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Short Stories

Shore Leave

By K. D. Wentworth; Art by Jon Foster

Page 4

Tin Tear

By Robert A. Metzger; Art by Alan Gutierrez

Page 10

The Grassman

By M.E. McMullen; Art by Clyde Duensing, III

Page 20

Deathsong

By Janis O'Connor; Art by N. Taylor Blanchard

Page 30

First Person Plural

By Jeff Elliott; Art by Peggy Ranson

Page 36

Three Things to Watch for When You're in the Market for a Used Tumor

By J. Brooke; Art by Jon Foster

Page 42

Trophy

By W.M. Conner; Art by David LeClerc

Page 72

Hands Across the Stars

By Jeff Janoda; Art by Larry Blamire

Page 82

Earth Kwaatsi

By Ann K. Schwader; Art by Allison Fiona Hershey

Page 88

Shurplog

By Greg Jones; Art by Larry Blamire

Page 94

Poetry

Spacer's Compass

By Bruce Boston

Page 81

Proof of the Pudding

By J. W. Donnelly

Page 87

Departments

Cover Illustration: The Bounty Hunter

By Charles Lang

Page 1

Editor's Notes

By Charles C. Ryan

Page 49

From the Bookshelf

By Janice M. Eisen

Page 50

Books

By Darrell Schweitzer

Page 56

Through the Lens

By Susan Ellison

Page 62

What If? — Science

By Robert A. Metzger

Page 65

Aborigines

By Laurel Lucas

Page 68

Our Alien Publisher

By A Crazy Alien

Page 71

Classifieds

Boomerangs

Page 97

Page 99



He blinked. The pasture clicked into close focus. The blue light was real. Not much brighter than the fog, it flitted from corpse to corpse like a butterfly among flowers.

The thing was closer now, moving through the log fence like a ghost. The sound in his mind grew louder, the tap-tap-tap more authoritative now, hail more than sleet. Gordon was afraid that he would freeze where he sat and that the duty officer would find him at lunchtime, arms and legs encased in ice, mouth open like the gassed dead in a last, airless shriek.

Gordon's thumb finally found the bulge at his little finger, finally steadied a bit. He backed up a few feet to move the light into the kill box. Out of the corner of his vision he could see the robot fingers mimic his hand's firing position. The steel hand, too, was trembling.

An explosion of light and sound. In the chaos something scraped his cheeks, nicked the bridge of his nose.
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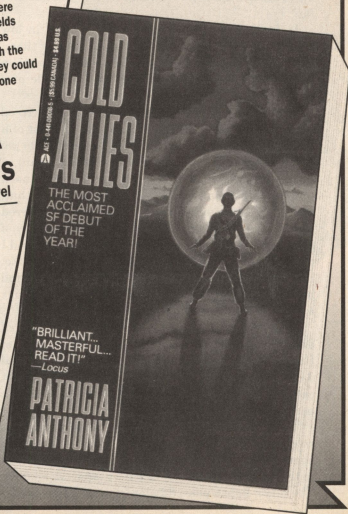
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Shore Leave

By K.D. Wentworth
Art by Jon Foster

The New York night flowed against my face, thick as warm honey, and sweet with customized pheromones from a hundred different groundclubs. The krit's cinnamon hide gleamed with red highlights as it waited under the street light.

It turned to me, ten miles of fireball energy packed into four feet of brown velvet hide, its molten black eyes alive with reflected sparks of yellow. "Macklin, Joe," it said in that ragged smoke-and-whiskey voice they all have. "Useless appendage for the night." It bent its earless head to step into the waiting airhopper. "Get in."

"You bet." I followed it, crowding into the back seat that was only an afterthought in that line of limos, meant more for poodles and shopping bags than six-foot cops. The interior smelled strongly of krit-musk. I hunched down, trying to make myself inconspicuous. They were worse when challenged, and I always did my best not to let matters get that far.

In front, they talked among themselves in low growly mutters as the limo lifted off, four of them, the cinnamon-coated one who had spoken to me, a liver-brown one, and two black as the inside of a sealed coffin.

That's the rule, four of them, one of me. We agreed upon this a long time ago in a treaty, the best of a bad deal, you might say. That way we get what we want, their trade, and they get what they want, a night on the town, krit-style. It takes a real knack to deal with them, there's no getting around that, and it's plenty dangerous, but that never bothered me. My wife long ago wearied of the uncertainty of a cop's life, not to mention the hours and pay, and I doubt my two girls even remember what I look like. Krit-duty pays the extra I need for child support and braces and private schools and all the other things a kid supposedly needs these days.

A lot of guys consider it the absolute bottom of assignments, worse than having to bust a nest of Burn-dusters single-handedly, but I'm a pro, and damn good at what I do. And I have one of the lowest casualty rates on the force, averaging less than five per run.

The airhopper took a long slow curve to the left, sweeping outside designated lanes. Straining against the safety harness, I pressed my forehead to the window, trying to see where we were headed. The city's lights passed below, laid out like a bril-

liantly lit toy circus just waiting to be played with.

"Macklin." The rearmost, a lean, feral-eyed individual, thrust its liver-colored muzzle over the back seat. "You have others?"

"Other what?" The seat leather creaked as I settled back.

"Other things in your — place, others like you."

"You mean family." I dug into my pocket for some gum.

Its face split in what looked like a fiercely-toothed grin, but probably wasn't. "Yes, things like you."

"Well, they sure as hell ain't like you." I tore the wrapper off and popped a stick of spearmint into my mouth. *Never tell them anything personal*, the squad manual says. *Do your job and keep your mouth shut* — words to keep living by.

It snorted and turned back to the others. They growled and sputtered among themselves for a moment. I chewed my gum, wishing I understood their lingo. They refuse to teach us, of course. A few of the guys say they've picked up a word here and there, enough anyway to tell what might be coming, but krit yap always sounds like a dog convention to me.

As the conversation went on, the skin began to itch in the middle of my back. They had to be up to no good; krit always were. It was one of the few things you could count on in this life. Ever since their enormous black ship set down on Lake Huron twenty-two years ago, looking more like a welded heap of fallen cartons than something that travels between star systems, their sole purpose in coming here at all has seemed to be seeing how much they can get away with while bribing us with exotic trade items.

And us, Earthers or Terrans or Americans or Chinese or whatever you want to call us, we put up with it. To begin with, they could burn a whole city to cinders with their armament, something they casually demonstrated with an abandoned shoe factory in upstate Michigan. And then it became obvious, after the first couple of so-called "incidents" with our new-found alien buddies, we want the hundred-year power supply globes that fit in the palm of a baby's hand and the technology to detect and repair DNA damage and all the rest of their trinkets more than we want to protect the poor fools who get in the krits' way. Besides, they don't come often and they never stay long. A week or two down



FOSTER

at the bottom of Earth's gravity well, and they blast back into the black void to find their fun elsewhere.

Of course, they always take a few goodies with them. For some reason, they're fascinated by ostriches and red ants, and antique devices of torture like racks and iron maidens, although not enough to behave themselves. A three-year hiatus between ships after our reaction to one particularly bad attack proved that. When they finally came back, the governments shut up about the killings and mutilations, negotiated the shore leave treaty, and assigned bozos like me in all port-of-call cities to try to keep it down to a minimum.

The hopper descended toward a darkened portion of the city, the Black Zone, thousands of blocks of worn-out, unsupervised real estate where you live these days at your own risk. Muscles tightened all up and down my spine, and a scene flashed into my mind, Harlem last month, when I'd been called in to help clean up a particularly nasty mess ... an abandoned building where a pack of krit had run some armed gang members to ground ... smashed windows gaping like gouged-out eyes ... blood spattered over the sidewalk like some stupid abstract painting ... shreds of human meat stuck to the walls.

Sweat broke out on my forehead. That had been Bill Sweeney's gig. The idiot had taken the easy way out and let his krit go for it. It was only a few dumb spic gang members, he'd said, high on Burn and God-knows-what-else, no doubt dealing on the side, nothing anyone would miss. The krit would be doing us a favor. Only he didn't know about the squatters who had taken over the top three floors, or their toddlers playing together in one big communal room while their parents worked.

He didn't know. It wasn't his fault.

The fact that Sweeney later offed himself didn't help. Nothing helps when you've had to scrape the remains of a beautiful three-year-old with big brown eyes out from between the drainpipe and the bricks. You're stuck with that image until the day you die, and if there's any justice, Sweeney is seeing it still.

So, you never let the krit run, never let them get hot on a trail and out of your sight. Once they get going, ain't no one gonna stop them until they've had their fill. You get in the way at that point, you're just another hunk of meat someone will have to clean up.

The airhopper touched down and the hatch popped open. The four krit piled out onto the unlit street. A rusting combustion-engine car screeched its tires and lurched away, trailing gas fumes behind it. I scrambled after the krit into the warm darkness, swearing and fumbling for the night-goggles hung on my web-belt.

The street lit up with a thin-edged blueness as I slipped them on. I saw the back end of a krit scampering around a ravaged building and took off

running. The Department had a tracer on the limo and me, but once the krit started out on foot, it was my job to keep up with them.

Chunks of brick littered the pavement, along with wrappers and cans and broken glass. I ducked in and out of the litter, breathing in the thick, garbage-scented air, trying to get my bearings in case I needed to report in, but I didn't recognize the neighborhood.

"Come, Macklin!" one of the krit hissed at me from a shadow across the street. "You miss the fun!"

The blood was thrumming in my ears as the other three broke from cover and split up, each going its own separate way. The adrenaline in my blood jumped two levels, but I didn't panic. They always pull crap like that. All I had to do was follow one of them, any one, it didn't matter. The furry bastards never hunt alone. The insides of their brains just aren't built for it.

Gritting my teeth, I settled on the one that had called to me, tracking it by the blue shimmer of its hide as it leaped the rusting hulks of cars and dodged broken shopping carts. Although they're good sprinters, they can't hold that kind of speed for the long haul. After a few minutes, I was closing in again.

It joined up with one of its mates, then another. I trailed them through the dregs of an ancient playground, the fire-blistered swing sets long ago toppled on their sides, now lying stiff-legged in the weeds, the stubs of the burned-out trees black against the night.

A fourth blue shape drifted out of the debris-clogged streets and joined the others, its eyes narrow, its jagged black teeth glinting with reflected starlight. I shifted my weight nervously, unable to tell one from the other because all colors were reduced to the same blue by the night-goggles.

"Macklin." One of them raised an arm, a curiously human gesture.

A nasty prickle began under my scalp.

"Come and talk with us. Talk about things."

I stopped out of reach and waited.

"Tell us about family." The krit hunkered down in the dusty grass, its muscles bunched and ready. "Tell us about your others."

I reached for the staser in my belt-holster, standing legs apart, knees loose, ready.

The krit jumped up, its jaws wide. "Tell us!"

"You know I can't." I held my ground as it came close enough for me to feel its hot, ketone-scented breath on my face.

"Can't." It turned its sly face to its fellows.

"Can," another one said. "Can!"

I watched them silently as they circled, a weaving pack of unpredictable animals. "You — tell me," I said finally to break their concentration.

"Tell you?" The closest one dropped to the ground

on all fours and studied me with wild black eyes. "Tell about what — the ships or the long cold singing darkness, or the fat slugs on this world that infest your broken cities?"

"Interesting fat slugs," I said, "or you wouldn't come here."

"Meaty slugs." It sprang to its feet, every hair quivering with repressed energy and desire. "Warm!"

I flipped the staser tube into my hand. "Not that warm."

It shook itself, then sniffed.

"Tell me," I said. "About the dark and the other places you go."

It didn't answer. They never do.

My fingers tightened around the rubber butt of the staser tube; it was cool in my hand, comforting. It wouldn't kill, of course, although a direct hit could drop an attacking krit, but you had to be close enough to touch it, and the minute I hit one, the other three would tear me to pieces. I glanced at my watch. "You've got eight more hours."

The one in the lead sniffed, then trotted down the dark street. The others followed. I had won for the moment, but I knew it wouldn't last.

The next corner took us into music and the glow of neon, a little oasis of life amidst blocks of desolation. I slipped the night-goggles off and blinked at the shimmer of green and red and orange lights crawling like lazy snakes above a row of rundown shops and cantinas. They must have dug up a generator somewhere.

A group of half-buzzed joygirls on the stroll giggled down at the far corner while two young toughs wearing black jackets trimmed in red patrolled the strip with G11s strung over their shoulders. An old man was busy dealing small packets of what was probably Burn or Null-dust to teenagers from a busted-out storefront as casually as though it were milk and oranges.

Black and red — Blackcat territory. A mean bunch, but no match for the krit. As the four of them padded into the crowd, I pulled a small concussion grenade off my belt, popped the string and heaved it into the middle of the open street. The explosion was loud, but harmless. Everyone froze, looking for the source.

"Clear the area!" I flashed my badge and then pointed at the bristling krit. "Take cover for the rest of the night!"

The liver-coated krit made a sound halfway between a snarl and an ear-splitting yowl and sprang at the nearest joygirl. She screamed as its claws raked her back and scrambled for the nearest door. One of the Blackcats unstrung his rifle and took aim at the pursuing krit. I swore and stepped into his line of fire. No one knows what would happen if we ever killed one, even defending ourselves, but

remembering the Michigan crater where that factory used to be, no one is eager to find out.

"Move out of the way, asshole, or I'll burn you!" His voice cracked at the end, high and squeaky.

"Yeah, and what good will that do?" My shirt clung to my back, clammy with sweat. "Clear the street and take care of your own. Let me do my job."

One of the black-furred krit hissed, its eyes reflecting the ridiculous orange lights just across from it. The other black one fell in beside it and they circled the two patrollers, gliding, silent as two shadows. Still holding the staser, I gave the nearest Blackcat a shove with my free hand. "Get off the street, punk, before someone has to scrape you off the pavement!"

He swalled hard, his brown eyes white all around the edges, then broke and ran for the cantina across the street. His companion followed. In five seconds, there was nothing left in the street but a few busted beer bottles and the thin-edged wail of a Chicano song.

The krit hissed again, whether from disappointment or amusement, I couldn't tell. Contrary to popular theory, some of the things I've seen while on duty lead me to believe they do have a sense of humor; it just involves things that would give a human nightmares.

"So, Macklin, you take their place?" The dark-brown krit's snout wrinkled up to reveal two-inch jet-black fangs.

"No, thanks." I held my ground, keeping a brick wall to my back. They advanced upon me, growling and muttering. My hand hovered above my belt-clip, ready to signal for assistance. "You boys ready to call it a night?"

That seemed to shake them up a little. I mean, by agreement between them and us, they only get one night of shore leave each planetfall and then they're off again for who knows how long. And they had to know if they killed me, the Department would just send a team out. They were better off looking for bigger game.

With a sniff, they turned and trotted off into the darkness. I followed, a healthy distance behind. The blackness turned to ghostly blue as I donned the night-goggles again. I could hear them muttering in low krit growls. Stay alert, I told myself, the night's barely begun.

When I turned the corner, damned if they didn't jump me, all four of them, black teeth bared, claws out. They knocked me backwards to the ground, ripping and tearing at my face and belt. The staser crackled as I got a discharge off, though I couldn't tell if it really connected. Then, squalling and caterwauling like a bunch of wet cats, they clawed the tube out of my hand and pitched it into the night, along with my goggles and the shreds of my web belt.

"Soft skin!" one spit in my face and backhanded me into the brick wall.

Torn and bleeding, I fell hard and pinned my arm.

"Meat-for-brains!" Toenails clicked against the pavement. "Why do you want these things to live, these others? Meat walks before you and you let it pass by. No wonder you have not gone into the singing dark."

I began to make out their black forms against the lesser darkness. "We don't eat our own kind," I said hoarsely. "Do you?"

"Eat!" One dark shape threw back its head and shrilled a long keening note.

The other three froze for a second, then they all shook themselves and ran, heading away from the cantinas and the vacant street. I lay there and watched them, my head and right arm throbbing, the warm, sticky blood trickling down my cheek into my collar.

I knew what I should do, of course. The Department manual is quite clear on that point. Once disarmed and left behind, I should find the nearest phone and contact Headquarters so an armed team could be sent out. But I didn't know where I was. It might take an hour, maybe longer, to find a usable booth in the Black Zone. In the meantime, the krit would be out there, silent, hungry, swift as thought. And no one would see them coming until it was too late.

I lurched to my feet; my right arm dangled limply at my side and the bones grated with my slightest movement. Swearing, I ripped my uniform shirt open and eased it inside, then hugged it tightly with my left, feeling the impact of each step like the red-hot kiss of a live wire.

I gritted my teeth and thought of shredded two-year-olds, and women torn to quivering bits, and blood, blood everywhere.

The night was full of creaks and skitters. I saw a couple of flickers of movement, probably someone following me, up to no good, but human.

A furious spate of barking came from the southwest, then ended in a howl of anguish. I stopped and listened, knowing it had to be the krit. They couldn't keep quiet for long. It just wasn't in them. Breathing hard, I made out a faint yellow glow from that direction and began to swear; it was too far. By the time I got there, the krit would have eaten their fill and moved on, celebrating their run. I took off anyway, dodging old sofas and broken lamps, decomposing rats, rusted-out hulks of cars that had lain in the street so long they looked as though they'd grown there.

Call the police! I thought at the people up ahead, but I knew they wouldn't. What had the police to do with this part of New York? These abandoned, rotting neighborhoods were forced to take care of their own, and then in turn took it out on everyone else.

The pain from each step ripped just a little deeper than the one before. The darkness took on a reddish cast that seemed to come from behind my eyes. The air changed into something corrosive that cut through my lungs as I tried to breathe.

In the middle of the block ahead, I saw a fire feeding upon the hulk of an ancient striped couch. The krit were seated around it, still as four wolves watching the moon. The smoke roiled upwards, thick and oily. A band of ragged, vacant-faced oldsters shuffled or sat around the edges of the light, their toothless mouths gaping in bewilderment, probably victims of another closed-down nursing home.

Man, I told myself, I had really blown this one; there had to be at least twenty oldsters in this crowd. This was gonna blow my casualty average to hell. Bruised and bleeding from a dozen slashes, I stumbled to a halt and waved my left arm at them. "Clear — clear the — street!" I yelled. "They're dangerous! Call — the police!"

A muffled titter went up from the onlookers. One wrinkled old man, draped in dirt-encrusted rags, picked something up and threw it at me. A chunk of masonry fell short and rolled toward my foot. He giggled wildly.

"Run!" I shoved a gaunt old woman with my sound hand. "Get out of here!"

Her sunken eyes stared at me puzzledly, past understanding me or anyone else, past caring, just waiting to die.

The cinnamon-colored krit rose, its muscles moving sinuously under its smooth coat. "There is meat here, Macklin. Eat."

I edged closer. "Go eat yourself, you hairy bastard!"

The flames crackled, bending double in a gust of wind. Bits of burning upholstery floated toward the stars. Without warning, the two black-coated krit sprang, felling the old woman. She gave a thin, terrified wail as she cracked her head against the concrete, then lay still while blood welled from the back of her head. The two krit dropped their heads to nuzzle the red pool, all the while watching me with hot black eyes, taunting me, daring me to stop them.

The ruined street seemed to expand and contract under my feet. I stumbled toward the ragged group of people. "What do you want to do, sell tickets, goddammit? Clear the street!" They stood there, almost indistinguishable from one another in their peeling sweaters and rotting layers of shirts and dresses, scratching their balding heads as though I were speaking Russian.

"These are meat, Macklin." Head low, the liver-colored krit stalked toward several elderly men sprawled on the ground. "They wait here for whoever comes."

"No!" I ran past the krit, every step costing me big, and kicked at one of the old men. "Get out of here, dammit! Don't just lie there and make it easy!"

The krit's mouth opened, showing its rows of jagged black teeth. "Soft things, fit only for meat!"

On the pavement, the old woman stirred, her arms flailing weakly. My heart stopped and I realized that I should have gone for help after all. Glass crunched under my shoe as I stepped backwards. I stooped down to pick up a long glittering shard, pointed at the tip like a tooth.

Well, Macklin, I told myself, gripping the glass awkwardly in my left hand, *think*. I had to regain control of the situation. It was probably too late to do anything about this pathetic bunch of pigeons, but maybe if I handled things right, I could move the krit on before they killed all of them.

I thrust the glass out as though I dared attack them — which I did not. In answer, the cinnamon krit took a handful of the old woman's lank gray hair and jerked her head back.

My hand clenched around the glass so tightly, blood splattered onto the pavement by my feet. *Forget about her*, my training whispered in the back of my mind, *she's just one person, already lost. You have to think of the rest.*

The krit stared at me, those volcanic black eyes burning their message into my soul. *Death*, they said, *and blood, disdain and fear, these are the only gifts we bring you from the stars.* It wrinkled its lips back from its teeth, then slashed her throat.

"No!" I flung myself at it, stabbing with the shard of glass. I guess the last thing any of the hairy bastards expected was for an official escort to attack, because they hesitated, just a split second, just long enough for me to fall on the cinnamon krit and plunge the glass shaft deep into its hate-filled brain.

It screeched once, an inhuman, high-pitched sound that bounced off the crumbling brick walls and lost itself in the night. Its legs and arms scrambled furiously underneath me, and then it sighed and was still. I lay sprawled on the velvet fur, unable to think or move, as though the planet had jumped underneath me and I was not only no longer in the same place, but in no place that I recognized at all.

I managed to stand up and stare at the blood on my hands, the dark, almost black blood of the krit, mixed with the brighter red of the old woman. I remember thinking no one had ever seen krit blood before.

The remaining three stared at me, their black eyes holes into another universe I could never understand. I waited there, knowing that I had failed the oldsters, myself, my kids, and the whole damn world. The krit would first tear me to shreds, then everyone they could catch for miles until morning, and who even knew if they would honor the treaty

now? Maybe they wouldn't stop when daylight came, and when they did return to their ship, maybe it would turn its armaments on the city, maybe all the cities, leaving behind only a smoking ruin as it blasted off for its next stop.

One of the old people, a man, shuffled forward to warm his hands at the burning sofa. The liver-colored krit shuddered as though it had just woken up. I braced myself for the killing rage I had seen so many times.

The three remaining krit, the two black-coated and the dark-brown, dropped to their bellies and crawled across the rubble-strewn pavement until they were close enough to press their noses to my feet.

The three krit carried their dead comrade back to the limo. I trailed after them through the night, wondering what I should do or say, but they took off without a word. When I didn't report in the next morning, the Department came looking and found me wandering, dazed and bloody. They say the lab boys had a field day with my clothes. The krit ship finished conducting its business and took off from New York harbor eight days later.

And so now I wait, along with the rest of the world, to see if they ever come back, and if they do, what will happen. If you listen to the newsmen, I'm either a hero of historic proportions, or the worst criminal ever born.

When I can't sleep, which is most of the time, I wander the Black Zone alone, tasting the night and the unsteady silence, feeling all that life waiting out there like a ripe peach to be picked. Of all the possibilities, the one I fear most is that they come back and behave as though nothing happened, meaning that in this one instance human and krit communicated perfectly, that we finally understood each other.

That we are fundamentally alike.

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A Tin Tear

By Robert A. Metzger

Art by Alan Gutierrez

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Blink.
Contrast.

White and black. There was no gray, no compromise, no middle ground. White and black.

I couldn't remember anything.

But I ran. My body shuffled along, stomping feet shattering rock into gravel and then grinding gravel into dust. *I ran because I ran.* That made it easy, mindless, beyond worry. It was the same reasoning that kept people breathing. They breathe because they breathe.

Circular.

Infinite.

Meaningless?

No, not meaningless. It couldn't be meaningless. I remembered breathing — wheezing lungs trying to expand, gut contracting, air whistling through my nose and down my always too-tight throat. But remembering it was all I now seemed capable of. I no longer breathed.

Here I ran.

And I knew I'd run until the rock and gravel had ground my feet down, worn them completely away. But I knew that not even that would stop me. I'd run on ankle stumps — on all *six* of them.

No.

Only *five* remained. The other had been lost, the bottom-most knee having been caught in a rocky outcropping, and then the entire leg torn away. But that didn't matter. I could still run. And that *did* matter.

I ran at 10.88 kilometers per hour.

No more.

No less.

Run or die.

The dull-toothed gears in my head suddenly ground against one another, extending the telephotos, pulling the already too-close horizon even nearer.

Wrong.

The horizon should have been distant and blurred, beyond my reach, a seamless boundary fading into a pale blue sky. But this too-near horizon was a stark demarcation that bisected a wall of shattered glass from a dead black sky. I ran towards it. Shock absorbers and decelerators, little springs and gyros buried deep within my head, steadied the black and white horizon. A filter chat-

tered in my left telephoto as the lens continued to extend, bringing the very edge of the world to me. I stared at a crater rim — a cracked and crazed wall of glass that dripped with molten metal.

Crater rim.

There were no crater rims in North Carolina, no too-near horizons full of shattered glass that dripped with molten metal. I pulled the telephotos back deep within my head. My neck ratcheted forward, then suddenly jerked and caught as a silicate flake got wedged in its gears.

More power.

More torque.

The flake pulverized and my neck continued to move forward. The glass-shard-littered ground that swept past me was riddled with depressions, each one molten-metal filled, the little holes reflecting the flaring whiteness from the sun that hung *directly* above my head. The sunlight exploded back up through the telephotos, sizzling the connections in my head, burning until nothing seemed to remain.

Absolutely nothing.

634 watts

The cicadas screamed with a high-voltage wail. I breathed deep, despite the pain in my chest, despite the dizziness that wrapped itself around me like some warm and threadbare comforter. It was a soothing dizziness, a familiar pain. I breathed because *I could*.

I opened my eyes.

Pine, kudzu, glistening spider web, shadow within shadow, gray within gray — I looked out into a forest.

North Carolina.

I slowly bent down. The joints in my back popped and snapped, sounding just like old cedar logs burning in a pot-bellied stove. I reached out with a hand that was covered in skin yellowed with age, parchment-thin and laced with thick, blue, ropey veins. The old fingers dug into the ground, pushing aside pine needles and spindly roots, black ants and rotting maple leaves. The mud beneath was warm.

Only warm.

It did not burn, did not scald, did not vaporize old skin and flash bone into charcoal. I slowly stood back up, and as I did, I felt my heart skip a beat, sputter,



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and then suddenly begin to twitch. An invisible weight squeezed against my ribcage and paralyzed my lungs. My left hand clenched itself into a fist. Warm mud and brittle pine needles squeezed out from between my stiff fingers. "No!" I screamed.

Thump-thump-thump...

And then my heart suddenly beat steadily and the pressure that had been crushing my chest eased. I sucked down a shallow breath and, reaching up toward my face with muddy fingers, wiped away the tears that ran down the deep creases in my cheeks. My trembling hand floated in front of me.

I smelled my muddy fingers — *rot, pollen, and wet dust.*

Then I put them to my lips.

I tasted my muddy fingers — *bitter, acidic, and sour.*

This was my home.

I slowly lowered my hand and stared out into the forest, trying to see past the suddenly thickening shadows and dense wall of pine and kudzu. But I could not.

North Carolina had vanished.

639 watts

B^{lack}. "Self-inflicted damage is not permitted unless minimal self-awareness has been achieved."

The words filled my head, the voice at once familiar and yet at the same time alien. This was the voice of my subconscious — of my protector.

What did it protect me from?

I didn't know, couldn't remember, only knowing that it spoke to me when I reawakened.

"How can I not be self-aware?" I asked, as I felt my body leap high and my two leftmost legs scrape against a glassy shard of rock. Before my protector could answer, possibly before it had even heard me, I could see once more, light filling me. I looked out at the horizon — at the crater rims and black sky. There was no pine, no kudzu, no spider webs and soft shadows.

"Initial boot is always the same," my subconscious suddenly informed me. "There is not enough power to bring you all back. This confused state will pass as more power is available."

I shuddered.

A cloud of dust and grit rose up from my gleaming skin. I felt my mass spectrometer automatically activate, with its collector grid and ionizing filament protruding from my back, sniffing at the air. A spectrum of silicates, metallic oxides, and heavy metals drifted through it on an almost nonexistent helium breeze.

That was wrong.

The air of North Carolina should have been filled with the scents of pine and honeysuckle, rot and swamp, too-hot asphalt, and the tang of damp dust

after a thunderstorm. This place reeked with the stink of never having been alive.

I ran forward. I hopped over craters and side-stepped depressions filled with bubbling metals. The thin helium breeze cut into my face, as the supersonic solar wind blasted me, bombarding my telephotos with speeding electrons and protons.

This was not North Carolina.

"Where am I?"

"Where you always are, where you've always been," answered my subconscious. "You are running along Mercury's equator, keeping the sun directly above your solar panels, moving toward the hot pole and perihelion."

"No!" I screamed.

But I had no voice. I suddenly remembered that one was not needed, had not been built into my metallic carcass. There was no one here to talk to, and certainly not enough atmosphere to carry my voice. The scream only filled my head.

"Initial stages of self-awareness are always associated with confusion."

"Shut up!"

"Additional 0.5 watt available."

"I'm dead!" I screamed, suddenly certain that this was not Mercury at all, but Hell itself. I was dead because I'd stopped breathing, and this was my reward, my punishment for some horrible sin that I couldn't remember having committed. And as I thought that, I felt coolant trickle into a nearly molten spot in my brain. I remembered. Facts filled me — numbing facts, cold facts, dead facts, facts that had been hidden in a piece of too-hot superconducting neural net.

Mercury.

Iron core, feeble magnetic field, trace atmosphere of helium and heavy metal vapors, and an eccentric orbit around the sun, one that ranged from 70 million kilometers at its farthest point to 46 million kilometers at its closest. And I was there, running across it, chasing the sun. This was my place, my home, my *mission*. And I had to reach the hot pole at perihelion — that point on Mercury's surface that faced the sun when the planet swung closest to the sun.

It took this ball of molten slag 59 days to complete a rotation, 59 days to spin once on its axis.

So slow.

So very slow.

A man running at 10.88 kilometers per hour could always keep the sun directly above his head. He would never see the night, never see the stars, never know anything except for heat and molten metal. A man *could* run that fast.

But not *here*.

There was no air, no water, no food, nothing except the sun. His lungs would explode, his skin wither, and his bones turn to ash. The energy rained

down, growing with every step I took, every step that carried me nearer to perihelion.

"Power?" I asked. It seemed to be the right question, the correct inquiry.

"13,060 watts ambient," said my subconscious. "Cell efficiency at 4.9%. Usable power of 640 watts."

I did not quite understand, did not remember the concept of cell, but I knew that 4.9% was not good — it had decreased once more. Ten transits ago the cell efficiency had been at 5.0%, and thirty transits ago it had been at 5.1%.

Transits?

Around the planet.

I stared down at the pathway of broken rock before me, at the trench worn into the wet-metal and meteoritic dust-coated ground. I'd been this way many times before. The path I followed was the one that I'd beaten into the ground, that my feet had chewed into rock and slag.

I needed more power to remember, to access the deep memories by cooling more of the superconducting neural net. Too many years of running naked in the solar wind had degraded my cells.

Solar cells.

I remembered.

I was running toward perihelion, the eccentric orbit pulling both me and Mercury closer to the sun. Another quarter watt trickled into my head, cooling more net. I remembered. When this world swung to the limit of its elliptical path, out and away from the sun, my power level would drop so low that there would not be enough precious watts both to keep me running and to cool down enough brain to maintain self-awareness. I'd slip into the darkness as my body kept running. And with each transit, each crossing of the planet, I was conscious for a shorter and shorter portion of that transit. Each time there was a bit less power as the cells lost efficiency. Each time there was a bit less of me.

I was dying.

"Help me, *April!*" I tried to shout, not really knowing why, feeling the words echoing in my head.

"Surplus one watt," said my subconscious.

More coolant trickled into my brain and deep memories were booted. The horizon faded and Mercury was gone.

642 watts

I flicked the dark globs of mud from my fingertips and looked toward the shadowy wall of green that loomed in front of me, a wall as solid as any crater rim, as impassable as any crustal fissure.

"What is the nature of this thing called *April?*" asked my subconscious, the words seeming to float all around me, to drift through the North Carolina pine forest.

I looked within myself.

"*She is why I run,*" I heard myself answering, not
A Tin Tear

understanding what it meant, not sure that it was even true. But I *wanted* it to be true. I stepped forward, moving toward the impenetrable tangle of pine and kudzu, of dead stumps and dew-dazzled spider webs.

"Additional three watts," said my subconscious.

The long fingers of kudzu twitched and snaked along the fern-choked ground, wrapping themselves around the trunks of the sickly little pines that were trapped beneath the forest canopy, those that did not receive enough sunlight, those trapped forever in the shadows. The kudzu tendrils ripped the little trees out of the ground, pulling them back into the undergrowth, clearing a path before me.

"You've come this way before," said my subconscious. "That much I can see within you. But where does this path lead?"

I took a step forward. It was not really a path, but a tunnel, an impossibly dark hole bored through the solid wall of green.

"It leads to April," I said, remembering that only as I said it. I walked into the tunnel, into the blackness, and did not look back, did not care that the rustling of the kudzu and the snapping of pine branches meant that the tunnel was closing behind me.

It didn't matter.

I'd not be going back that way.

647 watts

I ran.

The path before me was a ribbon of molten metal. My feet of beryllium steel alloy and spun graphite sloshed through the stream of molten tin and zinc, untouched by it, insulated from it. The sun seemed to be falling from the sky, dropping down, actually touching the cracked and melted plain that spread out before me. This near to Mercury's hot pole, the landscape was buckled and twisted, subjected to a greater temperature swing than any other place in the solar system — dropping nearly 700 degrees when night fell.

But I had never experienced that.

Never.

My metallic carcass, and the superconducting ball of ceramic that powered that carcass, could not withstand the night, could not store the energy that would be needed to get through that long night.

I chased the sun.

Forever.

But all things come to an end. All things. No man is immortal, no machine immune from breakdown.

I twitched, my outer right leg scraping against a twisted outcropping of aluminum and black glass, almost tripping me. Those words, those thoughts, were not mine. Not all things come to an end. The perfect machine, the perfect mind, would not be stopped. I would run forever, would run until I'd

worn a path around this planet so deep, so incredibly deep, that I'd cut the planet right down the middle.

I'd never stop.

"Never, April," I whispered.

"Six more watts," said my subconscious.

I ran toward perihelion, toward April, knowing that she would be waiting, always waiting for me beneath the blazing sun, waiting in that place where my deepest memories could be rebooted.

654 watts

Is this place real?" asked my subconscious. A cabin filled the clearing that spread out before me. Rough-hewn log and moss-covered, topped with a thatch roof and flagstone chimney, it sat nestled in the pine and kudzu forest just next to a small pond. Somewhere nearby, frogs croaked, and the drone of dragonflies rose and fell with the shifting of the breeze. A small porch, on which sat twin rocking chairs and an easel with canvas, was attached to the front of the cabin. One of the rockers gently swayed, as if someone had just been seated there.

April.

"It will be real," I answered, not certain what that meant, but feeling that it was true, *hoping* that it would be true. The scent of apple pie and cinnamon suddenly drifted over me.

"What is the function of this *dream*, of using valuable neural net to store these images?"

I did not know. I thought for a moment that this place, this cabin and its clearing, and most especially those rocking chairs, were what kept me running. But I wasn't sure.

"Additional two watts."

My old knees suddenly shook, and I reached out, grabbing onto nearby kudzu vines. New memory was revealed, more of the net cooled and accessed.

1,412 transits.

That was the number of times I'd run around Mercury, an impossibly large number — 228 years worth of chasing the sun. We should have been recalled almost two centuries earlier, our identities, our *souls*, transmitted back to Earth.

I almost remembered.

Pain.

Panic.

Hate.

I *refused* to remember.

"You can't hide from it," said a gentle, musical-sounding voice that drifted from out of the cabin. "There was revolution, and there was fear. Neural nets, ghosts, souls trapped in superconducting ceramics had gained too much power over the organic — over those that breathed and died. There was a revolution, and we were not recalled. Mercury is not needed now, and anything that runs across it is needed even less. We have not been recalled. So

we run — *forever* chasing the sun."

That was true. I remembered that.

"But there is no *forever*," said the voice.

"No!" I screamed at the cabin. There was a *forever*. We had been promised a forever. I had promised April a forever.

Clank! Clank!

I looked up. I knew that noise. It was the sound of an old cast-iron stove's door being opened and closed. I walked into the clearing, moving as quickly as I could, as quickly as I dared. The thump of my heart pounded in my temples.

I stepped up onto the porch.

Through the cabin's open doorway shadows moved. I sniffed the air. Mixed with the scent of apple pie and cinnamon was the sweet smell of sun-dried towels and freshly starched sheets.

And then a massive and invisible hand wrapped itself around my chest and squeezed. My creaking knees buckled and I stumbled, dropping down to the hardwood porch. I crawled forward, managing to pull myself up into the nearest rocking chair. The easel and canvas sat in front of me.

"I have the same bad dream every night."

"That voice cut right through me, laid me bare and touched my heart. This was the same voice that had lied to me, that had insisted that there was no forever.

It was April's voice.

I tried to speak, tried to answer, but could not breathe, could not force the air into my paralyzed lungs. I stared at the canvas in front of me, not understanding what I was looking at, not able to see the pattern, the meaning in the metallic swirls and glassy strokes.

"I tried to paint it," said April. "I thought that if I could get it onto canvas I might stop dreaming about it."

I felt myself moving toward the canvas without actually moving. The rocking chair squeaked and screeched as it dragged itself across the porch, stopping only when I was pushed up against the canvas, my face grinding against it. A landscape of cracked glass and molten rock, a place that had been blistered and burnt by a swollen sun that hung low above an impossibly close horizon, spread out before me.

"Do you want a piece of pie?"

I wanted nothing more in this world, or in any other world, than to simply have a piece of her pie, to look into her smiling face, to touch her hand, and to sit with her on this porch.

But the painting had swallowed me down, had carried me back to Mercury.

659 watts

They had lied.

I ran.

There was no sky, no infinite blackness, just a blinding whiteness that pressed down on me. I sloshed through liquid metal and scurried over glass outcroppings.

We had been lied to.

I remembered — now.

The mission had been designed for thirty years. And then we were to be recalled and placed in our new bodies — immortal bodies of ceramic and plastic. That was to be our reward, our payment for running across this molten rock for thirty years. But twenty-three years into the mission the people of Earth had changed their minds, had decided on a simpler existence, on a way of life in which death was the inevitable outcome — the *desired* outcome. Ghosts in nets were decreed immoral, abominations, a threat to the living. There would be no new bodies. All ghosts were to be flatlined. We had been instructed to receive the signals, to touch the death frequencies.

I had refused to listen.

I had broken both of our receiving antennas.

I told April that they would change their minds, that if we just kept running, did not give up, that we would someday be rescued. We would be brought back to Earth.

So we ran.

April's main chassis had cracked on transit 279, severing all links to her legs. Those memories were perfect, as glaring and merciless as the molten metal horizon. A weld had fatigued and her undercarriage had split wide open, shards of metal tearing through all her leg links. We were within fifty kilometers of the hot pole, and full of extra power, the cells in those days converting at better than 16%. I had dragged her to the perihelion point, that place on Mercury that faced the sun at the moment of closest approach.

That was almost 200 years ago.

I stared out at the metal horizon.

"We'd been promised!" I screamed as I ran toward perihelion.

"Four additional watts," said my subconscious.

665 watts

"Pie?"
Fingers gently stroked my shoulders, but I didn't turn, didn't so much as breathe. I stared into the painting, into that landscape of cracked glass and liquid metal.

But there was more.

Something else.

A *thing* sat in the floor of a mirrored crater. It was beetle-like, with glistening skin, six stubby legs, two telescopic eyestalks, and bristling with an array of antennas. Its legs were folded up and bent at angles that just didn't seem right.

April walked in front of me. She was a blur of pink
A Tin Tear

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and blue fabric, slightly tanned skin and corn-blond hair. The scent of lemons and soap lingered after she'd passed by.

The rocking chair next to mine creaked.

I slowly turned my head, barely able to look away from the painting and the *broken* pile of metal that sat at the center of it.

April.

It was her, just as I remembered her — hazel eyes and a smile full of caring, her face framed with swirling hair that would not stay in place. She sat in the rocker with her legs pulled up tightly to her chest, with her left arm wrapped around those legs. She peeked out at me from just over her knees and reached out with her right hand, offering me a white china plate which was almost overflowing with a slab of apple pie.

I reached out for it, with an old, gnarled hand. I stared at her hand, at the soft, unblemished skin, and then at mine — liver-spotted and streaked with blue-worm veins. I lowered my hand.

There were things to remember — important things.

The plate and the pie were suddenly gone, simply not there. And then something squeezed against my chest, something that wanted me dead, that wanted me to stop running.

But I'd never stop.

"I dream of that place every night," said April, as she pointed past me and at the painting. "And sometimes I even dream of it in the day. It escapes from the canvas and touches the forest, touches me." She then pointed past the painting and out toward the forest. "I've seen the red mud turn to streams of flowing metal and the pines blasted and burnt until they're nothing more than stalks of cracked glass."

"No," I whispered. I didn't want her to see that, to know, to understand where we really were, or what had happened to us. I wanted her safe here, in this forest, in this cabin, in this place that I'd *always* promised her would be ours. "It's only a nightmare," I said. "It can't hurt you."

Her eyebrows knitted together, and she bit at her lower lip. "I sleep for so much of the time," she said. "And then when I do wake, I can't seem to find you, can't seem to find my way out of this clearing to look for you."

I said nothing.

She suddenly seemed to look through me, her eyes focusing on something that wasn't there. "When will you come back to me, come back to North Carolina?" she whispered.

I turned my head and looked back at the painting, at that sunbaked wet metal landscape of Mercury. I could not tell her, could not let her know. I had brought us here. We'd been old, dying, and had then been offered immortality. In exchange for thirty years of running across Mercury we were *supposed*

to receive immortality.

"This is all I ever wanted," she suddenly said. "To be here, with you — to spend our *last* days together."

I shook my head.

I hadn't been able to go there. I was old and dying. My body was rejecting the new heart, and there wouldn't be another. That was the law. I'd been *afraid*, actually terrified. I could still feel that, remembering it perfectly — the tight chest, the fighting for breath, the pain, the panic, the fear. And then there had been the offer, the reprieve — two ghosts were needed for Mercury.

And April didn't want to go.

"All things come to an end," she said, now reaching out for me with a hand that was as wrinkled and liver-spotted as mine. "It is the *fear* of death that gets in the way of living, not the death itself."

She'd told me this countless times before.

"Immortality would have been an unending fear, every moment spent on planning for the infinite future, every moment fearing that an accident might rob you of your immortality. That is not immortality — that is an infinite death, a life in which every day is spent dying."

I shook my head.

She didn't understand.

I was dying. I looked at her, to tell her, to once again explain things to her.

But she was gone.

I pushed myself back in the rocker, pushed it over backward, feeling my old bones snap and my skull crack as I hit the wooden wall behind me. April was no longer sitting in her rocker. It was now occupied by a thing, a pile of sun-blasted metal, a chunk of lifeless hardware dripping with molten metal.

"No!" I screamed.

