

Absolute Magnitude

Science Fiction



Spring 2000

Issue #13

Harlan Ellison

on ass-kicking fiction

Allen Steele

Primary Ignition

Cecilia Tan

Mike Allen

Steve Sawicki

Kevin Rogers

Lauren P Burka

Julia Duncan

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Editorial Notes by Warren Lapine

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In 1999, DNA Publications was the only genre magazine publisher to see an increase in circulation. While all five of our magazines managed to increase their circulation, the rest of the magazine field was not so fortunate. *Asimov's*, *Analog*, *F&SF*, and *SF Age* all saw losses of 25% or more. A 25% percent loss of circulation is staggering; as a result of this, *SF Age* folded and one can only wonder what the other three magazines will do if they don't turn things around this year.

Now you might think I'd be happy with the situation as it stands, but honestly I'm not. I do not want to see the rest of the science fiction field go to hell in a handbasket. The magazines have always been the life blood of science fiction. Without magazines, a lot of great writers would never have managed to crack the field. Ideas and concepts that were too risky for book publishers would never have been explored. If SF magazines go the way of the dinosaurs, the rest of the field will soon follow. Without someplace to explore new ideas and take risks, science fiction will quickly stagnate and die.

I don't know about you, but I would hate to see a world where every science fiction novel was "safe." The major book editors and publishers don't like to take risks. If too many of their "risks" fail to turn a profit their jobs will be on the line. Magazine editors, on the other hand, can take a lot of risks. Why is this? Because the success of a magazine does not rest on any one story. If the readers are happy with five of six stories then the issue was a success.

Here's the problem as I see it. Of the top five magazines in the science fiction field last year, only *F&SF* was published by someone with any ties to the science fiction field. The publishers of *SF Age* didn't care about the field, they were in it for the money. And when things got rough they bailed. *Asimov's* and *Analog* are now published by a newcomer to science fiction. My fear is that they have no feel for the tradition and history of science fiction and will do as *SF Age* did if their numbers do not turn around. Now I want to make it clear that I believe that the editors of these magazines are doing a good job and that they care about science fiction. Unfortunately, it's the publishers who make the financial decisions and not the editors.

Ultimately, I believe that DNA is growing because the publisher loves science fiction. I grew up reading the magazines and I understand science fiction's history and tradition. When DNA hits hard times I never question my commitment to the genre. Other publishers might think, *I don't need this headache, I could just publish a magazine on log homes or start a new crossword puzzle magazine and make more money.* I love what I do and no matter what happens with the other magazines I will continue to move DNA Publications forward. We will not allow magazines to disappear from the science fiction universe.

DNA Publications is in this for the long haul. We will not get caught up in the pessimism that enfolds the science fiction field. DNA's future is bright and we will continue to forge forward into the next Golden Age. Thanks for joining us, we will not let you down.

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Science Fiction

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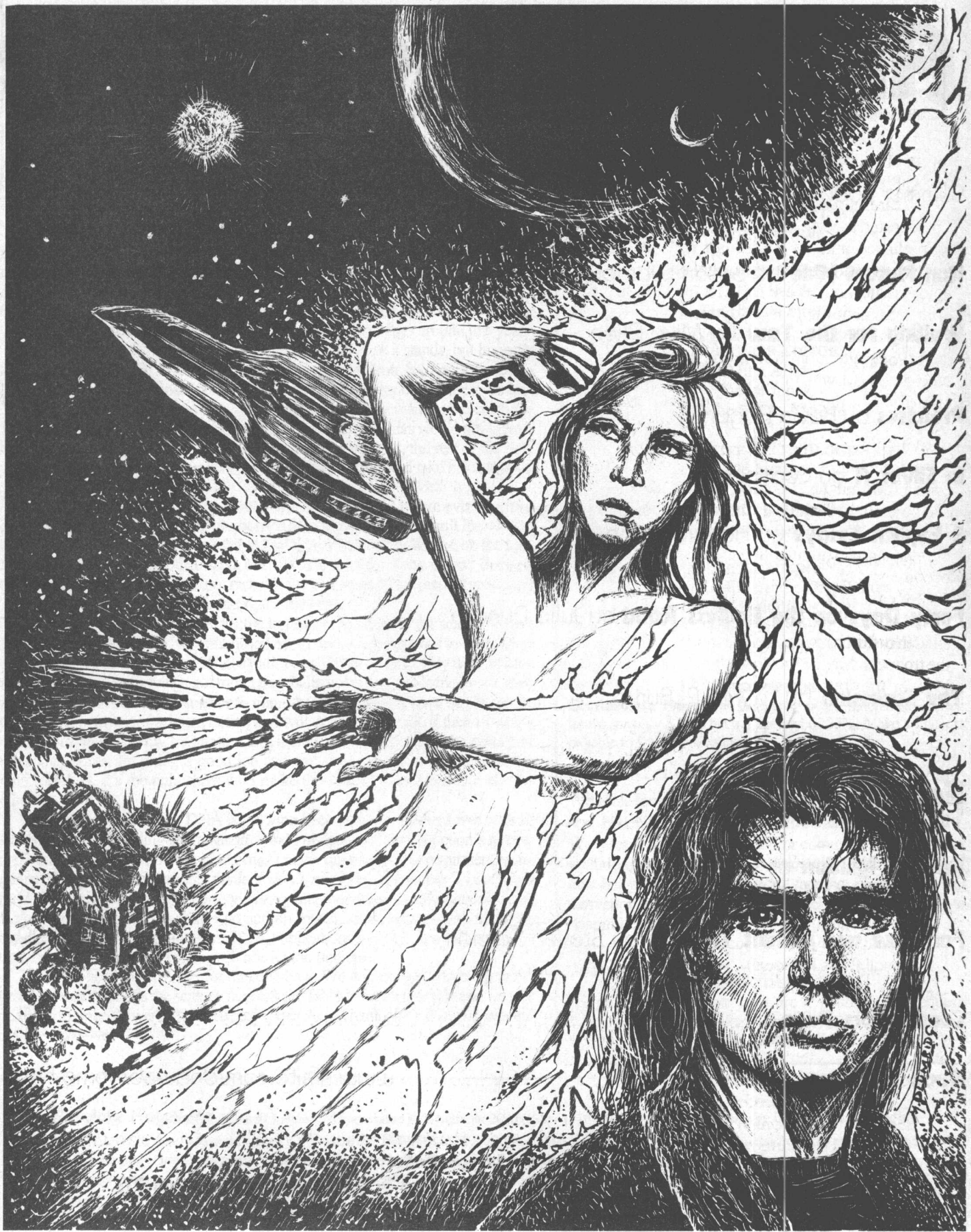
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Run, Mutant, Hide

Susan Warner

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NO! I thought weakly, feeling myself begin to flicker. Please, not now! I took a deep breath, holding it for a carefully counted ten seconds, then exhaled slowly, and repeated the whole process, trying to forget about the men who chased me, about the hot fire that burned not two kilometers away, and thought only about myself. Breathe in, hold, exhale, and, please God, let me keep this form.

In a moment I felt the giddy feeling recede, and knew the immediate danger was past. I looked around, but no one was paying any attention to me. The Trade Concourse corridor where I stood was not the main thoroughfare, but a side branch. Still, the corridor was densely traveled and busy. People of all shapes, sizes and status thronged about me, weaving through the crowd, intent on their own business. There were beggars and nobles, humans and non-humans, and even a few mutants. Like me, but not like me.

The sunlight dappled the heads and shoulders of the people about me, raising iridescent colors from the few scaled humanoids, and highlighting the prism ornamentation that had become stylish again. I stepped back into the safety of the shaded edge of the corridor, and fell in behind a group of four off-worlders, keeping my pace idle and staying alert to any sudden disturbance behind me that would signal the arrival of the troopers. Maybe they hadn't really been able to get a good look at me, but I knew cops: when someone runs, the troopers' instinct is to follow, and they had. It was only luck that I stumbled into the Trade Concourse before they caught up with me. If I just hadn't fallen asleep, if I just hadn't dreamed the nightmare, maybe I wouldn't have morphed. And maybe the building would still be standing, but instead it was a smoldering pile of debris, and I was, again, running from the law.

The four off-worlders in front of me came to a sudden stop, and I moved around them to continue down the Concourse. One of the off-worlders, a pale-haired and pale-skinned woman, suddenly started shrieking, and now her arm was stiffly pointing to a small street child that cringed against the adjacent wall. The child's grubby hand held a small, siliconite purse.

Poor bugger, I thought, easing myself away from the loud disturbance. I remembered being a hungry child like this one, and learning to steal. I'd hated it, and been astoundingly pleased when the Government tracked me down, and took me into their care. I had intended to never be hungry again.

The woman's companion was also yelling, and he reached down for the Siliconite purse, jerking it from the child's grasp. The boy scrambled to his feet, and would have run away, but the quick hand of the man shot out and pulled him back. The man was still yelling. I hesitated, then saw the awful fear in the child's face. I moved back towards the

group, but not in time. The sharp slap of the man's hand on the boy's face made everyone turn to look. He drew his hand back again, but now I was by his side. My foot came down heavily on his instep, and he howled, releasing the boy. I grabbed the child's arm, and pulled him into a run, darting through the crowd. I could hear the outraged shouting behind us, but they didn't follow, and the crowds thickened as we entered the main thoroughfare. After a few minutes, I released my grip on the boy. He grinned at me, grabbed up my hand again, and kissed it, then he darted away.

I stood there, catching my breath, and filled with an overpowering grief. My own child would have been the boy's age, if she had lived. It's funny how grief, pushed down and hidden, comes back as sharp as if it were the day it happened. My baby died suddenly, and I hadn't even been with her. The choking grief welled over me, and I fought it. There was no time for grief now. Sunlight was shining down on me, and I quickly stepped back into the shadowed edge of the Concourse. I couldn't let the emotion grip me, not with sun all around, too.

This planet wasn't safe for me. The two suns were too bright, and the planet's orbit made it daylight ninety percent of the time. Sooner or later their bright light would catalyze something in me, and I would morph. Just as I had a few hours ago, after carelessly falling asleep in an alley, behind some crates. The alley was now a smoking ruin, burned when my nightmare helped trigger the change within me until I couldn't stop it, and I morphed into flame right there in the alley, igniting the crates, and the whole building went up. Matter to energy in a split second. I'd been told it was a desirable trait for the Government—if it could be controlled. And I was able to control it as a child, and even as a young girl.

But I wasn't young anymore. I was only twenty-three standard years, but I felt old, aching old.

"Can I help you?" a voice asked at my side.

I jerked, startled, and looked up into the tired, worn face of a spacer. He smiled at me, exposing bright white teeth in the sunburned face so typical of spacers on a planet-fall. His black hair was unflatteringly flecked with grey, and lines creased his brow and traced down the planar cheeks. But the blue eyes looked kindly.

"N...no, thanks." I brushed a strand of hair out of my face, aware of how I must look after spending the night in the alley. Plus I was wearing borrowed—all right, stolen—clothes, which were ill-fitting. Morphing always destroyed my clothes, and when I changed back I needed to find new clothes somewhere to cover my nakedness. I couldn't be choosy, and I took whatever was handy.

"Don't want to push, girl, but you look like you're in

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trouble. We spacers got to stick together.” He held some expensive, gold-threaded cloth over his arm, and a clerk behind a nearby table was keeping a hawk’s eye on him.

I was surprised that he recognized me as another spacer, then realized that the shift I wore bared my upper arms, and the spacer tattoo could be seen. The long sleeves of my own clothes always hid the mark, but there hadn’t been much choice in clothing when I ran, naked, from the fire. The spacer code—sticking together—was strong. The offer of help was tempting, and for one moment of weakness I almost blurted out my need, then remembered again, and controlled myself. No spacer would want to help me, either, if he knew what I was. I began edging away from him.

“Hey, now!” His voice was urgent, and he took a few steps to follow me.

There was an explosion of native language, and I saw the clerk, red-faced and anxious about his gold cloth, come quickly around his table, and tug on the spacer’s arm.

I left while they settled their bargain, slipping through a dense throng of humanoids and down an alley toward the spaceport, keeping in the shadows.

I hated to steal, but I felt that the Government had left me no choice. They took me and used me and when I broke, threw me away. Rehabilitation, they called it, but imprisonment was a truer description.

The Norese ship I arrived on had tossed me off as soon as it landed—a bit overzealous, I’d thought, as it had only been a small fire and easily controllable. And they’d taken all my currency.

So I needed to get some more currency, pick up some clothes, and get a ticket off-planet. Another day here, I knew, and my nerves would be really shot. And a good portion of the city might go up in flames. And so I looked around for someone I could rob.

I found him at last, and I can’t even pretend he was rich and could afford to lose the money. He was a tourist, it looked, and almighty careless with his bag of currency. Snitching it would be simple, and, pushing down the faint guilty thoughts, I took it and slipped away from him, and the poor guy didn’t even know he had been robbed yet. I felt like I did as a young child—guilty and somehow unclean. I tried to rationalize it, thinking that it evened it up since everyone took from me, robbing me first of my freedom by branding me a spacer, later of the control of my mutant talents, and finally of my right to live. I was a murderer, after all, and should be dead by all rights, except the legal ones.

I held the stolen purse in a tight fist, and searched for the clothes and supplies I needed.

The vendor who sold me the clothes was dubious, given my appearance, and wouldn’t let me touch any of the merchandise until I’d parted with some of the currency. “Can’t take no chances, lady. I don’t ask where you gets this money, do I? I only want to make sure I’ll get paid.”

“You’ll get paid,” I said curtly.

“That one’ll be thirty vegans,” the vendor told me, and I

could hear the oil in his voice.

“It’s marked only twenty.”

“Must be a mis-mark, lady. It’s thirty.” His cold black eyes stared at me unwinkingly. It was clear, I saw, that he thought we were two of a kind. And perhaps we were.

I dug out more coin, and purchased the dress, a black garment with green-edged trim. It was merchant class in style, and would suit my needs. I looked through the clothes for a different style, and found a muted brown dress, but the neck was cut too low for my purposes. Under it was a simple grey dress, almost robe-like, and I pulled it out of the pile. It would do. I paid for the other garment and added a plexi case, again paying more than they were marked. The grey dress fit loosely in the plexi case. I added a hair brush and other essentials, passing over more coins, then snapped the case shut. “I’ll change here,” I told the vendor, tossing him another coin before he could object. I could only make my appearance less bedraggled. Soap and water were what I needed. But at least I would draw less attention than I had before.

The walker to the spaceport was not crowded, and I caught it easily, striding down the moving walkway like a woman who knows where she is going. I hesitated momentarily at the spaceport, because I wanted to find a class B spaceship, not too ritzy, that was heading out towards the galactic edge, and the holiday planets. There were some that orbited weak suns, rotating with short days, and I wanted badly to reach one. And sleep, without danger, for a thousand days.

There was a small class B ship, *The Warper*, that specialized in holiday tours, and was scheduled for lift-off within the hour. There were three berths remaining, and I took one, spending more of my stolen currency. There was no curiosity from any of the other passengers or crew members as I boarded, and with relief I passed easily into the ship.

She was a nicely designed ship, with curved passages, reflecting panels, and muted lighting that gave the impression of roominess, while being fairly compact. My berth was a small, one-room compartment, with the bath merely an alcove screened with darklight. Economical, but comfortable.

I stowed my plexi case, took a quick bath, and used the mirror as I tried to repair last night’s damage. My long yellowish hair, still wet from the bath, clung to my head and back. I brushed it vigorously away from my scalp and, twisting it, set it into a severe bun at the base of my neck. The stark hair style emphasized my thinness, and I added more emphasis with make-up shadings around my dark eyes until I looked like one of the ancient photographs of a consumptive. But it was certainly an effective disguise. I put on the second dress purchased that day, the long, grey robe-like drape, which was caught at my waist with a plain black belt. I looked, as intended, like a member of one of the more austere religious orders. Exactly the type to be journeying to a sinful holiday planet, hoping to redeem some lost souls.

I left my berth and made my way to the mid-section of the ship. I was certain that the ship would at least have a floating

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lounge, and I was right. But the little *Warper* held more than simply a floating lounge. There was a circular platform, filled with small intimate tables, floating in the center of the lounge. Rotating around it, with shifting lights and brilliant colors, was a dance floor, and set high above both of these, cloaked in muted darklight, was a hanging restaurant. It was more luxury than I had experienced for a very long time.

I stepped on stairs that took me past the lounge, and continued rising toward the restaurant. The hostess seated me with a smile, and showed me how to use the darklight over the table for maximum privacy. I'd ordered a drink, and had just triggered the darklight, when someone slid into my booth with me.

For a moment the darklight was so intense that I couldn't see anything other than a black shape, then the shape smiled, exposing bright white teeth, and I recognized the spacer from the Trade Concourse. I raised one eyebrow, saying coldly. "I'm sorry. This is a private table."

"Just glad to see you're doing so fine. You look a lot different than you did a couple of hours ago." His blue eyes looked amused.

"Again, I'm sorry, but you have me confused with someone else. . ."

"Not likely!" he said, smiling, and, with a movement so fast that I had no time to make a sound or a gesture of protest, snaked his hand out and grabbed my wrist, and with his other hand shoved the loose grey fabric up my forearm, above my elbow, to expose the spacer mark. "Not bloody likely, my girl."

I jerked my arm away, and he released me readily enough. "What do you want?"

He shook his head, the eyes still amused. "Nothing."

"You followed me. . ." I stated.

"No. I was already aboard, then I saw you come down the corridor, dressed a bit different than you are now, and different, too, from the Concourse. I got curious."

"I only want to be left alone."

"Now that much was obvious. But I've got a feeling. . ." His voice trailed away, and his eyes narrowed as he looked at me. I suddenly realized he wasn't as old as I'd thought, perhaps only forty or so. "Look, I'll leave you alone, if that's what you want. But you looked frightened, scared as hell, in the Concourse, and right now you look all played out. All I want to know is whether I can help," he ended simply.

"Why should you help me?" Trust was never one of my strong suits. I'd trusted the Government, and look where it got me. I ignored the voice at the back of my mind that told me it wasn't the Government, but myself that caused me to be in the jam I was in today. Instead I looked across at the man suspiciously.

I thought I saw a look of exasperation cross his face, then it was gone and he just looked patient. "Because you're a

spacer and you need it." He tilted his head, studying me. "Who're you running from?"

I didn't answer. For all I knew he could be a Government agent. Most spacers were. I knew the Government wanted me back, although I wasn't sure why they cared.

"You can relax, girl. I'm not after you." And he smiled.

"Why bother to help me?" I asked again.

The smile disappeared and he sighed. "Why not?"

"Helping people on the run, if I am, isn't exactly good behavior for upright Government citizens."

He laughed, and I felt an unfamiliar stirring within me. I quashed it; trust was too dangerous.

"I guess it isn't. But maybe I'm not an upright citizen. Now, who's after you?"

"As a matter of fact," I said calmly, beginning my lie, "no one. You caught me by surprise on the Concourse. That's all. I wasn't expecting to see another spacer. And since lots of folks don't take real kindly to us, I thought I'd rather travel as something other than a spacer."

He snorted. "C'mon, girl. I'm not a fool. You've got all the signs of a spacer on the run. And if the Government isn't after you, then who is?" His brows lifted questioningly.

"You're wrong. And now, if you wouldn't mind. . ."

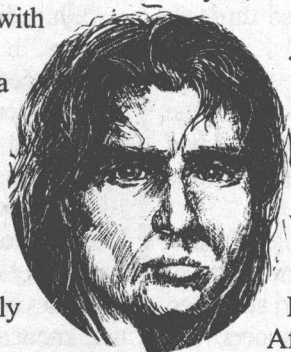
"I do. Blast it! I can see you're in some kind of deep trouble. Can't you accept it that someone else, another spacer, wants to help you?" He waited, but I didn't answer. Another sigh. "I see you can't. Well, since it's what you want, I'll leave. But before I go, remember that I'm here, and I'll help you, without strings, if you need it." He looked at me, waiting, but still I said nothing.

After another long moment, he rose, pushed away from the table and disappeared through the pool of darklight.

I sat there, considering, and chewed on my lip. I was fairly sure he wasn't a Government agent, since he wouldn't have simply left me here if he'd been tracking me. He could be some planetary authority, but the spacer look was too clearly written on his face. Maybe he was just that: a spacer, believing in the old spacer code that said all spacers needed to stick together and help one another. God knows there were few enough of us.

Our heritage had developed the old spacer code: professional spacers were bred, genetically selected to have the traits necessary for a lifetime among the stars, to be stationed on outback planets where no visitors came for decades; or sometimes, like me, to take long, lonely trips across the galaxy on obscure assignments for the Government.

My drink came, a non-depressant beverage, and I sipped it. I hoped the spacer would keep quiet about what I was. The fewer people who knew what I was, the better. He didn't seem to mind who knew he was a spacer, but then he wasn't



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a mutant. Except for the Government, who were gleeful that they'd bred another mutant spacer, most humans reacted to mutants with fear, not to say loathing. For the Government I was that much more interesting and useful. For awhile. Again a niggling thought deep in my mind struggled, and I fought it down. It was easier—much easier—to blame the Government and not my own, reckless ambition.

I sipped at my drink, and wondered rather grimly what the spacer would say if he knew I were a mutant and a killer. I depressed a button and spoke into the autowaiter and ordered my dinner.

I didn't eat much because a full stomach would make me sleepy, and, above all else, I couldn't sleep. Not until the cellular changes within me that were catalyzed by the twin suns on the planet we were leaving finally ceased their frantic pace, and I was in less danger of morphing. And so I drank several cups of a stimulant beverage, until my ears began to buzz, and avoided the tempting foods and depressant drinks.

I could feel my pupils shrinking to pinpoints as the stimulant went to work on my tired body. At last I left the safety of my restaurant booth, and made my way down the autosteps to the floating lounge. I thought I saw the spacer once, then he disappeared as the lounge floated through patches of darklight. I turned away abruptly.

Taking my time, I walked throughout the entire ship, occasionally losing my way, but always ending up back at the lounge. By the time my tour of the ship was completed, I had returned to the lounge for the ninth time, and the place was now quite crowded.

There were several dancers now on the rotating disc that surrounded the lounge. It was possible with some effort to walk along the outer edge of the disc, I found, and still keep one's balance. As I walked, I marveled at the dancers who seemed oblivious to the rotational force.

Strobe lights mimicked miniature suns, flashing down at the dancers, freezing their movements in pulses of light. As the lights flashed and the disc rotated, I began to feel slightly queasy from the motion. Suddenly, I felt the telltale beginnings of a flicker in me, and I realized in a rush that the lights weren't ordinary strobes but must actually be duplicating solar intensities. I stepped off the rotating disc with a lurch, and headed down the closest corridor. Breathe in, hold, exhale. Breathe in, hold, exhale.

It wasn't working. The cell changes were coming too fast. I needed a shower fast, and my room was several corridors away. Incredibly, I saw, as if in a haze through my morphing eyes, the spacer step out into the hallway. He stared at me.

"Please," I mumbled through flame-wavering lips, "I need. . .can I use. . .your bath?"

He looked astonished, but I didn't wait for a reply, just shoved past him through the half-open door into his room. I stepped through the darklight, and into the bath alcove, and turned on the shower full blast. I was already starting to morph, for I could smell the threads of my robe smoldering, but the cold water extinguished me, and pushed my internal

reaction back so that I was solid flesh once again.

I stayed in the shower for a long time, running up his bill for the water to an incredible amount, then turned off the water and inspected the damage. The robe showed faint signs of scorching, but its advertised retardant properties were, apparently, valid for it didn't look burned, and only a few areas appeared melted. It was, however, soaking wet and clung to me like a second skin.

"Are you all right?" The spacer's voice called from beyond the darklight.

"Yeah. Uh. . .thanks." I hesitated a moment, then asked, "Do you have any sort of robe or tunic?"

"Robe? Hmmm." I heard him moving about, and shortly his hand thrust through the darklight, holding a towel and a dark blue garment that proved to be a robe. I stripped out of my wet clothes, dried myself, and put on the garment. It was too large, but felt soft and dry, much better than my sodden dress.

With some trepidation, I stepped out of the alcove and into his compartment.

He was seated, half-reclining in a pull-out chair, and watched me in silence as I came into the room.

"Uh. . .did I thank you?" I asked, self-consciously.

"Yes."

I glanced away, wondering how to start. "Well, I guess I owe you some explanation. . ." I stopped, not knowing how to go on, and he only sat there, watching me, with a trace of a smile on his lips.

"You see, I. . ." The words wouldn't come.

"You don't have to tell me anything unless you want to. Anyway, I think I can guess."

"Can you?" I was startled. Not too many people, spacers or not, knew about morphing. I wasn't the only morpher, but I was the only one who morphed to flame.

"There was a story going around among the spacers about a mutant who could morph into light or fire. I'd heard the mutant was dead, though." The first trace of curiosity came into his voice.

I smiled grimly. "I nearly was." Nervously I moved across the room. The only other place to sit was on the bed, and so I did, in one corner and as far from the man as I could.

"Government had that spacer—that is, had you—I'd heard. You running away from Government agents?" he asked for the third time that evening.

"They let me go," I told him. It was an incomplete answer because I was reluctant to tell him it all. I owed him something for his fortuitous appearance in the hallway, and he was, after all, a spacer, but I had stayed alive by being suspicious for too long. In a way, what I said was true enough: they did let me go, for awhile. But they didn't expect me to leave my 'rest assignment' and skip the planet. It was just that I couldn't stay any longer.

The spacer's eyes grew suddenly unfocused, as if he were dredging up a memory. Then he said: "There was something bad that happened, they tried to hush it up as I recall, but the

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media got it, and it came out that the Government was responsible for. . . for some people dying?"

My teeth clenched automatically as he spoke, and with an effort I loosened my jaw, but I couldn't speak.

He looked at me. "If I know that much, don't you think you should tell me what happened?"

I swallowed. Well, he could only throw me out of his room, if I told him, and pass the word to the ship's authorities. And nobody ever caught me breaking the law, so there was little they could do to me. Besides, for no explicable reason, I was beginning to feel I could trust the spacer. It was a strange feeling; I hadn't trusted anyone in a very long time. So I told him: "You have it right enough. The Government did have me, and the work I did for them used my morphing ability. As you noticed, I morph into energy—sometimes fire. It's a handy talent for. . . well, for espionage and other special Government needs. And I was good at it, but I'd begun to lose some of my control on the morphing. I asked them to stop for awhile, to let me rest and see if I could get the controls back together." I paused, remembering that I had downplayed my growing disability.

"And they wouldn't let you rest?" He sounded dubious.

"There was a tough assignment," I said, and I could hear the harshness in my voice. "They asked if I could do it."

"Why didn't you tell them no?" He asked, reasonably enough.

"I couldn't," my voice was almost a whisper, but my mind was screaming. My ambition hadn't allowed me to admit I couldn't handle the stress. If I gave up the assignment, I would give up all that I worked for, and I'd be another nobody, like I was when they picked me off the street so long ago. I always took assignments, especially the tough ones. It was just such a tough assignment when my baby had died. The doctors told me that it wouldn't have made a difference if I'd been home with her. She still would have died. But it would have made a difference, and I knew it. So I took another assignment, and another, and then another, until that last assignment. I quashed those memories, and let bitterness ride me: the Government should have known I was disintegrating. He was still watching me, silently, and I wondered what my face was showing. "Anyway, I guess I wanted the assignment myself. They didn't make me." The Government didn't make me take it. And only I knew how shaky my controls over my abilities were then. I swallowed, and went on, "It was in a crowded hotel." I paused, remembering. It was a luxurious hotel, filled with richly-clothed people, important people. "I lost control," I said abruptly. "In the middle of the hotel, I morphed out of control. I set the whole building on fire, and eleven people were killed. Innocent people. The media found out about it, and the Government put me on 'rest assignment' in a quiet, out-of-the-way world. I decided not to stay." I had said it all now. I looked directly into his clear blue eyes, and he returned my gaze steadily.



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"It wasn't your fault."

He didn't understand. "Listen, I killed those eleven people just as surely if I had walked up to each one and blasted him away. I should have known I wasn't. . ." I stopped, then continued. "I was protected, of course, by the Government status of the operation, but that seemed only to make things worse. The media really yelled when I couldn't be touched. No flashy trial, no long conviction."

"So the Government exiled you to a backwoods world."

"That's about the size of it. I guess it's better than life imprisonment for murder."

"You didn't murder anybody. The Government had you, spacer girl, and they can do anything with you that they want."

"You, too," I said quickly, defensively.

But he shook his head. "Yeah, maybe. But you're only a kid," he said, lifting a hand. "I'm not so young, nor so talented. I don't get pushed as hard."

His words were what I wanted to hear: It wasn't my fault. But even as I warmed to his words, the voice in my mind laughed bitterly, and the knowledge rose unbidden to remind me that my ambition was mine alone, and I had known there was a chance I wouldn't be able to control my morphing. I had known it, and still I wanted the assignment.

I became aware that he was watching me, and I looked away.

"Don't you think it's time we got better acquainted? I'm called Hoag."

The robe was warm and I was getting sleepy. I gave myself a mental shake, and sat up straighter. "My name is Silla."

"Well, Silla, what causes you to. . . to morph?"

"It comes naturally when I want it, but right now I'm. . . well, my control isn't good and the sun catalyzes me, and I can't hold the morph to light, but I pass to fire," I told him, somewhat sleepily. The room was very warm. "That last planet was full of too much sun. . ."

"I'll say!" He exclaimed, rubbing the peeling sunburn on his forehead.

". . . and too long. It was dying down in me on board the ship, then I was fool enough to walk along the dance disc."

"Christ! Those lights are set up to reproduce, in miniature, all of the major suns of the Government!" His eyes, huge in surprise, suddenly narrowed in understanding. "That's why you began to. . . change?"

"Yeah. It happens like that sometimes. And sometimes, when I get too much sun, something like a nightmare can trigger it off."

"And I'll bet you have plenty of nightmares," he said softly.

I just looked at him.

He sighed, and leaned forward in his chair. "And now what are you going to do? Where are you going?"

"One of the holiday worlds, perhaps one of the night-prone ones. I don't know. I just move on, from one place to the next."

"Damn poor life."

"Any different from yours?" I asked nastily.

He grinned. "Don't get touchy. Sure, it's different. I chose when and where I go, the Government pays me well enough, I do my work for them every now and then, and they keep their hands off me."

I was curious, despite myself, but with the relaxed sleepiness came an increasing awareness that I was alone in the man's bedroom, wearing his robe, and sitting on his bed.

As if reading my mind, he grinned again, but all he said was, "I better throw that robe of yours into the cleaners. That is, if it isn't burned?"

"It's not."

He got up and crossed into the bath, returning with my dripping garment. He tossed it down the cleaning chute. "It's pretty wet. Probably will take a while to repair it." The last words were spoken casually, but I felt there was a change in his manner. I looked up at him quickly, and found his eyes on me, in speculation.

There was a tense moment, then he laughed, making me feel strangely irritated.

"I was just. . . wondering. . . well, whether nightmares are the. . . the only activity that trigger you to morph?"

I flushed, catching his meaning. "I haven't ignited anyone yet!" I retorted. "At least not that way!"

He laughed again, and we looked at each other, as two people will when one is male and one is female and they're alone in a bedroom.

He came to sit beside me on the bed, carefully not touching me, and looked directly into my eyes. "I meant what I said about no strings, Silla. But I'd like you to stay with me now—just tell me, yes or no—your choice." He lifted one brow. "Well? Okay?"

It was my turn to laugh. "Yeah. Okay." Then I shook my head in warning. "But I can't sleep after. . ."

"I'll watch you. If you start to dream. . . to have a nightmare, I can wake you." His voice was getting low, and rough. I sighed, smiling, and bent to him, letting myself touch him as he was touching me. He was skilled in love-making, and I let myself succumb to the pleasure, and tried for the moment to forget what I was.

My daughter was crying. Her small, thin arms reached toward me, and I as moved toward her she only cried harder. I reached out my hands to her and she shrieked in fear as the hands wavered into flame. . . despair filled me. . . then the dream shifted and I was running. . . running.

Someone slapped me, open-handed, across my face. I felt it, but I could feel more strongly the queasiness set into my stomach, and the blurred feeling as I started to flicker. The slap came again, but I didn't feel it nearly as much this time. I heard someone's sharp cry of pain, followed by a sudden spate of cursing. Then I morphed.

The flames within me died away, and I was standing, watching the firecrew spray the burning bed in front of me.

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There were startled cries as I resumed my own shape, then I felt a strong hand on my arm and the spacer Hoag was drawing me away from the closeness of the fire.

"You're hard on clothes, girl," he muttered, thrusting a soft, light tunic into my hands. I pulled it on over my head, glad to cover my nakedness.

"You were supposed to wake me!" I accused, in a hissing whisper.

"I tried!" he hissed back. "You nearly set my hand on fire!" He drew me slowly out of the room, until we were in the corridor, mixing with the throng of onlookers gathered about his berth, and still we faded further from the room.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"You want them to throw you off, Silla? The next stop is for fuel at a mining planet."

I shivered. "No."

"Then we're getting off under our own steam. We're going to take a liferaft."

I sucked in my breath. "You're crazy!"

"Nope. Merely realistic. How else can we get off this ship?" He didn't wait for an answer, but continued down the hall, stopping in front of a service door. "You coming?" He asked dryly, as I hung back when he pried open the service door emblazoned: KEEP OUT - AUTHORIZED STAFF ONLY. He pushed through the door. I hurried after him.

The service door led to a tight, spiraling stairway, and as we circled down it our footfalls echoed hollowly. The sound of the engines grew progressively louder.

"Hoag. . ." I asked, keeping my voice low, as I followed him down the spiral.

"Yeah?"

"You don't need to get involved, you know. And I shouldn't let you. Stealing a liferaft is a felony. You could go to a penal colony." For some reason, I cared what would happen to him on my account. It was as astonishing to me as the strange trust I felt earlier. It was a long time since I cared what happened to anyone or trusted anyone.

He kept on moving down the stairs, and didn't answer until we reached a platform bearing a sign: LIFERAFT NE3. Then he turned to me, and his blue eyes were curiously blank. "I never do anything I don't want to do." His statement made me uneasy, and all my earlier trust dissolved in an instant. However, it made it easier to do what I did next.

We pushed through the liferaft hatch, and entered the small craft. There was a metal rod holding the hatch ajar, and Hoag unfastened it, setting it into its holder in the door. He turned away, and I picked up the rod, bringing it down across his skull in one fluid movement. It was more than a tap, hard enough to knock him out, but not, I hoped, hard enough to do him much damage. He pitched forward, as his knees buckled, and fell with a sickening thud to the floor.

I knelt beside him quickly and felt for his pulse in the

softness of his throat. It beat, strong and regular, under my fingers. I pulled him with a lot of effort back through the hatch and onto the platform by the spiral stairs. Then I stepped for the last time through the hatch and closed it tightly behind me.

The liferaft was a standard one, and I could pilot it easily. The touchy part, I knew, would be getting free of *The Warper*.

I studied the control panel carefully. The best way would probably be to use the emergency over-ride, and just shoot away, hoping they wouldn't set some tractors on me before I got out of range. They wouldn't be quick to set a tractor beam, I guessed. There was always a risk that a craft as small as the liferaft would break up under a tractor. Few cruise ship Captains would want to use tractors until they knew who was aboard the liferaft and why it was launched. The possibility always existed that a misguided passenger had taken the liferaft because of a genuinely perceived emergency, and accidental deaths of a passenger if the liferaft split under a tractor beam would take a lot of explaining.

I launched the liferaft, and vectored away from *The Warper* as sharply as I could. The little craft began to shudder as I pushed her speed higher, and at first I thought a tractor was attaching, but then realized it was only the unsteady engines, starting cold, and maneuvering too sharply.

"NE3. . . Liferaft NE3. . . Identify pilot immediately!" the transceiver yelled shrilly.

I ignored it.

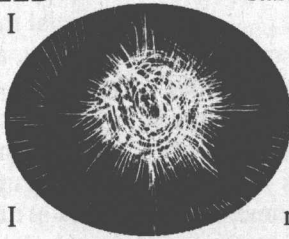
"NE3! NE3. . . respond! Failure to respond will result in immediate action!"

I accelerated slightly, and the little craft responded smoothly, the engines now perfectly sequenced.

I felt a slight blurring, suddenly, similar to the preliminaries to morphing, but somewhat different. With a cold trickle of fear down my spine, I recognized the sluggish feel of a tractor. Then suddenly it was gone, and the liferaft bucked wildly once, before returning to its smooth trajectory. I was probably at the limit of the tractor's range, and somehow managed to slip out of the beam's field. Luck, for once, seemed to be with me.

The transceiver continued to call out pleadings, mixed with threats, for identification, but I ignored them all, and eventually shut the communication system down. The noise was distracting, and I had too much to think about.

The pleasure planet of Oolan was becoming dull, I thought drowsily, rolling over on my back, and staring up at the distant, dull red sun overhead. Too far away, and too old to catalyze me, the sun hung low in the sky, where it hovered for the past ten standard days I'd been on Oolan. Oolan's rotation gave it a 'day' that consumed seventy-nine standard days. And the moons that circled Oolan moved across the sky like racers in comparison. Seventy-nine days of the 'night' were supposed to be spectacular, with Oolan's



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multi-colored moons decorating the sky in constantly changing patterns. I'd gone once to the now dark side of the planet to watch, but found the perpetual night too dismal, despite the beautiful satellites, and I returned to daylight after only one day.

Beneath me, the sands next to the sea were warm, and I was deep in the lethargy that was near sleep. The very faint and constant breeze that blew across me was also warm, as was the sea. Warm, perfect, and dull.

