind you of that."

"What I'm obliged to do is keep the President in power. At any cost." He moved the sheets over to his side of the table. "I'm going to have to disseminate information on a need-to-know basis, and I've told you all I can afford to risk. This is a crisis situation, 43. I'm switching into Battle Override."

43 nodded but didn't pretend to acquiesce.

"I hope you can appreciate my reasons for discretion." They both stood, and Gitte walked him as far as the kitchen entrance. "It's not an easy thing, maintaining a legacy."

Or toppling one, 43 thought, trying not to look at the stack of sheets. He forced a brief smile and clapped the man on the shoulder to show there were no hard feelings, then turned and started toward the door.

On his way out, he shook a small black disk from his sleeve and let it glide to a shadowy nook beneath the coat tree.

The bug was a risk, but 43 saw no way around it if Gitte did in fact have a private line on sexual indiscretions committed by the Democrat. Tomorrow 43 could arrange to have other agents monitor Gitte's movements, but tomorrow might be too late. There was no wildfire quite like sexual scandal. If the Democrat was to have a chance at winning the election, 43 would have to spoil any attempts to capitalize on his extramarital activities. He would probably have to spoil the activities themselves.

But now he had a liability the size of a thumbnail in Gitte's house, a patient, silent device that had been developed by the CIA for use in the failed negotiations with OPEC. From his cubicle at Bureau headquarters, 43 could guide the bug on its nylon wings through the house and use its night vision to peer over anything that might indicate the woman's identity or location. But Gitte could trace the bug straight back to him, should its meanderings be discovered.

It was past midnight when 43 got back to Bureau headquarters and into his chair in the Operations Center. He had passed a few lights burning behind frosted office windows on his way through the corridors, but he was alone among the cubicles.

He set up the interface. The bug's movements were controlled through a glove of articulated con-

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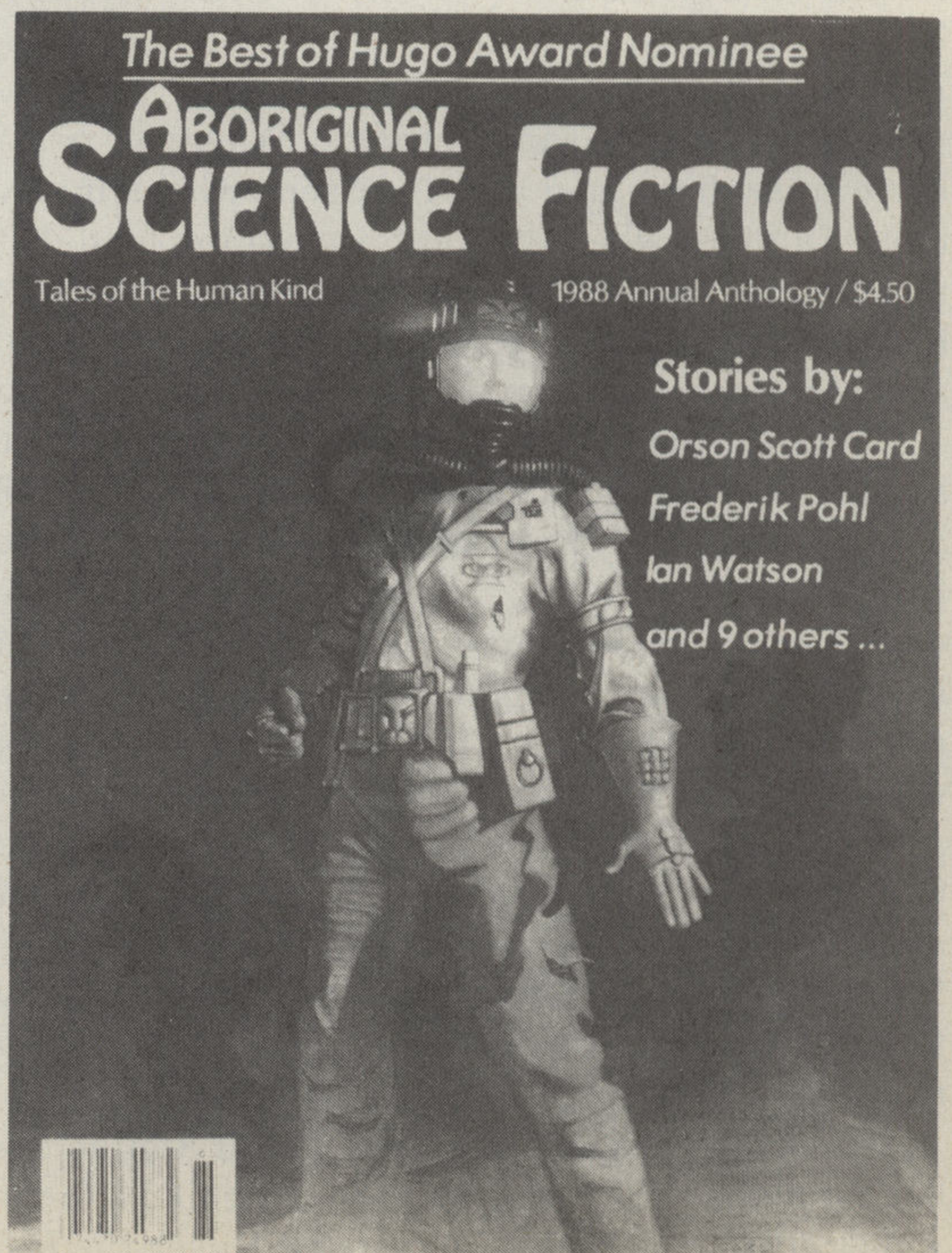
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trol rods that snapped over his hand. First he strapped the video unit across his eyes, a pair of rubberized goggles that filled his head with the broad stripes of a television test pattern. 43 toggled on the bug's pinprick camera eyes, and the hallway he had walked down less than an hour earlier shimmered before him again in a computer-embellished view of floor and walls.

It was like moving into the set of a black-and-white film — Night Vision conceded color as it extrapolated on the minimal light available — but 43 got his orientation from the masking tape boundary that ran beneath the bug like an interstate highway.

He piloted the bug down the hall. The house was quiet. No sign of Frances. A television played soundlessly in the living room. Otherwise, no movement whatsoever. He was counting on Gitte being asleep by now.

It was a long shot, but 43 hoped the man had been incautious enough to leave the file on Katrine X lying somewhere, unconcealed. All 43 needed was a single piece of empirical information on her, or just a hardcopy of the photo, and then within a matter of minutes he could have field agents tracking her down to remove her from public view and the possibility of scandal.

There was something on the kitchen table. 43 could see pages. Some kind of manuscript.

He tilted his hand upward and the bug climbed in altitude for an aerial shot. His fly-by over the table was slow enough for him to see the picture on the manuscript's front cover. Graphs and exponential equations. A magazine for bored housewives, *Dell's Big Book of Calculus Problems*.

He sank with disappointment. Where to next? Gitte must have had an office somewhere in the house, a place where he kept everything he didn't trust to the common eyes that might come inside the house. No doubt, then, it would be on the right hand side of the masking tape.

Banking right and sweeping down to the floor, the bug glided a real inch above the plains of white tile, a mountainous white Frigidaire drifting by in the periphery of 43's vision. He took the bug around a corner and down another hall. At the end, a closed door. He dipped the bug lower, almost grazing the carpet's forest of fibers, then sailed it through the slot between the bottom of the door and the floor.

On the other side was a bedroom. He could see a plateau of draped linen sheets and peg legs. Queen-sized bed. From this low angle, only the toes of one foot were visible on top. 43 decided to risk climbing for a better look at the room and its contents. Hopefully, H. L. or his wife would be sound asleep.

43's field of vision swooped beneath him as the bug made its ascent, the room turning like a ferris wheel until he stabilized a trajectory over the bed

and its occupant.

It was neither of the Gittes. It was a man, longer and leaner than either. He was not sleeping, though he didn't seem to be awake. A broad leather belt pinned him to the mattress. Wire garrotes kept him down at the ankles and wrists. Silver duct tape closed the bottom of his face and sealed the transparent plastic cup over his nostrils. 43 almost didn't recognize him.

Fleck. Chairman Richard Fleck.

The supply line of his nicotine delivery system had been pulled from its proper flask and diverted into a cannister sitting on the nightstand beside his head. 43 angled the bug so he could see the product name on the can. It was an aerosol furniture cleanser. Someone had been blowing furniture cleanser into the chairman's lungs.

43 pulled back.

Looked for a crack or hole or closet where he could dump the bug, be rid of it. But suddenly, while the room was rotating in front of his eyes, the interface squealed and cut back to the test pattern. The visuals were gone and he couldn't call them up again. Something had happened to the connection. A bad omen.

43 slowly unstrapped the goggles, then laid them on the desktop. It took a moment to adjust to his real environment. The building was quiet, and he alone in the dimly lit room. Still, he couldn't shake the feeling that something was different between when he first plugged in and now.

A blue glow played over his hands. Slowly, he turned in his chair and saw that the telemonitor on the next desk was angled toward him. Gitte's face was rippling within the screen's blue wash.

"I should have known you were in on it. Fleck was reluctant to say."

"You'll be arrested," 43 said. "The Chairman is solid in the Bureau."

"No one knows he's missing."

"I do."

"But who are you? By tomorrow morning, there won't ever have been a 43 in the Bureau's databanks."

"Is there a Katrine X?"

"We'll find one. Or make one." Gitte shrugged.

"The order to spoil the Committee's work didn't start with Fleck, you must realize that. It came from higher up."

"It doesn't matter."

"What if it came from the President himself? You thought of that? That maybe you're too much of a liability, even for the Republicans?"

"It doesn't matter what the President thinks of me. Whether he wants me dead or alive, active or incarcerated, makes no difference whatsoever. All that matters to me is that he stays in power."

"Goosestepping and *sieg heils*, they're all that's

missing, Gitte. The problem with you is, you were born in the wrong country, wrong decade."

"The problem with me is, I get results."

43 stood and began moving toward the door. He remembered the lights he had seen when he came into the building and wondered how many people were still around. He bumped into a chair, caught his balance, continued through the rat maze of cubicles.

The doors wouldn't open for his palm-print. He looked over his shoulder. Still alone, but now more of the monitors had crackled to life. Gitte's face came up a dozen times, repeated in rows and columns of hazy blue static.

"Are you a religious man, 43?"

He wiped his palm before trying the lock again.

"Maybe you should be."

The doors opened grudgingly. 43 walked into the corridor. He refused to draw attention to himself by moving faster than a brisk walk. The overhead lights were shut off, and only the bare minimal emergency EXIT directions glimmered along the hallway. He headed for the elevator at the far end.

Before he'd gotten halfway there, the floor indicator above the elevator doors showed a car was already on its way down. 43 wasn't surprised that it stopped on his level. The doors hissed open. Two