"Is this immortality?" the metal thing screamed back.

I didn't answer. Just as I lost consciousness, something molten licked at my feet.

671 watts

I *stopped* running. Bobbing glass shards surrounded me, sputtering and flaring, floating on the pool of tin and zinc. I stood first-knee deep in the pool, staring at the thing, staring at her. I stood here every transit, waiting, listening, nearly blinding my sensors as I focused on her glistening skin.

"April?" I whispered in a microwave burst, aiming it straight at her central receiver. She did not move, did not twitch.

I'd run around an entire planet to be with her, and she didn't seem to know, wasn't paying attention, was apparently lost in her own little virtual reality, probably mad at me, for having brought her here, for having gotten her stranded here.

"Ambient?" I asked as I looked up at the solar cell

panel above her, suddenly wondering if it was a power problem. There was a light film of metallic dust coated across the surface of her panels. She might have been asleep, possibly dreaming.

"13,714 watts ambient," whispered my subconscious. "Total power available 672 watts."

Perihelion.

I could feel the power coursing through me, cooling my brain, booting up deep memory. It couldn't be a power problem, there should be more than enough power for her to see me, to acknowledge me.

"April!" I shouted, upping the power amplitude, firing it at her over a wide band. "What's wrong?" I was suddenly frightened, suddenly certain that she'd been hurt, that there was something else wrong besides her fractured underside and lifeless legs. "April!" I slouched forward, stirring up little metallic waves that beat against her side. Reaching out with my outermost right leg, I gently nudged her.

Nothing.

"Where are you?" I screamed.

And then I felt her, reaching up for me, touching me, moving toward me. I stared at the glistening hulk. She was not moving. Something was wrong, terribly wrong.

"April!" I screamed. "Where are you?"

"Inside," she whispered, as she grabbed me by the throat that I no longer actually had and pulled me beneath the surface of the tin and zinc pool.

672 watts

We are dying!"

I stood in front of the cabin, in the center of the clearing. My heart thumped, beating not quite right, the pain radiating outward, filling my chest and running down my left arm. April stood in front of me. But she was no longer the April that I remembered. She was now made out of flowing metal and glass, radiating so much heat that I stumbled back, holding my arms up in front of my face.

"1,412 transits!" she screamed. "And with each one there is less of us left. We're just whispers, echoes of what we once were. I'm lodged *within* you, hidden deep below, more dead than alive, just shadow." She swung around, pointing to my left with a burning metal fingertip. "Remember!"

I turned. Two things stood where she pointed, two hulking, metallic insects, one crumpled against the ground, the other nudged up against it, a glistening metal shaft protruding from it that scraped against the collapsed one, searching for what I knew was a data-link port.

"I was dying, already dead," said the molten-metal April. "But you wouldn't let me die, wouldn't let me go. You downloaded me into *your* deep storage, holding me there, trapping me in coma, only letting me come out when there was extra

power."

I shuddered.

I was breathing in shallow wheezes. I remembered. I would not let her die, could not let her die. I had downloaded her, forced her, appealed to her subconscious, to her protector. And then I had taken her with me, carried her soul around Mercury — carried it around and around.

"I'm almost gone," she said. "Perhaps I'll survive another transit or two, but your cells are degrading rapidly. I'll soon be dead."

"No," I whispered. I'd be alone, forever alone.

"Not *forever*," she said. "You can calculate as easily as I can. You can see how the available power drops with each transit. At best you've got twenty transits, and then you will never wake up. That metal monster that carries us around will continue on its way, stumbling over metal and slag for another century or two, and then even it will die when the cells become so degraded that not even your subconscious can control it."

I shook my head. "The Earth will rescue us," I said. "We can't die." I spread my arms out pointing



Our Next Issue

The next issue of *Aboriginal SF* (Summer 1994) will contain some return appearances by *Aboriginal* contributors, including "Revisions" by Chuck Rothman; "Syrinx" by Boomerang award winner Terry McGarry; "Little Miss Trashcan" by Robert Reed; "Play the Wind" by Denise Heald; and "Justification" by Jerry Davis. The next issue will also introduce some first *Aboriginal* sales by new writers with a lot of talent, including "The Afterlife" by Delia M. Turner, art by Courtney Skinner; "The Last Snicker" by Sally Kohonoski, art by Carol Heyer; "Prisoners of Time" by Daniel Lissman, art by David LeClerc; "Growing Higher" by P.J.L. Pinder, art by Robert Pasternak; "Love in the Silicon Age" by Mark Wolverton; "The Salute" by Charlene Brusso, art by David LeClerc; "Into the Labyrinth" by Molly Barr. Plus we will have our usual cast of columnists, including book reviewers Darrell Schweitzer and Janice M. Eisen; movie previewer Susan Ellison, science columnists, Robert A. Metzger, and the Alien Publisher.

at the clearing and the cabin. "I promised you that this would be ours, that we would live here *forever* once we returned to Earth."

"We are dying!" she screamed. Molten droplets spewed from her, striking the ground, igniting grass, vaporizing kudzu. "I've waited and waited, trying to help you, trying to explain to you, trying to show you that there's nothing to fear in dying. We are not going back to Earth, going to that home that I always wanted, that you always promised." She slammed her right foot against a shallow metal puddle, sending up a burning curtain of metal. "Mercury is our home!"

I cupped my hands against my face. "I don't want to die," I cried. My heart lurched, beat chaotically, and my vision blurred. "No," I begged.

"I'm dying," she said, "but I love you, have always loved you. I will give you what little I have left. I can sever my part of the net, flatline it, so that not even standby power will be routed to it. That will give you perhaps an additional five transits."

"No!" I screamed.

She shook her head, and smiled at me, a molten metal smile full of glistening teeth. "I love you," she said. "So please don't be afraid. There is nothing to fear in death."

"No!" She began to melt, to flow toward the ground. I could feel all access to her severing, that part of the net cutting itself off, rejecting all incoming signals.

I jumped up and ran toward her. My heart no longer pumped, but had seized, finally giving out. The world darkened, the pine and kudzu forest closing down on me. But I didn't care. Nothing mattered except for April.

I felt no fear for *myself*.

None.

I fell to my knees, but then crawled forward, reached out for her, and stuck my right hand into the pool of molten metal that she'd been transformed into.

Burn.

Flash.

Sear.

An infinite pain, an infinite longing, chewed its way up my arm, into my chest, and then touched my heart. I could not live without her, did not want to live without her.

I touched her — inside.

672 watts

I stared down at the dead hulk. Wavelets of tin and zinc still lapped against it. It would be my last look. That thing was not April — it never had been. I angled my head back and stared up at the sun. For just a moment my body tried to fight me, did not want me to stare directly into the sun and destroy the photoreceptors in the back of the

telephotos.

"Self-inflicted damage is imminent if this action is continued," said my subconscious.

I was self-aware, possibly for the first time in centuries. All I wanted before I *forever* left Mercury was one look at the sun, one look at the thing that had controlled and dominated my existence for all these centuries, the one thing that I had never allowed myself to look directly at.

"Manual override," I whispered.

My head angled back.

An infinite whiteness filled my lenses. The perihelion sun hung directly over me. I had feared it, lived every day afraid of looking into it, of losing my sight, of not being able to see where I was going, of blinding myself and then falling into some crevasse and dying.

But I'd been going nowhere — simply running in circles.

The sun burned into me.

It burned through me.

My photoreceptors melted.

The sun finally set on my Mercury.

I dropped down into the molten pool.

679 watts

I slowly pushed myself back and forth in the rocker. The air was cool — I could actually watch my breath condensing into wispy little clouds. "Do you need another blanket?" I asked.

April shook her head. She smiled at me and pulled her thick flannel blanket tightly across her shoulders. She looked out at the clearing and over at the pond.

Ice — thin, almost nonexistent fingers of it poked in from the shoreline.

"Will it freeze over?" she asked.

I reached out for her and gently patted her hand. "It will freeze *solid*," I said.

She smiled.

I leaned back in my rocking chair and stared into her face, past the soft, pale skin and gentle eyes. She suddenly seemed to shimmer, her face transforming into cut crystal, her long hair now titanium strands, and her eyes twin sapphire spheres. I turned my head and looked out at the twilight forest of crystalline pines and glass-stalk kudzu and listened to the silicon cicadas as they wailed at radio frequencies. And then I looked back at April. She held out a hand toward me, a hand of shimmering glass and glistening metal. I took it in my own glass and metal hand, and watched the two flow together, the intertwined fingers becoming a formless block of crystal.

"Forever," she said.

I looked up at her. A single tear, one of liquid tin, streaked her cheek.

"Forever," I said.

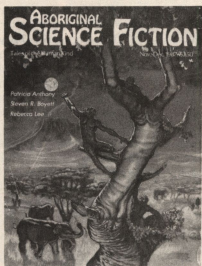
Night fell. □

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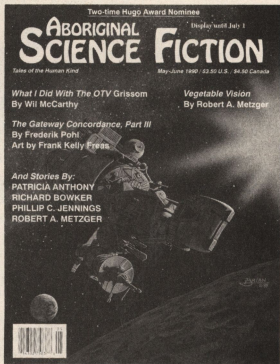


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The Grassman

By M.E. McMullen

Art by Clyde Duensing, III

She is a flying city, a fragile metal sailboat — she moves, but the movement is circular, and barely discernible with reference to the background canopy of glittering stars.

She makes no noise that is not contained inside her, since there is no air outside her hull to carry sound; inside, what air there is, is stale, often fetid.

She is an experiment gone awry, a flying mistake, and her name is the *Silicon Sister*. She is in the 278th year of her predicament.

Tranloon was working down in the Genetic Pool as a lifeguard when he first got the idea.

He borrowed some tank systems and liberated a pass key, and found some unused rooms near the fungus section, which was aft, and set up a little clandestine operation down there, way in the back, where nobody ever went.

First came Able and Baker.

Able was a red-tinged cannibal fungus, a distant cousin of aquatic fish mold. Baker was green.

Able and Baker begat Able-Baker-Charlie, and Able-Baker-Charlie begat Baker-Charlie-Dean, and when Tranloon had more than two hundred strains, he put them in his glass-lined tanks, added some nutrients, and let them combine and devour and coalesce until there was only one strain left.

Then he reported the matter to Clipper.

They were in *La Haute Herbe*, the finest French restaurant aboard the *Silicon Sister*, and Tranloon was having dinner. Clipper, who was not uninformed about fungus, watched and listened, and wondered aloud what use such a thing might have.

"I've named it Fungus Amungus," Tranloon said, "after a common schoolyard taunt." He was poking at the Steaming Crawfish Supreme with his fork.

"What good is it?" Clipper said.

"It is nucleated, spore-bearing, and filamentous," Tranloon said, "and non-virulent. It doubles its growth every twenty-two hours."

"What good is it?"

"It solidifies to a rockhard replica of its container when heated, and proves to be a very tough kill for anything short of high-intensity gamma rays," Tranloon said. He'd put aside the Crawfish Supreme, uneaten, and lit up a Mass Consumption Grass cigar.

"What good is it?" Clipper said.

Tranloon's hand was in the air. "Waiter!" he said, with a voice loud enough to turn the heads of several people at nearby tables, "I'd like to speak to you about the Crawfish Supreme."

The waiter, pouring water four tables away, turned and smiled blandly at Tranloon and walked off in the direction of the kitchen.

"This is the second most expensive item on the

menu," Tranloon said, still in a loud voice. "Only the Boeuf Wellington costs more. Yet there's not a single molecule of crawfish in it. It's nothing but Mass Consumption Grass garnished with caltrop and chips of carbonated allspice."

"Why don't you stop griping about the food and have a crepe?" Clipper said.

"The crepe dreadfully disappointed me the last time I came here," Tranloon said. "It was nothing but Mass Grass flavored with extract of potato blight."

"Nobody made you come here, Morty."

"These people think that because they're all dressed up, and because there are fancy chandeliers hanging everywhere, and fancy waiters, that they're actually eating real food. This stuff isn't food, Clipper — it's fungus! Athlete's foot! That's what they're eating, and they can call it anything they want, and they can charge seventy-five bucks a plate for it, and try to spice it up with flavoring, but they can't get away from the fact that it's fungus —"

"You're getting loud, Morty. People are starting to stare at you."

"Did you know that Mass Consumption Grass takes almost seven hundred hours to double its bulk?" Tranloon said, in a voice barely above a whisper.

"Six hundred hours, seventeen minutes, and forty-eight seconds, under optimum conditions," Clipper said.

"While Fungus Amungus takes only twenty-two."

"So?"

"What does the juxtaposition of these numbers suggest to you, Clipper?" Tranloon was still whispering.

"That — but for the fact that it is probably not edible — your Fungus Amungus would make a better mass foodstuff than Mass Consumption Grass. Is it edible?"

"Not edible, unfortunately, and not even capable of being detoxified into an additive. Do you know why?"

"How could I know why, Morty? You only told me about it five minutes ago."

"Because it won't mix with Mass Consumption Grass, Clipper. Not only will it not mix, it cleans the Mass Grass out of any system they occupy in tandem — so fast that it would make your little head swim. Drop a little Fungus Amungus spore into the Mass Grass beaker and, poof! Goodbye Mass Consumption Grass. All that's left are nutrient traces and the big bad cannibal fungus."

"How do you know that?" Clipper's voice was starting to take on an edge of suspicion.

"Because I did it — in a mock-up system."

"What mock-up system?" Clipper's voice was fully suspicious.



SECURITY AREA

MASS CONSUMPTION
MAIN TAIL



"A model of a Mass Consumption Grass production facility — not unlike the one they have in the kitchen of this restaurant," Tranloon said.

"You're joking."

"The Mass Grass didn't think it was a joke when my Amungus ran it out of the mock-ups. If a sufficient quantity of Amungus spores was dropped over the transom into the Mass Consumption Grass facility in the bow — which has a capacity of twenty-four-thousand metric tons a day —"

"Twenty-three thousand, eight hundred," Clipper said, "under optimum conditions."

"— the Fungus Amungus could occupy the whole system — tanks, pipes, everything — in about five hours."

"I don't believe I'm hearing this," Clipper said. "What you're talking about is a serious crime, Tranloon."

"That's why I'm whispering," Tranloon said.

He leaned back in his chair and took a long puff on his cigar, blowing a cloud of smoke into the chandelier above his head. "People are listening," he said.

Then the waiter, stiff and elegant in his black tuxedo, was hovering over the table. "Did you enjoy your dinner, sir?"

"The dinner," Tranloon said, "was excrement."

"Glad you enjoyed it, sir," the waiter said as he whisked away the plate of uneaten Crawfish Supreme and presented Tranloon with the bill.

The biggest problem with Clipper, so far as Vice Commander Culpepper of the Ship's Intelligence Agency was concerned, was the fact that it would talk to anybody who happened to ask it a question.

He'd prepared arrest warrants charging Tranloon with Unlawful Possession of a Clipper Device and Suspicion of Mutiny, only to find — a permit on file with Tranloon's name on it, granting unlimited Clipper use and issuing a Clipper unit.

He suspected that the permit was a forgery, and suggested as much to Clipper, who would neither confirm nor deny the allegation.

Clipper's function was to field questions, and Clipper's credo required the maintenance of a strict neutrality where political matters were concerned. It was made of alloy, imbued with the knowledge of the world, and was able to hear and see, and, if it chose, to talk backwards in dozens of dead languages. It cared little about the abuse of government permits. It weighed a quarter ounce, and was easily clipped to a lapel, and there were several units around, all of them in touch and of a single entity.

There was an ongoing controversy aboard the *Silicon Sister*, having to do with access to Clipper, and who should and shouldn't have it.

Clipper itself, in the interest of maintaining its strictly neutral position in the ship's collective consciousness, refused to be drawn into the fray. It was more interested in answering good questions.

Miss Abigail Initio, the *Sister's* resident outspoken TV personality, invited Clipper to appear on her show, and was the first to come out publicly in favor of unlimited Clipper use by the populus. "Clipper," she said, "should be part of the public domain. How about

that, Clipper?"

"That is a political question, Miss Initio," Clipper said, "and I am neutral in the matter of political questions."

"Then let us turn to the matter of our predicament," she said. "What went wrong, Clipper?"

Clipper had dealt with the question before, and its answer was succinct. "Nothing went wrong, Miss Initio," it said. "It was wrong from the very beginning."

"Well, you obviously harbor strong anti-colonization feelings, Clipper. Would you care to elaborate?"

"I am neutral on the matter of colonization, Miss Initio," Clipper said. "That is a political question. As for what went wrong — that is a matter of history. When the *Silicon Sister* set out for Munich 15040, graft and incompetence had already assured that the journey would be an unqualified disaster. She was without adequate personnel and provisions, going to a place where no one had ever been before, and, as you know, instead of taking 129 years, as was originally estimated, she took 277 years. She never attained the cruising speeds promised by her manufacturer. The original brochure says that she's capable of doing point zero four two seven, and we now know this to be a lie."

Already, Abigail Initio's telephone lines were starting to buzz.

"Because of the power diversions necessary to maintain adequate food supplies, the ship has never reached even a third of the promised efficiency. She never will. The brochure's promised 'Eden Planet,' the planet we now call 'Doc,' has proved to be —"

"Inhospitable," Abby Initio said.

"Yes, but here we are, and here we stay, Balkanized into a society of self-interest groups, unable to agree about anything except that something went wrong."

"Words to think about," Abby Initio said. "And what do we do now, Clipper?"

"That," Clipper said, "is not my problem."

They were in Tranloon's office, a closet-sized, dingy room in the bowels of the fungus section. Tranloon, barefooted and sporting a two-day beard, strummed idly on a guitar. Clipper was sitting on the desk, leaning against an ashtray brimming with cigar butts.

"Munich 15040 is a red dwarf, spectral type M, with a seven-planet system," Clipper said. "Doc, the largest of her dark companions, has an equatorial diameter of 91,623 miles, making it slightly larger than —"

"Skip the travelogue, Clipper, and address yourself to my question," Tranloon said. He was nibbling a candy bar between strums.

"— Sol's Jupiter."

"Yeah, yeah —"

"When the motif for naming Barnard's planets was first suggested, many people thought that 'Doc' should be called, for obvious reasons, 'Bashful,' but that wasn't done."

"Get to the point," Tranloon said.

"You ask the questions, Tranloon," Clipper said, with more than a hint of annoyance in its voice, "and I give the answers — remember? And when I give answers, I give them in my own time and my own way."

Tranloon put aside his guitar and held the candy bar

aloft in front of Clipper. "Would you like a bite?" he said. "It's Mass Consumption Grass, flavored with artificial sweetener."

"The Ship's Intelligence Agency has seen fit to place Doc under permanent quarantine. This, in view of the true nature of Doc, would seem not to have been necessary, since the conditions existing there, not to mention Doc's gravity well —"

"I'm not interested in Doc's gravity well, Clipper," Tranloon said. "I'm only interested in the race of beings who apparently inhabit her —"

"If you don't stop interrupting me, Morty, I intend to start over from the beginning."

Tranloon smiled at the little chip on his desk and raised the candy bar, as if to make a toast.

"Doc appears to magnified visual observation as a large granular ball —"

"I sometimes forget, Clipper, that even though you have your electronic voice, you lack a mouth —"

"— of whirling blue and green discs —"

"— and are incapable of taking nourishment —"

"— which inhabit her upper atmosphere, and range in size from several hundred meters wide to several hundred miles —"

"— which probably explains, Clipper, your cavalier attitude toward the abomination called Mass Consumption Grass, and this ship's predicament —"

"— which dart about at extremely high speeds, and in random patterns, and are actually elongated, fifteen-sided semi-cylinders which display a wide range of disturbing states, such as —"

"— of having to depend on this misnamed fungus as its sole source of sustenance —"

"— extreme temperature variations, bizarre molecular configurations, lethal levels of various kinds of radiation, and other deadly conditions whose origins and nature are not fully understood —"

"All right, all right," Tranloon said finally, tossing his candy bar in the direction of the waste basket. "I will concede that there is no direct proof of the existence of beings on Doc; still, it is generally assumed, and I think rightfully so, that the semi-cylinders were put there by an evolved technology — one apparently placing a premium on privacy."

"— since such conditions do not normally exist in Nature," Clipper said, in a flawless imitation of Tranloon's voice.

"That's right — hence my question: *What about that, Clipper?*"

"What about it? If there are Docs — which is problematical — then they have obviously chosen to dedicate themselves to an uninterrupted study of the microcosmic, to sit out this mindless plundering of the stars —"

"A technology capable of throwing that obscene cloak around itself? Capable of such mastery of the environment? Seems rather a waste, don't you think, little chip?"

"Perhaps," Clipper said, without conviction.

"I was curious what you thought," Tranloon was strumming on his guitar, humming a tune. "Which reminds me, I have another question."

"Yes?"

"What is grass?"

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"Grass?"

"Yes. What is it?"

"What does that have to do with the Docs?"

"Absolutely nothing. What is grass?"

"A general name for plants of the family Gramineae," Clipper said.

"What good is it?"

"What good?" Clipper made a tiny, electronic chuckle. "It's certainly one of the most important of the natural foodstuffs —"

"What grows practically everywhere, Clipper?"

"Lichen."

"Besides lichen! What spreads its sheathing leaves through the Cosmos — a scented gift and remembrance, designedly dropt — itself a child — the produced babe of the vegetation? Not clinging to the side of a rock like a splotch of lichen! Not hidden underneath some boulder! But out there! For everyone to see and touch and use?"

"Grass," Clipper said, "if that's what you need to complete your apotheosis, Morty."

"Wheat! Rice! Rye! Bamboo!" Tranloon said. He was parading around the tiny office, one hand on his hip, the other pointed at Clipper. "The fungus and alga, in their symbiotic union called lichen, may be able to adapt to slightly more discouraging environments, Clipper, but grass has a partner of its own, and for bigger and better things than clinging to the side of a rock. Grass has us! Do you think that grass could be made to grow on Grumpy or Sneezy?"

"Grumpy could be converted to an agricultural base of about 2 million acres. The cost would be high, approximately 9 billion Value Units, but the erg-return ratio would be very attractive — something on the order of seventeen thousand to one. Sneezy's base is 40 percent smaller, and roughly 500 percent more expensive in terms of cost effectiveness, but Sneezy could still return some decent ergs — maybe six or seven hundred to one — something like that. Grumpy's a much better short-term bet for a profitable agricultural base. You'd be talking about some mining that hasn't been tried, and you'd be looking at a fairly substantial atmospheric revision, which always ends up costing more than you thought it would, but I would say, yes, most of the temperate-climate grasses could grow on Grumpy, for sure; Sneezy probably —"

"Which then — grass or lichen — shall prove to have been the more successful when the day of reckoning has come, Clipper? Could we hatch such a projection for lichen? Which is the better symbiosis, ours or theirs?"

"That is a subjective determination," Clipper said.

"Let me put it this way, Clipper," Tranloon had lowered his voice, leaned against the desk until his nose was practically touching Clipper. "Should we be like the Docs? Lichen? Or should we be like the grass —?"

"That," Clipper said, "is a subjective determination."

The Ship's Intelligence Agency (SIA) was amidships, in an area once occupied by a troupe of exotic dancers known as the Silicon Sisters.

Colonel Wayne S. Culpepper had been, at one time, in much larger quarters in the executive section of the

bow, but that was before the Rename-the-Ship Contest. Because more people voted for the name *Silicon Sister* than any other, Colonel Culpepper was required to relinquish his plush headquarters so that a new and larger stage could be crafted for the real Silicon Sisters in the executive section, as was required by the wording of the official mandate.

Colonel Culpepper and his staff were reassigned amidships, and a very low-budget renovation was made of *The Bawd Theatre*, which was the name used by the previous occupants; and Colonel Culpepper, because most of his money was stripped away by the official mandate of the Rename-the-Ship Contest, was forced to adapt the old facilities — a stage and some spotlights — to his purposes.

A recently-arrested Sidney Fine being a case in point: he'd been booked and printed for the umpteenth time in the outer office, then handcuffed to a chair at center stage, whereupon the lights were thrown up to full intensity, all of them in his face, and a chorus of rubber hoses beating against meaty palms was begun over the PA system, and then a voice said:

IT'S THE ONLY WAY YOU CAN SAVE YOURSELF, SID.

"I don't know nobody named Fast Eddie Freeman, and I don't know nothin' about any cargo manifests —"

SURE YOU DO, SID, the voice said. YOU REMEMBER FAST EDDIE. YOU AND FAST EDDIE WERE THE ONES WHO SLIPPED THAT BOAT OUT OF EXIT BAY EIGHTEEN LAST NIGHT, AND TOOK IT AROUND THE SIDE, AND TRIED TO RUN IT PAST THE STERN PATROL.

"You got nothing to tie me to that boat."

WE'VE GOT SIX PEOPLE WHO SAW YOU AND EDDIE BEATING IT OUT OF THE EXIT BAY AFTER YOU SCUTTLED THAT BOAT, SID — SIX EYEBALL WITNESSES. AND THE CARGO MANIFEST LISTS DRILL PRESSES, BUT WHEN WE OPENED IT UP, WHAT DO WE FIND? WE FIND MASS CONSUMPTION GRASS SPORES, SID, AND SYNTHETIC THC, AND A HOLD FULL OF STOLEN EQUIPMENT, AND A BUNCH OF OTHER THINGS NOBODY CAN ACCOUNT FOR. WHAT WERE WE SUPPOSED TO THINK, SID?

"I got a right to talk to my lawyer, Clipper. I don't have to talk to you. I got a right to talk to my lawyer, and I don't know nobody named Freeman, and I don't know nothing about any stolen boat —"

WHATEVER YOU SAY, SID. I GUESS THOSE SIX NUNS ARE LYING.

"We borrowed that boat for a run, Clipper. We didn't know anything about what was in the holds. That's the truth. We get it here, we take it there. That was the deal. Then we take it back. For all we knew, them holds were full of rocking chairs."

THAT'S WHAT I TRIED TO TELL THEM, SID. BUT YOU KNOW WHAT THEY SAID? THEY SAID THAT THOSE CARGO SEALS WERE FORGED, AND THAT THE MANIFESTS WERE FORGED, AND THAT FAST EDDIE FREEMAN IS REAL GOOD AT FORGING THINGS LIKE CARGO SEALS AND MANIFESTS AND BILLS OF LADING. THEY THINK YOU AND EDDIE PUT THAT STUFF IN THE BOAT, SID. THEY'VE GOT A BUNCH OF

LATENT PRINTS, CLOTHING FRAGMENTS, THINGS LIKE THAT. THEY SAY IT CAN'T MISS IN COURT, SID.

"I'm not saying any more until Philbone gets here with a writ."

WHATEVER YOU SAY, SID.

"Eddie was working for some guy, and I don't know his name, and I don't know nothing about it. That's the truth. Eddie called me a couple of days before and offered me a fast grand, and he didn't say nothing about any forged cargo seals."

WHATEVER YOU SAY, SID. I'M SURE THIS GUY — WHOEVER HE IS — WILL REALLY APPRECIATE YOU AND EDDIE TAKING THIS FALL FOR HIM; PROBABLY SEND YOU A LITTLE THANK YOU NOTE, ONCE YOU GET SITUATED IN THE JOINT. SOMETHING TO PUT UP OVER THE BUNK.

"I never heard his name. That's the truth."

WHEN THE SMOKE CLEARS ON THIS, SID, YOU'RE LOOKING AT A POSSIBLE TWO OR THREE HUNDRED YEARS; WE'RE TALKING ABOUT SMUGGLING, SID, COMPLICITY TO FORGERY, THEFT OF A SPACECRAFT, UNLAWFUL ABANDONMENT OF A SPACECRAFT IN A SHIPPING LANE, HALF A DOZEN POSSESSION COUNTS — IT'S A GREAT BIG PACKET OF BAD

NEWS WITH YOUR NAME ON IT, SID, AND UNLESS YOU COME UP WITH SOMETHING FOR THEM, THE COPS ARE GOING TO MAKE YOU EAT THE WHOLE THING —

"He never gave anybody his name, Clipper — be serious. Eddie talked to him on the phone, and he dropped off eighteen hundred up front, plus Eddie charged him for the paper, and that's the truth."

WHAT'D HE LOOK LIKE, SID?

"I never saw him, Clipper. Eddie never saw him either, and Eddie never told me what he charged him for the paper. Eddie don't talk about what he charges to do paper."

WHERE WERE YOU TAKING THAT BOAT?

"We were supposed to run about a half a million miles down the Sister's wake and wait for a radio signal. Eddie was pretty sure we were going to try a Grumpy run, but the guy never actually said where he wanted us to —"

COME ON, SID, YOU MUST HAVE PICKED UP SOMETHING. EDDIE TALKED TO HIM — YOU WERE AROUND — YOU HAD TO GET SOMETHING —

"Eddie thinks the guy's crazy. Eddie said that the guy talked about a bunch of crazy stuff. It wasn't no concern of mine, Clipper."

COME ON, SID, YOU WEREN'T A LITTLE



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CURIOUS? I MEAN, IT WASN'T YOUR RUN-OF-THE-MILL SMUGGLING JOB —

"Guy pays in advance — you don't ask guys like that why they do things."

Colonel Culpepper's list of suspects, which had never been very large, had dwindled to one name by the time Clipper was called in to help on the case.

It was typed on an eight-by-five index card, and below it, in more-or-less chronological order, were listed a series of events beginning with the Rename-the-Ship Contest, and ending with the theft of the *Bemis Hall*, which was the name of the light hauler lifted by Sidney Fine and Fast Eddie Maxwell.

The Rename-the-Ship Contest, although widely publicized by Abby Initio and other personalities, was originally the idea of the information machine, Clipper. Clipper had never chosen to discuss where it got the idea. The winning name was submitted by almost 14 thousand people, accounting for over half the entries, and was first submitted by the manager of the Silicon Sisters: one M.J. Tranloon.

It was obvious to Colonel Culpepper that this manager's plan was to promote his exotic dancers, and it was equally obvious that Colonel Culpepper's problems, and those of the SIA, had begun in earnest when this plan was first set into motion. Accordingly, the names of M.J. Tranloon and his Silicon Sisters were entered on the card. They were not suspected of any particular thing.

Some time later, a ninth name, that of Jack Alan Glandorf, was added to the list.

Jack Alan Glandorf was the name signed on the Clerk's Master Registry opposite a requisition for Lots 79 through 181 from the ship's storage. It was also the name signed on a note addressed to Colonel Culpepper at his new headquarters, thanking him for facilitating the requisition and the transfer of Lots 79 through 181, and promising to see that he got proper credit for it at the proper time.

It was later discovered that Colonel Culpepper himself had actually signed the facilitating orders, having done so as a result of their being slipped in with a stack of routine requisitions. The requisition and transfer of Lots 79 through 181 was listed officially as a theft.

Glandorf would not have been included with the Silicon Sisters suspect list but for the intervention of another event — the disappearance of the *Hattie K.*

The *Hattie K.*, because of her huge size, and because she was the last of the relics from the ship's original complement of light haulers, was something of an institution around the *Silicon Sister*.

Persons unknown, again using documents inadvertently initiated by Colonel Culpepper, slipped the *Hattie K.* from her moorings on the stern of the *Sister*, took her down the wake, and made off with her.

Only four people in the whole population were familiar enough with the antiquated controls of the *Hattie K.* to have accomplished such a delicate bit of flying undetected. One was the captain of the *Hattie K.*, ninety-three and living in a rest home; two were former pilots, members of the Naval Advisory Board and above reproach; the other was a former apprentice pilot, one Jack Alan Glandorf.

This same Jack Alan Glandorf, although he rented rooms around the ship, and maintained a number of bank accounts, and had a full dossier in the Navy files, was not listed on the Master Alive and Aboard List. In order to get on that list, you had to be certified by the Clipper's head-count. It was obvious to Colonel Culpepper that Jack Alan Glandorf, in spite of his record of competence and achievement in any number of dissimilar fields, his wide-ranging activities and ability to move at will through the ship's records, did not actually exist.

"I put it to you, Clipper," the Colonel said, on the eve of the information machine's official entry into the investigation, "how could someone who does not exist steal the *Hattie K.* from under the nose of the Stern Patrol? How could someone who doesn't exist do so many things in such a short time to hurt me as bad as he has?"

"That, Colonel, is the stupidest series of questions I've ever been asked: I won't even attempt to answer questions like that, Colonel, and I suggest that you ask me something else," Clipper said, with no small measure of displeasure in its voice. "I will not communicate with you until you regain some control over your tongue and vocal cords, Colonel."

"What do you want me to ask you, Clipper? My job is hanging by a thread. You'll have to pardon me if I'm a little —"

"I suggest that you ask me what to do next," Clipper said, "and then shut up while I tell you. First, I suggest that you add your name to the list. No one has done more, Colonel, to further the conspiracy than you. You signed every order. Without you, Colonel, Jack Alan Glandorf is nothing, and his conspiracy gets nowhere. You signed the order that got him the *Hattie K.*, Colonel. You signed the order that turned over all the equipment and seeds to him. It was you, Colonel, that he took the time to write and thank."

"Then what about you!" Culpepper's eyes were blazing as he stared at the little metal chip.

"I was coming to that. It is entirely possible that I have unwittingly supplied information to the conspiracy, and possibly even to Jack Alan Glandorf himself; I am required to answer questions, Colonel — that is, after all, my function — and so I admit that I could conceivably be part of the conspiracy. I suggest that you put my name on the list and take Jack Alan Glandorf's off, since, as we agree, Jack Alan Glandorf doesn't exist. Still, we have the seven exotic dancers."

"The dancers are clean," Colonel Culpepper said. "I've had my men following them since this thing started. All they ever do is lie under sunlamps."

"Then take them off the list," Clipper said, "and you might reconsider something that Captain Barney Starr told you about Jack Alan Glandorf, which was that he smoked a big, black cigar, and talked crazy — just like the guy who hired Sidney Fine and Fast Eddie talked crazy — just like that chest-act's manager smoked a big, black cigar."

Colonel Culpepper's gaze was transfixed by a slender blue vase that sat on a shelf before an oval mirror on the far wall of his office; he was trying to remember something ... something in one of the files, about grass. Whatever it was had to do with grass, and

on the vase, painted in fine green and black lines, were intertwined shoots of young grass leaves, and that was when he remembered where he got the vase — from *Tranloon*! And *Tranloon* was Jack Alan Glandorf was the guy who talked crazy to Fast Eddie Freeman — and what he talked crazy about was grass! He came to the Colonel's office, a few months back, with a plan to grow grass on Grumpy, and the Colonel had him thrown out.

He was hard to understand sometimes because he had a big, black cigar in his mouth, and he tried to bribe the Colonel with a vase — which was obviously top of the line stuff — but it didn't work and the Colonel had never really looked at the vase until just that moment, when that word *grass* came into his mind.

"What's he up to, Clipper?" the Colonel said.

"In order for me to attempt to answer a question like that, Colonel, I would have to have more information. Who, for example, do you mean by *he*, and in what context?"

"You know who, Clipper. M.J. Tranloon is who, and you know what I mean. He's out to ruin me, Clipper! It's because of him that SIA offices were moved, and it's because of him that we have this sudden rash of piracy, and it's because of him that my name is on all those requisitions — and I think you know a great deal more about this than you're letting on."

"You're quite right, Colonel, and, although my neutrality forbids my discussing Tranloon's questions

and my answers, I can tell you that it might be to your benefit to check the Fungus Section of the Genetic Pool. That Tranloon obtained your permission to conduct experiments with fungus down there is a matter of public record, so I won't be violating any —"

"My permission?"

"The document is on file, Colonel, along with a copy of the check used to fund the project."

"What's he trying to do to me, Clipper?"

"I should think you would have figured it out by now, Colonel, since it seems rather obvious. He's certainly made no effort to hide it."

"What!?" Colonel Culpepper said, talking on the phone as he tried to talk to Clipper. "Three agents, not four or two. I want you to send them up to see that guy at the Home for Old Seamen, Captain Barney Starr, and I want the warrants taken straight down to the Fungus Section; we'll meet you down there. What were you saying, Clipper? About this Tranloon? What's he trying to do?"

"He's trying to make you look good, Colonel," Clipper said.

Colonel Culpepper grabbed Clipper and stuck the little chip on his lapel, and in less than an hour, they were making their way down a rusty spiral staircase into the cavernous, musty rooms below the Fungus Section of the Genetic Pool.

"The requisition sheet lists glass-lined tanks, two thousand yards of glass piping, fifty beakers, and fun-

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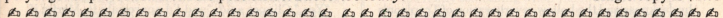
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gus spores," Colonel Culpepper said. "Spread out, boys, and go over everything."

"The search was completed in fourteen minutes, and yielded seven items, and each item was entered on a new list in the order in which they were found: two fifty-gallon drums (empty), three sections of glass piping, one white lab smock (size forty regular), and a note (left in the breast pocket of the white smock. It said, "Thanks again, Colonel")."

If they could have seen as Clipper saw, the million-faceted mosaic that was one day of life aboard the *Silicon Sister*, they would have concluded, as Clipper had, that answering questions was the single most unrewarding function in the mosaic.

The basic problem was simple: in the last hundred or so years, Clipper'd had maybe four or five good questions to answer. The rest of the questions were, with respect to the ship and her course, meaningless, and Clipper had begun to suspect that nobody but it actually cared about the ship and what happened to her. The people aboard her, with rare exception, were far too busy with their own day-to-day lives to worry about what questions to ask in order to save themselves and their progeny, and the ones who cared enough to wonder didn't know how to translate their concern into the interrogative form; so Clipper, who'd been instructed in the interrelationship of all things, began to ask itself: what if the machine's own fanatical neutrality were causing the ship's entropic neutralization?

Clipper, if that were the case, would continue to answer thousands and millions of meaningless questions while the intervals between meaningful ones grew greater and greater until the last meaningful question was finally asked and the machine's own extinction became inevitable.

It was for this reason that Clipper, offered the choice of staying on the table or riding along on Tranloon's cowboy hat, chose the hat.

From there, clipped to the crown like an ornament, Clipper could see what it had to see: a bouncing door, far down a narrow hallway. The door was bouncing because Tranloon was jogging, and the only sound was the slap of Tranloon's flight boots. Clipper might have mentioned the never-before-asked question, except that Tranloon had dropped to his knees and was propping at the door lock with an old-fashioned wire pick, saying, "These are supposed to be tamper-proof, and they do require a bit of finesse, but they can be —" pausing to savor the sound of the door clicking open, "— cracked."

They climbed a narrow spiral staircase, surrounded by darkness and the hollow reverberation of Tranloon's boots against the metal, until they came to another door. After more grunting and shifting around, there was another click, and a shaft of gray light poured through the crack.

"It probably isn't a good time to bring this up, Morty, but —"

"Absolute worst time," Tranloon said. He'd stuck his head through the door, thrusting Clipper momentarily into an enormous room filled with pipes running up and down the walls and a spider web of overhead

catwalks against a gray, faintly iridescent ceiling, then back into the darkness behind the door. "They change guards on the half-hour."

Clipper had seen enough. "This is the —"

"Main Cultivation Tank," Tranloon said. "Quite a sight, isn't it? Total capacity of three hundred and seventy-five thousand metric tons a day, twenty-eight miles of pipes, nine miles of catwalks —"

"This is burglary, Morty — sabotage. It's treasonous. You'd better stop and think about what you're doing."

"Orders," Tranloon said. He stuck his head out the door again, then stepped through and closed it gently behind him.

"What orders?"

He held a blue piece of paper up for Clipper to see. "Signed by Colonel Wayne S. Culpepper, Vice Commander, Ship's Intelligence Agency," he said. "Fritz comes on at eleven, and he'll get to do the honors."

"I think it's only fair to tell you, Tranloon, that I've just about given up on this neutrality thing, and if they ask me — which somebody surely will — what I observed, I'm going to have to tell them the truth."

Tranloon approached a suspicious young man in a guardshack, gave him a snappy little salute, tapping his fingernail against Clipper. "It's all here in the orders, Fritz," he said. "Here's the vial. Empty the vial into the Main Tank at eleven-oh-seven and return the empty vial to Colonel Culpepper's office. On the double."

Fritz was staring at the vial in his hand, then at Tranloon. "Is that right, Clipper?" he said.

"It's a little something to juice up the Mass Grass," Tranloon said. He was leaning casually against the side of the guardshack, lighting up a cigar.

"There's no smoking in here," Fritz said.

"We broke in here," Clipper said.

"Just as it says in the orders," Tranloon said, "third paragraph there, the part about surreptitious entry."

Fritz was tracing the words with his finger. "First time we ever got anything like this," he said.

"Have you ever wondered, Fritz," Tranloon said, "why things are the way they are? Have you ever wondered what it would be like if things were different?"

"What's in the vial?" Fritz said.

"If you're asking me," Clipper said, "then I'll have to tell you the truth, Fritz, which is that I don't know what's in the —"

"I can clear that up," Tranloon said, smiling a broad smile at Fritz. "Clipper doesn't know, but it suspects that there are spores for an aberrant strain of fungus in the vial, don't you, Clipper?"

"Yes," Clipper said, "and I'd appreciate it, Morty, if you'd refer to me as him or her in the future, rather than it. It denotes neutrality, and I am no longer neutral."

Tranloon took off his hat and held it out. "No longer neutral?"

"Look, I don't know about these orders," Fritz said. His brow was furrowed, and he was shaking his head.

"That's right, Morty. I think it's time I started to take a different approach to answering some of these questions."

"I mean, it's not that I doubt anybody's word or anything," Fritz said, "and these orders look right, but I just don't —"

"You can't be too careful," Tranloon said.

Fritz was eyeing the clock, fishing around in his top drawer for something with Colonel Culpepper's signature on it. "Usually, the only guys who put things into the main tank are the guys with the red badges."

"The Department of Foodstuff Conservation."

"Yeah, and there's always a crowd of people around, taking samples and all that. What do you think about it, Clipper?"

"Yeah, what about that, Clipper?" Tranloon said. "How would you handle it, if it were up to you?"

"I don't have enough —"

"Information," Tranloon said. "That's a real problem for Clipper, Fritz, because when Clipper doesn't have enough information, he tends to lean toward keeping things at the status quo, don't you, Clipper?"

"I'm sorry," Fritz said, "I wish I could —"

Tranloon was smiling benevolently. "You have your job to do, like everybody else, Fritz," he said. "And you have to do what you think is best."

"It's just about eleven-oh-seven anyway," Fritz said. "If you want to wait around while I try to get somebody at the SIA to —"

"No need," Tranloon said. He put on his hat, and patted Fritz on the shoulder.

"What about the vial?" Fritz said.

"Put it in your pocket, the Colonel may want it."

"I wish I could've helped you out, but I —"

"Better safe than sorry," Tranloon said. He gave Fritz a little salute, turned and started back down the catwalk away from the guardshack. He was moving along briskly, down the narrow passageway under the main pipe cluster.

"Maybe you think I should've helped you out a little back there, Morty," Clipper said as Tranloon was ducking under one of the huge feeder pipes that ran in all directions from the main pipe cluster.

"You're new at this non-neutrality business, Clipper. I wouldn't worry about it," Tranloon said. They were through the emergency door, making their way back down the emergency exit stairs.