The pleasure planet had been reclaimed from a frozen waste nearly a thousand years earlier, by igniting the nuclear reactions at the planet core, and the generated warmth melted the frozen world, warmed the dead seas, and created the ultimate in recreational worlds. But the sameness seemed depressing to me, after only ten days. Yet people paid a great deal to visit the planet, and many stayed for months.

I had plenty of money, and I, too, could stay on Oolan for a long time. Sale of the liferaft, even to profiteers of the black market, had netted me a considerable sum. I used only a small fraction to book passage to Oolan for a two-week stay.

But after ten days, I was thinking about other places, other havens. And Hoag. I thought about Hoag a lot, and was faintly ashamed each time I did. I hoped he wasn't punished by the authorities for my escape. I hoped I didn't hurt him too badly when I'd hit him. I hoped he understood.

I closed my eyes against the mild light of Oolan's sun, and considered what I could do next. I hadn't morphed since I'd escaped, although twice a nightmare left me wringing wet with the awful sweat of fear. It was close, each time, but I felt my mind lock down on the cellular changes in me, and control them. If I wasn't too careful, the Government might find out I was recovering, and step up their search efforts for me. But, then, they wouldn't want me back to work again, I thought drowsily, not unless or until people forgot about what I'd done.

I felt a shadow fall across my body, blocking out the sun, but changing the warmth not a whit.

I opened my eyes and peered upward.

"Well, hello, spacer girl. It took me some time to find you, Silla."

"Hoag!"

He sat down beside me, dressed for the beach in abbreviated swim trunks that exposed his strong, muscular body, complete with the assortment of whitened scars I remembered. He'd told me the marks were remnants of assignments for the Government, and at the time I'd wondered about the scars I couldn't see. He had to have them, too. Like me.

"Hoag," I said again, and smiled.

He looked pleased, and slightly surprised by my greeting. I was surprised myself. I felt something for him, but veered away from examining it too closely, reluctant to admit what it might mean.

"You gave me lot of trouble, Silla."

"I'm sorry, Hoag." I touched his arm. "It was less trouble,

believe me, than if I'd let you escape with me."

He grinned. "I wouldn't be too sure of that."

"I'm sorry."

He nodded, and stretched out beside me in the warm sand, one hand idly rubbing my arm.

I cleared my throat, trying to ignore the awareness of him that his touch caused, and asked, "Why did you follow me, Hoag?"

His eyes moved to mine. "Not because the Government asked me to, Silla." He watched me, waiting, still touching me.

I leaned my cheek against the back of my other hand where it lay against the warm sands. The beach was made of a very fine sand, almost silt, but I suddenly could feel the grit biting into my palm. "Then why?"

His thumb made a series of small circles on the flat of my wrist, and he stayed silent.

"Why, Hoag?" I asked again, feeling a sudden and inexplicable edge of fear at his continued silence.

At last he sighed, and with a movement which took me completely by surprise, leaned across and kissed me lightly on the lips. Then he settled back into position, on his side, watching me and wearing a strangely sad smile. "Because, Silla, I want to use you and your morphing talents. . . your special morpher abilities will help me in an assignment I'm starting, and I need those talents badly. I want you to work with me, and that means going back to the Government."

His words were even, emotionless, and his eyes watched me unflinchingly.

I sat up, wrapping my arms around my knees, and didn't look at him. I said nothing. I couldn't.

He didn't move, and I could feel his eyes on me, while the silence stretched out between us. The he spoke, and his voice was still even, but I could hear emotion in it as he continued: "I could have lied, Silla. I could have spun you some tale, and you'd have believed it for awhile, because I'm good at that. We're the same kind, you and I, and I want your help, but I want it willingly." There was a pause. Then: "Will you let me tell you about the mission, Silla, and how you can help me?"

I nodded, still not looking at him. The red sun still hung in the sky, the planet's motion deadly slow. Bathers splashed in the sea a few hundred meters away, enjoying their playground. And I waited for Hoag to tell me why he wanted to use me, and tried not to feel bitter.

"You have worked for the Government, doing espionage, you said? Well, this job is similar, yet different because you wouldn't be stealing secrets, but helping me free some people who are in prison and shouldn't be."

I still said nothing, and after a moment he went on.

"There are some people, good people, who are being held by the Priest of Tomor. Do you know the planet?"

I shook my head.

"I'm not surprised. Few people have heard of Tomor. It's a backwater planet not far from here, actually, dominated by a rather obscure religious order. The people being held are not

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Government agents, incidentally, if that makes a difference to you.”

“Are you an agent, Hoag?”

“The very same.” He waited for my reaction, and when there wasn’t one, he went on: “I’m a specialist of sorts. And getting these people free falls into my specialty. They’re descendants of the old ruling family on Tomor. They aren’t special people nor important people, Silla. They aren’t even of any great value to the Government. They just happen to be out of their depth with a maniac. And now they’re in his prison, and they could be killed.”

I smiled bitterly, and thought of our time on *The Warper*, and how I stupidly gave him my trust. A Government agent. He must be enjoying this. After a moment I said: “Are you an Enforcer?”

He shook his head. “Not me. I’m just another mutant specialist, like you.”

“What d’you mean, like me?” I couldn’t keep the surprise out of my voice. I stared at him. “How are you a mutant?”

He chuckled, and ran his hand, once again, down my arm. “I’m a finder, Silla. I find things and people.”

I considered it. “Is that how you found me?”

“Umm-hmm.”

“I see. And, you were sent to find me from the beginning?”

His hand contracted on my arm, then loosened, and he withdrew his touch. “No.”

I looked at him, and he watched me somewhat warily. “Why should I believe you?”

He shrugged. “It’s the truth, Silla. I only started following you, using my finding, after you left the ship. At least consciously. Maybe I always wanted to find you, without knowing it, from the moment I first saw you on the Concourse and felt. . .” he stopped.

I decided to ignore the last part. It would be too easy to trust him again. “And how could I help free these people anyway. I’m not that kind of spacer. Besides, I don’t owe the Government or these people anything. Or you.”

“You owe me for some trouble, not to mention clothes. But you’re right. You don’t owe these people anything.”

“So maybe you ought to go away and let me be,” I said coldly.

“These people need help,” he explained, as if I had not spoken. “They’re scared, probably hurt, and certainly in danger of being killed.”

I laughed suddenly, without mirth. “Do you expect me to care?” I saw his eyes flicker, and I thought it was anger. Ruthlessly, I went on: “Do you really think it matters to me, or to anyone here on this pleasure planet, what is happening or might happen to some unknown people on an unknown planet?” I looked at him and shook my head. “No, Hoag. I’m not going to help you or the Government. I’m going to get away from it, get away from you, them, all of it.”

“You’ll never do that. You can’t. You’re what you are, like me, and you will use your talent. Once you get your control

back, if you haven’t already, you’ll use it. You have to. It’s like breathing. And you’ll either end up using it for the Government. . .”

“Or for you? No, Hoag.”

He rubbed the spacer mark on my arm, then touched the one on his own. “You forget what you are. This mark is more than a mark of ownership by the Government. It’s what we are—spacers. And you like being one. You liked it before, maybe too much,” he said, with too keen an insight.

“I don’t anymore.” I took a deep breath. “Anyway, I can’t morph yet. It would be too dangerous. Remember what happened, Hoag. I killed eleven people. And I don’t want to be a spacer anymore. You’re wrong,” I told him flatly. “I was a spacer all right, and do you know what that meant? It meant that my baby girl died while I was gone on a mission, and I didn’t know till I got back. It meant starting a fiery inferno and killing eleven people. Tell me why in the seven worlds I’d want to be that again?” I sat rigidly back on my knees, resting against my heels.

Hoag’s voice was very gentle when he spoke. “I didn’t know about your daughter, Silla. I’m sorry. . .”

I brushed it aside with an angry wave of my hand. His gentleness was the last thing I wanted. “I didn’t tell you for your sympathy, Hoag. I don’t want it. I only want you to understand that I don’t ever want to do that again.” I said each word slowly, sharply.

“So what do you intend to do? Steal for a living?”

I flushed. “No. I’ll step into the world like everyone else, and get a job. Maybe as hostess on a cruise ship. Why not?” I stood up, and looked down at him. “Don’t try to find me, Hoag. Maybe you aren’t here as a Government Enforcer. I don’t know. But I know that now I’m going to leave the planet, and if you follow me, I’ll have to stop you.”

He smiled, and just shook his head. I wasn’t sure whether the gesture was to indicate that he wouldn’t follow me, or that I wouldn’t stop him if he did.

The dark world of Moray was not as dull as Oolan. It was also a pleasure planet, but for the hardier recreationists. The wilds of Moray contained real carnivores, and the broad seas were filled with giant aquatic lizards that ate three times their weight in meat every day. The planet was not a good place to stray off by oneself, but for the hunters and risk-takers, the world was a paradise. I liked it because of its distant sun, and the short but frequent days.

I once tentatively tried to morph in my room, and successfully passed completely to the cool light that was my specialty. I could move as light almost anywhere I wanted, through any open window or crack, and it would have been easy enough to make a living as a thief, but I couldn’t bring myself to it. Instead, I hired on as a scout to locate some of the most fierce carnivores on the planet. The tour agency didn’t know how I located the best specimens so quickly, but they didn’t ask questions. And they paid me very well. I could use

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my morphing skills undetected, and earn legitimate money. It seemed the right thing to do, and I began to feel more and more confident with my control. The work was easy—I would morph to light, speed to various jungle areas, briefly and safely locate a huge carnivore, and report back, often five and six times a day. As far as anyone could tell, I never left my hotel room. This one was the last trip of the day, and I morphed back into flesh near a large pool of water where a ye-ot, a particularly vicious feline-like animal, was drinking. It raised its enormous head, covered with dusky red fur and spotted with yellow, and glared at me through oval eyes that seemed as red as its fur. It was one of the largest ye-ots I'd seen. It suddenly sprang towards me, but I was already passing to light and I morphed carelessly back to my hotel room. Too carelessly, for at the last moment my control slipped and I wavered an instant into flame. The fiber carpet under my feet was smoking. I stamped on it with my bare foot, angered at how reckless I was to get so close to the ye-ot, and how easily I lost control of my morphing. There was an icy feeling in my stomach—the smoldering carpet was only slightly singed, but I didn't want to be an arsonist and murderer again. It was time to find a new line of work.

I notified my tour company of the Ye-ot's location, and at the same time told them I would be moving on.

"But you can't, Silla. Not yet, anyway. I just promised this guy who's come half-way across the galaxy that you'd find him a gargantuan Trog. You gotta help me at least one last time," the man pleaded.

I hesitated, then recalled that the man had given me a job, no questions asked. "All right, Lowry. One more trip, for a Trog." I couldn't imagine why anyone wanted to hunt a Trog. Most hunters ended up dead, but since they paid in advance, Lowry didn't care about the outcome. I glanced at the time. "I'll go tonight, Lowry." There was time for another trip into the wildlands, even a long one to find a Trog. Trogs, I'd learned, were cave dwellers, which limited where they could be found, and I knew of a couple likely sites to check. I took a calming breath, made sure of myself, and morphed once more to light.

The Trog was difficult to locate, but I found a champion-sized creature at last, at the far edge of one of the Moranian mountain ranges. It should suit the tourist. This carnivore would not be easily caught, I thought, studying the large animal as it ravaged some poor, less-fortunate beast. With this one, the tourist had a good chance of becoming the hunted. But my job was only to find them, not to worry about the actual outcome of the hunt.

I morphed back to my hotel room, and came back to my own form, carefully this time, then instantly knew something was wrong.

Bright light blazed around me, then dwindled, and I could see my naked reflection in a hundred faceted mirrors. And

reflected with me were a dark man and a red-headed woman. I had seen them before in the hotel's casino, when the man seemed to win grandly and loudly exited with the willowy red-head toward his suite. Now they were smiling nastily, and both were pointing stunners at me.

I tried to morph, but the light grew brilliant again, and seemed to press me smaller and smaller until my human form was plain again. I was panting, and sweat was dripping off my body. I could see it shining in all of my hundred of faceted images.

The man laughed, and the sound chilled me. "Don't bother trying, mutant. It's an inhibitor, especially made for you. The harder you try to morph, the more power it draws from you."

"Let's get this over with," said the woman briskly, putting her stunner aside. She reached toward a stand at her elbow, and picked up a syringe lying there.

I panicked and tried to morph again. It was worse this time, and when I resumed my shape, I dropped to my knees, gasping.

"I warned you," the man told me.

The woman crossed to where I knelt, and thrust the syringe against my upper arm. I felt its sudden coolness and a faint ache as I heard a hiss as the syringe injected its contents into my arm.

"It's a drug, mutant, that dampens the cellular changes which permit you to morph. And there's a sedative and a mild paralysis agent also. You'll find you won't be able to move very well, but after awhile you won't really care."

He needn't have told me. Already I was falling forward, on my face, as my muscles locked up.

He picked me up, rather ungently, and took me to the bed, laying me on it.

The woman spoke from behind him. "When will the transport get here?"

"As soon as I signal that we have her."

I tried to move my tongue, and my throat, to make a sound, but nothing came out. But the woman must have seen my effort, for she smiled coldly down at me. "Wondering who we are, mutant? Well, we're bounty hunters doing a job. Someone will pay good money for you on the black market. Your little escapade on that tour ship gave us a lead. . .you're worth a lot of money."

Bounty hunters. I should have known. And mutant skills were always worth money on the black market. But usually the Government was enough protection, unless you were on the run from them, like I was.

There was a sudden loud crash, like glass shattering, and my reflections disappeared in a falling tumble of mirrored fragments, revealing three men. The woman screamed, and the man whirled with his stunner already blasting, but the three newcomers were too quick for him. I watched, a prisoner of my frozen muscles, as the man and woman simultaneously took stunner shots, and dropped heavily to the



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floor.

One of the three men crossed to me, carrying a small satchel. Without a word, he set it down on the bed beside me and reached inside it. He withdrew a dress, and hurriedly pulled it over my head, pulling my arms through the proper places, and quickly closing the fastenings. Through it all I draped limply in whichever position he placed me.

They carried me out of the hotel room, and down the service stairs, into the night. I fought a tendency to let my eyes close, and a feeling that I might as well just go to sleep. Soon, I didn't bother fighting.

I came to, still feeling slightly sluggish, alone in a strange room. The bed was narrow and placed against one wall of the empty, almost barren room. There were no windows, and only one door in the wall opposite where I lay.

As I struggled to sit up, against reluctant muscles, the door began to open. A man stepped into the room, and I recognized Hoag.

I stopped struggling to sit up. We looked at each other, his face nearly devoid of expression and mine, I knew, full of resentment.

"How do you feel?" He asked, breaking a long silence.

"How do you think?" I snapped, again trying to sit up.

He moved forward quickly, and helped ease me into an upright position. "The drug should wear off rapidly, now. You'll feel much better soon."

I hoped he was right. I felt helpless, and that was the last thing I wanted to feel around Hoag.

"Am I your prisoner?"

He looked startled. "No."

"Then what?"

"How much, that is, what do you remember?"

"Morphing into the hotel room, finding myself trapped there by a man and a woman and some kind of device. . ."

"A damping field, yeah. What else?"

"Then three men busting in, knocking out the other two and taking me away. Where to? Here?"

"Yes."

"Your men?"

"Yes."

I looked about the tiny room. It was much like a cell, with no windows, and the door looked remarkably like a hatch. I suppose I could morph out of the room, somehow, but it would take some figuring. "And you say I'm not your prisoner?"

"You can go whenever you like. And, of course, as soon as you're able. You've been sleeping for two days, Silla. Now that you're awake it shouldn't be very long before the drug is completely worn off."

"And then you just let me leave." It was a statement, and I couldn't keep the dryness from my tone.

"You don't believe me?" he asked quietly.

"Now why shouldn't I believe that a Government agent went to all that trouble to break me away from two bounty hunters, knock them out, rescue me, and bring me here, just so that I could walk away again?"

He flushed, and looked angry. He moved his gaze away from me, and jammed his hands into the pockets of his coveralls.

I waited, and when he didn't say anything, but only stared at the wall, I asked: "Why did you help me?"

He looked at me then, with an odd expression on his face. "I'm not sure I know, Silla. Maybe because nobody should be caught by a bounty hunter, and I sure don't want to see spacers sold on the black market. Even renegades."

I started to deny I was a renegade, then shut my mouth. I guess he was right.

"And it wasn't because I could spare the time right now, but if you fell into the wrong hands, the Government wouldn't much like it. And I guess I figured. . . ." His voice trailed off.

"Figured what? That I'd work for you if you helped me?"

"That wasn't it," he said curtly. "Do you always have to expect the worst of people?"

I raised my brows. "It's usually wiser that way." Seeing his irritated expression, I switched the subject.

"Where is this place?"

"I brought you to Tomor."

I felt a deep stirring of anger. Tomor! And he said he hadn't rescued me to help him against his crazy priest! Lies, all of it lies. "I said I wasn't going to help you, Hoag. And I'm not. You can't force me."

"I wouldn't try!" he snapped, and his anger was clearly evident. After a moment he went on. "I brought you here to Tomor because that's where my base is currently. I'm afraid I'm strapped for time, and this place was the handiest. That's all. Like I said, you can go anytime. I've hung around here too long as it is, waiting for you to come out of it. You can leave anytime. Naturally," he said with stiff courtesy, "naturally, I would like you to stay. I could use your help. But it's your decision." He was losing his polite courtesy. "You can go back to Oolan or Moray or any other place and watch your own back from now on. I won't stop you. I'll even provide transport."

I almost told him that I hadn't asked him to watch my back, but I was glad, now, that he had. I knew I sounded shrewish, and tried to think how to start again. While I stared at the wall, thinking, I heard him turn and leave, closing the hatch with a quiet click.

I got up quickly, but my legs and arms weren't yet coordinating, and I fell to my knees. More carefully this time, I stood and walked slowly to the hatch. I tried the handle, and it opened at once. Looking outside, I saw a long, empty corridor.

I stayed motionless in the doorway, staring down the empty



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corridor, and listened. There was no sound: no footsteps, no rattles, no noise whatsoever. It seemed to me, suddenly, that Hoag had disappeared into silence, leaving nothing whatever to show he'd existed. The sharp ache I felt at that strange thought dismayed me, and I was frowning as I took a step into the empty hall.

At first I thought the drug was still affecting my movement, for my legs seemed to quiver and failed to support me. Again I fell to my knees, but as my hands touched the floor I felt a rolling shudder flow under my fingers, and I knew then that the entire corridor was shaking. Large portions of the ceiling fell, and there was suddenly noise everywhere. The corridor darkened as the lights lost power. I struggled to my feet coughing from the air that was thick with dust. I heard explosions outside, and they seemed to come from all around me. Fighting the unreasonable but overwhelming desire to run back into my cell, I moved through the falling debris, toward the end of the corridor. The floor seemed to roll under me, and the walls quivered with a constant bombardment. Violent noise assaulted my ears.

At the end of the corridor, after a hard right turn, I came to a door. It was halfway open, and tilted at a sharp angle from a severe bend in its form, two thirds of the way down the door. The floor shuddered again, and there was another terrific explosion somewhere close. I stepped to the door, and saw that the wall opposite the opening was bloody, then almost tripped over the body of a man who had apparently crawled a few meters from where he'd been flung, then died. It wasn't Hoag.

I pushed myself through the bent door frame, and stepped out into the blazing light of day, lit more brilliantly by a constant sequence of flashes in the sky. Each flash was followed by a shudder in the earth beneath my feet. I was in a large courtyard. There were bodies strewn across the yard, most motionless, but some still quivering with faint life. The sickness that rose in my throat was held off only by my own intense fear. The continuous bombing ceased suddenly, and the sky stopped flashing.

In the sudden silence, I heard my name called.

"Silla!"

It was Hoag's voice. I looked across the huge courtyard and saw him. He was leading a group of people toward the shelter of a building. One arm hung limply at his side, drenched in blood. He took a step toward me.

There was a sudden commotion at the other end of the courtyard, and with unsettling quickness, a troop of men entered the area. They were led by a tall, thin man in bright robes. He saw Hoag, still moving towards me, and smiled. His smile was ugly, and I looked sharply at Hoag, yelling his name in warning.

The tall, thin man carried a stunner, and was already leveling it on Hoag. He fired.

Hoag dropped in mid-stride, falling to the dirt, and was still. The thin man turned the weapon to me, still wearing the horrible smile. He fired, and I morphed. I felt the stunner light

reach me, and I grew with it, harmlessly. Then I directed myself up and away.

I didn't know if Hoag was dead. The people he'd been taking to shelter were collected and taken away by the troops of the tall man, who I guessed was the outlaw Priest of Tomor. I watched from a secure vantage point throughout a long afternoon, all the time Hoag lay motionless in the bloody dirt of the courtyard. The blast from the stunner that had hit me was of the stunning quality, not killing. If the same type blast had hit Hoag, then he could still live. With half of my mind I cursed him for bringing me here and into his troubles, but the other half of my mind would go blank and cold with fear at the thought of Hoag being dead. I huddled, naked, on my perch and watched until at last the troops came and carried Hoag away. The rest of the bodies were left where they lay.

I followed them, a small ball of light glowing behind their craft, as they flew from Hoag's destroyed camp past tall mountains, until finally the craft came to a city. It landed within a large group of buildings looking suspiciously like a prison. I morphed back to my shape on the roof of a nearby building, taking cover under an eave.

The prisoners were herded out, and I was relieved to see Hoag, holding his bloodied shoulder but walking, come down the ramp of the craft. His guards halted him in front of the tall, robed man, who said a few words to him. I saw Hoag answer, and for his reply receive a rough shove from a soldier, pushing him past the robed man. The group disappeared inside a building. I waited until most of the activity was over, then I morphed again. I didn't stop to analyze why I followed Hoag and why I was still here when I could have been safely morphing hundreds of kilometers away. Instead, I moved as light and entered the building.

They were not easy to find. The prison held many people, in various stages of torment. I passed them all, until I came at last to a cell that held Hoag and a half-dozen others. I passed through the bars and into the cell, and morphed back.

There were a few, quickly-hushed screams. Hoag just looked at me when I appeared, then bent to grab a filthy blanket, which he thrust at me. I took it in silence, wrapping its roughness around me.

"Who is this, Hoag?" A soft, imperious voice asked.

"A friend, your Highness," Hoag answered, never taking his eyes from mine.

I broke his gaze, and looked at the one he'd called "your Highness". She was old, I saw at once, although her dark hair held only a scattering of grey. She was standing, and at Hoag's words she sat on a bunk at her side. She moved very slowly, keeping her gaze always on me. "A friend?" She repeated. "A strange friend, Hoag. Can she help us?"

"I don't know, your Highness."

I looked back at him.

"Can you, Silla? Help us?" His words were very gentle.

"At first I thought you were dead," I said, not directly

Run, Mutant, Hide

answering him. "Are you badly hurt?"

He shook his head.

"Even if I get you out of here, Hoag, I don't know what good it will do. You'll have to figure how to get them out of here." I waved at his companions. It seemed impossible to me and I told him this. I still wasn't even sure why I had come.

He grinned. "Not impossible for this team. We can get out with your help, Silla. How will you do it?" The last was asked somewhat diffidently.

I took a long time in answering. I had not willingly morphed to fire since I'd killed eleven people. I wasn't even sure that I would be able to, on demand. I knew I didn't want to. At last I said: "I don't want to use fire, unless I have to. I may not be able to control it. . ."

"You can control it," Hoag interrupted confidently.

"And I could injure someone, but I guess we've not got a lot of choice."

"That 'we' has a good sound, Silla." He smiled, then turned away and examined the cell door. "This closure shouldn't take concentrated heat. Can you duplicate the force of a blaster?"

"Maybe." I wasn't sure I could duplicate anything but light. I crossed to where he stood and looked at the mechanism.

He was pointing to a section of the latch. "Here."

I swallowed. The dread I felt was almost suffocating, but I tried to ignore it, and concentrated on thinking through my controls. I let the blanket slip from me, then I morphed.

The dense pattern was hard to hold, but I kept remaking it each time the morph threatened to slip, all the while directing my force on the latch. I felt the latch melt, and I resumed my shape, picking up the discarded blanket. My entire body was quivering. I didn't know whether it was from the effort or my fear.

Hoag's good arm came around my shoulder. He said nothing, only held me, then he was moving us all through the released door.

Hoag gave lightning quick directions to the people around us. He directed me to release several more groups of prisoners, and each time I was left quivering at the end, then we moved toward the outside.

"Silla. . ." he began, talking close to my ear. "I want. . ." he stopped, then began again. "This is going to be hard for you, but I want you to morph to fire and set some terrific blazes going in the buildings around this place. The distractions will be our only hope. Can you do this?"

I swallowed, my throat dry as dust. His eyes were steady on me, trusting, and after a moment I nodded. He stroked my hair lightly, then took my blanket and stepped away from me. I morphed.

I left the prison building quickly, then headed to a likely place to start a fire: the eave where I'd originally landed. Once there, I knew I couldn't do it. Hoag was wrong to trust me. I couldn't start the flames that leaped, burned, ravaged. . .

Below me the guards must have detected the breakout, for there was the sudden sound of blasters, and the acrid smell of disintegrated matter. I felt the tears falling on my face, and harsh sobs racked my body, but I couldn't. . . I couldn't. . .

"Silla! Silla!" Hoag's voice calling me grated against my spine. I covered my ears with my hands, but I could still hear him call me, and the sound of people screaming.

The blasters fired again, and, shaking with loathing, I morphed to fire. All around me blazes ignited as I darted throughout the compound. I didn't know whether Hoag escaped, or if I had been too late. All I knew was fire: moving, igniting, ravaging fire.

It was night, and in the distance the city lights were muted by the brilliant glow of the prison fire. I wondered how many people I had caused to die this night? Tears that never stopped falling still traced down my cheeks.

Somewhere down there was Hoag. Maybe dead, and if not dead, surely despising me. Over a year ago eleven people died because of my ambition; today, how many died because of my fear? Hoag had trusted me, and I'd helped him too late. Much too late. I shivered in the cold and empty night air.

Something dropped over my naked shoulders, and I clutched at it.

It was a cloak. Looking up, I saw Hoag silhouetted against the night sky. He dropped down beside me, and laid his arm around my shoulders pulling me to him. I wondered how he could even bear to touch me.

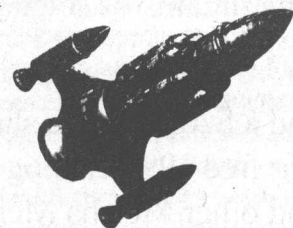
"They got out," he said softly against my hair. "Not all of them, but almost all. The Princess is free, that maniac is now in custody, and the Government has established an interim rule until things quiet down here." His arm tightened. "They know about you. It couldn't be kept quiet. Too many people saw you. But you don't have to worry there, Silla. The Government Enforcers haven't been hunting you. They only want to help you. The agents said there won't be charges from stealing the liferaft—they're going to pay for it. No publicity. Nothing. They're grateful." He nuzzled at my hair. "I'm grateful." He was silent for a while, then: "Silla. Can you forgive me? Can you just speak? I know I made you do something terrible, but. . ."

"You didn't make me, Hoag," I said against his chest. It seemed too much that he could be asking me to forgive him, when by rights it should be me begging him for forgiveness for almost letting them die. "I'm only glad," I took a shaking breath, then went on, "terribly glad you're alive. . .and that you've found me."

I felt a chuckle rise deep within him, and I tried to see his face, but the darkness left it in shadow.

"I'm a finder, Silla," he said, cupping his hand to my face. "I can find you anywhere, always. You won't ever be able to get away from a mutant like me."

There was only one answer for that, and I turned to him and made it.



Primary Ignition

And Now, Our Lead Story

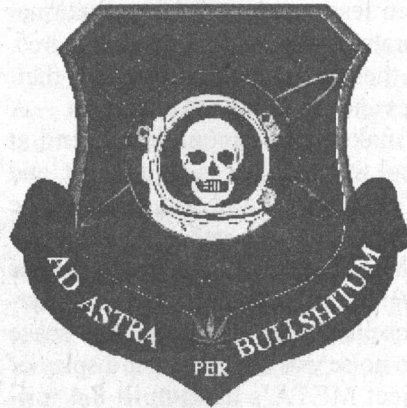
by Allen M. Steele

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Everyone has daydreams. For science fiction writers, the only difference is that we get paid for ours. For many years, this has been one of my favorites:

I'm at home one early summer evening, working in my office upstairs, when I hear my dogs barking in the front yard. A minute or so later, the front doorbell rings. When I go downstairs to answer it, I find two men standing outside. One of them is an Air Force officer—probably a lieutenant colonel, although possibly even a general; either way, he's in uniform—and the other gentleman is a civilian: middle-aged, casually dressed, carrying a briefcase. A dark brown sedan is parked in the driveway; its motor is still running, and I can see another USAF officer sitting in the driver's seat. The civilian asks if I'm Allen Steele, the science fiction author, and when I answer in the affirmative, the Air Force officer asks if they can speak with me regarding a situation of highest national priority.

You can see where this is leading, don't you? In fact, I'd be willing to bet you've had much the same fantasy, regardless of what you do for a living. An alien spacecraft has landed somewhere nearby; it may have crashed, or it may have soft-landed, but either way the military has cordoned off the site (and you know it's got to be in some remote location, because peace-loving ETs haven't landed in front of the White House since *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. . . and when they have, as in *Independence Day* or *Mars Attacks!*, it's only a matter of time before they blow up the place) and scientists are desperately trying to figure out how to communicate with the visitors. Never mind the fact that there are thousands of qualified university astronomers, astrophysicists, anthropologists, biologists, psychologists, sociologists, zoologists, and lin-



guists who would crawl across miles of broken glass for a chance to converse with an honest-to-God alien. . . no, the military comes to you, because (a) quite conveniently, you happen to be in the neighborhood, and (b) because of whatever particular skill or talent you may happen to possess, someone has determined that you're humankind's best hope of achieving a peaceful relationship with these otherworldly creatures. Or at least until they blow up the White House.

The reason why this particular daydream is so familiar (and don't tell me you haven't had it) is because it's been in our popular culture for a very long time now. The outsider-turned-insider to a first-contact scenario figures in two of Michael Crichton's novels, *The Andromeda Strain* and *Sphere*, with James Olson and Dustin Hoffmann playing the respective role in the cinematic versions. In Larry Niven's and Jerry Pournelle's *Footfall*, published in 1985 and still the unsurpassed champion of alien invasion novels, a team of science fiction authors (including a thinly disguised Robert A. Heinlein) is assembled in an attempt to second-guess the elephantine bad guys who are stomping the planet flat. The motif appears in novels as classic as Heinlein's *The Puppet Masters* and as relatively recent as Greg Bear's

The Forge of God, Jack McDevitt's *The Hercules Text*, and Damon Knight's *Why Do Birds*. I'm sure you can provide your own examples, whether it be from episodes of *The X-Files* or from science fiction literature I've overlooked.

As fantasy, the scenario is highly attractive. At the very least, it lends itself quite well to drama. Yet would it really happen this way?

If one disregards, at least for the sake of argument, the notion that first contact will be achieved by an alien spacecraft landing on Earth—the pros and cons of this scenario are sufficient for an essay of its own, so I won't dwell upon them here—then the most likely way humankind would learn of the existence of intelligent extraterrestrials is through radio contact, probably through one of the various long-term projects devoted to SETI. Since 1960, when the short-lived Project Ozma was launched, there have been about sixty projects devoted to searching for radio signals of artificial origin from space, the most recent of which include Project META, conducted under the auspices of the Harvard-Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory in central Massachusetts, and Project Starvoice, Europe's first SETI program.

However, the chances that these programs will hit pay-dirt is anyone's guess. When it comes down to brass tacks, SETI is the most transcendental of scientific endeavors; it assumes that intelligent life exists beyond our planet, although there is not a shred of unrefutable evidence to support this hypothesis. We merely *think* there may be intelligent races elsewhere in the galaxy, and rely upon astronomical observations, deductive reasoning, and not a little bit of wishful thinking to bolster our hopes. However, it's possible that we may scan

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wishful thinking to bolster our hopes. However, it's possible that we may scan the heavens for many, many years without ever discovering positive proof that alien civilizations exist out there. Indeed, one day we may be forced to conclude that humankind is the only technologically advanced race in the entire galaxy—a notion which I find appalling, particularly after I've read the morning newspaper.

However, let's say that, one day not long from now, one of the radiotelescopes scanning deep space detects a regular, repeating pattern which, upon continued observation, proves not to be a pulsar, a misplaced communications satellite, or an elaborate hoax. What would be humanity's reaction to such a discovery?

In science fiction, it's been often suggested that the government, embodied by the military or the so-called "scientific establishment" (whatever that is—most scientists I know are so anti-establishment that they make the late Abbie Hoffman look like a fascist), would immediately step in and clamp down on the news. In *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the scientist Heywood Floyd cautions his colleagues during a top-secret briefing about TMI-1, the mysterious alien monolith discovered on the Moon, not to release their findings until the public has been "properly conditioned." More recently, in the film version of Carl Sagan's novel *Contact*, the U.S. Army storms the monitor room at the Very Large Array within hours of the reception of an ET radio signal, and the public isn't informed until President Clinton makes a formal announcement during a White House press conference.

Again, all this makes for great drama, and I'd be the last person to dare suggest that either Arthur C. Clarke or the late Carl Sagan suffered from a failure of imagination. However, while writing an article about Project META for a Massachusetts monthly magazine¹ about twelve years ago, I interviewed Paul Horowitz, the Harvard University physics professor in charge of the program. When I asked what would be first public notification of

the discovery of a legitimate SETI signal discovered by META, Dr. Horowitz expressed his belief that it would probably be leaked to the news media long before a formal announcement was made. "Although we wouldn't be very good at keeping a lid on it," he said, "even less good would be a national laboratory with a staff of one hundred, and these guys would be telling their wives and their kids and their dogs. . . A kid makes a comment to a friend at school whose father is a journalist, and that's how the world will know of the first contact."

When I wrote that article in 1988, the only place one could observe the wavering oscilloscopic patterns of deep-space radio noise was the computer display of Project META's hand-built 8.4 million-channel spectrum analyzer, tucked in a small control room beneath the 84-foot radiotelescope on a hilltop in Harvard, Massachusetts. Since then, SETI has gone public; it's no longer the sole province of professional astronomers and astrophysicists.

Today, you can download a program called "SETI@home" from the University of California-Berkeley (<http://setiathome.ssl.berkeley.edu>). This program relays the latest findings from the Project Serendip SETI program straight to your desktop computer, where it runs as a screensaver. When you're not balancing your checkbook, answering email, or playing "Tomb Raider," your computer analyzes a parcel of current data sent from Berkeley, and you can look at all those ragged spikes which graphically represent of the "music of the spheres," the cosmic background noise which most radio astronomers ignore as junk yet nonetheless may contain a signal from some faraway alien race.

If that's a little too sedate for your taste, you can always try building your own radiotelescope. It won't come cheap, yet nonetheless the proper hardware for building a backyard SETI listening post is commercially available, including C-band satellite TV dishes, high-end preamps, and digital micro-

wave receivers, all of which can be hooked up to your computer. A grassroots organization of such amateur observers, the SETI League (<http://www.setileague.org/>) boasts a membership of over one thousand.²

Therefore, it's remotely possible—however wildly improbable it might seem—that the first person to identify a real, honest-to-Sherlock SETI signal may not be a trained scientist working late at night in a lonely hilltop observatory, but a fifteen-year-old school kid running an elaborate screen-saver on the bedroom computer his folks bought him for Christmas, or a forty-year-old radio hobbyist playing around with a home-built radiotelescope during idle weekends. And if this were to happen, do you think they would immediately phone the White House or the Pentagon?

Not a chance. If they're responsible people, they'd first notify Cal-Tech or other members of the SETI League. If the finding was confirmed, however tentatively, they would then tell everyone they knew: their family, their friends, a girl or guy they want to impress, the dog, the cat, the pet iguana. . . in short, everyone within earshot, let alone those they could reach by phone or email. In all likelihood, they would probably post the information on the Internet, probably including the URL to their home-page.

Then, if they wanted their Warholian fifteen minutes of fame (and who doesn't these days?), they would inform the media. Not the *Hooterville Gazette*, mind you, but the local network TV affiliates, along with CNN, the major radio stations, and the largest newspapers. If they're smart, they'd charge the camera trucks \$1,000 to park on their front lawn, and get some neighborhood kid to sell ham sandwiches for ten bucks each.

In this scenario, the President of the United States would not be one of the first persons to learn about the detection of an alien signal from space, but one of the last. He would get the word the same way the rest of us will:

"And now, our lead story. . ."

So now the public knows, one way or

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another, that a radio message from deep space has been received. What happens then?

Let's disregard for the moment the actual content of the message—again, that's a subject upon which one could speculate endlessly, as many science fiction authors have already done—beyond supposing that it's relatively simple: either an untranslatable sequence of rhythmic pulses, or at very most something along the lines of, "Hello, can you hear me?" Even if the signal was nothing more complex than a repeating series of beeps, though, it would be almost incontrovertible proof that humankind is not alone in the universe, that another civilization exists somewhere in our galaxy.