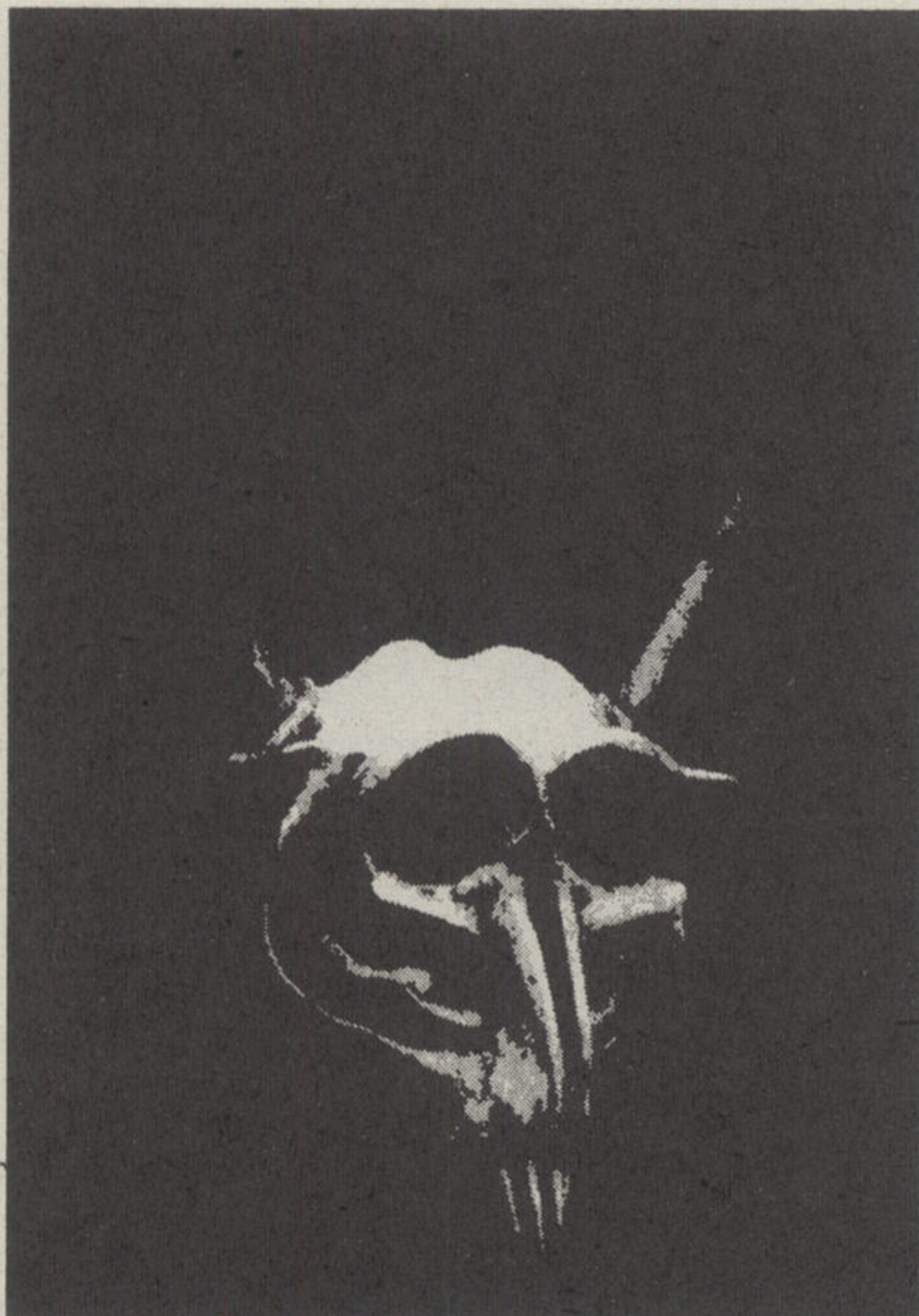
figures were on board, but they kept to opposite sides of the compartment so that only one arm of each was visible. Seeing the rigidity of their stances was all he needed to know they were Plumbers.

43 turned casually, began walking in the other direction. Did he hear them disembark from the elevator? Careful footsteps over the carpet?

He wiped his palms again, and was about to look back when two more appeared from the opposite direction.

Plumbers were not supposed to seek strong individual identities. They were supposed to favor the anonymity of blandness, a tool that would help them blur into crowds of the unknowing masses. The pair who stood at the opposite end of the hall, however, had their hair slicked back with Brylcreem, and bar mustaches thick over their lips, and eyes as small and focused as the ones that had stared out at him from the proliferation of monitors in the Operations Center. Even the measured grins that slid across their faces as they turned from their posts toward him seemed to 43 less like standard demeanor than some kind of tribute, or maybe a declaration of new allegiance.

He felt his heart tripping, but sensed the emotion was too late coming to be of any use. □



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# In Love with Multi-Woman

By Brooks Peck

Art by Allison Fiona Hershey

In a way, Jeff had never before seen the woman who kissed him on the subway as it slid into Van Ness station. She was tall and lanky with thick, brown hair and a freckle-splashed face. "See you tonight?" she asked.

"You bet."

She took her briefcase and stepped off the train. One stop later at Woodley Park the woman boarded again, wearing jeans instead of a suit, with a camera bag slung over her shoulder.

"Hi there!" she exclaimed when she saw him, and leaned in for a kiss.

"Hi, Melissa." Jeff listened to the silence expand around them as the other passengers peeked over their newspapers.

"Guess what I did yesterday," she said. "It was terrific. *Washingtonian* wanted an aerial shot of this house on the Eastern Shore, so they chartered a helicopter to go over and I got to hang out of the door on straps to shoot it."

"Gee, wish I had been there," Jeff said. "Sounds great."

Melissa laughed. "It *was*. You wouldn't have been scared."

"I'd have been sick." As he spoke Jeff overheard a whispered exchange between a middle-aged couple across the aisle with Smithsonian shopping bags between their knees.

"But I already got a picture of her in Butte."

"We'll get one of her here."

"No. She'll notice."

The subway pulled into the Farragut North station. Melissa squeezed Jeff's hand. "See you tonight?"

"You bet."

Jeff took the far exit of his station so he could walk a few extra blocks in the unseasonably warm March morning. As he waited at the curb, Melissa skidded up on a mountain bike.

"Hey!" She held out a poster tube. "You lost this."

"Oh, hell. Thanks. Where did you find it?"

"You left it on the platform in the other station. I found it and gave it to me and biked it over."

"Well, thanks a lot, really. Like your hair."

"Haven't you seen this?" It was a spiky crew cut.

"No. It's cool."

The walkie-talkie on Melissa's belt squawked. "Gotta pedal," she said, kissing him. "See you tonight?"

"You bet."

A month before, Jeff had stood uncomfortably alone by the window in a hotel suite staring at his drink. A client-stroking party — attendance mandatory. People in suits packed around the open bar. Jeff had wormed up to the counter and shouted, "Just a tonic." But back in his corner he discovered he was

holding a cup full of warm gin. No wonder the bartender had leered. What had he heard, *Gin, no tonic?* Barf.

"What's wrong?"

Jeff looked up at a tall woman. She wore a baggy black shirt pulled down to her thighs, black leggings, and black boots.

"Oh — nothing." He smiled. "I just can't drink this."

The woman took the cup and sniffed. "Woof," she said. Jeff stared at the way her hair dropped over her shoulder in one bulging braid, thick as his arm. "Why did you get it?"

"I didn't. It was a mistake."

"Ah." She put the drink on the window sill. "Are you in the marketing department?"

*Time to go home*, Jeff thought. "No, I draw."

"Oh, wow. I'm with the National Archives. Did you work on our Baldwin locomotive exhibit?"

Jeff nodded. "I did the animated sequence of the engine."

"Really? That was great work. I especially liked the detail on the block release valves."

"The which?"

"Did you use ray-tracing for that?"

"Um, no, that was all hand-done. Ray tracing is for more three-dimensional images."

The woman turned away for a moment, and Jeff thought he'd bored her, but then she looked right into his eyes and said, "Yeah. You're right."

Jeff grinned. "I am? Thanks for letting me know."

She laughed. "I'm sorry. I always do that to people."

"No, that's fine."

"Do you want another tonic?"

"No thanks. Hey, how did you know —"

"I just figured. You know — deduction."

"Deduction? Based on what?"

The woman shrugged. "On everything." She looked around the room. Jeff wondered if she was teasing him and decided he didn't care. She was fun.

"My name's Jeff Oberley," he said. The woman smiled, but didn't reply. Was something wrong? Jeff forged ahead. "What's your name?"

The woman looked startled, then took his hand and grinned, showing teeth. "Melissa," she said earnestly. "I'm Melissa."

"Hi, Melissa."

"Hi, Jeff. Are you hungry?"

"Yes indeed."

"Want to get some ice cream? I know a great place in Rehobeth."

"Rehobeth, *Delaware*?"

"Yeah, it's a couple of hours' drive. Is that okay?"

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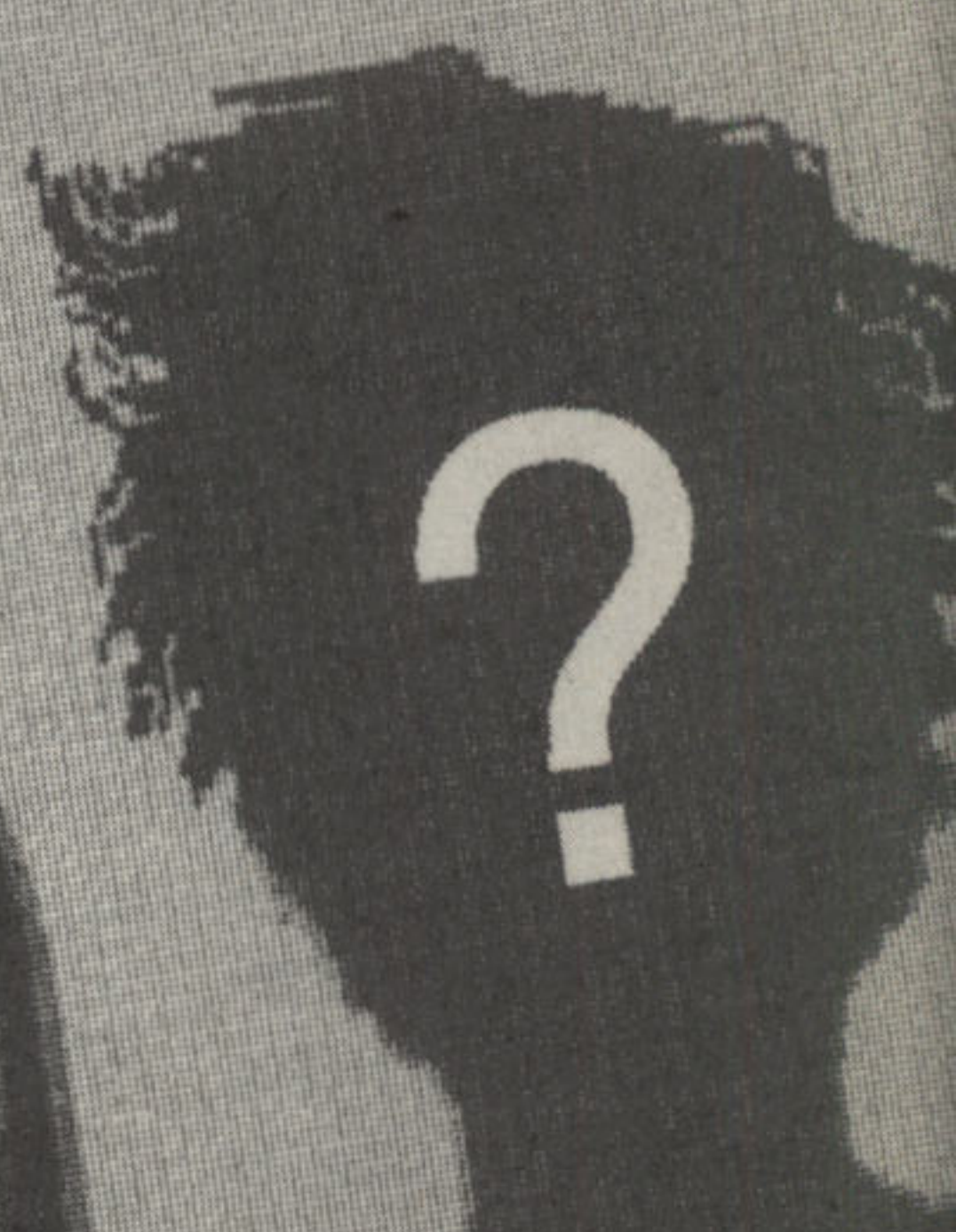


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"Sure," Jeff said. "I didn't bring my car, though."  
"That's okay, I'll drive. I've got an extra helmet."

The next afternoon Jeff balanced pasta salad on a plastic fork, creeping it up to his mouth.

"Jeff!"

He looked up. Noodles fell down. Melissa stood by his table. "Want some company?" she asked.

"Sure."

She dropped a carpet bag over the low railing that enclosed the outdoor café, and then just stepped over. Today she wore a gauzy cotton skirt and tan shoes, almost like slippers.

"Were you tired this morning?" Jeff asked. They had talked at the ice cream parlor until it closed, and she had dropped him off at one a.m.

Melissa laughed as if he had made a joke. "No, not really. I'm sorry I got you home so late. I can't believe how much I talked."

"That's okay. I liked it."

She shrugged. "I don't know what got into me. So how's your project going?"

"Good," Jeff said. "Great. Actually I hate it. Which means we'll be finished soon. How are things at Archives?"

"Archives?" Melissa looked away for a moment. "It's a bit busy now," she said finally.

Something was wrong. Jeff looked at the lines on her face. They were similar, but changed. She had a new scar on her temple shaped like a diamond — new, but old. "I saw the animation festival last night," Melissa said. "Have you seen it? There's a great piece about a crippled bird ...."

Jeff stared at his styrofoam plate. Melissa. *Melissa* for God's sake and why the hell hadn't he recognized her?

Melissa stopped in mid-sentence. She touched his hand and he tried not to flinch but did, and she let go. Jeff looked up.

"I'm sorry," Melissa said, sitting back.

He shook his head. "I'm so embarrassed."

"No. I thought you knew. I mean, you were so sweet treating me like I was just ... a person. That's never happened to me before. I thought you were kidding or maybe making fun of me but I didn't care. I liked it."

"I did think you were a person — I mean you *are*." He felt like he was speaking with a quadriplegic, trying to be casual and feeling obvious. "Are you the same Melissa I met last night?"

"Of course I am."

"No, I mean, you look a little different so I meant are you the same one or — *shit*."

