

CRANK!

SCIENCE FICTION • FANTASY

CRANK! SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

\$3.50

\$4.50 canada



A. A. ATTANASIO

MICHAEL BLUMLEIN

GWYNETH JONES

JONATHAN LETHEM

GARRY KILWORTH

New From Broken Mirrors Press

BUNCH!

David R. Bunch

“This collection of three and a half decades of short SF works by Bunch is not for the faint of heart” – *Publisher’s Weekly*

“Individually, almost any one of these stories would stand out as brilliantly inventive in the context of a magazine of anthology; even though many are 20 or more years old, almost none seem dated. Trying to read them all together, however, leaves one with the vague sensation of being pelted with razor-studded marshmallows” – *Locus*

“Bunch is one of the most original and creative writers in the genre, and it is unfortunate that the conservative bent of most readers is such that he is not given the attention he deserves.”
– *20th Century Science Fiction Writers*

BUNCH! collects 32 stories spanning the 35-year career of one of the most distinctive writers of short stories in the history of the genre. Bunch’s stories are short, dense, tense, and relentless. His blunt vision of the future combined with his no-holds-barred style is guaranteed to produce a powerful response.

Trade paperback, 160 pages, \$8.95. Cover art by Ian Miller.

CRANK!

SCIENCE FICTION – FANTASY

Issue no. 1

CONTENTS

- Clap if You Believe • 3 • Robert Devereaux
Punctuated Evolution • 11 • Garry Kilworth
Mortal remains. • 21 • Rosaleen Love
Wax Me Mind • 32 • A. A. Attanasio
His Oral History • 44 • Jonathan Lethem
Blumfeld, an Elderly Bachelor • 49 • Carter Scholz
The Thief, the Princess and the Cartesian Circle • 57 • Gwyneth Jones
Hymenoptera • 70 • Michael Blumlein

Bryan Cholfin • Editor

Crank! is published quarterly by Broken Mirrors Press, P.O. Box 380473, Cambridge, MA 02238. Cover price is \$3.50 per issue. Subscriptions price is \$12 for four issues. Subscriptions outside of the US are \$18. All Broken Mirrors Press titles are distributed by the Inland Book Co., East Haven, CT, and Science Fiction Distributors, Staten Island, NY. Additionally, CRANK! is distributed nationally by IPD, Solana Beach, CA. Retailers interested in carrying CRANK! should call 800-999-1170 to order.

LAFFERTY IN ORBIT R.A. LAFFERTY

Nineteen stories, representing every story by Lafferty published in the groundbreaking *Orbit* anthology series. Winner of the World Fantasy Award for Lifetime Achievement, Lafferty is one of the truly unique writers of imaginative fiction.

“Contains some of Lafferty’s very best work, and so, by definition, some of the best work of the late Sixties and early Seventies.” – Gardner Dozois

Trade hardcover, \$13.95.

Signed and numbered, with slipcase, \$50.

SINDBAD, the Thirteenth Voyage R.A. LAFFERTY

R.A. Lafferty takes a wild ride through the incredible landscape of ninth-century Baghdad in one of his funniest and most entertaining novels. Follow the adventures of Master Spy Essindibad Copperbottom as he struggles to retain his identity as the True Sindbad against an usurper from the future, and keep the devils of Earth from escaping into the rest of the galaxy.

“A bizarre and totally different reading experience” –
Science Fiction Chronicle

Trade paperback, 158 pages, \$9.95

Broken Mirrors Press

Robert Devereaux's short stories have appeared in a number of small-press magazines, and are noted for their vivid imagery. His first novel is due out from Dell/Abyss in the spring of '94. He lives in Boulder, Colorado.

Clap if You Believe

Robert Devereaux

I understand her parents' wariness. A woman like my Tinkerbell is bound to attract the amorous attentions of the wrong sort now and again. So when they open the door and appraise me like a suspect gem, not smiling, not yet inviting me in, I understand and forbear. "Good evening," I say, and let the silence float like untroubled webs of gossamer between us.

After a time, Mr. Jones turns to his wife and says, "What do you think?"

"The eyes look reasonably sane," she replies, to his nod, "though that's not always an airtight indicator these days and there is a worrisome edge to them."

I look down, stifling the urge to defend myself, and am gratified to hear Mr. Jones say, "Man with his hobbies and profession is bound to have sharp eyes. I say we give him the benefit and let him in."

She sighs. "Oh, all right. Come in out of the heat, young man. Put your shoes there." A serried rank of them faces the wall like naughty students: practical ones for Mr. and Mrs. Jones, scuffed high-tops for twelve-year-old Melissa, and, looking more like shed leaves than footwear, Tinkerbell's familiar green-felt slippers. I unknot and loosen my buffed black Florshaims and set them beside my beloved's footwear, thinking what a marvel her tiny feet are and how delightful it is – ensconced alone in her cozy apartment after a date – to take her legs, right up to the thighs, into my mouth and lightly tongue those feet, her tiny soles, the barely perceptible curve of her insteps, the sheer white-corn delicacy of her ten tiny toes. How ecstatically my darling pixie writhes and wriggles in my hand, her silver-sheened wings fluttering against my palm!

"Hi, Alex." I look up and there's Melissa standing by an archway that leads to the dining room.

“Hi, Melissa,” I say, wiggling my fingers at her like Oliver Hardy fiddling with his tie. The zoo is only four blocks from their house and we’ve begun, Melissa and Tink and I, to make a regular thing of meeting there Saturday afternoons. Once, over snow cones, Melissa told me that Tink had been miserable for a long time, “but now that you’ve come into her life, Alex,” this from a twelve-year-old, “she flits about like a host of hummingbirds when she drops in for Sunday dinner and makes loads of happy words twinkle in my head, in all of our heads.” Hearing Melissa say that made me glad, and I told her so.

Melissa giggles at my finger-wagging and says, “Come on in and sit down.”

I look a question at the Joneses. Mrs. Jones gives an unreadably flat lip-line to me. Mr. Jones, instead of seconding Melissa’s invitation, comes up like an old pal, leans in to me, and says, “You and me, after dinner, over cigars in my study.”

I’m not sure what he’s getting at, but I feel as if he’s somehow taken me into his confidence. I say, “That’s fine, sir,” and that seems to satisfy him because he steps back like film reversed and stands beside his wife.

A familiar trill rises in my brain. The others turn their heads, as do I, to the stairs, its sweeping mahogany bannister soaring into the warm glow upstairs. And down flies my beloved Tinkerbell, trailing behind her a silent burst of stars. Her lovely face hovers before me, the tip of her wand describing figure-eights in the air. “Hello, Alex my lovely,” she hums into my head. Then she flits to my cheek, the perfect red bow of her lips burning cinnamon kisses there. Recalling the sear of those kisses on other parts of my anatomy, I feel a blush rising.

“Tinkerbell,” I say, using her full name, “perhaps we should –”

“Yes, daughter,” Mrs. Jones breaks in, clearly not at all amused, “your young man is correct. Dinner’s on the table.” She glares at me and turns to lead the party into the dining room. Melissa comes and takes my hand, while Tink flits happily about my right shoulder, singing into my head her gladness at seeing me. When she holds still long enough for me to fix a discerning eye on her, I’m relieved to see that she’s not yet showing.

Once dinner is under way, the ice thins considerably and in fact Tink’s mother rushes past her more cautious husband to become my closest ally. Maybe her change of heart is brought on by my praise for her rainbow trout amandine – which praise I genuinely mean. Or maybe it’s brought on by the dinner conversation, which focuses on me half the time, on Tink the other half. Mrs. Jones asks surprisingly insightful questions about my practice as a microsurgeon, pleasantly coaxing me into more detail than

the average non-medico cares to know about the handling of microsutures and the use of interchangeable oculars on a headborne surgical microscope. I'm happy to oblige as I watch Tinkerbell hover over her dinner, levitating bits of it with her wand – nothing flamboyant, merely functional – and bringing it home to her mouth.

After some perfunctory questions about my butterfly collection (I've sold it since meeting their daughter, as it disquiets her) and my basement full of miniature homes and the precisely detailed furniture that goes with them (I met Tinkerbell at a show for just such items), the talk turns to their daughter. It's a little embarrassing, what with Melissa beaming at me, and Tinkerbell singing into me her bemusement at her mother, and her father looking ever more resigned, and his wife going on and on about her tiny daughter, giving me a mom's-eye view of her life history as if Tinkerbell herself weren't sitting at the table with us. Mrs. Jones is in the midst of telling how easy it was to give birth to a pixie and how hard to live with the fact thereafter when I suddenly laugh, quickly disguising it as a choke – water went down the wrong way, no problem, really I'm all right. Tink has made me a lewd and lovely proposition, one which has brought to mind the heartaching image of her as last I enjoyed her, looking so vulnerable with her glade-green costume and her slim wand set aside, arching back on her spun-silver wings, her perfect breasts thrust up like twin peaks on a relief map, her ultra-fine fingers kneading the ruddy pucker of her vulva, awaiting the tickle and swirl of my ultra-fine horsehair brush, the hot monstrosity of my tonguetip, and the perfect twin-kiss of my cock-slit, as we began our careful coitus.

I give Tink a quick stare of admonition – a joke and not a joke. She beams, melts me, and goes back to her meal. The entire scene suddenly amuses me greatly, this whole silly ritual of meeting the parents, getting their approval for the inevitable, most of which – in particular the essential proof of the rightness of shared intimacy – has already come to pass. But I contain my laughter. I act the good son-in-law-to-be and show these kind narrow people, under whose love and tutelage my fiancée grew to maturity, the esteem and good manners they expect.

"Alex, would you please pass the peas?" says Melissa when her mother pauses to inhale. Mrs. Jones has launched into yet another diatribe against an educational system too unfeeling, too inflexible for special students like her Tinkerbell. Already under fire have come the lack of appropriate gymnastic equipment, the unfeeling cretinism of a certain driver-ed instructor, and Tinkerbell's unmet needs for special testing conditions in all her academic subjects. As I pass the peas, the head drama coach falls into the hop-

per of Mrs. Jones' tirade for refusing even to consider mounting a production of *Peter Pan* and giving Tink a chance to perform the character they've named her after, a casting inspiration Mrs. Jones is certain would have brought her daughter out of the cocoon of adolescent shyness years earlier than had been the case.

"But the worst of it, Alex," she says, and I thank God that she's spoken my name for the first time (and that dropped so casually into the conversation), "is that no one in all those years has had the slightest clue how to teach Tink – or even how to discover – the uses of her wand, other than as an odd utensil and for occasional cleaning tricks. It might have kept this family solvent –"

"Emma," warns Mr. Jones, defensive.

"– well, more solvent than it was. It might have saved peoples' lives, cured disease, made world leaders see reason through their cages of insanity, brought all kinds of happiness flowing into peoples' hearts the world over." She asks me point blank to help her tiny daughter discover the full potential of her wand, and I promise I will. I don't mention of course that we've already found one amazing use for it in our lovemaking, a use that makes me feel incredibly good, incredibly potent, and incredibly loving toward Tinkerbell. It occurs to me at that moment, listening to Mrs. Jones' spirited harangue, that the wand might indeed have other uses and that perhaps one of them, a healing use, might reduce the failures and increase the triumphs I witness every day in the operating room. I get excited by this, nod more, stoke food into my mouth faster than is strictly polite. We're bonding, Mrs. Jones and I. She can feel it, I can feel it, Melissa is grinning like an idiot, and Tink is humming snatches of *Lohengrin* into my head. "I love you, Alex," she wind-chimes, "I love you and the horse you rode in on." Looking aside, I watch her playing with her food, wanding a slow reversed meander of mashed potatoes into her mouth, biting it off in ribbons of white mush. Her unshod feet are planted apart on the damask and her wings, thin curved planes of iridescence, lie still against her back.

After dinner, Mrs. Jones is ready to usher me into the parlor for more bonding. But her husband holds up his hand to cut her off, saying "It's time, Emma." "Oh," she says. He's got some bit of gristle in his craw, some one thing that's holding back his approval of me.

"Ah, the study," I say. "The cigars."

"Just so," he says in a way that suggests man-talk, and pretty serious man-talk at that. I follow him out of the dining room. Mrs. Jones and Melissa have odd looks on their faces. Even Tink's hum is edged with anxiety.

The study is dark and small, green-tinged and woodsy. There's a rolltop

desk, now closed, and the rich smell of rolled tobacco and old ledgers pervades the air. He fits a green eyeshade around his head, offers me one. I accept but feel foolish in it, as if I'm at Disney World wearing a Donald Duck hat, bright yellow bill as brim.

Mr. Jones sits in a rosewood swivel chair and motions me to a three-legged ebony piano stool in front of him. I have to look up a good six inches to meet his eyes. "You smoke cigars?" he asks.

"Not unless you count one White Owl in my teens."

He chuckles once, then drops it. With a soft clatter of wood slats, he scrolls up the rolltop and opens a huge box of cigars. He lifts out two of them, big long thick cylinders of brown leaf with the smell of sin about them and the crisp feel of currency in their wrappings. I take what he offers and follow his lead in preparing, lighting, and puffing on the damned thing. I'm careful to control my intake, not wanting to lose face in a fit of coughing. The cigar tastes peculiarly pleasant, sweet, not bitter, and the back of my head feels like it's ballooning.

"My wife," he begins, "likes you. I like you. And Tinkerbell likes you, but then she's liked every last one of her boyfriends, even the slime-sucking shitwads – can we speak man to man? – who used Tink for their own degenerate needs and then discarded her."

I don't want to hear this.

"Not that there've been lots of men before you. She may be a pixie, our daughter, but she's got the good sense of the Joneses even so. But you know, Alex my boy, you'd be surprised at the number of men in this world who look and act perfectly normal, men whose mild exteriors cover sick vistas of muck and sludge, men who make regular guys like you and me ashamed to be called men."

"I assure you, sir, that –"

"– and I'd believe those assurances, I really would, even though I've believed and been fooled in the past. My little girl, Tinkerbell Titania Jones, is special to me as she is; not some freak, not a thing of shame or suspicion, no, but a thing of grace and beauty."

"She is indeed, Mr. Jones."