In this post-Information Revolution age of satellite-linked global communication, the word would spread faster than a Windows virus at a Microsoft convention. If the story broke before 5:00 PM Eastern Standard Time in the United States, it would doubtless be the lead item of the evening newscast for all the major TV networks, and probably make the late-evening reports of the European TV stations, and the morning reports in Asia and Australia. But even if it didn't, the major wire services would run the story as soon as it was received, so it would be on their online news pages almost at once. Since most American morning newspapers don't send their front pages to press until about 9:00 PM the previous evening, a verified first-contact story would probably be an "above the fold" headliner in next morning's one-star edition. . . providing, of course, that another important event didn't occur that same day (such as war being declared, the President being assassinated, or Los Angeles being destroyed by a 7.5 earthquake).

In old movies, we'd see this as montage of cinematic images: newspapers with 48-point headlines spiralling at us from the screen, radio announcers wearing snap-brim hats barking into microphones, vast crowds staring up at the old electric headline "worm" in New York's Times Square, more spiralling newspa-

pers in French, German, Italian, Hindi, and Japanese, more mobs gathered in Picadilly Circus, in Red Square, in front of the Taj Mahal, while other radio announcers proclaim the news in their respective languages. Perhaps a shot of the United Nations General Assembly, just for good measure.

And, indeed, real-life might be something like that . . . or at least for a day or two. Without a doubt, news of first contact would freeze everyone in their tracks. . . and this feeling would last for about five minutes. Ten, perhaps, if nothing else going on. Fifteen, if the message was signed by Elvis Presley. Nonetheless, this would be the biggest, most important event of our lives since. . . well, the last big, important event of our lives.

Think about it. As significant as first contact would be, how many other major news stories have you witnessed in your lifetime? I was born in 1958, so I've been walking around on planet Earth for four decades now. The first big event I remember was the assassination of John F. Kennedy, yet his funeral didn't prevent my family from having an early Thanksgiving dinner with our relatives. Immediately after Apollo 11 landed on the Moon, I went outside and mowed the front lawn. When Polish army troops moved into Warsaw to quell an uprising among its citizens, the invasion was noticed, but little more than that, among the students having a party in my college dorm. The fall of the Berlin Wall was the main subject of discussion among the breakfast patrons of a diner in Peterborough, New Hampshire, but no one leaped from their chairs to proclaim the end of the Cold War. I wept when I heard that John Lennon had been shot, and I was outraged when a Libyan terrorist bomb exploded aboard a Pan Am 747 over Scotland, and I was deeply afraid when the U.S. dispatched its armed forces to Saudi Arabia . . .

And then life went on. Other things attracted my attention, and I'd be willing to bet that much the same thing happened to you, too. Our world is constantly changing, and nothing short of

World War III can hold our interest for very long. Even a message from interstellar space wouldn't stop the World Series from being held.

Without question, word of first contact would dominate the global headlines, the TV newscasts, the online services, and so forth for about a week. Ten days, at very most. And then, gradually, it would fall from above the fold to below the fold, then move to the back pages, and finally disappear altogether. Unless, of course, more messages followed in its wake, or it was discovered that the original message contained information of shattering proportions (e.g. blueprints for an faster-than-light starship, or the opinion that Pepsi tastes better than Coke).

And yet, despite our furtive attention spans and our deeply-ingrained cynicism, there would be a subtle change in our collective mindset. For just as Apollo 11 forever changed the way we looked at the Moon, we would never again be able to step outside on a clear night to look up at the stars and wonder if there was anyone else out there. We would know the answer, and would have to interpret that knowledge one way or another.

After the news of first contact has broken and all the usual pundits, columnists, and talking heads have rendered their opinions, whether they be noteworthy, banal, or ridiculous, we can expect the next phase to be assimilation into mass culture. And unless popular fashion changes between now and then, I bet the first thing we'll see are T-shirts.

I'm not kidding. The night John Lennon was killed, a couple of friends of mine, Duane and Kent, were preparing to close their second-hand record store in Nashville, Tennessee. They had heard about the shooting over the radio about an hour earlier, and both were rather upset—particularly Duane, who was a lifelong Beatles fan. They had just locked up and were about to turn off the lights when they heard someone banging at the front door: a rather sleazy-looking dude, his arms loaded with cheap T-shirts upon which he had hastily silk-screened a bad sketch of Lennon's

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face and the inscription "John Lennon 1940-1980 R.I.P." This huckster had apparently started making the shirts within minutes of hearing the news, and now was trying to get local storeowners to buy his stock for resale. Duane angrily grabbed the T-shirts and threw them into the street, but the very next day Kent saw people wearing those same shirts.

So I'm willing to bet that, if an interstellar radio signal is a set of computer-generated bar graphs, and if those bar-graphs were released to the general public, we see that image on T-shirts within a few days. Regardless of whether or not that signal has been translated, or even if SETI researchers have determined that it has any meaningful content at all, it will soon become an instantly-recognizable symbol. So it'll appear on T-shirts, key-chains, bumper-stickers, notebook binders, posters, underwear. . . virtually any object you can name, you'll soon be able to buy it with the symbol reproduced on it. Wherever there's a quick buck to be made, you can be sure that someone's ready to cash in.

The flood of cheap trinkets will be only the first wave. The publishing industry will hop on the news immediately. The first "instant book" paperbacks about the signal in particular, and SETI in general, will probably be shipped out to newsstands within a week or two, a month at the very most. At the same time, a handful of previously-published non-fiction books about SETI will be rushed back into print, perhaps along with two or three science fiction novels regarding the same topic. Meanwhile, the authors of penny-dreadfuls will be pounding away at their keyboards, guzzling coffee and chain-smoking as they struggle to meet tight deadlines for the completion of a slew of lurid thrillers. *Deadly Signal*, by Ima Hack: "First, There Was Contact. . . Then, The Invasion. . ."

The tabloid press, of course, have always known that intelligent life exists in space. Indeed they've been keeping us informed of the latest developments for the last two or three decades, thanks to

countless exclusive interviews with UFO abductees, parents of space babies, anonymous Russian scientists, and various world-renowned experts you've never heard of. We'll be reliably informed that the signal was sent by God, Elvis, or Princess Diana, that the aliens are coming to meet us, eat us, or have kinky sex with us (not necessarily in the same order), that the end of the world is imminent, that they've got a miracle weight-loss plan. . . you know the rest.

Hollywood won't sleep through the news, either. After hastily re-releasing a half-dozen old movies on videocassette and DVD, the studios will fall over themselves to rush into production a scad of new films, each scripted by well-paid scenarists who wouldn't know a science textbook if they tripped over it. One or two might actually make it into theatrical release, but I imagine most of them will be straight-to-video, or wind up on the Sci-Fi Channel. A couple of mediocre made-for-TV movies will be made, of which at least one will be "based on a true story" depending on whether the participants in the actual discovery of the radio signal sign lucrative contracts—my hypothetical teenager will make out quite nicely, if he or she doesn't mind being embarrassed by the final result—and they may do well in the Nielsen ratings if a competing network doesn't run a football game the same night.

The audio recording of the signal will not only be heard so many times that it becomes as familiar and immediately recognizable as its graphic symbolization, but it may also get sampled into pop music. If it has a regular cadence *beep-beepbeep-beep-beepbeep-beep-beepbeep-beep* and so on—then it could conceivably supply the backbeat for a single. Hip-hop, probably, from an enterprising gansta group out of L.A.:

Beep-beepbeep-beep-beepbeep-beep. . .
Don' know who you are, don' know where you been

Beep-beepbeep-beep-beepbeep-beep. . .
Tellin' you once, ain't tellin' you 'gin
Beep-beepbeep-beep-beepbeep-beep. . .
Come to my 'hood, there one thing for

'sho
Beep-beepbeep-beep-beepbeep-beep. . .
Mu'fuckin' alien, stay away from my 'ho
Beep-beepbeep-beep-beepbeep-beep. . .

So the initial shock of first contact will last about a week—ten days at most—before it settles into the background hum of everyday life. If a SETI signal had been received by Project OZMA back in 1960, the impact might have been deeper, the news more unsettling, yet in the four decades since then the idea of extraterrestrial life has become much more widely accepted by the general public. Indeed, news of interstellar radio contact may seem anti-climatic to many; not only have they become accustomed to the notion of ETs, but indeed they may have been waiting for this event for quite some time.

UFO buffs, naturally, will point to this as confirmation of their beliefs, with the more paranoid of them insisting that the government has been receiving such signals for many years, yet only now has disclosed the information. Their claims, as ever before, will be irrefutable since they're simultaneously unprovable, for how can you disprove a false statement for which there is no evidence? Yet many will believe them, and the conspiracy theories will continue as always. By this time, I hope my hypothetical teenager or backyard SETI watcher has had the wisdom to change his or her phone number.

Since the latter tend to operate on the same wavelength as other fringe groups, we'll probably hear about various far-right militia groups stocking up on guns, canned food, and liquor in anticipation of an alien invasion. Likewise, we can anticipate the reaction of pseudo-religious groups on the farther-most edges of the lunatic fringe. If the mere appearance of the Hale-Bopp comet was enough to cause thirty-nine members of the Heaven's Gate cult to commit mass-suicide, another group of wackos may do much the same if a SETI signal is received. However, I find it much more likely that new cults will

Primary Ignition

quasi-cultist groups—the Church of Scientology, for example—already have the existence of extraterrestrial intelligence built into their doctrines, the longer-established, more traditional faiths tend to hold to the belief that God created humankind (or, more specifically, Man) in His own image. If and when these religions are presented with evidence that humankind isn't alone in the universe, they're going to have to wrestle with a direct challenge to their orthodoxy.

It's likely that the most conservative religions or denominations will denounce the announcement of first contact as blasphemous, fraudulent, satanic, or all of the above, with assorted priests, ministers and laymen bellowing warnings of hell and damnation from both pulpit and sidewalk. Yet at the same time, leaders of the more open-minded religions will probably accept the idea that God created more than one intelligent race in the universe, and call upon their congregations to rejoice in the revelation that the Almighty's wisdom is as vast as it is powerful.

Such a change in mindset may take time, of course. After all, it took nearly four hundred years for the Roman Catholic Church to finally admit that Galileo was right. Yet in the age-old conflict between science and religion, there have rarely been occasions when science hasn't won. . . least in the long run.

And finally, one has to ask, where would this leave science fiction?

First contact has been one of the genre's favorite themes. Indeed, the very phrase itself is coined from the title of a classic story: "First Contact," by Murray Leinster, published in the May 1945 issue of *Astounding*. Although the idea of a meeting with extraterrestrials has been with us for a very long time—centuries, in fact—it is only within the last few decades that science fiction has treated it in any truly realistic sense, such as in James Gunn's 1972 novel *The Listeners*.

Science fiction has proved itself to be very good at forecasting future events; by much the same token, though, there have been very few instances in which a SF story has accurately predicted the future. Expeditions to the Moon were a

staple of the genre since Jules Verne's *From Earth to the Moon*, but no one foresaw that hundreds of millions of people would witness Neil Armstrong's first steps on the Sea of Tranquillity via live TV transmission. H.G.Wells depicted air combat over Europe and the siege of Britain during World War II, but he also believed that such a conflict would be the last war ever fought. E.E. "Doc" Smith foresaw interplanetary spacecraft and had them propelled by diesel engines. And although computers were a mainstay in SF stories as far back as the early 1930's, no author ever foresaw the day when they would fit on a desktop or would be as commonplace as telephones. SF writers have a good track record for figuring out the shape of things to come (to borrow the title from the beforementioned Wells story), but the devil is in the details.

If and when first contact occurs, whether it be by radiotelescope, a rendezvous in space, or even an alien craft landing on Earth, we can safely assume that it won't resemble any scenario that has ever been depicted in science fiction. In fact, it may be that humankind never encounters or communicates with extraterrestrial intelligences, even if we eventually develop the technology which enables us to travel beyond our solar system. This is not to say that there aren't other civilizations out there; indeed, I find that prospect very difficult to swallow. However, it's all too easy to underestimate the sheer size of our own galaxy, and nearly impossible to truly comprehend the size of the universe. Other intelligent races may very well be out there, but so far away that we'll never detect their presence.

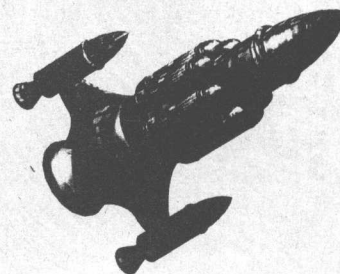
On the other hand, this essay may be dated by the time it reaches print. For all I know, the first repeating, verifiable signal may be appearing on a SETI listener's computer screen even as I write these words. Or maybe. . .

It's an early summer evening. My wife is playing softball with her team, and I'm upstairs in my office, all alone at home with only my dogs to keep me company. Someone just drove past the house. Perhaps I'll just sit here for awhile, and wait for the doorbell to ring.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Reprinted as "LGM" in my collection *Rude Astronauts* (Old Earth Books, 1993; Ace Books, 1995)

2. Source: "Join in the Worldwide Backyard Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence," by H. Paul Shuch; *Monitoring Times*, June 1999



Waiting for the Tow
By Mike Allen

It's impossible to describe how *boring* the stars can be when you've no choice but to hang as motionless as they, and rescue is light years, maybe centuries away, and you are so stir crazy you'd rather make yourself take your 15th spacewalk topside than crawl back into that claustrophobic stasis box that stinks from countless years of having *you* inside. Yes, *you* could stay there with brain set to auto until your rescuers arrive, but no, not wise, you had best set the thing to make you rise every twenty years or so to make sure nothing *else* has further crippled your craft. . . . But you've been stranded so long in dead space between stars where only nothing happens, that you would cheer at a meteor hole in your hull, because it's something new in your *universe*, and you wonder endlessly—when conscious to wonder—if the tow ship will ever come, and you free float in space (safely tethered by gravity) beneath your long-dead stellar drive, composing doggerel poems to keep yourself from going crazy.



Promises

by Kevin W. Rogers

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File: Audio.Encrypt_Corrie.Diary

April 19th, 2116

Daddy says that we'll be leaving Inverness station on the next supply shuttle—forever! What's worse is where he's taking me: all the way back to Earth!

Oh, he claimed he had no choice in the matter, but I could see right through him. He's always going on about how much he misses the rotten, dirty place; I know this is exactly what he wanted. The fact that it would completely ruin my life seems to be entirely lost on him.

"Fine," I told him, "go back to Earth. Have a great time; I'll write often."

"Corrie," he said in dismay—like he'd thought I was going to like the idea, "I couldn't leave you here. . . .we're a family." He was standing in the hallway of our compartment; I was sitting on the sofa. He snuck a glance at Mom's picture. "It might only be the two of us, but. . . ." He looked away and frowned. "Honey, just give it a chance. Just think of all the open space and fresh air. You'll fall in love with it," he said in an enthusiastic voice. His mouth was smiling, but his eyes were anxious. I could tell this was hard for him, but I steeled myself against foolish sentiment. I wanted to stay and that was that.

Still, looking at him made my heart melt.

"Earth sounds wonderful, Dad," I said, trying to sound like I meant it, "And I love you. But I want to stay here on Miranda." I could tell this wasn't going over well. How could I make him understand how important this was to me? "I've only got 200 more points to go on my tech rating, and Mr. Taylor said I would be a shoo-in for a job over in Arden's botany department. I've been wanting this forever. We can't leave now."

"Corrie," he came into the living room, sat down, and shook his head. "You're all I have now and I wouldn't do anything to hurt you, but. . . ." He looked away for a moment, like he was trying to hold back a sob. "I can't stay here any more. Every time I walk these halls, I think of her. Every nook and cranny of this station is filled with memories—so filled that I'm not sure if there is room for me anymore." He picked up our magazine weight and began fiddling with it.

"Dad." I went over and hugged him. "I miss her too, but there are other stations out here. We could transfer to Titania, or even Mimas. Why do we have to go back to Earth?" He pulled me close and I could feel his chest shudder. He let go and looked down at me and smiled.

"We're a team, you and me. If you don't want to go, we won't go. I'll talk to Admin and work something else out." He tousled my hair and headed for the door.

That's when I knew I had lost—we were going to Earth. I can't really explain why his giving in did it. If he'd ordered me to go, I wouldn't have gone. But how can I deny him something he wants this much. Daddy needs someone to take care of him and, ever since Mom died, that's me.

Now I just have to figure out what I'm going to tell Jason. I've heard of long distance relationships, but Earth to Uranus is rather far.

It isn't easy being fifteen.

April 23rd, 2116

Two short weeks to go. Not much time to pack up my life into three small boxes. That's all the baggage I'm allowed to take—three lousy boxes. I already gave away most of my music disks. I suspect I'll have to give up my collection of Jeanne Raden books too—books are just too big to be practical. It makes me sad though, they were real paper.

Well, they started me on electro-whatzit therapy (okay, I can't remember the real name). It reminds me of something I once saw in an old style horror vid. They strap me to a table and hook up all these electrodes and stuff and then give me some drugs. It feels sort of neat at first, like I'm being massaged all over, but I don't like it. I can't stand being strapped down; I always get an itch I can't reach.

Daddy says this is necessary because of Earth's higher gravity. Our bones and muscles are perfectly fine for living out here, but on Earth my weight ends up being as much as if I massed 50 kg on Miranda. Without therapy, I would barely be able to move, to say nothing of walking.

That's not the only weird thing about Earth. Apparently the gravity is so high even the natives can only jump a meter or so. Running must be practically impossible, you'd never make any headway.

And I'm going to live in this place. Oh, the tortures I endure!

Jason took the news well—almost too well. I prefer my beaus to get a little more upset when I tell them I am rocketing out of their lives forever. I wasn't going to speak to him again until Daddy let me know that he'd talked to Jason first and convinced him to be noble and strong for me, blah, blah, blah. . . .Daddy isn't stupid. Jason is just the sort of lug to fall for a line like that, so I forgave him. Yesterday we got together and did things right.

Absolute Magnitude

Daddy needs to learn someday that sometimes tears make things better. A stiff upper lip can get a bit tiring. He also has to learn to let a little variety into his life. He's been watching stupid travel holos of Earth for the past three days. If I see ONE more holo of that Great Canyon thing, I am going to throw up!

May 1st, 2116

I hate hospitals.

I've fallen behind in my recording because I have been in the hospital for the past six days and I am miserable. The drug therapy hit me hard. The only thing I've done all week is eat and sleep.

I cannot believe how MUCH I'm eating. At the rate I'm going I should be about the size of one of those Earth cows by the time I get there. At least I'll fit in. Daddy said I was worrying too much.

"Your body is going through a lot of changes, Corrie," he said, "It's bound to take some getting used to. I'm from Earth, so my system remembers how to handle itself. Yours has never had to support such a heavy load." He was sitting on the corner of my bed helping himself to the chocolates Jason had sent me.

I was trying to look unconcerned despite all the tubes sticking into my body, but I don't think I was doing a very good job. Even though meta-shock (that was what the doctors called my fainting spells) was usually pretty mild these days, I'd heard stories of how it used to be. Back then it killed people. If you were born in space, you died in space—you could never adapt to Earth.

Come to think of it, maybe things weren't so bad back then. Daddy would've let me stay spaceside and everything would've been fine. "Why couldn't we just go to Luna?" I asked weakly. Daddy chuckled grimly—I think he felt a bit guilty about my condition.

"No, honey. Luna looks like Miranda which looks like Titan. Earth is special. You'll understand." He stood up and stretched. He looked bigger than I had ever seen him before. The treatments were making him thicker too. "Right now you have to rest. Give your body a chance to get used to what is happening to it."

Oh joy! I'd rather jog naked in vacuum. I smiled at him anyway. It had been my stupid decision to go along with his hare-brained plan. It wasn't fair to blame him. "I love you, Dad," I said.

If Mom were still alive, she would never have put up with this nonsense. She was hard-nosed and practical, one-hundred

percent. She wouldn't have let Dad drag her away from her future and. . . .aw heck, what can I do, let him go to Earth alone? The poor guy would be lost.

. . . .and I think I'd miss him. I sure miss Mom.

May 8th, 2116

We spaced today.

Sometimes I try to fool myself into thinking that we aren't just going back to Earth, but that this is an exploration ship headed for uncharted reaches of the galaxy—filled with danger, lust, and glory. I mentioned this to Daddy (I left out the lust part: fathers just don't understand these things); he said I watch too many of those trashy adventure vids. Can I help it if I want a little excitement? Personally, I think that dashing space pirates beat the heck out of bingo.

That's right, I said BINGO. That's this ship's primary group entertainment. Most of the other passengers are Earth types going home and they all look a bit green around the edges. Bingo appeals to them because they can do it without moving much. Daddy says that space-sickness is fairly common among Earth folk, but I can't understand it—we aren't even weightless! How can you be space-sick when up is still up and down is still down? Daddy just says that I should have more compassion.

Our ship is called *The Independence of Greece*. From what I understand, it's supposed to be some sort of political statement. I'm not quite sure I follow its meaning, though. All of Earth shares the same life support system, so how one small part of it could be independent is beyond me. I asked Daddy if this was an environmental engineering effort and he said no. He said it had to do with nationalism, which has something to do with what sports teams you root for in the Olympics. I gave up trying to figure out the rest. Earth makes no sense.

May 9th, 2116

Shipboard life is looking up a little. I've had a chance to talk to the crew, and they are cool. Even though they aren't out rocketing among the stars, rocketing among the planets is pretty close. They hate bingo too. The chief steward, Mr. Blackton, played cards with me for a while this morning. He taught me a game called Jupiter's Moons. I taught it to Daddy, so now I have two partners.

I'm still not happy, but I suppose I can survive a little easier



Promises

now.

We are traveling at one-half of one Earth gravity. This seems like a lot, but all of that therapy apparently has worked, I'm bearing up well. But it sure does make my back ache.

In a couple of days they are going to raise our acceleration to a full Earth gravity to help all of us get used to it; in two short weeks we will be on Earth, then we'll have no choice but to put up with it.

Daddy has been spending most of his time fawning over holos and travelogues of his home planet. Considering the fact that we're going there, you would think he would just have a bit of patience.

Most of the ship is closed off to us. I haven't been able to explore the parts we can go to much because we are still maneuvering. Every so often, the acceleration warnings sound and we all have to strap ourselves into our couches for the length of the "burn" (that's how long they fire the rockets, usually about ten minutes).

I met Mr. Blackton when I decided to ignore the horns and keep looking around. Most of the burns are pretty gentle, I figured I could just grab a hold of something when the time came. I hadn't realized that the crew actually made a count of the passengers before they fired. They counted and came up short.

I was down in the galley looking for a way into the crew compartment. Both the passengers and the crew shared the eating space, so I figured that there had to be a hatchway for both of us—a hatchway which might have been accidentally left open.

Well, I found a likely looking portal, but it was sealed. There was a keypad next to it. I was debating whether I wanted to just try entering a random code. It probably wouldn't have worked, and it would've been pretty hard to explain why I was doing this if I got caught—but still, the idea was tempting. I was still wrestling with this dilemma when the hatch clicked open. My view of the hallway beyond was obscured by a large scowling man.

I wanted to run, but found myself frozen in place. I knew I shouldn't be where I was. There is nothing like being caught red-handed to send your mind into a whirl.

The person in front of me was one of the largest men I'd ever seen. Oh, his mass probably wasn't much, but his height. . . ! He had to duck his head to fit through the portal. "Didn't you hear the warning!?" he said in a deep voice. I stammered, but nothing came out. I could tell from his face that he was angry. . . make that furious. He reached out and grabbed me around the waist. "Come on, we've got to get secure." He pulled me back through the hatch and hurried down the hallway. I occasionally managed to get my feet on

the deck, but for the most part he carried me. I was going to protest, but didn't have the voice; he moved so fast.

He ducked into a side compartment. There were several couches, some occupied. He threw me on one and fastened the straps faster than I could follow. He jumped onto the one next to me and hit one of the intercom switches, "Blackton here, sir. Our stray is secure." He reached down and strapped himself in. Almost at once the final warning sounded.

This burn was NOT gentle. I felt as if I'd been kicked in the stomach. Have you ever had one of those dreams where you're gasping for air, but you just can't get a breath? It was just like that. I could feel breakfast slowly moving back up my throat. I struggled to keep it down.

I heard a voice to the side of me. "Don't tense up, that just makes it worse." I looked over, the man who had grabbed me, Blackton, was smiling in my direction. "This should only last another minute or so," he said soothingly. I had to look twice to make sure he was the same person, he seemed so different when he was smiling. Sure enough, soon the acceleration stopped. About a minute later the "all clear" horn sounded.

"Sorry if I scared you, kid," Mr. Blackton said, undoing the straps for me, "we were under some time pressure there: unplanned burn," he said. I sat up—too quick for my stomach to be happy—and almost got sick all over the place. I must have looked it. Mr. Blackton reached into his pocket and handed me a pill. "Take this: it's a motion sickness pill." I stared at it dumbly for a moment. "Go on, it won't hurt you," he said. "I couldn't get through a burn without them."

"I'm sorry, I didn't think it was going to be that bad," I said, choking them down.

"Well, it usually isn't. Like I said, this was an unplanned burn. The nav boys picked up something in our path, we had to alter our planned trajectory. Still, that is no excuse. If you hear those horns, you run for a couch, you understand?" He stopped smiling for a second, "Next time I'm libel to get angry." I felt my heart skip. A second later he was smiling again.

I spent a while talking to Mr. Blackton, then he stopped by again after lunch and taught me that card game. He knows all sorts of neat things about life in space. I mean REAL space life, not just living in a station, but actually doing work in vacuum and stuff. Sure, this wasn't as exciting as those vids I watch, but that's just fiction. Mr. Blackton knows all about real things that are exciting.

Maybe I could become a spacer, now that I know to take motion sickness pills (but I still have no respect for people who get space sick just from standing around).



Absolute Magnitude

I asked Mr. Blackton why we had so many burns; I mean the planned ones, not the ones to avoid asteroids and stuff. You would think that they'd just pick a trajectory and fire. That's the way they taught us in school. Do they keep on making mistakes? That certainly doesn't inspire confidence.

Apparently that's not why they do it. According to Mr. Blackton, things get pretty tricky in around the large planets like Uranus, so they plan on several burns to "get into the groove" (more spacer lingo). That way they have less of a correction to make if they do have an error.

I don't know. It still sounds like they don't have much faith in themselves.

May 17th, 2116

We are up to 3/4 Earth gravity now and it is bad. One of the other passengers fell in the lounge and sprained her knee. Can you imagine that! She got injured just walking!

I've resolved to be very careful.

I have gotten to know some more of the crew, and they are pretty cool also. Mr. Blackton introduced me around. I even get to go places the rest of the passengers are barred from. I told Daddy and he told me not to be a pest. That's what he thinks of me, a pest!

Most of the crew are hard spacers—folks who wouldn't set foot in a gravity well if they didn't have to. I know how they feel. This high gravity makes it tiring to do anything.

If I didn't love Daddy, I wouldn't put up with this. Of course, if he really loved me. . . .

No, I shouldn't think that way. I know he loves me—he just loves the idea of going to Earth more. He grew up surrounded by the dirt and the rodents (how can anyone live someplace where insects outnumber mammals by millions to one?).

If Mom were here he wouldn't have gotten this crazy idea. She knew how to handle Daddy and keep him from indulging in fantasy. Practical and realistic, she knew that space was the only place for thinking people. Earth is for people who don't know enough to get a job off-planet.

But she isn't here and I'm going to Earth no matter how much I hate the idea. And I'm going to keep my mouth shut because I don't want to hurt Daddy's feelings.

Damn him.

May 21st, 2116

You know, even good card games get to be boring when you play them every day. I still talk to the crew a lot, but they are getting busy preparing to reach Earth. There isn't much to do on a spaceship on your own, and the rest of the passengers

are real zeros. I've been reduced to reading book disks and even (geez) watching holos of the Earth with Daddy. We will be establishing our orbit around Earth some time tomorrow. In a day or two, we will be shuttling down to the surface.

Daddy's got this holo here of a "coastline" called Maine. Its sorta neat. All of this water travels across the ocean all nice and peaceful. Then it gets near the rocks and it gets all white and frothy. Finally it jumps up and slams into the ground with a huge thundering crash. Half of it vanishes into a white spray, while the other half sort of slinks back into the ocean.

Something about it makes me feel one with the water—now dancing and free, then spent and withdrawing to the depths. Looking at the holos, the concept of something so big seems terrifying. There are suddenly no walls. No pressurized rooms to hold the world in. No roofs to keep the universe from crashing in.

Soon we are going to be in a place where there is no inside. I feel like crying.

May 22nd, 2116

Isaid goodbye to Mr. Blackton today. It seems like I knew him forever. I stopped by his cabin just before he went on duty. He tried to look angry when I got there.

"All passengers should be in their compartments. We're going to be making orbit soon," he said. I tried to look abashed. "You're not fooling me, Corrie. I know you think you're special just 'cause you're my friend, but you gotta take ship's rules seriously. You get caught wrong during a maneuver, it doesn't matter whose friend you are, you could be hurt bad."

I went over and bounced down on his bunk. "I'll be back in time, I promise. Most of the other passengers are still saying goodbye in the lounge," I said. He shook his head and smiled.

"You better be back in time. The captain already said that he wasn't going to hold off another burn for your sake."

He turned back to his dresser. He was taking his clothing and packing it into a case.

"Are you leaving too?" I asked, shocked to think he might be going to Earth.

"Leaving? No, not permanently. Once we reach the station I'm going to make a hop over to Luna," he did a half dance step, "I've been cooped up on this ship too long. Now it's time for some serious R&R."

"You're lucky," I said. He looked confused.

"What do you mean? You're fifteen. You're whole life is R&R. Now, once you start working. . . ."

"No, I mean you're lucky to be going to Luna instead of stupid Earth," I said. He opened his mouth and looked at me. "I'm a spacer, I shouldn't have to go down there."

Mr. Blackton shook his head again. "Are you too good for the mother planet," he asked mockingly. I started to laugh, but

Promises

stopped. He still had that stupid grin on his face, but his eyes looked serious. I suddenly got the feeling I'd said something wrong.

"I . . . I'm sorry, did. . . ." I started to say. He laughed and slapped me lightly on the shoulder.

"Oh, don't mind me. I know how you feel. You're young, can't wait to get out on the cutting edge of life."

"Well, sorta."

He nodded his head. "Believe me, I know." He took the last of his things from the dresser and slammed his case shut. "I'm originally from Earth, you know," he said suddenly. "Took the high road the first chance I got, never looked back." He sat down on the bunk next to me, ". . . until my Father died. I hadn't seen him since I left and we'd never been close, but. . . I felt I should go to his funeral. Looking back I realized that he hadn't been as bad as I had remembered him and I felt I owed him at least that one final respect." He sighed.

"You went back to Earth then?" I asked. He shook his head.

"No." His shoulders sagged a little bit. "You know those treatments you had to take, to regenerate your bones and muscles? I couldn't take those. I started the therapy and went into severe meta-shock. It almost killed me. Something about my body couldn't handle it. I missed the funeral, end of story." He got up and was silent.

"Can you ever go back?" I asked.

"No," he said softly, "and I suddenly found myself missing the damn place. I never had before I couldn't go back." He laughed and straightened up, "You know what?" He waited half a beat, then answered himself, "I found out that I'm happy anyway. I miss my home, but my life hasn't ended."

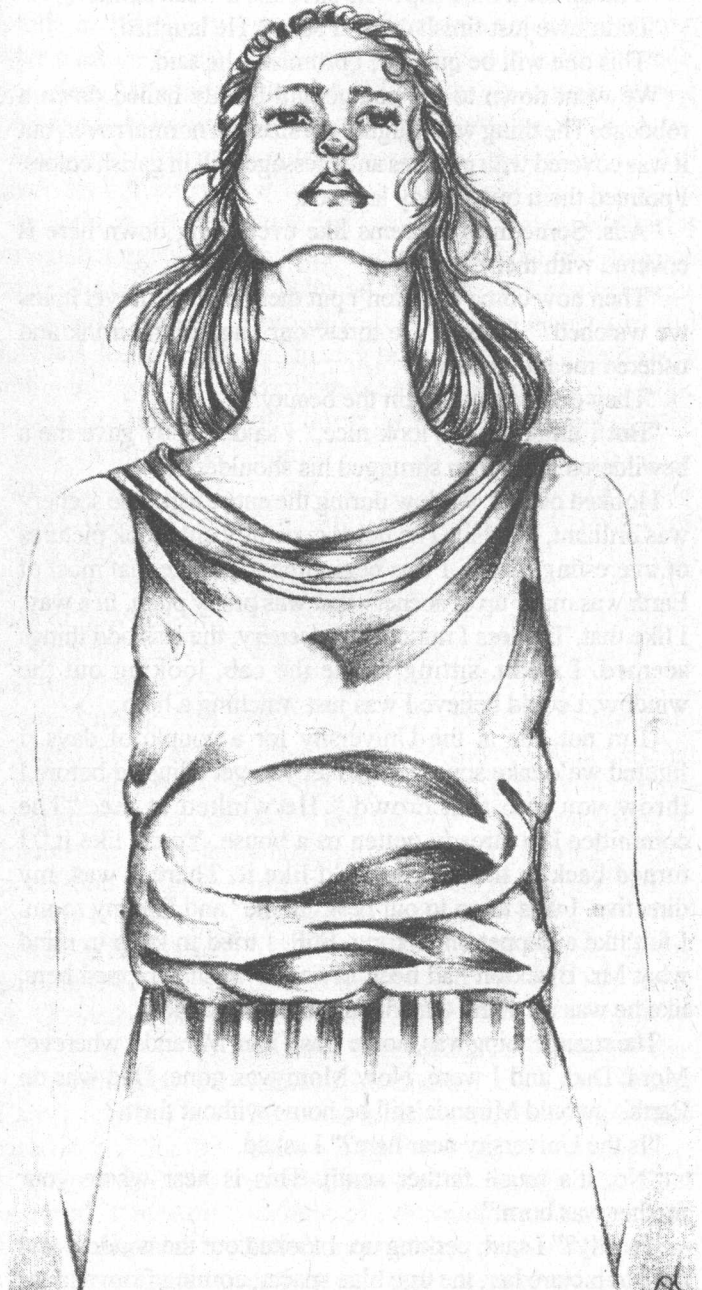
"I'm sorry," I said, feeling awkward.

"Oh, don't be," he sat down again and put his arm around me. "I wanted to be a spacer, now I am one. So what if the details didn't work out the way I wanted. You want to be a spacer, so be a spacer. . . when you're older. In the meanwhile, maybe you'll learn something."

May 27th, 2116

We got passed through near-orbit customs today and were cleared to go planetside. I cannot believe the delays, you would think no one had ever come here before.

The shuttle we rode down in was no different than any other shuttle I had been on in my life. We disembarked and made our way through the space station. Sure, the gravity felt like Earth's gravity, but I was becoming resigned to that. Everything else looked familiar. This space port was just like every other space port I had ever seen. The people had the same anonymous faces I had seen a thousand times.



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I don't know, I think I felt disappointed. I don't know what I was expecting, but the utter sameness of everything seemed wrong. This was EARTH, not Miranda. Where were the grand sweeping deserts? Where were the snow-capped peaks?

I looked at Daddy. He seemed exhausted. I don't think he'd been able to sleep much lately. The excitement he had felt was probably about ten times what I had been feeling. He looked down at me.

"How you doing, kiddo?"

"I'm fine." I was determined to be as upbeat as possible. This was, after all, his homecoming. I wasn't going to rain on his parade.

"You up for a little trip?" he gave me a weak smile.

"Didn't we just finish one?" I asked. He laughed.

"This one will be quicker, I promise," he said.

We went down to the garage and Daddy hailed down a robocab. The thing was roughly the size of a normal rover, but it was covered with pictures and messages, all in garish colors. I pointed them out. Daddy laughed.

"Ads. Sometimes it seems like everything down here is covered with them."

"Then how come they don't put them in those travel holos we watched?" I asked. He threw our bags in the trunk and ushered me into the cab.

"They don't want to ruin the beauty."

"But I think the ads look nice," I said. Daddy gave me a bewildered look, then shrugged his shoulders.

I looked out the window during the entire trip. The scenery was brilliant, but dull. The holos generally only took pictures of interesting places. I was beginning to realize that most of Earth was made up of scenery that was pretty plain. In a way, I like that. The less I noticed the scenery, the less odd things seemed. I mean, sitting inside the cab, looking out the window, I could believe I was just watching a holo.

"I'm not due at the University for a couple of days. I figured we'd take some time to let you get adjusted before I throw you into that crowd." He winked at me. "The committee has already gotten us a house. You'll like it." I turned back to the window. I'd like it. There it was, my directive. I was to go to our new "home" and like my room. I felt like a puppet on a string. Still, I tried to keep in mind what Mr. Blackton had been saying; I wasn't trapped here, like he was up there. One day I would go home. . . .

The strange thing was, home was Titan, Miranda, wherever Mom, Dad, and I were. Now Mom was gone, Dad was on Earth. . . would Miranda still be home without them?

"Is the University near here?" I asked.

"No, it's much farther south. This is near where your mother was born."

"Really?" I said, perking up. I looked out the window and tried to picture her, the true blue spacer, coming from a place so. . . earthy.

"Yes, this is her home, and she always had a place for it in her heart. She made me promise to bring her back here if she. . ." He looked away for a moment, ". . . if she died." I didn't say anything. I really didn't know what to say. I'd never have pegged Mom for a sentimentalist.

Daddy ordered the cab to pull off the road into a rest area. Daddy got out and went back to the trunk. I stepped cautiously from the cab. I hadn't actually stood outside yet, for some reason this seemed like an important milestone. With a small, cautious step, I finally was outside.

Well, there was one thing that neither the holos or the cab window had gotten across to me yet. . . Earth is cold. I zipped up the jacket I had on. The rest area was at the edge of the seashore. I looked down over the railing; sure enough, there were those waves hitting up against those rocks. It didn't seem as loud as it had in the holos.