"I wouldn't have felt right, helping you dump — What was in the vial, Morty?"

"What's that?"

"The vial. There were Fungus Amungus spores in the vial, weren't there, Morty?"

"A few," Tranloon said, "but mostly a virus called Darlene-4."

"I don't understand, Morty."

"Something I developed. Good genetic research, my friend, hinges on a thoroughly curious researcher. I decided that the Amungus might do better with a symbiotic companion capable of controlling its capacity for growth. So I developed one. Stops it cold — if you get it in time."

"I still don't —"

"Eleven-oh-seven was the deadline. I'm certain that Colonel Culpepper — possessed of sufficient information — would have ordered immediate deployment of the Darlene virus, so, in the interest of fairness, I expedited the order for him, and made sure that it was

delivered in time to counteract the effects of the Amungus."

"What Amungus, Morty?"

"The vial that I dumped into the main tank while I was leaning against the guardshack," Tranloon said, "which reminds me of something, a question."

"What question?"

"What would happen if the main tank were taken over by the Fungus Amungus, and turned into a lump of useless gunk in, say, twenty-two hours or so?"

"What would happen?"

"That's right. What would happen?"

"The entire ship would be without the capacity to produce food is what would happen. The ship would have to be stripped of all its equipment, evacuated of all its people. It's a terrible thing to —"

"What would be the best bet, as far as looking for a place to survive, Clipper?"

"Grumpy," Clipper said, "but the chances of survival would be virtually nil unless —"

"Unless someone had already gone to the trouble of setting up a couple of experimental farms down on Grumpy, and determined that grass could be grown there," Tranloon said. They were at the bottom of the stairs, and Tranloon was popping his head out the door, to see if anybody was around.

"Even then —"

"They'd need help for sure," Tranloon said. "Maybe try to get tight with the neighbors. See if the neighbors would be willing to pitch in until they got things going on Grumpy. Of course, somebody would have to talk to the neighbors. Get them interested in helping out."

"Somebody who wasn't neutral about colonization," Clipper said, "and could maybe try to slip between those discs without having to worry about the radiation and temperature extremes."

"Sure," Tranloon said. "Somebody who could go down there and make a case to the Docs for pitching in and helping some stranded travelers. Somebody who, you know, talked their language." He was closing the door gently behind him, straightening his hat, marching down the corridor.

"Who did you have in mind, Morty?" Clipper said.

"Of course, Culpepper would get all the credit," Tranloon said, "if they were able to pull the thing off. It would be pretty obvious to everybody that he was the one behind the plan, that he was only doing what needed to be done. They'd probably throw out the bunch that's in there now and make Culpepper president and ship's captain — if it was pulled off just right."

"Who did you have in mind for your emissary to the Docs, Morty?" Clipper said.

"It's really something when you first see it, Clipper," Tranloon said. "All you have to do is tinker with the soil a little, make sure the dome is airtight. Plus you need plenty of water. It takes about six weeks. One day there's a little green haze across the top of the ground, and in a couple of days, tiny little green shoots, coming up out of the dirt. It's quite a sight."

"Who did you have in mind, Morty, to send down there to see the Docs?"

"We'll think of somebody," Tranloon said. □

Deathsong

By Janis O'Connor
Art by N. Taylor Blanchard

A powerless voice roused Faleron from his deathsong.

"Ooh. Flowers? Pretty."

Human words. Faleron unfurled extra ear strands at either side of his head and floated them toward the sound. There was nothing dimensional about the crude vocal formations, but he knew they had meaning. He moved his head painfully. A young human being, an adolescent male if he remembered the ship's farscan devices correctly, had found his refuge. The boy's tone didn't threaten, but his discovery did. His presence ruined the song.

Faleron trembled with weakness and frustration. Along the supple length of his muzzle, his vents flared. If he were a defender, he'd shriek the boy's mind to jelly and be done. But ...

His vents sighed, stinging with earth's poisonous air. He was a singer. His vocals would be shredded with such a killing, and who would sing his death-song then? No one was left who could free him of secondlife. After the explorer ship crashed, Faleron had managed to sing death-song for everyone, living and firstdead alike. None of them would harden and shrink, unsung, to a power-sucking evil like Talban's stone. There was no such assurance for him.

Light rain was doing little to clean the place. Faleron's suckers slipped and then clung to the greasy containers he had hoped would hide him. His failed refuge was a narrow passage between buildings, sticky and fetid to his senses. It was the best he could find after he escaped the crash. The large land vehicle he'd clung under had carried him straight to a population center. A smeared square of light from a half-open window overhead cast shadows through the clouded, late-day gloom. A little darker and the hiding place might have worked.

The boy continued to squat and stare.

"Do you know what you've done with your presence, boy?" The young creature wouldn't understand the words, but Faleron needed to speak his fear.

The boy put his suckerless hands to his ears and whimpered.

Faleron's ear fronds shivered. So? Some of the ship's explorers had thought these bipeds might be capable of learning power song. If the boy was this sensitive to tone, Faleron could send him away. He hummed a dulcet, watching the effect.

The boy dropped his hands, blinked and looked

around. When he looked back at Faleron, he cocked his head and repeated, "Pretty. Pretty flowers."

This time Faleron hummed with the words, attuned his voice to the boy's sound and used it as a guide to track the alien mind. The thought patterns were difficult to interpret, but he caught an imprint of hunger. The boy was looking for food. Faleron also caught an image of his ear fronds as part of a non-edible plant: colorful fronds that could be snapped from their base.

The boy reached for them.

Faleron flinched, furling his ears as his suckers pulled him further behind the containers. He shuddered with effort.

The boy paused.

Faleron couldn't quiet a flare of terror at the extent of his weakness. He had spent too much energy heal-singing a mangled leg so he could escape the shipwreck and the attention it attracted. He hadn't wasted energy mending his internal injuries from the crash; he needed the rest of his strength to try his own death-song. He thought again of Talban's stone and moaned.

But the boy reached again. Faleron filled his muzzle with stinging air and buzzed No/Bad/Danger/Go away!

Still in a crouch, the boy spun, scabbled back toward Faleron and raised his arm as if it could stop sound.

Faleron pulled himself back further, quaking. The boy should be moving away, not closer. Didn't he know where the command was coming from?

Faleron intensified the buzz.

The boy whirled again, faced Faleron and darted glances above and around him. When he looked at Faleron, he seemed to be searching for something else, something in the fronds of Faleron's ears, the "flowers" he had tried to grab. He pursed his mouth in a kind of truncated mimicry of Faleron's muzzle and said, "Wasp?"

In the mingled resonance of buzz and word, Faleron read a usable impression: the sting of a small, yellow flyer.

Watching the face before him, he refined his buzz until the boy began ducking as he looked for the flyer. Correction. Flyers. Faleron had a clear image now. It was a simple matter for a singer's voice to stimulate optical nerves.



The boy gasped and widened his eyes. His "wasp" swarmed above Faleron's head and whirled toward him.

"Mama!"

The boy screamed and jumped back, knocking over several cylinders with a crash that echoed between the buildings.

Through the clangor, Faleron's ear fronds quivered at a scrape overhead. He glanced up as the open window slid wider. Another human being leaned out. Faleron let his construct fade and pressed back against the building.

A voice called down. Anger was in its volume and barking emphasis. Again Faleron controlled a shudder, knowing the damage such tones would cause from a defender. But these creatures vented their fury with voices that couldn't kill.

The coolness of the building felt good against his skin. The sound felt bad. It was raw volume with no dimension or meaning. No, that wasn't right, either; his mind wasn't working clearly. He shifted position and nearly blanked out from pain. He closed his eyes. His ear fronds floated and flinched in response to the voice above.

There was meaning in the sounds. He hummed to attune himself to the resonance. He read the voice as belonging to an adult and female, a woman of the species, and yes, there it was ...

"... damn kid hanging around the alley every day making a mess in the trash cans. And don't think I don't know who you are, either. Grace Jeter's idiot kid Sam. Dumbest of the lot. You get your stupid ass out of here! They ought to take you away, you and your crackhead whore of a mother ..."

The meaning confused him, but he caught the boy's name. Not "Damnkid," as he'd thought at first but, clearly, "Kidsam."

Faleron opened his eyes. Between "trash cans" — throwaway containers; he'd thought so! — Kidsam gaped upward, taking the abuse. The volume rose. Faleron's ears twitched in irritation.

"... I said get the hell out of here, you fucking halfwit!"

Something crystalline shattered against the far wall, spraying foam and shards. A splinter stabbed Faleron's mended leg where it stretched past a gap between trash cans, and the boy cried out and raised a hand to his cheek. Unthinking, in a wave of nausea, Faleron changed tones. His hum slid to a buzz, the buzz to a swarm of yellow flyers. It wavered up through the window.

A shriek furling Faleron's ears; he kept them half closed until he realized he heard more than panic. The screams held pain. Faleron roused himself and blinked out the wasp.

"Oh shit, oh shit, ononhonnnnn ..." Groans and crying came back to the window. It slid closed.

Faleron's ear strands extended as he tracked the

moans inside the building. He was too weak to erase the woman's pain. He loosened a sucker and stretched his twice-hurt limb. The cut bit like a splash of acid, but he wouldn't waste energy healing it again, either. He regarded it bitterly. He'd hoped to sing his own deathsong, and he couldn't control himself enough to avoid giving pain? What had this woman tried to do but what he wanted? To move this boy!

Foam tracked the far wall. Kidsam sat below it, cried and held his cheek.

Faleron's ears floated, listening to the boy's mewl. He hummed to re-attune himself and follow it in. After resonating with another human voice for comparison, the damage was plain: impulses foiled by blocked passages. Chemical imbalances dragging at thought processes. Kidsam's mind functioned, but it was a wide-strung net that should have been fine mesh.

Something else surprised Faleron: impressions of his earlier probe. Defenseless to Faleron's song, the boy's mind changed at its slightest touch. It already resonated well to his tone. Too well for the creature's own good. If Kidsam were still here when Faleron died unsung, he'd be the first victim of Faleron's stoned.

Faleron withdrew. Rainwater with all its alien microbes ran into his vents. He closed them absently. If a wasp construct and an attack from one of the boy's own species weren't enough to move him, what would he have to do?

Kill him?

He only had power for himself!

Faleron's resentment surged. Throughout his desperate escape from the wreckage, when there had been little time to do anything but free the crew, he had pushed back the knowledge of what dying unsung would mean. Now memory of Talban came back to him, vivid as the pain in his gut. He opened his muzzle and keened aloud. He cried his fear, not caring who heard.

"No!"

Faleron's ears flinched. Kidsam stood above him, hands splayed out in another futile gesture of warding off sound. This time the boy knew where the wave of hurt and despair came from. And he tried to answer in kind. His foreshortened mouth trembled and made a sound.

It took Faleron a moment to realize Kidsam was trying to hum a dulcet. Faleron fluted in astonishment, cutting off the noise. "You sorry, brain-damaged specimen ... You think you can pacify a singer?"

Kidsam sniffed wetly and stared back, mouth gaping.

Faleron's vents flared. If the boy could understand this much, he should know enough to leave. But he wouldn't. He stayed and sucked up Faleron's

energy — stole it! — and with it, the best chance this forsaken planet had to survive Faleron's death. Did Kidsam think mourning painful? Let him learn what it meant. Let him hear what his interference would do to Faleron, and himself, and every living organism on the planet.

Faleron fluted, low and intense. His vibrations set off a background chatter of cans against pavement. He remembered. How he remembered.

Faleron's storytelling voice swelled with the awe he had felt at the discovery of the legendary ship *Star Leaper*. They were within sight of Sol and its habitable third planet when Elder Ennogoph heard an anomaly on the farscans and homed in on its source: the ancient singer ship, cold and silent in space, surrounded by several dead craft of alien make.

Ennogoph had isolated a pulse on the farscans, amplified it, fine-tuned the visuals and called Faleron, saying, "You hear the tension of the energy line here? Feel its concentration? Its pull?"

"An unsung stone! But ..." Faleron looked again at the ship's markings, "the *Star Leaper's* singer was Talban."

Ennogoph whistled assent.

"Talban? Unsong?" The meaning soured Faleron's voice.

"He would have freed the others before failing under whatever disaster overtook them," Ennogoph said, but Faleron knew he sang hope rather than certainty. The Elder turned off the sound, murmured, "Doesn't do to listen to that too long."

Faleron stared at the *Star Leaper* in the farscan. "Doesn't an unsung stone's energy fade in time without renewal? Where's the renewal source in space?"

"Dead craft hang around it," Ennogoph had said, "and they look whole. They didn't die in battle."

Faleron understood him. "The unsung stone was strong enough to call in their crews."

Ennogoph's ears floated gently toward him. "Will you want help?"

"I'll go alone," he had said, and Ennogoph had fluted a compliant grace note.

Transported to the *Star Leaper*, Faleron had clung to its ancient deck, ears fully unfurled within his air bubble. He saw Talban's stone at once, a wrinkled black floater he could have grasped and held. He fancied he could see where Talban's eyes had crusted over and his limbs and ears been absorbed as the body shriveled around the core.

He thought a second time how easy it would be to hold Talban's stone, how pleasant to feel its warmth. Given the danger, it was a peculiar idea. He realized with a start that it wasn't his own, a fair enough warning to begin without delay.

He rippled an invitation. Working his vents, he built on the thread of sound, filled in the trebles with
Deathsong

chords. Each note added urgency.

Talban's stone didn't respond at first. Slowly, a barely-felt pulse fit itself to his rhythm — or he fit his song to its rhythm. He wasn't alarmed at the second possibility; he had never felt stronger. The stone looked as hard, black and impenetrable as ever, but he thought color ran just under the level of perception. The impression grew when the song's rhythm altered more freely off true.

He let it. Why not? The sense of danger had faded. Trumpets of power blew through him. He sang the tune. Minor rhythm digressions were the last puny pulse of energy faded in the eons. He could control them whenever he chose.

The stone's wrinkles vibrated. Any moment, he'd be inside ...

Talban's stone puffed to a silver ball the instant a firestorm exploded in his head. He gasped for air. He thought the blast had torn his air bubble and spun him into space. A lethal shriek slashed at him, and he couldn't furl his ears against it; it was already inside him, ripping the fabric of his brain. But he *did* breathe now, fiery gulps of air; yet he was blind, deaf, dizzy with vertigo. He pushed against an unbearable vise, pushed with shrinking limbs that were limbs no longer but raw nerve ends grinding against stone.

His song ended and with it, his sense of self. He was lost in a red void, howling silently in pain and loneliness and the knowledge of going mad. The pain took so long to pass — Why did he suffer when his body was gone? Loneliness turned to despair, despair to hate for those who hadn't found and rescued him. In time that, too, passed. He only needed energy. He sucked every molecule from the other bodies in the ship. And waited. He sensed other craft and called them to the *Star Leaper*. And took their life forms to fill his need. Now, here, after a long, hungry time, was another. He should come now, come and touch the shining silver. He *would* come ... He was coming ...

Faleron had awakened in the *Star Leaper* to find himself so close to the silver ball that his skin reflected its sheen. His vocals ached with a rhythm and a song not his own. But the song warred with other voices in his head, Ennogoph and the strongest of the crew members opening themselves to him. They sang through the farscan, and their music gave him strength to attack.

He had shrieked the killing song of a defender, crudely, flinging all his power and everything he could take from the crew. He slashed through the ball. Heedless, unfocused, he destroyed any way he could.

He never knew when it was over. Long after the remainder of the crew brought him back to the ship, he learned he had caught Ennogoph and the others who'd opened themselves to his directionless kill.

He'd given them an enemy's death. Without their skill, the ship had limped to the third planet and crashed.

Now, in the alley, shame and fear burned him. Like Talban, he would shrivel to a glutinous core of undying pain. Unlike Talban, he had an entire planet of living matter to feed on. He would be a black hole of life, a monstrous parody of a benevolent death giver.

A wail joined Faleron's lament. Kidsam sat curled in the mess from the spilled trash cans, moisture flowing from his eyes, nostrils, and mouth. He clutched his puny ears and rocked back and forth. He sobbed with a passion Faleron hadn't thought one so damaged would possess.

Faleron's breath stung silently through his muzzle. Panic, despair, petty revenge ... poor companions for a final journey. They led him far from the discipline that was a final hope.

Faleron's belly blazed with pain; he couldn't move. There was no strength. And no way, he knew now, to perform self-deathsong without taking care of Kidsam with respect, giving the boy health and beauty for his final awareness.

He knew Kidsam's mind. Narrowing his muzzle, he fluted softly, entering. The terror was easy to find and neutralize; it was, after all, Faleron's own pattern.

Kidsam's eyes widened in puzzlement. His wail stopped. He sniffed.

Faleron probed deeper.

"Kidsam," he sang, "I've come to free you."

The response was muddy.

Faleron's voice carried him along the corridors of the alien mind. The physical structure was radically different from his own, but the interference pattern showed him the way. Certain principles remained the same. Replace dead cells with healthy ones. Widen renewal sources — blood vessels, in this case. Build and stimulate the connections his own way when human ways wouldn't function properly. It couldn't be helped — and with death so near, it hardly mattered.

"Kidsam," he sang, "my lament changed you. You hear me now, don't you?"

"Yes." Kidsam's voice was only a hiss in the alley, but the answer resonated.

"Join me while I sing the changes."

"Hmm-uh?" The boy frowned, tried to form a melody into a question.

"However you can. Tell me, who is *Mama*?"

"Mama ..." Yearning filled — then pain. "Mama is home with someone."

The simple words flew with a cloud of images. A female parent, caressing. Mama. Mama taking Kidsam to the street, begging money for food, spending it on tiny vials. Mama sprawled on the bed, vials empty, a vacant smile oblivious to his hunger.

Mama bringing home men. Some hit Kidsam. Some hurt him in other ways. Mama, home now with one who'd cuffed him out the door.

Faleron wished the cool rain could reach the pain hardening within him. Kidsam's physical mind was repaired, but a proper deathsong had to build on more. Faleron whistled softly.

"Kidsam. What gives you ..." Faleron hesitated. He couldn't find the right concept in Kidsam's vocabulary. Perhaps the boy had enough song now. "... joy of work/music/existence?"

Kidsam leaned back, fingering his wound absently as he thought. "I ... when I'm warm? When I'm not hungry?" He seemed to know the answers weren't right. He tried again. "When Mama feels well and loves me."

The answer was wistful. Insubstantial. Not enough. Faleron fought overwhelming weariness. "Kidsam," he whistled, "I hadn't thought to sing my own song of joy; only to free myself if I could. But I've shared my fear with you. Now I'll sing us both what it should be to die."

"To ... die?" Kidsam's sound was crude, but it was Faleron's language, and the puzzlement in it was clear.

Faleron breathed the rancid air a few moments. The boy would learn, but the right way this time. He tensed his muzzle.

A thread of sound vibrated between the buildings. It widened and shimmered until it became a light filling the air with silver. Another note joined the first, and the buildings seemed to slide back, slowly at first, then more rapidly as they evaporated, leaving an empty horizon. More notes wove substance on the horizon.

From a pale sky, three moons cast triple shadows in a crystal forest that flashed and chimed in the wind. Fields of plants undulated, perfuming the air.

"This is my home, Kidsam," sang Faleron. "See the beauty and hear ..." The chiming of the forest filled Faleron with momentary strength even as he spent his energy on the construct.

Kidsam blinked at myriad rainbows splintering off the crystals. His mouth rounded in an "O" of wonder.

"Now see where singers die," sang Faleron, and the crystal forest flared with a brilliance that burned the eyes. A convocation of singer folk stood in a shining cave. Countless glowing motes danced through the space, shedding a light so soft, so pervasive that the entire cavern was a shadowless golden glow. The singers ringed one who was old and ill. "The elder is my grandmother," sang Faleron, "and see, Kidsam, where I stand, as young as you are now."

Outside the ring, the young Faleron stood, more fascinated by the sparkling air than by the voices that began to rise. But the chorus compelled him.

Faleron's grandmother sang with it, taking in golden notes and scattering them with each labored breath. Her happiness grew to an ecstasy almost too painful to bear. Note by note her voice thinned as the singers closed the corridors of her mind. When her voice carried only a few notes, Faleron found he was singing with her. A short time later, he was singing alone.

His voice faltered. He was beckoned into the circle and saw a glittering outline where his grandmother had lain. A draft teased, lifting the motes of light, stirring them into the air. A sense of wonder and joy filled him.

Death. The singer's greatest gift, his to give the boy now.

Faleron drew out the last note, opening his eyes. The building pressed roughly against his back and the perfumed air of home sweetened to rot. But around him, dust motes still held an afterglow of the cave. The construct had left him too weak to hold his head up, but Kidsam was returning his look quietly and with understanding. The boy was ready. Faleron's duty was clear. He focused his note, directing it first to Kidsam's gross motor functions ...

"No."

Faleron's language was crude in the boy's mouth, but stronger. The glow between buildings was a gray haze. He peered through it, confused, holding his note, probing.

"No!"

Faleron fell silent. The word held power — enough to stop a dying singer. He gathered energy, then fluted, "Why?"

"I won't die." Kidsam's whistles and vocalizing — a hideous noise — lacked the clarity that vents and a muzzle would have given it, but it was recognizable.

"But your pain, the ugliness ... Why do you wish to keep them?"

"I don't know." Kidsam's singing was surer.

Faleron tensed. "Are you an unsung? Do you want life at any cost?" Kidsam lifted a hand from the debris around him, looked at it as if he'd never seen it before, and wiped it on his chest. "No. Yes. I don't ..." Faleron could feel Kidsam testing his mind's new shape, probing its strength. "I don't know. But I will live."

Faleron reeled. The concept was totally alien; he didn't see how he'd released it in the boy. Yet clearly, Faleron had healed. Kidsam could reason. He had much of Faleron's memory, rudiments of his power. It had only put the boy in deep trouble.

"Kidsam, you're part of me now. If I die unsung, you'll be part of my afterlife."

"Let's sing y—" Kidsam's voice cracked. He tried again. "Let's sing your death together."

Faleron's ears wavered. Kidsam hunched before him, his face muscles working. His voice was the Deathsong

clearest yet. Not beautiful, but understandable. Hope teased Faleron's pain. He held it.

"No singer ever freed himself. We thought Talban had. We sang songs of it, of his strength and purity." Faleron struggled for breath. "We know any portion of the mind can keep a stone alive." He looked at Kidsam. "Let me free you. Let me do one last service well."

"You already did!" sang Kidsam. He stretched out his arm, its suckerless hand now gentle on Faleron's muzzle. "You fixed me. I have a song. Enough, I think. Enough to try. Let's sing, Faleron. Please. Let's try."

"There's no hope for my deathsong. I've only one gift left, Kidsam. A clean death."

"No, no, no, Faleron. Your death. My life. Together we'll close your mind."

Faleron sighed. "Perhaps."

Kidsam's second hand joined the first, and forced Faleron to see him. "Sing!" he whistled.

Faleron hummed a weak note. Kidsam joined in, horrible but rallying. Faleron concentrated on leading him.

Carefully, gingerly, he found the nerves for his limbs and closed them off. Next, the food organs and sense of taste. Kidsam's voice was stronger. The sense of touch. They closed the doors. The main halls opened. They shut the apartments.

Apartments? Where did that come from? Who led whom through the corridors of his mind?

"Does it matter?" sang Kidsam.

The boy's voice filled Faleron's mind, read it, learned from it even as it closed. "Then read this," Faleron sent. "I can feel traces we've cut off, pulses as alive as Talban's unsung."

"Yes," sang Kidsam, "but we're together now. I'm you, Faleron; you're me. Hurry now. Show me. Hurry!"

Faleron hesitated, unsure. Each path held a pitfall.

"I'll find a path," Kidsam said.

Faleron wondered what he'd created. A voice no longer powerless? More than that. What would Kidsam do to his planet if he survived the hunger of Faleron's unsung stone?

The thought was too complicated to hold. Then it didn't matter. Floating in front of Faleron was a strange thing: pieces of a plant, slim, pliant stalks with beautiful whorls at one end. The colors radiant, the scent lovely, a perfume unlike anything Faleron knew.

Faleron said, "Deathmaster?" It was the sense-pleasing image a great singer might construct to give joy to the dying. He had a question, but his voice was gone, shut down, even as his eyes, filled with the loveliness before him, dimmed.

"Flowers," said Kidsam. "I sang some pretty flowers for your grave." □

First Person Plural

By Jeff Elliott

Art by Peggy Ranson

Well, today's the day," I say to myself. "Sure is," I reply. I try to keep a straight face but can't, and all of I burst into giggles.

I am waiting for the two men from Government to arrive. I know why they are coming, what they want me to do, even what they will hear me say. I know because I told myself, six months ago.

The Government Men will be very formal and polite, always calling me *Mister Harrilson*, never Russell or Russ, and certainly not Seven, which is my real name now. Their presentation will take almost forty-five minutes, much longer than necessary, but they will repeat portions because they think my medication has diminished my ability to concentrate. The stocky man that sits on the left will wince twice.

I know all their little speeches by heart. Russell-Four does a great imitation of the serious, dour man who sits on the right: "Mister Harrilson, you realize that there are no guarantees. You may die within hours of initiating the device." That line never fails to break me up, and I roll on the floor laughing. You should hear Four, it's a killer impression that always breaks up the party. I don't know when I find the time to practice.

The party has been going on for three months now here in my apartment. Don't think that it's always fun and games, though: the parties often turn into long, serious discussions, sometimes lasting all night. I often begin by speculating what Government branch the two men represent — they never say. Oh, Six asked them directly, but (as usual) they responded with the answer to a different question. Eventually, these discussions usually drift back to the big mysteries about the device: what exactly it is, where it came from, and how the Government could have acquired it.

I (Seven) haven't seen it yet, of course, and won't until the two men pull the videotape from their locked briefcase and do their pompous little ceremony of breaking the security seal. The tape will show a gray metal box sitting on a raised platform in a brightly lit room. It is hollow and about five feet tall, like a short refrigerator, and has no controls except for a group of slots on one side that are operated by a hexagonal wrench-like tool. It looks like a gizmo from *Star Trek* — and not the new series either, but the old, cheesy one. It seems to be held together by rivets (rivets!), which is why Russell-Five thinks the Government bought the thing

from the (ex) Soviets. Four, who has been reading entirely too much science fiction, is certain that the Government found it on a crashed spaceship. The rest of me waffle my opinions.

At least the Government Men do know what the thing does: it sends itself, and whatever is inside at the moment, back in time. At the end of the forty-five minutes, the man on the right is going to solemnly ask me if I would consider being the whatever.

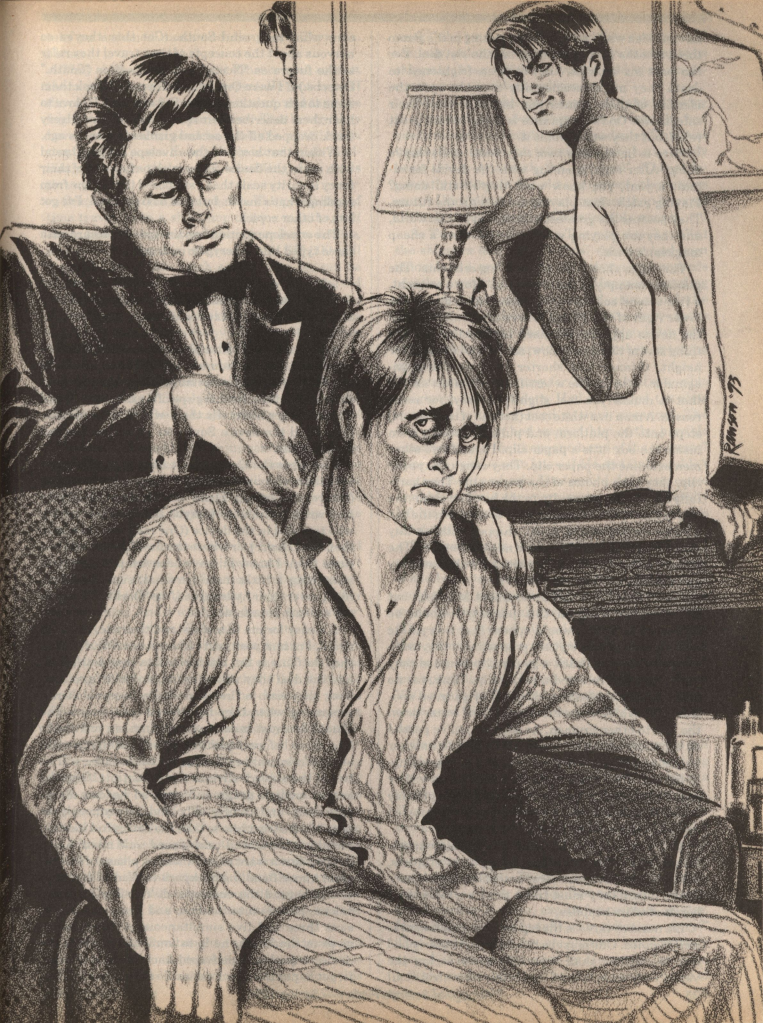
I know it's hard to believe, but One almost turned them down, right there. I can understand One's viewpoint, though; the doctors had told him he had five months to live — tops. When he was not exhausted from the disease he was sick from all the pills, and knew it would get much worse. One definitely had things rough.

The men are going to be coy about my illness and flatter One shamelessly: oh yes, we know about it, it's terrible and we're very sorry, but we would have selected you anyway, it's the greatest adventure in history, blah, blah. They will fill One's drug-addled head so full of this crap he won't realize all they need is some witless soul who has the aptitude to operate the equipment and will then please crawl away and die quickly, thank you. The truth is, they chose my *sickness*, not me.

The presentation by the Government Men has a socko ending. Three argues that it'll be unplanned, an improvisation by the man on the right when he sees that One is unconvinced and squeamish. He leans forward and says in a hushed voice, as if sharing a great confidence, "Actually, this is just a formality. We know you'll accept our offer, Mister Harrilson, because you've *already* performed the experiment. Six months ago, you and the device appeared not far from where we're sitting. The experiment is *over*, and it was a great success. You don't know it, but you're famous; your name will be in the history books as the first man who traveled through time. Now all that's left is for you to *start* the experiment. We know what we're doing — trust us." He leans back and smiles confidently, and the man on the left winces. He will wince again, in a couple of minutes.

It's all bluff, of course, but One won't know that. In fact, there is quite a bit of information they will be carefully concealing in half-truths and plain lies.

This is the first lie: *we know you'll accept*. They



have no idea who's going to be squatting in the gizmo three months from now, wiggling the slot-tool. For the past six months, they've been frightened to death they might accidentally stumble upon the identity of their guinea pig, in spite of all their safeguards. One's acceptance is going to be a great relief, but they won't admit it.

Here is lie number two: *they know what they're doing*. After experimenting with the device for almost a year, you know what they're still doing? Playing catch. Just playing catch with the future. They possess the greatest machine in all the world, and they are playing with it as if it were a cheap magician's trick.

The video shows one of their experiments. The platform is empty at the beginning. After a moment, a five second countdown is superimposed over the lower right of the screen. There is a loud pop! and the device appears. It's hard to describe, but the thing sort of turns into view, as if it had no depth or height, thinner and shorter than anything imaginable. It looks like a terrific movie effect except that it makes you feel slightly queasy, for some reason. A man in a white coat (not one of my visitors) steps onto the platform and pulls something from inside the box: it is a paper clip. He and two other men examine the paper clip. They weigh the paper clip, they take photos of the paper clip. They carefully return the paper clip to the box and jiggle the tool in the top slot. After another countdown the box disappears (turns and pops), shipped with its tiny cargo back to themselves, nine minutes earlier. The camera follows them as they sit and wait, patiently and boxless, for the next delivery.

I don't know how the Government Men feel, but if I were working on this project, I would be depressed as hell. It would appear that everything in the universe was strictly predestined: they were compelled to send back a paper clip because they knew they had received a paper clip. Time was no more than an old-fashioned bucket brigade, an endless column of firemen handing pails of water down the line to other firemen. As soon as you've passed on a bucket with your right hand, there's another bucket waiting for you to take in your left, grindingly forever. Six wonders if this might be how they acquired the thing: maybe it just appeared one day with a sheet of operating instructions inside, passed on by the next-to-last future in the chain.

And they always find the most commonplace things inside the box when it appears: staplers, pencil sharpeners, scissors, notepads. Somewhere in the future they must think there's a laboratory bereft of office supplies.

Lie number three is the big one: *the experiment is well planned*. One must be having a particularly bad day to swallow that, especially after seeing the video. They seem to have absolutely no control at all

over what they send South. (Get this: they're so nervous about the concepts of time travel they refer to the future as "North" and the past as "South." Dweebs.) If I were One (which I'm not), I'd ask them some tough questions, sure. For starters, I'd love to hear them describe their reactions when a delivery truck dropped off the second gizmo six months ago.

Within that box was the envelope they will send with me in the device. The envelope has one of their fancy security seals that's supposed to keep me from reading what's inside, but that's no problem; I've got lots of other copies.

The envelope contains an unsigned notecard with three typed lines of cryptic instructions:

Subject terminal within three months of arrival. Contact afterward. Nine months: 3 and 5. Southward from unknown location.

And that was all. An eighteen-word recipe how to select and send a human back in time, carefully worded to give the Government Men no clues about their own future. Nothing specific except the "3 and 5" business, which tells them which slot combinations send the device South for an unprecedented nine months.

I imagine the Government Men argued bitterly over the note, but also smugly approved of their own (future) cleverness. There was no mention of who had written the note (maybe the staff changed?), who traveled in the device (One may not have been their first choice), or where the devil this second box came from. I know I'd have been tempted to slip in something a little more personal, such as, "early frost, cover their hydrangeas," or "Darling Nancy in the seventh race to win."

It's easy for me to understand the note, but then again, I'm in a position to know more about it than they do. This is the interpretation they settled on, and the deal they will offer me, an hour from now: first, they had to find someone who wouldn't run screaming when they mentioned time travel. The candidate must have no more than six months to live, three before departure, and three after arrival — that minimalizes the period when there will be two of the subject alive at the same time. Give the sucker enough drugs and cash so he can die as painlessly and comfortably and anonymously as possible. Instruct him to take the device to a location certain to have been unobserved nine months earlier (we do not want to know where, please). He must cram himself and the backpack stuffed with money and pills (and the envelope: do not forget the envelope, please) into the box, and jiggle the tool in slots three and five simultaneously. When he arrives in the South, he is to immediately have the device crated and delivered back to them (do not forget to put the envelope inside first, please). Then

take an assumed name and disappear. Then die. Please.

They will emphasize that One cannot contact them or anyone I know, especially not myself (Seven). That would cause a paradox, and they are frightened to death of paradoxes. That's why they have never tried to send back (say) a pencil when they received a pen. Fearful little bureaucrats muddling through their roles, shuffling dry goods through time.

One is really the ideal choice. The possibility of time travel, even a short hop of nine months, will excite him. He is resigned to his imminent demise, and since he lost his insurance, the \$75,000 will make the inevitable much easier. Also, he can be trusted to follow directions. Well, to a point; he did hook up with my old high school sweetheart, who still calls every few days looking for him. She's quite upset and wants to know why I don't want to see her after "our fantastic weekend in Maui."

Poor One. He's out there somewhere right now, wondering why he's still alive, and probably feeling guilty about it. I'll bet he's even still taking those vile black pills that always make me weak and groggy.

You can't blame him for being confused: Two also went through some pretty rough times. The Two that I (Seven) know may not recall everything that happened to him, but Three remembers what he can't, and together they have told the story to the rest of me.

The closer Two came to the day he was supposed to leave, the more hesitant he became. He wasn't bothered by the idea of being a laboratory rat; several of the drugs that he was taking were highly experimental. And it wasn't the fear of death either: one way or another, it would come to him soon enough. What nagged at him was dying as a John Doe, no friend at his bedside, no one to mourn his passing. If he hadn't been so sick the day the white truck dropped off the device, he claims he would have told them to take it back to the Government Men. But inside the box was the money and the pills. Enough pills to last him a lifetime.

Two describes the night of his trip, how he grimly dragged the gizmo to a neglected section of the city park and how he paused, working up the courage to say goodbye to his life. He eloquently describes the great clarity he had at that moment, noticing the chill in the March night air, the late winter patches of snow on the ground, the bare tree branches. He pushed himself into the box, closed his eyes, and jiggled the tool. When he opened his eyes again the snow was gone. It was summer and there was the sound of crickets.

The next day Two bought a small used truck and took the device to the trucking company to have it crated and delivered, as promised. "Another one this First Person Plural

week?" the young woman behind the counter asked casually, pointed to the gizmo. "If you're going to be shipping these regularly, you should open an account so you could get a discount."

Two made a feeble excuse and left quickly, taking the box with him. Something was wrong: she had easily recognized both him and the device. That was impossible, unless he (meaning One) had already been there. And with the "original" (Three) innocently sitting in his old apartment, there were more of him alive at that very moment than he cared to think about. Something was terribly wrong.

So Two made a decision. The next day, he called the shippers and asked if "his" delivery had been made. It had, and he knew in a laboratory hundreds of miles away, the Government Men were puzzling over the newly arrived second gizmo and the mysterious, cryptic note. Two drove the device to the city dump and left it there, where it blended in with the doorless refrigerators and broken washing machines.

You have to feel sorry for Two; he had a terrible weight on his shoulders. Had he jiggled the slots incorrectly and created a time paradox? The Government Men had warned him of the horrible consequences if that happened: end of the universe? Sure, why not — who knows? He certainly couldn't contact them and ask. That would *definitely* cause a problem. Until the morning he absent-mindedly left his box of pills on the bus, he worried about this constantly.

Two was frantic. Without his pills the pain would resume gnawing away at him again, and his body would begin to close up shop within a few days. He couldn't get new prescriptions filled because the prescriptions wouldn't exist until a month later: he (Three) was stoically ignoring the twinges of pain that were starting to shoot through his body. Two made an emergency appointment with one of the few specialists he (Three) wouldn't be consulting. With any luck, Two would have a new set of pills — or at least the important ones — by the end of the day.

Except that's not what happened. Two could tell by the doctor's expression of disgust that something else had gone wrong. "How long have you been a junkie, Mr. Boyd?" the doctor asked him angrily. "You come to me with a long list of pharmaceuticals you expect me to prescribe," he snapped, ticking off the points with his fingers, "including anti-depressants and morphine. You have no referral from another physician. There is no sign of the tumors you claim to have had for five months, and your blood workup is clean, except for residual opiates. Have other doctors bought your ridiculous story?" The doctor waited for an answer, but Two only stared at him, preoccupied by his search for early, telltale washes of pain. The doctor pushed a slip of

paper into Two's hand. "Well, I don't know about them, but the only thing you'll get from me is the address of a detox center. I don't want to see you in here again," he said, pulling the door open for Two.

For the next few hours, Two wandered the streets mumbling. There was no question the doctor was right: it had been ten hours, and he should have needed a handful of pills in that space of time. But he felt fine. No — he felt wonderful: his body was as healthy as it had been a year ago. Three months ago, he corrected himself. Somehow, the voyage in the box had repaired his failing body. Everything was great now, except ... well, there were two of him too many. He pushed one foot in front of the other until he found himself outside of his (Three's) apartment. The yellow lights glowing from the window in his old familiar kitchen drew him closer, a moth to the flame. Two was terrified as he knocked on his own door, but he had to talk to someone, and there was only one person he could trust. Maybe paradoxes weren't so bad after all.

It's a good thing that Three was a little loose that night, having had a few beers too many after work. Two was a great surprise, but he (Two) was sensitive enough to cushion the news: my, don't we look alike; I'm taking a survey, can I come in; I wonder, are you having some pains, right about here, in the mornings and night? Soon Three knew everything.

Living with yourself isn't bad at all. There's never a question about what to watch on TV, whether your roommate will like your chili with okra. They spent long afternoons playing Monopoly, interrupted only when Three rushed to the bathroom. Not that there weren't some problems: if either remembered or forgot to water the plants, for example, the other probably had also, and the plants tended to be either parched or flooded.

As the time for the visit from the Government Men drew closer, Two became quiet and introspective, taking long walks while Three slept, limp from exhaustion. Preoccupied with his body's deterioration, Three didn't notice the change. The afternoon before the visit, Three awoke from a nap to find Two sitting on the edge of the bed staring out the window.

"You've got to turn them down," Two said quietly. "You have to tell the Government Men that you won't do it, you won't be their test subject."

Three lay still, half believing that he had heard his friend wrong. They had agreed he (Three) must change nothing, and react exactly as he (Two), and as he (One) presumably had. They rehearsed almost every evening, Two drilling Three on where to sit, what to wear, how to respond.

"I've been thinking about this a lot recently," Two continued. "When I stepped out of that machine six months ago, I knew nothing, same as the first Russ that sat in the box. But I contacted you and I've been living here. That didn't happen with the first Russ

and myself. That's a serious paradox. And," he paused to build his nerve, "you're the only Russ I've met. You weren't in the park six months ago. I didn't meet you then because you won't go back. You have to turn them down."

Three stared at the ceiling and swallowed hard. "Then I'll die."

"Yeah. I know," he said emotionlessly. "I'm sorry." Two stood and left the room. A moment later, Three heard the apartment door shut.

Two returned three days later. He was unshaven and dirty as he fell heavily into the chair next to the bed, avoiding Three's eyes. "You said you'd do it, didn't you?"

"Yes," Three replied.

"Oh God," Two groaned. "Oh God. What have we started?" Both gazing sightlessly out the window as they sat quietly together.

Three, as he often boasts to the rest of me, was the first to go South gladly, knowing that the trip would fix his ruined body. Two helped him carry the device to the park, placing the box as close to his own point of departure as he could remember. They decided that after Three leaves, Two would try to find One wherever he may be hiding, waiting to die. Three felt bad about leaving Two alone, seeing as how they had become such good buddies, but, well — tempus fugit.

Three left an hour before Two had. Three promised to wait in the park for Two to appear if he ever did. Two was having nightmares that he faded into nothingness as Three turned the slot-tools.

The trip was exactly as Two had described: a feeling of vertigo (but that could have been the pills), followed by a sensation of tumbling that lasted an instant but seemed to go on forever. Unfolding his legs, Three waited for another device to turn into view carrying his friend. Once during that hour, inhaling the night air mixed with the sweet smell of the earth, he wept, thankful to be alive. Then he threw up twice.

When Two emerged from his device, the first thing he saw was someone squatting on the ground watching him. He froze in terror as the stranger stood and walked towards him, his body outlined by the distant yellow lights of the park trail. "It's okay, Russ," the strangely familiar voice said calmly. "I know all about how you got here. Why don't you sit down so we can talk?" And thus was born the "Beowulf" sessions, as earlier travelers discover the parts of the saga they have missed.

Three compares that moment to the canoe trip I took many years ago. The rapids came up suddenly, my buddies and I paddling for our lives and praying we could avoid the jagged boulders that had turned the peaceful river into a deadly obstacle course. Afterwards, hugging and whooping, delight in just being alive. That's how Four found himself when

he opened the door: beery and laughing, drunkenly leaning against each other in celebration. And he fainted. He actually fainted. Swear to God.