"No. Yes." She winked. "I wouldn't forget you, though. Would you like to take a walk?"

Jeff suddenly noticed the glances they were drawing from other lunchers in the café. He tried to remember if Melissa had been in the news lately. He always saw her in the supermarket tabloids, but that didn't count. They left the cafe and walked toward Dupont Circle.

Jeff realized he was avoiding looking at her. "How many — how many of you are there in Washington?"

"Thirty-eight, counting the suburbs."

"That's a lot, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Important town, though."

"All of you have different jobs?"

"Jeff, there is no all of us. There's just me." She gestured, looking for words. "Have you ever wanted to sleep in one day while your double went to work for you? That's what it's like. Or actually I think it's like having extra hands. There's only one me but I can do lots of things at once. Hey, you want to know what this body does?"

"What?"

"I letter comics. You know, the editor gives me the drawings and what the characters are supposed to say, and I fill it in. I do *Marauding Moose* now but next month I'm going to start the *Lampwicks*."

They walked around the circle twice, and Jeff began to relax. Melissa didn't seem alien — plenty of regular humans talked a lot. Abruptly she stopped and said, "Oh, hell, I've got to go. A Fedex just arrived for me."

"How do you know?"

She tapped her head. "Connections."

"Oh, yeah," he said, awed.

"I'd like to see you again, if that's okay."

"Sure. Can I call you?"

"Dial zero in the evenings, ask for operator seventeen."

"Okay. Hey, listen —" He leaned closer to her and dropped his voice. "You can tell me. Are you really —" he glanced side to side — "the result of alien sperm delivered by comets mingling with the flesh of the buried dead?"

Melissa stared at him for a second, then pushed him back, making him stumble. "Get out," she said. "You're whacked."

There." Melissa held up a paper place mat crayoned with Hiragana characters. "What'd you do?" Jeff's drawings imitated kindergarten stick people and houses. He turned his crayon on its side and shaded random swirls. They sat in silence.

"What is it?" Melissa finally asked.

Jeff looked at her. He didn't want to be acting this way, but he couldn't shake it off. "Yesterday you said you love me," he said.

"Yes, Jeff. I do."

"What do you mean when you say 'I'?"

She sighed and looked around. "Everyone always wants to know what I mean by that. Why you, too?"

"Well, it's especially important to me. You're everywhere seeing many people all the time, and I don't know what that means to me. Because I'm only me." *I'm normal*, he wanted to say.

"You're my boyfriend. First one I've ever had. The only one."

"But how can that be enough?"

"Most people only have one, if you haven't noticed."

A nervous force pushed up in Jeff's stomach. Might as well say everything, he decided. "You could be going out with a hundred guys, and I'd never know it."

"Fuck. Is that what you think?"

"I don't know. If you were a lot of people, then it would be okay, of course, but you say you're just you." He couldn't make his thoughts line up. "You do so much. How can I be enough?" Suddenly the crayon, which he had been squeezing in his fingers, snapped, and a piece hit a waiter in the back of the head. Melissa

laughed into her napkin.

"Okay," she said. "How can I expect you to understand what I don't understand myself? But listen, really, it's just you."

"Why?"

"I like you. Didn't I just say?" She waved her hands next to her head. "You're fun. What's to know?"

He shook his head. "Out of all the people in the world you pick a mediocre graphic artist who works at one of the most unknown —"

"Do you want a job? I'll get you a job! I can get you a job in San Francisco, Minneapolis, Hong Kong, you name it." Melissa sat back with her arms crossed.

"No, that's not it."

"What is it, then? Wake up hating yourself this morning?"

"Mel, I'm just trying to figure out what I am to you. Overall, time with me is just a very tiny part of your life, right?" She hesitated, then nodded. "So how do you sort through it all and see who I really am?"

Melissa opened her mouth, closed it. He had never seen her unable to speak. Before he could say anything she took his hand. "I really care about you," she said. "I —"

Melissa stood up and walked to the door. At the same time, she came around his chair on the other side and sat down. "Hi," she said. Jeff smelled shampoo and perfume. "I was pretty tired, so I went home. But I'm wide awake."

Three telegrams sat on Jeff's drawing table the next day, from Paris, Moscow, and Shanghai. JEFF HAVE A GREAT DAY they shouted. Barry, the receptionist, brought in four more, and Jeff laughed at his expression. He tacked them up in a row.

As the morning progressed, the telegrams kept arriving. Barry began to scowl when the rate passed ten an hour. Jeff slipped out for an early lunch.

When he returned, the telegrams had spilled off his chair onto the floor. He pawed through the pile, sighing, and picked up the phone. He could hear the anticipation in Melissa's voice, eager for his reaction.

"Melissa, please ... stop. It's too much."

"Well, I wanted you to know you're a big part of my life."

He swallowed. "Listen, I need some time to think about things. Maybe some time apart."

"Oh. Why — No, forget it. I guess you should call me." The phone rattled and smacked silent.

"Crap." Jeff pulled the trash can next to his chair.

As the week slid by, Jeff had enormous amounts of free time. Evenings were open now, the phone quiet. Sweeping, Jeff discovered his photo albums under his bed. Flipping through them drew out memories of friends and past exploits, making him smile. He wondered why he hadn't shown them to Melissa. He even surprised himself when he sat on his stoop one evening sketching the opposite street.

When he walked home on Friday, everyone looked strange and cross. Jeff searched for familiar faces, hoping to see some old friend he could talk to. Maybe he would call someone up.

A block from his house, three men in coveralls clustered around a wheeled machine the size of a small

car. Segmented tubes like foot-wide worms crawled from it into an open manhole. The machine rattled so loudly the workers had to shout, and it puffed grey smoke across the sidewalk. A woman in a dark blue suit and hard hat stepped out of a white car behind the machine. She glanced at Jeff, paused, then walked over.

Melissa looked at him, and he couldn't read her face. She said, "Are you the same Jeff I met before?" Jeff laughed and had an impulse to hug her. "Sorry about this," she continued, scratching under her helmet. "I knew you'd be coming past but didn't know I had to swing by until just now, otherwise I would have warned you."

"That's okay. I was wondering when I'd see you. Glad it finally happened. I didn't know you did this."

"Yeah, well, I have a lot of hobbies." She looked at the work crew.

"I was going to call you."

"Oh, yes?" She seemed distant. Jeff wanted to talk quickly before she went away. The machine rattled even louder, rocking on its tires.

"Yeah. I think I was feeling left out of things." She raised her eyebrows. "Don't take it wrong, but I think you don't know me too well as a person. It's like you were so happy to have a boyfriend that you missed really getting to know me." He caught her eye and smiled. "I didn't notice because I was having such a good time. And I had to fight for a chance to say anything."

## You can help

The Second Renaissance Foundation is a non-profit Massachusetts organization [(501)(c)(3) application pending] that has taken over the operation of *Aboriginal Science Fiction* in order to keep the magazine coming to you on a regular basis. While we and the staff of the magazine will be putting forth our best efforts, there may be a bump or two along the way. We ask that you please bear with us.

We are all doing this on a part-time basis, which means working evenings and weekends, and no one is being paid a salary. We may make some changes in the future, but we hope to keep the unique character of the magazine alive. We hope to restore the full-color art as soon as the economy allows.

The biggest problem we face is that it currently costs more to produce the magazine than it earns. The magazine needs to raise funds. So if you can afford a tax-deductible contribution (be it \$10, \$25, \$50, or more), and are willing to help, you can send your donation to:

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"Hey!" She jabbed him on the arm. "Listen, let me talk to my guys for a minute, see what the problem is, then I'll walk you home. We'll talk."

"Great."

Jeff smiled at how well the evening was turning out. He heard two cracking sounds and then a crunch — a deep, heavy crash wiping out everything else. Something battered him in slow motion. His feet were yanked away; blue sky split by a black plume of smoke flashed past. Then he crashed onto his arms and legs, the wind blown out of his gut. His head rang.

Finally the fuzz of colors dissipated, and Jeff made out pebbles and asphalt close to his face. He was on his elbows and knees and felt warm water on his hand. He looked over. Rushing, *pouring* around his hand fast like a faucet, the water was blood. Some rational part of his mind told him not to move while at the same time his stomach clenched, but he didn't understand either of these things. He followed the red stream with his gaze.

A puzzling image presented itself. Melissa lay on the ground wearing a wide-brimmed hat. It was dark gray. Her eyes were closed as if she were carefully listening to the fire blazing from the carcass of the street machine. Its pieces lay scattered around her. Jeff blinked and the picture refocused. He saw the crushed helmet and hair. He saw the slab of metal, impossibly, in her head. Jeff gagged, the smell of burning tires cutting down his nose and throat. He crawled forward, urging himself not to. Coming closer, he caught a flash of the black wounds, the peeled flesh, and he closed his eyes. Now he wanted to turn around, but he didn't want to crawl in the street with his eyes closed. But he couldn't open them. He heard shouts and lifted a hand to show that he was all right. The fire hissed. Sirens grew from faint to loud, overlapping each other. Someone grasped his shoulder saying, "Sir? Sir?" They helped him to a police car where he sat in the back with his feet out the door, a clear oxygen mask strapped around his face. One of his pant legs was soaked in blood from the knee down. A fire truck blocked his view of Melissa. The paramedics looked him over, feeling his scalp and bandaging the cuts on his hands. Jeff answered their questions in monotone. He felt like a blanket had been draped over his head, dark and heavy. When he headed home most of the emergency vehicles were gone, and a firefighter hosed down the street.

**I**n his apartment Jeff heard the can opener wind through its cycle and drop the can on the counter. When he shut the door, Melissa ran into the living room.

"I didn't know whether to come here or meet you but I figured it was such a mess — oh, God." She looked at his pants, mouth slightly open. "Is that you? Or me?"

"Not me."

Melissa turned away, then spoke over her shoulder. "Why don't you change."

Jeff dropped his clothes in the tub and put on jeans and a sweatshirt. When he came out, Melissa was putting bowls of soup on the coffee table. They sat on the couch, and Melissa slid her arms around him, her face pressing his neck.

"I'm okay," Jeff said.

"I'm okay too."

"Yeah." He hugged her, smelled her hair. "Yeah. You are okay, aren't you?" He sat up. "God, what was I thinking? Of course. You're fine. You're fine." He hugged her again, but she pushed away.

"What do you mean?"

Jeff grinned. "You're still alive. You're here. Okay." The relief felt like cool air washing over his skin after stepping out of a sauna. He took Melissa's hand.

"Yes," Melissa said, "but what about *her*?" She pointed out the window. "She's dead."

"But, Melissa, isn't it all right? I just realized, that was only a small part of you. Like a few cells, right? It's okay."

"No, it's *not* okay. Someone's dead." Her mouth contorted and her eyes flicked around, as if she were thinking a hundred things at once. It looked like crude, freakish animation. It scared him. "I felt it, you know. I remember every second of it. And now — now part of me is gone. A big part. You don't know what it's like, I can feel this hole in my memories — in my mind — and it's horrible. Shit, there are things I should be doing, but I thought if I came over you could help me."

"Well, sure, I want to help you —"

"But you think I'm a Goddamn *alien*!" She bashed her fist on his knee.

"I thought I was being understanding. Why are you so mad?"

"I can't believe it. Talk about *me* not treating *you* like an individual. I'm not a thing. I'm a person, but everybody refuses to believe that."

"But you're not making sense. I *am* treating you like an individual. If you're just one person, then it can't be that serious if one body dies. You have lots."

"Oh, no," she murmured. "No one has ever understood. Even my parents. *Especially* my parents. You would think, out of thousands of people, that one of them would have been cool about it, right? They were so scared — acted like I would sprout horns and kill them. I'm talking about the ones that didn't leave me at the nearest temple or orphanage after discovering, you know, that I wasn't their child. And I don't know" — she swallowed — "I mean, I was born really healthy but sometimes didn't live very long, you know what I mean?" She glared at Jeff and he nodded, barely moving. "I grew up *alone* in institutions or broken families — and I was the one that broke them! I never asked to be like this. It's not special or cool, it's lonely, and all I have to make me happy is work. I've never had a real friend before you. Not even a friend." She stood up and grabbed her jacket. "I'm sorry I was wrong about you. I'm not used to being wrong."

*Say something*, Jeff told himself, but no words came.

Melissa left, shutting the door firmly.

Jeff threw the bloody clothes in a paper bag, rolled down the top, and dropped it in a trash can outside. The soup was cold. He poured one bowl down the sink and heated the other in the microwave.

Dumb. He felt dumb and angry and kept trying to get back in touch with the panic and horror of earlier, the *right* feelings, but they were gone. The microwave dinged, but Jeff, leaning against the refrigerator, didn't open his eyes. He had only thought of himself,



he realized, flushing. And now he'd lost something — *someone* very important. How important he had only just begun to see.