"Come on," Daddy said, stepping over the railing and getting right up to the edge of the cliff. I resisted the impulse to pull him back. He was from Earth, I assumed he knew what he was doing.

He held up a small package and looked at me. "These are your mother's ashes. Before she died, she made me promise two things; one was to bring her back here and scatter her ashes into the ocean." He opened the package and wordlessly cast the ashes down to the waves. The wind blew some back in my face. I decided to ignore how utterly gross this was.

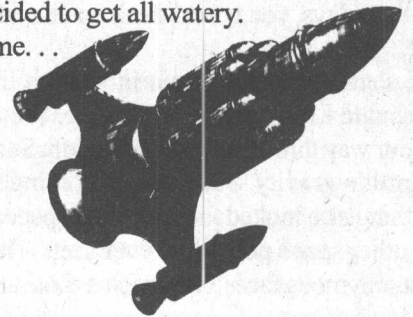
So Mom had been an Earther at heart, huh? Hard to imagine. "What was the other thing you promised her?" I asked.

He smiled. "I promised to bring you home too. It always broke her heart to think that you might live your entire life without ever having been here. . ." He gestured towards the water and then up towards the sky, ". . . home."

I looked down at the waves. Home? I looked up at the sky, the sun was starting to set, filling the sky with dramatic colors. I shuddered.

"Daddy, you're a sentimental kook, and so was Mom." I reached up and took his hand. The whole thing seemed strange, somehow metaphysical. Earth is just one big ball of dirt, that's all. Mom was dead, period. But somehow, looking out across the water with the wind blowing through my hair, she seemed alive, even if only a little. "I think I probably am too." My eyes decided to get all watery.

So this was home. . .



Far Haze and Distant Thunder

by Steven Sawicki

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Awards are like bugs, we all know they exist and we are quite capable of ignoring them until they start flapping in our face or falling down our shorts. The world is full of awards and the genres of the fantastic no exception. We have the Hugos, the Edgars, the Balrogs, the Nebulas, the Sturgeons, the Tiptrees, and a passel of others that come and go like so many palmetto bugs on a hot Florida night. These awards draw the occasional question; who decides who gets what and why? Are the awards markers or are they icing? Are they content or candy? Ultimately, the bottom line becomes: are they significant; do they have meaning beyond the award? To put genre awards in context we should ask whether we are dealing with the Oscars or with the People's Choice. This, of course, begs the question: is there a difference?

Odyssey #5, Liz Holliday ed., 31 Shottsford, Wessex Gardens, London W2 5LG England, \$6.95, 950pts Spain, \$9.95 Australia, 30f France, 3£ Britain, 72 pgs.

Every country has a flavor that is distinct and unique. Some suggest that we should revel in this diversity and I would agree, providing we are speaking of people. When we are speaking of fiction it becomes more difficult to revel in what we might not understand. This is not to say that we should ignore what is different or foreign, just that we need to recognize that it comes from a different context and culture. Such might be the case here as *Odyssey* presents us with differences right from the get go.

First off, *Odyssey* is a very slick production. Editor Holliday informs us that she is able to produce an entire magazine on slick paper. This means that she can use production values that most editors must reserve for covers on every page. Holliday takes full advantage

of this by making every page a canvas for art. Besides the great cover by Martina Pilcerova, there are beautiful interior pieces.

Odyssey starts off with news bits, a selection of info tidbits that are informative and, surprisingly for a bi-monthly magazine, timely. Other non-fiction offerings include an article by David Langford on what it means to be a British guest of honor at an American Convention. Talk about being the alien in a foreign land. Langford utilizes British understatement to its full extent. Andy Lane wades in with an article about SF hacks which really targets the whole discussion about media tie-ins and fiction produced for a price. It's an informative article and Lane does a good job of shedding some new light on a fairly old and tired subject. Liz Holliday herself provides us with an interview with John Jerrold. I know, none of you have heard of Jerrold and that's example enough of the differences between here and there. There is also a piece on Karen Joy Fowler who speaks of how she and Pat Murphy came up with the idea for the Tiptree awards and what the awards mean and how they are funded. This answers some basic questions, at least about this particular award. Jeff Hecht gives us a science article about water on the moon which is interesting and sets some of the public speculation to rights. Hecht writes in a style that is approachable and informative. This issue also contains some gaming articles and four pages of reviews. Oh yeah, there's fiction too.

Fiction is, after all, the main focus of this magazine and so it is what we should focus on. The lead story, "For the Love of Falmoth" by James Van Pelt is reminiscent of a Lovecraft. I'm a bit surprised at this because this magazine is geared towards science fiction and fantasy. There are indeed fantastic

elements here as Van Pelt introduces us to a young boy who is struggling with his place in the community as well as within his peer group. After witnessing a rather witless act of violence against his neighbors, this boy searches for a means to get revenge. Van Pelt describes not only this search but the conclusion of the search and the connection with basic and elemental forces. It's an interesting tale, but Van Pelt makes some unusual style choices which distance us from the central character. This story is well written but constrained by choices of style and format. The biggest letdown is that the end is somewhat of a forgone conclusion and lacks the bang that one is expecting. There is emotion and poignancy but I would have been more comfortable coming upon this tale in the middle of the magazine instead of at the front.

Joe Sutliff Sander's "The Importance of a King," is also well written but is one of those stories where the writer has chosen obscurity as a stylistic device. We are never really sure what is going on and we are never really involved in the story. While I am convinced that Sander knows full well what he is doing, I am afraid that many readers will not. I liked the moody nature of this story, but I didn't like the way that the story took an angled turn at the end, leaving me at a place that confused me instead of opening my eyes.

"Probe," by Devon Monk, is my choice for the best story in the issue. This is a story of self awareness, of alienness, of adopting values and of what it means to interact and learn. It also involves mostly machines. Monk has chosen a perfect length for the subject matter, provides us with just the right amount of information and gives us a satisfying ending. The characters are as engaging as they can be given the length and Monk creates an interesting

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landscape for them to move on.

Corey Kellgren's "Chapter & Verse" is a story that has potential, but which is ill treated by the writer. This is a story of the world after the fall, and centers on a group of women who are looking for a place to settle after their settlement is destroyed. The set up is a great one and Kellgren does an excellent job of characterization. We feel for these women and really want them to succeed, or at least come to a reasonable conclusion. We quickly grow to like these women and feel for their situation. We don't get what we want, though, as the story builds, builds and then just sort of trails off to smoke. I was disappointed by this, more so because it is so strong to begin with. This might be simply a writer producing work beyond skill level or it might also be something as simple as a cultural difference. Whatever the case, I felt let down.

Mary Gentle also has a story in this issue and is probably the best known author here. "Kitsune" is a fantasy of love and loss. The problem here is that this tale is much too long for the point that Gentle is making. This is basically a character piece. We need to become interested in the character, otherwise nothing else works. I think this tale would have been much more interesting at half the length.

Awards, awards, awards. Sometimes more awards than you can shake a statuette at. Who creates these things? Who decides who gets them? Who figures out what criteria should be used? Once all this is done, does anyone remember or care? For the major awards, it's quite simple. The Hugos and the Balrogs are decided upon by people who attend the annual world conventions. The Nebula is decided upon by the members of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America. The Sturgeon, the Campbell, the Tiptree, the Clarke, the Norton, and a bunch of others, are decided upon by juries. There is not, to my knowledge, any significant award given out solely based on sales.

Most of these awards have constraints concerning timing, content, appropriateness and quality. All of the awards symbolize representational epitome—we can hold the works up as proud examples. There are awards given for new authors, for works written within a certain framework, for novels, for short stories, for editing, for magazines, for movies, for poetry, for writing, for art, and for more things than you would have first imagined.

Robotomy, Andres Vaccari, Saturn Press, P. O. Box 419, Church Point, N. S. W. 2105, Australia, \$12.95 Australian (Write or email for exchange rates or for more info) saturn_press@hotmail.com.

This is a very unusual work. It's a short story or perhaps a long story, which is generously interspersed with computer generated pictures. This is fitting since the story is cyberpunk in origin and deals with an individual who has transferred his consciousness to a machine, or at least that is what has apparently happened. As with all tales which deal with realities upon realities it is important that the author craft his words very carefully lest we end up dazed and confused. This confusion is perfectly fine in the middle of a story and even a bit okay at the beginning but if we end a tale this way we are soured on the entire experience. Vaccari does an excellent job of weaving us towards a conclusion that, while not fully illuminating, is bright enough that we can look back and see all the steps we made to get here. This is one fascinating trip.

Vaccari has provided us with not only the words, but with the pictures. We move from page to page, some pages containing almost all text while others are nearly all pictures. The two compliment each other, adding and building as you move from text to photo. The story is an odd one, unusual in the sense that it is sometimes unclear what is going on and it is not until the end that we gain some understanding of just who we are watching and what is happening.

The format is beautiful and the slick paper makes each page an interesting sight for the eyes.

Vaccari has produced an unusual beast here, something that has interest not only because of the content, but because of the form. Saturn Press deserves some credit for taking a chance on producing this as their first offering.

Awards and awards. Who votes for them and how is that done? Honestly, it's different for each award. The Hugos for example are both nominated and decided by those who attend the World Science Fiction convention each year. Understand, though, that not all that many actually bother nominate or vote. In fact it took as little as 17 votes to get nominated for a Hugo this past year. Granted with some of the better known categories you needed nearly a hundred votes to get nominated. To win? You needed at least a couple of hundred. And the nominating? Do the people who nominate really understand the process? Probably not, since you rarely see any fiction magazines in the semi-professional science fiction magazine Hugo category. This is due (according to my word of mouth contacts) to the fact that people think magazines like this one (yes, the one you hold in your hand) are professional. Honest. Just because a magazine looks great does not make it fit the professional category. For Hugo qualification you need to be published quarterly, pay pro rates as established by SFWA and have a circulation base of more than 10,000. Who knows this stuff? You mean besides the awards committee? Next to no one. So, this year when you vote, remember to nominate and vote for this magazine in the semi-pro category. Assuming you think it's worthy of course. (While you are at it, feel free to mention your favorite reviewer in the fan writer category.)

Transversions #8/9, Dale L. Sproule & Sally McBride, Paper Orchid Press, 216 Woodfield Rd., Toronto, ON Canada, \$11.95 Canadian, \$9.95 US, 4/\$18

Far Haze and Distant Thunder

Canadian or US, 144 pgs.

This is a double issue and an issue which is on the cusp of change. Editor McBride slides to a way back seat and Associate Editors Marcel Gagne & Sally Tomasevic clamber their way to the front. Their impact won't be felt until issue #10, so we'll have to wait and see what kind of effect this will have on the mag.

For this issue, or this double issue, we start off with "What are Little Girls Made of?" by Michael Coney. This is a tale set in his Greataway universe. I am not really familiar with it so take that into account when I tell you how nice this story was. It is set in the future when genetic tinkering is commonplace. We splice genes of animals into ourselves to get the best traits. Our soldiers are not just loyal but altruistic. Our nurses are caring and a bit timid. Our farmers strong and land loving. The problem is that there is a movement to get back to basics, to come back to Earth and settle without benefit of technology with the hopes that by interbreeding the race will homogenize again. We begin our story learning about a father and his daughter and the nurse who cares for them both and the threat which comes their way and how they all save the universe.

Boy, this is great stuff, and if Coney's Greataway universe is filled with such wonders then you should rush out (after buying a copy of this magazine) and get the rest of the tales. Coney creates his characters with just the right amount of empathy and realism that makes you constantly sit back and shake your head in agreement that, yes, they would indeed behave in just that manner. Coney writes with clarity and with conclusion that many other writers would do well to study. This is a perfect start off piece.

Following a tale like Coney's is difficult, unless you have something so different that it shines by simply being so. Carl Sieber's "A Bird in the Head" is exactly that. Sieber's tale is such a distraction that we are abruptly moved from Coney. This is a short, odd tale that serves its purpose well. Nice editorial

placement.

"Old Dog," by Steve Slavik, is a story that I did not like the first two times I read it. Subsequent readings changed me, though. There is profound thinking going on here as we not so much listen to an old man's thoughts as freely associate with him. This is a story you need to read slowly to get all the nuance.

Mary Soon Lee follows with "Heron." This is a great story of a princess who is imprisoned in a temple for refusing to wed a man of her father's choosing. Mary Soon Lee captures the inner struggle and the growth in development and understanding that goes on as year after year the young girl refuses. Finally there is a turning point and choices are made. It is here that the story ends leaving the reader feeling a bit let down. Still, the writing is wonderful and if you can take that as enough then you are well served. I would have wanted more, mostly because Mary Soon Lee made me want more by creating characters I came to care about.

"Torch Song," by Gemma Files, is perhaps the oddest and most unusual and most uncomfortable story in the bunch. It is a story which encompasses a curse and love and partnership and revenge. It is great writing done with style and grace and with just the right touch of foreshadowing. Files doles out info in just the right amounts so we become reader-detectives, moving from clue to clue as we unfold the tale. This is powerful stuff and finely written. Hard to believe a magazine can actually contain so many great stories.

One of the best pieces in this issue of solid stories is Rick Kennett's "The Road to Utopia Plain." It's an old standard; the starship that almost crashes only to find that the world is a bit off. Those we thought dead are alive, wars lasted a few years more or less, events died on the cusp while those we thought long dead still simmer. Kennett tells this story through the eyes of a young woman navigator and I'm not sure if it's this particular point of view or just Kennett's interpretation of it that makes

this such a good read. Whatever the case Kennett has produced a solid, emotionally driven piece that grabs you with the first sentence and stays with you long after the last word.

This is such a solid issue of *Transversions* that you have to wonder if they can keep it up. Having read previous issues I can tell you that this is pretty much the status quo. Whether the editorial changes (or any other changes which may be ablooming, such as producing a large format issue annually) will have much of an impact on this strength will have to be seen. For now, get this issue and grab a back issue or two while you are at it. You risk missing the best fiction magazine in Canada if you don't.

Awards seem to be everywhere, in one form or another. If this is the case then what value can they have? As a collective, probably not much. Realistically speaking, many awards target such niches that the impact is neither great nor important except to those few who occupy the niche. There are some awards which carry some weight, at least historically. These would be the Hugo and the Nebula. The Hugo at least should be recognizable to most readers of SF. The Nebula may be a bit more obscure but if you've read for any length of time it would be hard to miss either. The Balrog and some of the others tend to obscurity. Anyone read the latest Balrog anthology? I thought not. But I bet you've at least looked at the Nebula or Hugo anthologies. In fact, one can argue that either is an excellent answer to that age old question; "Hey, exactly what is all this science fiction stuff anyway?"

Aurealis #20/21, Dirk Strasser and Stephen Higgins, ed., Chimaera Publications, P. O. Box 2164, Mt. Waverly, Victoria 3149, Australia, (www.aurealis.hl.net), \$13.95 Australian, \$8.50 US, 4/\$28 Australian, 4/\$34 New Zealand, 4/\$35 everywhere else, 200 pgs.

This issue starts off with a description

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and listing of the winners of the 1997 Aurealis Awards (boy, do I love it when a theme just seems to fall in place). Everything is explained; who won, why they won, what category they won in and what the awards are all about. None of the winners are published in this issue, though, so you'll have to buy this issue and then hunt the winners down other places. The exercise will probably be good for you.

The lead off story in this issue is "Imagining Ajax," by Simon Brown. This is a story written by an Australian with an Australian as a main character but it is set in California. Talk about the alien other! The basic plot here is an old one; computer intelligence and the questions which instantly arise about awareness and when it begins and what it entails. Michael Norris, the lead character, is called in to deal with some of these questions. The intriguing thing is that Norris is a poet. Now, you may be asking just what qualifications a poet might have to even approach these things, never mind wrestle with answering them and you'd be pretty much where I was. I think Brown knows this, too, and he does such an excellent job of structuring the story that after a few pages we are convinced that there is no one who is better qualified than a poet to do this. Great writing and a great story. Brown has produced a tale that is tightly plotted and which relies on movement and inner dilemma to drive things forward.

Robert Hood's "Occasional Demons" is a story equally up to the task. It's about the ghost of Princess Diana stalking the Australian President's house. This story is so well done and such a surprise that every paragraph brings you to territory you never expected to see. The end wavers a bit and fades somewhat, which does detract from the overall sense of satisfaction I had. I actually wanted this to be a bit longer with a bit more explanation. Still, there is plenty here to get your teeth into, and it shows that Hood has a pretty good grasp on what it takes to construct a story.

"Rule of the People," by Sean McMullen, is a fascinating exploration of what happens to the old gods when the new ways arrive. McMullen postulates that they still hang around and just adapt to new situations. Of course the way McMullen lets us know all this is what makes the story worth reading. This is great stuff, and what fantasy is all about. Well written, pretty quickly paced and with a point which makes the whole thing even more enjoyable. To top it off, McMullen has a wry sense of humor and keeps it in check, letting just enough leak out to give the whole thing a somewhat sardonic glow. Exactly the coloring for a tale of such subject matter.

Dirk Strassor's "In Theory" is a political story which has been told before. It's about an actor chosen to play the President in order to draw out some assassins. The technology used is new and futuristic but the plot is still one that we should all be familiar with. Strassor adds a different sort of ending to it all, but it's a bit rushed and somewhat unsatisfying. Strassor shoots for irony and ends up with depression. This is well written, just with, perhaps, the wrong flavor of emotion. On the other hand it could just be me. Read it yourself and let me know what you think.

"On the Continent," by Hoa Pham, was just too strange for me. I couldn't comprehend what was going on and that frustrated me to no end. I don't mind a bit of confusion, but I remained confused pretty much all the way through. Maybe it was a cultural thing.

"Keeping the Meter Running," Geoffrey Maloney's fictional entry, is a futuristic mood piece, part cyberpunk and part Raymond Chandler. It's gritty, witty, wry and dry. Fun to read for the most part, although I did struggle through what I thought were a couple of slow sections with a bit too much exposition. Still, the story dealt with some different issues in new ways and had a freshness that I enjoyed. I'd like to see more of Maloney.

This issue also has a story by Terry Dowling, who is perhaps the best

Australian writer currently practicing the trade. Dowling has that singular view of the world that we are accustomed to seeing in only the best. What Herbert did for *Dune*, Dowling has done for a future Australia. His story here is representative of his work.

This is a pretty complete issue. Perhaps not as strong as *Transversions*, but strong enough to warrant a high recommendation and a suggestion that if you want to taste fiction down under there is no better place.

Awards bring many things with them, especially the bigger awards. The Hugo brings more sales, a few more bucks for the writer, higher expectations from the reading public, a chain of quality that one is ever expected to meet, maybe a gold star on mom's fridge, perhaps the recognition of one's peers, although they will typically be somewhat jaundiced about exactly how you won. And how did you win anyway? Can you lobby? Can I tell you all to vote for me? Can I buy you memberships and then tell you to vote for me? None of this is against the rules, at least the written rules, although one would be frowned upon, and there have been some murmurings in the past about such potential practices. Can I buy myself a Hugo through the purchase of enough memberships to carry the vote? Can I at least buy enough to sway the thing one way or another? With the numbers so low it is only a matter of time until we are confronted with exactly these issues. What can you do about it? Well, vote of course, at least for those awards you are eligible to vote for.

Talebones #12, Patrick & Honna Swenson ed., 10531 SE 250th Pl #104, Kent, WA 98031, \$4.50 US, \$5.50 Canada, 4/\$16, 8/\$30; 4/\$17, 8/\$31 Canada, everywhere else add another \$1, 68 pgs.

Being in Washington state is almost like being in a foreign country. Based on the cover, this issue promises some punch. This is one of the big difficulties

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with the small press as a whole—it has become quite adept at making promises. The pros know that you actually have to deliver on those promises if you want to succeed. It is a lesson hard learned. It is a lesson that must be learned before I'll even consider a mention here.

This issue starts off with Hugh Cook's "Consequences." This story starts strong, powerful, bullet writing with a wallop. Then it's the slow slide to dull torture and boredom interspersed only with confusion and obfuscation. I've mentioned before that I think the one thing readers won't put up with is confusion. You can bore them, lecture them, dialogue them to death, teach them, give them thinly veiled morals, values, and ethics and they'll stay with you. Confuse them for a paragraph or two and they're gone. Sometimes they're gone for the entire package. I liked Cook's writing style; I just failed to grasp where the story was. There was a man, a woman, strong drink and a curse. The elements were there but what happened? Damned if I know.

Mary Soon Lee's "Three Kingdoms" (and we've reviewed her above as well) justifies some of the eternal hope that readers seem to carry by giving us an unusual story told in a way that really draws you in. Mary takes a fairly simple thing and twists it to make it complex and morally important. No one wins in this tale except the reader, as Mary uses a few pages to show us how strong her writing has become.

Mark McLaughlin, best known for his poetry, at least until now, wades in with "ascloseasthis." This word is not in any of my dictionaries. I liked the story anyway. Liked the way that McLaughlin utilizes an odd character as a focal point and then tells the story from a singular perspective. This means we must learn everything from this character. This makes story telling a bit difficult and even more so if your story is difficult to begin with. McLaughlin does an excellent job and if the tale sort of wanders from our ken at the end, it's only a minor step to the left or right, and

we've enjoyed getting to that point so much that we can easily forgive. A nice piece, finely written about an odd subject and told in a different and captivating way.

"God of Exile," by Terry McGarry, is a nasty little horror tale not for the faint of heart. This is bad, evil stuff. Yet the writing transcends the message, moves us past and through the horror to the ending point where truth rests. This is great stuff if you can stomach the parts which threaten to return your lunch to your lap. An excellent example of what a good writer can do with a simple idea and a great imagination.

Perhaps the best story in this issue is Daniel Schwabauer's "Ulla." This is Wells' *War of the Worlds* told from an unusual perspective and told in a way that really makes you stop and think. This is what fiction is supposed to do after it entertains you—make you think. Schwabauer's tale does just that, and in ways that catch you off guard. This is an intriguing glimpse into an alien mind and what might have been if the war had actually happened. A fine piece of writing.

Talebones is a strong magazine, perhaps not the strongest of the bunch submitted here, but well worth the investigation. It all comes down to personal preference in the ultimate process and all I can do is point you in some rather specific directions with the hopes that you'll at least take a look.

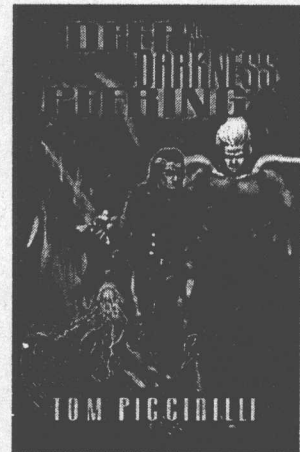
Next time we look at even more magazines worth reading. Who knows what I'll focus on. There's so much out there. As always you can reach me care of this magazine, or by email at sfreviewer@bigfoot.com. If you've got something you'd like reviewed, you can contact me for info on how to get it into my hands. Understand, though, that not everything that touches my fingers gets into a column.



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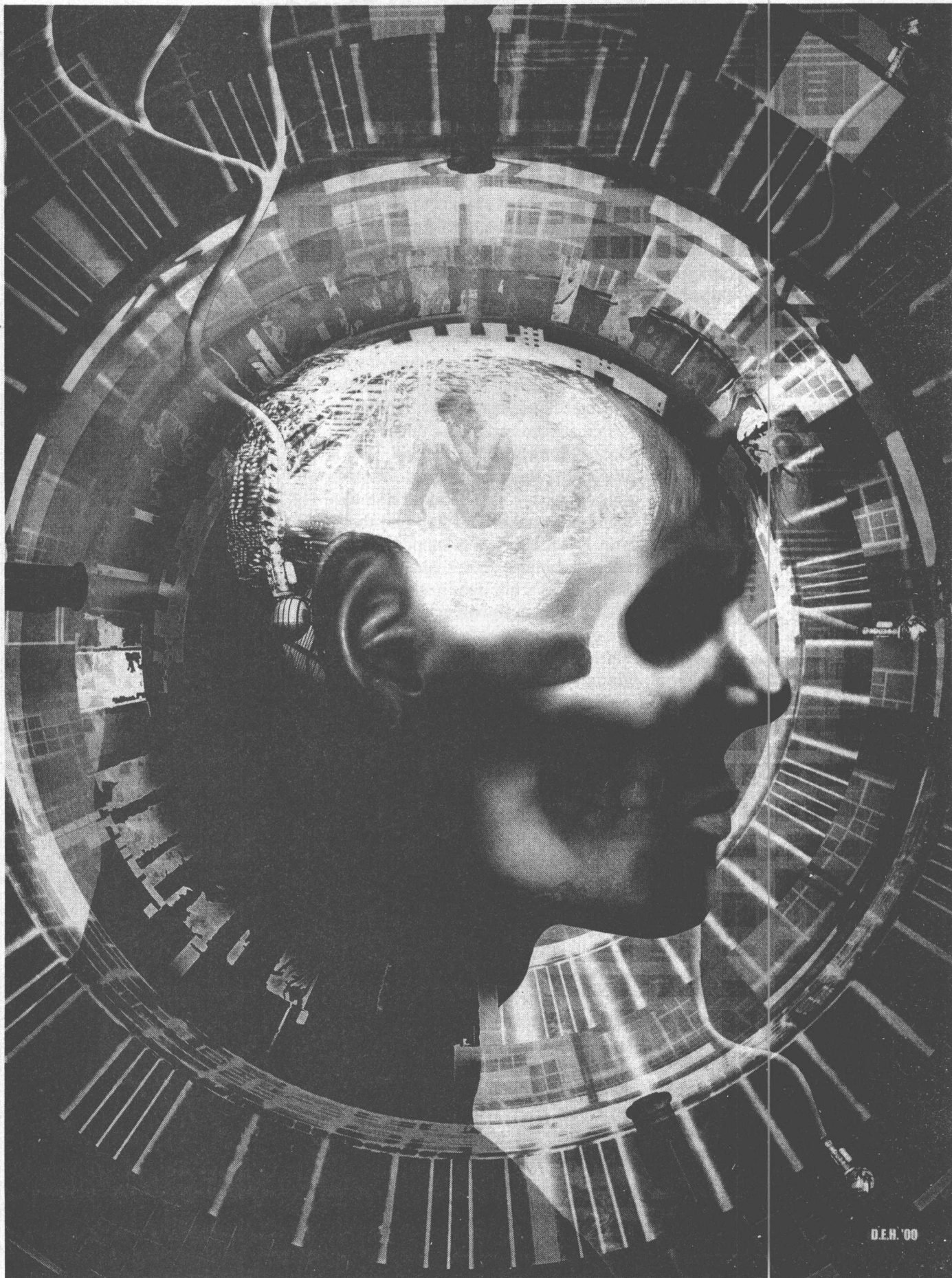
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In Silver A

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In Silver A there is no crime, no pollution, no strife, no domestic violence, no trouble. That's what they told us at that recruitment rally seven years ago, and again when Marco and I got our silver badges of citizenship two months ago. So then, how would you explain the fact that I was sitting in someone's kitchen covered in blood? A baby was crying, there was an empty bulb of glucose in my hand, and all was not right with the world. The sugar was making it hard to think, overloading parts of my brain and trying hard to erase my short term memory.

And who wouldn't want to forget? I remember the cops standing over me, roughing me up, I remember taking a hard hit in the face while one of them spat "Fringe trash!" And I remember grabbing the bottle of glucose formula from the counter—my escape hatch from reality. Once my eyes rolled back into my head they stopped questioning me, stopped hitting me.

A woman's voice said: "Remove him!" I couldn't really feel it, but part of me knew they were dragging my rag-doll body down the stairs, across an immaculate lawn of prickly green irrigated grass, and stuffing me into one of those little electric vans all the police in Silver America drive. The van began to move, the woman driving, two men sandwiching me in the back seat. We pulled away from the upscale residential sector toward the rectilinear SA Center skyline, toward the seats of government and power, and somewhere on the outside of me, I began to babble.

The voice again, speaking crisp Civil tongue. "Can't you quiet him down?" Such perfect diction and syntax even in the face of a crisis. My own conditioning was not as good, try as I might to protest it came out in Fringlish—"Fuck-all, jeezus, I got rights!"—which elicited sneers from the bruisers at my sides. One of them pointed at my citizenship badge and the two of them laughed.

"He's like a talking animal," the first one said.

"Yes," the other agreed. "You can train them but they always revert to their wild state."

"That's better," the first one said, cracking his knuckles into his meaty hand. "I like it better that way."

I wished I could move away from him. I'd never seen them but there was always a rumor that men from SA would come into the Fringe, "hunting parties," hunting us. Fear started to creep through my sugar-induced haze. I didn't want to face what was going to happen to me because I knew it wouldn't be good. I slipped into the wonder of auditory hallucination and swirling wormholes behind my eyes. The cascade of molecules over my receptors tweaked something in my long term memory and the past swallowed me up.

It's seven years ago and I am meeting Marco's eyes across the crowd at the ration station. The Science jerks are on the Fringe recruiting for live bodies, ours. They're handing out food and it's all a tangle of arms and curses in broken Fringlish, but I see Marco at the center of a calm area and make my way toward him as Science's pitch begins.

We all know better than to go with the Arm. They just want cannon fodder for the border skirmishes between Silver A and Texico. But Science could be something different. Sure they're spouting words like "indenture contracts" and "eventual citizenship"—things we don't have words for in Fringlish. But they are projecting images on the cracked wall of nice, safe, clean, shiny, warm Silver America. . . Science is looking pretty good. Marco thinks so too. Science wants kids like us, they want converts. We want food, warm places to sleep, maybe a little clean water, too.

I look into Marco's unscarred face and think: he looks good at staying out of trouble. I can't say the same, squinting at him through an eye swollen half-shut from a fight the night before. They had wanted my coat, and didn't get it. But I sat awake all night scared and sure that I was as good as dead.

You going? Marco says. His hair is long and black, the ends frayed, not cropped and soldered like mine. *Fuck-all*. I tell him: I go if you go.

I felt the pressure on my shoulders from the cops on either side of me and I was back in real time. Damn simple sugars, burn bright but quick. I opened my eyes to see we were pulling up to the glittery tower that housed the offices of Science. Not Civil, where there's a hospital, not the Arm, where there's a detention tank and where they'd execute capital offenders, surely, if they ever had any. Big Momma Science didn't own me any more, I reminded myself, not for two whole months. The shiny badge on my chest said I was a free man. But I didn't feel like one when they grabbed me by the arms. If the glucose had run its course, I had no refuge from them. I was beginning to wonder about things like whose blood it was soaking my shirt, how it got there, and why Science wanted to know, when they hauled me upright, my brain did flip flops, and I swirled away again.

It's six years ago, very early in the dark morning, and I can't sleep. I'm in my dorm cell and thinking about how it will be my turn to go under the knife soon. I know it, Sugar Test Series—Subject #11, or so it says on my indent card. They took #10 from the next cell over last week and he never came back.

Marco's in the next wing over; he hasn't been taking to the special diet very well, so they've moved him to another project. The special diet is I-don't-know-what but it makes me

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hungry all the time and gives me headaches. Dawn light makes the ceiling gray where the thin strip of window runs along the top of the high outer wall. I hear the footsteps in the hall.

They aren't coming for me. It's only one pair of footsteps, just a guard or a caretaker, not an escort contingent. I hear the door being opened across the hall, a low voice, then a scream is cut off—

I decide maybe if they come for me soon it might not be such a bad thing. And then there is a sound at my door and I hold my breath.

Hey, hey you. Marco is in the hallway.

I slip from the bed and kneel at the door. Whatta you here?

I had to know if they took you away yet, he says. His Civil tongue programming has taken root and it barely sounds like him. Are you alright?

I tell him my time will be soon, and that I don't know if I'll be coming back.

You won't, he says. You'll be moved to another facility where you'll be isolated from the other indents for a while. So you won't see me for a couple of months.

I wish I could see him through the door but all I can see is the shadow at the crack. I want to tell him something more, but fuck-all, what else is there to say?

The next thing I hear is the sound of the door across the way opening, and a voice, Breton, this sector's caretaker, our legal guardian, saying to Marco: Oh my, my, my, what could you be doing here?

Marco starts to stammer that he has clearance, and I think he really does, but Breton isn't listening. He's pushed Marco up against the door, I hear the thump of Marco's head on the hard metal. Don't fight him, I'm thinking, just take it and he'll let you go. . . but I'm too scared to make a sound. Breton likes pushing his weight around and on this wing we've all learned to take it. But Marco fights back. He pushes Breton off, I hear the scuffling, another bang on the door. And then Breton laughing and explaining that Marco's violent tendencies make him a likely candidate for hormone reduction. Something bad is happening, I hear Marco screaming, and then Breton saying that he'd better take care of it right away. And then they're gone.

I cry myself to sleep. Breton wakes me up later with my special diet breakfast and a tablet for me to sign. He tells me to cheer up as he looks at the bags under my eyes. He pats me on the head as he tells me my whole life will be different as of tomorrow. They come for me the next day.

They didn't kill me. That was my first thought as I started to come to. Before I thought about the cops who dragged me here or where I was, I just thought *they didn't kill me* and who "they" was didn't matter. All that matters on the Fringe is that you've lived another day, no one

killed you for your blanket or you didn't die of the night desert cold. I used to struggle awake, quick, before anything bad could happen. When I'd signed up with Science I had seen enough life to know I wanted more, and that I could be dead the next day if I stayed in the Fringe. I wanted to be able to wake up without reaching for the broken screwdriver hidden in my shirt, without feeling like the axe was about the fall at any moment.

But, as I'd learned, that's exactly what it was like waking up in a room in Science, too.

So this time, after I came to it took me a while to convince myself I wasn't fifteen years old and waiting for Science's next invasive procedure. A couple of things helped, like the fact that I came to alone. No Scientist waiting with a needle and electro-probe ("I'm sorry you have to be awake for this"), no escort with heavy restraints or nerve cuffs ("I'm sorry, but we can't have you damaging SA property banging your head against a wall like that"), no guardians with a grudge or wanting something personal. I could feel the hardness of my silver badge digging into my ribs where I lay on top of it, and with one small motion of my finger I could feel the hard place

behind my ear where my machine connection sat. I told myself a couple of times, I'm a Machine Maintenance Engineer, a citizen, I am Civil's business. . . then I tried to convince myself that I wasn't even in Science, that seeing the Science tower was just one of my bad sugar-induced flashbacks. They had been much more intense than I'd expected. So maybe. . .

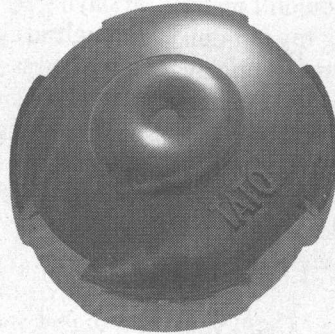
I looked around the room. I lay on a hospital gurney, with a tube in my arm. Someone had cleaned up the blood and put me in soft medical whites. The room did not

look like labs nor infirmary, more like an office with the furniture removed—recently, from the look of the dents in the carpeting. Science Executive wing. Damn. The slow drip was some blue shit I didn't recognize, but whatever it was, it was making me feel pretty good. Alert. No dizziness. No hunger. Of course these jerkoffs would know what to feed me. I sat up.

My movement must have triggered something, or maybe they had cams on me, because two executives immediately came in. Both blond, in suits. One of them was smiling and I almost didn't recognize Breton. My indent officer for the seven years Science had owned me and my body and my brain, and they'd done what they liked with that brain. I wasn't glad to see him. He'd grown a beard and lost some weight. My guess was he'd been promoted as a result of how well I'd served society—up until today, that is.

He walked right up to the bed, no handshake or anything and said, "You're in a lot of trouble, Tato." Using my name like a punctuation mark. Treating me like an indent.

The other guy, some big wig's assistant I would guess from the shine on his shoes and conservative, solid-color tie, did



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shake my hand. "I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Smith." I almost laughed at that. I couldn't get used to this last name thing, but I'd had to pick one to get my citizenship. "I'm Henry Billings."

I did what they taught us to do in Civil training. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Billings." Polite manners were mandatory for all citizens. Then I said to Breton, not quite in Fringlish, "What the fuck-all am I doing here?"

Breton could talk the talk and didn't stand on ceremony. I knew it was an insult for him to talk to me like this, but I found it weirdly comforting. "Don't give me any lip. Your ass should be over at the Arm getting fried right now. Murder, you know?"

"So why isn't it?"

"Mis-ter Breton, Mr. Smith, please." Sweat broke out on Henry's scalp where he was losing his hair. "I believe we have a proposal to discuss."

Breton: "Proposal, my ass. Let's just rip the fuck-all out of his head and find out for ourselves."

"You're not scaring me." I said. Which was a lie.

Henry looked shocked at Breton's language. *Fuck-all* was pure Fringe profanity. Citizens had neater things to fall back on like: *goddam*. But he smoothed his facial expression and said in an equally smooth voice. "Mr. Breton, may I remind you that would be a violation of Mr. Smith's civil rights? As you know. . ." he was about to launch into a canned speech about what made Silver America great, and better than New Japan's meritocracy on the coast or Middle West's hagiarchy, citizen's protection, civil liberties, equality. . . but Breton headed it off waving his hand and nodding.

"Just kidding, here." Breton clapped me on the shoulder and I suppressed the urge to bite his hand. "Me and Tato go way back, Billings, don't you worry."

"So what's this proposal?" If it was anything other than exile or killing me, I was interested to hear it.

Breton took a step away from the gurney and Henry looked unhappy and spoke. "It's very delicate, this situation, Mr. Smith. We need to know what happened, back at the Martin's place."