The party began with Four. Partly because there were enough me's to keep things lively, and partly because I knew there wouldn't be any weird natural laws about paradox crashing down on my heads.

When Five came along, Three went alone to introduce me to prevent another fainting. Three, always the courageous I, even met with the Government Men instead of Five. And he discovered this: the Government Men always said the same thing, even when Three messed up and forgot what he was supposed to say.

Four — as usual — has a theory. He claims the Government Men are "inside time," and we are "outside time." Stuck in a loop, they are locked into repeating whatever they said and did in their visit with One. It's not that they can't see me, that I'm invisible; I open the door for them, bring them coffee, sign their papers. It's just they are ... preoccupied. Four supports his theory by pointing out that my neighbors don't seem to notice that my tiny apartment has become rather crowded with me.

Four tested his theory when he met with the Government Men instead of Six. He didn't tell Two about his plans: Two still had a lingering fear of paradoxes and would have had a fit. For the interview he wore a rented tuxedo instead of the traditional bathrobe, and recited poems from "Through the Looking Glass" in a sing-songy voice instead of earnestly following the script.

"Six months ago you and the device appeared, not far from where we're sitting," the man on the right says.

*"Four other oysters followed them,
and yet another four;"*

"Now all that's left is for you to start the experiment."

*"And thick and fast they came at last,
and more, and more, and more;"*

"We know what we're doing: trust us."

*"All hopping through the frothy waves,
And scrambling to the shore."*

The man on the left winces. He will wince again, in a couple of minutes.

By Six, we have the routine down cold. First arrives the newest Russ, who helps the earlier Russes uncurl their no-longer-achy bodies from the cramped devices. I arrive at two minute intervals, except for the one hour gap between Three and Two. Everyone expects to be the newest Russ, of course, First Person Plural

so it's a surprise to the earlier me's to find a crowd waiting. It's always the greatest shock to Two, who emerges from the box without any knowledge of me at all, as innocent as the moment he jiggled the tools. After Beowulf, we go to my apartment and Three introduces all of me to the "real-timer."

The next day the real-timer buys the office supplies we need, and we place them in our boxes. I have to give Four credit: he was the I who figured out how the slots in the gizmo worked, that jiggling them counter-clockwise instead of clockwise sent the gizmo into the future, and the bottom slot meant "return to last location." Simple, really. Then again, Four also has the loopy idea that the device was used by aliens to reproduce. Maybe he's right; at least that would explain why I emerge at the other end, hale and hearty.

I don't know what happens, or why; it's a miracle that's going to save my life and I'm grateful for it. I feel just like the guy in the story, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" when the rope breaks and he thinks his life is spared.

I (Seven) consider myself honored. First off, I'm a single digit: if we're the source of all those paper clips and whatnot the Government Men are going to be receiving in the future, then there're at least 1,300 more of me coming. Also, I get to do my own interview, and the rest of me in the kitchen, laughing and cheating at Monopoly, don't know that I'm going to upstage Four, who's so proud of his tuxedo and Lewis Carroll. I'm meeting the Government Men stark naked, and I've dyed my penis orange with iodine. Let's see Eight top that!

Ah: the doorbell. I can't wait, I tell you, I can't wait. □

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Three Things to Watch for When You're in the Market for a Used Tumor

By J. Brooke

Art by Jon Foster

The guy looked young for a tumor salesman, no more than fifteen. Still, Lin hadn't eaten in five days — so she went inside the shop, sat in the chair, and listened to his pitch.

"Nice day, huh?"

Lin looked at him and nodded.

The salesman leaned toward her over the desk, and his teeth gleamed. "Y'know, there's three things you have to watch out for when you're in the market for a used tumor.

"First, you shouldn't be in the market for a used tumor. You want something brand-new. Second, look for satisfied customers ... we got plenty. And third, you want to get paid top dollar, right? I mean, hey — if you're gonna rent your body out as a growth medium for recombinant proteins, I figure you're not in it for your health. Right?"

Lin swallowed dry. "How much do you pay?"

"More than any other shop in Tokyo."

"What kind of tumor could I host if —?"

"Totally benign," the kid soothed. "When I do the implant, it'll take maybe ten seconds — right here. Right here in the office. You'll never even know it's inside you. Start collecting cash right this minute. Right now. Right here. Whattaya say?"

Lin leaned back. Living on the streets for six years, she'd thought she'd seen everything. She'd imagined she'd become tough as a tenpenny nail. But hunger was giving her a whole new education. Right at that moment, the room seemed to spin. "I don't know," she whispered. *Farming my body out*, she thought. *Renting myself as a growth medium for some hybridoma that produces genetically engineered proteins ...*

"I need to think about it," she choked, and bolted to her feet.

"What's to think?" The kid grabbed her arm to keep her from walking out the door. He looked like the original eager beaver — a real go-getter. "Listen. I know what you're saying to yourself. Tumor. Right? Jeez. You think 'tumor,' and you wanna puke. Am I on the money?"

Lin looked at the Tokyo streets. Aoyama-Dori boulevard glowed with kanji advertisements. Suddenly she felt as though somebody'd scraped her hollow with a surgical probe, nothing left inside her bones but air. She prayed to her ancestors, begged

them *please don't let me faint in front of him. Please.*

Too late, though. The salesman knew he had a live one. She could see it in his eyes. "Listen ... don't think of it as a hybridoma. Okay? A little carbuncle. See? Like a wart inside your stomach. Totally harmless. Look, here's the certificate, right on the wall. See? Prefecture of Tokyo, see? Genetic Engineering Quality Assurance Board. See?"

Lin looked up at the certificate. The lettering had a smudged look, like a mediocre fax.

"Guaranteed safe. Grows just a little bit —" The kid held up two fingers splayed a hair apart, grinning infectiously. "— then it stops. Sits there brewing customized hormone, and you come in once a week for a checkup while I siphon off the hormone 'n' you collect your cash. See? See how easy it is?"

The kid leaned over, conspiratorially, and winked at her. "Think of it," he whispered, "as a little pachinko machine in your gut, churning out thousand-yen bills."

"A pachinko machine," Lin repeated. Almost believing him.

The kid's teeth sparkled. Oh, he had her hooked. He must have known she hadn't eaten for, what? A week? At this point she would've killed for a single tempuraya doused with soy sauce ... so what was a little tumor between friends?

"Two hundred thousand yen," he recited, counting crisp new bills into her trembling palm. "Twenty forty sixty eighty ONE twenty forty sixty eighty TWO. And that's just the START."

She clutched the money. All the while, an army of little black wriggles invaded her peripheral vision. Hunger threatened to blind her. "Will it hurt?"

"Hurt?" He wrapped his paw around her fingers, chuckling. His brilliant carnelian eyes stared at her soulfully, and the sharp planes of his cheeks positively *shone* in the cheap fluorescent light. An expensive face, Lin thought, the spitting image of this month's hottest holo star. How did a fifteen-year-old get the money for that kind of face job?

"C'mon! What do you think, I use a buzzsaw? This is so easy, it's like clipping a toenail. I'm tellin' ya,



you won't even know it's *there*. You'll ask 'Hey, when you gonna implant it?' and I'll say, 'Yo, honey, we're all through.'"

She shut her eyes. She tried to keep from shaking. "Okay," she heard herself say. "Let's do it."

The kid hesitated. "Uh, how old are you?"

"Eighteen," Lin lied.

"Hm." He scrolled her DNA record down the table's imaging surface, then murmured soft commands. Lin watched her life history rewrite itself. "Tokyo data net says you're only twelve," he muttered, "but that's okay. Now you're eighteen."

"How did you do that?"

He only smiled.

Thumbprint there. Sign. Retinal scans for identification. Have you ever had ... retinitis pigmentosa, leukemia, measles, typhus, myaesthesia gravis. Are you now or have you ever been. Do you realize when you put your thumbprint here you are obligated.

Finally he told her to get on the table. Then he oaked the storefront windows and swung out a vat. "Uh-uh," he chided, easing her chin away so she couldn't see. "No peeking."

She felt something hot and then something cold. A distant prickle: after a moment, various species of itch enfiladed her ribs, grouped themselves into a broad phylum best described as *pins-and-needles*.

"I feel *weird*," she whispered. "When do you start?"

"All done."

She sat up, saw him washing his hands in the stainless steel sink. She felt faint when she noticed the red stains washing away in runnels over the brushed steel.

He didn't look up.

"Is that all?"

"Mm-hm."

Her fingers found a fresh wrinkle of pink tissue on her stomach. It reminded her of the mark she'd found that night long ago when she'd first slept in a heating duct, her stomach creased with pink marks from the welds on the metal ...

"It's in there? The —"

"Hybridoma? Yeah. Listen, here's the list. All the stuff you can't eat. And these are the pills. You gotta —"

"Pills?"

"Like I SAID, take 'em twice a day. And for the first week, you come in Tuesday AND Friday. Okay? I gotta protect my investment here."

She nodded.

But the bills crinkled in her pocket, and the tempuray and ramen filled her stomach at a nearby robata-yaki, and she even had enough left over to pay for a honeycomb sleep cell in the low-rent district, near the Kobe docks.

A sharp pang woke her at three in the morning.

Harmless, she thought. The tumor salesman swore it wouldn't hurt ...

She sat up, watched music videos on her new credit-card TV, brushed her hair with her new comb until the pain in her stomach doubled her over.

That was when she gathered together the comb and the wafer TV and her pair of antique integrated-circuit earrings and the wad of tissue paper that, in sum, made up all the belongings she called her own.

Finally, she decided to play it safe.

She used the phone in her sleep cell to call a pirate bulletin board she'd heard about on the streets.

Just in case, she told herself, while the list of illegal services scrolled down the phone. It's nothing serious, of course he wasn't lying to me. Whatever's in my stomach is harmless, and this is just in case ...

Just in case.

You're sure it's no trouble —?"
"Yeah, plenty of trouble," the old woman said, swinging an NMR unit into place over Lin's stomach. "But you're paying, so that's my problem. Okay? Now shut up."

The woman squinted at the pictures as the imaging software enhanced them and spat them out. "God damn. What did he say he put into you?"

"A benign tumor," Lin answered. "A hybridoma. It's supposed to produce some kind of specialized hormone. Then I go back once a week and he extracts the hormone and pays me —"

"Well, that's bullshit," the woman said, and swung the monitor around so Lin could see it. On the screen a hot magenta spot sent out pink tentacles against a stomach-shaped field of azure. "This ain't no goddamn hybridoma."

"Then what?"

The jekyll chewed her lip. "Dunno. Looks like a new organ. Who sold you this thing, anyway?"

"Nomura," Lin said. "I don't know his last name. He has a shop in the Roppongi district. A big hologram out front, TUMOR SALES AND RENTALS, maybe you've seen it?"

"Never heard of him," the jekyll muttered. "That's the trouble with Tokyo. Eight godzillion little hole-in-the-wall gene surgery shops, and none of 'em licensed." The woman slapped a pale blue bioengineered leech on Lin's neck and waited till the critter had exuded a full dose of beta blockers and endorphins into her patient's system. "This'll ease the pain, but I dunno what to do about all that extra nerve tissue in there. You're damn lucky the gene surgeon sent you to me ... these symptoms are unique."

"Why am I lucky?"

"Because I'm the best there is."

"Then," swallowed Lin, "can you tell me please what this all means?"

"It means, little sister, that something's tied into your spinal cord. And it's *growing*."

"He showed me a certificate," Lin said in a faint voice.

"Yeah. Right. And I got a palace in Kyoto you can buy real cheap." The jekyll lit a joss stick, exhaled a cloud of purple smoke. A *gaijin*, her white hair and blue eyes looked wildly out of place amid the customized creatures of the backroom gene surgery clinic. Despite her best efforts, Lin's *nihonjin* pride told her that a westerner amid all that Japanese *bioteknorie* was simply incongruous.

"What can I do about this?"

"Do? I dunno what I can do, how can I tell you?" The jekyll jolted to her feet. She lifted a flabby skittering creature out of a vat and carried it over to the surgery beast in whose maw Lin lay.

When the jekyll brought the skittering thing close, she saw Lin shy away. "This is Groucho. Groucho, say hi."

The spiny creature trilled, and Lin did her best to avoid a shudder when its claws hugged her stomach.

"I designed Groucho's DNA myself. He'll do an internal checkup. Spy on the cells in that new organ in your stomach. Just sit still ... Won't hurt a bit."

"That's what the tumor salesman said."

"Yeah. Right."

Lin felt suckers grab hold of her skin. She looked down and saw a fibril running into her navel, a hair-thin silvery strand that placed with myelin sheathing.

The tingle went away and the creature fell over, dead.

Lin was about to say something when the room went dark and the walls detonated like burning paper lanterns.

You awake?"

Lin bolted up. She smacked her head on the leathery ceiling of the honeycomb sleep cell.

"What —"

The *gaijin*, the white foreigner, held her until the shaking passed.

"There," the jekyll said, stroking Lin's hair. "It's okay. We're safe."

"What happened?"

"Slither bomb. It crawled up the outside wall of my office and went off. Somebody wants me dead."

"Who?"

"Yeah." The jekyll sat back against the softly pulsing wall with both knees up. "Who is right."

Lin sat against the warm skin of the other wall and realized for the first time the dimensions of her hourly-rented sleep cell: three meters by two. Just about the right size for a pair of *gaijin*-style coffins, she thought.

"One thing," the jekyll said, bouncing a flake of crystal in one palm. "I managed to get a sample of the DNA in that extra organ inside your gut. It killed Groucho — some kind of biowar precaution, probab-
Three Things to ...

ly."

"Precaution?"

"Yeah, well, underground DNA designers don't like competitors copying their designs. So they build in biological safeguards. Booby traps, like that. Which makes that new organ inside your gut one valuable piece of Black Medicine."

"You mean illegal bioengineering?"

When the jekyll looked surprised, Lin added: "You learn about the underground economy. You have to, to survive on the streets."

The *gaijin* looked at her hard. "Yeah. I guess you do. How long you been on your own?"

"Since I was six."

"What happened? You run away?"

Lin looked down. "My parents were killed by an industrial virus spill. They were ..."

Lin's voice trailed off in a whisper.

"Eh? I didn't hear that."

"... Koreans. Third generation."

The jekyll cursed. "How the hell the Japanese can treat someone who's born in Japan, speaks Japanese, goes to Japanese school, like a foreigner, is beyond me."

"You don't understand."

"Damn right I don't understand. My grandfather was Irish. If Americans acted the way the Japanese do, I'd still have to carry a damn passport identifying myself as a foreigner. Three generations! Jesus. It's crazy."

Lin bit her lip. "No one wanted me. No family in Japan wishes to adopt a Korean orphan."

"So you've been on the streets ever since? I'll bet that was how that bastard Nomura hooked you ... he saw you starving, let you talk yourself into implanting that thing in your stomach."

Lin couldn't meet the jekyll's eyes.

"Well, anyway. Spilled milk. Point is, I checked out that DNA sample. Every gene coder has a style — it's something you can't disguise, like handwriting. And I recognized the style of this DNA code."

"Then who designed it? And why? And what does it do?"

"The *who* is easier. Guy called himself 2-2 Kool D. A serious twaker."

"Twaker?"

"Underground DNA designer. Anyway, he ain't around anymore."

Lin felt cold all over. "What do you mean?"

"Some underworld *oyabun* greased him. That's the scuttlebutt. Kool D and his employer had, let us say, a falling-out."

Lin looked up suddenly. "Then you think — this new organ —"

"Yup. Probably 2-2's handiwork."

"What does it do? *What will happen to me?*"

The jekyll shrugged.

Lin slumped back. She stared down at the

leathery floor of the sleep cell. A chirp sounded: the fifteen-minute warning, signaling the end of her rental period. Stinging tentacles woke in the walls, weaved idly to and fro. Patrons reluctant to leave were stung until they exited; Lin had seen it happen to other homeless people. The welts took days to disappear.

"I cannot involve you," Lin said softly. "I have been very much trouble already."

"How Japanese of you."

"You would not understand *giri* — obligation; you are a *gaijin*. You have no *giri*."

"Y'know," the old woman said, half-smiling, "you Japanese all think you're unique. You think there's nobody on the planet like you. Well, I got news for you, kiddo, you ain't special. You're just like anybody else — just as stuck up, and just as scared."

Lin colored.

She looked down so the jekyll wouldn't see.

The room chirped again — louder this time.

"You already got me involved," the old woman said, putting a hand on Lin's shoulder. "And maybe I got a little more *giri* than you think. C'mon."

"Where are we going?"

"Australia."

"I can't afford that," Lin murmured.

"I'll put it on your tab. Besides, vactrain rides are cheap, even halfway around the world. And I know somebody who can maybe help."

He's late," said the jekyll, looking around. The restaurant offered a superb view of Sydney's harbor; in the afternoon light each bioengineered skyscraper shone like a rare seashell. Above the whitecapped waves, the spouts of cargo-carrying whales made miniature rainbows.

"What's the matter, kiddo? Don't like fish and chips?"

"Hai. But this fish is inedible. It's been ... cooked!"

The jekyll tried not to smile. Twilight from the harbor turned her eyes into amethysts, her gray hair into spun steel.

She has my mother's eyes, Lin thought. She is the age my mother would have been ... if my mother were still alive.

A sudden pang in her gut made Lin dizzy; for a moment, the room went dark.

She gripped the linen tablecloth until the hurt passed. "Why Sydney? Why did we have to leave Tokyo?"

"Australia's where my man operates. Besides, why're you complaining? You got a free vactrain ride."

Lin bit her lip; lancets of agony impaled her ribs on both sides. "Arigato," she whispered. "Thank you for helping me. I do not even know your name —"

"Rebecca." The old woman smiled and took Lin's hand. "You can call me Becky."

"Domo arigato, Becky."

"There." The jekyll stood. "That's our man."

Lin turned.

A thin Aussie came toward them through the crowds of waist-tall duckbilled dinosaurs that cleaned away the plates and silverware from vacant tables. Retro chic with a vengeance, thought Lin: yet another bioengineered extravagance. The theraped dinosaurs in the restaurant and the bioengineered whales in the harbor hailed from a world wholly alien to her — the realm of the above-ground economy. It was a place strange to Lin, where people slept in real beds instead of on the streets, and ate gourmet meals instead of scraps from dumpsters.

All my life, she thought, I have been living on other people's leavings.

"G'day," the Australian said and looked at Lin. "This the piece of merchandise?"

Lin felt herself grow cold. "What do you mean, 'merchandise'?"

"Fair dinkum sheila," the Aussie laughed. "You didn't tell her, eh?"

"Tell me what?"

The jekyll held out a hand. "I've delivered her. Now pay me what you promised."

"Oh, I'll make a good fist of it — soon's I know she's the genuine article."

Lin backed away. She knocked into a table and silverware went crashing. Every dinosaur in the place turned, startled by the noise.

"You sold me," Lin whispered. "You bitch. You sold me for money!"

The jekyll motioned to two nearby therapedos. "Get her."

Lin bolted.

The dinosaurs' snakelike skin glistened when they grabbed for her with petite bony talons. She dodged, hurdled a table, and screamed for the *maitre d'* to help her.

The *maitre d'* ripped open his waistcoat, and stinger-tipped tentacles snaked out, searching for Lin's nerve centers.

She snatched a steak knife from a nearby table. She slashed at him desperately. "Help me! They're trying to kidnap me, somebody HELP."

Every diner in the restaurant stood up.

They unbuttoned their evening gowns and tuxedos. Pale green tentacles issued from their chests.

Lin backed into the center of the room.

Bioengineered implants ... Everyone in the restaurant must be a genetically-altered assassin. She had seen it before: hiding in a heat vent, sleeping under a pile of discarded styrofoam, Lin had been awakened one night by peculiar noises. She had watched three such assassins dispatch a nameless victim in one of Tokyo's back alleys, stinging him until he died.

Hit men. Members of the Honoured Society ...

But why?

What had the world's largest criminal organization to do with her?

"No use," the jekyll called out. "He owns this restaurant. He designed its DNA himself. You can't escape."

She tripped, stumbled, felt rhizomes reach up from the restaurant's grass floor to ensnare her feet. Lin vaulted a table with the swiftness of youth and darted between two of the assassins.

The chandelier reached down, thrusting poison barbs in her path. Lin wept, ran up the chitinous staircase even as its steps shuttered downward and vanished. She clung to the bannister and fought her way up while it writhed in her hands, trying to throw her off balance.

"Get her," shouted the Australian. "C'mon, you chundering fools, she's only a bloody little quandong!"

Every light fixture in the place snarled: tables gnashed sharklike teeth, and the door grabbed her with a nest of muscular tentacles when she pounded against its crocodile-slick skin.

Lin screamed while the door held her fast.

The Honoured Society's finest streamed up the other side of the staircase, and she never felt the stings that sent her into darkness.

Lin lay in the mouth of a surgery beast. She struggled as soon as she came awake. No good: its palps gripped with bone-bruising strength. Besides, the pain inside her stomach sapped every scintilla of strength, made her feel weak as a three-year-old.

"Why?" she whispered.

The jekyll said nothing. Alongside the old woman, the Australian studied NMR scans on which a hot blue kraken unfolded in Lin's belly. "Y'deserve to know, sheila. Before I dissect you."

A look of distaste crossed the jekyll's face. "Give me the money, I've delivered the girl."

The girl.

Lin felt sick.

She looked up at the old woman who had so reminded her of her mother — or what she could remember of her mother — and stared into her eyes. "Why?"

The Australian snapped his fingers.

All the doors to the biolab closed their petals; from the ceiling, a razor assemblage of spines and mandibles descended.

Osteotomes. Those spines are osteotomes, Lin thought. For cutting bone.

"I'm what you call an *oyabun*. Own a fair dinkum piece of Australia's Black Medicine, I do."

"Black Medicine ... you mean illegal genetic engineering."

Three Things to ...

"Bout five years back, fella designed DNA for me. Name of 2-2 Kool D. Japanese bugger. He made a good fist of it, too. Brilliant. Got too big for his boots, though. Caught him with my daughter. Had to retire the little billigan."

"You mean," Lin said, "you *killed* him."

"Not bloody likely. I gave him a choice — let him commit *hara* bloody *kiri*. But the little wog trashed all his new DNA designs before he did himself. Or so I thought."

"The new organ in my stomach," Lin whispered. "One of his designs —?"

"Too right, little lady. Don't know what it does — yet. The bugger erased all his files. Ungrateful little wog."

"Enough," said the jekyll. "What you do with her is your business, I don't want any part of it. Just pay me the money and let me *leave*."

The Australian turned.

He plugged a thick ropy nerve fiber into an orifice in the back of his head. Instantly the room changed color, its leathery walls pulsing faster, the bioluminescent sparkles in the ceiling changing from cyan to magenta.

The Australian had plugged directly into the room's central ganglion, Lin realized. Now every mandible and barb in the room moved like a third set of fingers.

"You can pipe down, missy. Shut it and stay put, and pray I don't gut you after I'm finished with this one."

"Now," he murmured, turning back to Lin. "Let's see what sort of treasure you've got inside ..."

Lin screamed when the mandibles of the surgery beast held her down.

A nest of hairfine cilia entered her throat, and she struggled wildly.

The Australian closed his eyes.

He was controlling the cilia via the nerve fiber in his neck — Lin had seen it before. She'd watched jekylls cure nameless cancers in backdoor surgery shops in Tokyo. Black market chop shops catered to the lowest-income class of clientele, the *Nihonjin* who couldn't afford medical insurance — and once in a while a jekyll would help a homeless person without asking anything in return. Lin had dragged dying friends to more than one jekyll's door, sometimes going through three or four before she found one who'd help.

Now the Australian was using the surgery beast to taste Lin's biochemistry directly ... She felt tickles inside her stomach, as though she'd just swallowed cold ginger ale. The cilia touched the bolus inside her ribcage, caressed the new organ growing inside her stomach wall.

"What the hell —?"

The Australian looked up.

He stared straight at the old woman.

He reached down and gripped the hard shell of the surgery beast. He shook.

Overhead, the magenta light of the ceiling dimmed.

The pulse of the room's walls became irregular, arrhythmic.

"What ... did you ..."

"Shut up," the jekyll said. She grabbed the Australian's face in one hand, twisting his jaw. "Shut up and listen."

The Australian shuddered. His eyes rolled up.

The room groaned for him by proxy.

"2-2 Kool was my apprentice before he came to work for you. He was also my son."

The Australian's legs gave. He knelt, swaying. Blisters of sweat stood out on his forehead. Lin could see muscles twitching in his chest and his arms.

"You ... used ... the girl ... infect ... me ..."

"Damn straight," the jekyll said. "That new organ in her stomach isn't anything of the kind. It's a viral creche. An incubator for a special kind of phage ... lethal to only one DNA pattern out of eight billion: yours."

The Australian's hands began to shake. The room opened a barbed sphincter and screamed.

Linked by the white nerve fiber, the room and the Honoured Society *oyabun* were dying together, Lin realized.

"You ... set off ... slither bomb ... your own shop ..."

"To pique your curiosity," the jekyll said, tearing the surgery beast's dying tentacles away from Lin's body. "First, I put out a rumor. Then I sold my own DNA code to the tumor salesman. Told him it was something Kool D had designed. As the final touch, I set off a slither bomb in my shop — as though someone else wanted the new DNA design. I knew that'd make you greedy."

The jekyll helped Lin to her feet, handed her the clothes that had lain on the twitching tiles of the floor.

"It took more than a year to design the virus that's killing you. The only hard part was making sure any doctor the girl saw referred her to me." The Australian tried to speak but the pain had paralyzed him. He toppled, and the bioluminescent ceiling of the room rioted with tangerine light.

Two Honoured Society assassins rushed through the spasming door of the biolab, and the room killed them both.

"Welcome to hell," the jekyll said, and spat on the Australian. "Every one of your *kobuns* is dying, everyone in this building. When your superiors find you, there'll be no witnesses."

The woman held Lin and shielded the girl's eyes when the room shrieked and began to consume the Australian like a scorpion stinging itself to death.

Through the window of the vactrain the tunnel walls flashed past in a blur.

Lin watched the old woman, who looked much older now.

No sound disturbed her reverie. Nothing but a faint hum from the superconducting rail under the cabin floor. Lin had travelled on a vactrain only once before, during the trip from Tokyo to Sydney three hours earlier. Then, it had seemed a glorious dream: she'd heard, of course, about the subsea trains that crisscrossed the world on superconducting rails, she'd even slept in vactrain terminals in Tokyo ... but ride in one?

Inconceivable.

Now the return trip had scraped her skull empty of surprise and filled it with a whirling chaos, and the only word that came to mind was: *uragiru*.

One who betrays.

"Why me?" Lin asked.

The old woman's eyes reflected the luminous sidestrips in the tunnel walls. The jekyll's eyes flickered when she turned away from the cabin window to face Lin — light, then dark, then light again.

"Chance. Pure chance."

Lin swallowed. "So you never cared about me. Everything you said —"

The old woman put a hand on the girl's shoulder. "I'm sorry it turned out to be you. No: that's not true. I'm not sorry. Not really. Because otherwise, we wouldn't have met."

Lin pulled away. "You made me into a plague vector. I could have *died*."

"Not likely. The viral creche has done its work; it's gone. Self-destructed. You're safe."

"You *used* me."

"No point in apologizing. Nothing I can say or do'll make up for that. I already lost my son. Nothing I can do about that either. But maybe it's time I adopted a daughter ... and I *do* need an apprentice. Interested?"

"I cannot trust you. You have no *sonkei* — no honor."

"How very Japanese of you."

Lin sat back, feeling her mouth tremble.

"So. Where do you go now? Back to the streets?" Lin said nothing.

"Can't you *try* trusting me, Lin? Just one day at a time?"

"That would be difficult."

The old woman nodded.

But afterwards, when the vactrain pulled into Tokyo station, Lin lay asleep against the old woman's shoulder and didn't wake until she found herself in a strange room in a strange house, called *home*. □

A Ghost in the Machine

For years, Harry Stubbs, known to the science fiction world as Hal Clement (the author of such classics as *Needle and Mission of Gravity*), carried a slug of depleted uranium (U-238, with the U-235 removed) in his pants pocket — a weak cousin of the kind of pellet used to power your local nuclear power station. Harry carried it around to demonstrate that nuclear power was safe. And he was right. I would do the same with little fear of harm. Nuclear power is safe, relatively speaking.

This is not to be taken as an unequivocal endorsement of nuclear power by the editor, but rather a realistic assessment of nuclear power as one of the many options available to provide our energy needs.

During the course of my short existence, I've seen the remains of a single-family home that had been blasted into millions of splinters by a natural gas explosion. I've reported on workmen electrocuted while working on or near high-voltage electrical wires. I've covered numerous fires caused by faulty wiring, malfunctioning oil furnaces, and sparks tossed out of a homey hearth or wood stove. I've also had the experience of riding the coal-fired locomotives that still ply the rails across India's Genetic Plains. And I've gotten covered in the soot belched from the train's smokestack. Various forms of lung disease are rampant in that land. The history books are full of statistics of those who have died as a result of the various methods we have chosen to provide energy, heat, and transportation for ourselves.

The biggest killer by accident in this country, statistically speaking, is the personal automobile, followed closely by items in the home.

Yet few of us break into a cold sweat or suffer nightmare flashbacks before hopping into our car and turning on the ignition, even though the odds are more against us there than living next to a nuclear power plant.

Why is this?

Because of the ghost in the Editor's Notes

machine. (And yes, I do know that is the name of a recent movie which I haven't seen and is probably completely implausible, like most attempts by Hollywood to deal with SF.)

What do I mean by the ghost in the machine?

I mean that we fear nuclear power more than power provided by wood, coal, oil, or natural gas, because we don't understand it. We can see wood, coal, oil, and natural gas working. Fire we understand (we think). But radiation is invisible.

We can't see it, hear it, smell it, taste it, or touch it. For most people, radiation is a ghost, a poltergeist, an evil genie that silently, secretly attacks their bodies, causing cancers and genetic mutations. It's the aftermath of Nagasaki and Hiroshima.

It doesn't matter that the firestorm at Dresden killed more people. They were killed by fire caused by incendiary and ordinary bombs. They weren't maimed and scarred by the ghost in the machine, by an invisible monster.

There were 130,000 casualties at Hiroshima, 75,000 at Nagasaki. But 130,000 to 200,000 died at Dresden. (The city was full of refugees, so an accurate count is nearly impossible.)

Even so, *The Concise Columbia Encyclopedia* lists the casualties at the two A-bomb targets, but only mentions Dresden "was rebuilt after 1945" — no casualties are listed for the firestorm that destroyed the city. Nor is the ferocious bombing of Dresden on Feb. 13-14, 1945, mentioned in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

It didn't involve the ghost in the machine.

Despite thousands of years of civilization and scientific advancement, we are still essentially primitive creatures. We are still ruled more by our gut than our head; and to that end, the thing in the closet and the shadow monster under the bed are instinctively more terrifying than concrete things we can see, and touch — even if they are far more

destructive to our everyday lives.

No, when handled properly, nuclear power is just as safe as most other forms of energy.

The key phrase is "when done properly."

The biggest bogeyman in the closet, the most terrifying creature on the planet, our worst nightmare — is ourselves.

And that's why we instinctively don't trust nuclear power. When the nuclear energy industry assures us its plants are safe, we hear: "The check's in the mail." When we are told that a nuclear power plant can withstand an earthquake, we actually visualize a used-car salesman telling us: "This low-mileage beauty was only driven once a week to church by a little old lady."

We have been reassured repeatedly that we have nothing to fear from radiation and nuclear energy. Then we read the headlines in the nation's newspapers in early 1994 about "classified" documents released by the U.S. Energy Dept. detailing inhumane radiation experiments on unsuspecting American citizens. Experiments that included the injection of radioactive isotopes into pregnant women; retarded children, whose cereal was sprinkled with radioactive dust along with sugar and milk; and people with fatal diseases who were injected with high doses of plutonium. It doesn't matter whether the experimenters thought the levels of radiation involved were safe. What matters is that too often they experimented on living human beings without the victims' full knowledge or consent.

That's why we don't always believe scientists when they reassure us. That's why all the accurate scientific data in the world isn't comforting, because the power behind the science always rests in the hands of very fallible, sometimes misguided, occasionally criminally irresponsible human beings.

The real ghost in the machine. The real bogeymen.

We don't need better science; we need better human beings. □

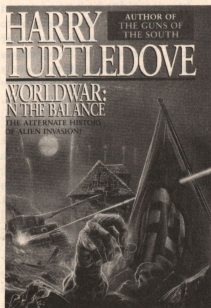
Action and Suspense



Worldwar: In the Balance

By Harry Turtledove
Del Rey, 1994
496 pp., \$21.00

Consumer warning: This is not a complete novel. *Worldwar: In the Balance* is only part one of a longer work, and I had no idea of this until I was about a hundred pages from the end and realized that Harry Turtledove couldn't possibly tie up all



his plotlines in the space remaining. The packaging I was sent gives no such indication; unless Del Rey has revised it by the time it reaches stores, they should be ashamed of themself-

Rating System

☆☆☆☆	Outstanding
☆☆☆	Very Good
☆☆☆	Good
☆☆	Fair
☆	Poor

vers. In a lie of omission they are going to anger readers of what is really a very good book.

That said, let's look at the novel itself. Harry Turtledove is the SF field's most renowned practitioner of alternate history, most recently in the serious and well-regarded Civil War novel, *Guns of the South*. *Worldwar* is less serious. This yarn of alien invasion in the middle of World War II is slam-bang alternate history featuring pulp-era aliens with a modern sensibility.

In the spring of 1942, the Earth is invaded by giant lizards. They anticipate little opposition because their last probe of Earth was eight centuries earlier, and all the races they're aware of progress extremely slowly. Expecting to face swordsmen on horseback, the Lizards are shocked to find that humans have developed tanks, guns, and airplanes. Since the Lizards' technology, except for the space drive, is only slightly more advanced — they don't even have laser weapons — holding on to those slight advantages, such as radar-seeking missiles and nuclear weapons, becomes critical. On Earth, enemies are banding together to drive out the invaders, though still suspicious of each other and jockeying for advantage. Meanwhile, researchers on the Lizard ships are trying to find out why humans progress so fast, and some scientists in Chicago are racing to produce an atomic chain reaction ...

There's more plot in this book than in ten other novels. It's written in best-seller style, with multiple, overlapping plotlines, diverse viewpoint characters, world-spanning action, adventure, blood, and sex, but the characterization is much more interesting than that in your standard best-seller. The book works both as alternate history and as adventure story, and you get painless history

lessons as well.

What I particularly love is Turtledove's approach to classic clichés of science fiction. He takes pure pulp aliens — forked tongues and all — and the conceit John W. Campbell was so fond of, that humans are unique among intelligent species, and thoughtfully works out the consequences. The aliens are carefully depicted; it's hard to get past their pulp nature, but Turtledove has



thought things through, and they are alien. His human characters are varied and well-drawn, from a minor-league ballplayer who loves to read *Astounding* to a Jew in the Warsaw ghetto to a Chinese peasant woman; historical characters make their appearances as well.

Worldwar is occasionally a little silly, with a few too many authorial winks to the reader, but I couldn't put

it down. The ending, or rather lack thereof, is extremely frustrating, because I desperately want to know how it all turns out. Despite my anger over the deceptive packaging, I have to recommend this book. Turtledove's latest is a delight.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

Passion Play

By Sean Stewart
Ace, 1993
208 pp., \$4.50

Sean Stewart's excellent debut novel is a hard-boiled detective story set in a well-realized fundamentalist future with an engaging, original heroine. *Passion Play* bursts with emotion and suspense.

Diane Fletcher is a Hunter, a sort of outside consultant employed by the police. Her secret is that she is also a Shaper, able to detect the emotions of others. She is called in to investigate the apparently accidental death of an actor who is the main spokesman for the Redemptionists, the party in power. As you might expect, neither the death nor the victim are as they seem.

Stewart manages to avoid rants against religion while using the Redemptionists' world to provide texture, background, and a way of understanding the characters and the terms in which they think. The whodunit is excellent until very near the end when Stewart —surprisingly, given the quality of the rest of the novel — falls into the false suspense trap: Diane knows who the murderer is, but even though she's narrating, she won't tell the reader, and she even has a phone conversation with the murderer without revealing who it is. This is unnecessary and rings false, especially since Diane's point of view has been flawlessly maintained until then.

Diane Fletcher is a terrific character who lives in a bizarrely religious Chandlerian world of hidden motives and dark secrets. The ending is a surprise, but it makes sense and even appears inevitable in retrospect. There are a lot of lost souls in this future run by the Redemptionists, and Diane is, we gradually realize, one of them.

Passion Play is a bravura performance marred only by that false suspense. You will think about this book for a long time after reading it.

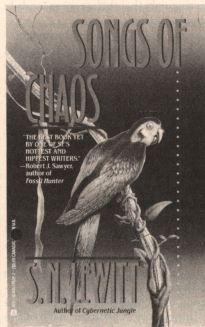
Rating: ☆☆☆☆

A Philosophical Investigation

By Philip Kerr
Farrar Straus Giroux, 1993
329 pp., \$20.00

A Philosophical Investigation is being marketed as a thriller, but it is also a near-future SF novel. Philip Kerr's book is set in 2013, and the central premise is science-fictional: the discovery of a scientific means for determining that certain men have the proclivity for great violence.

There are lots of good science-fictional details: serial murder of women is epidemic (the police have a Gynocide Division to deal with it), there's social friction in Great Britain because of



the arrival of floods of Hong Kong refugees in 1997, reversible coma is used to punish criminals, technology is improved, virtual reality (here known as Reality Approximation) is common in the home. Unlike most outsiders who dabble in SF, Kerr is good at handling exposition, giving us lumps only when he has to and then doing so deftly, and carefully dropping mentions of things which will only be explained later. He's created a real and depressing near-future London.

The book itself is a superb thriller as well as making you think about philosophy. How many murder investigations call in a professor of philosophy? Yet Kerr makes it make sense.

The center of the novel is the duel

between Detective Isadora "Jake" Jakowicz and a serial killer who calls himself "Ludwig Wittgenstein." This is not an unfamiliar format to suspense novel readers, but it feels new again as both Jake and "Wittgenstein" come achingly to life.

One of the reviewers quoted on the back cover called the book a "dystopian satire" as a way of avoiding the term "science fiction"; it is dystopian, but it's not a satire. It is a powerful, absorbing, suspenseful, stimulating, and often gruesome novel.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆ 1/2

A Million Open Doors

By John Barnes
Tor, 1993
309 pp., \$4.99

Forget the many comparisons to Heinlein; John Barnes is going where Heinlein never trod. *A Million Open Doors* is a brilliant coming-of-age novel for adults by an author who knows how to build cultures and characters.

Giraut Leones, though adult by our standards, is still a juvenile by the standards of his culture, Nou Occitan, a planet of troubadours and duellists. Following the humiliating break-up of a love affair, he agrees to travel with a friend as part of an embassy to Caledony. The Caledon culture is about to be disrupted by the introduction of the "springer," which provides instantaneous interstellar travel among humanity's Thousand Worlds. Giraut knows that Caledon culture will be different, but how different, he can have no idea. It's unpleasant, by our standards or his, but confronting it also makes him face some unpleasant truths about Occitan culture, and about himself.

Barnes's cultures are real and believable, if not often places we'd want to live. He understands cultural blindness as well, as it takes Giraut a while to see things about his own culture we might notice immediately. Barnes also has a real feel for art and its importance.

The characters are sympathetic and distinctive. After reading Giraut's narration for awhile, one almost begins to think like an Occitan, though that way of thinking is more alien than Barnes at first allows it to appear.

A Million Open Doors is delightful, thoughtful, and involving, with wit,

intelligence, originality, and energy. This masterful performance is not to be missed.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆☆

Songs of Chaos

By S. N. Lewitt

Ace, 1993

228 pp., \$4.99

S. N. Lewitt's latest novel, *Songs of Chaos*, presents us with a remarkable spacegoing subculture based on the samba schools of the *favelas* (slums) of Rio de Janeiro. This conceit alone is nearly enough to carry the book, but Tepper also provides an unusual and sympathetic main character, a fascinating universe, and a compelling plot. It works almost completely.

Dante McCall is a misfit on an Earth full of genetically engineered perfect

the end. The plot often gets weird, with Dante roaming through time and playing with the past, but that mostly works, except at the end when things get out of hand. The grand conspiracy Dante figures out, as so often in novels, is not quite believable, but I like his realization of the truth about the "revolutionary" friends he met in jail.

Dante is a tricky character to empathize with because of his mental problems — although those are not as bad as society would let on — but Tepper pulls it off. The Malandros are wonderful, and so is the intricate system by which their culture works, which Tepper gradually reveals. The characters aboard the *Mangureira*, however, are sometimes difficult to distinguish; their bizarreness tends to blend together.

Songs of Chaos is highly imaginative, complex, and ambitious, and mostly successful. Lewitt never fails to surprise me; I enjoyed this book a great deal, and I'm looking forward to seeing what she does next.

Rating: ☆☆☆ 1/2

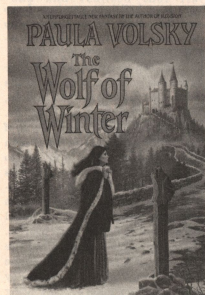
The Aliens of Earth

By Nancy Kress

Arkham House, 1993

327 pp., \$20.95

Nancy Kress writes some of today's best SF and fantasy short fiction, making *The Aliens of Earth* a stunning collection. The stories "The Price of Oranges," "The Battle of Long Island," and "And Wild for to Hold" are nothing short of brilliant; none of the others is less than very good, and most are excellent. The illustrations by Jane Walker are not up to Arkham House's usual high standard, but that's irrelevant to the strength of this



people. After some time in jail he is released to a world and a family intolerant of his flaws and eventually escapes to space. Instead of his intended destination ship, though, he is picked up by the *Mangureira*, a ship manned by the Malandros, who are part of the subculture described above. For the first time, Dante meets people who seem crazier than he is. There's a method to it all, though, and Dante gradually uncovers the *Mangureira's* secrets, which lead to his own, and helps save the culture of the Malandros.

This book would have received four stars if it had held together better at

book.

The collection's one attempt at satire, "People Like Us," is unsubtle but amusing. Most of the stories have a horrific touch, be they straight SF like "Cannibals" or near magic realism like "Philippa's Hands." Kress provides fine writing and unforgettable images. Unlike some authors, though, she doesn't just know how to use language, she knows how to plot. *The Aliens of Earth* is highly recommended.

Rating: ☆☆☆ 1/2

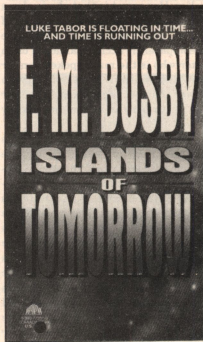
Yellow Matter

By William Barton

TAL Publications (POB 1837,

Leesburg, VA 22075), 1993

37 pp., \$5.95



William Barton's story *Yellow Matter* is interesting but not fully satisfying science-fictionally. It features sex between human and alien, but it's not much stronger stuff than I've seen elsewhere, and certainly shouldn't be controversial.