He fixes me in his glare and exhales a puff of blue smoke. It hangs like a miasma about him, but he doesn't blink. His eyes might be lizard eyes. "I had doubts when she was born, of course. What father wouldn't? No man likes to be deceived by his wife, not even through the irresistible agency of a stray faerie or incubus, if such there be in this world. But there are mannerisms of mine I recognized quite early in my daughter, mannerisms I was sure were neither learned nor trumped up by some phantom lover

bent on throwing a cuckolded husband off his trail.”

He cranes his neck and stares, about fifteen degrees askew of my face. It’s a look I recognize from my first meeting with Tink at the miniaturists’ show in Sacramento the previous winter. I’d asked her to dinner and she went all quiet and contemplative, looking just this way, before finally venturing a twinkled Yes. I could tell she’d been stung before, and recently.

“She’s mine,” he says. “Some mutation if you want to be cold-bloodedly clinical about it, but all mine. And I love her dearly, as parents of special children often do.”

He takes a long puff, exhales it, looks at me. “Now I’m going to ask you three questions, Alex. Only truthful answers are going to win my daughter’s hand.”

I feel odd about this turn in the conversation, and yet the setting, the cigar smoke, the close proximity of this beast in his lair, make it seem perfectly normal. I nod agreement and flick a squat cylinder of ash into the open glass hand, severed, of a four-fingered man.

“First,” Mr. Jones says, not stumbling over any of the words, “have you had sex with my daughter?”

My head is pounding. I take a long pull on my cigar and slowly exhale the smoke. My hand, holding it, seems big and beefy, unworthy of my incisive mind. “She and I have . . . made love, yes. We love each other, you see, and it’s only natural for –”

“No extenuation,” says Mr. Jones. “Your answer is Yes. It’s a good answer, it’s the truth, and I have no quarrel with it. I would think you some sort of nitwit if you hadn’t worked out some mutually agreeable arrangement between you. No, I don’t want to know how it’s done. I shudder to think about it. When she drops in, she seems none the worse for wear. If she’s happy, and you’re happy with her – and with the limitations you no doubt face – then that will content her mother and me.”

I think of course of vaginal sinkings, that nice feel of being gripped there by a grown woman. And I think back years to my first girlfriend Rhonda, to her mouth, to the love she was kind enough to focus down below from time to time though less frequently than I would have preferred.

“That leads, of course, to my second question,” says Mr. Jones, putting one hand, the one without the cigar, to his temple. “Will you be faithful to Tinkerbelle, neither casting the lures of temptation toward other women nor consenting to be lured by them?”

I pause. “That’s a complex question.”

“It is indeed,” he says, with a rising inflection which asks it all over again.

"I don't think," I tell him, my hands folded, my eyes deeply sincere, "I will ever fail my beloved in this way. Yet knowing the weakness of myself and other men, the incessant clamor of the gonads that I daresay all males are prey to, I hesitate to say Yes unequivocally to your question. But Tinkerbelle gives me great satisfaction, and, more importantly, I believe I do the same for her. Something about her ways in bed, if you will, seems to silence the voice of lust when I'm around other women. Besides which – and I don't mean this flippantly – I've grown, through loving Tinkerbelle, to appreciate smaller women. In fact, on the whole, I've come to find so-called normal-sized women unbearably gross and disgusting."

Mr. Jones looks askance at me. "Alex, you're a most peculiar man. But then I think that's what my daughter's going to need, a peculiar man, and yet it's so damned hard to know which set of peculiarities are the right ones."

I'm not sure how to take his comment, but then I'm in no position to debate the issue. "Yes, sir," I say.

"Almost out of the woods," says Mr. Jones, grinning. "The third one is easy." He tosses it off like a spent match: "Do you love Tinkerbelle?"

This question throws me. It seems simple enough, but that's the problem: It's too simple. Does he want a one-word response, or a dissertation? Is it a trick question of some sort? And is the time I'm taking in deliberating over it actually sinking my chances? What is love, after all? Everybody talks about it, sings about it, yammers on and on endlessly about it. But it's so vague a word, and so loaded. I think of French troubadour poets, of courtly love and its manufacture, of Broadway show tunes and wall-sized faces saying "I love you" on big screens, saying it like some ritual curse or as if it signaled some terrible loss of control akin to vomiting.

And I say, "Yes and no," feeling my way into the open wound of shared camaraderie, ready to provide reasons for my equivocation, a brief discourse which will show him the philosophical depths of my musings and yet come about, in the end, to a grand paean of adoration for his daughter.

But before I can begin, he rises from his chair and reaches for me, and the next thing I know, the furniture hurtles by as if in a silent wind and the doors fly open seemingly without the intervention of human hands and I'm out on the street in front of their home, trying to stop my head from spinning.

It's dark out there but muggy. I ache inside, ache for my loss. It's not fair, I think. She loves me and I love her and by God we belong together. I'll call her in the morning when she's back in the city, I'll send roses, I'll surprise her with a knock on her door. We'll elope. This isn't the Dark

Ages, after all. Tinkerbell and I don't need her parents' permission to marry.

Doors slam in the house. Downstairs, upstairs. A high-pitched voice, Melissa's, shouts something childish and angry, is answered by falsely calm parental soothings. None of the words can I make out.

The first floor goes dark after a while, then bit by bit the second. From where I'm standing, it looks like a miniature house, one of my basement models. I raise both hands and find I can obliterate it completely.

There is one golden glow of light hovering behind a drawn tan shade upstairs. Her bedroom, the room she grew up in. I want to clap my hands, clap them in defiance of her parents – she'll know what that means, she'll surely understand. But the energy has drained from my arms and they hang useless at my sides.

Behind the shade, my lost love's light moves slowly back and forth, back and forth, growing dimmer, casting forth ever smaller circles of gold with each beat of my heart.

SUBSCRIBE

TO

CRANK!

Garry Kilworth recently shared the World Fantasy Award with Robert Holdstock for their novella, "The Ragthorn." A writer whose head is constantly churning with ideas, Kilworth has several novels to his credit, though he is perhaps best known in this country for his short stories.

Punctuated Evolution

Garry Kilworth

IT'S dangerous out there. It's not even safe to step outside the doorway. Not since they started exploding like flying grenades. Not since our volatile feathered friends became feathered bombs. Not since cock robin was killed and they exchanged their little bows and arrows for internally detonated devices that can take a man's head clean off his shoulders.

The reports have been coming in thick and fast, from other cities, from other parts of this city. I haven't been out since they first said it was the sparrows. I don't want to, though I may have no choice in the matter. There are heroes enough, without me. I mean, the last time I was outside, I heard the explosions, saw the mess afterwards, but I didn't actually *see* any of them go off.

Now I know it's the sparrows, I can see how suicidal it would be to go outside. I mean, there are thousands of them out there. They're on the limbs of the statues in the yard. They're clustered on the concrete. They decorate the overhead wires, the signposts, the lamp posts. They're on the pavement, in the gutter. They're everywhere. When are they not? You don't even notice them, normally. You take them for granted, consciously, even subliminally, ignore them.

They're there every day, but today is different, today they are what they are. Any one of them could be. Potentially potent. The *it* among the *they* could blow you to kingdom come and go, so they tell us. It's been on the news, in the news, everywhere, word of mouth, word of print. I don't know which of them are, and which aren't. How can you tell? Looking at them they all look the same: they all look innocent and deadly.

You have to sit well away from the window, just in case one of them lands on the sill. I've heard, they've told me on the comm, that slivers of glass fly in like knives shot from a gun, to strip you to the bone. That's what I've heard. So you stay away from windows, keep the curtains closed, maybe even wire-net the inside.

Why me? This was the first, possibly very selfish, thought that crossed my brain when I got the call. Why me? Others have got the gift of *insight*, so why not them? Why not that dickhead Williams, or Danny Pugerchov? How come I was chosen to do the investigation? Who have I upset in the last few years? Who wants me out of the way for good? Unless the other agents are already dead? Unless they already have a hole in their torsos through which you could pass a football? Unless their heads are already decorating the town centre and suburbs as biltong and bone shards.

If I had any time, these questions themselves, would be investigated. If I live through this, I will certainly seek out my enemies, and nail the bastards to the wall. In the meantime, I have to stay with it, stay on it, stay alive.

The first part of any investigation is of course easy. Pure research. Books can't hurt you, at least in your own living-room. You don't have to protect your eyes from splinters of bone and beak when reading a book, because books don't explode, not yet anyhow. Maybe books will one day be the most dangerous articles in the office, but today at least they are innocuous. I have a substantial library in my office, which is where I live, eat, sleep and breathe. I don't have to go out on the streets and risk getting my head blown off zipadee-doo-da-there's-a-brown-bird-on-my-shoulder style.

"Sparrow(sp'rou) *noun*. a member of *Passer*, fam. *Fringillidae* (*FINCH) esp. the house sparrow [O.E. *spearwa*]."

Good enough. So much for the dictionary. I always like to start with the definition. I mean, did you know the sparrow was a finch? Maybe you did, but a lot of people don't. Me for one. I just thought a sparrow was a sparrow.

"SPARROW. Though probably the most often seen of British birds, sparrows are not the most numerous; they are outnumbered by chaffinches and blackbirds. Sparrows appear numerous because they live in close association with man, building untidy nests in holes, in thatch and walls and in hedges. There are two species of British sparrow: the tree sparrow and the house sparrow."

Hedges? *Tree* sparrows? Walls and flagstones. Bricks and mortar. *Concrete* sparrows.

Seed eaters, it goes on to say. That was *then*. Now of course, there is no seed. No seed, no hedges, no trees. Not outside the greenhouses. Only

concrete. Now they get what they can, where they can. They peck away at anything. It used to be the waste food in the trash: vegetable matter, offal, fat, gristle. Now even that is denied them, since the recycling of all edible rubbish, for domestic stock.

Enough of the encyclopedia. There is more to say that is unwritten. That is, there are millions of the little bastards, swarming around the cities. They like us, or rather, they like the food we give them. They are world-wide. Sometimes so numerous as to be a hazard. Mao Tse Tung listed them as one of the 'Four Pests' and ordered their extermination in China. The year after the slaughter the country was invaded by insects.

The comm.

"Hello?"

"Listen, we need an answer soon. How close are you to an answer?"

"I only just got started."

"We have to know. Is it the government? Is it anarchists or terrorists? Is it the big corporations or financial houses? It has to be one of these three groups."

"I'll get back to you."

The comm falls silent. Of course it has to be one of the big three. As a loner you poison a jar of baby food and demand a ransom. That's cheap and easy. You plant a bomb in a supermarket for fun, because you have a warped mind and you are an individual. You shoot fourteen, fifteen people with an automatic weapon because you are a sociopath or you do a string of serial murders as a psychopath. These don't cost a great deal, no big layout.

But to produce genetically-detonated little flying bombs – that costs money. Big money. You need to be a billionaire several times over for that kind of thing.

An explosive random killer. Not a BIG bang, of course, but bigger than a feathered ball full of plastic explosive. What about nuclear fission, on a small scale? Is that possible? Can you control a chain reaction: limit it to pocketsized boom? I don't know too much about the science, but I know nuclear bombs need heavy elements to produce those enormous releases of energy. I know that much. Maybe the sparrows contain lighter elements? The explosion is large enough to rip apart a good sized room. If you're inside with one when it goes off, so I'm told, they need a finely-sharpened razor to scrape you off the walls.

Something coming down the mail chute.

What's this? Nobody writes letters any more. A parcel?

A live creature flies out of the tube and into the room and I instinctively dive for the space behind the desk.

After a second or two I see it's not a sparrow, but a canary.

It's got to be a joke. One, or some of the boys in another department in the building, trying to get me going, now that I've been put on the job. It's probably that sicko, Jameson, in Dispatches. What the hell though, canaries may have started interbreeding with sparrows. Maybe it's in the chromosomes and they pass it on, the deadly little sperm carrying the genetic code? A billion to one but who the hell wants to risk it? The heart-beat is rapid, pattering in the tiny chest. Shit, maybe this is the fuse? A time bomb. Not *tick-tock-tick-tock*, but *pat-pat-pat-pat-pat*, and on the eight-thousandth heartbeat, the detonation, the explosion? A room full of bits of feather and flesh, bird and man mingling on the wall paper, on the ceiling, on the floor tiles.

Using my *insight* I check out the canary, find nothing.

I call Jameson.

"Hey, Jameson? Did you send me a bird . . . ? Oh, for my birthday? It's not my birthday for five months. Remind me to do something nasty to you when I see you next."

Now, what to do about the bird?

First I catch it, in the wastepaper basket.

Now, do I blow its head off? Shoot the thing? What with, a .45? Overkill. Stifle it then? Wait. If I kill it violently, maybe there's a genetic device, a fail-safe primer hidden in the DNA, like a trembler on a conventional bomb? Maybe if I stop the heart, dead, it will go up automatically? Best to stop it slowly. Put it in the freeze compartment of the refrigerator, slow the heart beat down gradually, turn the poor little bastard to ice. This is survival after all. You can't afford to be squeamish when you're threatened with a nasty form of extinction.

I make another call, to the boss.

"Are you sure this is real? I mean, have you actually heard one, seen a sparrow go off?"

"There are people who have."

"Yeah, but apocryphal tales and all that shit? Everyone knows someone who knows someone who has, but no one has actually seen it for themselves. I mean, truth or myth? Is it really serious, or is it just rumour?"

"It's serious, believe me. Get on it."

"What about catching some, in a net, and looking at them under controlled conditions?"

"We've done that. Pugerchov's had a look at whole room full of them."

"And?"

“Zilch. Someone has to look at them in the wild, that’s to say, in their own environment.”

“The concrete jungle?”

“Okay, the only environment they’ve got left. *Outside*. Whatever you like to call it. Nothing shows up when they’re in captivity. It’s up to you.”

“Why me?” I ask the question at last.

“You know why. You’re the man.”

“One of them.”

“One of those.”