"And you propose. . .?"

"Tell us what we want to know and we'll clear your ass," Breton snapped. "What's so hard to figure about that? You go back to your nice place and no more trouble. Otherwise, we dump your ass over at the Arm as murder suspect Number One and Only."

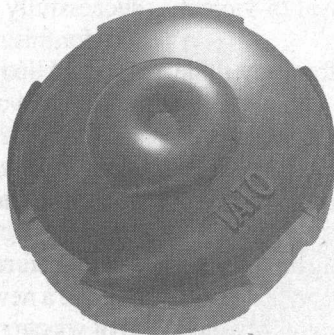
I didn't have any choice, but something told me it wasn't wise to give myself back to the people I'd spent so long trying to get away from. Of course the Arm could be worse. They'd just kill me, capital. Right? Still, I didn't answer.

My pal Henry went on. "We are especially concerned about what may have happened to your friend, Mr. Columbus."

Marco. "Me too, Mr. Billings, me too." A creeping cold climbed up my spine as I thought about the blood, and the dose of sugar, and I realized I didn't have the slightest idea what had happened back at the Martins' house, whether Marco was alive or dead, or why any of it would matter to Science. They wouldn't hand me over to the Arm too quick, I thought, not if there was something they thought I could tell them. And, why the Arm, not Civil? Everyone thought that Civil ran SA, and in a way they did, regulating all the parts of day to day life that made SA such a happy place, like garbage pickup, mail delivery, media entertainment, etc. But be a part of Science for enough years, you pick up ideas, like the one that the Security Arm and Science are really struggling for control of the country, and that it wasn't the Arm that put down the Hoover Dam rebellion. If this was about Arm versus Science. . . I supposed I would have to play along if I wanted to find anything out, not the least of which being whether Marco was alive. Marco. . .

I didn't want to think about it. I didn't need a med monitor to know my heart rate doubled and my epinephrine level peaked.

"Goddam, he's going off." Breton sped up the drip on my i.v. and Billings called for a woman in a lab coat, med-tech, Scientist, whatever. . . the sight of her was probably enough to send my neuro imbalance right off the edge and they slipped away in the blackness.



It's two years ago. I'm limping down the street toward Marco's place in the indent sector, hoping nobody stops me. Any teenage asshole born in SA outranks an indent—they'll stop us and quiz us on the Ninety-First Amendment just for kicks, give us orders, and make us do tricks, and if you get it wrong or disobey them it lengthens your indenture, don't you know. I don't even know if Marco's there. I only run into him once every couple of weeks, when our shift rotations coincide. I have a headache. I've just finished a job, interfacing with the internal security at Science, syncing up their facial recognition eyes. . . and I feel like the inside of my skull has been scrubbed with steel wool. I ache all over and I need something I can metabolize without going to pieces.

Marco opens the door. I'm too glad to see him to remark how weird it is that he doesn't look first to see who it is. Maybe I haven't outgrown my paranoia like he has. He sets me down in front of the window and goes to get me something. I don't have to say a word, Marco just understands. He always has.

He brings me a squeeze bottle full of something smooth and greasy. He knows what sugar would do to me.

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Marco tells me I look like shit. I am shit, I say. Science wishes I'd died like all the others, but I didn't. I'm left in the human shitpile.

You nuts, he tells me in soft Fringlish. He says I'd feel better, about everything, if I took better care of myself.

What for? I never say it out loud, but I know I've already passed the lifespan of the other guinea pigs. And if I last another two years, I get to inherit Utopia. Maybe I will say it. . .

But he's already kneading the palm of my hand with his knuckles. Breathe deep, he says. The empty squeeze bottle falls from my fingers as he bends the flesh of my hand, until even the bones feel soft and warm. I am a rag doll that he slips out of its silly clothes and warms its skin all over. His hands turn my spine to jelly and eventually even the weight of my skull is gone. He rolls me back and forth and makes me glad to have muscles and bones and skin. Why should I take care of myself, I murmur, when you do it so well? We moan together and move together and when I ejaculate I feel his relief more keenly than my own.

We don't do this often, because neither of us likes to be reminded too much of some of the more drastic modifications Science has made to Marco's body. The removal of violent tendencies.

I feel the slight tug as he removes the plug from my right socket. He rolls the cord neatly up to his own ear, and then pulls it from his jack. It's a one way connection. I was never wired for a secondary sensory input the way he was. And if he wasn't, I wonder if he wouldn't have killed himself long ago or what. Thanks, he says.

You welcome. I feel like I ought to be thanking him, really. But we've known each other long enough that maybe I don't have to say it. Or if I did, it wouldn't go down right. My dick probably would have shriveled away by now if it weren't for him. We talked about it once. I told him that I'd gladly donate mine to him if it could be done. But it's his nerves, too, deteriorated connections. He needs me to read the climax from. But for some reason it's always me who lands on his doorstep like a lost dog.

He serves me another squeeze bulb and we drink in silence. He's right, I do feel much better.

I opened my eyes to a bright light and a voice said that my pupils were starting to contract. The woman took the light out of my eyes and stepped back. Billings and Breton were still there, looking useless standing off to the side with their hands in their pockets. She moved to the other side of the gurney and stuck some kind of monitor onto my forehead. "This will alert you if a relapse looks likely, but his system should be pretty well clean by now." She started fiddling with something in a shrinkwrapped package.

Billings—Smiling Henry—stepped forward, looking down on me with concern. "Are you feeling better now? I'm sorry if this is hard for you, Mr. Smith. Have you had any other blackouts like this one? And the one you had in the car?"

"Not until today," I said. But then I'd never chug-a-lugged a whole bottle of infant glucose solution until today when the cops had started asking about the blood. . .

Breton leaned in close to us both. "I'll leave him to you, Henry. I'm sure he'll cooperate, won't you Tato? Be a good boy, alright?"

I almost said "yessir" out of habit, but got it out as "alright," and then my ex-guardian went out the door without incident.

The med-tech finished her fiddling and handed me a glass of a bluish solution, maybe the same stuff as was going into my arm. "Drink this, Mr. Smith," she said. "It'll help to stabilize your condition." And then she left, too.

I took a small sip. Tasted like. . . nothing much. I was expecting something salty, like broth or blood plasma. "What's in it?"

He shrugged. "I do not know, Mr. Smith. I am not very familiar with your modifications."

That was probably a lie. The sugar test series had been a big one here at Science, in their never-ending quest for building a brain-machine interface that would work worth a damn. I had been under the impression that I was one of their special cases, being one of the few who could interface successfully and survive. Surely he'd been briefed specially, too, for this meeting. But I was playing along. "Ah, well, it's good," I lied.

He went on to ask if I was comfortable, wanted anything else, etc. The whole good cop routine. I knew as long as I said what he wanted to hear, he'd stay that way, nice and accommodating, like I was a good citizen assisting my country. But as soon as things got tough, Breton, in the sanctioned role of bad cop, was going to come back in and tear me a new eye socket trying to get the truth out of me. My goal was to put that off as long as possible.

Which wasn't that long. Because I couldn't remember a goddam thing about what had happened. Henry hemmed and hawed, and I tried to act like I really wanted to cooperate. . . "Really. Marco asked if I'd go with him to work on their kitchen system. When I arrived he was already there and at work on it. I plugged in and was deep in trance with the machine when something jostled my foot. I opened my eyes and it was Mr. Martin, slumped over and bleeding. . . where your security had just pushed him. . . that's all there is!"

"What about the glucose?"

"What about it? Your security people scared me. . . I did it without thinking. It was in the kitchen in bottles, for the baby, and I downed one. And they dragged me away." I saw his eyes narrowing, his mouth tightening with distaste as he made his decision to turn me over to Breton. "That's all of it! I don't know any more!"

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Smith, but I'm afraid that you do know more."

Breton came in then with a pair of nerve cuffs in his hands. "Time to go, Tato. We gave you your chance."

I'd be damned if I was just going to let him put those things on me. I was a citizen, wasn't I? I suppose I wasn't acting

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much like one when I tried to kick him in the nose. The gurney tipped under me and my foot only hit him hard enough to make him mad. I threw the glass at him then and backed up as he batted it aside. No surprise that it was unbreakable and rolled away silently on the carpet. The windows were probably the same stuff, sealed, and we were probably fifty floors up, no escape there. Henry wasn't smiling any more as he called for help with his lapel com. Breton tried to tackle me but I dodged him and made for the door which was opening.

And then my ankle was on fire as one of the nerve cuffs wrapped around it. Breton had flung them, open, on full power, and I went down, grabbing at it and the dead limb of my lower leg. He sat on my chest then and smacked me hard across the face. There was a trickle of blood coming from his nose.

"Precious goddam brains, I'll rattle your goddam brains!" he shouted.

It wasn't the first time I'd seen him like this. He hit me again, back of the fist, but he was so pissed off the swing went wild and only glanced off my cheek. I thought maybe he'd choke me then, but I'd stopped struggling and he moved the cuffs to my elbows, where they belonged, and my arms went dead.

"And you can goddam well walk the rest of the way." He was standing up and I wasn't even sure he was talking to me anymore, but I guess he was since the two techs who'd come in response to Henry's call stood me up and pushed me toward the door.

Before I'd gotten ten feet my arms were starting to hurt, bad pins and needles and that bone ache so cold it burned. "Where the fuck-all we going?" Two security men fell into step behind us.

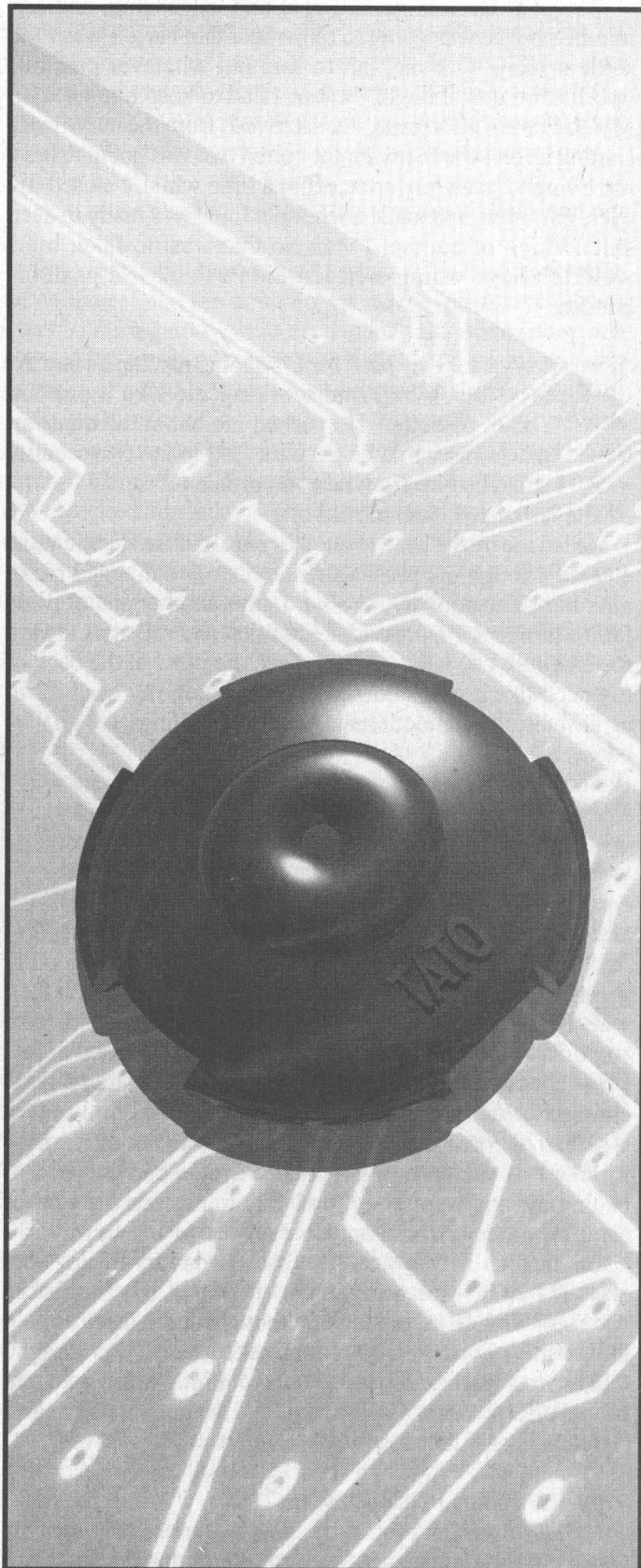
Breton's hand was around my numb bicep, hurrying me along. "Nowhere you'll like. Back to the Brain Lab."

The lab wasn't in this building, not if it was where it used to be. It was out on the edge of the city, where they'd reclaimed some badlands on the other side of the warehouse sector that nobody would miss if something really *really* bad happened. They'd have to take me outside for this, into another van or rotorfoil or something to get me there. I couldn't be lucky enough to think he'd try to walk me the whole way. "I told you I don't know anything."

"You know plenty, and I'm going to enjoy getting every word out of you." He tightened his grip, forgetting that I couldn't feel it. Okay. Let him have his fun. The more this was between him and me, the better. All of Science I couldn't handle, but Breton alone, maybe. Especially if I could get him agitated enough that maybe we didn't go straight to the brain-sucking lab. "Every goddam word," he muttered.

"I guess that means you missed me." I smiled, felt where my cheek was swelling up from one of his earlier blows. We got into an elevator, the four of us.

"I hope I never have to see your miserable face again," he said, his teeth gritted.



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No good. He was getting cold and calculating, and any minute now he was going to remember that his job wasn't to settle a score with me, but to find out whatever precious information they thought I knew. I had to keep him hooked. My arms were killing me, the backwash from the nerve cuffs starting up an ache in my motor cortex that was going to have me trying to gnaw my arms off in a little while. I closed my eyes, grimaced, and made a whimper like I was really in deep shit. Which of course, I was, so that was no fake, but I wouldn't have whimpered if I didn't think it'd push his buttons.

Breton yanked my head back, winding his fingers into the coarse black hair and working me like a puppet. "You're pathetic." He pushed me out at the transport level and held me while he gave the nod to the two security men. "I can take him from here, no problem."

They hesitated, then moved off.

He led me by the head to another one of those electric vans, entered through the passenger side door and dragged me in after him. The door swung shut. I gave another one of those little whimpers. He pressed the ignition and rolled us toward the exit with one hand on the wheel, the other at the back of my neck like it was soldered there, holding my head down against the cool, smooth seat. As he told Billings, we go way back.

Like three years ago, he showed me the apartment where I'd be living until I made the full 'transition' to citizenship. He went into full asshole mode, commenting that I probably wouldn't live that long anyway, maybe this would be a comfortable bed to die in, I better not break anything. . . trying to provoke me into saying something or doing something. But my favorite word was "yessir"—I had gotten very good at giving him and any other citizen I came in contact with their way. I'd seen indents spit on, kicked, our labor disturbed or work destroyed as if we weren't working for the good of SA. I thought constantly of Marco. . . what made Marco a good candidate for hormone redux but Breton a good indent guardian? Violent tendencies. So what was the difference? Privilege of citizenship. Eventually Breton had got tired of baiting me and went away, probably to blacken the eyes of some new indent who'd only live for two years anyway.

But he didn't always act like that. I had to try to play both sides of him if I was going to get out of this. My flashbacks were still fresh in my mind and I thought about the way he'd looked into my face years ago, and asked me if I was all right, told me to cheer up. The car moved out into traffic—I could hear courier scooters zipping by us and the hum of other vans. "Breton," I said, in a low voice.

"What."

"What's going to happen to me?"

He narrowed his eyes at the road. "Dunno. If it goes the way we think, and we get the proof out of that thick skull of yours, you're clear. But maybe we find out you offed Martin and his wife, and we have to turn you over for capital."

"I didn't kill them."

"I don't think that you did."

"Then why. . .?"

Both his hands clenched harder, on the steering wheel, on my hair. "Because someone thinks that you did, someone would *like* to think that you did. Someone would like very much for a so-called Son of Science to go berserk and kill a few innocent citizens."

The Arm. Without the indent corps, Science couldn't maintain the infrastructure, and power would swing the Arm's way. Make Science's work horses look like a threat to security, a threat to the American Dream itself. . . Civil would have to step in under public demand and cut back Science's programs. Meanwhile, proof of a conspiracy to discredit Science on the part of the Arm could result in Civil curtailing the Arm's reach instead. . . and I was that proof, maybe. "And you really think you can get the truth out of me."

Breton sneered. "I know it. How much of your brains we have to rip out to do it, that I don't know."

I shivered. Now that I had him away from the bosses, I hoped for an option that wouldn't make him look bad. "You're just saying that to scare me. Look, if you want me to testify a certain way, I will. You don't have to do this intimidation bullshit with me."

He was shaking his head and laughing to himself.

"Come on, Breton! Don't take me back to Brain. You know. . ."

He pressed hard on me, and I stopped talking. The nerve cuff feedback was giving me a facial tic where my cheek was mashed against the seat. His voice got low. "You don't get it, do you. I'd like to help you, you know, Tato? But the truth is you were always street trash."

"But you don't believe I killed. . ."

"You think I'm going to make a deal with you? That everybody'd be happy then? Nobody's going to take your word, *Citizen Smith*." He chuckled like my name and title were a joke, which I guess they were. "Especially me. No, I don't believe you killed anybody, but I do believe you're inferior scum and should be treated as such."

Bastard. "Fuck-*all* I wish I'd broken your nose."

"Shut up." He ground my face into the seat harder. From the sound of things outside, we were on the outskirts, possibly getting near the lab. My teeth were aching now, too.

I kept talking. "You know what? I hope I did kill those people. And I hope they blame you for the way I turned out. . ."

"I said shut up, you little fuck-all!" He yanked on the back of my head but couldn't hurt me any more than that without letting go the wheel. Profanity was good, a sign he was losing control. "Shut up!"

"Oh yeah, if I go down you're coming with me, Breton." He looked at me like he was trying to figure out what to do next, stop the car and beat me to death or see if he could just ram my head into the dashboard right here. I looked him in

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the eye, and changed my tack. "Hey, Bret, does it give you a hard on to push me around like this?"

He let go. He actually let go like he couldn't stand to touch me any more. I twisted to look him in the face better. My voice shook but I kept on. "Haven't you missed me? This could be your last chance."

He stopped the car. We were traveling along the edge of the manufacturing sector. He turned in the seat and grabbed me by the neck. "You perverted little fuck-all. You sick little fuck. I know what you and your lover boy do, you know. I know what you did every moment of your life from when you first entered Silver A up until two months ago."

I went cold. I hadn't thought of that. I knew that we were monitored on the job, and in the dorms a lot of the time, but I didn't think we were actively observed in private residences. In fact, I was pretty sure that was completely against Civil rights. . . but of course, I didn't have any rights until two months ago.

“In fact, if I'd had my way, I'd already know what you did every moment right up through whatever fuck-all just happened at the Martin's, right down to the holes in your goddam socks.” His grip tightened and I braced for a blow. But he kept talking. “But no, we've got no live record. Just what's in your goddam head. . .” He cut off abruptly, like he just came awake. And he pushed me away like I was filthy.

What had he just told me? He started the car again and placed both hands on the wheel with a fierce determination. Every moment of my life. . . I thought about the way the glucose triggered those near-living memories in the blackouts. Was that what they were going to suck out of me at the lab? Could I have an unconscious record of everything that went on around me, even when I was in machine trance? No matter how much of my brains they had to rip out. . . I thought he'd meant they'd pump me full of drug analogues, or beat the shit out of me until they were satisfied I didn't know any more than I'd told. We really were going to the Brain Lab; that wasn't just a threat to get me to cooperate. I'd played my cards wrong, then. I had to hope that we were both right, that I didn't kill them, and that there would be enough of me left after they were done to let me go back to work. . .

and what had happened to Marco?

Breton was driving with a single mindedness that bordered on manic. He wasn't going to let me sidetrack him again. And the ache in my arms and in my head was making it tough to do much of anything but grind my teeth. I willed my fists to clench but no signal was getting through the restraints. I kept trying to think of some way to turn this around. I was a citizen. . .

I should be able to go to Civil and testify by some other means. If only I could get away, get to a Civil station. . . I must have squirmed around or something because Breton reached over and turned up the power on the cuffs. Something in my brain started screaming and I banged my head against the window, once, twice, then a long succession of bangs.

“Stop that.”

I was succeeding in getting blood on the window and my face.

“Stop it! Should have sedated you. . .” He tried to grab for me with one hand but couldn't get any leverage. As I threw myself at the window, we lurched to the side. Breton slammed on the brake and grabbed me with both hands. I sank my teeth as deep as I could into his wrist, bones and flesh giving way slightly although I did not break the skin. Now he was maimed and pissed. He tried to get me by the hair again, but couldn't maneuver in the tight space of the van. I got my feet up and kicked him away, a good hard one to the stomach, and he retched. Then another kick, in the eye.

It was then that my door opened. I didn't stop to think how, I just pushed myself through head first, hit the ground badly with my shoulder, and staggered as I tried to run. The street was all warehouses, no traffic, no people.

“Ssst!”

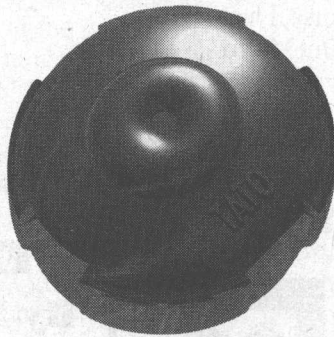
I made for the whisper as I heard Breton coughing and gasping in the car behind me. The doorway of a warehouse. I almost tripped over a courier scooter lying on its side in the dark. A shadow in the shadows.

Marco. He pulled me through the door and closed it behind him. “This way.” There are no locks on doors in Silver A, because there is no crime. He urged me through the static and haze the cuffs were making of my vision, past rows of knee high warehouse caretakers recharging, oblivious to our presence. Through another doorway and into another cavernous space, stacked high with sealed bins. I stumbled into the first row and stayed where I fell. “Marco. . .” Now my arms were shaking, the fingers flopping at the ends.

He turned back and seemed to see the cuffs for the first time. “Fuck-all. . . you had these on long?”

“Too. . . long.” I could hardly speak my jaw was clenched so tight. He turned the power down and then popped the release. I cried out as the sensation flooded in, pain first. It was going to hurt for a long time, I knew, and my grip would probably be weak for a couple of hours, but the first few minutes would be the worst. Marco supported my upper body as I convulsed. Fuck-all that hurt. I was glad Breton wasn't here to see it.

The pain was backing down to a dull ebb and I wanted to lie there in his arms, but Marco was urging me up. “Come on, Tato, gotta go.” Breton. He'd be blind with murderous rage



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about now and coming after me. . . if he knew where I'd gone. But he didn't.

"Where?" My legs seemed to work okay as I stood. "Where can we go?"

Marco's eyes glittered black in the dim light. "New Japan?" "What?"

"No extradition treaty with SA. We're wanted. Leastways, I am." He took my hand and led me toward the far back wall of the warehouse. "They want to kill us, you know."

"No, no, I *don't* know. I don't know anything!" My fingers were still smarting and tingling where he held them. "I didn't even know if you were. . ."

Marco stopped and spoke, his voice hushed in the largeness of the room as he switched back to the clear enunciation of Civil talk. "The Arm. The Martins were supposed to kill us both and make it look like we two outsider peons couldn't handle the freedoms of citizenship and fought with each other. I killed them, instead."

But not the baby. I remembered the baby crying. I let out my breath like I'd been holding it.

It wasn't fair. We'd played by the rules and everything we ever wanted should have been entitled to us. I could still go back, turn myself in to Civil and get cleared. Of course, I had to make it there before Science caught up with me. But Marco

was standing there, still bloody in places, and I was shivering with the aftereffects of the nerve cuffs, the blue juice, epinephrine, and a bad, bad sugar craving. "Then you're wanted. Why are you still here?"

"Tato." He was rubbing my fingers softly and they hardly hurt any more. He raised my hand to his lips and brushed the tips, passed the back along his cheek, then took my thumb into the warmth of his mouth. The pins and needles turned to liquid fire but it didn't feel like pain. "If you don't come with me, I don't know what I'll do." He touched my swollen cheek. "You followed me into this place. Will you follow me out of it?"

I swayed in place. "Tell it like it is."

He touched my swollen cheek. "You all I got."

"Ain't much," I mumbled, but I took a shuffling step forward. New Japan was a long way north and west, and between there and here was the Fringe. But the Fringe might not be so bad with someone to watch my back. I leaned on him and we went out the back door of the place, under the old fence into the grassy, rocky emptiness on the other side.



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by Harlan Ellison

I: First, There Was The Title

Like most comfortable, familiar old-shoe clichés, there is an important and irrefutable kernel of truth in this one: people, schmucks though they may be for doing it, *do* judge a book by its cover. Even I do it once in a while. I bought a recent Bantam paperback, *APELAND*, because of the cover. There was a mystery novel I spent seven dollars to purchase, in hardcover, because of the cleverness of the cover art. It was called *DEAD PIANO*. It wasn't that good a novel, but what did the author or the publisher care by that time . . . they had me. Not to mention my seven dollars.

And after judging by the cover, readers judge by the title. Many times they read the back spine of the book, or the title on a table of contents if it's a shorter story in question, so it's judged *before* the cover. What you *call* a story is important.

I'll try to tell you why. And how to do it well.

Here's a sample group of titles. I've made them up on the moment. Say they're arrayed on a contents page, each bylined with a name you don't know, so you have no preference based on familiarity with an author's previous work. Which one do you read first?

The Box
Heat Lightning
Pay as You Go
Hear the Whisper of the World
The Journey
Dead by Morning
Every Day Is Doomsday
Doing it

Now, unless you're more peculiar than the people on whom I tried that list, you picked "Hear the Whisper of the World" first, you probably picked "Doing It" next, and "Dead By Morning" third. Unless

you've led a *very* dull life, you picked "The Box" next to last, and would read everything else before selecting "The Journey." If you picked "The Journey" first, go get a bricklayer's ticket, because you'll never be a writer. "The Journey" is the dullest title I could think of, and believe me I *worked* at it.

It wasn't the length or complexity of "Hear the Whisper of the World" that made it most intriguing. I'll agree it may not even be the most exhilarating title ever devised, but it has some of the elements that *make* a title intriguing, that suggest a quality that will engender trust in the author. He or she knows how to use words. S/he has a thought there, an implied theme, a point to which the subtext of the story will speak. All this, on a very subliminal level as far as a potential reader is concerned. And (how many times, to the brink of exhaustion, must we repeat *this!*?) trust is the first, the best thing you can instill in a reader. If readers trust you, they will go with you in terms of the willing suspension of disbelief that is necessary in *any* kind of fiction, but is absolutely mandatory for fantasy or science fiction.

The second thing it possesses is a quality of maintaining a tension between not telling too little and not telling too much. Remember how many times you were pissed off when a magazine editor changed a title so the punchline was revealed too early: you were reading along, being nicely led from plot-point to plot-point, having the complexity of the story unsnarl itself logically, and you were trying to outguess the writer, and then, too soon, you got to a place where you remembered the title and thought, *oh shit, so that's what it means!* And the rest of the story was predictable. The title stole a joy from you.

A Note from the Author to the Reader:

Andre Gide once wrote, "Everything's already been said, but since nobody was listening, we have to start again." I have been a professional writer for now fifty years. On and off, I have *taught* writing in a thousand various venues for at least thirty-five of those years. Helped create the Clarion Workshops with Robin Scott Wilson. Have "discovered" and helped nurture the art and craft of perhaps a hundred men and women who now make their living either in full, or in significant measure, by way of the written word. There are not merely hundreds of good books on "how to write," there are assuredly *thousands*. And yet, when one reads the Slush Pile, or the unsolicited stories that keep coming unwanted and unannounced, when one reads the spavined and crippled efforts that glut the small press publications, one sadly understands the wearying truth of Gide's observation. The three essays presented here were written in 1977 and were originally published in a marvelous semi-pro magazine called *Unearth*. They have been reprinted here—you'll excuse the dated references and substitute your own current ones—because, well, everything's already been said, you've been told all this in a thousand books, but since nobody was listening, well, once more into the breach, dear friends. And remember: "momentarily" ain't the same as "in a moment"; and every time you say "like," as in "I like went to see her in like her house, y'know," the Devil swallows a bite of your immortal, ungrammatical soul.

HARLAN ELLISON
11 February
Year 2000

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So a title should titillate, inveigle you, tease and bemuse you . . . but not confuse you or spill the beans. Titles in the vein of "The Journey" neither excite nor inform. "Hear the Whisper of the World," I hope and pray (otherwise it's a dumb example), fulfills the criteria.

The BLANK OF BLANK titles are the kinds of titles away from which to stay, as Churchill might have syntactically put it. You know the kind I mean: *THE DOOMFARERS OF CORAMONDE*, *THE DANCERS OF NOYO*, *THE HERO OF DOWN WAYS*, *THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM*, *THE CLOCKS OF IRAZ*. That kind of baroque thing.

Naturally, I've picked examples of such titles that include another sophomoric titling flaw. The use of alien-sounding words that cannot be readily pronounced or—more important—when the reader is asking to purchase the book or recommending it to someone else, words that cannot be remembered. "Hey, I read a great book yesterday. You really ought to get it. It's called the something of something . . . THE REELERS OF SKOOTH OR THE RAVERS OF SEETH OR . . . I dunno, you look for it, it has a green cover. . ."

Asimov believed in short titles, because they're easy to remember by sales clerks, bookbuyers for the chain stores, and readers who not only don't recall the titles of what they've read, but seldom know the name of the author. On the other hand, both Chip Delany and I think that a cleverly constructed long title plants sufficient key words in a reader's mind that, even if it's delivered incorrectly, enough remains to make the point. Witness as examples: "Time Considered as a Helix of Semi-Precious Stones," "The Beast that Shouted Love at the Heart of the World," "Repent, Harlequin! Said the Ticktockman" or "The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth." There is strong argument both ways. "Nightfall," "Slan," "Dune," and "Killdozer" simply cannot be ignored. But then, neither can DO ANDROIDS DREAM OF ELECTRIC SHEEP?

The rule of thumb, of course, is simply: if it's clever and catchy enough,

short or long doesn't make a bit of difference.

But try to avoid being *too* clever. You can bad-pun and out-clever yourself into annoying a reader before the story is ever considered. I NEVER PROMISED YOU A ROSE GARDEN makes it, but YOUR ERRONEOUS ZONES simply sucks. The original title for Roger Zelazny's "He Who Shapes," published in book form as THE DREAM MASTER, was "The Ides of October," which seems to me too precious by half, while the title Joe Haldeman originally wanted to put on his *Star Trek* novelization—SPOCK, MESHUGINAH!—caroms off into ludicrousness. But funny. I know from funny, and *that* is funny. Thomas Disch is a master at walking that line. GETTING INTO DEATH is masterful, as is FUN WITH YOUR NEW HEAD. But the classic example of tightrope walking by Disch was the original title of his novel MANKIND UNDER THE LEASH (the Ace paperback title, and a dumb thing it is), which was originally called THE PUPPIES OF TERRA. (That's its title in England.)

Arthur Byron Cover has a flair for the utterly ridiculous that is *so* looney you have to buy the book to see if he can pull it off. Witness: THE PLATYPUS OF DOOM.

Until the very last tick before production, the title of Margaret Mitchell's GONE WITH THE WIND was MULES IN HORSES' HARNESS; and though I truly love the hell out of it, sufficiently to have appropriated it half-a-century later for an essay I wrote, I think Scott Fitzgerald was well-pressured when his publisher badgered him into retitling TRIMALCHIO IN WEST EGG as THE GREAT GATSBY.

The name of a character, if interesting, can be a way out when you're stuck for a title. It's surprising how few SF novels have done this, indicating the low esteem most traditional SF writers have placed on characterization, preferring to deal with *Analog*-style technician terms such as "Test Stand," "Flashpoint," "Test to Destruction" or "No Connections." We have so few novels with titles like THE GREAT GATSBY, BABBITT, ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN, or LORD JIM. Delany scored with

DHALGREN, I've had some success with "Knox," and Gordon Dickson's best-loved story is "Black Charlie."

Ideally, a title should add an extra fillip when you've finished reading a story. It should capsulize it, state the theme, and make a point after touchdown. It should, one hopes, explain more than you cared to state baldly in the text. Judith Merrill's "That Only a Mother" is a perfect example, as is the double entendre of her "Dead Center." It is an extra gift to the alert reader, and makes the reader feel close to you.

By the same token, you dare not cheat a reader with a clever title that doesn't pay off. The one that pops to mind first is "The Gun Without a Bang," one of the best titles from the usually satisfying Robert Shekley. *Great* title. The only thorn on that rose was that it was a dumb story about some people who find a gun that didn't make any noise, which says a whole lot less than the symbolic, metaphysical, textual, or tonal implications passim the title's promise.

One of the most brilliant title-creators SF has ever known is Jack Chalker. I'm not talking about the actual stories, just the titles. Beauties like MIDNIGHT AT THE WELL OF SOULS, AND THE DEVIL WILL DRAG YOU UNDER, PIRATES OF THE THUNDER, and "Forty Days and Nights in the Wilderness" are to die for.

But when—way back in 1978—Jack saw publication of a short story with the absolute killer title "Dance Band on the *Titanic*," everybody wanted to assassinate him. First, because the title was utterly dynamite; and second, because the stupid story was *about* the dance band on the *Titanic*!

No! we screamed at him, *you great banana*, you don't waste a prime candidate for beautiful allegory on a story that is about the very thing named in the title. Man was lucky to escape with his life!

For myself, I cannot begin a story until I have a title. Sometimes I have titles—such as "The Deathbird" or "Mefisto in Onyx"—years before I have a story to fit. Often a story will be titled in my mind, be the impetus for writing that particular piece, and then, when I've

Harlan Ellison: Writing

finished, the title no longer resonates properly. It is a title that has not grown to keep pace with more important things in the story, or the focus was wrong, or it was too frivolous for what turned out to be a more serious piece of work. In that case, painful as it may be to disrespect the spark that gave birth to the work, one must be bloody ruthless and scribble the title down for later use, or jettison it completely. That is the mature act of censorship a writer brings to every word of a story, because in a very personal way that is what writing is all about: self-censorship. Picking "the" instead of "a" means you not only exclude "a" but all possible storylines proceeding from that word. You kill entire universes with every word-choice. And while it's auctorial censorship, it is a cathexian process forever separating the amateurs from the professionals.

I cannot stress enough the importance of an intriguing and original title. It is what an editor sees first, and what draws that worthy person into reading the first page of the story.

No one could avoid reading a story called "The Huckle is a Happy Beast" or "If You Was a Moklin," but it takes a masochist to plunge into a manuscript titled "The Wicker Chair."

I leave you with these thoughts.

Right now I have to write a story called "The Other Eye of Polyphemus."

II: Telltale Tics and Tremors

Under the pseudonym "Frederick R. Ewing," the late, multifarious Theodore Sturgeon once wrote a serio-comic historical romp titled I, LIBERTINE, the protagonist of which had an interesting character trait. The novel was a swashbuckler, and the hero was a much-vaunted swordsman. The only trouble with him was that when he was in a dangerous situation, he became petrified with fear. When that happened, his mouth went dry and his upper lip invariably stuck to his teeth, forcing him to draw his mouth up to loosen it. It was a nervous tic, but the effect it had was to make him appear to be smiling. He became famous, therefore, as a man who "smiles in the face of danger." This

minor infirmity was taken for what it was not, he was counted fearless, and frequently escaped being killed because it generated a wholly undeserved reputation for his being foolhardily dangerous to the point of lunacy; and it terrified the bejeezus out of his attackers.

Scott Fitzgerald foreshadowed the totality of the basic theme of THE GREAT GATSBY in his portrayals of Tom and Daisy Buchanan as people who "... smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their vast carelessness . . . and let other people clean up the mess they had made . . ." The concept of "careless people" is one that applies perfectly to whole groups of young people one meets today. For instance, the wife of a friend of mine has managed to accumulate one hundred and thirteen parking tickets in a year in Beverly Hills alone. Most of them have even gone to warrant. Unlike New York City, where, if you are a scofflaw and have a pile of tickets, they settle with you annually . . . or states where they refuse to renew your license until you clean up your outstanding tickets . . . in California, they simply bust you and toss you in the tank till you're paid up. So last week, when this woman's husband was himself stopped for some minor traffic infraction, the Highway Smokey ran the car's registration through the computer, found there were warrants outstanding, and tossed *him* in the slam till several thousand dollars were shelled out. He spent the night in the Beverly Hills penal pen, with other high-end felons, and the next day they started to ship him off to one jail after another in the jurisdictions where *she* had picked up bad paper. Her carelessness caused an entire cadre of us, their friends, to waste an entire day, and many dollars, trying to pry *him* loose from the coils of the Law. And she just laughed it off. Careless. And that's the key to her character. She is a woman terrified of growing up, of becoming an adult who must accept responsibility not only for her own life, but for that part of the lives of others that is involved with hers.

Pinocchio's nose grows when he tells a lie.

archy the cockroach avers he is the reincarnation of a *vers libre* poet.

Uriah Heep wrings his hands, dissembles, and deprecates himself when he is being disingenuous.

Scarlett O'Hara captures the totality of her character, in the denouement of her story, in the microcosm of a single phrase as she keeps repeating, "I'll think of it all tomorrow . . . After all, tomorrow is another day."

Chaucer's pilgrims all have mannerisms and physical attributes that speak to their basic nature. The Wife of Bath, as an example, is gap-toothed, meaning lusty. She has had five husbands.