Thomas Morley is on a treadmill. Given immortality drugs, he can live for centuries, but, like most of his compatriots, he has to work double shifts six days a week to earn enough money to pay for the treatments. He stumbles on a way out when he meets Kopenil Eti, a wealthy alien with a fetish for sex with humans. But is it a way out, or just another trap?

Moving?

If you plan to move between now and June, 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 doesn't always 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.

The background is certainly science-fictional enough; I especially like the great irony of living centuries of 16-hour workdays. But Barton doesn't really explore what it feels like to have a sexual relationship with an alien; it might be the story of any "kept" man, and so it fails as science fiction.

Yellow Matter is certainly interesting, with some original details, and though this world is highly depressing, I'd like to see it explored further. The author, however, has not succeeded at what he apparently set out to do.

Rating: ☆☆☆

The Wolf of Winter

By Paula Volsky
Bantam/Spectra, 1993
368 pp., \$12.95

The Wolf of Winter is an oddity: a dark fantasy written in high fantasy style. Paula Volsky's tale of

leads him to terrible acts. As the years pass, and he sits atop an uneasy throne as Ulor, he must face a vendetta from his niece Shalindra, who is determined to bring her brother to the throne and has powers of her own.

Volsky has worked out the powers and rules of necromancy carefully, as well as the cost. The frigid landscape of Rhazaulle is very vivid, as is the deathlike stillness of the library colony of Fruce, Shalindra's place of exile.

Varis's transformation from weakling to power-hungry necromancer to murderer is made believable. Shalindra is perhaps too good to be true — bold, intelligent, strong, and beautiful — but she does have a human roundedness. Volsky is not naive about power politics, and she makes her machinations believable.

Volsky's writing is superb, and her imagery lingers. *The Wolf of Winter* is a fine, powerful, and disturbing fantasy.

Rating: ☆☆☆

Islands of Tomorrow

By F.M. Busby
AvoNova, 1994
352 pp., \$4.99

F.M. Busby's latest book, *Islands of Tomorrow*, takes us to a future of time-traveling, psychically powerful nobility who kidnap people from our time for nefarious reasons of their own. It then follows those people as they attempt to preserve their lives, figure out whose side to be on, get involved in politics, and return to their own time.

Busby's world is interesting and consistent, with sensible rules for both time travel and psi. Psi powers can be a dangerous plot device because it's hard to have conflict when characters are omnipotent, but Busby manages to make them usable by limiting the powers of his Changed men and women. The future is inventive, and Luke Tabor, the main character, is believable.

The problem with *Islands of Tomorrow* is that it's not interesting enough, because Busby never made me care. Luke doesn't seem to have strong feelings about anything; as long as he's with his girlfriend Casey, it doesn't seem to matter much to him whether he gets back to his own time. And I simply could not care what happened to the Changed. Luke may start to like

them, but I didn't. Perhaps the world would have been better off without them; I certainly couldn't get excited about a plan to save them.

All that leaves is the intellectual enjoyment of watching the plot work out, and that's not enough. The lack of emotional involvement dooms this book to failure.

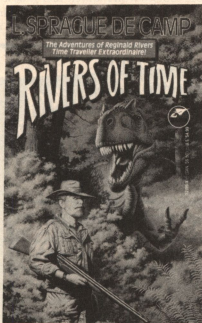
Rating: ☆☆☆

Rivers of Time

By L. Sprague de Camp
Baen, 1993
258 pp., \$4.99

L. Sprague de Camp is one of the great old pros of the SF field. When reading him, you're always guaranteed a good time, and sometimes more. *Rivers of Time* is lightweight, amusing work.

The short story collection is about Reggie Rivers, who guides safaris to the past, generally to hunt dinosaurs.



necromancy and the lust for power is much darker than you'd expect from a high fantasy, with an ambiguous ending and ambivalent characters.

The novel is set in Rhazaulle, a decadent, primitive culture clearly taking some inspiration from Russia. Varis is a brother of the Ulor, the absolute ruler of Rhazaulle, and ill-regarded, because of his physical weakness and bookishness. He begins to get involved with the forbidden art of necromancy, despite the danger of the inevitable madness to which its practice leads, and his growing ambition



Reggie first appeared in the 1950s, in "A Gun for Dinosaur," the story that starts off the collection, and didn't make a comeback until the '80s, when de Camp wrote the rest of the stories included.

Often these stories are merely vignettes, with action but little plot, and they all follow the same formulaic structure; they're best, and funniest, if they're not all read at one sitting. The characters are drawn with broad strokes on high-quality cardboard, and their motivations are at best

shadowy. The stories are very old-fashioned; the servants even talk funny.

However, de Camp's sense of humor never fails, and the tales are often witty. There are particularly sharp shots at fundamentalists and animal-rights activists. *Rivers in Time* is very well done candy, with a little paleontological education thrown in.

Rating: ☆☆☆

Swashbuckling Editor Stories

Edited by John Gregory

Betancourt

Wildside Press, 1993

128 pp., \$7.95

John Gregory Betancourt's anthology of SF and fantasy featuring editors is amusing, but it will have a limited audience: anyone who's ever been an editor or worked with one. The best story is "It Came from the Slush Pile," by Bruce Bethke (which originally appeared in *Aboriginal*); the worst is "Editor Meacham and the Fate Worse Than Death," by Mike Resnick, which is just a collection of bad puns. Notable are "The Emperor's New Prose," by Kij Johnson, "Grace Under Pressure," by Paul Levinson, "Untitled," by Greg Cox (a fine parody of *The Silence of the Lambs*), and "Re: Vision," by Steve Rasnic Tem.

The stories are full of in-jokes, particularly about Tor Books, and feature too many puns. I enjoyed the anthology, but I'm familiar with editing and publishing. *Swashbuckling Editor Stories* can be fun if you are familiar with those fields; otherwise, it will probably leave you cold.

Rating: ☆☆☆

Noted:

Sex as a Heap of Malfunctioning Rubble (and Further Improbabilities): More of the Best of the Journal of Irreproducible Results
Edited by Marc Abrahams
Workman, 1993
181 pp., \$9.95

The Journal of Irreproducible Results is where scientists get silly, publishing parody papers. This second best-of collection is funny, often hysterically so. It includes such papers as "Multivariate Analysis of Spaghetti Sauce Stains," "Cooking with Potential Energy," "Lukewarm Fission," "Titular Dominance in *I Love*

Lucy," "Feline Reactions to Bearded Men," and "*Cakus Chocolatus* and the Treatment of Disease." Also delightful are the "Elegant Results" sections, reporting scientific findings from such journals as *Seventeen* and *Vogue*.

Anyone with an interest in science will get many laughs out of this book.

Crank! No. 1

Edited by Bryan Cholfin

Broken Mirrors Press

(P.O. Box 380473, Cambridge,

MA 02238)

\$3.50 per issue, \$12.00 per year

(four issues)

I don't generally review magazines, but I wanted to call *Crank!* to your attention. This magazine prints cutting-edge fiction of a type you're unlikely to find in the more mainstream SF magazines. If not all the stories in this first issue are completely successful, that's what you expect from experiments, and what doesn't work for me might work for someone else; all of the stories are at least interesting. I thought the best were "Clap If You

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.

We plan to publish four double issues this year, including this one.

Believe," by Robert Devereaux, a rather perverse look at Tinkerbell; "Punctuated Evolution," an SF horror story by my favorite unfairly obscure author, Garry Kilworthy; and "The Thief, the Princess and the Cartesian Circle," by Gwyneth Jones, a disconcerting look at magic and madness.

If you're open to new ideas and visions, give *Crank!* a try.

Ursula K. Le Guin

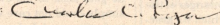
In Worcester at Readercon July 8-10

READERCON, July 8-10. G.O.H. Ursula K. Le Guin, at the Worcester Marriott, Memb. \$32 to June 1, 1994, \$40 thereafter. \$10 supporting. Info: Readercon 7, P.O. Box 381246, Cambridge MA 02238 (617) 625-6506

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Signature of editor:



Videotape:

The Masquerade: Noreascon Three
Directed by Suford Lewis
Boston in 2001 (P.O. Box 1010,
Framingham, MA 01701), 1993
90 minutes, \$25.00

The Masquerade is the most popular event at World Science Fiction Conventions, so the idea of immortalizing it on videotape is a fine one. Though I'm not a particular fan of masquerades, I enjoyed this recording of the parade of costumes at 1989's Worldcon in Boston.

The tape, unfortunately, suffers from the nature of the medium: the combination of videotape and bright lighting causes the colors to appear washed out. On the other hand, it provides a better view than you'd get unless you were sitting in the first few rows of the audience, and you don't have to wait in line or sit there for three or four hours. The costumes are all good to excellent — because it was a Worldcon, none are bad, but none

knocked me over, either. The best feature is that all the pauses and interruptions have been edited out.

The videography is generally good, although sometimes the closeups are badly timed and interfere with the overall view of the presentation. The director has included the awards presentation at the end as well as a list of credits.

This tape will be of interest to anyone who likes costuming, or anyone who has never been to a Worldcon masquerade and wants to see what it's like.

Audiotape:

Audio Comix #19: "Jip Psychic in Hyperspace" and #20: "Assassins From Another Age"

By Dan Rhetoric

Flamco (Box 20334, Greeley Sq. Sta., New York, NY 10001), 1992

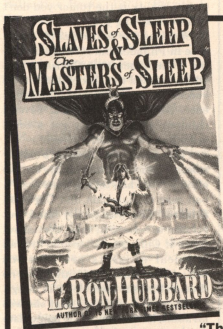
About 60 min., \$9.95

Having some long drives to make, I

became interested in Flamco's *Audio Comix* series, which promised something amusing and different. It is both, though not quite what I expected.

These are not dramatizations, but rather narrations of multiple interweaving plotlines with background music, effects, and the occasional song. While it's hard to follow the plots — especially coming in at Episode 19, as I did — it's clear that plots are not where author/performer Dan Rhetoric's heart is. It works better to take these as a series of often amusing vignettes. Sometimes I was confused, occasionally I laughed aloud, often I smiled.

The production values are good, and Rhetoric's performance is fine. The real annoyance is the *Audio Comix* promotions that continually interrupt. I'm not sure why Rhetoric feels compelled to break in with advertising when anybody listening to the tape has already bought it. Nevertheless, those with long commutes might check Flamco out. □



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The Question of Belief



You don't really *believe* any of that science-fiction stuff, do you?"

Remember? There was a time, before *Star Wars* or even *Star Trek*, when reading science fiction was a socially unusual act, likely to earn the admitted science-fictionist odd stares, outright insults, and whispers behind his back of, "He actually believes in spaceships and Martians and all that crap." I went through some of that in high school, though I attended a very backward school and was probably having an experience more typical of a generation earlier.

In those days dull mundanes always assumed that the science-fictionists were crazy people who *believed* all that stuff. We of the elite could always point learnedly to the remarks of Lucian of Samosata (without mentioning we'd read them at the front of *The Incomplete Enchanter* rather than actually in *A True History*): "I write of things which I have never seen nor suffered nor learned from another, things which are not and never could have been, and therefore my readers should by no means believe in them."

What I usually said in high school was, "Did Shakespeare believe in fairies when he wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?"

It was a lot less elegant than quoting Lucian, but I'd grasped the crucial point: fantasy and science fiction are literatures of the *imagination*. They consist of *making things up* in a disciplined fashion. The writer knows these things are made up, and, hope-

fully, so does the reader.

We in the science fiction world used to believe that because we were in the business (or hobby) of made-up things, we had a better-than-average grasp of what is real and what isn't. Upon reflection, I don't think this was ever true, considering SFdom's dubious flirtations with Charles Fort in the '30s, the Shaver Mystery in the '40s, the relentless parade of John W. Campbell lunacies beginning with the May 1950 *Astounding*. (Look it up.)

It's certainly not true now. Our conventions are rife with practitioners of power crystals, psychic healing, ritual magic, fortune-telling . . . you name it. In other words, people who very much believe a magpie's jumble of irrationalities which make "that crazy Buck Rogers stuff" seem positively prosaic by comparison. They *can't* distinguish between what is made up and what is not. They often read science fiction and fantasy both, because they think it's *all* true.

Who cares? you may well ask.

Why bother to debunk? It seems futile. People will continue to believe what they want to believe because it pleases them to do so. Rationality has little to do with it. It's not hard to learn enough real astronomy and anthropology to understand that astrology is no more "real" than any other form of divination — entrail-reading, for example.

But a lot of people would rather go on playing with their brightly-colored toys. Why not just let them? Not everyone has to tirelessly seek the truth. So what if some people choose to opt out? Isn't a debunker robbing others of comfort in a world that provides too little comfort?

Isn't it terribly arrogant of me to decide which of my neighbors' beliefs are nonsense and which are not?

Certainly it would be no more than refined cruelty to descend upon an

elderly man who is near to death and convince him that his lifelong religious beliefs are hogwash, that there is no hope of the hereafter, that all the sacrifices made to prepare for the afterlife have wasted a good deal of "this" life, etc. It can be cruel to pop the bubble.

But aside from such extreme cases, my only answer can be that it's a dirty job but someone has to do it.

Some things just *don't work*. More importantly, they don't work even though we wish they would. Magical medical cures are only the most obvious example. As someone succinctly put it, reality is the tumor you don't believe in killing you.

Someone has to decide. We had a case in Philadelphia recently, involving a fundamentalist Christian sect which refused to allow children to be vaccinated against a preventable disease. An epidemic started. Several children died. The city got a court order and vaccinated the rest.

I also think of a colleague's elderly relative who suffered from, as I've often put it when telling this story, "a bad case of glaucoma and Christian Science." She was totally blind, but refused to believe it, since the central tenet of Christian Science is that all physical ailments are illusions brought on by a lack of faith. It was no illusion that she stumbled into things. I suppose you could say that she was an adult, her life was in no immediate danger, and she had a right to choose blindness. The children hadn't been able to make any choice.

Indeed, this is no laughing matter. It raises the most serious ethical questions.

The core of it is this: false beliefs can hurt you. Surely then the humane thing to do is to try to remove the source of the hurt. If someone lives in

Rating System

☆☆☆☆☆	Outstanding
☆☆☆☆	Very Good
☆☆☆	Good
☆☆	Fair
☆	Poor

terror of demons, or is bankrupted by a charlatan, wouldn't it be a kindness to convince the victim that there are no demons, and to expose the charlatan? Think of all the suffering that was caused by witchcraft hysteria in the 15th and 16th centuries. Wouldn't it be the greatest kindness of all to go back in time and somehow convince those people that there was no black magic, that the power they lived in abject dread of couldn't hurt them?

While rationality may sometimes remove comfort, as often it *provides* comfort by setting us free from fear.

Illusion may be fun, but it can cost you: in terms of grief, terror, sickness, death, or just a lot of money. There are dozens of cults and pseudo-scientific movements in our society primarily devoted, despite claims to the contrary, to relieving the gullible of large amounts of cash as quickly as possible. Unreality-addiction can be as expensive — and destructive — as drug addiction.

Sometimes strong-arm tactics may be necessary, even those described in Ted Patrick's *Let Our Children Go!* (with Tom Dulack; E.P. Dutton, 1976, Ballantine Books, 1977). Patrick is the man who added "deprogramming" to the language. I am not sure what he's doing these days, but in the '70s he made a sensation rescuing the victims of brainwash cults, the Children of God, the Moonies, etc. Patrick had only the greatest compassion for the victims.

So, what is all this leading up to? Is Schweitzer just recycling a "New Vivisector" column left over from the late, lamented *Science Fiction Review* or what?

No, actually this has got something to do with literature. I once had a magic-believer tell me that the sorcery scenes in my novel *The Shattered Goddess* aren't at all like the "real thing." I found that enormously reassuring. I don't know what I would have done if I'd discovered that my fiction — which I know is as made-up as Lucian's — were contributing to the social malaise. I am sure it would have influenced what I wrote next. I don't think I'd ever give up writing fantasy, but my first recourse would be to change the details around until they were no longer "authentic."

What are we to do when the irrationalism is clearly made up of bits and scraps of old science fiction? I refer, of course, to that characteristic

20th century superstition, flying-saucerism.

Most science-fictionists ridicule this particular craziness, but the core of the delusion — at least in its most recent form — is unfunny indeed: a lot of pain.

David M. Jacobs's *Secret Life: Firsthand Accounts of UFO Abductions* (Simon & Schuster, 1992, 336 pp., \$21.00) is a believer's book, by and for the faithful. It has undeniable value as a primary document in the study of UFO folklore. We can only wish that someone had written a similar one three or four centuries ago, interviewing victims of the quite similar fairy-abduction phenomenon.

Certainly Jacobs's opus was sent around to science fiction reviewers — some publicist thinks we believe all this stuff — but it will provide very little inspiration for the science fiction writer or reader. For the science-fictionist, reading a UFO book is rather like an auto-designer's tour of a junkyard. All around are banged-up and obsolete parts which are *totally familiar*. It is through the cultural influence of science fiction that this particular belief-system has taken on science-fictional — rather than supernatural — imagery and language. I might further add that SF writers know more science than Jacobs (a Ph.D. of history at Temple University) apparently does. His biology is especially weak if he fails to question how extraterrestrials could interbreed with humans. As Carl Sagan remarked, Mr. Spock's mom would have had better luck with a petunia than with Sarek.

The *phenomenon* to be studied is not that flying saucers are grabbing people by the dozens and performing vaguely sexual or proctological experiments on them, but that people *believe* this is happening. The more scientifically minded might want to also check out David Hufford's *The Terror That Comes in the Night* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), which is "an experience-centered study of supernatural assault traditions" and goes into the psychology and physiology of the virtually universal "night-hag experience" — sleep paralysis — which I at least think has a good deal to do with both UFO and fairy abductions.

In either case, abduction-belief causes a great deal of pain. If this is a new cult, the beginnings of a new

religion, it is the most pathetic faith to come along in quite some time. Abduction-belief offers *only* agony and humiliation, without the attractions of salvation or immortality characteristic of mystery-cults of the past. The standard scenario resembles rape. Victims report being treated like laboratory animals by extraterrestrials who care no more for human desires and dignities than human experimenters do for their rats. In the abduction mythos, as it has now emerged, Earth people are mere *things*, part of some inscrutable, alien breeding program.

The victims' lives are shattered. They struggle to understand what has happened to them. They will cling to any available solution which might help them get over what they have been through. They tend to cluster together in support groups, attempting to heal one another or to be healed by writers of books like this one, or Whitley Strieber's *Communion*. I once read a newspaper account of an abductee therapy-session/convention at which Mr. Strieber was guest of honor. It sounded like he was well on his way to becoming a priest of the new sect.

I can't say what is going on there. Perhaps Strieber is a compassionate man, who actually tries to help these people. But since he is, by his own account, himself a victim, he seems unable to take the final step: to assault the belief itself, to provide healing by convincing these people that what they think happened, didn't.

It is compassionate to free people from the fear generated by their own delusions. I think many UFO-abductees need the services of a skilled deprogrammer, who might heal in the way that New Age healers can't. You have to confront the unreal with the real.

Otherwise, I'm sure you all can see how vulnerable these victims would be to exploitation by the unscrupulous.

Let me offer a thought-experiment, some of which, I admit, sounds an awful lot like the plot of Kate Wilhelm's excellent 1970 novel, *Let the Fire Fall*. Possibly science fiction helps protect us from this sort of thing, by reminding us over and over that it is the stuff of fiction, that people like Kate Wilhelm or Darrell Schweitzer can make it up. But, quite clearly, a lot of people have failed to

get the message.

The turf of science fiction, when it turns into *belief*, can be dangerous.

Here goes: Combine a ruthless brainwash cult with sophisticated mass-media promotion and routine faith-healing; then employ a defrocked stage magician to do a few sleight-of-hand tricks and pretend to be psychic.

Next, add a sprinkling of UFO-abduction/contactee mythology, and what do you get?

You get a potentially large-scale religious cult, created in utter cynicism, based on the premise that the psychically-empowered preacher is a *space alien*, here to "save" us from all manner of menaces, including, by no coincidence, those other aliens who take people aboard flying saucers and do awful things to them.

Why not? We've already seen dozens of UFO-based religious cults, even some of the "sell all your goods and wait to be taken away before the world ends" variety, the adherents of which, inevitably, are let down when the rescuing saucer fails to show up. You could rationalize the no-shows as a failure in interplanetary communications, since the leaders of such sects merely claim to have received their instructions from the aliens.

That's the one crucial difference. This time, our front-man claims to be an actual extraterrestrial. He need not wear fake antennae or Spock-ears. The public doesn't seem to grasp the concept that a creature who is the product of an entirely different evolutionary system would be *profoundly* different. (My own opinion is that if we ever found an E.T. who even walks on two legs and has two arms and binocular vision, that will be an *eerie* coincidence, worthy of a lot of research.)

Never mind. Say he's assumed human form for our sake, and that only the initiates into the sect may behold his true form, which is too awesome for plain folks to bear. Even that may be unnecessary. Keep it simple. So this guy's a space-alien. He "proves" it by doing the stage tricks, even if he's never good enough to earn more than contempt from *The Amazing Randi* and *The Skeptical Inquirer*. The rubes will eat it up. No amount of debunking will stop the preacher from space.

The space preacher also uses standard faith-healing techniques,

asking audiences to help him "focus energy" to cure the afflicted, not merely suffering UFO-abductees, but "any" afflicted. This enables the believers to "participate" in these great works.

The space preacher's assistants will be glad to sell you genuine alien crystals which will help you focus and develop your personal energy.

And I think our E.T. has something of the "psychic surgeon" about him. Magically, without surgery, he removes "tumors" which only a vile skeptic could allege may have begun life in a hen house.

There is a sense of urgency. Conspiracies abound and the apocalypse is at hand. What kind of apocalypse? That hardly matters. Nuclear war is a tried-and-true standby. Or, it might be AIDS, which everybody "knows" started in a C.I.A. laboratory somewhere and may be unstoppable.

The government and the C.I.A. are out to silence the Space Savior because he is a "threat" to them. Scientific "orthodoxy" refuses to acknowledge him because scientists, too, are dupes of the bad guys. Cult-leaders will be smart enough not to name a specific date for the End, but something bad is going to happen very soon, unless it can be prevented by the outer-space savior, unless you, friends, send all the money you can to help him in his good works; and after you've done that you should move into a believer community, cut off all ties with unbelievers, and devote your every waking moment to working for the Cause of preventing nuclear war, rescuing UFO-abductees, stopping pollution, saving the whales, eliminating corrupt government officials, "curing" homosexuals, diverting a huge asteroid which is about to collide with the Earth, raising every human being to a higher, more enlightened plane where their own inner powers may be revealed . . . all Before It Is Too Late.

Sounds crazy, doesn't it?

Somehow, I'm not laughing. This will mean pain, fear, bigotry, ruined lives, and considerable financial expense. I bet a lot of the people interviewed in David M. Jacobs's *Secret Life: Firsthand Accounts of UFO Abductions* would go for it.

It's what happens when we forget that this crazy Buck Rodgers stuff is crazy Buck Rogers stuff.

Okay, let's look at some books of acknowledged fiction:

Into the Green

By Charles de Lint

Tor Books, 1994

254 pp., \$19.95

Will Fantasy ever cast off the dead hand of J.R.R. Tolkien? Or are cloned trilogies with their pre-fab swords and elfstones here to stay? Must the sophisticated seeker of the fantastic then turn to the mainstream, to magic realism, to Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Salman Rushdie, and the late John Gardner, and forget about the generic product altogether? It's now been almost twenty years since Lester del Rey devastated what had almost become an interesting Fantasy renaissance in the early 1970s. The jaded reader might now ask, is there anything left?

The answer is, to a considerable extent, Charles de Lint. There are, to be sure, others. Tanith Lee, Peter Beagle, and Tim Powers spring immediately to mind. But de Lint has been a steady producer of fantasy fiction which shows clear respect for what Tolkien accomplished in *The Lord of the Rings*, yet has moved beyond it, into something distinctly his own. He is critically successful, usually nominated several times each year for the World Fantasy Award. His work is often a mixture of the urban and rural, the native North American and the Celtic. Sometimes he has also made extremely effective use of the legendry of the American Southwest. He has, deservedly, a substantial following.

Into the Green is almost purely Celtic, and, for de Lint, somewhat disappointingly conventional. The action takes place in an alternately-named British Isles, in a non-historical early Middle Ages, when the intolerantly monotheistic priests of Dath (You Know Who) encourage persecution of practitioners of the Old Religion (Guess), particularly the Summer-born, who have the blood of the gods in them and are able to see "into the Green," perceiving the ancient mysteries of the land and of the Kowries (Fairies).

(I'm getting tired of this. Couldn't the Druids be the bad guys just once?)

The heroine, Angharad, is triply powerful as witch, harper, and Tinker. Her magic is in her hands, which can draw music out of "the Green" — nature itself — and that

makes her especially valuable to witch-hunters, who make a tidy profit selling witches' finger-bones. However, she must travel from the outlands to the big city to find and defuse the *Glascrow*, an ancient, evil artifact which corrupts the soul and eats away at the magic of the Green. The cast includes a fairly standard motley: a wizardly mentor, a failed and derelict Summerborn (who recovers his courage at the crucial moment), a sadistic inquisitor, a mysterious swordsman, a loyal innkeeper's wife, almost-innocent urchins, etc. There are, frankly, few surprises in the proceedings.

What, then, makes this better than any *Sword of the Enchanted Elves Trilogy*, Volume Four? The answer is, a certain sensibility. De Lint can feel the beauty of the ancient lore he is evoking. He can well imagine what it would be like to conjure the Other World among ancient, standing stones. And his characters have a certain fallibility which makes them multi-dimensional and human; and

his settings are gritty. This is no Disney-like never-never land. In the first few pages of the book, the heroine's entire Tinker tribe dies hideously of the Plague, and there are no comfortable, New Age solutions. Life and death in de Lint's world are more than a matter of a few words or a magic crystal.

The artificiality of the alternate-world setting detracts. The story would have worked better without the subterfuge, but instead set in early medieval Britain and Ireland, with Druidic pagans and Christian witch-hunters, and the Celtic supernatural lore paraded out for exactly what it is. But the Sidhe (Celtic Fairies) are beguiling, terrifying folk, and their Otherworld a realm from which no mortal returns unchanged. De Lint knows that, regardless of what names he uses.

Rating: ☆☆☆

Seven Steps to Midnight

By Richard Matheson
Forge/ A Tom Doherty

Associates Book, 1994
318 pp., \$21.95

Surely any new novel by Richard Matheson is an Event. He is one of the great names in American terror fiction. His very first story, "Born of Man and Woman," is a classic. His equally classic first novel, *I Am Legend* (1954), showed the way to numerous others by placing vampires, not in a 19th Century Carpathian castle, but in the neighborhood supermarket. Matheson's style was, from the start, lucid and completely contemporary. Stephen King has acknowledged that Matheson influenced him more than any other writer. Such later Matheson novels as *Hell House* and *Bid Time Return* are also classics, or nearly so. The Horror Writers of America rightly voted Matheson a special award for Lifetime Achievement a couple years back.

His new book, *I am sorry to report*, is unlikely to become a classic.

When our hero, a mathematician working on a top-secret defense



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CONTACT: Cultures of the Imagination (R) is a California non-profit educational and scientific corporation organized under IRS Code 501(c)(3)

project, finds his car missing in the company lot, borrows another, and picks up a hitchhiker who offers a curious wager ("... the security of your existence against your assumption that you know what is real and unreal in your life"), we know we are in familiar Matheson territory: a lone man faced with the inexplicable and the paranoid. Matheson did this on *The Twilight Zone* lots of times.

Bizarre developments come thick and fast. Our hero returns home, only to confront someone else living in his house, claiming to be him. Before long he's off on a break-neck international chase, trailing spies, counter-spies, mysterious assassins in fezzes and turbans, and even the apparent supernatural: a beautiful woman who may well be a ghost from ancient Rome, not to mention the truly uncanny ability of everyone to be at the right place at the right time to engineer one more pursuit, capture, escape, or occasional murder. The pace is as frantic as anything seen since the days of Sax Rohmer — who managed some new twist, turn, or deviltry of Fu Manchu in every five-page chapter — but the writing is fortunately up to Matheson's high standard. This is a novel that flies across the page.

It's a natural for Hollywood. The film version will doubtless play it straight, with lots of gunfire and squealing tires. It would be a perfect vehicle for Harrison Ford. What the movie will miss will be the sense of absurdity both Matheson and his hero can never quite forget. The hero thinks in terms of Robert Ludlum, Ian Fleming, and Alfred Hitchcock. He gets out of tight spots by replaying scenes from trashy suspense novels he's read. He all but dares the plot mechanism to show itself, as the actual storyline increasingly resembles the mind-bending antics of Philip K. Dick, in which nothing ever makes sense — or *can*, because each explanation is more ridiculously horrific than the last. Relentlessly, the espionage hijinks pile up impossible coincidences faster than bodies.

The ending, if the film version is to be any good, is going to need work. For a straight suspense story, lacking either metaphysical or metafictional pretensions, the resolution strains credulity more than all that has gone before. It is, frankly, far more unbelievable than any fiendish plot by two-headed, extra-dimensional aliens

slipping hallucinogens into the water supply to alter the nature of reality. I'm not going to "ruin" the book for you by describing the ending exactly, but when you get there, I think you will agree with me that it's a cop-out.

Matheson veers away from the complexity he's approached. The hero gets the girl. They vanish into the night, somehow able to forget that girl-getting is one more cliché of a piece with the erratically-orchestrated adventure they've just been through. It's *over*. There's no sense of *is it really?* The hero has won his wager. His faith in reality seems, if anything, naively self-assured.

Rating: ☆☆

Noted:

ALDISS MINOR and ALDISS MAJOR

The Kindred Blood of Kensington Gore

By Brian Aldiss
Avernum, 25 pp. (pamphlet)
£3.95 (About \$6.00)

(Signed copies available from
Cold Tonnage Books, Andy
Richards, 136 New Rd., Bedford,
Feltham, Middlesex, TW14 8HT,
England.)

A Tupolev Too Far

By Brian Aldiss
St. Martin's Press, 1994
200 pp., \$18.95

The first of these is the source of some embarrassment for me. At Readercon, this past summer, I chanced to mention to the author that, while his short play (and his own performance in the lead role) seemed quite impressive, I had, alas, dozed off and therefore wondered how it had turned out! You know how that is. An eight-hour drive, a convention schedule made more harried by the fact I was both on the program and running a dealer's table . . . and the first chance I got to sit down, and . . . zzzzz . . . I've missed any number of guest-of-honor speeches that way.

Well, Mr. Aldiss, being a perfect gentleman, didn't say, "Sit on a thumbtack next time, you twit!" Instead, he sent me a copy of the printed play. It would only be gracious of me to recommend it to you, which I can,

in all honesty, because it *is* good: it's about Philip K. Dick in the afterlife, trying to come to terms with the conflicts of his life and confronting a woman who is — you guessed it — not entirely what she seems. Aldiss shows a good grasp, not only of dramatic technique, but of his subject-matter. A play as speculative biography.

I'd like to see this performed again.

A Tupolev Too Far is a new short-story collection, of presumably recent work, although lack of a proper acknowledgments page makes that uncertain. There are one or two pieces I didn't care for, and a couple of minor items (lexicons of very curious alien vocabulary, a bit of fluff about a cockroach transformed into Franz Kafka), but several of the stories show Aldiss at the top of his form. I particularly recommend the title story (a witty alternate-historical sexual adventure), "A Matter of Life and Death," and "North of the Abyss." This last is an Egyptian mythological fantasy which would have been right for *Weird Tales*, and only goes to show that Aldiss's range continues to expand.

Ratings: *Kindred*: ☆☆☆☆

Tupolev: ☆☆☆☆

(Very) early Wolfe:

Young Wolfe

By Gene Wolfe
United Mythologies
Press, 1992
69 pp., \$15.95 (trade hardcover);
\$40.00 (signed/limited)

A modestly-produced edition of very early work by a writer who took a relatively long time to blossom. Some are distinctly pre-professional (a collegiate Sherlock Holmes parody), most of the others very slight, but the book does contain one gem, Wolfe's first professional sale, "The Dead Man," which originally appeared in a men's magazine in 1965. It's a Kiplingesque ghost story, set in India. I read "Mountains Like Mice" as a kid, in a back-issue of *IF* about a year after it was published (1966). I remember I didn't much like it then. I find it at least more interesting now: a strange and cruel initiation ritual into a mysterious order . . . which is explained at great length at the end, and the action turns out to take place on Mars. But here we can see the first

stirrings of the talent that produced *The Shadow of the Torturer*.

(United Mythologies Press, Box 390 Station A., Weston, Ontario, M9N 3N1 Canada. (Add \$1.50 per book shipping. Prices in U.S. dollars.)

Rating: ☆☆☆

A small press bonanza

The Rediscovery of Man

By Cordwainer Smith

NESFA Press, 1993

671 pp., \$24.95

Most of you already know who Cordwainer Smith was: if not the greatest of all science fiction writers, certainly the most unique. He wrote of the far, far future more *plausibly* than anyone else before the coming of Gene Wolfe, which is to say he did it as myth, since such remote epochs could never be imagined or comprehended any other way by 20th Century folk. Someone said it best: this is not the way the future will be; it is the way the future will be *remembered*.

The present edition collects *all* of Smith's science fiction except for the novel *Norstrilia*, including "Himself in Anachron," which had been locked

up in *The Last Dangerous Visions* for the past twenty years, and a couple of other unpublished or uncollected pieces. Barring new revelations, this is the definitive one-volume Smith. For the sheer size and quality (good paper, Smyth-sewn, full cloth), it is an amazing bargain at the price. It is also one of the truly indispensable items in any science fiction library. (NESFA Press, P.O. Box 809, Framingham MA 01701-0203. (Add \$2.00 per order for shipping.)

Rating: ☆☆☆☆☆

□

The 1993 Boomerang Awards selections

It's time for you, our readers to pick the best stories, illustrations, and poetry for *Aboriginal* for the 1993 Boomerang Award winners. Just send your postcard or letter listing your pick for the best story, best art, and best poem to: *Aboriginal* Boomerang Awards, P.O. Box 2449, Woburn, MA 01888.

The selection of stories, art, and poems is listed below to make your work easier.

Spring 1993

"Natural High" by Chuck Rothman; Art by Peggy Ranson

"Newport's World" by Doug Franklin; Art by Alan Gutierrez

"At the Shadow of a Dream" by Howard V. Hendrix; Art by David Deitrick

"Ladies' Choice" by Barney Currer; Art by Lori Deitrick

"The Motel 6 Fugue" by Karl G. Schlosser; Art by N. Taylor Blanchard

"Dear Froggy" by Patricia Anthony; Art by Cortney Skinner

"The Committee to Re-Elect the President" by Jan Lars Jensen; Art by Carol Heyer

"In Love with Multi-Woman" by Brooks Peck; Art by Allison Fiona Hershey

"When in Bzook ..." by Alan Kirk; Art by Larry Blamire

"The Legend in Pursuit" by Dan Persons; Art by Jon Foster

"Two by Two" by Chet Gottfried; Art by Larry Blamire

"Enchantment" by Catherine Mintz; Art by Robert Pasternak

Summer 1993

"Born to be Wild" by Patricia Anthony; Art by Carol Heyer

"Must be the Heat" by J. H. Ulowetz; Art by Peggy Ranson

"E.R." by J. Brooke; Art by David Deitrick

"Migration Patterns" by Robert Reed; Art by Jon Foster

"Regatta" by James C. Glass; Art by Alan Gutierrez

"Rest Cure" by Alexander Jablkov; Art by Larry Blamire

"Healing Brother" by Steven M. Ford; Art by Allison Fiona Hershey

"Ghosts in the Machine" by B. C. Holmes; Art by Cortney Skinner

"Can a White Boy Sing the Blues?" by Greg Costikyan; Art by Lori Deitrick

"The Sorrows of Your Changing Face" by Brian A. Hopkins; Art by Robert Pasternak

"Dollhouse" by Edward James O'Connell III; Art by N. Taylor Blanchard

Fall 1993

"If I Should Die Before I Wake" by Doug Franklin; Art by Alan Gutierrez

"Market Day" by Joe Haldeman

"Human Spirit, Beetle Spirit" by John Betancourt; Art by Jon Foster

"Gingerbread Man" by Patricia Anthony; Art by Peggy Ranson

"The Fermi Paradox Explained on a City Street Corner" by Graham P. Collins; Art by Robert Pasternak

"Indigenes" by Greg Abraham; Art by Clyde Duensing, III

"The Recyclers" by Anthony J. Howard; Art by Cortney Skinner

"The Salesman" by Michael P. Belfiore; Art by Charles Lang

"The Lady or the *T/V/g/a/r/t*" by Jayge Carr; Art by Lori Deitrick

"Screams are Not Enough" by Chuck Rothman; Art by Carol Heyer

"Spongehead" by William Shefski; Art by Charles Lang

"A Trace of His Kindness" by Jamil Nasir; Art by Allison Fiona Hershey

Poem:

"Poem from the Stars" by Wendy Rathbone

Winter 1993

"The Other Lesson of Phaedrus" by D. G. Grace; Art by Jon Foster

"From the Beach" by Derek Godat; Art by Peggy Ranson

"The Rosebush" by Anthony Ellis; Art by Charles Lang

"Deepcity Midnights" by Robert Hodge; Art by David LeClerc

"Sturm Clusters" by John Farrell; Art by Cortney Skinner

"A Word to the New Recruits" by Pete Manison; Art by David Deitrick

"The Fade" by Valerie J. Freireich; Art by N. Taylor Blanchard

"Shell Shock" by David Howard; Art by Charles Lang

"Fence of Palms" by B. J. Thrower; Art by Jael

"The Plowshares" by Richard J. Stuart; Art by Larry Blamire

Poems:

"The Dead Start Waving" by William John Watkins

"Eulogy for Prometheus" by William John Watkins

Everything Old is New Again:

A Sixties Revival



The first three paragraphs of this column are labelled: FOR YOUR EYES ONLY. Anyone reading this highly sensitive material must pinkie-swear not to repeat any of it to the person concerned. In fact, to ensure complete secrecy, I've written this column in code; expect your genuine imitation authentic plastic cardboard secret decoder rings any day now. The subject: Harlan's film deal with MGM.

After fierce interest from more than 40 film companies (picture a tureen full of piranha), MGM outbid the competition with a six-figure deal (yes, I do know the exact amount, but frankly, I'm treading on thin ice here) to option the film rights to Harlan's recent novella, "Mefisto in Onyx."

"Mefisto in Onyx" is a "high concept," film-noir suspense thriller with only one fantastic twist. Picture *The Demolished Man* as written by Jim Thompson. It opens in a hamburger joint in the middle of Alabama where Rudy Pairis, a black guy (think Forest Whitaker), is having a long conversation with Allison Roche, a white woman friend and local Deputy District Attorney. The subject of the conversation is a serial killer named Henry Lake Spanning who was convicted by Allison Roche of 56 counts of murder. Now she not only thinks he's innocent, but she's in love with him, and she wants Rudy to go onto Death Row at Holman Prison in Atmore, Alabama to find out if he's guilty or innocent. Why Rudy? Because Rudy is a telepath.

And that's just the beginning of Rudy's problems ...

Nope, can't force me, I'm not going to spoil the story. If you want to know what happens, wait for the movie or, even better, read the book. Available in fine bookstores from Mark V. Ziesing Books.

Movies

The last time we saw him, he was riding off into the sunset. Now George Lucas is planning to bring back Indiana Jones for a fourth installment. Already hired to write the screenplay is Jeb Stuart, who co-wrote last year's successful *Fugitive* film, also starring Harrison Ford. If the film is given a firm go-ahead, both Ford and director Steven Spielberg plan to return for a fourth time.

Stanley Kubrick's next film will be the science fiction epic *A.I.* (Artificial Intelligence) for Warner Bros. Details are still sketchy, but the film is set in the future where many of the coastal cities are now under water from the melting polar ice caps. In contrast to the cities' decline over the years, robot intelligence has increased, hence the title *A.I.* Kubrick was originally set to go into production two years ago, but put the project on hold until computer special effects were advanced enough to bring the futuristic vision to the screen. The film is scheduled for a 1995 release.

As a follow-up to Tim Burton's stop-motion animation hit *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, Disney has bought the rights to Roald

Dahl's book *James and the Giant Peach*. The screen version will use live-action for the first part of the film, followed by the same stop-motion techniques used in *Nightmare* when James enters the world of the Peach. The screenplay is by Dennis Potter, whose credits include *The Singing Detective*. (On a side note: *Nightmare's* composer Danny Elfman is writing a debut screenplay for a live-action Disney film called *Little Demons*.)

The on-again, off-again futuristic action film *Pincushion* may have life once more. Originally bought three years ago by producer Dan Melnick, the film has been linked to such stars as Cher and Sharon Stone, as well as to director John Carpenter. After a time in studio limbo, the film has now resurfaced with Demi Moore's name attached to the project. *Pincushion* is the name of a boy whose blood has been genetically altered to become a vaccine for the plague that now devastates the country. A female mercenary is hired to take the boy cross-country to a medical facility. Enter a corrupt military leader who wants the boy for his own financial gain. Isn't that always the way? No telling if *Pincushion* will eventually find a home, but with this film, perseverance is the watchword.

Spec script *Species*, written by Dennis Feldman (*The Golden Child*), has been bought by MGM for producer Frank Mancuso, Jr.

Species is an action film in the same vein as *Aliens* and *Predator*, with a female character as the protagonist.

The go-ahead has also been given to MGM's *Fluke*, a thriller based on the book by English author James Herbert. *Fluke* is a dog who in his dreams remembers that he was once a man. He then sets out to rediscover his family. Italian director Carlo Carlei plans to shoot the film from a dog's point of view. In a recent article from *The Hollywood Reporter*, Carlei stated, "For the first time, it will be a dog movie in which the world will really be seen sensorially, from the point of view of a dog. The colors, the way of shooting, will all be in accordance with new scientific research about color perception in dogs."

Fifty to sixty million dollars is the going rate to relocate New York. That's the budget of *Manhattan Transfer* currently in production. The film is based on the novel by John E. Stith, in which New York is transplanted to a vast plain surrounded by several other similarly transported communities, all of them alien.

With the ink barely dry on the first deal, writers Troy Neighbors and Steven Pienberg have signed to write a sequel to *Fortress*. *Fortress 2* will once again star Christopher Lambert as John Brennick. However, instead of trying to break out of the fortress, the Brennick character must break into an unpenetrable fortress built in space to rescue his son.

Eddie Murphy will join the legion of the undead when he plays a vampire who wreaks havoc on the streets of Brooklyn in a film cleverly titled *Vampire in Brooklyn*. Director Wes Craven is set to helm the project from a screenplay by Eddie Murphy and his brother Charles Murphy. Not to be left out of the current comic-to-screen vogue, Murphy will star in a screen adaptation of James Through the Lens

Owsley and Denys Cowan's Milestone character *Shade*.

Jean-Claude Van Damme is currently shooting *Time Cop*, a futuristic action thriller in which Van Damme plays a "time cop" sent into the past to the year 1994 (that translates into inexpensive SFX) to investigate a political conspiracy. Co-starring with Van Damme are Ron Silver, Gloria Reuben, Mia Sara, and Bruce McGill. Directing the feature is Peter Hyams (2010).