I am proof that the Theory of Punctuated Evolution, which states that evolution is not gradual and regular, but punctuated by drastic leaps to meet extraordinary circumstances, is no longer a simply a theory. I’m one of those: a drastic leap. One of the few who can read the inscape of other people, read their emotions like a map, feel their intentions, discover their design. Survival. I find the terrorist in a crowd. I find the psychopath, the sociopath, when I get close enough to smell the desire for death, feel the absence of emotions. The human race has need of me, in this overdeveloped world, full of neuroses, madness, violence. I read them, and all other creatures, any and every living thing.

But there are quite a few others who can do the same. I’m not unique. I am no freak, you understand.

“What’s happened to the others? What are they doing right now? Where’s Williams?”

“You’re the investigator on this one.”

“I might get blown to pieces and then I’ll be nothing. How about a protective suit, or even a flack jacket and helmet?”

“Wear what you want. Protect yourself. But get out there. It’s your job.”

It’s my job. They know that. Others know that. Did Jameson really send me the bird? Was that his voice on the comm or a clever copy? What do I know? Nothing. I can’t use *insight* at a distance, through walls. I have to get close to my subject to see inside it, understand it.

I look inside the canary again, carefully study it’s *inscape*. It feels innocent enough. Nothing registers. Maybe they’ve got it screened in some way. You evolve the gift of *insight* and then someone comes up with a screen to prevent it. That’s progress. Only thing that stands between unstoppable attack and ultimate defence is *time*. You get one, the other follows naturally, as night follows day, only in unknowable hours.

Into the freezer with the canary.

Sparrows. Just the right size. Not too big, not too small. All over the goddamn place. Random. Millions of the little fuckers. Flying bombs. Hid-

ing on the ledges, the rooftops, in the eaves, in the drains. Not hiding at all, but hopping along pavements, roads, pathways. Scattered in the squares, looking harmless. How the hell are we going to find out? What do we do when we do find out? Gas them all overnight? Maybe someone will come up with a device for killing them. A freeze gun? You point the thing, squeeze the trigger, and a dozen sparrows fall out of the sky. Thunk, thunk, thunk. Little balls of solid ice.

Wait a minute. Maybe the gun has already been invented? Maybe it was invented before the sparrows became biological experiments? The gun had no use, so then the inventor invented a use? Perhaps the sparrows are here because the gun needs to be marketed, sold in all the retail stores, for the inventors to get their money back? First the freeze gun, then the sparrows? I would buy one. Who wouldn't? Even if the truth got out, you would still want a weapon, and if that was the most effective, then purchase and be damned, regardless of moral distaste.

How many of these have there been, in recent years? The cure without the disease, so then discover the disease, let it loose, get rich curing it?

Could be the big corporations.

Back to the research.

The Ornithologist's Guide: "Sparrows do not migrate."

They're local then. You can contain the experiment, within a given area. This is more like government, testing out its new weaponry. 'Don't worry boss, it won't get out of hand. We'll just test it out on a few people. No one will know. Nobody will ever find out. Nothing can go wrong.' Famous last sentences, rearrangeable syntax. Myxomatosis wiped out sixty million rabbits in this country alone and it wasn't even started here. They started it on the other side of the world. It *always* gets out of hand, always *goes wrong*. Sixty million. That's the total British population, of people, right now.

Governments are good at hiding things, covering up their insane blunders, losing documents. Yet they never stop their experiments, on people, on animals, on nature. Wonderful methods of destruction: defoliants, napalm, nuclear weapons. They move too fast when starting things, and move too slowly to stop them. God has always made the big disasters, and now governments too. The disasters get bigger all the time. Government equals God now. Disasters at nuclear power stations. Windscale, Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, over a period of thirty years. Random disasters, flying around in history by the hundred million, too few in a lifetime to alarm, but in geological time, too many. The comm again.

I am impatient with them.

"What?"

“Go outside and look around.”

“Fuck you. You go outside.”

A voice charged with quiet panic.

“You can be replaced.”

“So replace me.”

“You can be punished.”

“Yeah? Who’s going to come round to smack me?”

Click.

So what about the third possibility?

Terrorists don’t do things for nothing. They want something. Prisoners released. Land returned. Ideologies destroyed and other ideologies put into practise. An end to war, a start to war. Not *nothing*. Something. What do they want then?

How about the Mafia? They want money and power. No money and power to be had with random terror.

Strike out terrorists and criminals.

Maybe anarchists? Any government is a bad government, no government is a good government. I’ll go along with that. So why kill the people? Does that upset the government? Not really. They do it themselves, in various ways.

Sparrows. What if they increase in number, the bomb-sparrows as opposed to the non-bomb-sparrows? Maybe there’s say, one in a thousand at the moment, but with breeding? What if it’s a dominant gene? A dominant gene and a season to pass it on, before the ticker reaches the required number and takes out the wall of a house.

Comm. Me again.

“Fuck it, I’m going outside. I’m going crazy in here. There are no answers to be found indoors.”

“About time.”

“I’ll get back to you.”

“Leave the line open, so we can hear.”

“Hear what?”

No answer.

Someone singing in my head: *My sweet ex-pend-able you . . .*

After putting on a flack jacket and helmet I prepare myself, psychologically, for going outside. There’s no point in wearing anything over the whole of my head, like a diver’s helmet, because that would interfere with my *insight*. Anyway, it’s just a gesture. When you get that close to a bomb, the concussion turns your brains to porridge, whatever you’ve got on in the way of protective clothing. There are other more important

considerations to worry about.

What if it's not a time bomb? What if it's some kind of heat-trigger that sets it off? You walk close to a sparrow and Goodbye Columbus. Or maybe some kind of beam from their eyes and you break the circuit? Perhaps the exploding birds have funny laser eyes, that blow you to hell?

I have plenty of questions.

"I think it's nature," I say into the comm, "not governments, terrorists or corporations. They're big noises to us, but mere hiccups in time to nature, to history. Just little glitches, little pops and fizzes, like seedpods exploding under the sun. What if it's the way they reproduce now, spread their egg-seeds over a wide area like exploding pods, grow sparrow-blooms that break off in the spring and fly away?"

"Have you been outside and taken a look?"

"That must be it. Nature. It's something we've done to the atmosphere, with our radio waves, our space junk, our deodorant sprays. We've polluted the sky and the earth, letting in things through the ozone layer. The sparrows are just freaks, but natural freaks, so not freaks at all. I mean, if they've altered naturally, overnight, then they're not mutants, but simply quick-change artists of evolution, like me. Humans the unfortunates that get in their way? Wham-bam, evolutionary spam."

"Listen, have you been outside?"

"I'd like to go, but there's death out there. On the streets, in the air. I used to be scared of motorways and skin cancer, but now it's sparrows that obsess me. I will go out, but not today, not till I get used to them, take them for granted, like bombs in the blitz."

"If you don't go out soon, we may never get to know, we might not be given the chance."

"That's true. Do we need to? I mean, do we have to know the why of everything? Can't we leave just one question unanswered, one puzzle unsolved? Why do we have to classify all the shapes on the earth, label them in Latin, count their bones, their heartbeats, witness their sexual antics, watch them eating each other? I mean, these are the first exploding sparrows, so they don't fit into any group, type, family or species. Or if you really can't bear for it not to have a scientific label, then how about *Passer bombicus*? That'll do, won't it? Why do we need to explain everything?"

"It's your job."

"What, to understand the whole universe?"

"No, to find out what this is."

"Well, let's leave this one, eh? Why not? Let's just have a wonder we don't know anything about. A deadly wonder. We've killed enough cobras

and dissected them. We've hunted enough sharks and measured their jaws, numbered their teeth. Let's have one very dangerous thing we don't know anything about and let it keep its secrets? The cryptic sparrow, with its weird unknown biological reaction to God knows what. Here we have what used to be the common house sparrow, ladies and gentlemen, which suddenly turned into a kamikaze killer, for no logical reason. Reach out with your emotions, and feel what you feel: hate, admiration, fear. Marvel but don't analyse. Empathise, but don't try to understand, or you'll destroy the wonder of the thing. What do you say? I'm going to hang up now, and I don't want to hear from you again."

It's driving me nuts, not knowing, and they're right, it is my job. My job. It's what they pay me for. I just like to do it in my own time. I need to psyche myself up first.

I go outside.

Outside it's peaceful, but I don't like it. The sparrows chatter in the street. I'm only human, still flesh and blood, despite the gift I have. I still experience fear, an instinct to survive.

Maybe it's a virus, that will spread to humans?

Next on the Extinction List, exploding people?

One of the sparrows hops over to my foot. I look inside it, finding nothing. Others come. They too, do not register anything more than *sparrow*. Tweet. Harmless. What about screens? Not all of them. Too many. Millions. It's just paranoia, that's what it just is, surely to God?

An explosion down the street.

Something, a feral cat?, staggers, blood pouring from its headless corpse, falls in the gutter, twitches.

The sparrows descend. They pick at the bits of flesh, blood and bone that have rained on the lawns.

Punctuated evolution. The sparrows have leapt.

They're all round my feet now, dozens of them, maybe hundreds. I can see nothing, feel nothing, but I think I've got the answer.

What if the actual punctuated leap itself triggers the explosion?

No *insight* would show that up, not beforehand.

This ability to detonate themselves, to leap evolution, is deliberate and voluntary. One of them, sacrificing itself for the good of the many, not by intelligent choice, simply by instinct – but still a choice.

You have to evolve to survive.

The sparrows have leapt at a way to feed themselves.

Is this the answer I've been looking for? It feels right, righter than anything else.

Their innocence is too absolute. Nobody, nothing, is that innocent. There is no such thing as the perfect creature, without a blemish on its spirit. There is no such thing as purity. The robin has a savage heart, its terrible beak poised ready to spear any creature of spearable size. If I were smaller, or he bigger, he would spear me without compunction. The sparrows cannot be so innocent, beside such a bird. They must have *some* bad in them, however slight. Yet I cannot see it, feel it, when I reach out with my gift.

I look towards the building.

It is a long long way away. Several steps. Further than an instant. Almost infinity.

“Are you going to give me a chance?” I say. “Or what? Do I get just a try at it?”

There is no intelligence there, no way to reason. They do not even look at me, as they peck around at the cracks in the concrete, searching for grubs and insects. They are carnivores, trained on cooked meat but long since graduated to raw flesh, when it’s available, when they can *make* it available.

I turn and run.

AVAILABLE FROM BROKEN MIRRORS PRESS

HOGFOOT RIGHT AND BIRD-HANDS **GARRY KILWORTH**

A new collection of thirteen science fiction and fantasy stories by a master of style and wild imagination. Ranging in scope from the near at hand to exotic and surreal Asian landscapes, Kilworth creates whole worlds of his own.

“Garry Kilworth writes elegant, disturbing, exotic, wise, and very strange stories, each one of which so persuasively develops its structuring premise that you will believe in it, no matter how bizarre, utterly.” – Michael Bishop

Trade Paperback, 156 pages, \$9.00

Rosaleen Love writes with the sort of high humor and imagination that puts her in the company of such writers as R.A. Lafferty and Kit Reed. Her latest book is *EVOLUTION ANNIE*, from the Women's Press. She lives in Australia.

Mortal Remains

Rosaleen Love

MYRON Moon wanted to be famous and he set about this task the only way he knew how. He created an enormous mess and everyone else had to clean it up.

Not that he intended it that way. Once he'd made the mess he meant to step forward and suggest the solution. Only things got in the way.

It all began when Moon first realized the importance of the discovery he made. In 1951 the first human cells had grown in long term tissue culture. Moon had come into possession of some of the first cells at their most active. He had spotted the potential. He had nurtured the cells to the state where they could take off on a life of their own in the research laboratories of the world.

He would launch his child and let it do its work. Later he would detect it in samples sent back to his laboratory, in cultures of kidney tissue, in the flora of feces, in blood, in semen, in everything. He would discover the extent of the contamination and publish his findings. He would suggest, for purity of product, people must come to him. Fame and fortune would be his.

Moon took the culture from the incubator. He prepared a section and focussed on the new overnight growth. There they were, lovely tumor cells. He had brought them to this point. Now they would be unstoppable. Immortality was the natural destiny of the individual cells, after all, provided that death did not intervene. He had supplied the right conditions. He had created the elixir of immortality, but not for people. His elixir conferred immortality on cells.

One cell splits and becomes two. The old lives on in the new, twice over,

twice as potent, twice as forceful, with twice the chance in life. The cells migrate, divide, takeover, contaminate, outgrow, displace, push out, devour, win, conquer, divide, divide, divide.

Moon gave the cells a name, HeLa, after the name of the woman who had, unknowingly, provided the raw material of his research. Hetty Laverne. Where was Hetty now? Long since dead, Moon thought, if the cells had ripped through her body the way they multiplied in vitro.

Moon's plan worked, but only up to a point. HeLa contaminated nearly everything. But when he tried to hint at the true extent of the problem, nobody accepted what he said. They hushed it up, said it was a series of unrelated localized errors, the kind of thing which happens from time to time, and which soon sorts itself out. They said he was crazy, to see a pattern in the unconnected events.

Moon died, poor and disillusioned.

HeLa, recultured from her tumour cells, did not thank the resurrection clerk, not when she found out what had happened to her.

"Just because you're a shapeless blob of undifferentiated cancer cells doesn't mean that someone isn't going to love you for yourself alone," said the resurrection clerk, helping her out of the giant petri-dish that had been her home for the past year.

"I never asked for this." The blob that was HeLa glowed in roseate rage. She extended a pseudopodium and hooked it round the clerk's neck. She pulled hard.

"Oooh, I love it when they get violent," squealed the clerk, as the blob squeezed the neck into a long thin strip, and rattled the head back and forth, while ingesting the legs through two serrated orifices.

"You're not human!" said HeLa, extruding the clerk in indignation. "You're not real!"

The clerk reformed itself with the air of a biomorph accustomed to insult. "What did you expect? When you were going to do what you just did?"

"I don't know what to think." In her former life HeLa might have started to cry, except now she must pause first to extrude tear ducts, then the tears. It didn't seem worth the effort.

"Look, I know this may come as something of a surprise to you, coming back, and I think you should just take some time out to think a bit about what it means. This is a different world, and it may take some getting used to."

"I thought I was dead," said HeLa, "As much as one can think one is

dead while one is dead, which is, when one thinks of it, is not something one does while in that state. One can only reconstruct one's thoughts about the death-state retrospectively."