In the series of novels about the actor-thief Grofield, Donald Westlake (writing under the name Richard Stark) has his bemusingly melodramatic hero hearing film background music as he has his adventures. He'll be going into a dangerous caper and the soundtrack in his brain is playing, say, the Korngold theme from the Errol Flynn film, *The Sea Hawk*. It is a mild and antic way of showing how Grofield is able to laugh at himself, even at a precarious moment; and it explicates his character fully.

Grofield's interior soundtrack, Uriah's dry-washing, Scarlett's refusal to deal with pragmatic reality when it soils her fantasies, Pinocchio's priapean proboscis, the Buchanans' (and my friend's wife's) amoral thoughtlessness, the swordsman's daunting grin . . . they are all examples of a writing skill that *must* be present in the work of anyone who wishes to create characters that live. They are the minute mannerisms and attributes that create an instant flare of recognition in the reader. They are the core of character delineation; and writers who think they can deal only with gimmicks and sociology and gadgets and concepts, without breathing life into the players on whom gimmicks, sociology, gadgets and concepts have their effect, is doomed to frustration . . . and worse, shallowness.

I've quoted this before, and will no doubt quote it many times more, but for me the most basic thing ever said about the important material for stories was

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said by William Faulkner in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech. He said: "... the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat."

What I've just said is so obvious to any professional, that it must seem a ludicrous redundancy. Yet my experience with young writers has shown me that an astonishing number of talented people conceive of the writing of a story as an exercise in conundrum: a problem situation that, like a locked-room mystery, must be solved. They relate to the work the way computer programmers relate to an "heuristic situation." They simply do not comprehend, as each of you reading this *must* comprehend, on almost a cellular level, so it becomes basic nature with every story you attempt, that the only thing worth writing about is people.

I'll say that again. The *only* thing worth writing about is people. *People*. Human beings. Men and women whose individuality must be created, line by line, insight by insight. If you do not do it, the story is a failure. It may be the most innovative sociological insight or scientific concept ever promulgated, but it will be a failure. I cannot stress this enough. Doesn't matter if it's a novel or a hundred-word short-short: no character that breathes... you got no story. There is no nobler chore in the craft of writing than holding up the mirror of reality and turning it slightly, so we have a new and different perception of the commonplace, the everyday, the "normal," the obvious. *People* are reflected in the glass. The fantasy situation into which you thrust them is the mirror itself. And what we are shown should illuminate and alter our perception of the world around us. Failing that, you have failed totally.

Melville put it this way: "No great and enduring volume can ever be written on the flea, though many there be who have tried it."

I had not meant, in this brief exegesis, to get too deeply into the arcane philosophy

of writing. I leave that to pedants and academics who all-too-often worry such concepts into raggedness, like a puppy shaking a Pooh cuddly. Nonetheless, I am pressed to it; there is such a fractionalizing of the genre currently, with many writers opting for obscurantism and convoluted, insipid cleverness in aid of the smallest, most familiar point... or wallowing in smug arrogance that they write "heroic" fiction that masters mind-numbing concepts, but does not reveal the presence of a single living, identifiable human being... that I find I must belabor the *people* concept a moment longer.

One of the least defensible rationales for the "validity" of science fiction as a worthy genre of literature, handed down to us from the 1920s, is that it is a "problem-solving fiction." This bogus apologia, handservant to the more exploitable (but no less phony) asseverative justification that SF predicts the future, is a bit of paranoia left over from a long-gone time when the writing and the reading of SF was considered tantamount to being certifiably tetchy.

But those days are far behind us. The sophistication and craft-upgrading that has come to SF through the works of writers such as Silverberg, Disch, Wilhelm, Wolfe, Harrison, Moorcock, Tiptree and Le Guin has put it forever out of the line of contempt of all but the most purblind and reactionary critics. (This does not save us, however, from the moronic effusions of *Time's* Peter Prescott, or the lamebrains who work on rural dailies, who think they're being hip when they call it "sci-fi." Nor does it filter any light into the murky caverns wherein dwell holdovers from the "Golden Era" who are now counted as great historians and critics of the field, who continue to suck up to every pitiful monster flick or limp-logic deigning of notice from Establishment journals, chiefly because their lack of ego-strength refuses to permit them to understand that SF has long-since arrived. We must suffer with these benighted few, but we need not allow *their* hangups to be *our* hangups.)

Summation, then: outdated attitudes continue to prevail throughout the genre. Bad writers justify their work and the Brobdingnagian publisher's advances they

get by puffing up with assertions that they write "true science fiction." Well, they're welcome to it, if they believe the value of the work lies in nothing but thunderous concepts flung through enormous vistas of space, sans emotion, sans people, sans wit, sans anything but necromancy and/or hardware. It is writing more allied with the preparation of technical journals than it is with the heritage of Melville, Twain, Shelley, Kafka, and Borges.

I urge all of you seeking careers as writers to eschew this dead end. Leave it to the amateurs who make their livings as technicians or engineers, with an occasional foray into fiction that is merely the mythologizing of their current "heuristic situation." Ten years from now their stories will be as forgotten, as unreadable, as the entire contents of issues of '60s and '70s Campbell *Analogs* are today.

The only stories that live on, that are worth "the agony and the sweat" of writing, are the ones that speak with force to the human condition. *Star Wars* is amusing, but please don't confuse it with *Citizen Kane*, *Taxi Driver*, or *The Conversation*.

Writing about people should be your mission.

Which brings us back to the proper place for this essay, after a digression informed more by anger and impatience than a sense of propriety. I beg your pardon.

If you'll accept my messianic fervor as regards the *reason* for writing, then it follows that creating (not real, but) verisimilitudinous people—go look up the word verisimilitude *now*—is mandatory. It also requires very nearly more art than any other aspect of writing. It entails keen observation of people, attention to detail, the eschewing of cynicism, the total flensing from your mind of any kind of bigotry, wide knowledge of habit patterns and sociological underpinnings for otherwise irrational or overfamiliar habits, cultural trends, familiarity with dress and speech and physical attributes, fads, psychology and the ways in which people say things other than what they mean.

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It devolves upon being mature enough, and empathic enough, and tough enough to be able to encapsulate a human being of your own creating, in a line or, at most, a paragraph. A single act or habit would be ideal. Lean! Lean and fatless, a minimum of words! The fewest possible words, where more would obfuscate that moment of recognition. The writing must be lean and hard!

Read this:

A man has a shape; a crowd has no shape and no color. The massed faces of a hundred thousand men make one blank pallor; their clothes add up to a shadow; they have no words. This man might have been one hundred-thousandth part of the featureless whiteness, the dull grayness, and toneless murmuring of a docile multitude. He was something less than nondescript—he was blurred, without identity, like a smudged fingerprint. His suit was of some dim shade between brown and gray. His shirt had gray-blue stripes, his tie was patterned with dots like confetti trodden into the dust, and his oddment of limp brownish mustache resembled a cigarette-butt, disintegrating shred by shred in a tea-saucer.

That was the late Gerald Kersh, my favorite writer, now-forgotten giant of great, great storytelling ability, describing the indescribable: a man with no outstanding characteristics, a plain man, an invisible man, a little soul never examined and a presence instantly forgotten. The words sing the song, of course, but consider the images. Precise. Lean. Hard.

Not cynical, but utterly pragmatic. Confetti in the dust, a smudged fingerprint, a cigarette butt disintegrating in a saucer. Exact. Evocative. And in sum the images and the choice of words—self-censorship at its most creative and intelligent and productive level—give us a description of that which cannot be described. The only other example of this I've ever encountered was Coppola's cinematic characterization of the professional electronic bugger, Harry Caul, in *The*

Conversation. As critic Pauline Kael described him, he is "a compulsive loner (Gene Hackman), a wizard at electronic surveillance who is so afraid others will spy on him that he empties his life; he's a cipher—a cipher in torment. There's nothing to discover about him, and *still* he's in terror of being bugged." Coppola's writing, combined with Hackman's subtle sense of his own anonymity, described the indescribable: a man who is a shadow. And both Kersh and Coppola did it with the barest possible delineation. Lean, hard, precise!

Get it: what I'm suggesting as an imperative for the writer who wishes to create stories of power and immediacy, is the tough and unrelenting process of describing characters in a few words, by special and particular attributes. The swordsman's grin, Heep's hand-washing, Scarlett's interior will to survive even in the face of consummate disaster. I'll give you a few more examples.

In Edmund Wilson's justly famous story "The Man Who Shot Snapping Turtles" we have a character named Asa M. Stryker (note the name as descriptive tool) who is obsessed with the predatory chelonians that lurk in his pond and drag down the little ducklings he admires. The obsession grows until Stryker goes into the turtle soup business. He becomes more and more snapperlike until his movements and manner become paradigmatic of the very creatures he has devoted his life to vanquishing. Here is a bit from the story:

... Stryker, at ease in his turbid room, upended, as it were, behind his desk, with a broad expanse of plastron and a rubbery craning neck, regarding him with small bright eyes set back in the brownish skin beyond a prominent snoutlike formation of which the nostrils were sharply in evidence...

Wilson uses the device of direct analogy to demonstrate the subtext of the story: Stryker became what he beheld. It is one method of characterizing a player. It is a variation of the Disney Studios manner of humanizing animals or inanimate objects like pencils or garbage cans by anthropomorphizing them.

Wilson's technique, technically known as anthroposcopy, character-reading from facial features, can be used as straight one-for-one value-judgment or as misdirection, where precisely the *opposite* of what a person looks like indicates his or her nature. Take Victor Hugo's Quasimodo, the hunchback of Notre Dame, as an example.

Chekhov once admonished young playwrights, "If, in act one you have a pistol hanging on the wall, be assured it is fired before the end of act two." The same goes for character traits.

Take the gorgeous novella BILLY BUDD, FORETOPMAN, for instance. Herman Melville tells us that Billy stammers. But only at certain times. When he is confronted by mendacity, duplicity, evil. Symbolically, we can take this to mean that Billy, as a corporeal manifestation of Goodness in a Mean World, is rendered *tabula rasa* by Evil Incarnate. That would be the academic view. But as a writer ensorcelled by "process," I choose to see the stammer as a plot-device. The inability to defend himself verbally is used near the climax of the novella as the mechanism by which Billy's fate is sealed. Herman Melville was a great writer, but he was a *writer* first. He knew how to plot. He knew the pistol had to be fired.

Historically, such physical infirmities were used by writers such as Hawthorne to indicate inner flaws. The Reverend Dimmesdale, in *THE SCARLET LETTER*, has a burning scar on his chest. He is an adulterer. The scar is the outward manifestation of what he feels is his inner sin. When he bares his bosom to the entire congregation, it is a shocking moment. The pistol has been fired.

Shakespeare goes even further. Probably because his talent was greater than anyone else's. More than merely using physical mannerisms or frailties, he uses the forces of Nature in all their unleashed passion to reflect the viewpoint character's state of mind. In Act II, scene *iv* of *King Lear*, at the very moment that he wanders out onto the heath, having renounced his power while trying to retain his title, having been driven to the point of madness by his

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daughters, who have thrown him out of their homes, we find the following:

LEAR

... You think I'll weep;
No, I'll not weep:
I have full cause of weeping;
But this heart
Shall break into a hundred
thousand flaws,
Or ere I'll weep. O fool,
I shall go mad!

At which point the storm and tempest break. Shakespeare mirrors Lear's instant of going insane with Nature's loosing of all its mad passion. He tells us that Lear realizes, in that moment of final lucidity before the plunge into madness, that in this life there can be no separation of title from power. That to retain the former, one must have the latter to buttress it. He is alone, beaten, tragic, defenseless before Man and Nature.

It is mythic characterization on a cosmic level.

Less grand in its scope, but as revealing in its placement of a human being within the context of his society, is the little trick Turgenev uses to show us that Paul Petrovich of FATHERS AND SONS feels discontinuous. The novel was written at the fracture-point in Russian history when the serfs were in revolt, and it is a time of ambivalence; dichotomous; vacillating between the traditions of the aristocracy and the pull of rule by the common man. To demonstrate Petrovich's uncertainty, Turgenev has a meeting between Petrovich and his young adult student nephew, after many years, containing a moment in which the elder not only shakes hands in the "European" manner but kisses him "thrice in the Russian fashion, that is to say, he brushed his cheeks thrice with his scented moustaches, exclaiming, 'Welcome home!'"

Alfred Bester's THE STARS, MY DESTINATION is a classic novel to read and re-read for such minutiae of characterization. Gully Foyle, the protagonist, for instance, has his progression and growth of character

from near-bestial lout to cultured avenger epitomized by his language and manner of speech. At first he speaks only the gutter slang of the future invented by Bester to micromize the era; but as Gully grows and buys himself an education, he declares himself in very different, more cadenced patterns. This is paralleled by the visibility of the "tiger mask" that covers his face. When he is a beast, it shows easily; later, it becomes almost invisible, manifesting itself only when his rage makes him revert for a moment. Literary resonance in simple impossible-to-misinterpret, dramatic imaging: *show, don't tell*. Heinlein's DOUBLE STAR is another limitless source-reference, jam-full of this kind of technique. Which is why these two books continue to be thought of as "classics" long after books that made bigger initial splashes have faded from memory.

Algis Budrys once wrote a story, the title of which escapes me right now, in which a very fat man, an official of some bloated interstellar military-industrial organization, stuffs his mouth with candy bars all through conversations with the hero. Thus, by miniaturized example—arguing from the smaller to the greater—Budrys led us to a perception of the fat man in paradigm, as one with the fat organization.

A horde of examples from my own work pops to mind, but a sense of propriety prevents my dealing with them in detail. I use a harelip sometimes to indicate that a character is a born victim; and men who are punctilious about their hair and clothes usually turn out, in my stories, to be men who get their comeuppance or who are shallow. "Pretty Maggie Moneyeyes" has two characters I think are well formed using the techniques I've enumerated here, and if you get a moment you might look it up.

In the script I wrote for *Blood's a Rover*, the 2-hour pilot movie for what was to have been an NBC series, based on the novella and the film of "A Boy and His Dog," I introduce a female solo who is as tough as the amoral Vic. Her name is Spike, and at one point in the film she joins up with the dog, Blood.

Vic returns, after having split up with Blood, and wants to get together again as partners. But the Spike character is now Blood's partner. To demonstrate that she thinks very little of Vic, when she gets angry, she never talks to *him*, she talks to the dog. "Tell it to shut its mouth before I blow its head off," she says to the dog, referring to Vic. Blood then repeats what she's said to Vic, who has heard it, of course. This goes on till Vic is driven into a rage. It is a mannerism that will be a continuing in-joke for the film pilot and the series. By talking to a dog about a human, and referring to the human as "it" instead of the animal, I hope to make a point about the way in which men treat women as objects. This, done subtly, because the networks would never permit it if they knew what I was doing . . . that is, actually putting in a subtext and symbolism, heaven forbid . . . will serve to deepen the subject matter as visually presented.

I've offered all these examples of minute character traits—tics and tremors—in an attempt to demonstrate that it is possible with extreme economy to create a fully fleshed player, even if that player is only a walk-on. And when you're getting into the story, touches like these can set up the reader through many pages of plot and concept, action and background, permitting the reader to identify with the viewpoint character. It is a tone that will inform the story throughout.

As a final note, let me hit once again at the core fact that no matter what it is you *think* you're writing about, the best and most significant thing to write about, what you're *always* writing about, is *people!*

Building people who are believable, verisimilitude being the operative word, not *real people* but *believable people*, is a product of the touches and techniques discussed here.

Or, as John le Carré, the novelist who wrote THE SPY WHO CAME IN FROM THE COLD and THE LOOKING GLASS WAR, among others, has said, "A good writer can watch a cat pad across the street and know what it is to be pounced upon by a Bengal tiger."

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Whether pounced upon by a giant cat, explaining why a coward's smile makes his enemies flee, how a careless person can destroy those around her, what hypocrisy lies in an idle drywashing motion of a sycophant's hands, or how a beautiful and kindly man can condemn himself to death because he stammers, if you intend to write well, and write for posterity, or even simply to entertain, you must remember . . .

Fire the pistol.

III: How Do We Get Into This Mess?

On a dead run, that's how.

One of the most common reasons for the rejection of a story has virtually nothing to do with the overall impact of that particular piece of writing. An otherwise excellent story can find itself being stuffed back into the SASE and being dropkicked into the mail chute because it had a slow, an obscure, a confusing, or redundant opening section. Though the characterizations are strong, the concepts imaginative, and the action sequences motor right along, if the story crawled on all fours from page one through, say, page eight, before it got to its feet and started sprinting, chances are good that the editor grew impatient and decided the reading of one unsolicited manuscript should not become his or her life's work.

No sense railing at this seeming callousness. The editor is only human. And to be absolutely pragmatic about it, freed of the maudlin self-pity and justifications unpublished writers substitute for logic, the editor is *only* a reader, albeit a more trained reader than the casual magazine-buyer. If you can't grab the editor's interest, odds are heavily against your being able to grab Joe or Joan Reader with that slow opening.

To state that communication is the bottom line of all writing would be to jackhammer a truism into the tarmac. If the communication isn't there from the git-go, the reader has—it seems to me—an unconscious reluctance to trust the writer. That means the writer must work ever so much harder to get the reader *into* that mind-warp I mentioned

earlier, the "willing suspension of disbelief." The longer it takes a writer to nudge, push or pull a reader into that state, the more chances the reader has of escaping the web of the fiction.

So it becomes clear that we must cherry-bomb the reader as quickly and as completely as possible, to the self-serving end of snaring the twisty beast. To that purpose, here are three devices I've found universally present in good writing. The first is the title, and we've already masticated *that* one. The second is the literary hook, the beguiling opening line, about which I'll discourse some other time. The third device is no device at all, but is one of the plimsoll-line measurements of craftsmanlike writing. It is knowing how and where to *begin* the story.

In editing the DANGEROUS VISIONS anthologies I read more than my share of stories that I eventually published, but often only after asking the writers for revisions that dealt with the opening pages of the work. And I've read many stories that made it into print even though they suffered from the same flaccid lack of muscle tone. In working Clarion, and other prestigious writing conferences, I've seen much the same thing. (And much less of that slow pacing at the beginning when I've bludgeoned my students into writing a story a day. When they have to write fast, they automatically understand that there is limited time available to them to grind out a complete story, so they instinctively reject superfluous or repetitious backstory, compress rambling scenes, find side-roads that shortcut lumbering, dead patches of exposition and, in the words of the television industry, they "cut to the chase" immediately. In most cases it tightens the plot and drags the reader along.)

Understanding where to begin a story is a facility that comes with years of writing *many* stories. It's a mugg's game, trying to set down hard-and-fast rules, because it's different every time; and no set of rules really works. The best I can do, I guess, is try to give some examples and then examine them, and hope that

I'm being clear enough so you can apply the lessons to specific stories on which you're working. But do please take this *caveat* into consideration as you read these comments: this is just a general rule of thumb, and you must take the Cortical-Thalamic Pause (as dear A.E. van Vogt put it), noodle this information for individual assimilation. Not to put too fine a point on it, do as I suggest not as I frequently don't do it myself.

All right, then, To it, with vigah!

Let's suppose a story. Um. Okay, how's this:

Bizarre story about a guy who has nothing but shitty relationships with women, who cannot cop to his own fractured persona. Argues with his lovers, brutalizes them, intimidates them. But though he's given to some low-level self-analysis—he's rather bright—he always manages to rationalize the encounters so he comes off looking good and the women always come off, in his mind, as immature or castrating or just plain fucked-up. So he sinks deeper and deeper into despondency, until he decides he'll never be able to find a woman who is good enough for him. Meaning, of course, a woman whom he can dominate while she manages to retain a sense of her own identity that doesn't threaten him. From this lightless perception of the world, skewed as it is, he comes across an advertisement for android companions, programmed to suit every need. So he gets one, a beautiful woman who seems just right, because he has gone through extensive bio-medical brain-scanning that has pulled out of him and his needs a template that forms the basis of her identity. He marries her. Everything goes well for a "honeymoon" period of six months, and then he discovers that his android wife is having an affair with another man. He is so enraged by this, that he plans to kill her. But is it murder if you kill an android? Is it rational? Should he take her back into the shop to be re-programmed? Or will he finally understand that the flaws are in *him*, that he sows the seeds of interpersonal destruction because of his narrow view of other human beings?

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(Yes, I know, *I know* . . . Bradbury did exactly this story, and then it was adapted for *The Twilight Zone* . . . but it's a place to start for a paradigm, so shut up and stop being such a pecksniff smartass.)

Now. That's the basic idea. It's *not* a story, friends. (That's something else I'll belabor at length in the future: knowing the difference between an "idea" and a "story." But not now, not now; stop pestering me.) But it's all we need to examine the point of entry *into the story*.

There is a kind of literary magic, the inarticulate power of certain auctorial magicians to transmute base metal ideas into the pure gold of a compelling story opening. Sheckley has the power, as did Phil Dick; so does Kotzwinkle, and Ann Beattie, and Ron Goulart; so did Alice Sheldon, before she killed herself, her ailing beloved husband, and James Tiptree, Jr., and Raccoona Sheldon, all on the same dark day. I could list dozens who lack that power, but I don't need to; you can do it for yourself. So where do we tap with that magic finger to start our story?

Well, here's one way:

Walter Nesterman tried desperately not to hate women. He walked away from Francine's monad cursing her, cursing himself, cursing his inability to have said what he wanted to say to her. The French called it l'esprit d'escalier, the spirit of the stairs, or as close to translation as could be managed in English, the mood of thinking retrospectively, as one walked down the stairs away from the argument, what one should have said. I should have told her, you stupid bitch, if you weren't having all these fights am currently living on the Eastern Shore of Virginia and sharing a home with three peculiar cats. I do many things well, none of which generates income, and pay the bills by coercing computers in an engineering firm to do what they're supposed to . . . I should have said, you're just flat out immature, that's your problem . . .

But he hadn't. He had raged and fmfuh'd and gotten red in the face, and now another affair was over. It was the fifth lousy liaison he'd been involved in over the past year.

And he felt at once furious and guilty.

Okay. Now there's nothing much wrong with that. I took pains to write it well, so I couldn't be accused of loading the gun in favor of an alternate method that I think is better.

Here's another way of doing it:

A snake uncoiled in Walter Nesterman's gut and the first thing he thought, a kind of inarticulate scream of rage within him, was I'll kill that android bitch!

Married less than six months and she was busily humping some other guy. His mind reeled across a surreal landscape of impossible possibilities. How could a pre-programmed android created specifically to his needs be unfaithful? Was it a human she was fucking, or another chemical construct? How was she slipping out to see him? Could it be a "her"? Was the flaw in himself, in the brain-scan that had been pulled out of him to form her template?

But most of all, mournfully whistling like an Autumn wind across his mind, was the cry Am I never to find a woman I can love?

And the certain knowledge. I gotta kill that android bitch!

Now that's closer to it. But even though we've eliminated all the backstory of Nesterman's unhappy relationships and an examination of his personality *in situ*, it's still wrong. Or, more exactly, it ain't right. (*Nothing*, if written well and intriguingly, is *wrong*. See what I mean about how hard it is to pinpoint this problem? The rules simply don't hold.) Whoever Francine was, she's out of it as we open the story, so we don't need to lumber the reader with a reference to someone we're not going to see again. And *both* of these open on interior monologue of one sort or another. Granted (he said humbly), notwithstanding they're both moderately interesting, passionate interior monologues, they are, nonetheless, essentially passive. And we want to start at a dead run if we can. So I'd suggest something short and sharp like this:

Nesterman looked down at his wife asleep in the waterbed. Her eyes were closed, her breathing was shallow, and the recharger plugged into her right hip

was glowing bright red. He held the laser knife tightly and warred within himself. Cut her lying android throat, or simply take her back to the shop and have them turn her into slag?

He couldn't escape the awful reality: not even an android, built to satisfy his every need, could be faithful to him. His beautiful chemical construct of a wife, beautiful charming Charlene was having an affair! And all he could think was: I've gotta kill this bitch!

Okay. Now, can you see the variations? In the first, we start six and more months before the nub of the story, with a lot of backplot and soul-searching that is pretty much dead time as far as plot progression is concerned. In the second, we bring the story six months into the present, but it's right at the moment when he's come to his decision to kill Charlene. And that might seem a pivot point in his life, which it is, but again we're dealing passively with a passionate, action-filled situation.

The third opening brings us to the moment that he's standing right over this sleeping, helpless woman, with murder in his heart. Now, if we want to have him back off because he's torn, because he's starting to realize the problem lies with *him*, not her; we have the basis for a subsequent series of scenes in which he has to disguise his feelings, in which he tries to draw out of her an admission of what's been going on, in which he seeks out the man or woman or artificial life-form she's having an affair with, in which he goes back to the company that made her and tries to find out what went wrong (nice idea: a psychologist who ministers to the fluxes and flows of both human and android principals) . . . an infinitude of possibilities for examination of the human condition, not to mention an expansion of the basic plot situation.

Or if we want to have him kill her, right then and there, we can run it like Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" and have the miserable fucker going bananas because of what he's done.

Don't forget, what we're dealing with in this story is the moment of realization on the part of a complex and tormented

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human being that he is incapable of decent warmth and a lasting relationship. *Therein* lies the story, not the amusing conceit of what is entailed when one murders something that isn't really alive. That's the furniture. The theme is human travail.

I'm not sure if you get what I'm saying in these three examples, but I'll bat it around a little more and hope that one or more comments will concretize the rigor I'm suggesting you adopt as a religion.

Look: a novice would go with the question "is it murder to kill an android?" Wrong. That's been done. Dozens of times, all the way back to Eando Binder's famous short story, "I, Robot" in the January 1939 issue of *Amazing Stories*. And it's a moot point at this stage of recombinant DNA research in our lives. It's no longer extrapolative when we're all reading a *Time* essay on the moral and philosophical conundrums inherent in such a real-life case. But right now all we have to work with is human beings, and this kind of story (it seems to me) is only valuable for us if it explores the labyrinthine byways of the human heart. It's an allegory, if you will. A paradigm. Using it as such, we can find out—if not for the entire world, then at least for ourselves as writers—what messes with *human* relationships. And to do that in a storytelling way, we have to get into the situation when it's already fully formed. Building to it *can* be interesting, but diving in while the action is transpiring around us makes it *immediately* arresting.

One way to do this sort of thing would be to start it at whatever point your own skill dictates, write on for a couple of thousand words, and then set it aside for a day, or even a few hours, whatever your work-habits require.

When you go back, reread it and ask yourself, *How much of this tells itself through context? How much is revealed by the actions of the characters without telling the reader through static narration? How much can I show with scenes, rather than dropping in lumps of undigested exposition? How much of this is stuff I needed to know, as*

background, but is also stuff the reader need not see specifically?

Then cut. And once you've cut it, cut it again. And when it is clear that nothing else can be cut . . . cut it again. Go to the muscle and the bone. Strip away the rhetorical flab. And then . . .

Cut it again.

Boil down that first two thousand words of bible and self-revelation to a paragraph of hard, mean prose. And you will very likely have gotten to a place in the story that originally appears on page eight.

Take the writing of screenplays as a model. Never write a scene where someone sits alone in a room and there is a knock on the door, the person gets up and goes to the door, answers it, meets the visitor, invites the visitor in, they seat themselves and begin to have a long discussion that ends with a fist fight. Cut to the chase. Open the story with the first punch being thrown. Fredric Brown did that sitting alone in a room routine, and called it "Knock." Except his first line was a technical masterpiece: *The last man on Earth*—or in the universe, for that matter—*sat alone in a room. There was a knock at the door . . .*

So unless you can beat what a dead man did perfectly, you can forget it, chum.

I've digressed on that man-alone-in-a-room situation, because I know sure as the insensate Universe made little green apples, that some wiseass fan would take my using it as an example of dull writing and say, "Yeah, but what about the Fred Brown story?" And it's a perfect example, so I wanted to close up the rat hole.

What I'm suggesting is that *any* scene you use to launch a narrative can be cut in half, opened like a ripe orange, and the flesh in the middle has *got* to be tastier than the pith. So go to the middle of a situation, go past the backstory material that got you interested in the first place, the stuff you can slide in as slivers of enlightenment throughout the first third of the story, the stuff that formed the original plot epiphany, when you said to yourself, "Hey, wouldn't it be interesting if . . ." It's what happens *after*

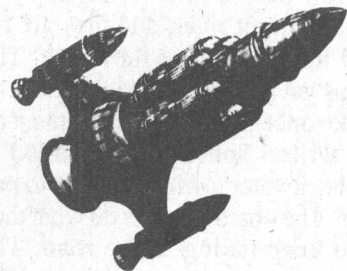
that initial idea the world has come to call "a story."

Cut to the chase. Go to the first punch. Start at the instant the fire ignites. Disabuse yourself of the misconception that to write well, to write interestingly, to write with class and verve, one must try to emulate Proust or James. Those were storytellers of a different time, who worked in a medium that has changed enormously. We read faster now, we think more quickly, and clarity can be as complex as obtuseness. Now you must snare them immediately!

The job is to tell the story feelingly, and at a dead run if at all possible. To do that, you must consider the point of entry and make certain it is one edged with fishhooks. Once having impaled the reader, you'll find you're telling a story that has snagged *you* too.

And by the way, I may eventually wind up writing that story about Nesterman and Charlene, because if I call Ray and say, "Hey, kiddo, I've got an alternative take on 'Marionettes, Inc.'—d'you mind if I go at it, if I drop a 'thank you' to you at the end?" my friend Bradbury will say, "It's an honor to be plagiarized by a talent as great as yours, Harlan!" So stay away from it, you geeks.

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Forty Days on the Endless Road Life at the Odyssey Writing Workshop by Julia Duncan

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My mom met Harlan Ellison, and all I got was this freakin' T-shirt?

—Kai Duncan

Learning to write is a lifelong journey into the depths of meaning. Usually, you undertake the trip alone, in an old patched-up vehicle or a leaky canoe, following a map that is torn and stained and missing a few pages. The way is rarely smooth.

You wander for a few years with the vague goal of seeing the world. If you travel hard, you find a landmark here and there, you learn a few routes—but sometimes the engine sputters to a discouraging halt, or you have to pause to patch the canoe. Imprecise road signs, normally in the shape of rejection letters or uneven feedback from other tourists, can send you into dead-ends, muddy coves, and dry canyons. Bad weather always hovers behind or overhead or around the next bend, and enticing stopping places beckon ceaselessly. The trip is a bitch, and after a few years, you realize it will never end.

If you don't hear the call—if you are not the kind of driven that would rather write than eat or sleep—you're as likely to junk the car or the canoe and settle down than keep on struggling. Face it, writing is a hell of a way to make a living—no way at all for most of us. Yes, a few people find the highway or the broad, bright river, and they are rewarded for doing what they love. The rest of us get repeatedly lost and have to hitchhike once in a while, and almost all fiction writers spend time stranded in boring backwater towns, working to pay the bills. The obsessed ones do what they must to keep taking to the road. The others come to their senses and lead saner, healthier lives.

I'm not the only writer who sees it this way:

Dorothy Parker: "The writer's way is rough and lonely and who would choose it while there are vacancies in more gracious professions, such as, say cleaning ferryboats?"

George Orwell: "Writing a book is a long, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness. One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand."

Georges Simenon: "Everyone who does not *need* to be a writer, who thinks he can do something else, ought to do something else."

Harlan Ellison: "Times grow harder for writers. There is less and less room for serious writing. That means that me sitting here and teaching you to write well is programming you for disaster."

If I have discouraged any of you from writing, sent you limping home to recover, you're welcome. Buy a novel, subscribe to a magazine, read and enjoy. Those of you still so committed to the road that you're looking for a better map, come on in and see the slides from my Odyssey of 1998.

There are as many science fiction, fantasy, and horror workshops as there are reasons to attend one. From national-level professionals-only sessions, to amateur critiquing groups, to afternoon meetings with pros at conventions, published and aspiring writers gather to read, be read, and learn. The basic rules usually derive from what is known as the Milford or Clarion model, formatted by Damon Knight. A group gathers, having read one or more pieces ahead of time, and each member critiques in turn while the writer stays silent. Cross-talk is frowned upon, as is repetition of points already made, especially if the group is large. After everyone has spoken, the author generally gets a chance to respond

or solicit further details, and sometimes, an untidier discussion follows, depending on the milieu. The critiquers are expected to return their copies of manuscripts, with written comments attached, to the author.

Local amateur groups might do this weekly or monthly for an afternoon at a time. Some professional gatherings run for a week. At Odyssey, as at the decades-old Clarion workshop, twenty of us did this three or more hours a day, five days a week, for a month and a half.

Literary boot camp meets encounter group, squared.

The major attraction to a six-week workshop is the professionals involved, who often feel that they are "paying forward" the similar help they received as younger writers. At Odyssey, the director and primary instructor is Jeanne Cavelos, writer and winner of the World Fantasy Award in 1993 for her editing of the Abyss imprint at Dell. She teaches every day—except when guest lecturers visit to add their own perspectives—covering the basic elements of fiction (setting, point of view, plot, character, and style). She also critiques along with the students and guests.

Cavelos is an experienced writer and teacher, but her background as an editor makes this SF/F/H workshop unique. Sometimes authors know only how *they* write and, while they can offer superb insights, may not be able to help a student who does it differently. Because Cavelos has worked with many disparate authors, she respects a writer's own process and focuses on helping students achieve what they want to do. Her exposure to the students' work for six weeks enables her to evaluate overall strengths and weaknesses and to give specific suggestions toward improvement. Her feedback is perceptive and thorough; hearing her comments on scores of sto-

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ries gives students enough exposure to enable them to separate her personal quirks from the more universal advice. Additionally, her real-world publishing experience, as writer and editor, is invaluable.

The 1998 visiting instructors at Odyssey were Patricia A. McKillip, John Crowley, James Morrow, Delia Sherman, Ellen Kushner, and Warren Lapine. Each came for about twenty-four hours; they chatted with us at an evening reception, lectured to the class the next morning, and discussed stories both with the group and in private with selected students in the afternoon. Harlan Ellison was writer-in-residence for a week—he did all of the above and yelled and jumped up and down and worked us like canines. We also had a surprise guest, Dr. Jack Cohen, who dropped by for an afternoon and educated us about what aliens might really be like. Poor Dr. Cohen, who arrived the day after Ellison left, found a shell-shocked group. He told some marvelous stories and reawakened my interest in fairy tales and speculative biology, but he probably left thinking we were a dull bunch for wannabe SF/F writers.

Each visitor taught on a specific element, each with unique style. Patricia McKillip, author of many fantasy and science fiction books, won the first World Fantasy Award in 1975 for *The Forgotten Beasts of Eld* and the Mythopoeic Award in 1995 for *Something Rich and Strange*. Though she has had little teaching experience, she has been a professional writer since 1973. Her topic was setting, one of her sparkling strengths, and to judge from much amateur writing, a difficult element to polish. McKillip directed a brief classroom exercise that spawned more than one finished story among the workshopers. She was warm, kind, and generally encouraging.

John Crowley also won the World Fantasy Award and the Mythopoeic Award for *Little, Big* in 1982, and the World Fantasy Award for his novella *Great Work of Time* in 1990. An experienced teacher as well as a prolific author,

he lectured on point of view. Crowley presented compelling support for the currently neglected third-person omniscient, or “universal,” perspective, convincing most of us to try it sooner or later. Among his especially interesting comments was an assertion that “reading is a dialog with the whole written world.” His critiques were crisp and acute, his specific advice directly on point.

Another World Fantasy Award winner—in 1991 for *Only Begotten Daughter* and 1995 for *Towing Jehovah*—James Morrow explored plot. “America’s best satirist,” according to James Gunn, declared that plot is rarely, for him, the most satisfying element in a story, but you *cannot* get by without it in genre fiction. With thoroughness and clarity, he outlined a “diagnostic toolkit,” several questions to ask about plot that will help pinpoint where the writing goes astray. His discussions of submitted stories were both precise and comprehensive, as well as largely encouraging.

Ellen Kushner—World Fantasy Award and Mythopoeic Award winner in 1991 for *Thomas the Rhymer*—and Delia Sherman—Mythopoeic Award winner in 1994 for *The Porcelain Dove*—taught as a team. They illustrated points about character with a lively role-playing exercise, during which some students discovered aspects to characters they had been carrying around in their heads for years. One of Kushner and Sherman’s intriguing ideas for studying character development is that gossip is good—writers can learn about human nature listening to this age-old entertainment. Their fascination with people shines in their enthusiasm for working with student writers.

While Warren Lapine hasn’t won any writing awards that I am aware of—and he can correct me here in a pair of editorial brackets if I’m wrong—he is a widely published short-story author and a top-notch editor. He lectured at Odyssey about publishing, touching on almost every element of fiction while imparting some practical ideas for analyzing markets, as well as a few entertaining stories

about what *not* to do. His devotion to the field is downright contagious. His critiques were among the most pragmatic we heard, focusing not on what makes a story artistic or perfect but on what makes it readable. Advice such as *ensure that each scene either advances the plot, develops the characters, or amplifies the theme and ask WHY about every element in the story* sounds quite general but can often be overlooked when a writer is concentrating on the components of setting, point of view, character, plot, and style.

Each of the visiting teachers added seasoning to the theory-and-practice stock of the workshop. Depending on your taste, your goals, and your situation in life, any single specific writer or editor could be incentive enough for you to spend six weeks away from home and a lump of cash to attend a workshop. Among our group of twenty students, about half mentioned one or another of the guest lecturers as an important draw to Odyssey. The chance to get feedback from an admired author can set an apprentice writer’s heart to fast-forward. The name heard most often, however, in discussions of motivation was writer-in-residence Harlan Ellison. To many of us, he was the meat in the workshop stew—which would have been tasty without him, just not so unusual or filling.