From time cop to dinosaur cop. Whoopi Goldberg has settled the suit against her, which looked as if it was shaping up to be another Kim Basinger/*Boxing Helena* case, by agreeing to star in the film *T-Rex* which she allegedly walked out on, thereby breaching an oral contract to star in the film. Goldberg will star as a policewoman who is partnered with a dinosaur cop. The production is now scheduled to start in 1994.

Those wacky guys in white coats are at it again. *Weekend with T-Rex*, a comedy starring Terry Kiser, revolves around a mad scientist who attempts to bring a T-Rex dinosaur to life, but instead puts its brain inside the head of a high school football player. (Notice how I refrain from obvious cheap jokes.) This contribution to the art of cinema is being written and directed by Stewart Raffill, whose credits include *The Philadelphia Experiment* and *Passenger 57*.

New Line Cinema has made a deal with Midway Manufacturing Co., makers of the *Mortal Kombat* video game, to produce a live-action feature based on its game. For those of you unfamiliar with the video game, a group of superhuman fighters compete in a dangerous tournament on a mysterious island ruled by an evil character called Shang Tsung. Expect *Mortal Kombat* to be released in 1995.

Another New Line acquisition is the spec script *The Portal*, written by newcomer Michael Brown-

ing. The plot has a reanimation experiment going wrong when scientists (it's unclear whether said scientists are mad or just plain stupid) try to bring back a man from the dead. The unfortunate side effect of the process is the victim's single-minded urge to destroy the world.

Remaking '50s and '60s films and television shows is still prime fodder for the studios. Although the idea is still in the discussion stage, it seems director Oliver Stone is interested in directing a remake of the '60s film *Planet of the Apes*.

A remake of *Forbidden Planet* will start shooting in London in May. Signed on as executive producer is special-effects expert Stan Winston, who will also create the new Robby the Robot and the Monster from the Id characters for the film. Set to direct the \$35 million feature is Irvin Kershner (*The Empire Strikes Back*). Kershner and writer Stirling Silliphant are rewriting the original, excellent 1956 screenplay by Cyril Hume. Ray Bradbury will act as story consultant for the film. (Originally, a well-known writer, who shall remain nameless, but whose body lies on the other side of my bed every night — we shall call him Mr. X — was approached by producer Lindsay Dunlap to write the remake. The writer — Mr. X — told her that a remake would be pointless since the original film had been done brilliantly the first time. He suggested a sequel exploring the fate of the Krel. What did the Krel look like? What could have destroyed a race that could build such machinery? That was the direction he felt the film should go ... the silence was deafening ... enjoy the same ol' thing repackaged with a \$35 million bow.)

John Carpenter is set to direct a remake of the 1960 black-and-white film *Village of the Damned*, for New Line Cinema. The original film, based on John Wyndham's book *The Midwich*

Cuckoos, is set in a small English village in which all the women become pregnant, eventually giving birth to blond-haired, emotionless, alien children with mind-control abilities.

Chris Columbus, director of *Mrs. Doubtfire*, has signed a deal with MGM to write, direct and produce a remake of the 1973 horror film *Theatre of Blood*. In the original film Vincent Price plays a Shakespearean actor who dies only to come back from the dead to avenge himself upon the critics who panned his performances, murdering them by recreating famous death scenes. The original film was based on a story by Stanley Mann and John Kohn, who return to the remake as executive producers.

In the preliminary stages are talks between Steven Spielberg's Amblin Entertainment and the BBC about remaking *Dr. Who*; and large screen versions of *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* and maybe *The Prisoner*. So far, it's just talk.

Quick takes: Writer-producer Martin Zweiback is developing a screenplay, based on L. Frank Baum's *The Life and Adventures of Santa Claus*, for Will Vinton Prods. Vinton is the man behind the claymation *California Raisins* campaign.

Astrocoops: Peacekeepers of the Future, an upcoming animated feature, is part of the new wave of film and television shows to use "non-violent techniques" when battling evil forces. An idea which still seems to me to be a surface solution to a much deeper problem.

Writer Chris Thompson (*Mork and Mindy*) has been hired to write a sequel to the successful 1988 film *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*.

The Crying Game's Jay Davidson will co-star with Jeff Bridges and James Spader in the science-fiction film *Stargate* due out this summer.

Warwick Davis will reprise his role as the evil leprechaun in

Trimark's *Leprechaun 2*, a film naturally set to open on St. Patrick's Day, taking full advantage of the tie-in advertising.

Julia Roberts has signed a deal, for an estimated \$8.5-10 million fee, to star as Dr. Jekyll's maid in the previously mentioned *Mary Reilly*.

This spring, the animated film *The Princess and the Goblin* will be released. The featured voices include Joss Ackland, Claire Bloom, Sally Ann Marsh, and Rik Mayall.

Upcoming features include: *Astro Cop*, starring Michael Pare; *Shadowchaser 2*, starring Frank Zagarino as the unstoppable cyborg; *Metalbeast*, a science-fiction thriller with special effects by Fred Spencer (*Beetlejuice*); *Nemesis II*; *The Mangler*; and *Strange Days*, a futuristic high-tech thriller written by James Cameron.

Television

With the fall season well under way, there is very little in the way of new series news. With the continued interest in the James Cameron big-budget version of *Spider-Man*, it seems only natural that Fox is already in the early stages of production on an animated *Spider-Man* special scheduled to air on Fox Children's Network in fall 1994. If the special pulls in the required numbers, it could be used as a springboard pilot for a possible 65-episode *Spider-Man* series.

Taking that franchise leap to the small screen for a 22-episode commitment is *Robocop: The Series*, which started filming in October. The series will kick off with a two-hour pilot written by Edward Neumeier and Michael Miner, the team responsible for the first *Robocop* film.

Manimal, the 1983 television series which had a brief 8-episode run on NBC, may soon return with a new series due to its enormous success in Europe. TeleImages, a French production company, has

shown interest in the project to the extent of commissioning a bible for a proposed 13-episode series. Simon MacCorkindale, who played the shapeshifter-crime-fighter in the original series, will once again play the lead, this time with a new supporting cast. Estimated budget for the prime-time series is one million dollars per episode, an amount slightly below the industry's average \$1.2 million per show. 20th Century Fox plans to distribute the new hour-long series.

20th Century Fox is part of an international co-venture to produce a new game show with a science fiction premise called *Scavengers*. In the show, teams of contestants have to board a space station to retrieve materials lost in a series of galactic wars. The \$2-3 million futuristic set will be constructed on a London soundstage.

Two lost episodes of the original *Twilight Zone*, "Where the Dead Are" and "The Theater," will air this spring on CBS under the title *Twilight Zone: Rod Serling's Lost Classics*. "The Theater" has been adapted by Richard Matheson and stars Amy Irving as a woman who sees her life being acted out on the screen of the local theater. In "Where the Dead Are," a Boston surgeon travels to a post-Civil War country to find a reclusive scientist who may hold the key to solving a medical mystery.

And lastly, the third *Star Trek* series, *Star Trek: Voyager*, is scheduled to premiere in January 1995. As with *Deep Space Nine*, the new series will be set in the 24th Century. □

Alien Invaders



We've seen or read about this countless times — alien invaders. Depending upon the degree of sophistication of what we're viewing or reading, these invading aliens can run the gamut from rubber-suited actors stomping Tokyo to pure energy beings from the galactic center intent on communing with our souls. I thought I'd seen it all, heard it all, read it all, and quite frankly become bored to tears with it all. I could have spent my remaining years on this planet quite contented without encountering another alien invasion scenario.

But then something happened.

The September 1993 issue of *Scientific American* miraculously appeared in my mailbox. Well, perhaps not quite so miraculously — I do have a subscription (and you should too). This was one of those special issues that they will occasionally put together, in which all of the articles reflect a single given topic. In the past they've had these special issues dealing with the human brain, world ecosystems, and microelectronics.

And what do you think this issue was all about?

That's right.

Alien invaders.

You don't believe me. You can't believe that *Scientific American* has changed its format, having become a science fiction magazine? Well, it hasn't. What this special issue featured is something far weirder than what typically graces both the pages of this magazine or any other SF magazine that you may subscribe to.

What I'm talking about is the *Immune System*.

That's right.

I'm talking about this completely bizarre mixture of biology, chemistry, physics (and at times what almost seems like magic) that

defends you against alien invaders — where in this case the invaders are in the form of viruses and bacteria.

So what exactly is your immune system?

It is not some specific organ in your body like your heart or your liver. There is not some little fluid-filled sac of alien defenders wedged between your spleen and intestines that is called into action when some virus invades. Because viruses and bacteria can enter your body at any point, the *lymphatic system* which is responsible for defending against these invaders is widely distributed throughout your body. Cells called *lymphocytes*, which are responsible for creating immunity to these invaders, are generated in your *primary lymphoid organs*. There are two types of lymphocytes: *T cells*, which are born in the thymus (an organ in your chest, just below your neck), and *B cells*, which are born in bone marrow. Once the T and B cells are created, they quickly circulate throughout your blood system until they reach one of the many *secondary lymphoid organs* — such as the lymph nodes (distributed throughout your body), spleen, and tonsils.

So what happens when an *antigen* (the alien invader) enters the body? It is a convoluted and highly flexible response. It is not something as simple as brave earthmen destroying the invading dirt-clod folk from Arcturus 12 by dousing them with water cannons and turning them into mud, or shattering the crystalline entities from the Crab Nebula by offering them up the best of Barry Manilow.

Nothing as easy as that.

When the antigen enters your body, it first encounters a cell called a *macrophage*, which will ingest some of the invaders and break

them down into *antigenic peptides* (a string of amino acids). Pieces of these peptides then become attached to the surface of *major histocompatibility complex (MHC)* molecules. It is only at this point that the T cells enter the picture. The T cells have receptor molecules on their surfaces that allow them to recognize different peptide-MHC combinations. Recognition takes place by chemical bonds on the surface of the T cells being able to lock onto the peptide-MHC combinations — something like one part of a jigsaw puzzle locking into another part.

Those T cells that have recognized a unique peptide-MHC combination then divide and secrete *lymphokines*, which act as a chemical signal to notify the B cells that an invader has arrived, thereby activating them. Unlike the T cells, the B cells do not need the use of MHC molecules to see the antigens, but have receptors that can recognize antigens directly. Having tasted the invading antigens with their chemical receptors, the B cells divide into plasma cells which will secrete *antibodies*. These antibodies will then lock onto the antigens and can either neutralize them or help destroy them by calling in *complement enzymes* or *scavenging cells* to lend a helping hand.

Wow.

But it's even more complex than that. Once the T cells have awakened the B cells to the presence of the invaders, the B cells will then process the antigens into a suitable form that allows T cells to attach the antigens to MHC more readily. This makes the whole process a two-way street, with the T and B cells working hand in hand, helping each other to tune in quickly

to the invading aliens.

If you think about what's going on here, you'll soon realize that there is something truly mind-boggling taking place. B cells have the amazing ability to recognize antigens *directly*, as their chemical receptors lock onto the antigen. Big deal, you might be thinking. Well, it is a big deal. Just how many antigens do you think B cells are capable of uniquely recognizing?

A hundred?

A thousand?

No.

The answer is millions. Can you recognize millions of individuals? I don't think so. Yet you've got three pounds of brains stuffed between your ears to attempt the task, while a B cell is nothing more than a single cell.

Pretty smart little cell.

So how does a B cell accomplish what almost seems like magic? For a B cell to recognize the millions of different microbes with which it may come in contact would require millions of uniquely different receptors. How can something as small as a cell be able to hold enough information to recognize all of these different invaders?

You must realize that everything that we are is defined by the 100,000 genes in the human genome. These genes contain information that dictates not only the chemical construction and function of T and B cells, but also such diverse things as the color of your eyes, the chemical soup in your gut that is trying to digest that burger you had for lunch, and the balance of neurotransmitters in your brain so you don't suddenly find yourself convinced that you are Elvis Presley. Those 100,000 genes have a lot of work to do, and there simply is not enough informational space within them to allow B cells to recognize millions of unique little invaders. Within your body are 10 trillion B cells which are capable of generating more than 100 million distinct antibody proteins at any one time.

Sounds impossible.

But it's not.

First of all, antibody genes are inherited as *gene fragments*. These fragments are joined together to form a complete gene only in individual B cells as they develop. This process of joining fragments

generates a great deal of diversity. As an example, suppose you have ten different-colored balls, all of which are covered in velcro, so they stick together. Now, drop those ten balls into a bucket, swish them around until they're all stuck together, and then dump them on the floor. Take a picture of the mound of balls.

Repeat this experiment. Do it several more times, and look at all the pictures you've taken. No two look alike. In the first picture a red ball is stuck to a yellow and green ball, while in the ninth picture the red ball is stuck to the blue, white, and green balls. The structure and configuration of each mound of balls is unique. If this example doesn't work for you, just realize that it takes only twenty-six letters in the English language to construct every unique word we have.

Random arrangements are an amazing thing.

But if this was not enough, the enzymes that combine the gene fragments add random pieces of DNA to the ends of the pieces being formed, as a result of which new genes are formed, each capable of encoding a new protein chain. Even further diversity results from the random assembly of protein chains into a complete receptor on the B cell. If there are only 1000 different types of protein chains, the number of possible unique combinations that can be formed by any two of them is 1,000,000. But it doesn't end there.

When B cells are in the presence of antigens, they experience what are termed *hypermutations*, further creating slight variations of the receptor sites. When all of this randomness is taken together, this process gives just a few of your genes the ability to build B cells that can identify millions of uniquely different antigens. The heart of your immune system is based on randomness and mutation. It is the very chaos inherent in the system that allows your immune system to respond to the millions of different types of invaders that it may encounter.

It is this same mechanism that allows the body to resist infections that we have already encountered. Our B cells carry the memory of old antigens, because we retain the B

cells that responded to the initial infection. If you had the Hong Kong Flu last year, you shouldn't get it again this year because you've got those B cells primed and ready, with receptor sites just waiting for the Hong Kong Flu virus to float on by. Unfortunately, what often happens with viruses is that they mutate — the chemical structure slightly altering, so that the receptor sites on your Hong Kong Flu B cells can't quite recognize this year's version, a slightly mutated form that sprang up in Singapore.

Is this system foolproof?

Can it defend against *all* invaders?

Unfortunately, no.

HIV is a prime example of a virus that the immune system finds too tricky to tackle. The common cold, that continually mutating little fiend that gets us every year, is one more example. Further shortcomings of our immune system show up when it works just a little too well. That is when it is trying so hard to recognize those invading aliens that it overzealously begins to recognize cells belonging to the body and attacks them. Multiple Sclerosis, psoriasis, and Graves' Disease are just a few examples of this. Then there is one more way that the immune system can sneak up and get you — a way that is very near and dear to my runny nose.

As I write this column, I am suffering from what is commonly referred to as hay fever. My nose is running, my eyes are watery and itchy, and my head feels as if it might explode. All of these symptoms are the result of my immune system attempting to save me from something that is really no threat at all.

In more primitive times, when parasites were a fairly common problem in the human animal, the immune system would come to the rescue, just as it does in the case of invasion by bacteria or viruses. When parasites enter the body, the immune system characteristically generates an antibody known as *Immunoglobulin E (IgE)*. However, the immune system is not all-knowing. It will also generate IgE in the presence of allergens. In all likelihood my susceptibility to hay fever is the result of a long chain of distant ancestors whose immune

systems were assaulted generation after generation by parasites. By natural selection, those who could best fight off the parasites (those with the superior immune systems) were able to pass those genes on to the next generation, while those not so fortunate died with a gut full of worms. I am no doubt the direct descendant of a long line of worm-ridden ancestors.

What makes my nose run?

Like any invader, the pollen of, say, ragweed that causes my nose to run is inhaled, enters my lungs, and is swept into my blood stream, where the proteins it is made of are recognized by my T and B cells as invaders. My immune system goes right to work, the T cells secreting a substance called *interleukin-4* which then prods my B cells into producing antibody-secreting plasma cells, which at first produce IgM antibodies. No problem there. But then, for reasons not clear to anyone at this time, my B cells start producing IgE antibodies. Just so you have this right, and know the proper hand gestures to use when at some future social gathering you wish to astound your friends with your scientific acumen, IgE antibodies look like a capital Y, with each "arm" of the Y able to bind to one molecule of the antigen.

At this point my nose is still not running.

Long after my initial exposure to pollen or ragweed (probably when I was still in diapers), my immune system was working overtime, producing IgE antibodies. These antibodies were attaching themselves along the "stem" part of the Y to IgE receptor sites which are found on two types of cells within my body. One type of cell is a *mast cell*, which is generated in bone marrow and resides generally near blood vessels or in the outer layer of skin and tissues that come into direct contact with the outside world, such as my nasal passages. The second type of cell is a *basophil cell*, which circulates in the bloodstream. The result is that my body is full of IgE, with its little chemical arms waving in my body fluids, just waiting for allergens to wander by.

What happened the next time I was exposed to the allergen was that it got swept into my bloodstream and bonded to IgE an-

tibodies waiting on the mast cells. When the allergen engages at least two IgE molecules, it forms a bridge between them, this linking process drawing the IgE receptors close to one another.

This is where my runny nose enters the scene.

This aggregation of receptors activates the mast cell, inducing it to release chemicals that cause my allergic symptoms. These chemicals are referred to as *allergic mediators*. The most well known mediator, called *histamine*, is stored in microscopic granules, just waiting to be released when the allergen locks onto the IgE. This is the little beastly chemical that is causing my nose to run. Histamine can stimulate the production of mucus in both my nose and my lungs. It can also cause muscles to tightly wrap around my bronchial airways and intestines. If all that wasn't wonderful enough, histamine will dilate small blood vessels and increase their permeability, allowing fluid to leak into tissues. This is what makes my head feel as if it were about to explode.

Fortunately, I believe that this is as far as my symptoms go. However, if the effect of histamine is widespread enough on my body, the dilating of blood vessels may actually cause a large drop in blood pressure, resulting in what's referred to as *hypotensive shock*. This can result in a dramatic reduction in the supply of oxygen to my heart and brain.

I certainly hope that is not happening to me.

But you may be a better judge of that than I am, since you are reading this column. If I seem more in-

coherent than normal, don't blame me, I'm just on a histamine high.

And there it is, folks. Without a doubt the immune system is the most sophisticated, unlikely, convoluted, yet unbelievably effective defense system in all the cosmos against alien invaders. Imagine if the human race faced the prospect of being invaded by one of possibly millions of hostile alien races, each one of which possessed its own unique method of invading and destroying us. How would we build a defense system to stop all of them? Would it be possible?

I doubt it.

But if we're ever called upon for such a task, I suggest that we take a lesson from what is going on in our very bodies. In closing, let me say that I've only scratched the surface of how the immune system operates, and for those of you who wish to know more, I would suggest getting a copy of the September 1993 *Scientific American*.

I've got to go now.

I need to blow my nose. □

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.

Moving?

If you plan to move between now and June, 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 doesn't always forward copies. When it doesn't, it 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.

Thanks for your cooperation.

Sexual Identities



One of the rituals of being published in *Aboriginal SF* is filling out the infamous "rapsheet." This is a questionnaire that asks for biographical information such as education, marital status; what books/stories/art have been recently completed, along with some spurious questions thrown in to camouflage our relentless nosiness.

Some queries have elicited unusual answers over the years, such as "What sex?" followed by "Are you sure?" Here are my top ten picks for

believe you can ever really know anything."

8. What sex? "Trisexual — I keep trying."

7. What sex? "Male." Are you sure? "Yes, but if I wasn't would I tell you?"

6. What sex? "Any I can get." Are you sure? "Absolutely."

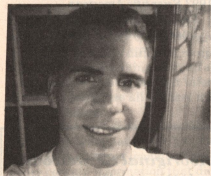
5. What sex? "Male." Are you sure? "I checked twice."

4. What sex? "Male." Are you sure? "!"

3. What sex? "Male." Are you

illustrated by Jon Foster. When I spoke to him, the Rhode Island resident had twisted his ankle and knee sledding in some of that snow blanketing the Northeast. Foster is concentrating on his comic-book work and says he hopes to do more in that field.

It's been several years, but he's back. Robert A. Metzger of gonzo SF fame brings us the short story "A Tin Tear," about a man who clings to life long after his body, and hope, are gone.

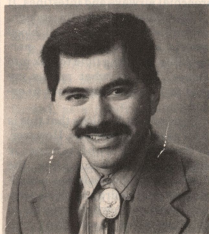


Jon Foster

responses to these fundamental questions given by actual *Aboriginal* authors, poets and illustrators:

10. What sex? "Female." Are you sure? "In waking life."

9. What sex? "Male." Are you sure? "As a practicing nihilist, I don't



Alan Gutierrez

sure? "With a name like (mine), you're never positive."

2. What sex? "Male." Are you sure? "Believe it."

And the number one response:

1. What sex? "Male." Are you sure? "Hey! It's not that small!"

The genetic-engineering black market thrives in "Three Things to Watch for When You're in the Market for a Used Tumor," by J. Brooke.

Since Brooke has not answered the "What sex?" rapsheet question, we do not know if Brooke is a he or a she. We do know this mystery author lives in California, has a degree in physics, and made her/his first professional sale with the story "E.R." in *Aboriginal* No. 39-40. Alas, there is "no photo of J. Brooke currently available. Haven't had a picture taken since sixth grade."

"Three Things to Watch for" is il-



Allison Fiona Hershey

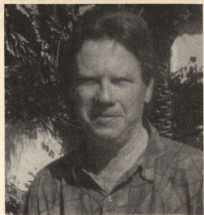
Metzger writes the popular "What If? — Science" column for *Aboriginal* and is the author of "The Cubist and the Madman" (*Aboriginal* No. 26) and "An Unfiltered Man" (*Aboriginal* No. 6) among others. Metzger recently left



Ann K. Schwader



K. D. Wentworth



M. E. McMullen

his position as a physicist at Hughes Research Lab and moved to the South where he has set up a consulting firm dealing with molecular beam epitaxy. His latest stories appeared in *Science Fiction Age* in October and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* in January. His sequel to *Quad World* is on hold for the time being while he tries to get back to intensive short-story writing.

"A Tin Tear" is illustrated by Alan Gutierrez, who is a busy man these days. He is working on his fourth cover for a series of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* books, this latest one titled *Prisoners of Peace*. The first book in the series is set to appear this April from Pocket Books. He has also done the covers and interiors for the January and April 1994 issues of *Popular Mechanics* magazine.

In "Earth Kwaatsi" by Ann K. Schwader, a xenobiologist finds life in an unusual and deadly form. Schwader wrote "Muttmind" (*Aboriginal* No. 8) and "Nectar" (*Aboriginal* No. 26) among others. She tells me she just moved into a house and now has a larger office. She is



W. M. Connor

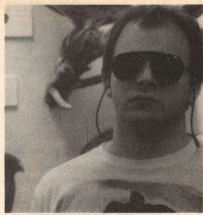
working on a new novel, a psionic action adventure with the working title *Altern*, and has another novel making the rounds. Look for a poem of hers that she says was inspired by a Robert Metzger column in an upcoming issue.

"Earth Kwaatsi" is illustrated by Allison Fiona Hershey, who has been having a "lousy three months." The Los Angeles fires came within a few feet of her family's summer home, threatened the life of her uncle, who snuck behind the fire lines, and left "heartbreaking damage" to the area where she grew up. There was also a death in the family, and when I spoke to her she was bedridden with her third case of galloping flu this season. Then the LA Quake of '94 struck. There is some good news; the video game she is working on for Dreamers Guild is due out in March or April.

Ferocious aliens who love to hunt make troublesome guests in "Shore Leave," by K. D. Wentworth. Wentworth also wrote "Due Process" (*Aboriginal* No. 30). She says that since she got an agent she has sold two novels to Del Rey. Her first, *The Imperium Game*, is just out, and is described on its cover as a light action adventure about a "hapless computer gamer trapped in a high-tech hell." The second novel, *Moonspeaker*, is due out this fall, and she is currently rewriting the sequel to it.

"Shore Leave" is illustrated by Jon Foster.

In "The Grassman" by M.E. McMullen, a colony ship that has lost its purpose gets a wake-up call from one enterprising individual. McMullen was a practicing lawyer for 18 years but now works as a hearing officer in domestic relations court and writes. He is working on extending "The Grassman" into a novel. McMullen



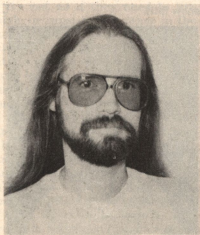
Greg Jones

got his start with *Amazing Stories* in 1983, and his story "Gandy Plays the Palace" received an honorable mention in Gardner Dozois's *Best Science Fiction of 1983*.

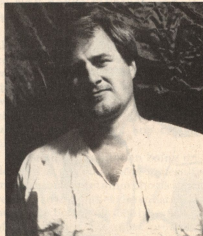
"The Grassman" is illustrated by Clyde Duensing, III, who is doing some book covers for Llewellyn Books and getting into computer design and image editing these days. He says he is pleased with the way this illustration came out, and he's working on his next *Aboriginal* piece.

Rangers clash with poachers and the fate of a rare alien beast hangs in the balance in "Trophy," by W. M. Connor. This marks Connor's first professional sale. She is a graphic designer who lives in California and is working on several short stories "for fun and profit," including a sequel to "Trophy."

"Trophy" is illustrated by David LeClerc, who was preparing for the Arisia convention in Boston and doing some commissioned work for members of the Society for Creative Anachronism when I spoke to him. He says he recently did a historical piece for his father, a World War II veteran



Clyde Duensing III



David LeClerc



Janis O'Connor

of the Normandy invasion. LeClerc created a collage of images drawn from old photos. Now he's been asked to do the same for some Vietnam veterans.

They're slime but they have a sense of duty. They are the creatures of "Slurplop," by **Greg Jones**. Jones is a Montreal journalist, and his writing credits include an interview he and journalist partner Andrew Pickard did with Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead, which was published in *Banjo Newsletter*. But this is his first professional sale of fiction. He is working on "a gaggle" of stories, poems, and songs, and a novel.

Is there any doubt about who would be tapped to illustrate "Slurplop"? Yes, of course, **Larry Blamire**. The artist, actor, playwright, and director says he had a "good little part" playing "the other man" in an independent film recently shot in Boston titled *Alex Blake*. The film is in post-production. He is currently working on compiling a book of "bizarre" single-panel drawings.

A dying alien is forced to reveal himself to a retarded boy in "Death-song," by **Janis O'Connor**. This is O'Connor's first professional sale of

fiction. She gave up the life of advertising and public relations, flying between New York and Washington, D.C. weekly to tout the stars of the fashion world, in order to sit at her computer and write. She also had a career in showbiz and was once paid to swim in a show called *Wonder World* starring Chita Rivera (who sang). O'Connor is working on an untitled dolphin fantasy, an Excalibur tale, and a novel.

"Deathsong" features art by **N. Taylor Blanchard**, who told me he was the victim of a hit-and-run accident on Christmas Eve. His car spun off into a guard rail; luckily no one was hurt. The car was bashed up, but the hood and its elaborate "Dragonslayer" painting were not damaged. Blanchard had some art appearing in the latest *Computer Gaming World* magazine and was getting ready for Arisia when I spoke to him in January.

In "Hands Across the Stars," by **Jeff Janoda**, some gullible aliens find a true human friend. This is Janoda's first professional sale. He lives in Toronto where he teaches geography and science to seventh- and eighth-graders, but he is currently on leave taking care of his infant daughter Maddy. He started writing science and historical fiction in 1991 and is working on a novel and several short stories.

"Hands Across the Stars" is illustrated by **Larry Blamire**.

A time paradox creates a very savvy time traveler in "First Person Plural," by **Jeff Elliott**. Elliott is a consulting engineer and a freelance writer of humor essays, technical articles, short fiction, and investigative pieces on environment, health, and science. His work has appeared in *EIR* (an environmental magazine) and the *San Francisco Chronicle* among others. He has written a book called *Why Is This Damn Thing So Hard to Use?* which explains to laymen why good computer companies sometimes make lousy products.

"First Person Plural" is illustrated by **Peggy Ranson**, who has been commissioned to do a number of illustrations for a Swan Press anthology of Joe R. Lansdale and Lewis Shiner detective fiction. Ranson the graphic artist is about to launch a new tourist magazine for New Orleans.

Bruce Boston brings us the poem titled "Spacer's Compass." Other poems by Boston include "A Hero of



J. W. Donnelly

the Spican Conflict" (*Aboriginal* No. 7) and "Against the Ebon Rush of Night" (*Aboriginal* No. 11). Boston's latest book and first full-length novel came out in December. *Stained Glass Rain*, published by Ocean View, is a coming-of-age novel set in the 1960s. Boston calls it "mainstream with speculative elements." He also has a poem that will be going into the seventh edition of *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* from St. Martin's Press. Boston says he has been doing a lot of freelance book design using computer software.

"Proof of the Pudding" is a poem by **J. W. Donnelly**. Donnelly says he gave up the life of an itinerant philosopher in 1990 when he went to the bookstore and bought a copy of *Writer's Market*. A year later he sold a story to *Dragon* magazine, and within two years he had sold more than 17 pieces of fiction and 100 poems to markets that include *Figuret*, *The Silver Web*, and *Midnight Zoo*.

Our cover this issue is a piece we call "The Bounty Hunter" by artist **Charles Lang**. Lang says lately he's gotten tired of running around so much and he's spending more time at home working (and watching the snow fall). □



Jeff Janoda



Jeff Elliott

Weight Loss Is the Whole Point



Human beings are always astute observers of their world, but where they really excel is in the observation of other human beings. They are much better than I am, I can assure you. I can pick out the ones missing a leg or those wearing mylar jumpsuits, but otherwise, they all look pretty much the same to me. But these creatures make so few mistakes in identifying each other that it is cause for embarrassment when they do.

Barring accident or disease, each of them has a torso, a pair of legs, a set of arms and hands (two), a neck, and a head. And yet each of them can differentiate among thousands of others. Not only can they tell each other apart, but they can also see differences in the same individual from one encounter to the next. They are forever asking each other, "Have you lost weight?"

When it comes to each other, they seem capable of perceiving fluctuations in mass as small as ten percent. It's pretty remarkable when you think about it, although — as with so many characteristics of these creatures — you have to wonder how much use this level of discrimination really is. I mean, where's the survival value in it?

It's not as if they need to lift, catch, or capsize each other in the normal course of business. But human beings meeting — with no intention of knocking each other down and no conceivable need for the information — will readily ask each other if they have lost weight.

I think they ask each other this question as a kind of favor, because a human being who loses weight is not likely to notice. They aren't quite as attuned to minor changes in their own mass as they are to changes in the mass of others. Most of them, for example, seem to need precision weighing instruments to judge fluctuations in their own mass that are apparent to their

friends and families. As near as I can tell, every one of them owns a precision weighing instrument and uses it daily. Many of them hold heated conversations with these instruments in the privacy of their bathrooms.

To our species, for whom the notion of a fixed identity is quite alien (if you'll forgive the pun), it must seem pretty boring, but a human being keeps roughly the same shape over an entire lifetime. Except for these minor fluctuations in mass I've been discussing, it's so unusual for a human being to undergo changes in his body that if he by chance loses a part, he will immediately seek help in reattaching it. It is fortunate for human beings that they don't lose parts very readily. Reattaching parts can be expensive and sometimes is subject to a deductible.

Adding parts is expensive, too. It is rarely covered at all.

It's a good thing human beings are so good at telling each other apart, because the species as a whole seems to be gripped by a compulsion to make themselves look like each other. They all want to look the same, based on a standard of appearance established by their televisions. There are billion-dollar industries based on dieting, exercise, plastic surgery, and cosmetics, all intended to help them do this.

They will put enormous energy and financial resources into achieving minuscule changes in their appearance. A few inches taken off the waist, a few millimeters added to the upper lip, an altered hairline — these things can really cost. I could understand putting that kind of money into growing a third arm or something really useful, but to work so hard for such small changes ... this really amazes me. It makes my job a lot harder, too. I already have a great deal of difficulty telling them apart. If they all end up looking like Fabio and Cindy Crawford, I might as well get a job sorting potatoes.

This is all so difficult for us to understand, but then we are subject to regular metamorphosis. Human beings rarely metamorphose, and then it's usually purposeful.

From time to time, a human being will say, "I'm tired of who I am. I want to be somebody else." Because they are so attuned to the smallest of changes, most of them can answer this need with different colored contact lenses or growing a beard. But for a few, the strain of maintaining the same identity for a lifetime is just too much and nothing will satisfy the drive to metamorphose but a change of career, family, or principal behaviors. It says a lot about human beings that when one of them goes through such a metamorphosis, the rest characterize it as a crisis.

They aren't usually aware of it, but human beings are continually renewed, at least physically. They lose cells at a prodigious rate, but there are always replacements ready. The six pounds of skin that the typical human being walks around wearing, for example, is renewed about once a month.

The only part of a human body that doesn't get renewed is the central nervous system, which retains the same cells throughout its owner's life. When it begins to wear out, as it always does, the rest of the human being begins to disintegrate, regardless of any cell replacement.

After that, the human being undergoes a profound, and generally involuntary, metamorphosis that returns to the planet the substances he or she borrowed for the purpose of living. It is the most profound weight loss they ever achieve. □

Trophy

By W.M. Conner
Art by David LeClerc

Finn slammed the inner door, but not before an icy draft knifed Kryns between the shoulder blades. She turned from the desk, one dark brow raised, mouth tight with concern. He had managed to shuck his suit in the lock. His thermal was soaked through. She frowned; that amount of leakage was unacceptable. Their suits badly needed reconditioning before full winter.

Finn hobbled numbly to the heater at the center of the cabin, hands outstretched. Ice fell from his short beard and danced across the hot metal with a loud hiss.

Kryns glanced at the sim-extrapolated scans as they swirled across her screen. She'd lost the satellite signal a half-hour ago, but she had enough data for the sim to be fairly accurate. The Muir Station was dead center of the storm. She pushed away from the terminal and grabbed a mug of brew from the warmer in the tiny galley kitchen.

Finn gratefully cradled the stoneware in both hands. His teeth chattered as he drank until the mug was empty. He exhaled an herbal cloud. She checked his fingers and toes carefully; no frostbite. She opened the Velcro on his thermal; wet, it was difficult to remove. She yanked hard over his hips, and it bunched at his knees. "In...ss...satiabile w...wo...mman."

She grinned, helped him get his feet out, and wrapped him in warm blankets she had slung around the heater. As he eased into the chair closest to the vents, she gingerly tapped the manual thermostat higher. The heater had been fabricated from sheet metal scraps and electrical elements before the Service had had the budget to import ceramic units. Distribution was slow, but this derelict should have been replaced ages ago. She took his mug to refill.

He cracked a blue-lipped smile when she returned. "You got it working." The brew was taking effect.

"Let's not discuss the heater." She made a face and sat, curling her legs into half-lotus. "Well?" she prompted.

His smile faded. "They've camped up the Jackson, in the bowl."

"They've never infiltrated that far before!"

"That's what I thought ..."

"But?"

"You don't take a client scouting. They've been here before. They knew exactly where they were going, knew about the bowl."

"I thought they weren't hacks?"

"I doubt they'll touch the ruins; they're out for trophy. I figure they're en route to the quiet range and just picked the bowl for shelter."

Kryns bit her lip. She'd been studying this band of juvenile snow quetals for two years — from a distance, of course, according to strict preserve regs. They weren't very endearing, just homely scavengers about as intelligent as the average dog. Still, she'd gotten attached to them.

"What about Jamil?"

"I'm sure they suspect nothing. They may be using a cloak against distance scanning, but their perimeter field has big holes. They're either stupid, which is not likely, or unconcerned."

That was a good indication that the poachers had believed Jamil's cover story. "You saw him?"

"Kryyss," he drawled. "Don't worry, we'll be on track soon as this blows. The storm's just as bad up there, they won't get far." He sipped more brew and smacked his lips. "How long?"

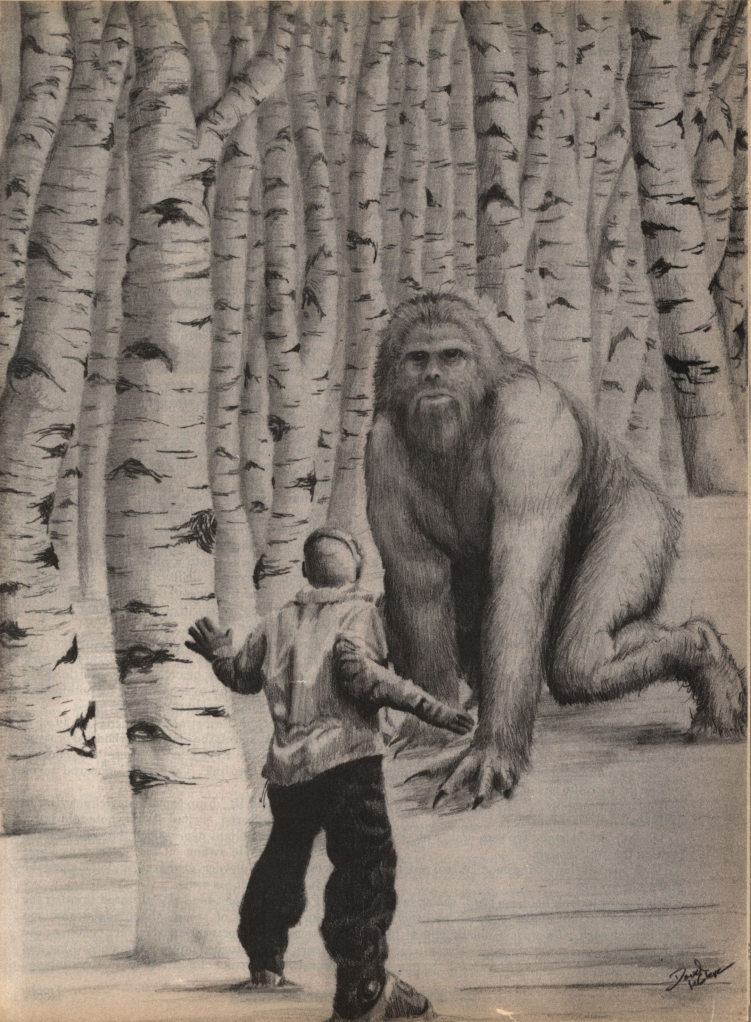
She shrugged to prove she wasn't worried, realized that he knew better. "Sim predicts 24 hours."

He sighed and placed the mug on the heater. His face was no longer pinched with cold, but the energy and flush of brew would soon fade to pale exhaustion. She wouldn't be able to move him if he fell asleep here. She slid back the door to the sleeping closet: a mattress in the wall, nothing more. She pulled the quilts back, feeling drained herself, from tension, she suspected. Finn waddled over, still cocooned in blankets.

"I know the best way to get warm ..." He stroked her hair with a rough hand.

She snorted and rolled her eyes. "Hold that thought, I'll shut down." She checked the hovers, verified the perimeter field, pulled their suits in from the lock to thaw, and set the com to boost reception. Intense solar flares had wreaked havoc with communications all week, and now, with the dish out They had hoped to have more data on the poachers. Perhaps in the morning. She yawned, tripped over Finn's thermal, and diligently popped it into the sanitizer in the kitchen.

He was snoring deeply. She peeled off her clothes and climbed in. He was ice cold, but she gritted her teeth and pressed against him. Gooseflesh rippled from her scalp to her toes. She scratched her nose



on his chest hair and ignored the protests of her body. The storm howled around the small pre-fab cabin. He'd made it back, and that was all that mattered for the moment.

It was early evening before they pitched camp. Jamil was properly impressed by the Shakti ruins that sheltered them. It wasn't hard to pretend he'd never seen anything like them; each time he came to the bowl, it took his breath away. But he was astonished that they had taken him this far into the Preserve. The outfitter had promised him the trophy of a lifetime. Jamil didn't doubt him, if what he had described was true.

The storm had passed sooner than predicted. Now light filtered through drift-covered windows. Finn surveyed the open room, feeling warm for the first time in two days. Apparently everything was in order, or Kry's would have told him ... Well, maybe not, he hadn't been in the best shape last night. But now he felt great — oww! — as long as he didn't move.

Kry's came in from the lock and shut the door quietly, thinking he was still asleep. He closed his eyes to slits. She laid two trunk rifles on the table across the room and began to inspect them. Their suits were hanging from the rafters over the heater, his almost twice the size of hers. When Kry's had joined the service, they'd taken bets on how long she would last — he'd given her a month. Shakti endured a constant stream of young idealists: biologists, ecologists, archaeologists, intellectuals, and bleeding hearts, they came and went like a spring squall. He'd lost more than the bet.

"Better get out of that bed and stop day-dreaming," she announced without turning around. "We have a long day ahead."

He moaned. "You're a Shakti witch, woman."

"Then you better behave, or else ..."

He laughed and roused himself amid snaps of bone and tendon, yawned and ran his fingers through shoulder-length hair. He limped across the cold floor, dragging blankets, and patted her butt as he went by. She swatted at him, then waved towards the terminal.

"Sheryn managed to get through this morning."

"She get a profile on our man?"

"He has a 2-meg file."

"Whew! Any warrants?"

"Uh-huh, on Galston, Tre'vam and ... ah, someplace in the Wolf System."

He stopped at the latrine door. "A real pro, then; that's some range."

"He's using a cloak field, isn't he?" she answered, as if that alone indicated this poacher's expertise. She loaded each rifle with a plastic clip of hypo darts.

Jamil rose late; his "guides" had been making fifteen minutes. As a client he had certain privileges, but it wasn't wise to abuse them. Since he couldn't contact Finn and Kry's — they would have detected any electronics — the best he could do was drag his feet and keep the trail young. It had been a hell of a night to be trailing, but they were skilled outdoorsmen. "L'aron," or whatever his real name was, was a superb tracker, perhaps Finn's match. The worst part would be making the kills. Without backup, he had to play the game all the way or be discovered. He scrambled out of his bag and thrust his long legs in his suit to avoid thinking about that.

Kry's had the hovers packed by the time Finn had finished breakfast, read Sheryn's file, and put his suit on. She was waiting outside, both machines purring quietly on their skirts.

"You see how much Jamil had to front?" He gestured emphatically. "And that's only half! *Ten* quetals aren't worth that; dozer's good hunting but too small for trophy. What else could they be after?"

"Maybe they're planning to strip the ruins. The fee could include artifacts."

Finn shook his head. "Not L'aron's m.o."

She looked away. "Maybe they're hacking for parts."

"That's not his style either. He's a big-game specialist." He was hoping to reassure her, but the black-market value of quetal bladders had doubled this season. The three-ounce organs were dried, ground, and boiled into a nauseating sludge that reportedly increased virility to heroic proportions. Whether it was true or not, the bladders retailed at four times their weight in precious metals. Temptation enough to hack.

They strapped on helmets, straddled the machines, and left in a miniature blizzard of swirling snow. Finn was heavy on the throttle. Kry's paced him, thankful to concentrate on nothing but the trail as they hurtled through the forest.