"Melissa!" A week and a day later Jeff stood in a dirt plot cut from the pavement for a scrawny oak. "*Meliss-uh!*"

The door of a brick townhouse opened. Jeff held up a softball and mitt. "It's a great day," he said. "Do you want to get out a bit?"

Melissa sat on the stoop. "Nice sweats," she said at last.

"You like them?" Jeff turned in a circle, threw the ball up, caught it. He took one step onto the pavement. "What do you say? Have you played catch much?"

"No." She slapped her palms on her thighs and jumped up. "Wait a few minutes while I change, and then I can meet us at the park with a glove."

"Wait," he said. "Are you going to buy one?" Melissa nodded. "I've got one for you in the car."

"Really? Thanks!"

"Okay. Let's go."

They drove into Rock Creek Park to a large field. Kites, frisbees, and soccer balls took most of the space, but they found an edge where they could throw, close together.

"This is revenge on your parents, isn't it?" said Melissa.

"What?"

"They didn't let you do stuff like this after they found out you could draw, right?"

"Actually I pitched for the all-state team in high

school."

"Really? Damn."

They threw, and Jeff felt content simply to be doing something, not worrying or wondering. Just when he started to feel some strain in his shoulder, Melissa kept the ball and walked over. "You got me," she said. "I'm surprised."

"I was kind of surprised you came. I wasn't very nice."

She shook her head. "There's all sorts of things I want to tell you about. I know you think I'm really smart because I do a lot, but I've learned so *much* about myself in the past week."

"Great. Cool."

"Yeah. So ...." They walked along the creek. "I know I was being inconsistent. I just can't think of a part of me that has a career and an apartment and goes grocery shopping as a few cells, you know? But I know I always insist that I'm just one person. I do that because I *feel* like one person. I realized that on the intellectual side my world is quite divided up. All the jobs I have ... I — we are separate in that aspect even though the information gets shared. But when it comes to *emotion*, that's out of my control. I'm just like everyone else when it comes to feelings. So if I have any focus — if there's any one *me*, it's the me that feels." She faced him. "*We* work, but I get sad. Does this make sense?"

Nothing in her voice or eyes asked for validation. She just wanted to know if he understood. "Yes," Jeff said, "it really does."

"I'm sorry I can't tell you if I'm definitely one or many. But I like the way I am, and for the first time I'm really getting to know myself. It's *great*."

Jeff clamped his mitt in his underarm, pulled out his hand, and took Melissa's. "I would still like to get to know you," he said. "Although I understand maybe now you don't need me." His stomach fluttered.

She squeezed his hand. "You don't just feel sorry for me?"

"No! I like you."

"I like you. And I need other people to help me keep on figuring these things out. Even though no one really knows what I am, the consensus among the scientists is that I'm some kind of observer, and that in the same way all of my minds share information, it's also being shared with someone else *out there*. On another planet or something. So I'm exploring Earth for them. I don't know if they will like me exploring myself, too, but hell, that's tough. I'm human. And who knows, maybe I *am* supposed to learn about me. You would think they would want me to, because that gives them an inside view of what humans are like."

"That's true."

"And Jeff, I also want to get to know you for who you are. I know I'm different — no one else in the world has ever wanted to get close. You *are* very special."

Jeff turned to face her. "Jeff Oberley," he said, shaking her hand.

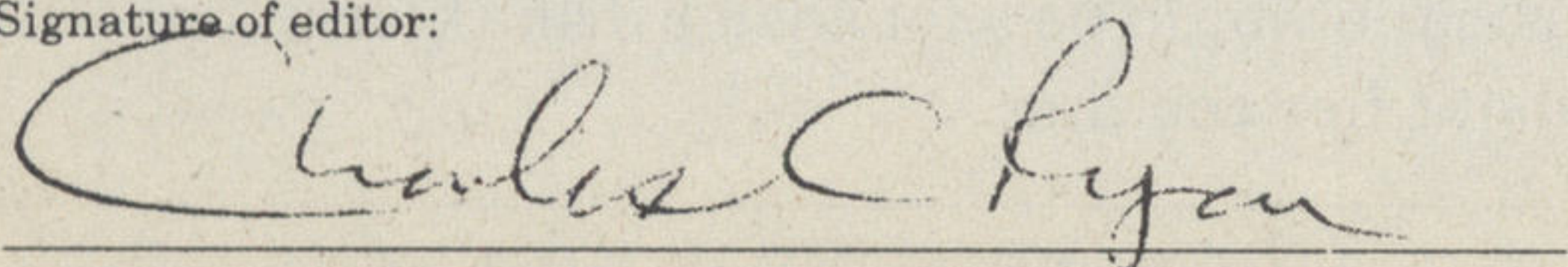
She smiled. "Melissa. I'm Melissa." □

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# When in Bzook ...

By Alan Kirk

Art by Larry Blamire

Xib planted his two outer legs firmly in front of his pear-shaped body and leaned back on his middle leg, the three limbs forming a stable triangle. His translucent, warty skin was sparsely covered with drooping lesser tentacles, which made him look somewhat like a gelatinous hooked rug. His two greater tentacles, which emerged from his pointed head on either side of his wide mouth, slowly waved and twisted in the random sequences that indicated the condition of deep thought in those enormous beings who inhabited the planet Bzook, a low-G world where everything was too big to be true, and where time was marked by the births and deaths of stars. As further evidence of momentous cogitation, Xib's myriad odor receivers and emitters were tightly closed, and the overall coloring of his skin was a light blue. His one huge eye occasionally blinked, turning from side to side on its muscular stalk.

The roving eye was focusing on the activities in a small cage that was identical to the other small enclosures which every Bzookian family kept in a cozy kitchen corner. At this same moment, all over Bzook, yummy little bipeds were scampering around in the fragrant Donkawood chips that lined the bottoms of their cages.

Xib could watch the bipeds for hours, if Chooka would allow it — but she usually didn't. There were times when Xib actually had grown fond of certain of the bipeds, picking a favorite and slipping it bits of vegetable scraps. But when Chooka found out, whichever biped had attracted Xib's interest would be served at the next evening meal. Chooka felt it was childish for a grown Bzookian to be so obsessed with his food. She had tried to get Xib to see a psychiatrist about his stunted development, but so far without success.

Xib opened his orifice of bittersweet resignation and emitted a puff of odor. He knew he'd better get out of the kitchen and go experience media or engage in some other benign activity, because Chooka would be home at any moment. His three legs tripodulated him away from the bipeds' cage like a one-legged man on crutches.

In the living room, he plopped down in front of the media terminal and jacked into the planetary grid, losing himself in the sights, sounds, and smells of a popular sense opera, soon dozing off.

The chief thrust of Bzookian culture was the

discovery and manufacture of odors. There was nothing a Bzookian enjoyed more than a delicate, pleasurable scent. And it was in search of such euphoric indulgences that their spaceships roamed the galaxies.

The bipeds had been introduced to the Bzookian menu by one such intergalactic exploratory ship. When first observed, the bipeds had seemed to possess a crude social organization. But when it was discovered that they killed each other, the Bzookians had classified them as sub-intelligent life forms. Also, their life spans were short, merely one revolution of Bzook around its giant blue sun, give or take a few kaks. It was absurd to believe that true intelligence could develop in such a violent, flash-in-the-pan species.

The bipeds originally had been sold as pets, given to children for birthdays, etc. With prompting, they would scurry around and leap from one piece of furniture to another, much to the amusement of both children and adults. Then it was discovered that the bipeds could be nutritious as well as entertaining, and over the years they had become one of the staple foods on Bzook, prized for their tender flesh and tasty, nutritious, calcium endoskeletons.

Xib was jarred awake by the sound of kitchen utensils being angrily clanged against each other. Chooka was home. Xib quietly unhooked himself from the still blaring media connection, but he didn't leap up and rush into the kitchen to greet his beloved. Because he had been developing a full-fledged aversion to eating the crunchy little bipeds, he wasn't looking forward to dinner. He yawned, three rows of razor-sharp teeth gleaming from his wide mouth.

Xib had come to the conclusion, contrary to all reason, that the bipeds were a lot smarter than the Bzookian extraterrestrial scientists had proclaimed them to be. Chooka thought this was just another of Xib's wild daydreams, and wished he'd hurry up and grow out of it.

Xib's greater and lesser tentacles paired up like twiddling thumbs and rubbed each other nervously. Announcing to Chooka his self-appointed dietary crusade would be a lot easier if she weren't so touchy about her cooking.

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Blamina '92

An orifice opened behind and below Xib's eyestalk and emitted a puff of resolve. His greater and lesser tentacles ceased twiddling, disengaged themselves from each other, and angled back along the sides of his body as if he were facing into a strong wind. Thus composed, he tripodulated toward the kitchen.

Chooka held a chittering biped in one of her greater tentacles and was just about to toss it into the boiling water when Xib entered the steamy kitchen.

"Stop!" Xib yelled, his two greater tentacles sticking straight up in alarm and his orifices emitting anticipation-of-irreversible-loss odors.

Chooka puffed a smell of annoyance from an orifice along the side of her body, then her skin turned green-purple, a Bzookian frown. The biped, a male, struggled in her tentacle, emitting that curious discharge of liquid from the corners of its eyes.

Xib kept tight control of his voice, trying to sound reasonable. "Chooka, please put him back in the cage. I'd rather not eat meat tonight. Why don't you make that great fungus salad of yours?"

But Chooka was not the type of wishy-washy Bzookian female to let herself be swayed by an overly sentimental mate. She relaxed her tentacle and the tiny male biped fell into the pot, its shriek cut short as it plunged into the boiling water.

Xib disgorged a puff of sorrow from an orifice between his eyestalk and his mouth.

Chooka shaded orange, angry. "How am I supposed to prepare a decent meal with you moping around the kitchen acting stupid?" Her lesser tentacles shot out horizontally from her body and froze, making her look like a giant sea urchin made of annoyed, orange gelatin. She stomped her middle foot to emphasize her sour mood and turned to stir the pot.

Obviously, this was not a good time for Xib to make his announcement.

**X**ib sulked during dinner, pushing his half of the biped around on the plate with one of his mid-body lesser tentacles.

"You haven't touched your dinner," scolded Chooka as she nibbled on a biped leg, her three rows of teeth stripping the meat cleanly from the little bones.

"Not hungry," Xib replied curtly.

Chooka stopped eating and irately tossed the biped leg down onto her plate. "So this is the kind of thanks I get! Slaving over a hot cooking unit to prepare a nourishing meal, and then you won't eat a bite!" An orifice near Chooka's posterior emitted a puff of short-fused irritation.

Xib glanced over at the cage of bipeds. They had gathered together in a circle and seemed to be chanting something — something that sounded

melancholy despite their high, squeaky voices. It looked as if they might be having a religious service.

The noises the bipeds made at each other were just gibberish, of course. But sometimes Xib thought he detected certain patterns, calls and responses, indications of mood. And each of the little animals seemed to have a unique personality. But, Xib knew, that was not so unusual, even among lower life forms.

Deciding he might as well forge ahead with his announcement, Xib extended his middle leg behind him, leaned back from the table and folded his greater tentacles above his upper lip. "Chooka, honey, I've been thinking ..."

Chooka's eyestalk went rigid and the vertical lids of her one large eye narrowed. "Yes," she said slowly.

"Well, it's the bipeds," said Xib, searching for the right words while unconsciously unfolding his greater tentacles and letting them droop submissively.

Chooka shaded to fluorescent orange, not in the mood for any of Xib's pussyfooting.

Xib emitted a puff of odor that indicated his discomfort, then decided just to go ahead and blurt it out. "I'm not going to eat bipeds anymore. They're too intelligent to be food." There, he had said it, a bit self-righteously, but at least he had taken a stand.

Chooka vented a belch of rapidly-growing annoyance from an orifice somewhere near her undercarriage. "Oh, don't be absurd, Xib. Of course the stupid bipeds are not intelligent — they kill each other!"

Xib got control of his drooping greater tentacles and resolutely refolded them above his lip.

In reaction to his body language, Chooka's big eye shot Xib a look that would peel paint, and her many orifices flapped and sputtered, contrapuntally issuing a variety of smells and sounds, the Bzookian equivalent of deprecating laughter.

Xib looked away, his gaze falling on the cage of bipeds. Their ceremony had ceased and they were lined up at the edge of the cage, watching Xib and Chooka intently. One of them, a female, was looking directly at Xib and gesturing frenetically, making angry high-pitched chittering noises.

Chooka's laughter stopped abruptly, and her warty skin rapidly shaded into the purple end of the spectrum. She got a glazed look in her giant eyeball, and its lids started blinking rapidly. Her carpet of lesser tentacles began undulating like a field of Tildagrass in the wind. "Damn!" she said woozily, puffing vexation odors at Xib as if her condition were his fault. "It's time to mate."