The stories are legend: Ellison, as a teacher, savages students, burns manuscripts, tells aspiring writers they have no talent and should get a job. He’s every bit as unflinching and acerbic and blunt face-to-face as he is in his nonfiction writing. He does not hesitate to say that the writing stinks, the story is garbage, it’s unredeemable bullshit.

As with all legends, some believed, some scoffed. In this case, the scoffers had an eye-opening experience.

The week before he was to arrive, a few of my classmates and I watched a tape of Ellison’s appearances on various television programs. One of my favorite chunks was from *Masters of Fantasy*, concerning the man who called Ellison

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to ask, "Why can't I get published?"

The writer said Ellison told him. "Because it's *crap*." That was without even reading any of the man's writing.

We practiced for days, toughening ourselves up, periodically yelling at one another, "It's *crap*." Like beach dwellers, having heard a terrible storm was on its way, we nailed plywood over our windows, stored jugs of water, and practiced whistling in the dark. But knowing the weather is coming is no preparation for living through an actual hurricane battering at your house on the sand.

I believed the stories. I knew the wind was going to blow harder than I had ever experienced before. Yet I could not accept that Ellison was motivated by ego or sadism, as a lot of people seemed to think. I could not imagine that the man whose work I admired actually *enjoyed* shredding people's creations and being widely perceived as a monster. Behind the apparent harshness, I thought, must lie a commitment to creativity, honesty, art—a commitment to the *writing*—well, either that, or he was an astounding asshole.

I respect strongly held convictions and applaud the capacity to speak on them without hesitation. In my years of taking writing classes and participating in critiquing groups, I have appreciated most those thoughtful, perceptive teachers and colleagues who could cut to the chase without sugar-coating their opinions. Pain can be useful; these people have always been the most helpful of critics, and I often wished that I dared to be more like them.

In my writer's heart, I hoped that hurricane Harlan would blow all the trash off my beach and leave my house standing . . . and I feared that I might have to rebuild entirely or perhaps even abandon the wreckage for life inland. Either seemed possible. After all, I built this house myself from the raw materials lying around and the distant tutoring of a few accomplished carpenters, and it had never been through such an elemental test before. I tried to be prepared for anything.

One student, Matt Rotundo, summed up Harlan week this way: "With a grateful smile on my face, I say working professionally with Harlan Ellison is like getting a chainsaw enema—may not be pleasant but it gets rid of the shit." While Ellison did not burn anyone's manuscript in front of our class, there were some intense moments. "The problem is you're doing such fucking stupid idiot *crap*. This present tense son of a bitch shit. How many times do you have to be told? The present tense is obtrusive."

"[This story] is such utter bullshit that we ought to whip you with chains."

" . . . in the first percentile of really awful titles ever written by anyone in the history of literature."

"There's not one moment of real life in this story."

Caustic ridicule, hurled epithets, repeated threats. Yelling. Tears. Pain. And a great deal of laughter and warmth and truth. My suspicions proved correct: The man does not enjoy ripping into people's work when he *knows* it hurts. He honors his own beliefs, and he does so for the writing, for what matters, for art. He teaches as he creates, and as he lives, honestly, unblinkingly, and passionately. He risks all—and he truly does not care whether you like him or not. His duty to you as a student takes precedence over everything else.

Ellison does not lecture about writing or art; he teaches by critiquing stories. Nothing is too small or too large for comment, and as he says, "I have a very low tolerance level for irritating bullshit." We heard a lot about irritating bullshit: grammatical errors such as the wrong preposition or verb tense or pronoun; awkward word choices and poor sentence structure and bad paragraph breaks; repeated words and redundancies and "schoolgirl syntax." Sophomoric errors like these damage the trust we must earn from the reader. While some writers think of these details as minor, Ellison points to a quote from Michelangelo: "Trifles make perfection and perfection is no trifle."

We also heard about our lazy reliance on computers and word processors.

"Folks, you are putting your faith in the devil-god, and it's going to jerk you around. Someday it will bite you. It will lose you an entire novel; it will have your manuscripts looking [imbecilic]. For godsakes, don't fall into the thrall of a piece of machinery. Stay human. Stay connected to your work. Be aware of what it *looks* like. I hope that message will get across to you if nothing else I say this week does."

Yes, it got through to me. I rely on my computer—I wouldn't make a living writing and editing these days without one—but I'm scribbling this out on paper with the "bloody end of [my] goddamn index finger." (Smile, Harlan.) I'm not sure that it helps much, and I get cramps in my hand, but I also took to heart the advice to read my printouts over and over and over again—aloud—after I found, too late, a clumsy phrase in one of the manuscripts I submitted during Ellison's week.

Another student, Morgan Hua, wrote this: "Harlan happens! Harlan will either make you a better writer or destroy you. After one week, most of his students improved remarkably. Under the extreme pressure, the few who had flaws cracked." Although I think "destroy you" is hyperbole, the pressure affected all of us one way or another. Some people refined their writing overnight, some struggled with their private demons, and one man left the workshop entirely after meeting Ellison the first evening.

Ellison told us that night that he knew what was in our secret hearts. Body language, he later said, "reveals everything, and as a writer, if you know body language, you will have characterization endlessly. You can walk into a room and you'll see the way people are sitting, or the way they look at you, or the way they respond or the inflection of their voice. . . . If you want to be a good writer, all you have to read are the Sherlock Holmes stories. They are based upon observing." He claimed he could tell, just by looking at us, which of us thought he was god, which of us thought he was an asshole. Ellison chose to directly question three of the twenty students in the

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room—basic stuff such as, “What do you do for a living? Why are you here at the workshop?” The first of these three people simply left that night and never returned to class.

I could speculate on exactly what his motives were, but obviously something about Ellison’s manner so threatened the student that he anticipated unpleasant results. As Plato put it, “They deem him their worst enemy who tells them the truth.” One thing was obvious from the moment we met him: Ellison would tell us the truth as he saw it, without hesitation.

He taught me this: We have a duty as writers to be honest with our readers, and we also have a responsibility, when we enter into a contract with our colleagues to workshop stories together, to tell the truth. Ellison said in class, “I learned early on that to lie to people about their abilities is not to be kind. People who don’t have it should be spending their lives doing things that will bring them pleasure and rewards and approbation. Being dishonest is for you, it’s not for them. It’s because you don’t want to deal with their bad feelings.”

Ellison wrote in 1990, “You *cannot* discourage a real writer . . . Break a real writer’s hands, and s/he will tap out a story with feet or nose.” Writing is tough. If a writer can be stopped by a critic—who is, after all, a fallible human being like the rest of us—then the right stuff isn’t there in the first place.

In any writing class, the students are the least predictable element in the mix—sometimes when you make stew, you have to go with the ingredients in the cupboard. The time and money involved, for a workshop like *Odyssey*, screen out the frivolous, and the application process weeds those who cannot string together a coherent sentence. Beyond that, all bets are off. Students in our class ranged in age from seventeen to fifty and in experience from almost none to English degrees and publishing credits. A few could have used a refresher course in grammar and punctuation, and everyone needed improvement in some

area. All who stuck it out were imaginative, enthusiastic, and dedicated enough to carefully critique dozens of stories; but there was no way to foresee how we would respond to the intensity of the experience or to each other. As Ellison remarked after a series of emotionally charged situations, whatever else happened that week, life was lived.

He also said a workshop like *Odyssey* resembles an encounter group—we became temporary family, revealing our deep psyches to one another, on the page and more immediately face to face. We went there to refine our writing process, but many of us left with new knowledge about ourselves, about truth, about the human heart.

Six-week workshops aren’t for everyone. You have to be damn serious about the work to spend the time and money, to disrupt your life, to face critical readers day after day for so long. Not necessarily serious about making money at writing—as Ellison took care to tell us, few people make a good living at this trade—but you must be passionate, dedicated, perhaps a little tetchy. When you take such a step, you proclaim to your world that this matters to you. Hard to go back after that. It’s much easier to keep writing in your spare time, read a few books about mastering prose, take classes, hang out with a critiquing group. Then, if you don’t succeed, you can say it’s just a hobby anyway. But go away for six weeks to study with adepts like the gang of visitors at *Odyssey* ‘98, and people will expect more. *You* will expect more, and there are no guarantees of achievement. That’s a big risk.

There are others. Some alumni from the previous two years of the workshop returned to Manchester during our last week there, for what they called TNEO—The Never-Ending *Odyssey*—a week of discussions and critiquing. We met them at a reception one evening, where several of them warned us about PODS (they seem to like acronyms), or Post-*Odyssey* Depression Syndrome. Writing came harder for some of the graduates when they went home from the workshop. Studying all the elements of

successful fiction in a short time, plus having your words intensely criticized, can be overwhelming; once the editor part of the brain begins to work, you can have trouble shutting it up long enough to get the words on paper. Such difficulty happens to most writers occasionally, but it is another danger to be prepared for if you are contemplating attending a workshop.

Bear in mind, as well, that not every writer has the mental shielding necessary to tolerate profound analysis of the work. If you have never encountered professional criticism, face to face, or if you recognize a tendency to be defensive, think twice before investing in a long workshop at this stage. Even if the instructors are gentle, nurturing, and kind, your fellow students will come from a variety of backgrounds and bring dissimilar philosophies to their critiquing. You should have at least some experience in sifting through the skills and biases of other writers in order to uncover what is most beneficial to you in their responses; barring that, you must have self-confidence, emotional endurance, and at least a snippet of courage. Realistic expectations help, as well—if you go in with an all-or-nothing attitude, be prepared to deal with the fallout. Workshops can be hellish, frustrating, and distressing; they can also be uplifting, inspiring, and charged with the dynamic exchange of ideas and insights. Results can depend largely on what you are ready to absorb.

At *Odyssey*, I found devoted traveling companions, assembled the tools to build a sturdy bus, and developed map-reading skills—all of which will make my continuing trip more pleasant, if not easier. I trust more: my talent, perspective, and ability to guide myself and the reader safely along the road. I learned that not only must I *make* the map, I have to clear the path—and I can.

I believe this: “It is not enough merely to love literature, if one wishes to spend one’s life as a writer. It is a dangerous undertaking on the most primitive level. For, it seems to me, the act of writing with serious intent involves enormous personal risk. It entails the ongoing cour-

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age for self-discovery. It means one will walk forever on the tightrope, with each new step presenting the possibility of learning a truth about oneself that is too terrible to bear." Harlan Ellison said that in 1981, and I keep the words posted over my writing desk. I want to continue taking that risk and finding that courage, every single day.

If writing is a journey into meaning, I head on more certain than ever that there is no resting place where I will say my travels are over. Yet I am no longer alone. I am connected in mind and spirit with the writers who risked all before me and with the ones who struggle alongside. When my courage falters, I will feel them there, exploring with me the heart of human experience.

Odyssey is held each summer at New Hampshire College, a shabby but friendly campus on the banks of the Merrimack River just outside Manchester, NH, about an hour's drive from Boston. This year's writer-in-residence will be Dan Simmons. For more information on the workshop, Jeanne Cavelos, and how to apply, see the *Odyssey Website* at <http://www.nhc.edu/odyssey/> and Jeanne Cavelos's *Website* at <http://www.sff.net/people/jcavelos/>. You can join the Odyssey mailing list by sending a SASE to Odyssey, 20 Levesque Lane, Mont Vernon, NH 03057.

1998 Odyssey Participants on Ellison.

About Harlan I would say—probably the most intense week of my life. Harlan has an incredible amount of energy. He came in like a tornado and worked us all into the ground. He devoted every waking moment to the class and the students—and there were very few sleeping moments for him or any of us that week. —Jeanne Cavelos

Working with Harlan Ellison is a lot of fun but a lot of pain, perfectly balanced on a scale. "Bad DC Sgt Rock comic in space" summed up my story, and it was

all true, every word. Thank you, Unca Harlan. —Stacy Dooks

Harlan blows in like an Ohio cyclone. Profane, aggressive, disconcerting, he is also passionate. He does not suffer fools gladly, but most of us knew his reputation. Bravely, or insanely, twenty of us convened in Manchester to learn at the feet of a master. He demands our best work, deprives us of sleep, shatters egos. Imagine Dr. Mengele conducting EST training on acid.

Yet he is also charming, a born storyteller, raconteur, entertainer. He shares highly personal stories, makes himself available to us at all hours, drives himself no less fiercely than he drives us.

In one rapid-fire week he is gone, leaving us as twitchy as troops too long under barrage. Like veterans of Ypres, we are shell-shocked, exhausted, forever changed. Yet the writing I produced that week is the best I have ever done.

Harlan's criticism can be damning, but it is honest and generally on target. His praise is infrequent, but cherished for its very rarity. Was it an easy week? Certainly not. Would I do it again? In a minute. —Rita Oakes

He's a sweetheart. It ought to be illegal. When he puts his mind to it, he is terrifyingly charming. —Sharon Keir

Anyone who's heard a Harlan Ellison lecture will find it easy to imagine what it's like to listen as he tears apart a story written by one of your friends. You cringe in sympathy, ashamed of yourself for feeling glad that it's not you who's got his full attention.

But in a workshop, sooner or later it *will* be you sitting in the hot seat. I made the mistake of sending him an initial story that I knew possessed more than the usual share of problems, a foolish move when dealing with someone with zero tolerance for fools.

It hurt to be told publicly, loudly, and at length that my tale was "weak and spavined" and that its incoherent plot "never connected events with cause and effect." All that, I'd sensed already. But

it *really* hurt when Harlan looked me right in the eye and said that it was "emotionally dishonest."

Bulls-eye! Found out.

A man who's been writing for forty years, who's possibly unable to be dishonest, cannot be bullshitted. Not by me, at any rate.

I wrote four more stories before the workshop finished and hope to write hundreds more. They *will* be as emotionally honest as I can make them. —Lea C. Braff

At first I didn't like him, but then I did, and I learned a lot from him. He was an honest fellow. —Stephen Chambers

Spending a week with Harlan Ellison is like undergoing a week of cult indoctrination. —Carrie Vaughn

God, it was like being flayed and enjoying it. —Richard Bradford

Considering his disabilities and Susan having to push Harlan around in his wheelchair, I was deeply moved by how expressive he is for a man without a tongue. I learned a lot from Harlan Ellison when I saved his life. The entire Odyssey Workshop was a tremendous experience. —Rob Jones

A simple man, easy to please. —Steven Prete

That week, a few people were too brittle—they shattered like glass and collapsed when the pressure found a flaw. Others grew too large for our self-imposed boundaries and shattered them the way a hatchling shatters its shell. It's cold outside that shell, it's sometimes harsh, it's always surprising, and we are very much on our own far too suddenly. But the thing to remember is that, despite the occasional hard whack with a sharp beak, it takes an essentially nurturing presence to get the bird to break the shell. —Walt Cuirle



The Secession

Lauren P. Burka

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Gareth vaulted the dead third rail of the elevated train track and slipped through a rip in the fence. The city smelled of oil and asphalt, burnt things and dirty water. A search-light spat at irregular intervals, subverting the warm night into something razor-sharp and cold, laying bare a skyline no longer one of the brightest in the world. Shattered towers loomed overhead, their splintered glass yielding to any more forceful breeze.



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The transit platform was wet and pitted. In places the concrete had fallen away into the steaming street below, threatening the unwary with a broken ankle. From beneath came the sound of booted feet. Peering through a large hole, Gareth spotted two curfew patrols in Army fatigues. He felt a moment of dizzying temptation. No one ever looks up, not even soldiers in hostile territory. Though Gareth carried no gun, he was more than certain he could kill these two. Add them to Kel's substantial honor guard. But no, he would be a responsible insurgent and report back to Command on the other side of the Charles.

His run had been successful, at least. Gareth had confirmed troop positions and delivered money and medical supplies to the loyalists in occupied Boston. The medical supplies had been traded from Quebec for recreational drugs. Some of the drugs would finally wind up in California, where supplies were running low after the Berkeley executions. Free enterprise at work. The only bad news was a confirmation on the death of the captured agent, but such losses were expected. Lee would be pleased. He'd probably get off of Gareth's back for an entire two days.

When the patrol had passed, Gareth dropped to street level. In repose he was passably handsome, if quiet to the point of being cold. In motion, as then, his body took on an exquisite grace. He could walk a tight wire or juggle explosives. During the first six months he had learned to snap a man's neck with one hand, a skill which well served his present avocation.

The cat-growl of an engine overhead broke the silence, rising to a shriek as the fighter pilot banked sharply over the river. Even with a tensely-negotiated truce in effect, the New England Republics weren't about to let the Feds forget who owned Hanscom Air force Base.

Gareth squeezed between boarded storefronts. The way back lay through a maintenance corridor beneath the Haymarket, parallel to the Green Line. It would bring him perilously close to the border of Somerville, the town the Feds had reduced to craters in response to the insurgency's nuclear bomb bluff. No one would have tried that, Gareth mused bitterly, had Kel been alive. Nor did anyone particularly miss Somerville.

The Common was off bounds, campground for the occupying forces. A fitting sacrifice to the new revolution, Gareth thought, and cut into the ruins of the financial district. The store windows there had all been smashed just after the battle. The banks were empty, their electronic billions wired to safer climes. Without the justification of money, the overbearing late 20th architecture seemed all rather ponderous and plain.

Gareth scanned the street ahead for sound and movement. Finding none, he dashed beneath the broken wire of a traffic light and skidded to a sudden halt against the needle-thin muzzle of a rail gun.

"You're out after curfew, citizen."

A matching pressure of gun settled into place against Gareth's left kidney. A split second late, the icy shock of adrenaline flooded his veins, making him shake. Everyone makes a mistake, eventually.

"I was going for a walk. It's hot. The air-conditioner doesn't

work. Someone shut off the electricity," he finished, staring accusingly at the white smear of face beneath the helmet.

"Your I.D., please."

Gareth shrugged. "Not on me."

He jumped as the other soldier whipped a cable tie around his wrist. Once his hands were bound, they patted him down with intimate attention, nearly causing his stomach to heave. Gareth hated being touched. But by then they had found his radio.

"Nice radio," one of them commented.

"Thanks. I bought it on sale at Shack."

The two soldiers glanced at each other over Gareth's head.

Even Gareth couldn't duck with his hands cuffed behind his back, not with a gun aimed for his heart. The blow snapped his head around and almost made him fall. The cool part of his mind was taking inventory. There was no suspicious trickle of blood, so the eardrum wasn't broken. Yet. Gareth decided not to say anything else, and figured he was lucky he wasn't black.

The police station was quiet at 3 a.m., stinking of spilled coffee. There were two other curfew violators being processed. Intelligence data had said such were common, and that the people of Boston didn't take kindly to anyone slinging guns and orders at them. Even without the I.D., Gareth would probably get out after a night in jail and some moderate abuse. So Gareth squirmed in the hard wooden chair, trying to keep his arms from falling asleep, watching an hour tick by on the clock, waiting for someone to start asking him questions.

Military personnel came and went through both doors, trading words and donuts with the clericals. Gareth hardly thought to look up when the door opened again, and didn't until he realized that the new arrival was standing over him.

She was tall and trim and wore her hair cut short. Her clothes were civilian, but with a military I.D. conspicuously pinned to her shirt. Her wide, brown eyes regarded him with an air of smugness, and, in fact, of victory.

"Alexandra Elias," he said.

Alexandra smiled.

Something inside Gareth snapped. He launched himself out of the chair and would have struck her head-first if the M.P. hadn't clubbed him over the back with a nightstick. Something else inside him snapped, this time a rib. He hit the ground screaming.

"Traitor!" he cried. "I'll have your heart!"

Gareth choked to silence as pain cut short his breath. One of Alexandra's feet tapped, and he wondered briefly if she would kick him. But she was never the sort to be vindictive, and she was only turning away from him, towards the door.

"Take him downtown," she said. "I'll meet you there."

Alexandra Elias had the distinction of being the only one of any gender in Cambridge Command who had successfully laid Gareth Holloway.

Most of the insurgents took sex seriously, at least as long as their condom supply held out. With life reduced to an alternation of boredom and terror, the brief and desperate pleasure of a coupling on the floor became the only real diversion from approaching death. Their trysts were sterile, producing neither lasting relationships nor children. Who would

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want a child in such a world?

For Gareth, life had always been boredom and terror, and the state of war brought no change. In fact, he thrived upon this confirmation of his world view. He felt no need to deceive himself with pleasure, or subject his skin, the thin barrier between himself and the rest of the world, to the hostile pressure of a touch.

Inevitably the first rejected propositions had bred curiosity, then a sudden fever of interest. Cambridge Command regarded Gareth as a greater challenge even than Lee, and that was saying something. Gareth had cringed from the notoriety and retreated behind a meticulous shield of shyness.

Alexandra was sharing a sleep shift with him in Forward Command in the basement of Building 13. Sleep was hard to come by, so they sat up talking about MIT back before it became a battle zone.

She touched him.

It was meticulously planned, he figured afterwards. Alexandra took his face in her hands with a deliberate slowness that telegraphed every fractional movement, leaving no doubt in either mind that Gareth knew and consented. He sank into a sweetness so sharp it hurt him, delighted against his better judgement that someone had come in to find him. He tried to keep his eyes open, but a languid warmth was weighing them closed.

"You don't need to look," she said, brushing his lids with the tip of a finger.

The kiss she gave him surprised her with the knowledge that Gareth wasn't, after all, a novice. She shortly thereafter had his clothes off, and then her own. Gareth lay beneath her at last, with a pile of someone's laundry to cushion his back from the concrete floor. He was lost in the friction of their bodies when he made the mistake of opening his eyes.

Hers wasn't the look of someone giving a gift, but of making a theft. If he hadn't been so close to climax, he might of thrown her off. But as it was her grip was firm. Gareth came into her, biting back the sound, turning his face away to try to shield at least that moment of greatest weakness.

He didn't say anything or look at her as they dressed. Shortly afterwards she gave up trying to touch him. The pile of laundry belonged to Kentwood. It had been clean laundry before they'd had the poor manners to fornicate upon it, and Kentwood made sure the whole Command knew about it and his displeasure. But the next week Alexandra was sleeping with Kentwood, and after that he left Gareth quite alone. Which was fortunate, because an assassin is the wrong person to have angry with you.

Tucked in the back of the car between two M.P.'s, Gareth had too much time to think. He was dead when Alexandra first laid eyes on him in the station. That his death would be preceded by some unpleasant technicalities hadn't occurred to him when he started screaming. Gareth knew things that

Alexandra didn't. He could probably expect interrogation. This, of course, meant that Lee was probably right about how immature hotheads like Gareth couldn't be trusted in a real emergency. Fortunately, Gareth was unlikely to survive to face Lee's superior sneer.

The car pulled up in front of a former mental institution within sight of the Charles. The building was constructed like a Gothic fortress in concrete, complete with spiralled entrance ramps and iron grillwork railings. There were plenty of alcoves from which to stage a fighting retreat. Not that Gareth would get the chance.

The elevator was out, so they had to climb. By the second floor, Gareth was moaning at every step, and by the third he was having trouble standing.

A small contingent of Marines was loafing in the lobby area. The air dripped with the smell of their bodies. One of them had his rail gun apart on the table and was replacing the sprung taser wire. The officer behind the desk looked up as Gareth's guard dogs saluted.

"Has he been stripped yet?" the officer asked.

"Nope."

"Well then, do it now."

Unpleasant technicalities. It's always harder if you fight it. That was the first thing taught in Surviving Interrogation 102. Pay attention; there will be a quiz later.

They cut his hands free first. He hadn't noticed they were bleeding. Gareth thought they would ask him to strip, and didn't know if he could do it in front of them. He pondered the cost of disobedience. Then, as if he were a doll, they began to pull off his clothes.

One black T-shirt, which would have read "Chocolate No. 3 (Dark)" had he been wearing it right-side out. Gareth risked a glance down at the purple blotch spreading along his cracked rib.

One black pair of Levis. No underwear. At the touch of the hot and clammy air upon his bare skin, Gareth began to shake again. The first M.P. missed the picks sewn into the seam of the jeans. The second one didn't.

The shoes were trickier, but the M.P.'s were alert now. The laces were polytwist cords, each of which could unwind to a length of a hundred feet. Gareth had bought them from a military surplus store. Unlacing the shoes, the M.P. tucked the cords into his pocket.

"Now for the fun part," one of them said. Behind them some of the Marines were chuckling. Gareth heard the snap of a rubber glove.

"Open your mouth."

Gareth took a second too long. One of the men seized him and, with surprising ease, pried his jaw open. A latex-covered finger probed around and behind his teeth, then as an afterthought jabbed at his throat. He gagged.

"I guess we don't got a cocksucker." Laughter. "He'll learn."



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Now bend over and grab the edge of the desk. I said grab it!"

He strained forward, wringing white hot fire out of his side.

Please, he thought, by Kel's soul, let me not struggle.

Many a bitter insult had been leveled at the Boston occupation General, her gender, and her love of surface-to-surface missiles, body cavity searches, and warrantless investigations. It wasn't penis envy, Gareth thought as fingers reached inside him. The General's phallic instruments were unweakened by fatigue or sensation, stone-hard and cold and infinitely superior for the purpose of violation.

Afterwards, they tossed him and his clothes into a cell where he spent the next half hour dry-heaving over the toilet.

The Secessionists in Command had attributed Gareth's touch aversion to childhood physical or sexual abuse. These evils of patriarchy and the degenerate last stages of capitalism were their prime justification for having a war. They were wrong. By the standards of the times, Gareth had lived a profoundly normal childhood.

Only quick action by his mother had saved him from being named John G. Holloway IV. His father brought that up every so often when he needed to distribute blame, as if naming his son John would have predestined him to mediocre obedience and a future in government service. John G. Holloway III, a minor but respected bureaucrat in the Maryland suburbs, would have cringed in horror from the thought of beating children. He never punished, only sought to improve through education and discipline.

"Now Gareth, let's see you write one hundred times, 'I am a slob who will not clean my room.'"

"I am willful and disobedient.' Two hundred times."

"I am a crybaby.' Five hundred times."

Gareth once sat down at his computer and generated exactly one hundred crisply typeset copies of the sentence 'I take no pride in my appearance' and presented them to his father, who then struck him with a belt exactly one hundred times. Neither of them ever tried it again.

His mother watched them with empty eyes, and then forgot to see what went on. There was always another diet or health club to occupy her time. If Gareth thought back, he couldn't remember ever seeing his parents touch.

Gareth learned nothing in school. This is not to say he did poorly. He received mostly A's in a curriculum that only introduced certified adjusted students to potentially subversive topics like calculus. Reading comprehension had just been de-emphasized as the last textbooks were replaced with video instruction as a cost-saving measure. Mostly because it was discouraged, Gareth taught himself higher math and read everything he could find. He absorbed history hyperlibraries and disintegrating science fiction paperbacks, and when he ran out of those, he learned to program computers.

The other children quickly marked him as a troublemaker and brought to bear all the crude powers of adolescent conformity. The teachers, who had also marked Gareth as a troublemaker, did

nothing to protect him. Therefore it would be incorrect to say that Gareth learned nothing in school. He was a stellar student at lying, running and fighting. The only time he got the worst of a battle was when four older boys cornered him in a stairwell. After a trip to the doctor for a concussion, his father treated him to another lecture.

"I don't see why you can't get along with your classmates. If you don't shape up, no one will ever want you, not friends, not a wife, not employers."

After a while, Gareth wore his 'unwanted' label like a shield between him and all the messiness of people. He didn't need people. He had the cold hearts of silicon machines to keep him company. If he needed something a bit more stimulating, there was always danger. He proved it really was possible to circle the Washington Beltway, a journey of sixty-six miles, in under twenty-two minutes, in a fifteen year-old Toyota at that. Much to Gareth's disappointment, the exploit didn't end in a consuming fireball or a trip to jail, either of which would have set him free.

Gareth's father didn't want him to go to college. The government provided service training for free, and with a son in higher education, someone might think that the Holloways were getting above themselves. When the acceptance to MIT came through, however, Gareth's counselor took his father aside. A semester or two would wear him down, and once he failed out, he'd come limping home and sign up gladly for remedial job training.

Or so they thought, until Gareth went home for Christmas.

Gareth hadn't realized how much he hated holidays until he came home. The density of relatives per square foot of living room left no space for breathing. They hugged him, kissed his cheek, and asked him the same empty questions over and over. They acted as if it were their semester, not his, and they had the right to hear every detail, even the parts they wouldn't understand. Gareth had left a precious enclave of people like himself for a house full of aliens.

"Do you have a sweetheart, Gary?" asked his grandmother.

"We'll, I'm seeing this woman. I guess you could call her a sweetheart," he answered, wishing that she wouldn't call him Gary.

"Oh, tell me. What's her name?"

"Larissa."

Larissa was the first person to disprove Father's rule. She didn't know who Gareth was supposed to be, so took him for who he was. Gareth was wanted. He didn't even try to explain that.

"Is she pretty?"

"I think so."

A heavy hand fell on Gareth's shoulder. "Is that why you failed Government?"

Gareth jumped. He hadn't known his father was in the room. "I didn't fail Government. I got a C." A grade you would have been proud of had you got it, he thought. The course load was grindingly difficult, but Gareth still could have got an A in Government, if he hadn't taken so much time on extracurriculars. Lockpicking was much more useful than Government. He didn't

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try to explain that either.

"Don't argue with me."

"I'm not arguing with you. I'm telling you the truth." Gareth shrugged out from under the hand and retreated to the kitchen.

His father followed. "And this woman. You probably don't know anything about her family."

Mother looked up from the cutting board. Her fingers were wrapped tight and white around her knife. "John, please. We have guests."

"Gareth," Father continued, "Where do you usually do your studying?"

"In my room . . ."

"Then why aren't you ever there when I call?"

"Because I switch on the answer when I'm doing work."

Unable to argue with his logic, Father picked a different angle.

"I want you to stop dating, or whatever that is you're doing with Miss Larissa, until you're getting straight A's."

Gareth turned his back to Father, feeling the pressure rise in his skull. Mother was slicing carrots, cutting each little round to exactly the same thickness, as if her life depended on it. As if for the first time, he saw how thin she was.

"Do you ever eat any of the food you cook for him?" he asked.

She glanced up, fearful.

"I see," Gareth continues. "He starves your body and my mind."

Her knife slipped.

Father jumped up shouting. "How dare you! Gareth, go to your room."

Gareth's jaw dropped. "I'm not a child, I'm not feeble-minded, and I'm not going to my room."

A crash made them both jump. Mother was standing over a heap of sliced carrots and broken dishes on the floor, dripping blood from her finger.

"John," she said, her voice shaking with control, "I won't have you ruin Christmas."

"I ruin Christmas! Gareth is the one who. . ."

Gareth could hear them shouting from upstairs. He got on his coat and threw his things back into his suitcase.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Father was in the door to the kitchen. On Gareth's other side, a wall of bewildered, related faces stared out at them, too shocked even to whisper.

"Out."

"Don't you dare take that car. I paid for that car. If you take it, I'll call the police."

"Fine," Gareth said. He pulled the car keys out of his pocket, dropped them on the floor and walked out.

Gareth hitched back to Cambridge in the back of a flat-bed truck. It snowed on the Jersey Turnpike, and he got back to Cambridge with frozen fingers and frozen heart.

Without a parental contribution, there was no way he could

meet his next tuition bill. He took a job, then another, then a semester off. Larissa complained that she never saw him, then when he started making time for her, she stopped answering his calls. When she got accepted to a masters program at Colorado, she left without saying goodbye. His father would have been pleased to know it. No one wants Gareth. Unless they get exactly what they want.

Gareth woke up with a rail gun poking him in the ribs. His head was fuzzy. So was his mouth. He'd been asleep for about five minutes, leaning against the wall.

"Did you have to do that?" he asked.

"Get up," the M.P. told him.

They didn't cuff his hands again. It was a dare, of sorts. Try to escape. Gareth thought about it. He'd have to ditch the shoes, which were flapping loose without laces. By then they had reached the only part of the hospital that still functioned as such. At least, it smelled of alcohol and antiseptic, and the people behind the bolted door wore lab coats and civilian I.D.'s clipped to their collars. The M.P. motioned him into an equipped exam room and then leaned against the door.

Gareth looked around. "What, no magazine?"

"Stop making trouble for yourself. We're doing you a favor, and we can always change our minds."

Gareth sighed and slumped into a chair. The doctor arrived shortly thereafter. His I.D. said 'Brezinski.' He looked rather young to be a doctor, and Gareth figured he had just got out of med school when the war hit. He seemed competent enough, and taped Gareth's ribs so that they didn't hurt unless he took a breath, then swabbed his cut wrists with antiseptic.

"Should I make an appointment to see you next week?" Gareth asked. "Any special instructions?

No contact sports, perhaps?"

Dr. Brezinski looked up the cabinet of bandage supplies. "I'm afraid not."

"Morphine?" Gareth asked hopefully.

"No."

Gareth sat quietly for a moment, looking from the glowering M.P. to the doctor.

"Why do you collaborate?" he asked.

"Because if I didn't, there'd be no one to patch your ribs."

"Does that matter if I'm dead tomorrow?"

"Don't be such a pessimist," interjected the M.P.

Gareth started wondering how the M.P. would look with a broken neck. He gave them both his worst fake smile and let the M.P. prod him back out of the medical area.

Down two floors and over about half a block, the M.P. handed Gareth over to a pair of officers. Those two brought him to a meeting room, where they sat him down and strapped him firmly to the chair by the wrists. Gareth felt a familiar caress as one officer leaned a rail gun against his shoulder.

"It's set for Taser," the officer said. "For your own



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protection.”

They waited. Gareth had thought he couldn't be frightened further. He had been wrong. The flesh of his shoulder was crawling under the gun's touch, and his empty stomach gave fitful twitches.

“At ease.”

The gun moved a hair away from Gareth. He looked up at the two women who had entered the room. One was Alexandra. The other was short and stocky, dressed in military fatigues with General's insignia. Gareth had seen her photo on broadcast news. Her name was Smith, and she commanded the Boston occupation force.

“So we have a field operative from Cambridge,” said Smith. She had taken a seat across the table. Alexandra lounged against the back wall behind the General, her smile faded a bit but still sharp enough to hurt.

“The last one we caught,” continued the General, “died under questioning. We'll try to do a better job with you.”

Gareth said, “I don't know why you're making all this effort to scare me. Alexandra can tell you anything you need to know, if she hasn't already.”

“Except how you get across the river, and who you talk to once you're here.” The General frowned, etching her face with deep lines and shades of gray. “Let's not waste time. Ms. Elias, how do you recommend we proceed?”

Alexandra's body unfolded. She leaned forward, resting the tips of her fingers on the table.

“Traditional methods produce pain, with information as an occasional byproduct. With a neurosynch setup, we produce information.”

“With pain as a side-effect?” Gareth asked.

Smith grinned. The esthetic effect was somewhat less pleasing than her frown. Gareth was abruptly glad he was tied down. Otherwise he'd have to decide which of them to strangle first.

“That's how we killed the last agent. We believe we have the proper calibration now, but we've been hampered by lack of cooperation amongst the medical staff. Something about a Hippocratic oath. Still, science sees the greatest advances at wartime, don't you think?”

Gareth was thinking, indeed. In his last semester at MIT, he had studied under Anderson, who had the original patents on neurosynchronous scan. Gareth had no illusions on how long he'd last if they broke a finger for every question he didn't answer. But neurosynch, a black magic to the layman, was merely an inexact and fallible art to the scientist. Gareth might be able to beat it. If he were lucky, he'd survive without brain damage.

“I'm always happy to do my part for science,” Gareth said.

The General smiled again. “The United States government is always pleased to accept such contributions from its citizens.”

Gareth lay on a hospital bed, examining with drugged interest the cracks in the ceiling. He was strapped down again. An I.V. fed fluids into his left hand, providing the only nourishment he'd had in almost a day. He'd been lucky to

be sedated and not knocked unconscious.

Anderson's experimental neurosynch interface had involved an elaborate system of feedback training. Lacking the time for training, and burdened with uncooperative subjects, the Federal interrogation team was relying on drugs and an enforcement loop. Gareth had watched them out of the corner of his eye loading the enforcement software. It and the minds behind it were his most dangerous opponents, and it helped him to have a visual reference.

One of the interrogation team added something to the I.V. drip. Gareth's senses started to fade, but not before he felt the cold, clammy touch of saline-dipped contacts pressed against his forehead. He recognized the read-pulse from textbook descriptions, a white light that dug in behind his eyes.

The hallway looked a lot like an MIT steam tunnel with doors down both sides. The recall pattern was so smooth and vivid that Gareth had to think hard to keep that drastic discontinuity from making sense.

“Open the door.”

Gareth jumped and turned around to see his father standing there in the tunnel, holding the belt. It was a suitably threatening concept, but if Gareth thought hard, he could fail to believe it. The ‘father’ had no face. It was a generic recognition pattern that Gareth was supposed to supply with details, except he knew better.

“I'm not afraid of you,” he said.

“Open the door.”

This time it was Alexandra holding the belt. He ducked sideways, but not before the buckle caught him across the cheek. By then it was too late to disbelieve. Her outlines were growing more distinct, her smile acquiring feeling. Gareth cowered against the wall, protecting his face with his hands.

“One round for you,” he muttered.

“I said open it.”

“Which door?” Gareth asked, looking out down the hall. The doors all had name plates, but they were written in some sort of cipher.

“Read them,” Alexandra said, clipping his shoulder with the belt.

The pain had an oddly clarifying effect. The door plates snapped into plain English.

“That one.” Alexandra pointed to the door labeled ‘Insurgency Information.’