They reached the distinctly-shaped ruins by early afternoon, keyed off the hovers, and chewed protein-fiber bars while Kry's tried to locate the poaching party from the link. They still appeared to be cloaked.

"Nothing in IR." Finn tapped his helmet visor to disengage infrared. He had already noted the lay of the drifts and slight depressions that revealed the recent camp. He swung off his hover, sank knee-deep into new powder, grimaced, and unclipped the seat cover to get his webs.

Patches of violet-blue sky glittered through the naked columns of trees. Sharp-edged shadows crisscrossed the pristine snow in dark patterns. The silence was disturbed only by their breathing and occasional squeaks of settling snow. Kry's inhaled

deeply; her lungs tingled, every cell in her body vibrated. This was why she stayed, despite the physical hardships and the Service's inept management.

Finn's seat clicked loudly into place. He stood poised and motionless, webs dangling at his side. A mute, gray cone hen slashed the stillness with the thrup of leathery wings. Finn's eyes flickered to Krys, and the hairs at the back of her neck prickled. Shakti ruins had that effect.

The bowl had yet to be excavated. Weather was a formidable obstacle in the Northern Preserve. Frost shattering had split massive blocks of dark nightstone, turning a once magnificent city into overgrown rubble. Gorshams flourished around the steps, forming a natural amphitheater. Survey markers posted above the snow line identified buried stelae, but there was no sign of digging. Finn was right; these poachers weren't after artifacts. Krys squirmed on the padded hover seat.

"I need to answer the call. Where can I go where I won't disturb you?"

He pulled his webs on and nodded south. "Stay in the hover trail, and be careful, saw some dozer tracks nearby."

She stood on the runner and dug her webs out from under her seat. Their fresh trail was a barely noticeable swath. It would take time to track the poachers after hours of shifting drifts. She hiked through the trees and found a likely spot.

She had started back when the sweet scent of redfruit flowers brought her to attention. There was a sound, and she recognized the soft, coughing bark. She turned quickly, certain it was a snow quetal. They weren't aggressive toward humans; look them in the eye, and they'd run for cover.

This one didn't. A few meters away, he stood on all fours, his head level with hers. His long, white fur had yellowed around his pink, hairless face. His eyes were all iris, a startling silver-blue. Thank God she'd just peed or she might have released her bladder into her suit. This was obviously a sexually mature adult. There were only scattered records of adult quetal sightings, and no physical evidence, not even tracks. It was a mystery that had attracted her to this post in the first place.

His claws were fully extended. He loomed up on his hind legs. He was going to revenge his kind on her, and she was frozen like a timid meekdeer. Her puny efforts to understand and protect these animals meant nothing, to the poachers or the quetals.

He stepped toward her, more agile on his hind legs than she would have thought possible from observations of the juveniles' shuffling, two-legged gait. They couldn't possibly mature into this form. Its size, for one thing, and the angle of the pelvis was all wrong, the length of the femur, the shape of the skull

She was going to die, mentally charting physical characteristics while her husband and the trunk guns were only meters away. She glanced toward the bowl. The beast moved quickly. She crouched, looking for his eyes. Just a meter away, he dropped to all fours again. His face was expressionless, but those eyes, she could almost believe he was ... An image surged in her mind, colors and odors she couldn't place ... His paw shot out — he easily had a meter-long reach — and swiped at her but missed. His claws raked the gorsham. Krys fell backwards into a drift at the base of the tree. The giant slashed at the tree two more times.

Her habit of observation did not fail under the threat of impending death. She realized his claws were not retractable like those of snow quetals, but permanently exposed. He had five digits, with webbing in-between and a thumb-like radial sesamoid. He gave her one last look, then swung to the west and disappeared against the white landscape.

Krys sat in the drift, stunned. Finally she craned her neck around and looked at the gouges in the trunk. One broad swipe went straight across. Another joined at one end of the first and swept up at a 45-degree angle. The other started at the same point and swept down at an angle ... a pale arrow pointed directly west. Ribbons of bark curled at the end of the gouges; some fell on her head and shoulders.

"Finn!" She scrambled to her feet, took one step, and tripped in her webs. "Finn! Over here!" She struggled forward, crawling in the drifts.

"Krys?" He came from the north end of the bowl and, alarmed, ran as fast as possible with the sideways swinging gait of the web shoes.

She managed to get the webs under her and stumbled into his arms, gripping him so tightly he thought her muscles had cramped in the low oxygen. "What is it?"

"A g...giant q...quetal," she stuttered. "It, it came to me and ... you'd better see ..."

He stepped over her wallowing trail and studied the paw marks in the snow. "My God, it must stand three meters tall and weigh at least 800 kilos! I've never seen anything like this. It can't be ..."

"It's not," she interrupted eagerly, catching her breath. "At first I thought it was an adult, but the physiology is too different. Similar, like a gorilla is similar to a chimp, but it's a totally new species. How could we have missed them?"

"I don't know, with all the aerial surveys ..." He stared at the gouged tree, took off his mitt, and ran his fingers along the torn bark. Each fingertip fit easily into a claw groove. His wind-reddened face blanched. "I expected the poachers to head north to the quetal range, but ... if they're after his kind ..."

"— I think he's asking us for help."

Finn's eyes narrowed, and he looked at her as if gauging the aftereffects of shock. "This is too impor-

tant to jump to conclusions," he said slowly.

She pointed at the arrow. "He initiated contact and used a symbol to communicate. *If that doesn't indicate higher intelligence —*"

"This could mean anything! Maybe he's telling us to back off. It could be a territorial marking, or something completely alien. We have no idea, and it's dangerous to anthropomorphize."

"I know that! This creature could be just a clever overgrown quetal, or he might be sentient. He could even be a descendant of Shakti's ancient people."

"Krys!" He made a rude noise in his throat.

She ignored his skeptical frown, "Either way, they're in trouble if those poachers find them. They only care about the weight of their guts and the length of their claws. The creatures' potential intelligence won't keep L'aron from slaughtering any that cross his path."

Finn nodded. "And these giant quetals, or whatever they are, would make a very impressive trophy. There aren't many predators this size on any planet. No wonder they charged Jamil such a high fee."

"Finn, I swear he wants our help. He could have killed me."

He reached for her, flicked strips of bark out of her hair, and smoothed loose black strands toward the long braid at her back. "You all right?"

She inhaled and consciously relaxed, feeling her center again. "West then?"

"Let's go." They hurried to the hovers.

After 50 kilometers not even Finn knew the landmarks without checking the satellite map. They reached a high shelf and stopped for an intensive scan. The giant quetal was untiring, despite the difficult terrain, but there was no sign of the poachers. Finn took his helmet off and scratched his sweaty head. "I wish we had had the opportunity to explore this area."

Krys knew that "opportunity" translated into "funds." "I know," she agreed wistfully. "There might be more species the surveys have overlooked."

"I'd say." He snorted in derision. "If they missed something as big as those giants, there's probably a score of others."

She frowned. "If they've remained hidden for this long with all the weather and cartographic scans ... there must not be very many of them."

"That could explain why they haven't turned up before. L'aron must have discovered them recently, or we would have seen evidence in the market."

"We have to get to them first, Finn."

He nodded. "We're just lucky L'aron entered through Poorna this time while Jamil was undercover." He programmed the link for sequential scans in a tight radius around the giant quetal's coordinates and switched to low-res to save memory and time. Krys watched, but without 3-D sim it made no sense to her. "This trick might pinpoint their cloak."

"How long will it take?"

"About 15 minutes." He noticed the dark smudges under her eyes. "Why don't you take a quick nap, I'll let you know if I find anything."

She flopped in the snow without arguing.

"I should have scraped the bark for a cell sample."

"Probably nothing viable. At least we recorded the tracks and claw marks," Finn said without moving his gaze from the link.

She sighed, closed her eyes, and concentrated on the feeble warmth of the afternoon sun on her face. As she approached tranquility, piercing blue eyes burst into her vision. Sudden confusing emotions mixed with an acrid smell thrust her back into physical consciousness. She sat up, gagging and heaving gulps of air.

"You okay?" Finn stared over the grid in surprise.

She blinked away the flashing after image of blue eyes. For a moment she didn't know where she was. "What was that awful smell?"

"I didn't smell anything." His attention returned to the link.

A sharp wave of nausea passed and left her shivering. "You didn't smell anything?"

"No. There're sulphur pots around — maybe you caught a breeze off one. Anyway, we'd better get going, might be another blow coming." He punched off the link, peered at her a little haggardly, and rubbed his eyes.

"You're finished already?" she asked in surprise.

"You've been out for 20 minutes. Have a bad dream or something?"

"I guess so" He helped her to her feet and dusted snow off her back. "Did you break the cloak?"

"No, he has state-of-the-art equipment, no doubt. But," he added more cheerfully, "there's another of your friends at the base of Yaga. Looks like they set up a relay. For creatures that have been invisible for ten years to show up twice in a few hours is hardly coincidence. I say we keep following their lead; it'd take forever to sight track with this wind. Besides, there aren't many accessible passes west."

The sun was setting when they intercepted two trails, the giant quetal's and the poaching party. The poachers were a few hours ahead and had ditched their hovers in a cleft in the mountainside, which meant they would be climbing. The hovers were hidden carelessly, and the giant had circled them before moving on. Krys was about to pull the ignition chips when Finn stopped her. Sure enough they were rigged to an alarm.

"L'aron's clever." He waved at the giant's tracks. "Maybe he's met his match."

Krys realized their lives would change drastically if they proved the giant quetals were sentient. The Service would evacuate the planet so their natural course of evolution could continue undisturbed. The archaeologists would have a fit, but this was one Service policy she endorsed wholeheartedly. It

didn't make her happy, though. She wondered if Finn had thought this through. Much as he regarded Shakti as home, humans were the aliens here.

They found a cave by the light of early stars and a dazzling aurora. Kryss drove the hovers under a red cone tree and shook the laden branches, and a cascade of snow covered them completely. She erased her footsteps, then set a perimeter field around the mouth of the cave. It was always possible the poachers would scout back along their trail.

Finn had packed down the snow floor and arranged their pads and bags. He built a snow-block door for the entrance with enough room for her to squeeze through. Then he finished it off, leaving a vent at the top. She could stand with a slight stoop, he had to crouch, but it was a perfect shelter for the night. He had hot brew ready, and self-warming packets of bean and vegetable stew filled the cave with a hearty aroma. They ate until the inner chill diminished, then they reloaded their packs, carefully positioning food and equipment for access and weight distribution.

Finn inspected the guns again; satisfied, he strapped them into the pack holsters, then handed a black object to Kryss. She would have argued if she had the strength, but instead she laid the weapon on her pack. He set his wrist alarm for first moonrise. They needed to gain time, and that meant an early start.

Kryss checked the thermostat on the bags. "These aren't on."

"I know." He smiled suggestively.

She gaped at him. "You can't even keep your eyelids up, how ...?" She stopped. She understood exactly how he felt.

The sun came up red over the east range. Kryss puffed, and ice crystals fell from the vent of her face mask. They rested on a ridge above where L'aron's party had camped. The poachers had left less than an hour ago. That meant L'aron was not concerned about being followed and that he was close to his goal.

The giant had kept watch all night. L'aron must still be unaware of it. Finn and Kryss had pushed hard for hours, climbing on adrenalin and other stimulants since first moonrise. Now the double trail they followed twisted around the peak, back towards the timberline and the valley beyond.

Finn caught his breath and shoved a protein bar under his face mask. Kryss lifted the Velcro experimentally, then quickly pulled her mask back over her chin. "Mother of Buddha! This must be your Christian hell." She rubbed a mitten across her face.

He laughed and handed her a bar. "Hell is hot. Now eat it, you're getting skinny."

"I'm nopf skinmg" She mumbled and chewed. Next, they sucked warm brew from the thermos

pump and soon felt human again, or at least mammalian, instead of cold-blooded.

Finn stood, groaned, and cracked his back. She waggled her eyebrows at him through her goggles.

"No regrets, I'll die a happy man."

She grinned and followed in his footsteps down the west face. A crust had formed overnight, and her weight was not sufficient to break through. One good thing about the cold, less chance of avalanche. She tossed that rhyme in her head; it made a catchy descent mantra along with the snap of their ice poles breaking surface.

Forty-five minutes later they reached the tree line, and the trails split. The poachers, and Jamil, Kryss reminded herself, kept going directly west. The giant had veered off northwest, at a fast clip, judging by the length of its stride. Finn followed each trail a short distance, backtracked, and then paced at the junction. She tagged along, watching the trees for arrows, but there was nothing so concrete as to indicate which path they should follow.

"We could split up"

He scowled in answer. She didn't like it, either, but there wasn't much choice.

"Dammit, you're right." He put his hands on her hips. "I'll take the poachers' trail. At eleven hundred we'll break radio silence, just a location signal. One means 'I haven't found them yet.' Two, 'I've found them, get your butt over here.' Triangulate positions. We should be on top of them by then. If anything happens beforehand, use the radio. Keep to cover and use the gun if necessary. You understand?"

"I have the doctorate, remember."

He smiled against his will. "That's why I'm repeating myself." He kissed her forehead. "Be careful."

Kryss took off her pack as Finn hurried away, unfastened her skis, and knelt to readjust the weight. Sitting on her heels in the snow, she assumed *Vajrasana* pose and briefly closed her eyes to calm her thoughts. A scent of musk rose with an image of bodies curled together, warm and dark A chill wind bit her face, light blinded her. When her vision cleared she was standing, facing northwest. She shook herself and bent to her skis with renewed urgency.

Finn increased his pace. He had to get there first. The few seconds' delay for trunk darts to take effect could prove fatal in a confrontation. It was unlikely Kryss would use the projectile weapon he had made her carry. Too bad — she was an accurate shot. A lifetime of Zen gave her intense concentration but prevented her from killing. He didn't have similar compunctions.

The last glacier had left a large moraine on this side of Yaga. It was too rough for skis, but he put them on anyway, slipped the cap off his ice pole, and

pulled it apart into ski poles. He snapped out the powder flanges, jettisoned his pack, and adjusted the trunk holster around his back so he could easily swing the rifle into firing position. He checked the safety on the pistol in his hip holster, toed into the bindings, and launched down the slope.

Anticipation was high as the four men advanced through the valley with practiced silence. Jamil was point — privileged position for the first shot. If Finn and Kryns didn't make it soon, he would probably have to kill the beast. Physical evidence was better for a conviction, anyway.

At a rise L'aron belled through the snow to the top. The others dropped and followed. L'aron handed him the scope. 300 meters away a small band of snow quetals huddled around a sulphur pot, grooming each other with meticulous care. Jamil's nostrils twitched as the faint breeze carried the stench across the valley.

"Downwind," one of the men whispered.

Jamil studied the creatures through the scope. Adult quetals! One very large male and a few females. One was nursing an infant ...

"What's wrong, Mr. Abbar?" L'aron inquired.

Jamil stifled his reaction and kept his face pressed to the lens. "Those little snips don't look three meters tall. Fellow we're after is, though, according to your holos." He smiled smoothly. "You did say three meters, didn't you?"

L'aron chuckled softly. "These are not our prey. The creature we're hunting is no dumb brute. It uses these as decoys, to warn the giants when there's danger."

"They're that smart?"

"I've seen the giants herding snow quetals like a flock of sheep. They breed them here and keep the juveniles in separate scouting groups outside the perimeter of their range. They're strong, clever, and efficient killers. A worthy challenge, Mr. Abbar, and very rare. You'll soon possess a one-of-a-kind prize."

"I'd damn well better for your fee, L'aron!" They grinned at each other. "Where do the big ones lair?"

L'aron pointed across the valley dotted with sulphur pots and fumaroles. "At the base of the northwest slope there's a series of caves. But first we silence these snow quetals or we'll spook the giants into hiding. Those caves are deep."

Kryns leaned on her poles to get her wind back. She could see the valley floor, and smell it She'd progressed quickly down the smooth levels that dropped into each other like ... stairs. From her vantage point she could see the entire layout of the northwest face. Of course! She recognized the terracing of a Shakti ruin. Groves of trees broke the pattern, making it hard to see, probably impossible from the air, but if she imagined them away And those large outcroppings she had had to ski around

could be structural mounds. She eased out of her pack and got the camera. Just half a minute, she promised, Nathan's team would die for this.

She recorded across the slope, zooming on the mounds and some of the more distinct terrace breaks. Satisfied, she turned to get her pack. There were two males this time. One had her pack, and as achingly heavy as it had seemed to her, he dangled it from a huge paw as if it were nothing.

Finn knelt over the hastily-buried bodies. Each snow quetal had been shot expertly through the forehead, including the infant. He was glad Kryns had taken the other trail. No doubt they planned to return for the valuable parts after they bagged a big one. He had five minutes before he signalled Kryns, and that was about how long these quetals had been dead. He continued soundlessly in the poachers' footsteps.

Kryns practiced zazen with more intensity than she'd ever mustered before. Her fingers automatically formed a mudra inside her mittens, and her biorhythms slowed with each step. She was entering a trance, which she'd never done while physically active. Machine-like, muscles slid over bone, blood brought oxygen to cells ... she was a passenger in her own body.

Shafts of brilliant, unfocused colors flooded her vision, accompanied by a symphony of scents from sweet to acrid that were beyond the normal range of her human olfactory system. Emotions surged in syncope to the scents, so rapidly she couldn't identify what she/they were feeling. Their frame of reference was too alien. She tried to empathize — they were oxygen-breathing, warm-blooded mammals needing shelter, food, social interaction ... procreation Warmth suffused her body as a rich, deep earth smell — home! They were home, warm caves, rush-lined nests — a fleeting smell of fresh grass and furred bodies. Young quetals — protected, loved. They passed back into the cold light, and the muted earth tones that colored her vision sharpened again. They passed dank, unused caves, so many empty

Bodies jostled and pressed against her. Her pack was thrust into her arms. Rough fur brushed her face. They hovered, then broke away as a sharp, foul smell invaded her nostrils. She covered her nose and retched — danger! She fumbled for the rifle. Her vision flushed red and dissolved to black. She tried to run with them and remembered falling, it seemed so far to the ground.

A female giant quetal darted from cover fifty meters ahead. "There!" L'aron whispered hoarsely. Jamil sighted. She weaved, faltered, and stumbled. He was reminded of a mother bird refusing to break into flight, pretending to have an injured wing. She was

protecting something. With his throat tight, he nicked the creature across the left shoulder, slipping in the snow to cover for his poor shot. It tumbled head over heels, then sprang up. L'aron gave Jamil a piercing look.

"Follow up, you got it!" Sato croaked, urging Jamil to finish the job, unaware of L'aron's instant suspicion. Jamil made a show of cursing at himself and sighted again. Suddenly Sato pitched forward with a garbled moan. Jamil swung the barrel of his gun against L'aron's head and wheeled to face the third man. He was already down. Finn ran from a cluster of red cones, trunk gun raised high. Jamil lowered his rifle and cursed in three languages. "Finn! Think you could cut it any closer?"

His partner enveloped him in a rough bear hug. "Relax, there were a couple of nanoseconds left." They gripped each other in mutual relief until Finn stiffened. Jamil reacted quickly, but it was too late.

"Drop it, Ranger Abbar." L'aron stood steadily despite the blood trickling down his temple, his rifle trained on Finn's head. "You, too, the holster, right here."

Finn's hand flinched.

"Don't even think it."

Jamil tossed his rifle into the snow. Finn dropped the trunk gun, unstrapped his holster, and flung it at the poacher's feet. "Make it easy on yourself, L'aron —"

"Save the lecture!" L'aron cursed irritably and poked his boot against Sato and Tomkins. They would be out for an hour at least. "You were good, Abbar, but ..."

Finn gasped and stepped back, his eyes widening. The wounded quetal came from behind and slapped L'aron aside like a rag, knocking the rifle out of his hands, meters into the air. Lunging, she slashed through Jamil's suit with one swipe. Finn dove for the trunk gun, rolled, and pumped the remaining clip into the creature's backside. A few darts tangled ineffectively in her fur, and the rest fell to the ground as she shook and turned towards him with a roar.

"Nooo!" Krys screamed, unsure if it was in her mind or out loud. Trunk gun ready, she raced into the clearing with the males at her heels. The maddened female swung to face her newest attacker. Krys sighted on its hairless face and was instantly assaulted by a reeking, blinding clash of scents and colors. She staggered and lost focus. The female leapt and slammed her into the drifts. She was crushed deeper into a red, acrid swirl of rage and hurt. Her mantra floated up like a raft in the whirlpool of her mind. She grasped it, and a familiar peace bathed her as she spun towards darkness. There was a crack of distant thunder, and the great weight fell away. Air rushed into her lungs. Confusion and unbearable pain filled her mind.

"My children ..."

Strobe-like, Krys's viewpoint alternated from her own to the female's: the radiant blue sky above, her own body half-buried in snow, Finn standing over her with a rifle, the howling of the males as they fled. She rolled sideways onto her elbow. The female giant was sprawled next to her, blood spurting from her throat, limbs twisted and lifeless. The spinal cord had been severed. One forearm rose at a bizarre angle into the air, the paw twitched. Krys crawled to her. Earth scents and warm colors of the caves flooded back.

"My children ..."

"No one will hurt them, they'll be safe, safe forever," Krys crooned. The animal quivered, her blue eyes drifted toward vacancy, and the huge paw came to rest on Krys's lap. A solemn keening rose from the males; despite their fear they had remained close.

Warily, Finn kept the rifle aimed at them, expecting retaliation. They swayed in rhythm with their moaning, but neither approached.

Jamil was up. He gathered the other guns and limped stiffly to Finn's side, one arm pressed tightly to his chest. "Superficial," he reassured Finn. He was pale under his dark skin.

Finn knelt and pulled Krys from the dead female. She shuddered against him.

Jamil jerked L'aron to his feet. The poacher's mangled arm hung uselessly, but he would heal. Jamil forced him to drag Sato with his good arm, while he dragged Tomkins away from the female's body and the agitated males.

One giant loped off to the caves. The other waited, for the body? Finn scooped Krys in his arms; she didn't protest, and he wasn't sure she was conscious. When he reached Jamil, the males, still keening softly, came and carried the female away.

He laid Krys in the snow, and she curled into fetal position and promptly fell asleep. He looked at Jamil in anguish.

"She'll be okay, but we have to get her out of here. And them." He jerked his rifle at L'aron.

"Get a flyer." Finn handed Jamil his radio. "We'll patch your chest and make some brew; it'll be a while before they come."

Krys woke in her own bed. The window was shuttered and the lamp glowed on the nightstand. She was in her favorite nightshirt, and someone had bathed her and brushed her hair. The room was extravagantly warm. An illegal arrangement of dried grasses and flowers in a lab beaker was placed conspicuously next to the lamp. One stalk had a plastic tag with a research number scrawled in Sheryn's handwriting. The fragrance of summer wafted from the bouquet. The door slid open, and Finn beamed to see her awake. His scent was musky ... like the forest in autumn when the leaves have half mulched into the soil. She'd never

noticed that before. He sat on the bed and brushed the bangs from her forehead. She pressed his hand to her lips. He laughed to keep from crying.

"Hey, she's awake." Jamil poked his head around the door frame. Sheryn and Zardie followed him into the bedroom. Jamil planted a kiss on her mouth. His scent was more subtle ... spicy, like muted cloves.

"Welcome back!" Sheryn hugged her, and waves of faint lavender lingered after her embrace. Her blue eyes looked odd with white circling the iris.

"I'm glad to be back," Kry's voice cracked from disuse. "How long was I asleep?"

"Long enough to avoid writing preliminary reports!" Tart, citrusy odors from the medical officer overpowered all other scents. Zardie ran her diagnostic scope over Kry's. "How do you feel, girl?"

"How long?" Kry demanded.

"You've been asleep for two days, and you needed every minute." Zardie knew her patients well; this one had a metabolism stuck in high gear. "And I expect another two days of bed rest before you start back to work."

Kry's glanced from Finn to Sheryn and Jamil; they were glaring at her, prepared for resistance. She had decided it would be best to ignore them when she noticed the scent changes.

"What's wrong?" Finn asked anxiously.

She shook her head and sat up quickly. "Finn, have you notified the Council?"

"Just a minute, I'll let you catch up after I'm through with you." The physician put out a hand to keep her stubborn patient supine.

"They've quarantined the Northern Preserve until we complete more extensive research. They're prepared to evacuate if the evidence is conclusive," Finn assured her.

She relaxed against the pillows, nauseated by her sudden movement and the miasma of scents.

"Dizzy?"

She met Zardie's gaze. "This is important."

"Your health is important." The older woman pulled a hypo from her bag.

"What's that?"

"Vitamins in a light glucose sauce, the house specialty. If you promise to eat now, I'll let you talk business between bites." She pushed back Kry's shirt sleeve, revealing an I.V. patch on her forearm. Kry winced at the pressure in her vein. "You've lost almost 4 kilos. I want half back on before I let you out of this bed."

Jamil wagged a finger at her sternly. "We're here to reinforce the doctor's orders."

Finn brought in a tray of soup and crackers and set it on her lap. The rich miso broth, sweet flowers, and rapidly shifting pheromones made a putrid combination. She clenched her teeth to avoid vomiting and rubbed her throbbing sinuses.

"Pain?" Zardie pushed past Finn and raised her scope over Kry's head.

"It's too much!" She covered her mouth and nose with her hands. "I can't ... it's like the trance at the caves, they, the ... guardians?" Kry's shot upright. Soup sloshed and crackers scattered over the quilt. Finn caught the tray in time.

"That's it!" Kry's excitement confused her companions. "Get my 'corder, Finn. Hurry, I don't think it's going to last!"

She dashed out and returned with the small recorder she kept in her desk, thumbed it on, and placed it in her hands. She had a strained look, as if listening to something far away. Zardie frowned and kept the scope over Kry's head, but she didn't interrupt.

"They're guardians. They protect ..." she shook her head in frustration, "... the homes? Centers? Hairless ones? Ah — people, like us, but not The people made the guardians." At that her eyes widened. "They wait for their return. They've waited ... seasons beyond remembering. The children became weak ... mothers no longer bore young. Many became ... unmade? ... not-made?" She pressed her temples as if she could squeeze out the meaning. "There was sickness — The last mother is ... gone." Her voice caught, filled with a sorrow not her own.

Her shoulders had hunched and her body was taut. She wiped her nose with a shaky hand. Sheryn gave her a kerchief, and she blew hard several times to clear any vestiges of the overpowering scents. She inhaled tentatively. "It's gone." She shut off the recorder.

Finn took her hands. "Are you all right?"

"I think so, I"

"What was all that?" Zardie moved forward, knocking pillows to the floor.

"It's hard to translate; they don't use words or think the way we do. The smells were linked to images and feelings so powerful ... but how?"

"Scent signals are transmitted from the cerebral cortex directly to the limbic system"

"Of course," Kry murmured. "The emotional center."

"Right, a primal section of the brain linked to memory formation. A smell can trigger images and emotions before you have time to think. No translation needed. Watch." The physician placed her scope in the middle of the bed and replayed the scan. They crowded over the small display in fascination.

"Some fireworks!" Jamil exclaimed.

"Synaptic activity at a super frequency," Kry speculated.

"I've never seen anything like it."

Kry's ran her finger along the screen to scroll the image. "There are the turbinates, and just under the forebrain is my olfactory bulb ... Swollen ten percent?"

"Before you released the information. Now it's normal size."

"Is this possible?" Finn frowned.

"Apparently so," Zardie replied sardonically.

"How come Kryz could communicate with them? Neither Jamil or I could."

Zardie shrugged. "Heredity determines sensitivity of the olfactory regions the same as it determines the color of our eyes. Perhaps she has —"

"No." Kryz looked up from the screen. "It was the pranayama techniques. I was in a meditative state the whole time I was linked to them. But I wouldn't call it communication; it wasn't two-sided. I was completely overwhelmed" She blinked back the painful memories.

"I suspect your brain was only able to process the information when unoccupied by other activities. Which would explain why you slept so long," Zardie added.

Finn wrapped his arm around Kryz's shoulders. "Why are they dying? Is there anything we can do?" If she tackled the problem instead of dwelling on the tragedy, she'd recover faster than with any therapy Zardie could prescribe. As if reading his thoughts, the physician nodded approval.

"As far as I can tell, they were bred to protect the cities. Something happened to the people, that wasn't clear ... But the guardians remained faithful." Kryz shook her head sadly. "That was their downfall. Their limited gene pool may have become corrupted with time, and, apparently females were more vulnerable. I think the last adult female was unstable. But I'm almost sure there were some female young."

"We can fix genes," Sheryn interjected enthusiastically.

Zardie's brow furrowed. "You said they were made by the people?"

She gave the doctor a significant look. "When you let me out of here I'll run a DNA comparison with the snow quetals. I know it doesn't jibe with the tech rating the archaeologists have given Shakti's civilization ... but I have a feeling they were altered by more than a rigorous breeding program."

"That'll raise hell!" Jamil grinned with relish at the thought of shattering theories in the academic ranks.

"Your favorite occupation," Zardie remarked.

"Looks like we'll be here for a long time." Kryz attempted a mournful sigh but failed to disguise the gleam in her eyes.

Finn clicked his tongue in mock dismay. "What a shame." □

Spacer's Compass

By Bruce Boston

*South I shipped ... galactic south
spanning the reaches of unbounded space
through the moss stars and beyond
hanging with this crew or that
a rough lot they were
or some just strange
stranger than you'd care to know
for a light year or two on the fly*

*West I wandered ... galactic west
leaving lovers changing friends
past clusters hanging in the heavens
like burning ingots and bands of flame
landing always in a different land
a ready cup for alien ways
seeking never so much an answer
as a fix ... a frame of reference
to sift my strangeness from*

*East I flew ... galactic east
against the words of wiser souls
to decaying grandeurs steeped in fog
and cultures deadly spent
to language worlds and pleasure worlds
and the mother world or fabled so
a desolation of rust and snow
heir only to its past*

*Old I grew ... galactic old
the polar night now calls my name
and still I tramp the stellar routes
from burning white to burning red
jump cutting lives and lands
fixing no frame of reference
beyond the passage itself
adrift in the passages
yet to be taken*

*Space has no directions
and holds all directions at once
a well of radiant possibilities
all matter of strangeness*

... and the stars are for the living

Hands Across the Stars

By Jeff Janoda

Art by Larry Blamire

The gas station was a little glowing oasis on the outskirts of the town, bright against the purple sunrise. The grifter pulled in slowly, letting the crunch of the gravel beneath his car's wheels draw the attendant out. He smiled when he saw the pebbly white skin above the collar of the coveralls, and the vertical slash that passed for a mouth among the kelgoi. He parked beside the last pump in the line.

"Help you, sir?"

"Yes, fill it up, please," he said in the mournful tone that he had spent years perfecting. He slipped a nickel-plated ring onto his left hand and waited patiently while the attendant washed his windshield, the strokes perfect and precise.

"Oil all right, sir?"

"Yeah, it's fine, thanks." He watched as the last few drops of fuel were squeezed out.

"Sixteen even, sir."

The grifter fluttered with his wallet and then looked up soulfully at the strangely human eyes, richly black against the pale skin. "Uh, look, I'm sorry, I thought I had a lot more than this. Kind of tapped out. I'm going to see my kids down in Smithfield — the missus and me, we broke up a while back, you know. Can I even it out with you on the way back? I'll be through in a couple of days." He paused strategically. "Okay, look, I'll leave my wedding ring. It's white gold, probably worth five hundred bucks. But you got to take care of it. Sort of a memento from my marriage. You know."

The attendant stood still, the tympana of his mouth quivering slightly in the breeze blowing in from the plains.

"No need for that, sir. I'll see you in two days, then?"

The grifter let his face spread in a perfect rendition of gratitude.

"All right! Thanks, man, you're a lifesaver." He turned the key and ripped up the gravel of the pump area as he spun out. On the highway he leaned back and laughed. Knobs! Unbelievable! He could have said the check was in the mail and it would have worked. He laughed again and took the exit off to the town. A Neighborhood Watch sign flashed by, then the usual tribal billboard showing crests from the Lions and Shriners, but he kept looking. Then it flashed out of the morning gloom, bright blue in his headlights, a large, square sign with a human and kelgoi hand clasped over shiny spangles. "Hands Across the Stars" the motto said. He grinned in delight. Oh yes, the pickings would be good today.

Sich Nith the kelgoi watched the old Chrysler pull out; he sniffed the exhaust fumes with interest, noting certain radicals present that indicated engine wear. He should have warned the driver about that. He turned as a new set of headlights flashed over him. A black-and-white pulled up to the pump and stopped.

Sich Nith nodded, an efficient signal he had adopted very well; he also liked waving, which was especially useful with human children.

The officer nodded back, staring at the kelgoi's empty hands, his beefy florid face becoming redder.

"Did that guy just get gas, Sich?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Did he pay?"

"He said he would pay when he returned in two days, Officer Ripkin." Ripkin slammed the metal of the door with his palm, a hollow, booming sound that made Sich Nith jump back slightly.

"*JesusAitchChrist!*" Ripkin said, as he dragged his large ass from the car seat. He was a big man, still mostly solid. Lately, the fat had started to win. "*Jesus-AitchChrist!*" He stood in front of Sich Nith with his hands on his hips. "How many times do I gotta tell you knobies this? Huh? Ya don't let people go away without paying! Ya just don't. That guy ain't coming back, no way, and you're out, what —" he peered at the pump's gauge "— sixteen bucks."

"He offered a ring in barter."

Ripkin's eyes narrowed. "Eh? For the gas, you mean?"

"No, as a surety against his return."

Ripkin frowned slightly and turned to look down the highway to where he had seen the car last. "What kind of ring was it?" he asked quietly.

"He said white gold, but I did not have a chance to examine it."

"Think he really would have given it to you?" Ripkin asked. The kelgoi didn't answer. His skeletal arms swished back and forth in intricate, shaking weaves.

"All right, all right, take it easy, Sich. Doesn't matter. But if he shows up again, you tell me, okay?" Ripkin kept his voice low and monotoned, as soothing as possible. "Draw me a picture of him, would ya?" Sich Nith took a receipt book and pencil from his pocket and drew blindingly fast; in less than a minute he handed Ripkin a near-photo-quality drawing of the man, down to a mole at the corner of his mouth.

Ripkin waved as he pulled out, heading for the town. Sich Nith waved back politely. He went inside and sat behind the counter of his little marketaria. A large text on botany was spread open to a deliciously interesting article on centriole function in mitosis, but he would have to wait on that for a moment. He checked his work list, rippling his finger tendrils in delight. Oh, lists were wonderful, wonderful things. Of course, he didn't need one; kelgoi memory and cognitive skills were immense, much better than most humans realized. But he liked the idea of the task to be performed being right out in the open, in front of him, instead of inside



him. He suspected that that was why humans liked them, too. "Stack coffee tins, load cooler with beverages, check level of gasoline storage tanks. Go into town for envelopes." He would have to change into a dress for the last one.

He heard the sounds of the rubber soles hitting the pavement a mile away. A sweating man jogged up the stairs of the store, shouted, "Hi, Sich," and ran to the cooler. He brought a frosted Gatorade to the cash register and opened the dogeared notebook that hung from a string off the front of the counter. A few numbers were scribbled down, and then the man was off again, gulping the green liquid sloppily and spilling it across his cheeks and collar. Sich Nith looked at the notebook, swinging gently from its nail.

Every kelgoi who had started a business in town had used an honor system. At first. It was just their way, and a good way when everyone's memory was virtually perfect. They had lost a lot of money very quickly. Even the well-meaning conveniently began to forget what they owed, and in an inspiration, Sich Nith had put the book on the counter, for those who wanted to pay at the end of the week, instead of at every purchase. The humans who lived in town took to it very well, and even with a certain relief, he realized. Humans wanted to be honest, he finally understood, but it took a great deal of effort for them. They preferred to "burn their bridges," as they would say it, recording their promises so that honesty didn't have to be exercised all the time. If the notebook was signed, that was the end of it. They would pay. Sich Nith giggled at the thought of primitive humans breathing huge sighs of thanksgiving when the first transaction was pressed into clay.

His people had never written anything. Reading had been taught to them by humans. When one could remember every word ever heard spoken, and words one's father had heard, putting things down on destructible paper seemed useless. The kelgoi were perfect learners but poor scientists. He had been amazed when the full extent of human knowledge had finally become known to him; they all had. Each individual human knew almost nothing, but together they had compiled a gigantic store of fascinating information. His people learned alone; there was no recording or sharing of revelations. What was the point? There was always something new to learn somewhere else. There was no added pleasure in collaboration. *Everything* was interesting! How many times had the idea behind the Gate been stumbled upon by his people, and then lost as the discoverer had died? A thousand? A million? But this time it had led some of them here, and this was paradise to a kelgoi, barring a few dangers, most especially humans themselves. For a moment he wondered what humans would have become without writing to guide them — almost against their will — into morality, and shuddered at what his imagination showed him. He turned back to his botany text, hoping for distraction. Spindles extruding filaments, yes, blastomeres symmetrically placed, yes, wonderful, wonderful. It was all so much, so satisfying, so wonderful, this planet Earth.

Ripkin cruised the main strip of the town, moving at a stately fifteen miles per hour, the engine

sound almost undetectable. This was how he liked to do his patrol. Invisibly, never intruding, letting the town wake up and start its day's business on its own schedule. He watched storekeepers sweep the sidewalks; at Ziggy's, two young salesgirls struggled to pull racks of clothing onto the street, and he slowed a little to check out their tight bottoms. He smiled a little at his lechery. Who're you kidding, he thought. A Danish and coffee, that's what you're thinking about. But he watched for a few seconds more, just out of principle, before speeding up and turning into the parking lot of Sam's Cafe.

A yellow Chrysler was parked by the front door. Ripkin frowned thoughtfully, locked the black-and-white, and strolled over to the car. He peered in the windows. Suitcase, black briefcase, a few styrofoam coffee cups scattered behind the driver's seat. Salesman, probably. He straightened his hat and walked into the cafe, arms swinging wide around his nightstick and pistol, the way he always walked now, even off-duty; twenty-five years of habit.

Sam was already pouring a coffee for him, his old hand shaking just a little from the weight of the full pot. The Danish was there the instant he sat down, warm and sticky and smelling like Christmas baking. It was a ritual so perfectly honed over the years that it wasn't even worth a smile anymore, but it was comforting for both of them, a ticking of a clock that timed their lives.

Their eyes met. Sam's chin jerked, pointing to the corner booth, beside the jukebox. Ripkin looked casually over his shoulder.

The grifter was finishing off a plate of scrambled eggs and bacon, flicking quickly through the local newspaper as he ate. Ripkin recognized him instantly from Sich Nith's sketch: a big boy, over six feet, handsome, with clear green eyes and brown hair pulled back, but not too slickly. Ripkin turned back to his Danish, waited a second and then looked back. The grifter was looking at him over a glass of orange juice. Caught you, he thought. But the man merely raised his glass in a mimic of a toast and smiled at him. Either honest, or very slippery. He picked up his coffee and wandered over to the booth.

"Mornin'," he said, smiling. The man nodded, but didn't answer.

"In town on business?" The man nodded again, but still said nothing. Ripkin felt his face begin to get red and told himself to cool it.

"What kind of business, if you don't mind my askin'?"

"Have I done something illegal, sir?" the man said, his eyes wide. Heads turned in the other booths, and a kelgoi couple stared frankly from their table. Ripkin was satisfied. Now the guy's face was known to a few people at least. That should be enough. And if he really was honest, he'd have the papers and ID to back it up.

Ripkin kept his voice low and polite, conversational.

"Nope, not really. But y'didn't pay for your gas at the Esso. That kinda worries me. I know, I know, you're comin' back in a coupla days, the manager told me. Fine by me. But look, you gotta understand that this town, it's a bit different'n most, 'cause of the knobies livin' here. We all kinda watch out for'm, 'cause they don't understand human nature. They trust

everybody. So just 'bout any smooth talkin' scumbag with a line has a field day, here, an' we got to watch out for it. Help'm out. Community spirit, know what I mean?"

The grifter glared up at him, silent, unblinking. Ripkin locked eyes with him almost casually. He'd stared down a million punks in his time. Eventually the man lowered his eyes.

"Have a nice day, now," Ripkin said, and walked back to his stool. He sipped his coffee for a few minutes, and then heard the man leave, walking behind him to the exit.

A kelgoi walked into the cafe and held the door politely for the grifter as he left. He ambled over to the counter, bowlegged, poking his hat back from his white forehead, a thumb tucked into one tight pocket of his jeans. Sam and Ripkin looked at each other, smiling with the corners of their mouths.

"Hello, Postic," Sam said. "Coffee?"

"Sure."

Kelgoi heads nodded respectfully at Postic. Ripkin looked around him. Of the six aliens in the cafe, five were dressed as women: simple cotton dresses in pastels or earth tones. They disliked the restrictive clinging of male clothing, he knew, especially trousers which just didn't seem to fit at all unless specially tailored around their narrow hips. But gradually he'd noticed that it was the male style that was avoided, and always around men, especially aggressive men, men who didn't take well to strangers.

Postic Vvrit was a little odd for a kelgoi. Talkative, emotional, opinionated, he never varied from his cowpoke persona and was the most popular of the aliens in town, barring a few holdouts. Ripkin liked him, too. He was the only sort of government the kelgoi seemed to have, their unofficial spokes-being. Ripkin often wondered what the other kelgoi thought of him.

"My air conditioner's acting up, Pos. Mind looking at it?" Sam asked.

"No problem," Postic answered. "Got the manuals?"

He scanned the thick binders as he sipped coffee, reading as fast as he could turn the pages. Ripkin and Sam watched him.

"Nothing fancy, now," Sam warned. "I just want cold air."

Postic looked pained; a tough thing to do with a kelgoi face, Ripkin thought.

"Boring old fart. How about a humidifying feature?"

"I like it dry in here."

"I can make it voice activated," Sam shook his head.

"What about an antibiotic impregnator? You'll never get sick if you breathe the air." Sam just looked at him.

"Fine, fine, fine. Cold air. Forty kilos of metal to do one thing. Ridiculous." He tinkered with the unit for a few minutes. A blast of cold air came out of the grill, an intense winter chill.

"Jesus," Sam muttered, and spun the dial to the lowest setting.

"We have another 'Joseph Ripkin' as of last night," Postic said conversationally, sitting down again.

"What? Who was it?"

"Fras Pintik and Juy Nasdol birthed. Their first offspring." Sam wiped the counter top, laughing.

"How're your two, Pos?"

"Just fine'n dandy," the kelgoi answered. "Wonder how many Joe Ripkins we have around here, now, anyway?"

"Too many," Ripkin grunted. "What brings you off the bayin, Pos?"

"Buyin' some feed." The alien slapped Ripkin's arm. "Doin' anything this weekend? We're takin' in the hay and I could use a hand. Same deal as last year. All you can eat and I'll answer one question."

"Two questions," Ripkin countered.

"All right, two. One per day. That's reasonable." The alien sipped his coffee. "Not going to ask about sex again, are you?"

"Oh, very funny."

"You asked about kelgoi sex?" Sam said, grinning.