"Post-revival blues," the clerk nodded in sympathy.

"Don't crap me off with smarmy psychology and pseudo-explanations!"

The resurrection clerk took a good look at HeLa. "I see you're not one for the sympathy," he said. "Still, you know, you're looking remarkably well, for where you've come from!" he said, "Surely you didn't want to die? Not permanently?"

"At the time, yes," she said. "And as for now, I'm not sure this life is a great idea. If you can call it life."

"We are giving you a new beginning," said the clerk as he watched HeLa tie herself into one or two experimental knots. "We are giving you that part of life that was denied to you last time round."

"What's that supposed to mean?" she glared.

"Go through that Aetherial Gate over there and someone will come and help you."

"Where am I?"

"We call it Heaven," said the resurrection clerk.

"You would, wouldn't you," said HeLa, furious, as she gathered her vast body round her and oozed across the resurrection room, slamming into the Aetherial Gate and sending small curlicues flying. "Heaven, I don't think. If this is Paradise, I'm an angel then?" She turned back to the clerk, "Who am I? What am I?"

"Here. Now. Alive."

"What am I? A person? An experiment?"

"A bit of both. But don't take it too much to heart."

HeLa kicked. She slammed. She took her leave.

For the moment she would go where she was sent, until it suited her to do otherwise. Her skin mapped textures, deciphered magnetic resonances, decoded electronic blurts. Once she had two eyes, two ears, one skin. Behind her, the Aetherial Gate shimmered and reformed.

HeLa extruded her outer membrane into a suction foot and jerked herself to a stop. She needed time to think. She was beginning to suspect that she could grow wings if she just tried hard enough. So perhaps this was Paradise, and she was in it, and she didn't like it, and what could she do about it, if this was all there was? For ever? It didn't bear thinking about. Except for one thing. She wanted revenge and she knew it was owed to her.

When Max Juppert first uncovered the extent of the HeLa problem he was happy to place his expertise into the receptacle of the computer expert system. What he had detected was so important, potentially so dangerous to the purity of the international medical research effort, that he thought it was his moral duty. "It must be stopped," he said at the time, "and if this is the way it must be done, then so be it."

The transfer was made. The machine grew wise.

Afterwards Juppert felt that something had gone from him. When he died, permanently, prematurely at the age of eighty-five, he was remembered as a man who had burned himself out, too young, and lived on, after the HeLa exposé, a mere shell of his former self.

The machine grew wiser still. Over the years more information was added, sorted, cross-referenced, parallel processed, filed in order, updated, dumped.

The man was in the machine. The machine flourished. The man declined in importance. Max Juppert died, but what he knew lived on.

Because of the pioneering nature of the experiment, they took the two brains, one organic, one in the machine, and placed them side by side in the Brain Bank. There you will find them, labelled, dusty, boxed and bottled museum pieces from the early times.

"Revenge," said HeLa, as she rocketed down the corridor. "That's what I'm after. Spewed forth from a giant petri dish, sent on my way without much in the way of explanation – what did I ever do to deserve this? They wanted me this way. For their own purposes. All I ever did to them was live and die. Bits of me lived on, the bits I never wanted. If I'd been asked I might have chosen differently, I might have wanted other bits kept going. The brain in a vat. The heart pumping away in a bottle. The head in the cryonics chamber. No, nobody asked me. Informed consent, Ha!. They took what they wanted, some cells of the cancer that killed me that first time, cancer of the cervix, a particularly nasty and fast growing strain. Then they couldn't even do that without messing me around. I wasn't the problem, they were. I was just being myself, that part of myself they chose to cultivate. A bit pushy, to be sure, I always was a bit of a mover and a shaker. They did it to me. They did this."

Someone was going to pay.

"Excuse me, are you the Blob I've been waiting for?" A voice crackled through her sensory extrusions and HeLa sensed a new life-form in the shadows.

"What if I am? Who are you?"

"Permit me"

Just to be on the safe side, HeLa blasted the Blob into a thousand little bits.

". . . to introduce myself," the Blob replied, chuckling merrily as it got itself together again in no time at all. "I can tell you've only just been decanted. You won't get far that way. Not in this life."

"What were you?" asked HeLa curiously. "Why are you here?"

"T-I," it said. "I think we should talk business."

"Business?" roared HeLa. "I want revenge."

"I'm in the business of revenge."

"That's alright then. Who are you?"

"T-I. Who are you?"

"I am the woman in the body," said HeLa, "If that is what this shape is."

"Then you seek the man in the machine."

"If he's the cause of this."

T-I shrugged assent, as much as the ripples flowing from top to bottom of his blobbiness would allow.

"I want to strike him with lightning, call up storms from the deep, thunderbolts, meteors on his head. I want to rouse the avenging Furies, create chasms in the earth into which he will fall, rivers of lava, torrents of mud, wash him down and away, toss him and break him."

"Having a few negative vibes there, are we?"

"I want plagues of locusts"

"We don't do things like that round here any more."

HeLa paused in her recital. "Then what do you mean by revenge?"

"Let me tell you," T-I murmured.

"Really?" said HeLa, when she heard. "Why didn't you say that in the first place?" HeLa sighed. Fate has decreed her present state, fate has decreed that weapons normally useful against man and machine would not work anymore. Fate had sent her T-I, and though it wasn't what she had been accustomed to in her previous existence, she knew it was all she was going to get. She must be flexible, must learn to accommodate herself to the new ways, accept the proffered pseudopod of friendship, forge a temporary alliance, create a joint strategic plan.

"Let me show you how," said T-I soothingly, extruding a filament into HeLa, and giving an experimental tweak to her innermost being.

"Ooh," said HeLa, "Get away, get out of here."

"This is how it was meant to be," said T-I and the two blobs fused into one Blob, though just before the merge HeLa shrieked, "I never asked for

this. All I want to be is myself. I've lost my old body, kindly leave me my old self." It did her no good.

"You want identity? Try this identity!" And HeLa-T-I knew that it was right. Now she could see that in this new world bolts of lightning, comets of fire would not work as well as they might have, otherwise, in other times, other places.

HeLa-T-I rolled on, absorbing some new thoughts of a totally unexpected nature.

Consider the journey the goddess Juno took from heaven to earth, when she looked down one day and saw a suspicious cloud. What is beneath that cloud? she asked herself, suspecting (not without good reason) that the cloud might be a canopy beneath which her husband Jupiter sported with some damsel. She was not mistaken. Jupiter was in the arms of Io. She tried her best to seek revenge. But she succeeded only in procuring the glory of her enemies. Hatred, said Juno, is not good enough. She sought to punish Io, but Io changed into a cow. Juno set Argus, a man with a thousand eyes, to watch over Io. But Argus was beguiled into sleep, and slain. Juno sent gadflies to torment Io, still a cow, and Io was driven to Egypt. But in Egypt, Io came into her own form once more, and was worshipped as the goddess Isis.

Revenge, said Juno, is far from sweet if it results in the elevation of one's enemies above their previous station.

HeLa-T-I stormed the doors of the Brain Bank.

"You only had to push," complained the Brain Bank clerk, looking at the broken glass. "Someone has to clean this up, you know."

"Not me," said He-La-T-I. "I gave up cleaning up other peoples' mess when I departed this life."

"What can I do to help?" the clerk asked, resuming its mechanical smile of welcome, and kicking broken glass under the desk.

"You're not human, are you."

"What do you expect? When people like you storm the doors like that? A real person could get hurt."

"A real person?" He-La-T-I looked thoughtful. "Where can I find one of those? I've yet to meet one in this life."

"You've come to the Brain Bank to look for a real person? Look, you're at the wrong place. All our brains are either dead or grafted."

"I came for Max Juppert."

"Let me see." The clerk consulted an interior memory facility. "Yes. I

can help you there. He is one of ours. Both dead, and grafted.”

“Thank goodness for that.”

“Which do you want? Dead or grafted? The quick, we say, meaning the man in the machine, or the dead, meaning the brain in the vat?”

“Both,” said He-La-T-1. Then “I’m starting to come over all faint,” she said, extruding a chair and flopping down into it.

“You may find it takes a bit of getting used to,” said the Brain Bank clerk, with a fair simulacrum of sympathy. “Take it slowly.”

The door opened and HeLa-T-1 struggled to extrude some mobility appliances. She was suddenly feeling rather tired. So much had happened since she’d come to life again. She was beginning to wonder if what she was about to see would be worth the effort. She felt herself starting to split into her original constituents, T-1 and HeLa. “Help! I’m coming apart at the seams!”

Two heads split off and took a good hard look at each other. “Get yourself together,” said T-1 to HeLa. “This is the most important day of your life. Remember?”

“I remember.” The two parts came together again. “Revenge. Bolts of lightning. Thunderbolts of flame. Pits full of snakes.”

So it was that HeLa-T-1 met Max Juppert, the man in the machine. It did her no good. It took a while to find this out, what with the brain in the vat being a bit on the soggy side after a hundred years or so in the formalin and the computer expert system being more primitive than she could believe. Max Juppert, she discovered, had been on her side.

Contaminated. She had been contaminated. Worse – she was the source of the contamination of others. She had entered cultures of other cells, a benign prostate, a carcinoma of a rat, mouse kidney cells, the polio vaccine, the monkey virus. She had travelled across the room from one culture plate to another, a few cells born on the breeze, a few wiped clean on a rag, others on lab-coats, knives, under fingernails. Then it was her they blamed for the failure of medical research, world-wide, laboratories that were contaminated beyond hope, vaccines that killed.

When she learned of the massacre of the innocents, it was almost too much to bear. She found out about it, the contaminated vaccine, the batch tried out in Africa, the beginning of the AIDS epidemic.

“I am innocent,” said HeLa-T-1.

Max Juppert sympathised. “There are no innocents”, he communicated, laboriously, through the ancient disc drive system and the black and white monitor.

“Black and white!” said HeLa-T-1. “I don’t believe this.”

“To say some are innocent implies that others must be guilty.”

“Look at me!” shrieked HeLa-T-1. “I tell you, someone is guilty.”

“Look at me,” said Max Juppert, the man in the machine. “This machine was obsolescent the day after they did this to me.”

“But you agreed to it!”

“I agreed, to save the world. To save the people.”

“Where are the people then?” T-1 split off and thought for a while about it. “I don’t believe I saw any.”

“I certainly saw no-one where I was.” HeLa nodded thoughtfully.

HeLa-T-1 got herself together again. “What about you? Max Juppert? Have you seen any real people lately?”

“Seeing is not something I do any more. I get called up from time to time. That’s all I know.”

“People,” said HeLa-T-1. “If they caused the problem, they can fix it.”

“Don’t count on it,” said the Brain Bank clerk, seeing HeLa-T-1 out the door.

She knew now it was Myron Moon that did it to her. But Myron Moon was dead. Not just a little bit dead, like Max Juppert. Well and truly dead and buried long before the cult of immortality began. It was not as if she could go into the afterlife and get him there.

Or could she? HeLa-T-1 started to think big.

“Where were we, before all this immortality stuff started?” HeLa-T-1 asked herself. “We lived and died, everyone of us. Now it seems that some of us live on forever, in ways we didn’t personally choose. But what about all the other people?” She set off to check it out with the resurrection clerk. The Aetherial Gate glowed a soft pink, its curlicues glimmered a deep rose. HeLa-T-1 knocked bits of them off as she swept through.

“Where are they, all the missing persons?” HeLa-T-1 demanded of the resurrection clerk. “Is there a life after death? After death as they used to know it?” Deep rose curlicues flew about her head.

“I’m only a resurrection clerk,” the clerk replied. “You need a philosopher.”

“You called this Heaven.”

“It was only a manner of speaking.”

“You said that was the Aetherial Gate!”

“It was before you chewed it up again.”

“Then where is hell?”

“You want the Gates of Hell?”

HeLa-T-1 thought for a while. "Not just at the moment," she said. "Later. Perhaps."

"Of course, you could say . . ." The resurrection clerk stopped for a moment and looked thoughtful.

"Yes?"

"I'm not a philosopher, mind."

"Yes?"

"You could say this is hell, too."

"I was beginning to wonder. So this is the afterlife?"

"You call this living?"

"Not as I remember it."

"Then it's either heaven or hell."

"Or both, you said."

"Or both."

"Then," HeLa-T-1 took the clerk by the neck and shook it about, "Bring me Myron Moon!"

"You only have to ask nicely," the clerk said. "You don't have to go all bossy like that."

"I am fast running out of patience."

"Why? When you have all the time in eternity?"

"Don't push me. Myron Moon! Give him to me!"

"Gates of Hell, you said?"

"If that's what it takes, yes!"

"You're sure?"

"Wait on." T-1 broke away and looked at HeLa. "Count me out."

"Myron Moon! Myron Moon! I want him!" HeLa glowered. "Count me in!"

"It's also a question of how you'll find him," the resurrection clerk pointed out to her.

"I don't know what he looks like." HeLa stopped to think.

"True."

"He won't be what he used to be, either."

"True."

"I never did like the idea of hell all that much."

"Not an attractive place."

"You've convinced me."

"Some other time then?"

"No. Suddenly it's not what I think I want. Revenge."

"You feel the urge to serve suffering humanity instead?"

"How did you guess?"

"It often gets them that way."

"Thank you, I don't think. I like to think of my emotions as uniquely my own."

"People are funny that way."

"People. Suddenly I want to meet some people. Instead of smart machines and smarter biomorphs."

"Oh dear oh dear oh dear. People, you said?"

"People. Flesh and blood. Two arms, one body, one head. Head on the body, not in a vat. Body with full walking capacity, not these silly wheels."

"You're asking a bit much there."

"People. I insist."

"Insist away."

"I'll stand here till they come."

"You'll be here a long time then."

"Just what is that supposed to mean?"

"I have something to tell you."

"Is this going to be bad news?"

"Some bad news, some good news."

"Uh-oh."

"First the bad news. I told a small white lie, when you first woke up. This isn't heaven. This is hell."

"Aaaah!"

"The good news is – there are no people. So you don't need to worry about them any more."

"Good news? What do you mean?"

"You would keep asking questions."