Xib forgot all about the bipeds.

**A**fter the deed had been done, Xib and Chooka leaned back against the pillows on their sleeping platform, snuggling. Xib crushed an after-

mating odor pouch with one of his greater tentacles, then lazily inhaled its mild intoxicant and passed it to Chooka, who wafted it around from orifice to orifice, dreamily partaking of the exotic bouquet. Ah, wedded bliss ...

But Chooka suddenly turned green-purple and emitted a quarrelsome odor, then said, "What's that noise?"

Xib widened the apertures of his auditory orifices, and he heard it too. It was coming from the kitchen, a series of smooth, tightly organized sounds — not at all like the chittering of the bipeds.

"Well," Chooka said irritably, "go see what it is!"

Xib levered himself off the sleeping platform and tripodulated into the kitchen. Surprisingly, the noise was coming from bipeds' cage. Xib approached slowly, so as not to frighten them, and was amazed by the scene that greeted him: five of the bipeds, two males and three females, were sitting in a semicircle drawing the most beautiful sounds from little stringed instruments they apparently had crafted from Donkawood chips. The remaining bipeds were squatting on their haunches, observing the perfor-

mance in silent rapture.

Xib, too, was captivated by the mathematical beauty of the aural textures. He stretched open his auditory orifices even wider and soon fell completely under the spell of what he had no way of knowing was Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Quintet in C Major*.

Chooka tripodulated up behind Xib and she too widened her auditory orifices to obtain full appreciation of the euphonious phenomena.

The performance terminated. The bipeds who had been observing it brought their tiny paws rapidly together, making little smacking sounds that seemed to indicate approval. Xib and Chooka each broke wind, long and loud, the Bzookian equivalent of applause, which startled the hell out of the bipeds and sent them all scrambling for the little piles of Donkawood chips under which they slept.

Chooka's one eye opened wide, and she emitted numerous tiny puffs of apology-for-delayed-realization odors. "I'll never eat meat again," she said resolutely.

Xib emitted a fragrant puff of smiles. □



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# The Legend in Pursuit

By Dan Persons

Art by Jon Foster

The problem was that alcohol had no effect on him. He could drink gallons of the stuff, and aside from the accumulation of liquid (also not a problem, except image-wise — a couple of days of retained fluid tended to make him look bloated and off his form), there was no blurring of vision, no slurring of speech, no pleasant numbness or distortion of senses. Sometimes — this time — he resented it immensely.

Still, after decades spent observing human behavior at its highest pinnacle and its lowest ebb, he had the patterns down. Faking it with conviction was almost as good as being it — form become flesh. So: order a double, hoist it in one gulp, feel the warmth that didn't really touch his insides and couldn't possibly spread upward to wrap his consciousness in layers of soft wool. Then raise a hand and, in a voice carefully furred, croak, "One more."

The bartender, a stranger — although less so now — looked carefully at him and said, "You sure?"

"I can handle it." Which was no lie.

"You got somebody to drive you home?"

"I'm flying."

"Oh. When's your flight?"

"What?"

"You don't want to miss your flight, do you?"

He realized what he'd said then, and couldn't resist laughing. "My flight takes off whenever I goddamn want it to."

The bartender's glance glazed. "Oh," he replied. Then, sarcastically, "Private jet." But poured the double anyway.

Glass in fist, up to lips, liquid tossed down in one gulp. Then hand-and-glass SLAM on the counter. Mouth clenched, eyes squinted shut: the exact replication of the man having had one-too-many, now having yet another.

He could fake the oblivion, but it was a lie. He remembered all: how he had arrived here, at this neon-laced nightmare located in one of the less reputable suburbs of his home city, how he'd seated himself in its dimness, one more anonymous face amidst a scattering of sullen and not altogether wholesome patrons. He could also remember the why of his coming.

When he opened his eyes, the bartender was still before him, watching. Not sympathetically — just watching.

He knew human behavior. This was as good a

time as any to open up. "She left."

"Uh-huhn."

"Can't believe it. She left!"

"It's a pisser, all right."

"Why would she do that?"

The bartender shrugged. "Don't know the bitch, meself."

Insult — and any human worth his skin would feel the sudden, upward flare of anger. Hands clutching at the bar's rim, he canted forward towards the offender. "She's not a bitch!"

"Hey, of course not," the bartender replied, taking a step back.

"Not a bitch! You don't even know her."

"Like I said," and tipped the bottle to pour a mollifying refill. "Here. On me."

"Thanks." And he drank, letting the downward flow of liquid simulate a plummet to the deepest of depressions. He sunk back into his seat, breathed in the fumes of ancient beer and stale alcohol — odors that seemed to permeate the very foundations of the building. "Goddammit, what'd I do? What the hell'd I do?" And his head tilted forward, rested on the bar.

Voice off to the side: "What's with him?"

Bartender: "Lady left him."

"Oh, man. Hey. Hey yo!"

He roused, turned to his right. Guy in business suit, nice material, nice tie, a little fleshy. Guy said, "Got dumped, huh?"

Past words, now. Disconsolate nod.

"This one was special, huh?"

Stupid question. He let a bit of resentment bleed into the next nod.

The stranger leaned towards him. "They're all special, pard."

And up the bell-curve again and out of his seat and over to the man, grasping him by those fine, crisp lapels, raising him (pretending, pretending: pretending the man's weight was an effort to heft, pretending so hard that the sweat began to break across his brow), feeling the exhilarating purity of his anger. "This one was! This one ..."

The man was flailing, face turning sheet-white. "H-hey, buddy. Wha ...?"

From the corner of his eye, he saw several patrons rise, hesitate as they considered whether to spring to the guy's rescue. Ironic, that — that he was now



the one to be rescued from — but it mattered little. Quickly, he nudged himself back into depression — down, down. He released the mortal, dropped him neatly back into his seat. From behind, he could feel, rather than see, the room's tension ease, the spectators resume their stations. He stood over the fool, looking down with eyes that flared anger. "You want to know how special? You want to know? I would've done *anything* for her. *Anything!*"

The man trembled. In the pale silence of the bar, the poor bastard's pulse reverberated off walls, loud enough to deafen (if you could hear it at all). The man gulped air. "S-sure she was."

"I *did* do anything, everything. I'd snap my fingers... boom, a diamond big as your eye, as your fist... for her!"

"Damn generous of you."

"Generous?! You wanna know generous? I saved her life! She kept stepping into shit and I'd pull her out."

The man shook his head. "Kid, you spoiled her."

"That's what *she* told *me*! You know what she said?"

"No."

"You won't believe it."

"Try me."

"She said ... she said ..." and the memory of her saying it came back then, and this time it wasn't the miming of inebriation that compelled him to press a fist to his temple, to try to stem the memory of her face, her voice as she said those words. "She said I was going to *kill* her. That saving her and killing her were the same thing."

The man puffed out breath. "That's crap."

"She said she'd come to rely too much on me, that I'd pulled her ass so many times from the flames that she couldn't trust her own judgment anymore."

"Lib shit."

"She said she was fine before, was building a career for herself, getting out and getting things done for herself, and then I had to come and ball the whole thing up."

He was aware that his slur was fading, that gradually the mask of drunkenness was falling from his face. He was past caring now, so rapt was he with the memory of her as she walked away, walked out of his life, leaving only the bitterness of her words to hang in space like paper ash.

"You know," the man was saying as he wrapped one hand around his glass, "they hit thirty-five, thirty-six, and they go all weird. Think like all the shit you did was their due, like they don't owe you nothing, like you *think* they owe you something."

Stepping away from the man, he sank back into his seat. "She's sixty-two."

The man stopped with the glass poised halfway between the bar and his lips. "What?"

"You heard me."

He took a second to toss back his drink, then laughed, quick. "Hell, boy, you can get younger ass than that."

"What makes you think I'd want it?"

"Why wouldn't you? Young guy like you, good looking — you could get anyone you want."

Inexplicably, a shutter of lead closed in upon rational thought. He turned to the barkeep, rapped on the counter. "Another."

"I think you've had enough, buddy."

What did it matter? It was alcohol — it didn't mean anything, it didn't *do* anything. But it was what he wanted, and it was what was being denied him by this worm, this civilian, this ... this *Earthling*.

He slipped then, let himself show — the true self, the one he had long ago sworn never to reveal while the glasses were on, while he answered to the pair of monosyllables that formed his *nom-de-Terre*. "Another," he said, through the force of his true identity.

For a second the bartender, hit with the full magnitude of this other being, could not move. Then, jaw slightly slack, he poured the double.

And up to lips. And liquid tossed down. He made a show of the drink's effects — gulp, shudder, groan — then turned to his companion. "So ... I'm young. How young do you think I am?"

The man could see it coming. His grin was sheepish, his laugh tentative. "Hey, I didn't mean anything by it."

Glass still clutched in his hand, he stood and approached the man. "No, I'm interested. How old do you think I am?"

The man shrugged. "I dunno. Twenty-five?" Beads of sweat began to form on his brow, his heart was racing again. "Twenty-eight?"

"Sixty-one. Too."

"Yeah?" the man replied, though he obviously didn't believe it. "Naw. What'd you have, plastic surgery?"

He laughed at that, and raised his fist, fingers clenching tight around the glass. "Surgery? The finest surgical instruments couldn't cut me. A fuckin' *chain saw* couldn't cut me."

The man was nodding, but his eyes remained fixed on the fist, the fist where the fingers had continued to tighten, the fist where the glass had finally splintered, a few crystalline-bright shards dropping from the prison of his not-quite-flesh. The man flinched at the brittle snap; conversation had again stopped in the room.

He knew he was the center of attention. It didn't matter. He was intent now on this final burst of anger, on relishing every last second of it. "What you see is what I am, what I've always been, what I always will be. *She* is a part of me — and she's run away. Why'd it happen?"



"Dunno."

He was only half-aware of what his fingers were doing, how he had set up a series of micro-vibrations within his grip, pulverizing the remaining glass into a fine, silicate powder. With a viciousness he'd never thought himself capable of, he leaned forward. "What should I do?"

The man's grin was pained. "Dunno. Go after her?"

He smiled. "That sounds good. That sounds right." And let the vibrations continue until friction had heated the powder to its melting point, until droplets of molten glass oozed from between his fingers and fell to sizzle on the lacquered wood floor.

From behind, the hoarse voice of the bartender. "Hey ..."

He turned, opened his hand, and, reaching over and plucking from its shelf the towel that he'd seen through the bar-top, wiped away the remaining residue as if it were the honest sweat of a day's work. The fabric sizzled, charred.

Reaching into his jacket, he pulled a wallet, dropped two twenties onto the bar. "Sorry about the mess," he said in his full-sober voice. "Fun though. I'll have to come back." Before anyone could respond, he wheeled, strode to, and through, the door.

In the parking lot, in the darkness of the late evening, he lingered by the building's brickface wall, calmly listened through it to the hushed conversations within. "What the hell was that?" the man in the suit said.

"That," replied the barkeep, "was one angry bastard."

He laughed softly, to himself, and thought back to his past, to the child who knew himself born of loving parents, parents who had made the ultimate sacrifice. He thought back to how he had been forced then to cope with the stigma of the illegitimate. He wondered why he'd been so reluctant to live up to the reputation.

"Yo."

He turned.

Two men stood before him, stood in shadows. Men? No, more like kids — grown-up kids, grown hard and desperate from the streets. Cold, barely human kids, with the taut, wiry bodies needed for survival, and more energy than they knew what to do with. He could see the effort it took them to stand in one place. One of them nodded. "Sorry about your woman."

He stared, remembered them from one of the bar's dimmer corners. "Go away."

"Couldn't help hearing," the other said. "Fuckin' shame you killin' yourself and the cunt walks." They both laughed.

"I said go away."

The first one took a step forward. "Imagine you  
The Legend in Pursuit

just throwing all those diamonds at her and flying her around in that jet of yours and shit. And she fucking walks. What a waste of money."

The other followed. "Probably doesn't matter, though. You probably got a lot."

The first nodded. "You got money? How much you got?"

He was sure these children had practiced long hours on their next move, had worked carefully to develop to a finely-honed ballet the sequence in which they plunged hands into pockets and emerged with brandished switchblades. He was sure they thought themselves lightning-fast. They had no idea of fast.

He swallowed, whispered, "That's a mistake."

"You're a mistake, you don't give us the wallet," the first said.

"Come and get it."

"Pull it out, faggot."

He smiled at that, reached slowly into his jacket, retrieved the billfold from its pocket. Carefully, he brought it forward, held it at arm's length.

"Fucker knows how to keep his ass," the second one said.

The first reached out.