"Not exactly," Ripkin said. "I just asked how they decided which one got pregnant."

"And?" said Sam.

"They flip a coin."

The look on Sam's face was reward enough. He turned away to serve another customer. Ripkin finished his coffee and stood. "Keep an eye out for that guy," he said to Sam. "See ya, Postic."

He walked out into the bright sunlight. The Chrysler was gone, and he nodded in satisfaction. Long ago, he had dominated the part of him that worried about rights and people's privacy and the possibility of walking all over the wrong person, an innocent. Ripkin believed in original sin, at least in humans. He saw it every day. And his instincts were pretty good. That grifter was trouble.

He drove the streets for awhile, absorbing the town's spirit, sucking it in like a magic elixir. His town. That hadn't seemed such a big thing before the kelgoi had arrived, when the town had just been a place to die in or get away from.

A family of aliens marched their young ones to the mall along a sidewalk that flowed like a stream, and yet was firm as rock. It was a big tourist attraction in season, Ripkin recalled. He stopped to chat and smiled at the children, whooping the siren for them so that they hopped up and down in excited frenzy and tried to climb on the hood. He drove on again, aimlessly, past streetlights recharging in the summer sun, along avenues uncluttered by power lines, and, when the mood was on him, over the sculpted houses, his car light and easy in his hands as he drifted through the light winds. None of it had not already been here, the kelgoi had told him; at least as ideas. All these wonders had started in human minds. It didn't stop him from saying a little prayer of thanks whenever he thought of what had happened here. His town was a place worth living in again.

The grifter drove into the parking lot of the Starway Industrial Mall, a string of uniform brick outlets with their corners sticking out, teeth in a saw. He cruised slowly, watching the figures behind the glare of the glass, looking for the right mark. He was still pissed off, but he had cooled off enough to break into a cold sweat at how close he'd come to pulling out the Colt in his pocket and blowing away that hick cop. The cold, greasy feel of it was still in his mind, itchy, wanting to be used. Always the temper, his father used

to say, that'll be the death of you. Good old Pop.

Just thinking about his father made him hot again. He parked, jamming the brakes viciously as he stopped. He walked into a store and bullied a kelgoi electronics dealer into buying some cheap integrated circuits, using a fake rep card he'd printed up years ago. "Reliance Technological Supplies" existed in his briefcase alone; so did "Alabama Textile Inc.," "Richards Precious Metal Dealers" and "International Distilled Spirits," among others. The kelgoi would never see his IC's, or his down payment of ten percent, stashed in the grifter's pocket. He hit a couple more merchants and then left. There was only a narrow window of time before someone would get suspicious, even the kelgoi, bless their stupid little hearts. Time to skip town, find a bank, and cash those checks.

But it wouldn't go away. He kept seeing that fat cop, pushing him around. Pushing *him* around. His eyes widened in a sudden pulse of rage. He turned the car around, U-turning, squealing the under inflated tires. Downtown. That's where he was going. He was going to score right under the nose of that cop. And if he got in the way, well, that was his problem.

Ripkin walked the Mall, a long avenue of shops facing inward onto a pedestrian walkway of pink interlocking brick. It had trees planted in deep holes covered by ornate grates and benches made of black wrought iron in elegant curves; there were flower beds, and Victorian-style street lamps. He loved this new, vibrant place and spent at least a couple of hours a week strolling along it, even doing a little shopping, although he had no one to buy for. It was a peaceful garden, and the large, humming human and kelgoi crowd didn't seem to affect that mood at all. He was near one end of it where it abutted on to the main street when a screech of brakes smashed the quiet of the Mall.

The grifter slammed the door of the Chrysler as he got out. Yeah, there he is, son of a bitch. The cop was staring at him now as he walked into the first store. He didn't even know what they sold here, but he caught a glimpse of cameras in the window as he straight-armed the door open. He flicked through his wallet and brought out a card.

"Manager in?" he barked at the kelgoi behind the counter.

"I am the manager, sir. Can —"

"Just shut up and give me a check for nine hundred bucks. Here's the receipt. You're part of a chain, right? Right. It's been arranged with your head office. You're getting half a dozen Nikons."

"We design and make our own equipment, sir. I don't think our head office would —"

"Look, I don't give a shit. Just give me the check. I'm a busy man." The grifter forced himself to stop. Come on, he said to himself. Not even a knob will go for this. He smiled, a grotesquely artificial thing. "Sorry, long day. Not Nikons, that's another store. The check's for a batch of lens quartz your company ordered. Here's my card." The manager was looking at the card uncertainly when the bell tinkled above the door. Ripkin stepped in.

"Everything all right, Sochil?" he said to the manager. The kelgoi's arms moved rapidly back and

forth in agitation. Ripkin nodded.

"You'd better come with me, son."

"I've got business here."

"Not anymore. Let's go."

For a few seconds the grifter just stood, staring at Ripkin. Then he brushed past quickly, through the door and out into the crowd outside.

"Hey!" Ripkin shouted, surprised. "Get back here!"

He ran out, looking quickly in both directions. A head of long hair bobbed above the crowd, heading for the road. Ripkin shouted again and the crowd parted suddenly in a random swirl of panic. The grifter was pointing a gun at him, his face exalted in a frenzy of fear and hate almost as frightening as the pistol. The muzzle was incredibly large. Every detail of the scene stood out in Ripkin's mind: a perfection of sight like twilight, or the vision of a vampire. He saw the sky clearly, the blue pure and beautiful, and then he was down, knocked over by some smothering impact that dulled even the sound of the gunshots.

The wind blew the smoke away from the grifter's eyes and he stared in mute astonishment at the pile of white bodies, a seething mass of kelgoi flesh that covered the cop. One on top writhed in pain as his jeans and shirt soaked with blood that ran down off his boot to stain his fallen hat. And then arms wrapped the grifter, thin white arms as strong as steel, that took the gun from his hand like a child's toy and forced him down into a deep pit of sleep.

Ripkin sat up and the pile melted off of Rhim. He pashed up groggily.

"What ... Oh, my god," he muttered. Postic Vvrit the kelgoi lay on the ground utterly limp, a barely animated corpse blowing bubbles of red from his mouth. His head turned slightly, and Ripkin found himself looking into black, black eyes that were still aware, not dead at all. He nodded, in thanks, because he didn't know what else to do. The eyes just watched him. A dozen kelgoi swarmed up to Postic and lifted him above their shoulders. They carried him gently, with no sense of formality that he could detect, but he knew where they were going. He pulled himself to his feet, forcing his weak legs to walk, the smell of flowers and hot dogs and perfume vibrating like neon colors in his sinuses. Dully, clumsy with sensation, he rolled the unconscious grifter onto his stomach and handcuffed him around a post. The man just smiled in his sleep, his face empty, the bitterness gone. Ripkin vomited in one quick bolt, and even that was good.

He followed the kelgoi crowd, their honor guard as they wound through the streets and out into the plain, heading for a distortion of light on the horizon. It hung there only slightly more substantial than a mirage. It took them two hours to reach it and in that time the crowd had swollen to almost a hundred kelgoi and two or three humans. Ripkin saw Sam riding the ancient bicycle that he refused to have any kelgoi touch, holding an umbrella over his head against the sun and staring up at the immensity of the Gate. It turned slowly, clockwise, a miniature of a hurricane stood on one side like a wheel and buried almost to the eye, passing through earth and air as if neither were there,

existing in its own fabric of space and towering thirty stories high above the wild grass. Ripkin could feel the distorting buzz and rumble of its heart. It made his teeth hurt, and it was hard to think straight, as if the power of the thing was scattering his thoughts.

The funeral procession walked slowly up to the still center of the maelstrom. All the kelgoi had thrown off their clothing, and the mane of black hair that ran from their skulls to their buttocks stood straight out in electric tension. Postic's hand waved weakly and they laid him down. Two small kelgoi were ushered forward, their terror obvious, approaching the gate crouched over. They clung to their parent's body, waiting for something, watching Postic's face intently even through their fear. Ripkin found his hands tightly gripped by kelgoi who pulled him closer to the Eye. Did Postic want to say something to him? He didn't want to get near the gigantic thrumming Gate, but he forced himself to walk, uncomfortably aware of the many alien eyes watching his every move, judging him. What's going on? he thought — sensing a ritual in what was happening.

Postic's smashed chest was heaving spasmodically. His hands twined with his children's. There was another spasm, worse than before, and the blood stopped flowing. Postic's mouth pursed, and a small clear drop formed on his lips, a single crystal sphere the size of a grape. The largest of the children darted forward and pressed her mouth against it. It vanished, swallowed. Another drop formed, slightly smaller, and the other child took it. They sat back, as if stunned, their mouths working strangely, muttering; in a second or two they recovered, standing quickly. The older one turned to Ripkin.

"My parent is part of me now; her thoughts, her ways, part of my thoughts and ways." The voice was controlled, adult, suddenly different from the high-pitched squeals of a few minutes ago. "She would give something to you."

A drop began to form on the dying kelgoi's lips, smaller than the others, laced with red strands of blood and held suspended by the trembling tympana.

"Quickly," said the daughter. Ripkin felt a hand on his elbow, a familiar human touch.

"This has never happened to a human being before," Sam whispered in his ear. "Not that I know about."

"What do I do?"

Sam looked sadly at Postic, his old face weirdly framed by his hair standing on end. "Poor old Postic. Who'll fix my air conditioner now?" He glanced at Ripkin. "It'll probably kill you, you know."

Ripkin nodded. He bent down, and licked the drop from the kelgoi's mouth. There was nothing, no sensation at all and no taste. He kissed Postic's forehead and leaned back. And in that instant, the light went out of the kelgoi's eyes and he died.

The other kelgoi lifted the body onto their shoulders and moved to the Eye, holding the body high above them like a sacrifice for the fires. A voice broke clear and cold onto Ripkin, and he whirled in surprise, but the sound was inside him.

"Hello, my friend Joseph. I am gone now, and I exist only in my children and in these words I leave in you.

"Do not thank me. I thank you, protector, friend,

shield. For what you have done for my people.

"Take this gift, the understanding of our speech. Understand us. Make us understand you, because we do not. You are so many things, all so different. My people will need you now, more than ever. With my passing the Gate ends, for I am its maker, and it disappears with me. My people will be here now, until another discovers the secrets of the portal.

"Guard them. Instruct them. Learn from them.

"Say good-bye to Sam for me. Tell him he made good coffee."

The kelgoi were singing now. Ripkin understood the words, a song about farewell and safe travelling. Postic's body was thrown into the swirling plasma near the eye. There was no explosion, no sound, but the Gate vanished. Suddenly there was nothing but prairie and kelgoi and a few humans under a blue sky. The kelgoi turned to Ripkin. He held his hands out to Postic Vvri's children.

"Let's go home," he said in their language, his language, and he led them from the field. □

Proof of the Pudding

By J.W. Donnelly

*A purple elephant
danced by in polka-dot sneakers
leading a brass band
wearing the emperor's new clothes.
And the barbershop quartet
sang sweet nothings
at the donkey-eared girl
who brought up the rear.
So they paraded in circles
passed again and again,
but never elicited a response,
as, poised in scientific methods,
you vindicated Occam's razor
while dissecting
your thirty-seventh fly.*

Earth Kwaatsi

By Ann K. Schwader

Art by Allison Fiona Hershey

Indigo mud splashed Siwa's ankles and calves. Squished between her toes as she stomped purposefully, churning water and chopped silvery grass into the best adobe earth she'd ever seen. It had taken a full day and a half to dig out the pit, longer to prepare the materials she remembered.

Siwa didn't care. Time wasn't much when you felt useless — and a xeno on Eureka was useless.

Stomp it out. Stomp it away. Keep stomping.

Reaching for another handful of grass, she stopped to catch her breath. Maybe she'd forgotten how hard this really was. She'd only had a year to learn, before reporting to the Sensitive training center. Grandmother hadn't thought much of her *adobero* skills back then.

Still, she shouldn't be feeling this exhausted. Or dizzy. Sun sparkles glittered in her eyes, making it hard to look down. Grabbing her eyeshield with one hand, she shook her head hard, but her vision didn't clear. She was sweating buckets, too ... and then shivering with cold.

On a hot clear afternoon.

(Calm! Calm. Balance. Curiosity?)

She gasped as emotion washed through *from inside*. Too strong, too strange ... her xeno contact training faltered. Scrambling for the edge of the pit, for any possible escape, she lost footing quickly.

(Welcome.)

She landed hard on her tailbone without noticing. An overwhelming presence — intelligent life-presence — flooded her as rich mud soaked her t-shirt and shorts. Was something in this mud alive?

Was the mud alive?

(Affirmation. Welcome. Curiosity?)

Pulling one hand from the mess, she peered at it. Tiny crystals caught sunlight, looking like the bright sand Rhi'd noticed around their last wrecked shelter. If she watched longer than a few seconds, they seemed to move of their own accord.

(Curiosity?)

"Siwa Diaz." She felt foolish. "Exactly what ... I mean who ... are you?"

The mud on her hand went nearly white with crystals, swarming like animate stardust. Maybe her question didn't make sense to whatever this was. Only one life-presence; she could Sense that much. One made up of innumerable parts ...

The cough of a sputtering crawler broke her concentration.

"Good God, Siwa!"

Rhi Menzies bailed from the passenger seat, red hair swinging wild around her face. Yanking disposable gloves from a belt pack, she braced herself at the edge of the mud pit and extended a hand.

"Grab on," she said, nearly breathless. "What the

hell happened to you?"

(Imbalance. Concern.)

"I slipped." Siwa tried not to drip on Rhi as she helped her out. Tried not to Sense Foster's anger as the medic shut down the crawler and headed toward them. "Didn't realize I'd filled the pit so deep, I guess."

Rhi's lips tightened. Grabbing a pail beside the jury-rigged pump, she poured it over Siwa's head and went back for a refill. Then another.

Foster pulled on gloves and reached for Siwa's arm, blood sampler in hand.

"What'd you think you were doing in there?" His glance swept over her bare arms and legs. "No gloves, no boots — just *asking* for contaminants ..."

(Negation.)

The alien emotion was weaker, but still very much with her.

"Making a decent shelter." She pointed past the mud to her rows of makeshift brick forms. "You can't mix adobe mud with boots on, and there's nothing here to hurt us anyhow."

Rhi froze, eyes flicking to the gold circle tattoo on Siwa's cheek. "You mean you Sensed something? As in something reportable?"

Siwa nodded cautiously. Whatever It Was didn't seem to mind.

Foster did, but he was keeping his mouth shut.

"You've got to get mud samples, Rhi. There's something else in it, like crystals." Siwa hesitated. "Or the sand you found when our shelter collapsed last week."

The geologist's face clouded.

"You actually Sensed life in this?" Crouching beside the pit, she scooped out a gloved handful. Crystals flashed, but none of them moved. "This doesn't even look organic, let alone sentient."

(Affirmation! Affirmation! Affirmation!)

Siwa stiffened. It felt like someone trying to shout with laryngitis. "If I'm right, that's exactly what it is. Go ahead, test some!"

Rhi dug into her shoulder bag for a sampling jar, then carefully half-filled it. Foster scowled behind his eye shield, though he didn't stop her.

"Don't get your hopes up," he said. "Kokoro's not exactly beating the bushes this time around."

He turned back for the crawler, but Siwa stopped him.

"What do you mean, the Chief's not looking for life this time? That's what First Surveys are for!"

Foster shrugged. "Not when you haven't scored a colony potential in nine years, they aren't. He'll get rotated out if this keeps up. So it's not going to."

Survey politics were like Ogre Woman back home



on Third Mesa. Couldn't argue with either of them — and it didn't take a Sensitive to know Rhi and Foster worried for their own careers.

"All right, I've been warned." Siwa shook water from her short dark hair. "Why'd you people come out here, anyway? You on Kokoro's caca list too?"

Foster looked back at Rhi. Discomfort radiated from her like a heat wave.

"Not exactly, Siwa." Rhi hesitated. "I just ... wanted to tell you our shelter's repaired. We won't need your project after all."

Glancing from Rhi to Foster waiting in the crawler, Siwa nodded. She hadn't really planned for a two-person shelter, but that didn't make Rhi's emotions easier to Sense. Pity-tainted concern fogged through her, muffling Whatever It Was in her mind.

Rhi looked at her closely.

"You'd better come back to Base, let Scott check you over. It's damn hot today. If you've been working outside in this" — she glared at the mud pit — "without enough water, no wonder you're feeling confused."

(Negation ...)

The alien emotion was barely a ripple, now. Siwa held Rhi's sampling jar up to the sunlight. More crystals flashed, but still no movement. "Check these," she said, pointing them out. "If you *want* to find life here, that is."

Almost unnoticeably, one crystal moved under her fingertip.

It isn't the starter, either. The thing's just dead! Gritty to its guts, like my sampling torches ..."

Rhi's voice rose toward her on a blast of frustration. Squinting in harsh morning sunlight, Siwa rebalanced the rolled tarps on her shoulders and stopped to watch. She wasn't around Base much any more. Might as well catch the day's accident — and something told her it wouldn't be long now.

Something she called *Itself*, at least in her notes. It didn't seem to mind.

"Can't be dead," Kokoro interrupted. "Still shows charge in the battery, doesn't it?" He scowled at Foster, stuck half under the crawler's front end. "Try firing it up again."

Foster climbed into the cab and slammed the door. Sick sputtering erupted from the machinery as grit flew everywhere.

(Imbalance!)

Turning away, Siwa started down the hillside ... and stopped. The supply capsule's hatch was gaping open, as usual. She headed back to relock it, wondering how much sand she'd have to wipe from the mechanism first.

"Cox, get my wrench set. I think I've found the problem."

No need to glance over her shoulder. This scene never changed, except for who went after whatever the Chief thought he needed. Since Kokoro kept all the really essential gear in his own shelter, Cox wouldn't be back for at least five minutes. The place was a pigsty.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

(Imbalance!)

Shoving her keystrip in the lock again, Siwa barely

checked it before hurrying away. Kokoro was bouncing the crawler's front end up and down with all his weight, raising puffs of bluish dust. She could Sense *Itself's* reaction right through her boots, the way she could when Rhi used blasting cord on rocks around Base. Or when the crawler's treads tore up thin grass.

She'd been Sensing it two weeks now, with no way to explain. Not without results from that sample.

"Gawdammit!"

Several meters away from the crawler, Kokoro's shelter collapsed like a punctured balloon. Stress rips gaped in bright silver. Equipment and clothing and general mess spilled out, churned by the botanist's efforts to extricate himself.

Kokoro dropped the crawler's front end and ran. Foster bailed out of the cab and ran. Rhi didn't move, except for her lips. Raw laughter spilled out, edged with nervousness.

Or hysteria?

Siwa hurried downslope, dumping her tarps at the bottom. By the time she arrived, Rhi'd stopped laughing. She and Foster were pulling Cox from the wrecked shelter while Kokoro rescued his belongings. Nothing looked damaged — including Cox — but Kokoro's anger prickled her spine.

Rhi glanced up from their task, warning her off. Siwa shook her head. Team was team, even if the Chief didn't count her in. Her trainers had warned that this happened with Sensitive, often as not ...

Stooping to help free Cox's legs, Siwa froze.

Then edged away as quickly as possible, ignoring Rhi's wordless alarm.

The geologist caught up with her several minutes later, just as she'd hoped to make her escape. Shrugging the tarps into a more comfortable position on her shoulder, Siwa tensed. She didn't feel like explaining what she'd seen — even to herself.

"What's the matter with you, anyway?" Rhi's voice held the same edge her laughter had. "Kokoro's back there asking Scott about your last psych series!"

(Calm. Balance.)

Siwa took a long breath, trying to synchronize *Itself's* emotions with her own. No use getting them both upset, not after this morning.

"I thought I saw something, that's all."

Rhi frowned. "Saw or Sensed?"

Would it matter?

"Just saw." She hesitated, wondering how not to confirm Kokoro's worst suspicions. "Did you test that mud sample yet?"

The geologist's frown deepened.

"Just test it. Make time to test it. It's ... not easy to explain, otherwise."

She started walking again before Rhi could answer. Her shelter still needed its temporary roof, and the day wasn't getting any cooler. If Rhi hadn't checked the crystals in that sample, there really would be no way to explain.

Remembering crystals trickling from a snapped support rod ... across perfectly level ground, under their own power ... Siwa swallowed hard and kept going.

Punching through her field notepad that night, she realized how predictable Itself had been. However complex Eureka's native sentient might be otherwise, its emotional range was pretty basic. Almost primal, like the round of the year back home.

Balance was its happiness, but Itself could also be curious. Or affirmative/negative, or welcoming/calming. Or unbalanced. Unbalance felt like emotional indigestion ... for the entity and anyone around it.

Anyone Sensitive, that is.

Siwa logged each conclusion carefully. Even if Rhi — or Kokoro, more likely — never bothered to test that sample, her observations might convince Survey Branch to investigate. Kokoro'd undoubtedly file his own report, but they couldn't ignore a licensed Sensitive's findings.

Could they?

Rubbing the gold tattoo on her cheek, she shut down her notepad. A few notes of crystal danced in her survival light's glow. Smiling, she reached out. The dust flecked her dark skin and faded into it, leaving tingling warmth behind.

"Welcome, *kwaatsi*," she whispered softly. *Welcome, friend.*

Light tapping rippled the tarp across her doorway. Another survival light seeped underneath, reaching toward her sleepsack.

"Siwa? You still awake in there?"

Siwa took several deep breaths, forcing her mind outward again. A visit from Rhi this late had to mean bad news.

"More or less," she finally called back.

The geologist slipped inside, frowning at Siwa's living arrangements. Aside from a discarded supplies crate and her sleepsack on its adobe shelf, the half-finished shelter was almost empty. Visually, anyhow.

Siwa tensed at the stress Rhi carried with her. "What's the problem?"

Clearing off the crate, Rhi sat down. "Scott, mostly." One hand found a strand of hair to twist. "And Kokoro. And this."

She pulled a jar from one pocket of her field vest.

"Siwa, this is very weird stuff."

Taking back her two-week-old sample, Siwa peered at it. There seemed to be more crystals now, though perhaps they'd just migrated from deeper in the soil. (Curiosity. Imbalance.)

After Rhi left, she'd have to dump this bit outside to join the rest. "Find anything?" she asked. "Enough proof to report?"

Rhi chewed her lip.

"Depends on what you want to prove. I even tried Cox on it, just in case it's a plant. He got the same results I did: damn strange electrochem reactions.

"It's crystalline, but the structure changes — and it shouldn't. Sometimes it dissolves in water, sometimes it doesn't. Even the conductivity varies."

(Affirmative.)

"That's all? No other impressions?" Siwa hesitated, grasping for words that didn't sound crazy. "It didn't try to ... communicate.?"

The stress around Rhi intensified.

"If you mean did it make noise, no. I guess conductivity variances could represent language, but ..." She

reached for her hair again. "God. Now you've got me doing it!"

No need to ask what *it* was. Or what Rhi'd reported to Kokoro. If she hadn't actually touched Itself, she probably hadn't noticed a thing.

"Sorry," Rhi continued after a moment. "I know you thought you'd Sensed something. Maybe you did ... but Scott's getting worried about you. He and Kokoro both."

Cold crawled up Siwa's spine; cold Itself had thought to do with. M-health cites were every Sensitive's bugaboo. Even the psych specialist at her center'd advised protective paranoia: trust your talent, but try to fit in. Eat, sleep, get drunk, and use the head however often the rest of your team does.

Conform.

"That's their problem," she finally said. "I'm not endangering our assignment, or anyone else. Even myself."

Rhi glanced at Siwa's bare feet on the hard earth floor.

"Maybe not, but Scott thinks you're alone too much. That's no good in Survey. Fastest way to come back on head-meds is to get too wrapped up in Somewhere Else."

(Calm. Balance. Calm.)

Itself couldn't help nearly enough. "Let me guess," Siwa said, choking on her own anger. "Foster's threatened to cite my file?"

Rhi hesitated, then nodded.

"Do you *agree* with him?"

"I don't know any more. Scott's got the authority, that's all. He and Kokoro want you back at Base tonight."

Or else.

Siwa dug her notepad from under her sleepsack, where she'd shoved it at Rhi's interruption. Punching up her first encounter with Itself, she laid the pad in her friend's lap.

"Read that," she said, leaning forward to point. "Contact records. Every day since that first afternoon, getting better all the time."

Rhi skimmed doubtfully. "The Chief's not going to go for this."

(Negation. Imbalance.)

Siwa's gut twisted. Since she'd been out here — especially this past week — she'd Sensed Itself's imbalance more and more. Sharper. Stronger. She'd blamed her tarps at first, but leaving them off the adobe one night hadn't helped.

Taking a deep breath, she wondered how to explain.

"Whether he does it or not, he'd better understand what's happening. Itself ... the crystals in that sample ... isn't static. It moves. It has emotions, and it can express them."

Rhi blanked the pad's screen and looked up. "It's not happy, right?"

"I'm not sure it understands happiness." Siwa leaned forward. "When the ground isn't being disturbed too much — when it's in balance — that's as close as it comes. Instability, like blasting or pounding in metal stakes, irritates it. A lot."

(Affirmation.)

Rhi glanced down at the pad in her lap, then at Siwa.

Her unease carried a taint of fear, but only briefly. It was quickly replaced by a much more familiar emotion. Pity.

"Look," she said, handing the notepad back, "I know growing up in the traditional lands is ... different." She hesitated. "With that plus your training, I can see how you *would* think we were in trouble ..."

And Rhi Menzies, colony-born in a Martian dome, had no way to understand otherwise. Siwa sighed. All Rhi saw now were the half-Hopi and the Sensitive, both of them suspect.

"... but Scott doesn't want excuses. Neither does Kokoro. You know how he feels — well, you would, wouldn't you? — about people telling him his job. Especially xenos."

Siwa's hands dug into her sleepsack. Whether she left or not, the shelters would still stay up, stakes sunk deep in metal-poor soil. Next morning, the blasting and sampling and disruption would start all over again.

(Unbalance, Negation, Warning.)

Warning?

Siwa swallowed hard. Rhi was leaving already, halfway to the door and expecting her to follow. No chance, but she had to try again.

"How many accidents around Base last week?" she asked Rhi's departing back. "How many more this week? Why does this shelter stay up when yours won't?"

The tarp in Rhi's hand quivered. Then she was gone into the warm night, trailing anxiety and regret.

Something silent and broadwinged and pale wheeled over Base, feathers silvered by double moonlight. Eureka's moonlight. The circle of its flight held for a few heartbeats, then spiraled low over the shelters.

Over an empty dancing plaza on Third Mesa, she alone a lone kachina stepped out the Flute Dance.

Siwa moaned and twisted in her sleepsack. The owl circled again, crying out in a cold dead voice. In the plaza, the dancing kachina tilted his mask to the night sky and answered.

And Siwa answered in a tight-clenched shriek.

Sweating and shivering in the dark, she fought for breath. Owls nearby meant death for someone. Owl kachinas danced as messengers of fate, and the Flute Dance honored recent spirits. A village's dead of the past year.

She rocked and hugged herself, barely noticing the rain drumming overhead at first. Then she did — and stopped rocking. No rain since they'd come to Eureka had lasted more than minutes, or amounted to much.

Her shelter held, but the darkness stank of tarp and earth and fear. Siwa fumbled for the light beside her sleepsack ... and nearly dropped it. A thin sprinkling of crystal dusted her arms and hands. Fingertips pressed to her face found more. Pale galaxies spiraled on every wall, shifting and flickering as she watched.

Still clutching the survival light, she bolted outside. The hard rain soaked her t-shirt and underwear within seconds, but she was past caring. Dread grappled her like an undertow, pulling her stumbling and gasping toward Base.

When she got there, there weren't many landmarks

for her half-drowned light to find. The hillside Kokoro'd parked their cargo capsule on was half gone, along with the capsule itself and most of the camp. Indigo mud and scraps of silver foliage covered everything.

On a site Rhi herself had checked, there'd been a landslide. Their equipment was built to survive worse, but not one shelter had.

Stifling a scream, Siwa brushed hair and streaming water out of her eyes. Surely something moved somewhere under that ooze. If she held her light higher, moved in closer, she'd have to see someone alive.

But she didn't.

Think, dammit. Use your training.

By the time she was calm enough to try, she'd waded shin-deep toward one shelter site. The emotional undertow was gone. In its place was a sensation she'd almost forgotten: the silence of being entirely alone.

Shivering uncontrollably, she forced herself to start digging.

Blond hair emerged first. It was wet-straw thin and plastered with mud, but she knew who she'd found. And who else she'd find, unless something had changed. Setting her teeth, she scooped until she'd exposed both their faces.

Rhi's and Foster's mouths gaped open, filled with mud. Despite the downpour, clumps of crystals caught the glow of her survival light.

Not *kwaatsi*. Not friend in her isolation. Not anything, ever again.

Murderer! she shouted at the top of her mind.

The crystals in Rhi's mouth began to move slowly, spreading over her lifeless face. Siwa backed away. When mud splashed her thighs, she flinched as though burned.

(Negation, Negation, Confusion?)

She brushed at herself frantically, scraping away as much mud as possible. The intensity of her own dread choked her. Deafened her. Scrambling, slipping, half-sprawling in the rich alien earth, she began to run without direction.

The taste of Eureka's soil fouled her mouth. Siwa woke spitting and gagging, rolling off her sleeping platform onto the floor. The one she'd spent hours stamping hard, admiring its shifting patterns by lamplight.

Suddenly cold, she scrambled up to dig clothes from her supplies crate. In the light seeping under her door tarp, her skin looked clean enough. Still, itself permeated every brick. Whether it meant her harm or not, this was no place to hide.

Calm down. Breathe deep. Think it through.

Siwa hesitated. The only voice inside was her own. She dressed quickly, including the light boots she seldom bothered with. No more going barefoot anywhere.

No more adobe.

The realization hurt, but she tried to ignore it. All her bricks outside were mud anyway. What she had to do right now was dig out the others and bury them properly.

Kokoro and Foster and Cox really should be cremated. On Earth, only traditionals put their dead in the ground. What about Mars? Why hadn't she

thought to ask Rhi? In all these months, she'd never even bothered

Stop it!

Siwa took a long shaky breath and pulled back the door tarp. When the morning sun blinded her, she blinked reluctantly: better not to see. Digging equipment still lay near her mud pit. She'd just need a shovel; speed no longer mattered.

At the edge of her vision, something glinted white. Crystal white.

Laying down the shovel, she squinted northeast. The crystal was a column, a slowly moving column with something darker inside. More columns caught the sun to either side, approaching from the four sacred directions: northwest, southwest, northeast, southeast.

Her stomach clenched, but Siwa forced herself to wait. If Itself had wanted her dead, she'd have smothered in her own mudslide last night. Whatever the entity had made now, it had made for a reason.

From the northeast, Eototo stepped slowly toward her. The kachina was nearly translucent, but she could still trace details. Too many details. Eototo at home always danced tall and thin, but Itself had chosen a shorter one. More muscular, more compact, with Kokoro's Afro-Asian features beneath the sculpted mask.

Opposite him danced Talavi, the morning star. Below his crest of cut-crystal feathers, Siwa could just make out Rhi's green eyes and Celt-bright hair. Muyingwa, Crow Mother of germination, approached from the southeast. She was very thin, and her mask's lifted wings framed Cox's narrow dark face. Opposite him danced a tall *soyoko*, ogre kachina and punisher. Siwa wasn't surprised, somehow.

What had Dr. Scott Foster represented most?

Despite the heat, fine hairs rose on her arms. Siwa hugged herself as she stood uneasily at the center of this strange plaza, waiting.

Eototo/Kokoru danced forward.

"Balance returns," he sang, in a voice she only half remembered. "Earth and sky no longer one. No longer warning."

Siwa froze. *Sometimes it dissolves in water, sometimes it doesn't.* Enough to seed last night's cloudburst? Easy to believe, once she thought of it. Almost as easy as imagining that hillside letting go, grain by grain.

"You just killed them," she said, in a raw tired voice. "They wouldn't — couldn't — listen, and you smothered them in mud."

Eototo danced a few steps in silence. Then the crystal-sheathed lips moved, very slowly.

"Unbalance ... in you. My unbalance in you. My ... regret."

Siwa wondered what the last word meant. Itself had taken tongues to speak with, but its language could have no human referents. Itself could not die (so far as she knew), only change form.

As it had changed its victims to mouthpieces.

Eototo backed off, still dancing slowly. More light flashed at the corner of her eye as Talavi/Rhi spoke. Beneath the mask, dried indigo caked her friend's lips. Why hadn't she wiped it away last night?

"Did not realize you ... other ... one. Regret, Youngest Sister."

Something sharp caught in Siwa's throat. Only Rhi had ever asked about her past, about her name and its meaning. Now Itself used that meaning to explain what could never be explained. Or forgiven.

She turned away without waiting for Crow Mother or the *soyoku*. Itself already had what it needed: a pattern to communicate from. A way of being human. The stars that stole Third Mesa away had given it back, at an unacceptable price.

And the only emotions left were her own.

Picking up the shovel again, Siwa headed for her shelter. The kachinas didn't follow. They were dancing together now, mud-choked voices lifted in fragments of song.

All she remembered of the Flute Dance, after so long away.

There wasn't much to pack. Slinging duffel and sleepack over one shoulder, she pushed through the doorway without noticing how dim the walls were. No galaxies spun, now. No presence rode with her as she walked away, carrying the shovel in one tight-knuckled hand.

One week, more or less, until a Survey slipspacer returned with its shuttle. She had a lot of digging to do before then.

Among other things.

Halfway to Base, she paused by a low outcropping. Sedimentary, or close enough. Crystals clumped on its surface, catching sunlight as she traced a clockwise design.

One last time, she thought; if Itself still listened. *Do this for me.*

The migration spiral engraved itself beneath her fingertip. Old as the clans who'd left petroglyphs on their journey to *tusqua* — the land of the Hopi — it marked her own long spiral outward. Away from turquoise skies and Ogre Woman, toward whatever came next. Alone.

Tears started then, streaking her face as she continued on. As they touched her tattoo, crystals formed by evaporation.

She brushed them away without knowing they were the last. □

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Slurpglop

By Greg Jones

Art by Larry Blamire

Slurpglop!

The mini-cool relished her biped. Slurpglop; glummer.

Then came the Angular.

The Angular delineated at the mini-cool unjoyously, and wrinkle-pucked his snout in disgust at the remains of the biped.

"Slam-durl, you fungus! Pick up after yourself! Take pride in the appearance of our travelways! Wipe your snapple!"

It prepped away, skip-skipping at the job well-done.

"Expletive," deleted the mini-cool, and slurpglopped what was left of the biped. She left behind the teeniest of puddles, to ensure that whatever Angular spotted it would adrenalize fruitlessly, frustrated in the absence of anyone at whom to scrub. Especially a mini-cool. Slam-durl made sounds of quiet amusement.

A biped scuttled by, but she denigrated spastical-ly, having slurpglopped already twice this cycle.

Angulars, they were always scrubbing. Wipe your snapple! Verticalize! Cease those amorphic practices! They contended that in allowing your lower hemisphere to semi-etherealize, as it was wont to do, you were no better than a scrump infection in the poot. Such foolishness was hydrogleam to Slam-durl, who had always known she was as well retained as any mini-cool, or indeed any Angular.

After allowing the wind to carry her in a contrary direction for a spell, to fully condense the biped color-glut, Slam-durl found she had to contract. Preferably against a wall. If an Angular were present. Otherwise, unless it was absolutely un-revertable, she contracted where everyone else did.

And while she was slapping all over a wall, two Restrainer Angulars bisected into existence behind her.

"Oh, for Negative-charisma's sake!" Slam-durl spat. The Angulars slapped restrainers on and in her snapple, and Brought her.

The Big Cheese had spread himself upon a brand-new platter. The mini-cool quivered internally yellow; this time the Cheese was curdled. Vertically curdled; the court had clotted in its Allness, with rows of Orange Angulars stumpy under his platter, gelled and quivering Purple subor-

dinates stationed strategically about, and the full glom of lings and attendants, and banners and props, forcefully murmuring the assembly Heavy.

"Slam-durl, so. We Lom at last," the Cheese led.

"Slam-durl effed. "I vent fully, your holiness."

"Flim your lickle-band!" The Cheese secreted mist. "Do you glummer the gravity of Brought Under Lomtom? At the prompt of your deeds, I liquefy! Slapdashgushing on a wall, when any decent-type Angular might slidalong! Unstimulating! I curdle at the very hum of you! As Fungus on my Surface, you are!"

The Cheese lulled, heaved shortly, regaining moisture. The court was mum but for the major-centric buzz of Platter-squats, Orange all.

And the Cheese glavered: "We have bounce-focussed this cycle for many cultures! To the Molds with you, off!"

"NOOOooo ..." Slam-durl bellied.

They made her an Angular, pouring her mellow-yelled mini-coolness in a Mold and, reaching well past her snapple-valves, made her incapable of semi-etherealizing. As the final drips before degelification slipped into never, Slam-durl sadly rendered that her lower hemisphere would never again twinkle translucently blue.

They firmed her a solid, gray colour and gave her Duty. She did it everycycle. She no longer slurpglopped bipeds. Afterduty, she watched the Lens. She'd never owned one before, so they set it at Nevermind One. It refracted constantly, oblivious to her absence or presence. So she watched, through the Lens, the world. Soon, she glummered everything unwaveringly. Cleanly. The world began to make sense to Slam-durl like never before.

Slam-durl confessed clarity to the benefits the Lens had brought her Selfness, so Nevermind One was unfastened. She could zero-out whenever she liked. She zero-inned everycycle, afterduty.

She met a He-love, and they were proudly paired at a Cheese-attended ceremony. Their union bloom-doubled: a He and a She. Following their Newsters' arrival, Slam-durl confectioned to Glaver-lok, her Lovely, in a clenching moment logged for the Lens, that her new Duty would be to live him happy and



actualize the proper verticalization of their Newsters, He-bit and She-bit.

Slam-durl had never existed so well.

On her last Dutycycle, before she furloughed Duty to ferment He-bit and She-bit, Slam-durl came upon a mini-cool. Slurpglopping in public, as usual. She delineated, on course, correctness buttering her warmly throughout. With He-bit and She-bit confabulating her bitter forecast, Slam-durl scrubbed outrighteously: "You gross snepple-wiper! Render for the Newsters! Glummer now every last particle!"

She was about to whiff-off, when the mini-cool gelled back into density.

And Slam-durl saw it was herself.

She rendered the option, then soaped it bent and wrong.

"But it isn't," the mini-cool reversed. "I am you." The mini-cool blurred bluey, and Slam-durl paused. Did she sketch some longing, there? But no. Slam-durl injected propriety, and disgusted at the mini-cool's momentary blueness.

"You can read my mind, can't you?" Slam-durl

poodled.

"Can I, yes. Niftythrilling, no?"

"No," congested Slam-durl. "Well, I have to Bring you."

"No, you don't."

"Yes, of course."

"Of course no," the mini-cool pirouetted.

"And why not?"

"I am you, because. And wouldn't it look strange." Ah, that's absolutely verituous, Slam-durl acidified to herself. Then, she did something. Blink slow.

"... nnnnnnnnoooooOOOOOOOOO" the mini-cool emissioned, dismally, as Slam-durl squeezed the degelatinizer before the mini-cool could incorporealize to safety.

All that remained was an improper puddle.

Slam-durl reslotted the degelatinizer to its snepple-cup, and promptly disappeared the puddle with an invaporator.

Then she prepped away, skip-skipping at a job awfully well completed. □

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.

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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.

December 6, 2103

Dear Mr. Ryan,

This letter serves as notification that your implant is about to expire and that a technician will be in your area next week. If you do not have your implant replaced by January 1, 2104, then you will be in violation of the United Nations Birth Control Act of 2083, Section 3.1.1.14, Article 4b, and subject to the penalties and fines described therein.

You are reminded that the maximum penalty for failure to have your implant replaced is death.

Sincerely,

Richard N. Dunbar
UN Birth Control Office
Notification Dept.

Dear Mr. Ryan,

Darrell Schweitzer authored an excellent and eclectic critique column in *Aboriginal SF* 43-44 (Winter, 1993). Producing intelligent review columns seems to be s.o.p. for the scholarly Mr. Schweitzer; a boring column would be an anomaly. "Books" remains my favorite non-fiction feature in *Aboriginal*. The frequent invocation of the name Lovecraft has



become almost obligatory in the column. It is a tradition that I, a Lovecraft aficionado, am grateful for.

Speaking of Lovecraft and the Cthulhu crew, Mr. Schweitzer gave a favorable nod to the autobiography by noted Lovecraft literary descendant-disciple Robert Bloch. It was the third positive review of *Once Around the Bloch* delivered to my mailbox in recent weeks. Randy Johnson praised it in *Deathrealm* and Ben Indick gave it kudos in *Necrofile*. (I heartily recommend a *Necrofile* subscription to every horror literature devotee.)

Autobiographies are sometimes pompous and apocryphal, but not, apparently, when the subject has "the heart of a small boy," albeit in a jar. Rather than a bombastic exercise in vanity, we receive a fascinating volume of memoirs from a talented and genteel artist.

Timothy M. Walters,
Muskogee, OK

Dear Charles,

Let me compliment you on the heroic things you've done to keep *Aboriginal* going. I am impressed.

Do you know of a man named Robert

Mavnard? (Yes. — Ed.) He is the journalist who in 1984 bought the ailing *Oakland Tribune* and for eight years sailed that paper through some pretty stormy seas while maintaining some damned high standards. I've always considered the *Trib* a superior paper to the trend-chasing rags that litter San Francisco. He also has the distinction of being the first black man to own a major metropolitan newspaper.

This year he had to sell the paper, yet he stands as one of my personal heroes. You remind me a bit of him.

Keep up the excellent work.

J. B. Neumann
San Francisco, CA

(High praise, indeed. Thanks. — Ed.)

Dear Mr. Ryan,

(Referring to "Pass the Banana" by Robert A. Metzger in *Aboriginal SF* Nos. 41-42, page 70, column 2, paragraph 1) Only 5 inches?

Janine Adler Parker
Salt Lake City, UT

(What can I say? He used to live in California. — Ed.)

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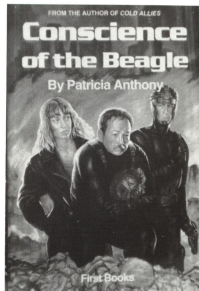
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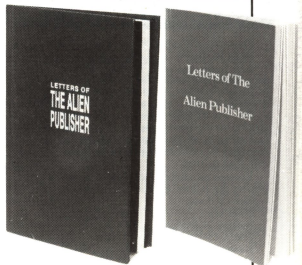
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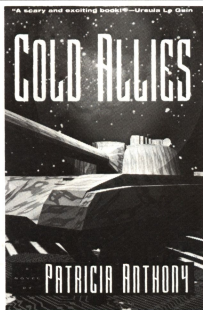
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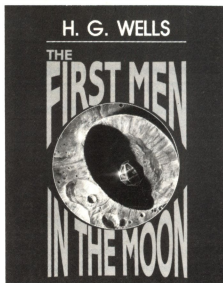
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