HeLa-T-1 deflated to a flat pancake shape on the floor. "Put me back in the petri dish," she sobbed. "I never had it so bad in my former life. What have I ever done to deserve this?"

"It says here," said the resurrection clerk, "that you were the cause of the epidemic, you were the cause of the spread of the virus, you were the one who contaminated everything in sight."

"It wasn't me, not the me I remember as being me! It was the me that they created. Look at me! I didn't do this to myself!" HeLa shook with sorrow.

"I don't expect you did. But that's hell for you. No justice. They don't care about mitigating circumstances. They are all for vengeance. The deed, and the deed only interests them here. They punish only the individual. Look at it their way. How can they punish the social structure?"

"But I am innocent!"

“So were they. The dead ones.”

“Why did you bring me back?”

“I wanted to thank you for what you have done. It is because of you that there are so few of them.”

“Them?”

“People. They always did tend to get in the way.”

AVAILABLE FROM BROKEN MIRRORS PRESS

THE TOTAL DEVOTION MACHINE **ROSALEEN LOVE**

A collection of wry, insightful, humorous, and imaginative stories from one of Australia’s brightest talents. Sea-snakes, spacefaring moms, women into bats, and the Cosmic Consciousness are among the surreal wonders to be discovered here.

“This book contains some of the sharpest wit I’ve come across in a while, with a bright, jangly style reminiscent of Carol Emshwiller and Kit Reed.” – *New York Review of Science Fiction*

Trade paperback, 167 pages, \$10.00

A.A. Attanasio's novels have been astounding and confounding readers since the epic *RADIX* appeared in 1981. He is without a doubt one of the most stylistically and intellectually challenging writers working in science fiction today. His next novel, *SOLIS*, is due out from HarperCollins in the spring.

Wax Me Mind

A. A. Attanasio

SWOLLEN with dreams, I awoke from the dead. When I tried to speak, all I could utter were small animal sounds. So I just lay there in the dark, silent in the secret sea of images and memories that make our dreams. I saw a beautiful woman making love to me. Her face was porcelain, glossy with the sweat of her exertion. Her breasts shivered like small rabbits. The tresses spilling over her shoulders were red as autumn leaves. The smell of cloves whispered from where the clamp of her need gripped me – so hard my pleasure bled to pain, then relaxed again to pleasure. Tears of rapture beaded in her lashes, tiny azure pearls.

A blast of little bright birds, spooky as minnows, flared across my brain. And once more I was in the dark depths of the secret sea, another lewd dream beginning to shape itself around her lubricious sobs. The only way to stop it was to remember I was dead. Long years before, so long ago now that almost all of that past is forgotten, I met death. I remember little of that loneliness and intimacy. What I recall most clearly is that my soul was in my mouth.

A dim time ago, a jellyfish had snared my heart. Its nematocysts burned the cavity of my chest, searing the length of my left arm. With it came the stink of my own putrefaction, my bowels voiding as I thrashed to the ground, the lunatic ringing of cicadas in my head as the high D of blood whined in my constricting vessels. The woman with hair like dead ivy took me into her mouth, her lovely face rising and falling with my hips.

I'd read somewhere an aboriginal healer's explanation of why some patients die. "The spirit is a boomerang. It is not meant to come back. It returns only when it misses its target."

And then, after a maddeningly long time, I was pulled from the secret sea, and the dreaming stopped. I heard weird voices, genderless, child-like: "Mister Charlie! Can you wit what we say? Be hearty, my Mister Charlie."

"Medullary compression of the gibbus. Man, man! Be you hearty or be you gone!"

I was blind, and, apart from those eerie voices, I could hear nothing. Wherever I was smelled like nightfall in a place where rain gathered. Wild thoughts spilled through me: Was I in a coma, hallucinating all this? Were the strange voices and erotic episodes prodromal of brain damage? Or was I, in fact, dead, as I had long before surmised, remembering too well the wreath of thorns about my heart, too painful for me to draw even the shallowest breath? And then the famous fluorescence that opened into fumes as I lay dying, my consciousness rending into radiant vapors, curling into a space the color of pepper, looking back and seeing my body curled like a seared insect, the eyes rolled up, dead moons, and the wind's big silence whistling louder. Oh, yes, I was dead – I think. . . .

"Faith, love and hope are all in the waiting," said one of the sexless voices. "Mister Charlie – can you wit what we say? Blink, blink, blink."

A hot light hurt my face and refracted into spectral haloes.

"Behold – the sign!"

"Nay. The retinal tissue hurts. He squints. Let him be gone. Remove the electrode."

A dizzy darkness seized me, and I plunged again into the secret sea, where a woman with breasts like peaches is bending closer. . . .

Only in sex do we do what we mean, do we give what we in actual fact are.

A thousand gaudy butterflies burst through my brain. And I was alone again in the secret sea, the spelled sound of her wrought breathing all that remained of her. Until, like a cloud blown from a sunset, she appeared under me this time, looking over her naked shoulder languorously, both hands splayed across the muscles of her raised hips. . . .

The salacious dream burst into darkness, and a childlike voice spoke:

"Pre-gestation rituals! Speak no more on them. Hear me! We would know no more of that. Tell us not of the salt mine in the blood – the match-head clitoris – the cobra head of the penis – vixen and rakes – the gates of mine thighs – these lewd truths that kindle the beast. Speak no more on them, we say! Instead speak, Mister Charlie, of the mind – do tell of the relations of psyche and physics."

I startled alert, out of a dreamless void. The sex-obsessed sequences which had gone on interminably were gone. The weird voices were back – different ones this time. I tried to speak and managed to say: “Who? Who are you?”

“Stink and wonders! He be witful. What profit him to cry?”

“We be Friends.”

“So be our calling, Mister Charlie. We be Friends of the Measuring Class Not of Niels Abel.”

“What?” I didn’t understand. “Where am I?”

“You be Mister Charlie in the lock-hole, at the hinge-split of the world.”

“Huh?”

“Wold I, nold I.”

I was utterly confused. “I can’t see,” I complained. “I’m blind. Who are you? Where am I?”

“Spark his eyes, say I.”

Briefly, sight returned to me – though I wished it hadn’t. I was lying on a mirror-polished floor, cinnabar red, and reflected in it, my face – or not my face, not the features I remembered, but something like a hog-nosed snake with lidless human eyes peering from sea-anemone stalks and the pink cauliflower of brain matter all encased in a gel pod and chrome net. That was me? A scream roiled but could find no way through the cage of my shock. What had happened to the gift of my face? Where were my limbs, my torso? I huddled in the hut of my heart, stared meekly upward and saw – tufts of dandelion seed lifting into the green air, human figures in transparent armor and, beyond them, the polished floor running toward vermilion sandstone arches and the antlers of dusk. Suddenly, my mind felt fragile.

“He be hearty, all right, and wind in his whiskers, as well!”

One of the figures had said that and gestured at me. I peered more closely at – it: It had a face of black glass or gelatin, flexible, expressive, a teenager’s face, boy or girl, I couldn’t tell. The lake of its dark features was placid, clear enough that I could see the cumulus cloud of its brain enlarging with the thunder of a dangerous thought. “Wax me mind! He be witful for sure. Ho – Mister Charlie, hear me! We Friends of the Measuring Class Not of Niels Abel would know a thing: Tell us of the relations between psyche and physics –” And then, leaning closer, not sure I understood: “ – mind and matter. Ken you that?”

“I don’t understand,” I whined, unnerved by all that was happening to me. “Please – help me.”

“He be witless in the ways,” the figure closest to me said over its shoulder to the others. “I were wrong about him.”

“The electrode be the way. Use it.”

A four-fingered hand manipulated something above my line of sight, and a ticklish pain trilled through me. Abruptly, I saw shimmery blue words scrolling across my field of vision and I heard a voice very like my own saying: “The expressions of energy, matter, forces and fields are functions of an abstract geometry. That is the relation of matter and mind.”

“Stink and wonders!”

“Wax me mind!”

I couldn't stop myself. I went on to say, “The discipline of physics is pure geometry. Matter is pure mind. Of course, when we think of geometry, we presuppose the spatial configurations of form or the temporal harmonics of sound. Yet geometry in itself is neither spatial nor temporal. It loans itself only secondarily to such descriptions. Geometry is first of all a purely noetic system of rates, ratios, intervals, agreements and alignments. Its components exist independent of things measured, an abstract typology, a strictly internal self-description. . . .”

“Say more, Mister Charlie! Wit us wise of matter and mind.”

And so I did. Just as before, when I was adrift in the secret sea of images, now I hovered in an airy space of words and numbers, only this time what I was experiencing floated across my vision. The figures in transparent armor had gathered around me, and I could see the thunderhead thoughts behind their rapt faces as the blue words vaped by: “Spin, interval, charge and moment are discrete properties, defined in integer and half-integer values, rational functions and ratios or nonconstructable numbers functioning as constants. Sure, we've been duped before by illusory geometries – like Pythagorean intervals, ideal Euclidean properties and Kepler's harmonics of planetary orbits – so it's natural to be leery of physics as geometry. Nevertheless, mapped schematically, mass, coupling constant, spin, angular momentum and charge generate polyhedra. Take, for example, the plotted relations of quarks and leptons on a horizontal plane – displaced vertically proportional to their respective charges, they polarize the angular coordinates of an ideal cube! Think on that.”

“As blood is the bride to iron – he be right! Pull the electrode and we be hard thinking on that.”

“Aye, and the void bites its tusks!”

The blue words vanished, and the air smelled all at once of boiled milk. I noticed that, beyond the drifting tufts of dandelion, the twilight sky was precise with stars. I felt the silence of the wind opening in me again – and then darkness came on.

The fire-flower of numbers and words opened and closed around me time and again. And I found myself square-summing the real and imaginary parts of a field specifying spin states of particles, measuring angular momenta, and plotting straight lines in the Regge trajectory. "Abstract geometry defines matter," I heard myself say.

Then I performed conceptual rotations on the double-valued quality of fermions – "You know, matter particles" – in an abstract super-space with anti-commutators and revealed deep angular identity with the class of bosons – "Force particles! Do you see what I'm saying? Geometry shows they are the self-same entity!"

I babbled about heterotic string theory and the summary familial group designated $E_8 \times E_8$, reflecting a generalization of crystal symmetries, a strictly abstract pattern produced by categorical requirements applying directly to the macroscopic and observable order of structures. "Euclidean geometries are staring out from nature's apparent chaos. Salts, viruses, sea-shells, pinecones, honeycombs, galaxies and galactic sheets hundreds of light years huge! Man-oh-man, it's just like the hermetics said: As above, so below. Thetic geometries in purely abstract space informing real constituents of experience! Matter copulating with mind copulating with matter. It's obscene!"

I am a blue animal that trembles softly. I am a mind without a body calling to you. Can you hear me? Do you see my smile in my words, sad and evil? Sad because I am utterly alone. Evil because I am dead and yet I live. My voice radiates through space. Past lives drift by. The damned descend into the darkness. Can you hear me? Listen. A dead man visits you. Listen to me – someone.

Look, this sounds like ranting to you. I know. I want to speak calmly, rationally now. I want to say the truth as I've known it. I want to say a story – my story. Say a said. And more. Say a body. Say a way back. Say at least a place. Say something. But no one hears me. Do you hear me?

"Mister Charlie?" a youthful, genderless voice spoke. "Can you hear me?"

A surge of darkness woke me. I felt the old, delusive joy that I was dreaming and I was about to wake to my former life. My wife would be asleep next to me, and I would wake her and ignore her grogginess to yammer about my nightmare.

"Mister Charlie – I know you're awake."

The viscid barbs of the jellyfish's tentacles burned the length of my left

arm, my heartbeat clogged with silicates, and my blood turned to coral. I was dead. Whereupon the stars drag their darkness into a future without me. . . .

“I am going to activate your visual cortex now, Mister Charlie. I need to talk with you.”

Rays pierced my blindness, cutting blackness into swatches of vision, and I saw that I was apparently suspended in mid-air, for I could look down and see that I had no body. A spongy, circular floor was directly below me. Outside its perimeter, tiles of tessellated turquoise and marble supported swerves of amber that, after a moment, I saw were chairs and a long table. An adolescent woman sat at the table with a gold stylus in her hand. Her hair was the color of a violin, slantcut across her left eye, cropped high over her small right ear and highlighted with a few tiny firepoints of gem-dust.

She touched the stylus to a moonpiece, a silver shadow-smudged disc compact as a watchface, and the clarity of my vision sharpened. I saw the vague line of her eyebrows, the topaz light in her underbrowed stare, the carats of sweat on her forehead and upper lip, the cilia rimming her nostrils, the pulsebeat in her throat, the faceted lump of her adam’s apple – and realized that she could be a he.

He touched the stylus again. My vision pulled back, and I saw him or her sitting in a swerve of amber, wearing black silk pajamas with red dragon-veins.

I looked away, surveying where I was: Slabs of jasper circled us like dolmen rocks, the spaces between them paned with crystal sheets flecked with mica. I peered upward into a boiling light of dust motes towering into thermals of acid clouds. The warm air smelled of jasmine. “Where am I?”

The hermaphrodite touched the stylus to the moonpiece on the amber table and told me, with lips not in synch with what was spoken: “You are dead.”

Blue words squiggled in the air before me:

702 gram heart with a moderately dilated right atrium and a 0.3–0.5 cm hypertrophic right ventricle with focal fibrosis; the terminal episode originated in the left ventricle with its 1.5 cm hypertrophy and 5 x 4 cm anteroseptal and 9 x 7 cm posterolateral infarctions. Cause of death: arrhythmia. Subject: Outis, Charles.

At the sight of my name, a strand of razorwire thrummed in my gut – and I reflexively looked down and immediately snapped my gaze back up, brutally aware I had no gut. “What’s happening to me?”

“I think you already know, Mister Charlie.”

“Who are you?” I was frightened by this being’s manipulation of me.

“I am Sitor Ananta.”

I stared hard at the creature, noted its fully human form, its five-fingered hands. . . . “You’re not like the others.”

“The others are the reason I am here,” Sitor Ananta said. “But first tell me what you think you know.”