They had no idea of fast. But they would learn. In the next split-second: wallet snatched away and slipped back into pocket. Then replaced by a grip of iron, one that circled the man-child's wrist, one that drew down, then up and *twist* until cartilage at the shoulder gave and bone twisted obscenely within its sheath of flesh. The boy's face turned white, the scream was deafening — deafening even if you didn't have ears sensitive enough to hear the magnetic death-flux of the universe.

He grabbed the kid by the front of his shirt, dragged him forward, flung him against the brickface, watched him fall, unconscious. With the other hand he seized the child's partner by the throat, turned, pinned him to the wall.

He grinned at the boy, and ever so gradually tightened his grip, pleasing himself with the bluish cast the flesh took on. "You have my sympathy," he

## This is a double issue

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whispered. "It's not really your fault — you're a victim of your environment. If only we could have given you the support, the love and security you needed as a child, all this would have been avoided. Society is as much the criminal here." His fingers tightened, and he looked tenderly at the creature struggling within his grasp, listened as the heartbeat fluttered like a caged bird seeking freedom, smiled as the lifeforce flared in desperation, then slowly dwindled.

There was a crack of wood against faux brick, close to his ear. And a voice: "Hey!"

With his victim still pinned, he turned, saw the bartender standing not one meter from him, legs spread and hand knotted around a well-worn and pointedly stained baseball bat. "Get the fuck off them," the man said.

"They're muggers. They've probably been rolling drunks here every night."

"They're fucking muggers, we let the police handle it. You drop 'em, or I'll fucking split your skull."

Impossible, of course. Amusing, in its way. But there was something else here, something about the man's courage, something about the guts it took to come out here, confront this stranger, take what he had to know was a genuine risk just to stop the violence. To his surprise, he found something touched that he had thought dying, if not already dead. Livers may rot in the man's hell-hole of a bar, souls may be drained into the bottom of a glass. But, goddammit, there'd be no bloodshed in *his* parking lot, except for whatever he had to spill himself. In this little kingdom, this small patch of land, this man ruled. If it meant his life, he would see that order was maintained.

Order. He had once understood the meaning of the word, had once thought he was its sole embodiment, its lone champion. That had gone out of him. Funny that he'd never considered what would happen once it left. The evidence was now all around him: carnage, chaos.

He released his grip, allowed the boy to drop by his companion's side. Turning to the bartender, he said, "Call the police. Tell them they tried to mug me."

"You tell them. You ain't going nowhere till they get here."

"Just call an ambulance, then. I can't stay." He turned, began to walk off.

He felt the man follow, felt a hand grasp at his sleeve and try to pull him around. "You're fucking gonna ...."

He spun, but only to fix the barkeep once more with the presence behind the mask, the one millions admired, but no one knew. He could feel the human shudder under the intensity of the glance. He could feel the sleeve released.

With a gentleness that stemmed as much from

exhaustion as from pity, he said, "I'm sorry. I have to go." And walked away and out onto the road. The bartender did not follow.

He walked a few blocks, until he was out of sight and alone, able now to look at himself, at what he'd become. He had no doubt how the parking lot had happened, what had caused him, after decades of adherence to the principles he had sworn to uphold, to throw it all away in one, vicious second. He'd had his balance once, had found it in her. Without the humanity she represented, without its guidance — as necessary as that of a lighthouse on a fogged-in shore — he was lost. The fury once more welled up. Two kids lay dying in a suburban parking lot — that had been her doing. He could not let it happen again.

And, before the impulse had made itself known, the ground dropped away, and he felt the rush of acceleration and the thinning of air, felt them as blessings. He was still in his civvies, not that it mattered — no one had seen his launch, and for what he had to do, the pants, tie, jacket of the common, white-collar worker would be of more use than the flash of his official attire.

He was up 500 kilometers now, beyond the atmospheric envelope of the planet that had become his home, looking down at the continent into which she had fled. To cover it would take time — days, maybe — but determination was on his side. And need. And maybe even a bit of fear.

He couldn't dwell on that. He had to concentrate on the search. There weren't that many great metropolitan dailies in the United States anymore, certainly not many that would satisfy her ambition. He would be careful, and thorough, and sooner or later she would be found.

What he would say to her then, he didn't know. But then, he'd always favored action over dialogue. □

## Moving?

If you plan to move between now and March, please notify us. It takes several weeks for a change of address to get entered into the database, and you wouldn't want to miss your next issue of *Aboriginal Science Fiction*.

The U.S. Postal Service usually won't forward copies, and destroys them, charging us 35 cents for the privilege. That's why we cannot replace lost copies without an additional fee, if you move and don't tell us.

Dear Editor,

"June 14, 1959" by Wendy Wheeler is a great story! Didn't care for "Ping Enclosed"; in fact, I found it repugnant ... but that's what makes a horse race.

"Godlet" by Laurel Winter is also in a class by itself. Nice to see poetry in SF getting away from the BEMs.

Sincerely,  
Larry Cuthbert  
Victoria, BC Canada

Dear Aborigines,

Regardless of the publishing schedule, you are still publishing the best magazine in the field. Keep up the good work.

Yours,  
James C. Douglass  
Boulder City, NV

Dear Sir,

I hope you will not find the request ludicrous, but would you consider science fiction material from Great Britain? (Yes. — Ed.)

I have yet to find a science fiction journal in Great Britain that can rival the imagination displayed in *Aboriginal Science Fiction*. I find the quality of *Interzone*, for example, to be disappointing.

Yours sincerely,  
J.M. Stockdale  
Great Britain

Dear Charlie,

Ernie and I just checked a wonderful book out from our local library, titled *Aboriginality*, edited by Jennifer Isaacs, University of Queensland Press, 1989. The book is a collection of modern Aboriginal art, and is full of paintings that would not be out of place in *Aboriginal SF*. The term "aboriginality" refers to the way the artists express themselves as both individuals and as Aboriginal people.

I like to think that I have aboriginality, too, in my own way; a quality I share with Patricia Anthony, Robert Metzger, Ray Vukcevik, Larry Blamire, et al. We share the same Dream Time.

Anyway, check out the book. It's the aboriginal thing to do.

Sincerely yours,  
Emily Devenport  
Phoenix, AZ

Dear Charles,

It's always illuminating to get feedback on a rejected story. Your check-

list comments on "Azure" were genuinely helpful.

Thank you very much.  
Sincerely,  
Margaret S. Hunt  
Jamaica, NY

Dear Charles,

Thank you, thank you, thank you!!! I understand that editors are inundated by submissions and can't offer critiques on every submission, but I think it's wonderful that you have a check-off form that gives at least some basic suggestions. It's very frustrating to get back rejections with nothing more than "Your story does not suit the present needs of our magazine." All one gathers is there is nothing wrong except the story line. Thank you for your suggestions.

I must confess that editors are far more demanding in their reading than non-editors (including some published authors who loved my work). You have given me some good criticism and I can't thank you enough. Keep up the good work on your magazine. I thoroughly enjoy my subscription. My only complaint would be that you need to publish more issues per year.

Sincerely,  
Keri Epperson  
Portland, OR

Dear Mr. Ryan:

I just wanted to thank you for your kind attention to "Stream of Consciousness." It was nice to receive a personalized critique instead of a standard rejection letter. Your suggestions are very much on target and will definitely improve the next draft as well as future submissions.

No wonder *Aboriginal SF* is the best. I really appreciate your insights and the fact that you took the time to offer a few words of encouragement.

Sincerely,  
Scott M. Azmus  
Kenosha, WI

***Aboriginal SF* welcomes letters to the editor. Please feel free to offer praise, criticism, or helpful suggestions on how we can make it an even better magazine.**

(Considering the thousands of manuscripts editors receive each year, it is understandable that few take time for any form of individual response. A check-off form is not perfect, but at least it gives a writer a general idea of why a particular story is not accepted. And it doesn't take that much longer to process than a "doesn't suit our needs" form. An editor's job is to find new writers, and you can only do that if you encourage the ones who show promise, and at least offer some guideposts to those who are making an honest effort. — Ed.)

Dear Aborigines,

I would like to take this opportunity to add my comments and praise to that which you have been receiving. First of all, I'm not going to complain about the loss of the color illustrations; I thought they were (to be quite honest) a bit distracting. I know there is another school of thought, but I subscribe to *Aboriginal* for the fiction. The illustrations are a nice complement, but not eagerly awaited. I am a bit curious as to how you select your covers, though — it puzzles me that there is never a story to accompany the illustration.

Onward to the praise. I thought the most recent issue, No. 35-36 (do you really think both numbers are necessary?), was particularly good. "The Secret Identity Diet" by Richard K. Lyon was outstanding, as was "The Curse." But there was not a single story in this issue which I did not enjoy. I am eagerly hoping that this trend continues. Usually, there are one or two which are not to my taste. Not bad, just not what I would choose. I realize that you must cater to a wide variety of tastes, so if a story does not excite me I simply move on to the next one. No harm done. The columns in this issue were up to their usual high standards — keep up the good work.

Eagerly awaiting No. 37-38,  
Elka Tovah Menkes  
Brookline, MA

(Back when all of the interior illustrations were full-color, we chose the best illustration to go on the cover of the magazine. We can no longer do that. Instead, we look for already existing art at convention art shows. We prefer previously unpublished art, but also consider art used for book covers. — Ed.) □

# Two by Two

## By Chet Gottfried

### Art by Larry Blamire

Lew Barrington put down the maple syrup container and picked up the June issue of *Roxie's Guide to Habitable Planets*. He rolled the magazine into a tight wad, and one expert swipe knocked a solitary fly out of existence. As an afterthought, Lew checked the dead bug for a bracelet, but it had none. *I didn't think so*, he thought, *but you can never tell these days*. He knew that all transmigrations had a utilitarian purpose. Picking up the bug, he crushed its body between his fingers and heard the snap of metal parts. "A Tru-fly," he muttered to himself.

Carrying a tea kettle, his wife Gladys came in from the backyard. "The coffee will be a few more minutes. Damn ants. They're all over the back step."

He became very pale. "What did you do?"

"I took care of the ants. You know how much I hate bugs. We've been cruising God knows where the past eight months, and I decided enough is enough."

"It takes time to find a terralike planet," Lew began very calmly. "I thought we had that perfectly clear before we decided to leave."

"Maybe. But I'm tired of it. What's the point of FTL if no one knows where we're going?"

"Traveling faster than light speed is simply a technique," explained Lew. "If we waited for all the information to come back to us, other colonists would get there first, and the planet would be a smog-ridden trap before we ever set foot on it. But that's beside the point — why did you kill those ants?"

Gladys smoothed her dark hair. "Coffee will be ready in a couple of more minutes. You're always better in the morning once you've had your coffee."

"We have a Tru-home, Tru-lawn, Tru-sky, Tru-trees, and Tru-shopping — thanks to MBF. You know the rules they set down. You didn't kill ants — you just wiped out one of our future agricultural districts. Or," he added as an afterthought, "a bunch of lawyers."

"Freeloaders," said Gladys, "if you ask me. They couldn't afford the full fare, so they let themselves be turned into the smallest bit of waste they could find — and be classified as living. I hate bugs. If they let themselves be transmigrated into cats or rabbits, I could understand. But ants? No thank you."

"Look, if everyone we needed to start a successful colony could afford full fare, maybe it would be different. Probably not, we'd still need transmigration to carry them all. But let's say everyone could pay. We'd need a ship a million times the size of this one and be lucky to break out of solar orbit instead of travel FTL. It's impractical to have everyone travel as humans — surely you can see that?"

"I hate bugs."

"What would we do if everybody wanted to be a cat? What would we do with a couple of thousand cats on board? That would be useless. We have Mi-ants to tend

to the soil and waste disposal, Mi-cows to supply milk, Mi-bees to make honey, Mi-chickens to lay —"

"Coffee is ready," announced Gladys.

Lew ignored her, got up, went out, and knelt down near the back step. With dismay he looked at the hundreds of scalded ant bodies. A high-pitched voice called to him.

"You'll regret this." A couple of meters away, an ant was yelling into a megaphone. "We've already notified MBF. We expect summary judgment."

"She didn't mean it," cried Lew. "She didn't know what she was doing — she thought she was back on Earth."

"It's out of our hands," commented the ant. "But you'll get what you deserve. You think just because we didn't pay full fare that we lost our rights? Ha! Just you wait. Your time is coming!"

Returning to the kitchen, Lew told Gladys, "They've started litigation and asked for summary judgment. No doubt everything you've done has been recorded on the ship's monitors."

"Good coffee," said Gladys.

The terminal next to the toaster began to clatter. Unsteadily, Lew took out the message. "It's from MBF," he said, scanning the print. "We're to report to deck level 26 — the Transmigration Studio. Our account has been debited for 25 million credits — which wipes us out — we can't afford the rental on our Tru-home anymore."

"What about a Tru-cottage?" asked Gladys.

"Not even that. We can't even afford a Tru-tree," he said bitterly. "We'll have to sell just about everything we have to afford the transmigration. And we've only got twenty-four hours to take care of it."