Gareth bowed his head and walked up to the door with Alexandra close behind him. As he reached for the knob, the one next to it, the one labeled ‘Kel,’ opened and splashed light across the hallway.

“Come in, quickly!”

Gareth ducked Alexandra's swing and sprinted for the door, slamming it shut and bolting it behind him.

“Glad you could make it,” said Kelly Verhave.

Her apartment was lined with books, precious paper covering everything but the windows and doors. One shelf sagged under the weight of computer simulation texts and journals. The stacks under the loft were fiction. One corner held a computer, spin

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tank, and a tangle of phone cord. There was a couch in the other corner. Gareth had slept in it for a month when it was that or turn himself in for remedial training and a shadow life in a government dormitory. Now he had a night-shift job feeding printers and chip-storage readers over at one of the biochem labs in Allston. It was enough to keep him fed and housed, barely.

Kel put down her book, Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, and went to the freezer. She was wearing jeans and a white tank top. Gareth noted without desire the dark of her nipples poking out against the fabric. Her tawny hair was loose, spilling over her shoulders, stirring in the breeze from the window.

"Are you afraid?" she asked.

"Yes."

"I'm always afraid. It's like jumping off the high dive. You get to the very edge and have an overwhelming desire to climb back down. Fortunately, fear has little to do with whether or not you have a good trip."

She dug into the frost in the corner of the freezer and came up with a test-tube. Inside the test tube was a folded piece of plastic wrap containing a small bit of white paper. Kelly pulled it apart into squares.

"Take two," she said. "They're small."

The paper was dry under Gareth's tongue. It tasted exactly like paper and not like anything else. Kel poured a glass of water, took a sip, and handed it to him. He drank, swallowing.

"When does it happen?"

"Not yet."

Kel sat down on the futon. "Try reading something. When you can't read anymore, it's here. Actually, that's not true. I can read, but I've had lots of practice."

Gareth dropped down on the side of the couch out of the sunlight. Kel picked up Thucydides.

"Yet?" he asked.

She looked up. "You may be feeling something, but it's mostly nerves. I'd offer you a backrub, but . . ."

Gareth shook his head fractionally.

"Anyway, you've got a few minutes, so chill."

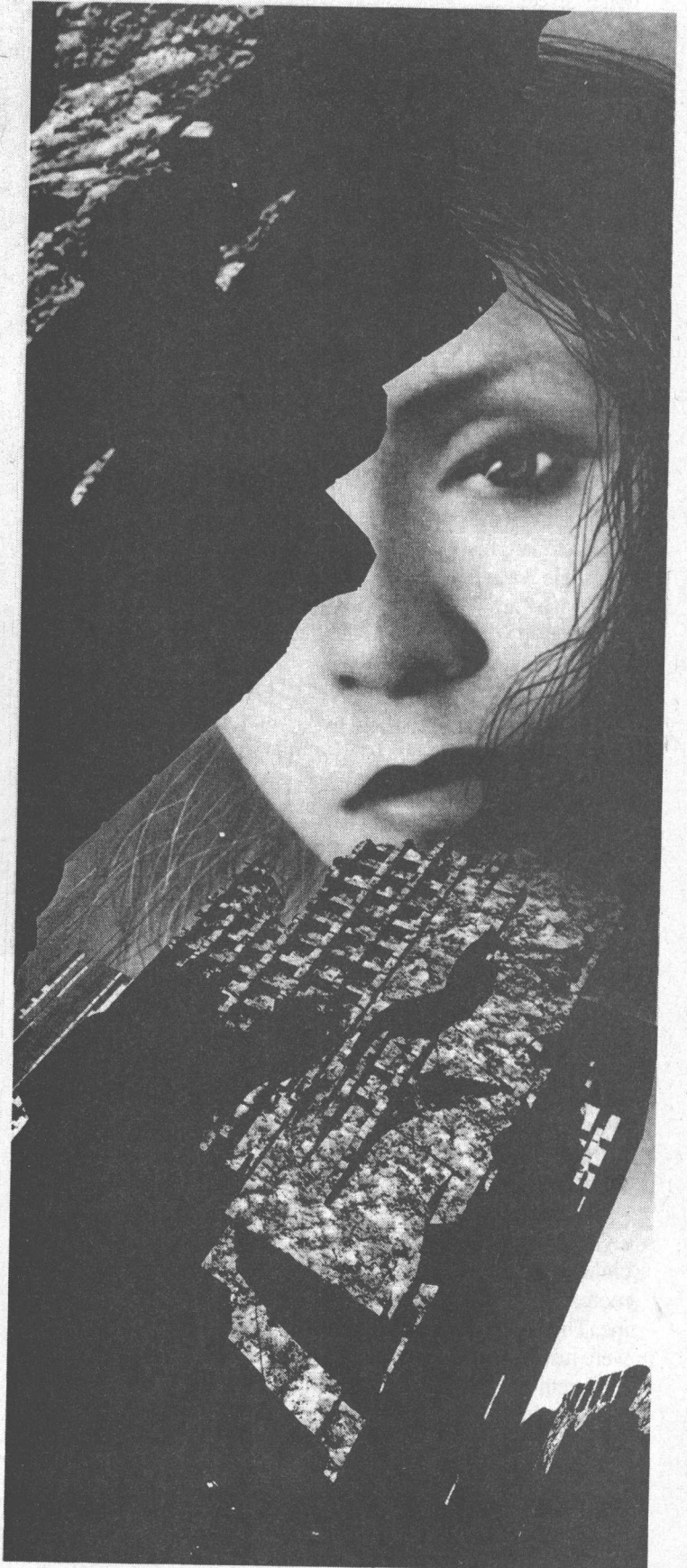
The sun slanted deeper through the window. Gareth edged away on the couch, then sat on the floor. Kel put down her book and rummaged through an overflowing drawer, pulling out a bottle of bubbles. She took out the wand and blew through it, lofting bubbles into the shaft of light.

Gareth watched them fall to the floor and break with tiny pops. Kelly blew another flight of bubbles. They spun, flashing colors that grew brighter and brighter until they smeared, tinting all of the air . . .

"Oh," Gareth said. "Oh wow."

"I wonder if this was more or less fun back before we could fake it with computer animation," Kel said.

Gareth was on his back, swatting at bubbles like a lazy cat. Distracted by the motion of his hand, he rippled his fingers languidly, watching the afterimages. His senses warmed with



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honey sweetness, feathers, and dying sunlight.

"So you going to tell me where you got it?" he asked.

"It's the major funding project for the Secessionist underground."

"No kidding?"

"Well, I'm partially kidding. LSD isn't the most profitable product. Too easy to make, and too many people do, even after the institution of the death penalty. No, we produce some of the coolest designer drugs ever tested or tasted, anything that isn't habit forming. But lots of purists like me want acid for private use. I get some of my best ideas on acid."

"So I guess that makes you a Secessionist?" Gareth's mind was having a hard time gripping the concept of political conflict. Wasn't the world big enough to encompass the myriad human ideas without crowding? The spines of the books on the far wall were sliding into a pattern of digressions in time with the music on the radio.

"Very good. I'll bet you thought I bought all the books and computers on the pay of bagging groceries part time."

Gareth laughed. He'd been doing that frequently in the past hours. He wasn't used to it, and his face was starting to hurt.

"So why are you telling me this now?"

"Because you've eaten of the flesh of the one true god."

"When did you get religion?"

Kel grinned. "I didn't get religion. I am religion. And you're just as much an outlaw as I am now, a traitor to the United States. Don't expect any special consideration for turning me in."

"Is that the only reason why you gave me acid?"

"No. Actually. I thought it might give you pleasure. Does it?"

"That it does."

Gareth stretched, feeling every pressure against his skin like a sexual touch, free of threat or complication. He turned over and looked at the probability graph in the spin tank. It was in four dimensions, three spatial and one time, and it twisted as the fractal program behind it homed in on vital parts and exploded them. His mind slid off the meaning of the information and clung to the ragged edges, shapes and lights. The whole world moves slower under the influence, Gareth noted. He could almost see the blades of the tank turning, giving form to the lasers splashing over them in controlled design.

"What'd you do, run a prediction and figure we'll all be starving in ten years without a revolution?"

"Eight years. Key statistics over the past five years: rate of civil forfeiture up 300%, incarceration up 39%, vaccinations for children down 32%, literacy rate down another 11%. There's more, but I'd have to look it up, and I won't because it depresses me. The U.N. didn't even intervene after the last election. They were just happy to be out of New York when the riots hit."

Gareth considered that. Riots: another unlikely concept.

Kel said, "I'm the navigator on the sea of luck. I sail the Secession."

"So," Gareth said, "can you prove to me that fewer people will die if Secession happens than if it didn't?"

"Hm. You've picked the wrong time to ask me to think. I can talk forever but I won't be able to summarize. I mean, if you go

have a war, you can count N many people who died, and N dollars spent on killing them, and N years of economic devastation before recovery. But how do you count the cost of not having a war? If the U.S. had got into World War II earlier than it did, many millions of people wouldn't have died in the concentration camps. But all of them would be dead by now anyway. Eventually you have to stop calculating and do something. Pardon me, but I think I'm going to be deeply non-verbal for a while."

Gareth rolled over on his stomach and thought. The New England Secessionist Movement had been gaining ground in state legislatures for the last two years. He pictured a line dividing the country, with him and Kel on one side of it, and everyone else, John G. Holloway III, Mother, and Larissa on the other. Right then Gareth was in the most perfect place in the world. He doubted he'd feel that way tomorrow. There would be a war, and he might even help start it, and his father would read about it in the paper and tell everyone he'd told them so.

The first tears sliced him open like knives. Gareth sobbed, burying his face in the futon. Black emotion poured out of him from a spot between his shoulder blades, shook him, dropped him. There would be no climbing back up from that fall. Some time later he caught his breath and blew his nose on the sheets.

Kel was still sitting across from him. She hadn't moved, only clenched her fists at her sides, nailing herself to the floor. Sunlight cut to ribbons by the blinds slanted across her face. A single molten-silver tear rippled on her cheek. As Gareth watched, her hands unclenched and she placed them palm-up and open in her lap.

Afterwards, months afterwards, Gareth began to understand how much it cost her not to take him in her arms. But just then Gareth was having his first lucid moment since he walked through the door. If this was a memory, couldn't he replay it any way he wanted?

Gareth struggled up to his knees.

"Kel, touch me."

He reached for her. But Kel's face was fading, tearing up the middle like a rotted video tape. The smell of her body evaporated into cold metal and ozone. The tear on her face glowed brighter and brighter, and then Gareth was staring up into a fluorescent light, screaming.

How embarrassing. Screaming at a memory. Gareth swallowed it. A hand touched his head, stroking his cheek, circling the outside of his ear.

"Program reset. Calibration for resistance level nine. Second pass commencing in thirty seconds."

The hand grew more distinct. Gareth forced his eyes back open and stared up at Alexandra. He considered the possibility that he was still under two levels of hallucination, and discarded it. In that time, he hadn't yet had the misfortune to see Alexandra Elias smile. Gareth wondered if she would get to keep his body after the interrogation team had broken his mind.

How fitting.

"Let me tell you the way it's going to be," said the Marine. He prodded Gareth in the ear with a revolver for emphasis.

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"You're a long way from home, and we're bored."

Behind them circled the rest of the troop. The reek of their sweat clogged his nostrils.

"We're going to give you a running start. If you make it back to Cambridge, you're free. If not, we're going to give you another strip search. A much more thorough one. Got it?"

The mouth of the gun pressed against Gareth's lips, ground on his teeth, until he opened. He tasted grease and steel. Then abruptly the Marine pushed him away, and Gareth ran.

He knew the way back to Cambridge. They'd never catch him.

Then a meta-logic snapped into place. It was a more basic strategy this time, and it had a grip on the simpler parts of his mind. Gareth had to run. He had no doubt what would happen if he didn't, or that the neurosynch memories would be just as vivid as real ones. But if he led the Federals back to Cambridge and showed them that knowledge, everyone would lose. It was time to change the rules.

So when he found the door, he opened up a hatch on one side and started dialing time coordinates. Footsteps pounded behind him, and he could almost feel hot breath on the back of his neck. The display flashed, reading a time six months in the past. Gareth opened the door and stepped through. He slammed the door, cutting off the howl of rage behind him.

The door had been spraypainted with the letters "IHTFP." Someone with different handwriting had provided a translation for the non-MIT people. It read, "I Hate This Fucking Place." The command center guard checked Gareth's face. There were no I.D.'s, and they all had to know each other by sight. Gareth felt through his feet the dull pound of artillery a half-mile away.

Communications was closest to the door. Alexandra and Dover had a bank of cellular phones, two-way radios, and an Internet link all up and running. Communications was designed for maximum redundancy. Someone in another room was pulling in reports off the media, extracting anything useful from press releases and television news coverage.

Alexandra looked up at Gareth and smiled. He wondered why that smile should make him uneasy.

Dover made a grab for a ringing phone.

"That was the reserve unit we have stationed at Logan Airport. They're falling back."

Hsing, the tactician, slammed his fist down on the table and swore. The computer projecting a battle map jumped about an inch in the air and came down beeping. "I didn't think the Feds could do it. Even with radar satellites, they were still getting lost in Boston. Should I pull a unit in from the Charles to reinforce them?"

On one side of the battle map the casualty count graph continued its slow trip towards the ceiling.

Kel looked up from the spin tank. Her face was pale and shadowed; she'd had three hours of sleep in the past three days.

Most of Command were no better rested, staying conscious on the strength of quarter-hits and black coffee.

"In another month," she said, "we could have held them. But we didn't have that luxury to put in fortifications. We have only six reserve units in the city, and a handful of National Guard. It's not worth the losses."

Lee nodded. "They can just have Logan. They won't try sending any more helicopters after us. It's amazing what you can do with a crate of Stinger missiles."

Lee had been doing no drugs but antacids, which he drank by the pint. He had the worst job in Command. Before the last, doomed Secession plebiscite, he'd given up being human. Other people dressed him, fed him, told him when to sleep. An armed guard accompanied him to the bathroom. Lee hadn't seen sunlight in a month. He was Cambridge's elected general, and he didn't expect to live to retire.

The door guard called out, "Hey, we've got food. Donations from the civs."

"What's for dinner?" Gareth asked.

"Ten dozen Peking ravioli, two dozen garlic pizzas, and two gallons of Belgian chocolate ice cream from Toscanini's. Tosci's also sent over their espresso machine with supplies, and someone to run it."

"Great," said Dover. "I want an I.V."

Gareth took a carton of ravioli and sat down next to Kel. He popped a dumpling in his mouth and wiped hot grease from his cheek.

"You should sleep," he said. "I can handle the odds for a couple of hours."

She nodded. "I will. Or at least, if I don't go lie down, I'll be sleeping in my chair, and I may as well be comfortable."

Dover called out, "We have a television report that the Governor has been arrested. Wait. Our troops confirm it."

Lee said, "Well, have Mikota call the media and put a positive spin on it."

Mikota appeared from behind a split-window screen displaying the complete speeches of Patrick Henry on one side and Samuel Adams on the other. "I haven't even finished the last load of propaganda you wanted. Could you go put a positive spin on someone else for a bit?"

Alexandra looked up from the radio. "Our troops are falling back across the Harvard Bridge. They request orders to stand or run."

Kel smeared sweat across her forehead. "This morning we had a fifty-three percent chance of losing Boston. Now it's up to sixty-eight. We have the rest of Massachusetts nailed down north of 128. The Cape is ours. The New Hampshire coast is secure. We can afford this loss. Pull all troops back to Cambridge and start blowing bridges."

For a moment, no one in Command said a word. Lee stared at the ceiling, re-envisioning an entire Insurgency plan without Boston.



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"Make it so," he said.

Gareth had lent a hand with the demolition plans for the Harvard Bridge. An enthusiastic cadre of MIT engineers had drawn a line in thermite around every support between the 200th and the 320th Smoot marks, triggered with excessive amounts of magnesium. Explosives were set to blow the bridge deck sideways into the Charles.

"We have the clear from bridge defense. They're back and firing from shore."

Kel got up and walked towards the door. "I'm going to bed. See you in a couple of hours."

Hsing pulled the cover off the detonation switch and started punching buttons.

"Command?" came a voice over a radio. "Blow it already."

"We just did."

"No you didn't."

"Yes we did."

"Shit."

"Eit."

Lee shouted, "Quit your fucking arguing and go figure out why it didn't blow, O.K.?"

Kel stumbled back from the door towards her tank and started punching up a new set of 5-D graphs.

"Gareth?" she said. "Do you know what our chances are if the Feds get into Cambridge?"

Gareth stared at the graph and tapped Hsing on the shoulder. "If it's the charges themselves, there's not a damn thing I can do, except tell you to try and touch off the fuses with rifles. I'm going to hope it's the detonation transmitter."

He bolted for the door, with Kel close behind him. She was headed for the surface, not for the rest area. Gareth didn't stop to ask her what she was doing.

The wire ran down the hall from the Command center, paused at a set of switch boxes, then proceeded up to the roof to the antenna. Gareth pulled out a flashlight and began to examine the switches. Each piece was large and simple so that it wasn't likely to break. The fault could be in the antenna, in which case Gareth was about to have to climb onto the roof.

One switch. Gareth felt a sudden rush of anger. Whoever had set up the detonator had left one switch open, whether by design or stupidity. He made a mental note to hunt that person down, and threw the switch.

The door guard nodded to Gareth and let him step inside.

"Did it go?" he asked.

No one answered.

Dover was speaking into the radio. "Can I have confirmation on that?"

"We're quite certain," spat the voice in return. "I'm sorry. There was nothing we could do."

Dover threw the radio on the floor.

"Did it go?" Gareth asked.

Dover looked up. "It went. But before it did, Kel went running out past our shore guard and onto the bridge. She met the Feds halfway across. They didn't fire. She just stood there talking to them for a good minute and a half. We very probably

owe her Cambridge."

Gareth sat down and stared into the spin tank, tracing Kel's last probability equations.

"She was on the bridge when it went?" he asked.

"That's what we've been told."

The graph blurred. The final analysis at the bottom came into focus:

Feds cross/Verhave alive : 12.16%

Feds stopped/Verhave dead : 49.81%

"We checked the detonators on all of the other bridges. They were similarly disarmed, which means we were bluffing when we told the Feds we'd blow the others if they moved. Now we are not bluffing."

Gareth stared down at Lee. The Secession General was seated behind a desk in an attempt to look imposing. It would have almost worked if parts of his hair weren't sticking up straight. The imposing part was therefore delegated to Kentwood. The assassin hovered behind Lee, his hand resting on his knife.

"I didn't set them."

"I know you didn't. Cheney did."

"So ask him whether it was an accident."

Lee got up and paced. "We can't. He fell down the stairs and broke his neck this morning. Where have you been, Holloway?"

"Sleeping."

Lee snorted. "Staff don't need sleep. As of now I'm relieving you of Probability Navigation."

"I'm the only one who can run Kel's machines, and you know it. Am I on trial for something?"

"Holloway, I don't like you. I don't like having young people in positions of responsibility. I have no patience for little Dungeons and Dragons freaks who could hardly wait for the end of civilization and now have nothing better to do than whine about how they want a hot bath."

"I've never played Dungeons and Dragons, and even if I had, I don't see how that would make me any less useful than your assassin who refuses to carry a gun."

"It's a matter of subtlety," said Kentwood softly. "Something you wouldn't understand."

"And this is a war," Gareth said, chilled to the bone by Kentwood's stare. Lee wasn't stupid. All three of them knew that Cheney hadn't fallen. One word from Lee and Kentwood would take Gareth outside and cut his throat. "We aren't supposed to be subtle. We're supposed to win."

"And that," said Lee, "is exactly what I'm doing. I'll have Marshall take over Probability. He'll be learning Kel's machines, and you're going to help him do it. Our current truce with the Feds is too fragile to have amateurs giving us bad advice. Understood?"

"Perfectly. Are you dismissing me?"

"No, I'm sure we'll find some use for you. Eventually."

"Eventually. But by then the information will be useless. Calibrate for resistance level ten. Thirty seconds."

"Gareth."

It was Alexandra's voice. Gareth saw no reason to open his

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eyes.

"You still have time to be reasonable. The neurosynch has a much better grasp of your thoughts now. The next pass will probably disconnect you permanently from your baseline reality."

"Would that be such a bad thing?" he muttered.

"They will reconnect you to anything they want. A more cooperative personality, perhaps. You'll spend the rest of your life in a schizophrenic universe of Interrogation's selection."

"This is, of course, a radical contrast to what would happen if I were to break for you."

A finger stroked his eyelid. "I always liked your determination."

"Gareth."

He closed his eyes tighter and waited for the next context shift.

"Gareth. Please, wake up."

That wasn't Alexandra. Gareth looked.

"Larissa."

She leaned over and kissed him on the lips. He inhaled sharply, pulling against the restraints.

"Priorities," she said, and began to unbuckle his wrists. "Someone get the needle out of him, please."

One of the staff stepped forward, disconnected the I.V., and taped Gareth's hand.

Gareth sat up, too dizzy to see for a moment, and pulled the contacts off of his forehead. Larissa put her arm around him. She'd cut her hair, he noticed. He hadn't remembered her eyes were brown. It had been a long time.

"Why did you come back now?" he asked.

"It was the first chance I got. I'm so glad I made it in time."

Gareth swung his legs over the side of the bed. "This can't be real."

"Do you doubt me? I've always wanted you."

Steadying himself on a bank of monitors, Gareth looked back at her. The disbelief was fading like a bad headache. "Do you still want me?"

"Of course."

Larissa stepped forward and took his hands. Her wide eyes were moist.

"You won't leave again?"

"Never. They've promised me I could stay."

There was no sense of defeat, only of acceptance. What reality could Gareth prefer to this one?

He slipped his arms around her, feeling the soft curve of her body fit against his. Larissa tipped her head up again, and this time the kiss went deeper, melting the last of Gareth's doubt.

Larissa broke the kiss and stepped back. "We need to ask you some questions first. Is that O.K.? You'll want all your friends with you here, and we can find them for you."

Gareth nodded. "This will take a while."

"That's fine, we're recording. Tell us first the safe way to get

to Cambridge."

As Gareth opened his mouth to speak, he was interrupted by a blow to his head like a half-dozen hangovers rolled into one.

"Idiot! You're supposed to bring him out slowly. You could kill him that way. Gareth?"

A hand pressed against his forehead.

"Don't touch me!"

"He's in there, all right. Unbuckle the restraints. Now."

Gareth came around smelling blood and looking into Kentwood's face.

"You had to be the first thing I saw," he said.

Kentwood smirked. "We've gone to a lot of trouble to rescue you. Don't make us sorry we bothered."

"Where's Alexandra?" he asked.

"Right here and safe. Can you stand?"

"Safe? Do you know what she did?"

"No, actually, I don't. Lee doesn't keep me up on double agent activities."

"Double agent. . . ."

Alexandra stepped into his vision, along with Kim, one of Cambridge's top assault specialists.

"They made it just in time," Alexandra said. "I couldn't stall any longer."

Gareth looked around him for the first time. Three technicians lay in three respective cooling puddles of blood. A glance towards the front door revealed the shadow of a fourth body, uniformed, lying across the hall. He turned back and stared at Alexandra. Her eyes were wide with concern. Gareth's mind gave up trying to deal with too many realities at once and grasped the one that would get him out.

"What's the day and time?" he asked.

Kim glanced at his wrist. "Wednesday, 2:15

a.m."

"You mean to tell me I was strapped to that thing for over twelve hours?"

"Probably," Kentwood answered. "We don't have twelve hours to get out of here. Can you walk?"

"I'm not sure." Gareth took quick inventory. His shoes were gone, but he was still wearing his clothes, which smelled rank. He plucked the I.V. needle from his hand and found a bandage to stop the bleeding.

The knob on the back door turned. Kentwood and Kim darted to either side of the door just as Dr. Brezinski stepped inside.

"What?" he asked, then Kentwood had a knife against his throat.

"Don't kill him," Gareth said. "Doctor, were you summoned for cleanup?"

Brezinski raised an eyebrow. "I'll admit that diagnosing neurosynch damage isn't my favorite job. We seem to have a bigger mess than usual, though," he said, edging his toe away from the blood.

"Yes. Sorry about that." Gareth rubbed at his eyes. "Now.



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About that morphine."

Kentwood rolled his eyes. "You're going to have to live without getting stoned right now. We have work to do."

"Listen, you. I've had almost no sleep in a day and a half and nothing to eat but an I.V. in as long. My ribs hurt, my hand hurts, I have a blinding migraine, and I won't be any less useful stoned."

Kentwood shoved Brezinski towards the bank of cabinets. "You heard him. Get the morphine."

"I would be outraged," said the doctor, "if I didn't have more sympathy for your side. I think I'm outraged anyway."

He selected a vial from the shelf and uncapped a needle.

"Wait," Gareth said. He took the vial away and checked the label. "Sorry. Go right ahead."

"Don't apologize. I wouldn't trust me now either."

The needle bit Gareth's vein, releasing a wash of ice water into his blood.

"Are you quite finished?" snapped Kentwood.

"Almost. Kim, get the restraints. Doctor, do you mind if we tie you, mess up your hair, and throw you in the closet?"

"Not at all," Brezinski answered cheerfully. "It would be a shame if I got arrested too. I suspect surgery's about to be busy."

"That it is," Kim said, obliging with the binding of restraints and the messing of the hair.

As they were shutting the closet, Gareth spun away from the door just in time to miss the Taser bolt that went whining past his ear.

"Back door?" suggested Kim.

Gareth said, "Kentwood, you two didn't bring guns, did you?"

Kentwood looked shocked. "Of course not."

"Idiot. Your goddam image is going to get me killed."

"Your foolish delays are about to get me killed, so we're even."

"Fine." Gareth took a deep breath. "I'll just have to go get a gun."

Alexandra shouted, "No!" as Gareth dove for the front door.

The full effect of the morphine hit as Gareth spun into the hall. He dropped to the ground and rolled, secure in the knowledge that nothing he did could possibly hurt. Two taser bolts smacked the wall where he had been as he snagged the rail gun off the corpse and rolled back. On his stomach by the door, he sighted and nailed the Marine firing from the spiralled concrete stairwell. The man gave a yelp and fell down stunned. Gareth crawled back into the room, ejecting the spent Taser from his gun. The induction charge meter, he noted, read full.

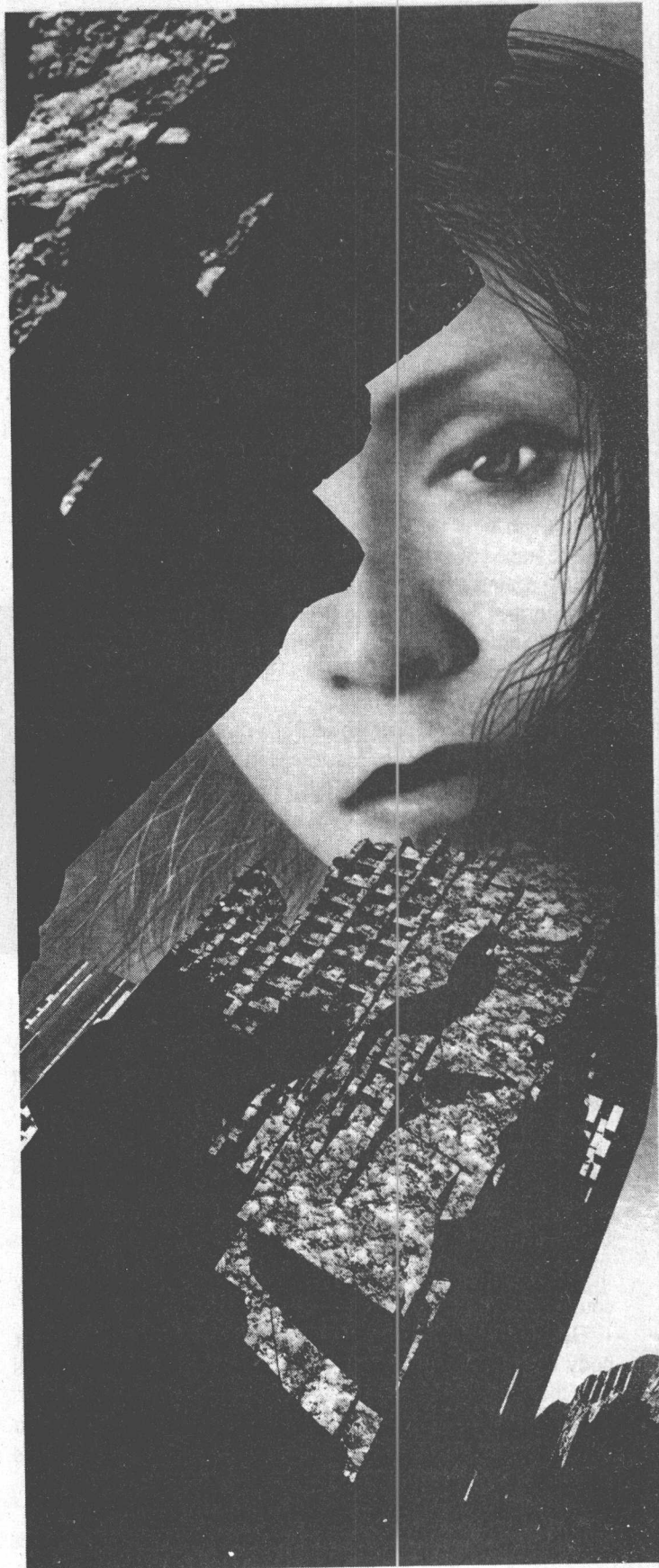
"Shall we go now?" he asked the three people who stood there staring at him open-mouthed.

Kim died, torn apart by rail fire as they reached the ground floor. The remaining three ducked back around a corner.

"So much for subtlety," Gareth said. He'd stepped in broken glass on the way down and his left foot was bleeding.

Kentwood scowled, flipping a knife into each hand. Rail fire cracked the wall two feet across the hall. Gareth sat down abruptly.

"Morphine caught up with you?" Kentwood asked.



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"Shut up."

Gareth edged backwards on his ass until the hairs on the back of his head were poking into the hall. "Listen to me," he said. "You too, Alexandra. I'm going to clear the hallway. When I tell you, run for the front door. If you aren't too proud, pick up guns off the bodies. I'll be right behind you."

"I'm running this," snarled Kentwood. "What do you think you're..."

Gareth let himself fall backwards. His back hit the ground with a shock that should have made him scream. He snapped his railgun into sighting position along the floor. The Marine who had been in the process of charging them skidded to a halt, but not before Gareth sliced his feet off. Raising the gun a fraction, Gareth shot him in the head before he hit the ground. He then sent a blizzard of magnetized steel winging at knee level toward the front door. Within moments no one was left standing.

"Now," Gareth said. "We're leaving."

Lobby Seven was a heavy, concrete, pseudo-classical building that had been the main entrance to MIT. Someone had spraypainted on one of the interior columns the words, "Nobody is proud of finding Lobby Seven." Underneath it several dozen people had signed in "Nobody" with dates and occasional notes on who they had killed to get there.

Gareth borrowed a marker from one of the Command staff and signed in. He didn't feel like adding an elaboration. He'd shot at least ten more people before they got across the river. A half-dozen loyals had screened them with a diversionary fire near Government Center, and if any of them got caught, they'd pay for Gareth's escape. The morphine was starting to wear off. When it was gone, he'd be very sorry. Exhaustion was fringing his vision with thin rainbows, and he began to take an unhealthy interest in the pattern of the floor.

"Now," said Lee. "Let's sort this out."

Kentwood said, "We retrieved Holloway and Elias. Kim died."

"I can see that. Elias, why didn't you send up a signal as soon as Holloway was pulled in?"

"I didn't have the time."

"You had over twenty-four hours," Lee said.

Kentwood interrupted, "She's not god. She's a double agent."

"On whose side?" Lee asked.

"That's hardly a reasonable thing to ask." Kentwood was wiping his brow. "She dare not show her face in Boston after returning with us."

Lee snorted. "Don't let the fact you're fucking her blind you. I can't have agents with questionable loyalty."

"How dare you question her?" Kentwood shouted. "Gareth was the one who..."

Gareth tuned them out and gulped water from a cup. He stood up, leaning against the cold surface of a pillar.

"Who do you believe?"

He looked up at Alexandra. "I'm not sure."

The corner of her mouth twitched. "Had I not intervened, they

would have put you to a cruder interrogation method. I made sure they used one you could beat."

"Yes, of course. I told you what I studied at MIT." He didn't mention losing. Only luck had kept anyone from knowing that.

Alexandra said, "That should do something for your doubts."

"Hardly." Gareth ducked out from under her arm, reeling slightly at the effort of moving. "I think neither Kentwood nor Lee is correct. I think you're on no side but your own."

"I'm no traitor."

"You touched me."

"Does that matter?"

"Yes, I think it does. You went with the Federals because they could get you what you wanted, and that time it was me."

Alexandra's face turned cold. She slipped to one side, cornering him against the wall.

"Gareth," she said, "you should know by now that idealists die alone. You're too intelligent to end up like Kelly Verhave. Learn to look after your own interests, as I look after mine."

"I really hope it was worth it, betraying a revolution just so you could gain a tame pet. That last head trip was all yours, wasn't it? Rewire my mind so that I'd think you were someone I loved and live happily ever after with you."

"You wanted it."

"So I did."

Gareth hurt. The morphine had deserted him, leaving him to the mercy of his injuries. That wasn't why he was crying.

Alexandra took his face in her hands. She brushed her lips against his with a familiar and delicate slowness, as if afraid she'd scare him away. Her tongue parted his teeth, sought the tender places in his mouth.

Gareth took her into his arms, stroking her back with his fingers. She made a soft noise and leaned into him, just as his other hand reached for her neck.

Snap.

Lee and Kentwood were still arguing. Gareth let her body slump onto a bench, as if she were resting. He drank down the last of the water and walked towards the door.

The door guard looked up as he passed and spoke into his radio to the troops stationed on Massachusetts Avenue.

"You're clear," said the guard. "Go get yourself some rest."

Gareth stepped out into dawn and hit the ground running.



Contributor's Page



Photo by Michael Amendolia/Australia

Harlan Ellison In a career spanning 49 years, he has won more awards for the 73 books he has written or edited, the more than 1700 stories, essays, articles, and newspaper columns, the two dozen teleplays and a dozen motion pictures he has created, than any other living fantasist. He has won the Hugo award 8 ½ times, the Nebula award three times, the Bram Stoker award, presented by the Horror Writers Association, five times (including The Lifetime Achievement Award in 1996), the Edgar Allen Poe award of the Mystery Writers of America twice, the Georges Melies fantasy film award twice, and was awarded the Silver Pen for Journalism by P.E.N., the international writers' union (this prestigious accolade was presented for his columns in the *L.A. Weekly*, titled "An Edge in My Voice," in defense of the First Amendment). After writing the columns for only 29 weeks, he beat out candidates from the *L.A. Times*, the *N.Y. Times*, and the *Washington Post*. He was presented with the first Living Legend award by the

International Horror Critics at the 1995 World Horror Convention. He is also the only author in Hollywood ever to win the Writers' Guild of America award for Most Outstanding Teleplay (solo work) four times, most recently for "Paladin of the Lost Hour" in 1987. In March (1998), the National Women's Committee of Brandeis University honored him with their 1998 Words, Wit, & Wisdom award. Harlan's new NPR radio show *Beyond 2000* starts in April.

Allen Steele became a full-time science fiction writer in 1988, following publication of his first short story, "Live From The Mars Hotel" (*Asimov's*, mid-Dec. '88). Since then he has been a prolific author of novels, short stories, and essays, with his work appearing in England, France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Brazil, Russia, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Japan. He has won two Hugo Awards and is hard at work on a new novel.

John Deakins is a retired science teacher. He has one novel, from Roc, to his credit: *Barrow*.

Steven Sawicki is the foremost reviewer of the small press. He has written more words on stories that no one will ever read than any other living person.

Joe Mayhew won the 1997 Hugo Award for best fan artist. Before retiring he was the science fiction recommender for the Library of Congress. He writes occasional reviews for the *Washington Post*.

Cecilia Tan's work has appeared in *Best American Erotica*, *Penthouse*, *Ms*, and many other publications. She is the founder and publisher of Circler Press. Her book *Black Feathers* is out in trade paperback from Harper Prism. This is her first appearance in *Absolute Magnitude*.

Susan Warner This Susan's first appearance in *Absolute Magnitude*.

Lauren P. Burka has appeared in a number of Circler Press anthologies. This is her first appearance in *Absolute Magnitude*.

Julia Duncan This is Julia's first appearance in *Absolute Magnitude*.

Dominic Emile Harman is a British artist who has just begun breaking into the U.S. market. His work has appeared in *Interzone* and *SF Age*. This is his fourth appearance in *Absolute Magnitude*.

Marianne Plumridge's work has appeared in *Dreams of Decadence*; this is her first appearance in *Absolute Magnitude*.

Lee Seed's work has appeared in *Dreams of Decadence*, *Aberrations*, *Dead of Night*, and in Circler Press publications. This is her second appearance in *Absolute Magnitude*.

Joseph Bellofatto Jr.'s work has been appearing in magazines for years. This is his first appearance in *Absolute Magnitude*.

Mike Allen lives in Roanoke VA with his wife Anita and their cat Prowler. His poetry has appeared in many magazines including *Dreams of Decadence* and *Altair*. This is his first appearance in *Absolute Magnitude*.

Kevin Rogers was one of the three founders of *Harsh Mistress* a magazine that later became *Absolute Magnitude*. This is Kevin's first published solo short story.