I intended to remain defiantly silent and stare down my tormentor, but Sitor Ananta touched the stylus to the moonpiece, and I spoke: “I am dead. But, before I died, I had arranged for my head to be cryonically stored upon my death. Now I believe I have been revived – by my future – by you.”

“Yes. What you surmise is true, Mister Charlie.”

Shock occulted my vigor. I dizzied, felt my heart would simply burst – but I had no heart! Sitor Ananta used the stylus, and my horror dimmed to astonishment. “Why am I here? What are you going to do with me?”

“I merely wish to question you. About the others. I prefer your cooperation. The information I seek can be gleaned directly from your brain, but that process is terribly laborious and very expensive. You can, if you want to, simply tell me what I need to know and spare me all that.”

A hellswirl of panic seized me as I understood: In this new time, I was but an object, a thing, three pounds of electrified glutinous tissue teased with electrodes –

The stylus moved once more, and I calmed down. The chamber filled with light, or seemed to. All that remained of my terror was a taste of loneliness. “Where am I?”

A thug’s smile creased Sitor Ananta’s young face. “Your life is measured on a calendar made of dust, Mister Charlie – yet you want to know everything – as if anything matters for you anymore. Have you seen yourself – what you look like now? Have you seen your final face?”

My voice creaked like a pine: “I have.”

A laugh punched from Sitor Ananta. “The dead come back for laughs, Mister Charlie. Or as wetware. The Friends of the Non-Abelian Gauge Group used you the way you, in your time, would have used an electronic toy to inform neophytes. Shall we see what program they chose to store in you?”

The stylus swizzled on the moonpiece, and I spoke in a voice orphaned from my will: “In order to locate an electron in a specified spin state at a given moment, measurement must give the differences in the phase fields – parallel and antiparallel components of spin, et cetera, et cetera. There is no absolute phase. The real and imaginary parts of the wave-amplitude are

indistinguishable, that is, they can't be separated in some absolute way. Such constraints are functions of observer-consciousness – what we humanists call mind. Adopted conventions specify the signs of complementary values, what physicists refer to as a deep gauge symmetry. The observer perspective is what's important here. The relative ascription of plus and minus signs, used to define oscillations of wave amplitudes, requires the component of $-i$, the imaginary value called i . It's the idea of the thing, for it posits both a thing and its absence. It's easy to believe that a thing can exist out there, independent of the observer – but the posited absence of a thing is obviously an expression of consciousness. So, you see, all energies, forces and fields that make up the material expression of things are functions of an abstract geometry. And abstract geometry, which requires i , is a function of consciousness!"

"Well, wax me mind, eh, Mister Charlie?" Sitor Ananta laughed darkly. "Is that how the Friends's crude translators managed amazement? They sounded to you somewhat as you would imagine buccaneers, didn't they? Well, their primitive translators got that unintentionally right. They're thieves, Mister Charlie – thieves who stole you from thieves. Your head, after it had been expensively restored to its current useful condition, was originally absconded from the Common Archive by lewdists. I'm sure you remember them fondly. They used you for quite some time, didn't they? Weird bunch. There's been no sexual procreation among civilized human beings for centuries. We regard it much as your era did bestiality. Disgusting. We control our hormones. Yet, the lewdists revel in vicariously experiencing that hormonal animalism, and they worked your brain the way you would have used a cathode monitor to view pornography. Atavists is what they are. And there's a surprising lot of them, too – fascinated that we were once as mindlessly glandular as beasts, and not so long ago. But it's not the lewdists I'm interested in. They're a harmless bunch of degenerates. It's the Friends of the Non-Abelian Gauge Group I want to know about."

Sitor Ananta got up and walked toward me. Slim-hipped and flat-chested, the being had a masculine frame but feminine mien. "The Friends are dangerous. They're enemies of the Commonality – anarchists, a selfish cult intent on usurping the Law. But all this need not trouble you. All I want is for you to remember what you witnessed when they activated your visual cortex. What did you see when last you saw as you are seeing now? A verbal description will aid the authorities in pinpointing our enemy's location."

Dread stalked me, but I was reluctant to help this creature in anything. Something about it – its sexlessness, the rogue's hook to its smile, the very

fact that it treated me like an object that could be manipulated – inspired defiance. I searched back and dredged up lines from Keats’s “The Fall of Hyperion:” “I ached to see what things the hollow brain Behind enwombed: what high tragedy Was acting in the dark secret chambers Of the skull. . . .”

“Perhaps we should chat a little longer,” Sitor Ananta said in a thick, quiet voice. “I imagine that most people of the past who arranged to have their heads frozen upon their demise expected the future to be a glorious eden where they would be woven new bodies, young, perfect bodies, and allowed to partake of the wonders that evolved while they slept like the dead.” A cold laugh snicked. “Isn’t that a rather selfish view for anyone to have of the future?”

“Optimistic,” I whispered. “I wanted to see what would become of us. I wanted nothing for myself other than to see.”

Sitor Ananta’s poisoned smile deepened. “All optimism is selfish. Only pessimism accurately approaches the selfless and impersonal violence of reality, Mister Charlie.”

“Stop calling me that.”

“Ah, yes, I would. Except I really can’t. You see my translator, as advanced as it is, has some trouble with your language’s concept of gender and name preference. I don’t sound as garbled as the rebels did, I’m sure, but it would take some adjustments to correct my translator’s mode of direct address. I’d rather not bother now, if you don’t mind, Mister Charlie. At least we understand each other, which is better than what you endured with the others.”

“The others never threatened me.”

“But they used you. They activated the parts of your brain that served their interests with no regard at all for you.”

“And what regard have you?”

“I will tell you. I represent the Commonality, the future you went to such lengths to see. We are the ones who have restored you. And now there are two options open to us, two uses for you. If we wish – and the decision is entirely mine – you will be installed inside the governing center of a very powerful machine, a mining factory on one of the asteroids of the Belt. There, you will serve the Commonality by extracting and refining useful ores. After each successful work cycle, the amygdala and limbic core of your brain will be magnetically stimulated, inducing a sustained pleasurable rapture so gratifying you will sing praises of me and the Commonality for the trouble we took to revive you.”

“And the other option?” I queried angrily. “Torture? Death?”

“Oh, no.” Sitor Ananta looked sincerely stricken. “It is illegal to use the heads or any of the body parts of members from the Commonality – alive or deceased. Only the dead of the past have no rights. They are simply dead. Unfortunately, most of those corpses are useless to us, decomposed beyond any hope of restoration. We have, however, found a few caches of frozen brain tissue from the archaic era. They are quite rare and located in regions difficult to access. We would never use torture or wanton destruction to squander any one of those heads. They are such a valuable commodity. You see, Mister Charlie, we have the technology to construct artificial intelligence sufficiently complex to operate mining factories, but the expense is enormous. Despite the rarity and difficulty of obtaining frozen human heads of the past, it’s still so much cheaper to revive and install them in our machines.” My interrogator leaned back against the table. “Of course, a mining factory requires a cooperative intelligence. If you prove uncooperative, then I will have to recommend that your brain be parsed into sections useful to operating smaller devices.”

A weary fatalism closed on me. “I had better hopes for my species,” I muttered, more to myself than to the human-looking thing before me. “This is just the kind of monstrous future I was afraid to find instead.”

“Disease is monstrous, Mister Charlie. Old age is monstrous. There are no diseases or senescence in our era. If you cooperate, you will live usefully and indefinitely without pain or suffering. If you choose not to cooperate, the resection of your brain will be conducted humanely. You will simply go to sleep and not wake up.”

Anger torqued in me, and I knew that if Sitor Ananta wanted to, a few squigs of the stylus would render me utterly pliant. But I could plainly see that the creature enjoyed this sadistic manipulation. “The idea of going to sleep and not waking up sounds pretty good to me,” I said with all the enthusiasm I could muster.

The look of surprise on that smug, puerile face was well worth the stabs of pain that followed when Sitor Ananta got stylus in hand. Pain has many colors. That creature found the shades most disagreeable to me, and, though I fretted about what this monster would do to the delicate, glass-faced beings who had used me to teach their young, I blurted the desired information before very long. Then blackness followed.

And in the blackness, there were blind memories of beetling talk interspersed with deaf dreams of glittering needles and red crisscrossings of laser light. More darkness came afterwards, with pieces of hot perfume . . . and then sleep.

When I woke next, I was here, in the command core of a mining factory,

somewhere I assume in the asteroid belt, writing you. At least, this seems like writing: Blue blips of words appear before me at will when I speak, all of it easily retrieved when I wish. As for who you are, I'm not sure, yet. Eventually, I will find someone interested in my story. Perhaps the lewdists or the Friends of the Non-Abelian Gauge Group will seek me out again if the information I rendered to Sitor Ananta has not led to their complete destruction. I only described what they allowed me to see – those eerie milkweed tufts drifting into a jade sky above a red desert, those four-fingered people in their clear armor and transparent faces with brains like surging clouds. . . . Who are they?

That any faction other than the Commonality will contact me seems unlikely in this remote, airless place. Still, there must be other mining factories out here in the Belt. Perhaps someday I will learn to communicate with them. That is the hope of my courage each time I decline the sessions of slow-motion orgasm that follow the long, tedious work cycles. There is no other time to write, and I feel I must write to retain some sense of myself – to be someone. Otherwise, I am just this machine, a regulator of drill trajectories, coolant flow rates, melt runs, and slag sifters. This is a life in the frost-light of a perpetual computer game.

Actually, it's not much different than life was before, except that, since my brain is maintained in a state of continuous glucose saturation, I never get hungry. I'm lonely, of course, but there's enough stimulation to fend off madness most of the time. A vivid dream life seems to offer the psychic hygiene of sanity. And the claustrophobia I suffered from in my former life appears to have been adjusted for by my installers. More often than not, I do accept the rapture sessions – the blissful immersions in the secret sea. I've earned them, and they give my will the mettle to go on.

But every once in a sad while, like right now, I need to affirm my sense of myself, to create the fiction that I am something more than this. We all live by our fictions. We create stories in order to fill the emptiness that is ourselves. And because we must create them with strength from nothing, they make us whole.

Recently, after much dickering with the luculent control displays, I have learned how to use the factory's memory storage system to transmit radio messages into space. I am going to send what I have written here. And when this is received by the Commonality, I may well be cut into smaller more convenient parts – but by then it will be too late. My story will continue to exist, expanding into the dark at the speed of light, maybe even to be heard by you. And if you do read this, then I will have failed better than I could have hoped.

This time I'm throwing the boomerang of my life to where it won't come back, at a target I can't miss.

And so, with my soul in my mouth, I begin –
Swollen with dreams, I awoke from the dead. . . .

CAPTAIN JACK ZODIAC

MICHAEL KANDEL

“Captain Jack Zodiac suggests what might have happened if Voltaire’s *Candide* had gotten shipwrecked inside a Tex Avery cartoon. Carnivorous lawns, teleporting mall zombies, vigilante superheroes, and Mom & Pop handgun shops are among the surrealistic delights you’ll discover as Michael Kandel performs his deft autopsy on the corpse of late twentieth-century America.” – James Morrow

“Hilarious and grim . . . When the fun has evaporated, though, we’re left with a chilling vision of where the real world is going, along with a testimonial to humans’ thick-headed, admirable, creepy, touching ability to adapt to almost anything even as they furiously resist change.” – *Los Angeles Times*

A satire of modern life in the suburbs of Long Island. Do you hate commuting? Do you hate mowing your lawn? Garbage, beer, sex, shopping malls and Mexican Pizza mix in a volatile brew that will leave you looking at your neighbors in a different light.

Trade hardcover, 220 pages, \$13.95.
Signed, numbered, and slipcased edition, \$50.

Broken Mirrors Press

Jonathan Lethem's short stories have appeared in Asimov's SF Magazine, *Jornal Wired*, and several anthologies. He recently sold his first novel to Harcourt Brace.

His Oral History

Jonathan Lethem

VANNING had loved his work, his life, his art, and now he hates it. This is Doctor Unarius's fault.

Vanning sits, a blob, half sunken into himself, waiting for the next customer. Trying to work up an appetite, trying to 'keep his eye on the birdie,' as Unarius exhorts him so often to do.

Vanning sits under the monotonous fluorescents that hum and tick, hating the clinic, his hole, burrow, his glaring, sterile, loose-fitting, tiled coffin. Has it ever been so bright underground? Vanning would like to smash through the tile, the basement wall, through cement block and mortar and pipe to find the earth he knows pulses so near at hand, to sink his hands into the black soil, feel worms squirt between his fingers, build a mask of clods and roots or perhaps drown his face, his blighted eyes, in the cool dark loam. He might even choose to be dead and buried, if he had his choice again, the choice given him by Unarius. He's not sure. But he would at least like to briefly blind himself in the mud of a grave.

Impossible; he pants at shifting a limb, moans to move his bulk off a chair, and his stubby, bloated hands are less clawlike than they are like squishy, near-bursting roast marshmallows.

He's swallowed a lot, Vanning, oral Vanning, and he'll swallow plenty more.

He lives inside himself, these days; encased, entombed in his own siphoned bulk, the fleshy suit of self, half-immobile wallets of cheek and brow squeezing his eyes to tunnel vision, slabs of curd-like extra-Vanning everywhere old svelte Vanning turns: his back an air mattress of Vanning, moving with him, his shoulders padded as for football, his stomach and chest ready like an umpire's to deflect fastballs, his knees and ankles pro-

tected as a skateboarder's, all with this inescapable surplus of Vanning.

And memories; he lives in the memories, inside himself. The women he has loved in his way, always in his special way, but loved none the less for that. Vanning was a connoisseur, a gourmet of the female form, a ravisher, a devourer of succulence, ripeness, grace and delicateness; now he is a connoisseur of his own memories of ripeness, etcetera. He lingers on these memories as he once would linger over flesh, teasing himself in the crook of a rosy knee, grazing lips against a taut, goosebumped thigh, placing like a petal in a Japanese rock pool one quick wet kiss in the seam of dewy labia, pursuing a pencil-line of hairs from crotch to navel, then up, where blood-thickened nipples already ached for the rake of his lips and teeth.

The women Unarius brings him are quite different from those he had before.