"Can we appeal?"

"It says here that appeals aren't heard until after we're transmigrated." Lew looked at Gladys. "That's to eliminate any emotional factors." He shook his head admiringly. "That MBF — they think of everything."

Lew and Gladys Barrington entered the outer rooms of the Transmigration Studio, which had on display samples of every type of animal that one could be transmigrated into, from the smallest flea to the greatest whale. Each miniature rotated, by itself, in the middle of a force field so that the total aspect of each animal could be seen.

They were enthusiastically greeted by a salesman, Scott Molloy, who eagerly shook their hands. After introductions were completed, he said, "A wise choice, a very wise choice. It may have been your only one, but you'll find that from now on, options are opening up in front of you."



"I'm not sure I want to stay an animal the rest of my life," complained Gladys.

"Now, Gladys," said Lew, "it's only until we reach a suitable planet."

"Absolutely right!" beamed Scott. "It's only for a relatively brief period, but we want you to be as comfortable as possible. After we land, your former body will be recovered via our gene database. Well, there are a few exceptions, but nothing important." He shoved a booklet at Lew. "That's our exception list that MBF insists you have."

"It's longer than I thought," said Lew.

Scott shrugged. "The booklet lists every single exception, and 99.9 percent have absolutely no relevance to most people."

"It says here that no surgical implants or cosmetic surgery will survive the transmigration ... What about my stomach? You mean to tell me that I'm going to lose my Tru-stomach? How can I enjoy curries — after I've come back? I'll be full of ulcers!"

"Don't worry about a thing!" Scott waved his arms and grinned at them. "You won't need any implants while you're a newly transmigrated individual. And when you're ready to return, why, if you simply pay a little insurance premium, we can reconstruct every single Tru-aspect of you."

"But that means paying for them twice!"

Scott half-closed his eyes as in a moment of ecstasy. "You're simply paying a little insurance premium — not the entire cost of a new operation. You'll also be receiving our latest Tru-implants. Uh huh! That got your attention. Now, be honest, when was the last time you had your stomach upgraded?"

Both Barringtons looked a little sheepish.

Waving a finger at them, Scott said, "You've been neglecting yourselves, haven't you? You've been enjoying the cruise and not taking proper care."

"I keep telling Lew that he should have his stomach looked after," said Gladys. "That's why his energy level is so low."

"I do the best I can," muttered Lew.

"And you'll do better from now on," promised the salesman.

"Can we become any of the animals on display here?" asked Gladys. "I never really liked tiny animals, but the whales always impressed me. Remember, Lew, the whales swimming in the Tru-ocean on level 17? They looked gorgeous!"

"There's not that much room in the Tru-ocean. I thought they were manufactured: Tru-whales."

"Not at all," said Scott, "those are indeed Mi-whales. But I couldn't agree with you more, Mrs. Barrington; they look splendid — a beautiful job of transmigration. Their fare even cost more than the regular full fare."

"Oh," said Lew in a small voice.

"Yes," said Scott. "I do believe that some people are far happier in their transmigrated state than they ever were in their own bodies. As a matter of fact, we do have a few options if you wish to stay in your new body."

"I want to be a whale," said Gladys.

Scott came to Lew's rescue. "While the idea is certainly a good one, Mrs. Barrington, there is the space factor. If you had come to us before the ship was launched, I'd say *no problem*. As it is, all the space for

whales and greater animals has been fully utilized — so that isn't a real choice for you. Considering the overall circumstances, we have to limit your transmigration to fill an existing niche. Wait one moment and I'll tell you what we have available." The salesman went to a terminal, punched several buttons, and came back with a printout. "There seem to be a number of vacancies in our ant farm."

"I hate bugs," said Gladys. "There must be something else. What about a wolf?" Her green eyes glinted ferociously.

"You may not have that particular option, Mrs. Barrington," said Scott. "It depends on availability."

"I won't be an ant. There must be something else," said Gladys.

"I'll check." He returned to the terminal and began punching an assortment of buttons. Several minutes later he returned. "There are a number of vacancies throughout the ship, but if you don't want to be an ant —"

"I don't," interrupted Gladys.

"Well, I won't be able to keep the two of you together. You'll be different species and will have to live apart."

Both Barringtons seemed to respond well to that idea, and they got into a serious discussion of animal availability. It was settled that Gladys would become a chicken and Lew a hummingbird. "I always wanted to fly," explained Lew.

"I never noticed," said Gladys under her breath. "Honestly, I find it hard to believe that all the predator slots would be closed."

"That's humans for you," said Scott, who had loosened his collar and tie. "But we have to keep our prey-predator ratio at a decent level — or havoc would break out. There's another factor I should mention: Since we happen to be traveling faster than light, you'll notice a slight temporal distortion when you transmigrate."

"What kind of distortion?" asked Lew.

"You know, relativity. You might assume your new form out of sequence with the old. No real problem. Just a couple of hours of overlap or underlap: sort of talking to yourself. Now, we have a few forms to go through before proceeding to the Transmigration Labs."

"I want to know how it's done," said Gladys.

"What does it matter," whispered Lew. "We don't exactly have any say in the matter."

"I want to know how it's done," persisted Gladys. "We're paying for it."

Scott said, "Nothing could be easier than to show how the Transmigration Lab works." He pressed a button on a nearby console, the room darkened, and a 3D image formed in front of them, complete with sound, smell, and taste. Chairs popped up behind them, and the Barringtons sat down to watch the display. They saw the dynamic transmigration of a young woman with shining blond hair and a green-wrap dress: into a flea, then a cow, a tiger, and finally back into her own form. Once returned to human form, she was naked and blushed and held her hands in front of herself till someone threw her dress back. "There you are!" said Scott triumphantly, "Transmigration and return. And just a little pointer that, while you can't

take anything with you, it can — for a small premium — be returned to you.”

“That’s just a simulation,” said Gladys.

The salesman nodded. “And done at MBF’s expense. A really first-class job of demonstrating transmigration.”

“But that doesn’t mean it *really* happens that way,” said Gladys.

“It does,” reassured Scott, “it really does. But you are very perceptive, Mrs. Barrington, for there is another aspect. You have to believe — you have to have confidence in your new form.”

“And if I don’t?”

Scott held out his hands in front of him in a gesture of supplication. “I wouldn’t advise wanting to be anything other than your selected animal.”

“I’d like to talk to someone who’s been transmigrated,” said Lew. “I would really like some firsthand information.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Barrington,” said Scott, “but you know the rules. No transmigrated animal is allowed to return to human form until after we touch down. Otherwise, the result could be chaos, everyone wanting to change back and forth. Husbands wanting to talk to wives, parents to children, and so on. It’s really impossible. We don’t have the facilities for it.” Noting the disappointment on Lew’s face, he added, “But we do have another exhibit. If you remember, while we’re not allowed to transmigrate to and from the human state, our laws say nothing about nonhumans. Come on out, Mabel!” he yelled. A cute golden spaniel ran out and rubbed against Scott. “There’s a good girl! Now, watch this!” Another 3D display opened in front of them. They saw Mabel transform from a dog into a salamander and then back into a dog. As soon as the lighting returned to normal, Scott said, “And here’s Mabel — as fit as she ever was!” He tossed a dog biscuit high up, and Mabel caught it in midair.

Lew patted Mabel’s head. “She seems fine.”

“She’s terrific,” declared Scott.

“Well,” began Lew, “how much ...”

“For the transmigration, nothing at all. Done aboard ship, we assume all expenses,” said Scott, whose eyes were sparkling with glory, “but there are a few options you might want to buy.”

“We know about the insurance premiums,” said Lew.

“Very good. I’m glad you want them. However, what I was thinking about was communication. We supply your own ID bracelet, so you won’t be mistaken for an alternative Tru-animal, but there is the problem of communication. No chicken — or hummingbird — has the means of speech. And without being able to talk to the folk around you, you might find that it’s a very lonely existence indeed. Now I did hear rumors that we might find a suitable planet in the very next system — only six weeks away — but how many times have we heard that story before? Let’s face it, the search could go on for another six months!”

Gladys groaned and Lew looked ill.

“Do you want,” said Scott, “to spend all that time without saying a single, solitary word to another living soul?”

Gladys looked at Lew very meaningfully. “You don’t

expect me to go around and simply cluck?”

“I wouldn’t think so!” declared Scott. “If you purchase our cephalic-enhanced speech amplifier, you can keep *any* conversation going. We also have the latest in miniature vidplayers,” began the salesman, but the Barringtons had run out of money. For that matter, Lew couldn’t even afford his own speech amplifier. Lew thought, “Well, she always did all the talking for the two of us.” Scott had them sign and thumbprint various forms and directed them to the Lab.

After they were gone, Scott collapsed in one of the chairs. Looking at Mabel, he said, “Want a drink?”

“Yeah,” said Mabel. “Tough sale.”

Scott became bitter. “I’m wasted on them. They *had* to transmigrate. Remember me back on Earth? I could turn anyone into anything.”

Mabel snorted.

“Listen, you,” Scott said irritably to the dog, “if you hadn’t killed that Mi-moth, we’d still have a normal life.”

“Shut up and pour some gin into my bowl,” answered Mabel.

**T**he wings felt fantastic! And did they hum! Lew Barrington regained consciousness in midflight and felt like breaking into song. If only he had known — he’d’ve transmigrated at the very start of the flight. To know such freedom! Then he realized that something was wrong. He flew down to a window pane and caught sight of his reflection. *Those bastards!* he thought. *There’s going to be hell to pay! I’m not a hummingbird — I’m a bee.*

He flew in a loose circle to try to determine where he was. A house looked familiar and he went to it. *I need a terminal I can use to communicate, and if that’s my house, I have all these macros.* Lew had no illusions about the coming difficulty of using a keyboard in his present state. *I’ll have to dive bomb to have enough strength. At least the macros should cut down on the number of times I have to hit the keys.* He thought bitterly, *Gladys would have to be the one with the speech amplifier. Well, I hope she’s stuck too.*

It was indeed his house. What’s more, he saw Gladys by the front door. *Is it possible — she didn’t transmigrate? No, law is law, and what MBF says goes. I must have slid a little into the past. But what is she doing? Killing those ants, I expect.* He flew closer and saw that the ants were alive and gathering. *If only I could warn the ants,* he thought despondently, *but there’s no way I can communicate with anyone!* He watched Gladys disappear into the house. *Maybe there’s a way ... a couple of good stings — she’ll forget about the ants, we wouldn’t have to be transmigrated, and I wouldn’t be an idiot bee.* He took a short cut through an open window and buzzed around the kitchen. Seeing his former self reading *Roxie’s Guide*, Lew thought, *Whoa! Better not get too close to that one — I’ve accounted for one bug already. Talk about predators!* He gained some altitude while positioning himself for a quick attack on Gladys.

Lew didn’t notice the web until he was quite stuck. *What the — ! Gladys’s always sweeping up and down the kitchen. What’s a web doing here?* He looked frantically around and saw the large, dark spider that was

approaching him very rapidly. Lew waved his ID bracelet in front of the spider's face, but it made no difference. In his panic he didn't notice the green eyes or hear the spider say, "I hate bugs."  
□

# The 1991 & 1992 Boomerang Awards

Oops. Because of the complexities of changing the magazine's operations over to the Second Renaissance Foundation, Inc. and a few other complications, we never got around to asking you, our readers, to pick the winners for the annual Boomerang Award last year. Well, we're making up for it now. This time you get to pick the winners for both years. The categories are 1. Best Story for the year; 2. Best Illustration for the year; and 3. Best Poetry for the year. To help refresh your memories, we have listed all of the eligible entrants below. **All nominations must be mailed by February 15, 1993**, so don't wait. Please send your choices (one in each category for each year) to: *Aboriginal Boomerang Award*, P.O. Box 2449, Woburn, MA 01888.