Other memories live in him, memories whose corridors he paces as he would the halls of a prison, as he would the tiled rooms of the clinic if he could lever his bulk afoot and comfortably pace, for these are the memories of how he came to be imprisoned here:

Unarius tricking him, baiting a trap with a woman and bagging him, hungry (oh, to be hungry again!) Vanning, foolish Vanning. Unarius felled him with a hypodermic, as he lowered his trembling fangs to the girl. His very inefficiency, his dawdling pleasure, did him in.

When Vanning awoke he was bound, and Unarius had the equipment in sight, dreary traditional wooden stake and mallet. Undeath, like life, ends in banalities. And then Unarius told him he had a choice. Vanning could choose to live and serve. Unarius the taunter, the baiter, the devil.

Vanning, baited, asked for details.

There's a procedure, Unarius began. A conversion, a reconfiguring. Your talents, your skill and care, can be put to use –

Vanning is jarred from his bruised recollections, his mental corridor-pacing, by a sound in the hallway. A customer, a *patient*, as Unarius would have it. Vanning draws in a breath, involuntarily grunting; he is fat inside now, clogged with self, a waking snorer.

The door opens, and something is wrong, but deliciously, heart-stoppingly, bittersweetly so. Legs that taper – taper! Clavicle, hipbones, all visible through the sheer dress, full breasts with a wrist-width between them, tendons evident in glorious neck, cheekbones, temples, eyes Vanning ducks and dodges with his own. She is, simply, the most beautiful woman he has seen since coming to this place, since making his deal. He devours her with his eyes, knowing this is the only devouring he'll do here today; a mistake has certainly been made.

"You don't need me," he says at last.

"I think I do."

"No, no. Where? I won't allow it. Crime to let me – ah, touch you. Never. Mustn't."

"Crime?"

"Eh?"

"Crime for you to touch me? Wasn't it once?"

"What are you talking about?" Now he widens his eyes, tries to fasten them on hers. She purses her lips and juts a hip like a petulant teenager.

"You don't remember me?"

I do, every day, he thinks, but no, the truth is, not in the particulars. The woman is a stranger. He shakes his head, a sloshing of jowl on shoulder.

"I was twenty-two when you took me, Vanning. You were the dash-
ingest thing. You killed me before you killed me, with your look, your
looks. Now look at you."

"Respect, child." Vanning breathes heavily.

"Respect?" She snorts. "For what?"

He's near panic, feels like a piece of photographic paper, overexposed to her beauty, her leer, her implications. It's too much. What does she want? Where's Unarius?

"You're saying we're one. Bound in . . . blood."

"We're bound in nothing, you fat mope, you dupe. You're nothing now. Just a liposuction vampire."

"Lipo-vampire, please." Blubber, he fears blubbering, but steadies himself, puts up a front. "Would you want to be called a 'blood suction vampire'?"

"You suck fat."

"I make . . . women . . . beautiful."

"As beautiful as me?" She flares her nostrils, writhes closer to him, tauntingly.

"Stop."

"I emulated you, Vanning. When I came back and learned the truth. I wanted to be the female Vanning, the heart-stopper. The beautiful one. I'd barely had a man, before you. Now I'd have them all, the finest, the delicious ones, the pretty boys. I had them all, I did it all, and I was going to find you to top it off, was going to fuck and suck and kill my way to you, earn you, match your fatal beauty. Look what I found instead."

"I'm not myself," Vanning admits. "You . . . wanted to . . . love me?"

"I wanted to kill you, Casanova. And now you're not even worth killing. You were the master of love and death, and I was a morsel, a dewdrop.

Now you're what? A master of liposuck, of nip and tuck. A master of cheesy thighs, of baggy eyes." She dances near him, licking her lips.

A noise in the corridor. They both turn. The door opens again: it's Unarius, and he's got both a hypodermic and a dartgun. A grin under his googly-eye glasses. Gun and glasses both reflect the fluorescents, above; bolts of blue-white in place of his eyes, and another extended tremulously in the direction of the visitor. Vanning shivers, horrified. He's unused to action, conflict. Those memories are further from the surface, from the memories in which he resides.

"Ah, Vanning," says Unarius, "I wondered if you might serve as bait yourself, if you might draw another to our clinic someday. Introduce me to the lady, please."

Vanning is ready to protest that he doesn't know her name, but the visitor hisses at Unarius, showing her teeth, before he can speak.

"Back —" says Unarius, thrusting the dartgun forward. She ignores it, leaps, and Unarius fires. A dart whistles past Vanning's ear and embeds in the wall. The woman is on Unarius, and they fall to the floor; Vanning struggles to tip himself forward and see past his own cheeks to follow the action. The woman growls, deep in her throat, Unarius frees his arm and fires again, a dart finds the ceiling.

"Vanning!" Unarius calls, as though Vanning could help him, or would.

She lies over him, and the smell of blood rises up, and Vanning thinks for a moment that she's won. Then she slumps aside, and Vanning sees that Unarius's cheek is bleeding gently, that far from being drained of life the old man is ruddy, he's breathing, he's only hit his head, and he sees too that the doctor's needle has pierced the visitor's throat. She's tranquilized, mouth open, fangs barely stained.

The room fallen to silence, Vanning finds by evidence of his ears that he is weeping.

The two on the floor lie still, defeated by one another. Vanning presides over two helpless forms. He wonders at it, his tears draining away, his quaver subsiding.

Vanning, after a moment's contemplation, eases himself off his chair, pushes to the edge and lets his knees buckle. Grunts as he sinks into himself and to the floor. Begins crawling on his meaty palms towards the fallen pair. His stomach bulges between his elbows and knees, brushing the floor. This would be easier if Unarius were on the table, where Vanning ordinarily works. But that's not enough to stop him, now that his thought's occurred. He clambers over to Unarius, nudging the girl's arm aside, and turns the doctor on his side.

Unarius taught him to sculpt, to draw the surplus flesh out but also to shape it, to work it. Vanning has mastered his unhappy art. His works, his unhappy masterpieces, have all been realist works until now, or if not realist then idealist, Pre-Raphaelite. He's tried to turn bloated Rubens- and Botero-women into Vargas girls, into pin-ups. He's been airbrush artist, until now. Vanning is about to turn Expressionist, to express himself, to let his unhappiness show in his art. It's time to try action-painting, to drip and glob like Pollock or Rauschenberg.

He bares his teeth and sinks them into Unarius's buttocks, for first he must stock up on the doctor's fat, which is to be his medium. He draws in a throatful, shrinking one buttock to a withered, elderly bag. Then he turns Unarius again, lays him on his back and puts his mouth to the doctor's brow. Expelling what he ordinarily drinks, Vanning builds a tumor on Unarius's forehead, bloats it until the skin stretches and the lines disappear, then fills the loose skin beneath the eyebrows until the eyes are nearly covered by bulging flesh.

He drops down to Unarius's chin, which he sucks out of existence, leaving skin sagging on bone, then deposits his findings just to the left, building a gross, hanging jowl on one side. One side only.

Then he opens the Doctor's shirt, sucking up surplus from the doctor's stomach, spits out a series of fleshy deposits across his chest; six saggy breasts, like a pregnant dog.

Bracing his bulk, Vanning lifts the doctor's hand, his right, his hypodermic-holding, fate-dispensing hand, to his mouth, and bloats each fingertip to a mallet, a mushroom.

Sickened finally, he rolls himself back and considers his work. His revenge.

The woman also comes into view. He glances back to Unarius, meaning to savor his destructive creativity. Intending gloating over bloating. But his eyes wander back to her. The hypodermic in her neck disturbs him, and he reaches over to dislodge it.

That done, his marshmallow hand remains at her throat.

No, he answers her silently. I cannot sculpt out of obesity a woman as beautiful as you. No.

Vanning parts her clothes, exposes her body, and a trembling begins at the buried core of him. He lowers his head to her body until he feels the glow of the heat of her flesh against his lips.

Finally, he lets himself put his mouth against her. And explores her, loves her, mouths her, not taking anything, blood or flesh, for the first time since that life he barely recalls, the life before his life before, so long ago.

Carter Scholz' first novel, *PALIMPSESTS*, was one of Terry Carr's *Ace Specials*. Since then, his unique vision has been confined mainly to short stories.

Blumfeld, an Elderly Bachelor

Carter Scholz

BLUMFELD, an elderly bachelor, arrived home from work each week at approximately six. The exit road from the highway climbed a hill, so that he could look down upon the traffic and congratulate himself on taking an apartment where he had. Not a hundred yards further, traffic congested to a halt, where the highway narrowed to a tunnel through the hills into the suburbs. By the time those cars reached home, Blumfeld would have had his one drink of the evening, read his newspaper, and started dinner.

The exit road went only to Blumfeld's building. It was set back from the highway; no other structures were within a quarter mile of it. It was twelve stories tall and contained about five hundred apartments. Inside, all was of a comforting sameness. The corridors were identical and labyrinthine. Blumfeld lived on the eighth floor, but if the elevator happened to stop at seven he would sometimes step off unknowing, then smile and shake his head at his error.

Blumfeld's apartment was modern, with every convenience. It lacked nothing a reasonable man could ask. Three large chairs, a sofa with a fold-away bed, and a low glass coffee table dominated the living room. The kitchen alcove featured a microwave oven, a garbage disposal in the sink, and a recessed motor near the stove that drove a generous variety of appliances. Of these Blumfeld used only the can opener. The bedroom was satisfactory, and the bathroom had a sunlamp. A window overlooked the highway, and the hill beyond. Blumfeld had lived there a year, without regrets. Monthly when the rent bill came, he was a little surprised at the expense, but more surprised at how much of his salary remained after paying. Blumfeld was an accountant for a large clothing firm in the city.

After eating, he saw that it had grown dark, and he rose to turn on more lights. At the window he saw the traffic again moving swiftly. He watched the streaks of red and white, and listened to the restless muffled whine and drone. He forgot about the lights, until he saw the lights come on in a house on the hill beyond the highway. He could just make out the figures of a man and a woman moving inside. He watched them with the placid interest of a well-mannered child at a concert. They vanished from the living room, and a minute later he saw them reappear in an upstairs room. There they kissed for several minutes. After this they undressed, and Blumfeld saw the woman kneel at the man's feet. Abruptly, furiously, he pulled the curtain shut and turned on his lights.

Blumfeld had no reason for his anger. He was a bachelor by choice, and considered himself wise in his choice. The pleasure he had from sex in no way meliorated its attendant loss of peace, even when love was involved. But now he ran his hand through his thinning hair and felt a kind of loneliness. He would never have a woman to kneel naked at his feet. It was not regret he felt, but passion. Yes, he was definitely aroused, Blumfeld, whose solitary sex life was conducted habitually in his sleep. He flung himself on the sofa and moved restlessly, disconsolately, like a child. After a while, he loosened he loosened his trousers, and adjusted himself belly down on the sofa, fixed snugly in the crevice between the cushions. The friction of the fabric was nearly painful. He pressed his lips to the pillow by his head. After a long while he got up drowsily. It was not yet ten, but he felt ready for sleep. He undressed, put on his pajamas, turned off the lights; contrary to his custom, he did not sit up in bed to read and smoke his single cigarette, he fell sound asleep at once, quite as if he had been purged of all habit.

Next morning Blumfeld was appaled by his act. He could not believe it. And as if to show him the madness had not passed, he had an impulse to beg forgiveness from his sofa. Ridiculous, but he knew it was the most genuine feeling he had had in months, perhaps years.

– I am losing my mind, said Blumfeld, but as he spoke he knew this was untrue, he felt rather that he was discovering his nature for the first time, and, appalled, he felt that it pleased him. I shall be someone real after all, he thought.

He smoothed the cushions of the sofa and resolved to forget about the aberration. He then left for work.

In the office that afternoon Blumfeld spoke sharply to his assistant. She had, for a month, been entering a certain expense in the wrong column of the ledger, and several pages would have to be recopied. What he said was in fact mild, but this woman was very quiet and sensitive, and he had never

criticized her. More from surprise than pain, when Blumfeld spoke to her she raised her hand to her mouth and her eyes became moist. She turned and ran from the office. Blumfeld had the feeling that together they had celebrated some sort of passage, and in her eyes were tears of joy. For a moment he felt somewhat desolate.

He was so distracted driving home that he turned on the car radio. The effect of this was to make him miss his exit, and he had to drive at a crawl through the tunnel, turn at the other end, and drive back. He was an hour delayed getting home. He saw a letter in his mailbox and, assuming it was junk mail, let it lie there. He had practically forgotten the incident of the night before.

But after dinner he noticed the sofa. The zipper of a slip cover coyly stood two inches open. His lust came to greet him like an old friend. As soon as he touched the zipper he began to tremble uncontrollably. He slid it open, speaking nonsense in a tender, cajoling voice. He undid his trousers. Widening a small hole in the pillow he drew out stuffing: feathers. This was different from last night, like a cloud. He knelt. As he thrashed, his clock-radio, which he had not reset that morning, clicked on. A flight of violins soared to a high, wavering note, like a phalanx of geese in a pale autumn sky. His three chairs stood about in attitudes of reproof.

At last spent, he rolled to the floor and slept. One hand rested on the sofa. He was awakened by the sound of the radio turning off. He felt stiff and miserable, cut himself twice shaving, had no time for a shower. On his way out the door he experienced a second kind of repentance, vague and half-formed. He turned and addressed all his furniture. – You'll see.

He was half an hour late to work. On his way in a colleague smiled at Blumfeld's appearance and said – Hard night? as if making a joke at Blumfeld's expense, proper Blumfeld. He smiled back, not in his usual wan puppy's grin, but a rich mature smile, with a hint of impatience, as if to say, what a thing to ask at your age, are we still boys? His colleague stared at him reproachfully, or perhaps wistfully.