## Jan.-Feb. 1991

"The Holes Where Children Lie" by Patricia Anthony, art by Lori Deitrick

"Hell on Earth" by John Moore, art by David Deitrick

"Singing the Mountain to the Stars" by Howard V. Hendrix, art by Wendy Snow-Lang

"The Transformative Ethic" by Doug Franklin, art by David Cherry

"The Honeymoon" by Sandra Paradise, art by Sandra Paradise

"Appliancé" by Bruce Bethke, art by Robert Pasternak

Cover art for "The Transformative Ethic" by David Cherry

## March-April 1991

"For Fear of Little Men" by Terry McGarry, art by Patricia Davis

"To Whom Shall I Tell My Sorrow" by Joyce K. Jensen, art by Pat Morrissey

"Only a Game" by Rick Shelley, art by Lori Deitrick

"MisFITS" by Mike Byers, art by Bob Eggleton

"Nectar" by Ann K. Schwader, art by Cortney Skinner

"The Cubist and the Madman" by Robert A. Metzger, art by Larry Blamire

Cover art for "Nectar" by Cortney Skinner

## May-June 1991

"The Cry of a Seagull" by Lois Tilton, art by Carol Heyer

"Like a Flithiss from its Shell" by Gary W. Mitchell and M. Alan Clarkson, art by Larry Blamire

"Amerikano Hiaika" by Wil McCarthy, art by David Cherry

"Darkness Upon the Face of the Deep" by Harlan Ellison, art by Paul Chadwick

"Targets" by Lawrence Watt-Evans, art by Bob Eggleton

"The Matter of Beaupré" by Frederik Pohl, art by Robert Pasternak

## Poetry

"Reason is a Reptile" by William John Watkins

Cover art for "Darkness Upon the Face of the Deep" by Paul Chadwick

## July-August 1991

All art by Mark Harrison

"Infinite Assassin" by Greg Egan

"The Nilakantha Scream" by Eric Brown

"Ten Days That Shook the World" by Kim Newman and Eugene Byrne

"Song of Bullfrogs, Cry of Geese" by Nicola Griffith

"Hamelin, Nebraska" by Garry Kilworth

"Gene Wars" by Paul J. McAuley

Cover art: *Dreamlands* by Mark Harrison

## Sept.-Dec. 1991

"A Thief in Heaven" by Gail Regier, art by Larry Blamire

"Neighborhood Watch" by Ann K. Schwader, art by Lori Deitrick

"The Larkie" by Phillip C. Jennings, art by Larry Blamire

"... But Fear Itself" by A.J. Austin, art by Larry Blamire

"The Coming of the Newest Messiah" by Nina Kiriki Hoffman, art by Charles Lang

"Jingle Jangle Morning" by Paul A. Gilster, art by Cortney Skinner

"Something on His Mind" by Chuck Rothman, art by Larry Blamire

## Poetry

"White Light, White Heat" by Robert Frazier

Cover art for "Jingle Jangle Morning" by Cortney Skinner

## Summer 1992

"Sid Dex: Once a Classic, Always a Classic" by Anthony P. Russo, art by Charles Lang

"Rumbling Earth" by Gregory Benford, art by Cortney Skinner

"Sliding the Edge" by Dean Whitlock, art by Larry Blamire

"The Secret Nature of Space and Time" by Joseph Kosiewska, art by Charles Lang

"Repair Man" by Valerie Freireich, art by David Deitrick

"Gray Lies" by Doug Franklin, art by Charles Lang

"Rat Race" by Jerry Fuchs, art by Jerry Fuchs

"Friday Night is Date Night" by Mike Moscoe, art by Lori Deitrick

"V is for Vulture" by Ann K. Schwader, art by Carol Heyer

"A Sense of Sharing" by Leonard M. Rysdyk, art by Larry Blamire

"Riffles" by D. Lopes Heald, art by Peter Peebles

"Sacrificial Lamb" by John Moore, art by Larry Blamire

"The Shoot" by Patricia Anthony, art by Carol Heyer

## Poetry

"Albert and Mileva" by Geoffrey A. Landis

"Pensive Ruminations on Impermanence in a Technophilic World" by Holly Lisle

"The Amnesia Addict" by Bruce Boston

Cover art for "Riffles" by Peter Peebles

## Fall 1992

"June 14, 1959" by Wendy Wheeler, art by Peggy Ranson

"The Claim Station" by Gerald W. Page, art by Alan Gutierrez

"The Penalties of Pirating" by Jerry J. Davis, art by Larry Blamire

"Sunlight" by Jamil Nasir, art by Allison Fiona Hershey

"Dead Cows" by John W. Randal, art by Charles Lang

"I Love You For Seventy Mental Reasons" by Amy Benesch,



art by Larry Blamire

"The Secret Language of Old White Ladies" by Patricia Anthony, art by Cortney Skinner

"Rat Race" by Jerry Fuchs, art by Jerry Fuchs

"Set a Place for Arthur" by Steven M. Ford, art by Lori Deitrick

"Spin" by K. D. Wentworth, art by N. Taylor Blanchard

"Succession" by R. Gary Raham, art by R. Gary Raham

"Ping Enclosed" by Robert V. Kozinets, art by David Deitrick

"Deezee" by James C. Glass, art by Jon Foster

#### Poetry

"Godlet" by Laurel Winter

"The Poet's New Mind" by Marianne J. Dyson

Cover art by Richard Hescox

#### Winter 1992

"Pictures from Home" by Mark Canter, art by Peggy Ranson

"Square Deal" by Ted Nolan, art by Alan Gutierrez

"The Curse" by Anthony R. Lewis, art by Larry Blamire

"The Silver Abacus" by Paul C. Schuytema, art by Allison Fiona Hershey

"The Secret Identity Diet" by Richard K. Lyon, art by Larry Blamire

"Bag of Bones" by E R Stewart, art by Lori Deitrick

"Rescue" by E. H. Wong, art by David Deitrick

"Cameo" by Claudia O'Keefe, art by Carol Heyer

"Hunter's Pink" by John Gregory Betancourt, art by Charles Lang

"Patterns of Little Gods" by Sharan Newman, art by N.

Taylor Blanchard

"Dead Sky Eyes" by John W. Randal, art by Jon Foster

"Light Bodies Falling" by Sean Williams, art by Cortney Skinner

#### Poetry

"Having Seen These Marvels" by Terry McGarry

"Apocalyptic Jingle" by Darrell Schweitzer

Cover art by Jon Foster

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# Enchantment

By Catherine Mintz

Art by Robert Pasternak

Drawing the covers more securely around himself, Charles lay listening to the small sounds of the night — the hiss of wind in tree branches and the distant hum of the traffic on the roadway. A faint damp hint of rain before morning came through the crack at the bottom of the open window.

The drapes lifted and let in the green-white glow of the lantern-shaped light at the end of the drive. *They* must have forgotten to turn it off when they came home from the party.

He rolled onto his back and looked at the plaster swirls on the ceiling, counting the figures in his private zoo. By the window an enormously long-legged rabbit with ears streaked dark from the leak behind the gutter. There in the corner a mouse with a long crack for a tail; and here just overhead a whale struggling out of a pile of clouds as puffy as whipped cream...

He cat-licked his upper lip, tasted stale milk and smelled the queer, half-sour smell of an unwashed empty glass.

He wished he'd managed to hide a cookie from his bedtime snack. They had his favorite kind, peanut butter with sugar sprinkled on top, smooth and sandy, dissolving to a sweet paste in a mouthful of cold milk. He could have eaten them and eaten them, but he was only allowed two.

His stomach rumbled.

There were still lots of cookies in the big jar in the kitchen.

No one would be up in the middle of the night.

He was not supposed to eat anything other than his three meals a day and the special bedtime snack. Doctor Brace had explained that very carefully.

He didn't like Doctor Brace — he had a nasty smile.

His stuffed bear was poking him in the back, and Charles shoved it hard against the wall. He lay, feeling a dull ache in his joints and a vague longing for something that was not there — something other than the regretted cookie.

The drapes lifted and fell and lifted again in the freshening breeze.

He was really wide awake.

His stomach rumbled again.

He flipped the covers back and sat up, feet fumbling for the slippers beside the bed. The floppy

leather things slithered away from his questing toes, and he abandoned them, padding barefoot across the icy floor.

Something bigger than he was moved in the darkness.

He froze and waited while it waited. He moved again, ever so slightly, once, twice, then the queer constriction of its motion told him it was only his reflection in the oval glass on the inside of the closet door someone hadn't remembered to close.

He could see his ghostly pajama-clad figure among the mirror's shadowy furniture. He grinned at it and something frightful grinned back, gapped and skewed teeth displayed in horrid jollity. Scary, but not quite scary enough. He put his hands to his face to twist it further and felt bristly folds of skin. His fingertips rasped down his cheeks.

He went closer to peer at his reflected face and brushed a wooden clothes hanger from the fluted crystal doorknob. It leaped, clattering to the floor, and struck him across one great toe. He gasped and bent half-forward to soothe it before a pang from his stiff back stopped him.

A red light came on atop the white grilled box on the wall, and it gave a muted buzz.

"Uncle Charles?" said a harsh female voice through the mesh. "You're not supposed to be up. Go back to bed and turn on Teddy." There was a muffled mutter of angry conversation that rose to a gruff male voice, "... not the one who forgot to put the tape in for the old goat!"

Propelled by the memory of the consequences of other infractions, Charles shuffled back across the cold tiles and lay down on the narrow bed. He hunted for the lumpy form of the teddy bear tangled in the covers, pushed the concave button in its gut, then held the toy tight and lay still, waiting.

The harmonic buzz made his head feel full of soft, black sleepiness. "Charlie," said his mother's gentle voice, "you're having a bad dream. Go back to sleep. Tomorrow's going to be a fine day and we can take a picnic down to the creek. Maybe there'll be a few blackberries..."

Charlie smiled and gripped Teddy tighter, anticipating a golden summer day in 1923. □



NAK

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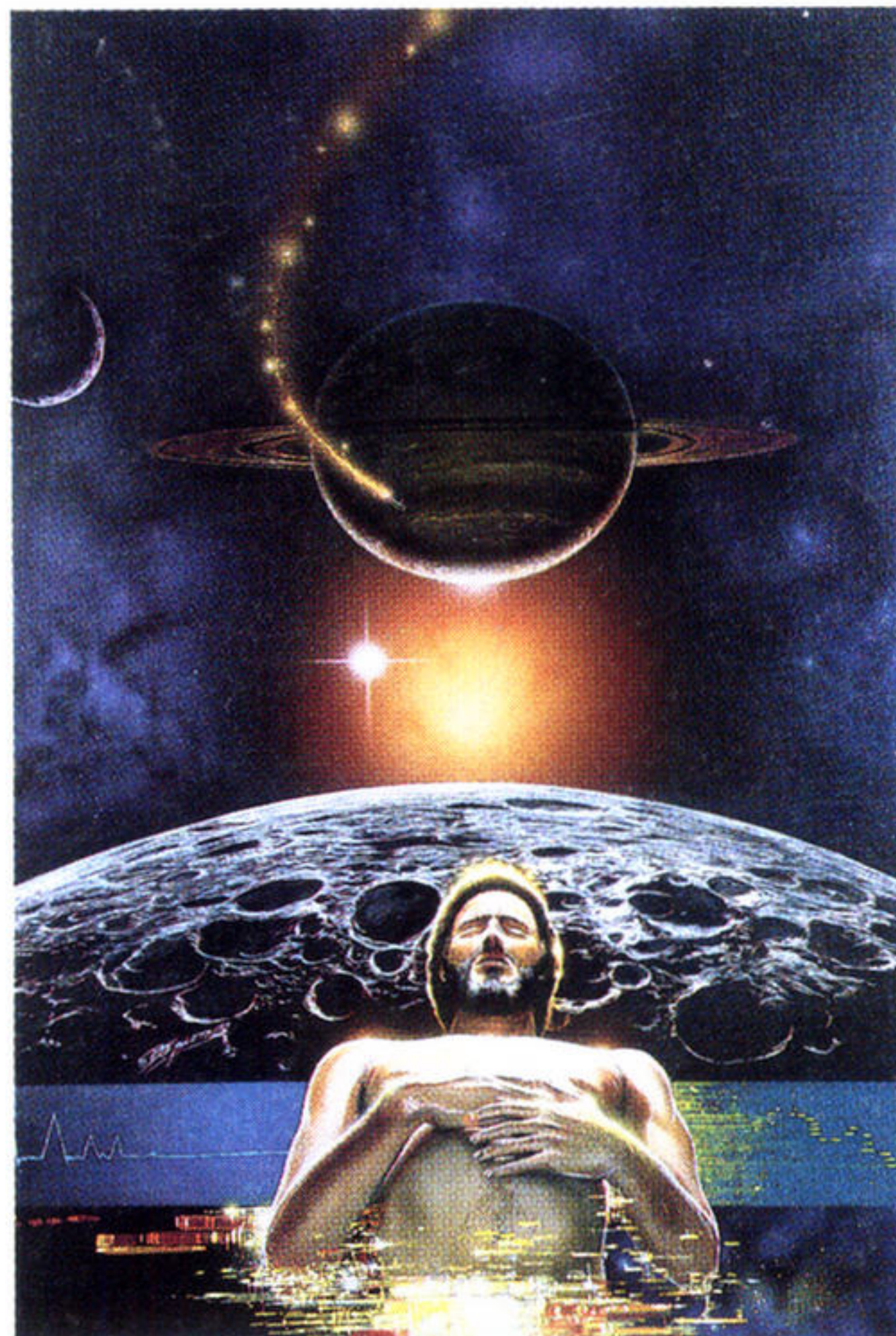
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