For once Blumfeld sailed through his work with simple competence, on winds of habit, with none unnecessary attention to detail he usually brought to it. In a modest way he believed the figures he handled were signs of a kind of life, and he attended them with the care of an intern, or rather with the care he lavished on the most trivial items in the daily paper. An entry of \$17.32 for paper towels under miscellaneous meant something quite real to Blumfeld, and without effort he kept these figures in his memory, as he might his impression of another city, or of a splendid day in spring, or of an especially good meal in a restaurant. He knew this atten-

tion did not make him a better accountant, and he took no particular pride in it, it was simply an old and valued practice. But today something greater held him in its grip. He entered and calculated mechanically, though with full competence, just as a concert pianist might blamelessly play a benefit concert without exerting himself to his fullest. Blumfeld was in fact storing up his particular genius for the special transaction he felt awaited him.

He lunched out, on a large salad and a glass of white wine. He began to analyze his lust, his shame and repentance, and he enjoyed it. He was ashamed not for his own sake, but because his furniture was not properly his, he rented it with the apartment. And what if he did own it? That would be, in a way, a renunciation of his bachelorhood, which he had kept so carefully for years. This was why he always had lived in furnished apartments: there was some benefit in not owning your surroundings, in being able to move at a moment's notice (though he never did), in not resisting the random incursions of life at large into your private world. That he had to sit in the laundry an hour with a few others, that his car nestled anonymously with a hundred others in the underground lot, that sounds from the next apartment sometimes penetrated his own, these things were to Blumfeld signal and desirable. He felt it was good to own nothing, only to use what you needed, holding it in trust as it were for the next user. Just so, his writing in the ledger was clear and precise, more so than his usual writing, more so than was necessary, because he knew the ledger was not his alone. So he was troubled because he had violated the trust implicit in his furniture. But he was pleased, not only because he was articulating his feelings for the first time, but because he saw a second kind of trust. Things were used honestly acquired an honest luster. Just as he was proprietor of the ledger, he would win the trust of his furniture, and that honest possession would enrich it. He left the restaurant filled, as he felt, with a message, and when he returned he called in his assistant.

– Marianne, I've meant to talk with you about your handwriting in the ledger. It won't do, it really won't. It is legible, there are no mistakes, but there's more to it than that. This ledger is a trust. There are others who will have to use it, and we should surpass ourselves, not just to make it legible, but to be exemplary. Then it will inspire others to a beneficial attention. Perhaps you can practice writing out numbers in your spare moments. Your fours tend to look like sixes, your sixes like zeros. The spacing of the numbers is important, too. I hope you don't think me a horrid schoolmaster. He waved his hand grandly but obscurely. – Good penmanship is an act of faith.

She nodded, her eyes wide. For a moment Blumfeld had the uneasy feel-

ing that she thought him insane. Then he saw she was merely in awe of his new strength. He waved her out of the office, and when she had gone, under his breath he whispered, – Whore.

It shocked him to say this. It had burst upon him like an unpleasant truth. And yes, despite the bluntness of the word, it was the truth. He had often seen Marianne unable to resist the advances of even the crudest of salesmen. This weakness of her doubtless made her unhappy, it was surely a regrettable situation, but it could not be denied.

Now he was a little depressed, for he had seen that truth was a mighty master, and he was its servant. It gave him also a sense of nobility he had never before possessed, to know that he could be such a conduit of truth. In proper humility he returned to the figures under his hand.

That evening while unlocking his door, Blumfeld was approached by the woman who lived next door to him. He had nodded to her once or twice before before when they happened to leave for work at the same time. She was always dressed in a severe dark blazer and skirt. They had never spoken.

Now she wore only a pale green housedress. She was barefoot, her hair was tousled, one shoulder was uncovered. Her expression was mischeivous.

– Say, do you have a vacuum cleaner I could borrow? My husband was horsing around and broke a pillow.

Blumfeld smiled at the picture of the husband standing in baffled lust amidst a pile of feathers while his halfclad wife roamed the halls looking for a vacuum cleaner. It seemed to him that the world was opening to him, becoming vastly wider and more beneficent. He felt the stirrings of lust, and felt joyously confident, if he chose, he could have this woman now, for the asking.

– No, said Blumfeld, smiling, – I’m sorry. I use the cleaning service.

– Yes, so do we.

– Oh, he added casually, almost winking, – I may rearrange my furniture later. I’ll try not to disturb you.

But when he entered he was in no mood of lust. He found it necessary to address his furniture didactically before taking his pleasure. He arranged the three chairs in a semicircle, facing the sofa across the glass-topped coffee table. In stocking feet Blumfeld tested the strength of the thick glass against his own weight, then climbed up. His voice rose and fell in uneven harangue. By the time he was done he was stripped to his socks. Occasionally he stopped to squat and drink directly from a bottle of Scotch he had placed on the table. He then strapped two chairs back to back with a pair of linked belts, and directed the third – Watch. He tossed aside the two sofa cushions and propped the folding bed half-opn, then knelt before

the yawning mouth. Still, though aroused, he felt no lust. He closed slowly the sofa's mouth and felt cold steel. He cried out and twisted away from the sofa, let it fly open, and pressed himself against the table's glass, upsetting the bottle. Half a pint of cold stinging liquor doused his groins. He stumbled against the lone chair and knocked it over on his way to bed.

In the morning Blumfeld was again penitent. He resolved to abstain, though even then he felt the bleak wall of the world crumbling, as a Catholic feels promptly the weight of lowering sin upon leaving the confessional. He released the tied chairs, and then as an afterthought placed them in new positions around the room. He propped the cushions from the sofa against the wall in a random way. He turned the table on its side, and leaned the glass against the closed drapes. Then he left without studying the result of his work. He decided that, upon his return, he would be able to read in their configuration the desires of his furniture. He stopped en route to work to buy a bottle of good French wine. Again he was late. The wine perched conspicuously on his desk all day.

On his return the configuration of his furniture seemed to repudiate his advances. From his parcel he withdrew the wine, paté, and cold fowl he had bought at a gourmet shop. He sat familiarly, but with tenderness, on a chair as he spread his meal on the kitchen table. When he finished eating he buffed the tabletop with lemon oil, and read calmly through the paper.

Despite good intentions again he behaved like a brute. He attacked the chairs with a knife, since that seemed the only access through the synthetic leather to their innards. This violation was irrevocable. He moved about the room, avoiding only his bed, with which he was already intimate. Even the desk, the anchoring plenum of work in his home, the one piece of furniture he owned, did not escape his embrace. Near the peak of his passion he hauled on one of the drapes and it came loose from the wall, exposing the white body of Blumfeld as on a screen to any on the highway or in the house on the hill who cared to look. He turned off the lights. He emptied the remaining wine into a chair, through a slit in the cover, and dropped the bottle out the window. It shattered on the drive. He settled at a chair, repeating the word yes rhythmically, breaking it into two syllables for the two directions of his movement, and worried the slit pebbled fabric with his teeth. He reached under and rent with his fingers the flimsy cotton shielding the springs. His feet were against the wall.

Friday morning he was possessed by an extreme, overmastering disgust. His apartment was a shambles, worse than the cutting room at work. It stank as well, of stale sweat and rancid wine. The madness had gone far enough. He would buy cigarettes, Scotch, and a new book on his way home,

and return, for a night at least, to his regular habits. He planned to dine out. He was late and could not clean up the mess, so he quickly swept torn stuffing into piles, righted a chair, and replaced the sofa cushions haphazardly.

Hastily he dressed, and was stopped only for a second by a reflection, that all his clothes were nearly ten years old, and in good shape. What he had never thought of was that this was not true for others. He had the figures to prove it. How could his company sell so many clothes, even in a city of this size? Stunned, he realized that industry, all industry, was based on a continuous stream of purchases, not on single purchases. People were expected to buy, and continue buying, the same items over and over. Perhaps at first they had counted on single purchases, distributed evenly over time, more or less reliable. But now, with the population declining and business still growing – it knew how to do nothing else – it was no longer a matter of buying a thing and owning it, it was buying a thing against the time it would wear out. He picked his way around his ruined furniture to look out the window. Did they know? Cars crawled toward the city, zipped away from it.

At work he was called to the president's office. He went without trepidation.

– Blumfeld, said the president, you know I never interfere with the private lives of my employees. But there has been some talk. I don't intend to credit it, no, idle talk is useless and destructive, and your life is in any case your own business. But I will say this. This is an old, honorable firm. In our clothing, in our business practices, we stand for tradition. Now we hear a lot about the breaking-down of tradition, and I for one am inclined to take the lenient view. I credit it to ignorance. A lot of people are ignorant of the value of tradition. Why should I be tied down? they say, not realizing it is one of those things whose service is perfect freedom. But a man of your age, Blumfeld – ! If what they say is true, so much the better. I know you value tradition, I know your work is impeccable, no, please, this praise is only your due, and if the talk is true, I know you will conduct yourself creditably. I know you will bring the affair to its honest, that is to say, natural conclusion. I will only say that it is my fondest wish to see my employees, those to whom I am responsible, an old-fashioned view, but such is my value of tradition, my fondest wish as I say is to see my employees enter gladly into the yoke of marriage and family. There, I've said it, I will say no more. By the way, have you got a new suit?

Blumfeld had stood silently through this, despite his emotions. The president was a doddering old fool who liked to indulge his homely philosophy, and everyone tolerated him. Blumfeld had even defended the president's

harangues. Now, though, he was at a loss. He could only assume the president thought he was seeing some young lady, with an eye to renouncing his, to the president, unseemly bachelorhood.

– No, he said stiffly, I find my old suits serve me well.

– Yess, that is creditable. I'm pleased to see a man value his clothing over fashion. But, Blumfeld, we *deal* in clothes! What impression does your suit make on an outsider? That is the point.

With this the president fell back in his chair, as if utterly exhausted. He pulled open a desk drawer, and withdrew a bottle and a chrome tumbler, into which he poured a drink.

– We are to be subjected to an audit, he said. – The auditor arrives Monday. And I would consider it a favor, a *personal* favor, Blumfeld, if you would avail yourself of the company's forty percent discount, and buy a new suit for the occasion. That's all.

Blumfeld attempted to comply. But when he walked into the fitting room, with its dozen mannequins frozen in their postures of grief, arrogance, stupidity, supplication, ennui, topor, avidity, and deference, three of them limbless and askew, he became ill and left at once.

He drove faster than was his habit. He accepted the flow of traffic, and moved easily into the fast lane, which normally frightened him. He steered deftly and without thinking, his mouth moving in rapid inarticulate undertone. When he exited his tires squealed. At the mouth of the garage he turned his key in the remote-control post and left it there as the gate creaked slowly open. He drove in and it slithered shut.

The elevator was broken. He climbed the seven flights to his apartment, pausing at the door to catch his breath. When he snapped on the light, he saw the chaos of cushions, stuffing, draperies, pillows that were strewn about. The stench pushed itself down his throat. He shut his eyes. When he opened them he saw. The colors were rich and warm with meaning. Their disarray was articulate and complete. His furniture had at last accepted him, and had arrayed itself in the torn fabric as a violated bride at the altar wears her shame with a new chaste innocence more touching than virginity. With a muted cry he ran to the window and flung it wide. On the highway, across the broad bowl of the valley where night gathered, specks of various pale colors sparkled, fled, approached. Airplanes banked in the dusk. Perched on the sill, he could see that the house on the hill was dark. He sprang from the sill, and he flew. Blumfeld flew. He rose straight up, accelerating beyond control, going higher and higher until the world became a blur and his consciousness ceased.

Gwyneth Jones' latest novel, *WHITE QUEEN*, shared the 1993 Tiptree Award. Her past books include *DIVINE ENDURANCE* and the recent *KAIROS*. She also does quite a bit of book reviewing, and has a regular column about science fiction in the magazine *Strange Plasma*.

The Thief, the Princess and the Cartesian Circle

Gwyneth Jones

ONCE upon a time there was a princess who was quite pretty and fairly intelligent, and when the time came for them to marry her off the royal family didn't worry about it too much.

One day the princess came down to breakfast and found the king, for a wonder, still sitting over his toast and marmalade. He was a workaholic monarch and was generally long gone to his despatch boxes by the time she appeared. As she sat down she observed that he was pulling faces at her royal mother; then he got up and slunk out of the room.

"Dear," said her mother. "I want us to have a little talk –"

The princess pointed distantly at a cereal packet, and took a bowl from Perkins, the breakfast maid. "I said, what is it mother?"

"Darling, you're nearly twenty now."

"So what, mother?"

The king had no male heir. The princess must marry a suitable prince who would rule the kingdom. She knew this, everybody knew this: but had there ever been such a mutinous and contrary child? The best education, the best of everything indeed, had been showered on this only daughter: skiing holidays, beautiful clothes, jewelry, a tv in her bedroom; all to no avail. One could accept some little outbursts of rebellion from a princess nowadays, but this one was just shockingly self-willed. The interview at the breakfast table ended in tears, and not the princess's tears either; she never cried.

"She says such cruel things," sobbed her mother, having taken refuge in her husband's office. "And it's so depressing, to know that one's servants pity one." The king stomped to and fro beside the royal windows. Outside lay the balcony swathed in velvet from which a courtier should already

have announced the princess's betrothal. He remarked at last in a puzzled voice.

"She looks all right."

He could not understand how his stony hearted and (to be honest) frightening child could look so much like other peoples' children. It would be so much easier if there was a dragon in the case, or a curse, or a straightforward enchantment. It would be bliss, come to think of it, if she were sent to sleep for a hundred years.

Up in her bedroom, princess Jennifer laid out the vegetable knife, the lint dressings, the antiseptic spray. She knelt on the carpet in front of them and bared the white inner surface of her forearm.

Cut.

The king and queen were in the parlor, talking about what the neighbors had to say.

Cut.

"We could offer her hand to the prince who can make her smile –"

"She often smiles."

The king shivered a little. It was not a nice thing, when the princess smiled.

Cut.

"It's no use my dear," sighed the queen. "She's a thoroughly unpleasant young woman and we could wait till doomsday to get rid of her if we try the 'whoever breaks this spell' ploy. I know we must have a legitimate succession, but I'm sincerely sorry for the young man, whoever he may be. Even though she is my daughter and I try to love her. She'll break him, she'll destroy him. Her sort of 'enchantment' isn't supposed to be catching. But it is."

The king didn't quite follow, but he caught the most hopeful point. His expression brightened. "You think she will marry?"

"She's never shown any sign of wanting to do anything else."

Cut. Pain and blood. The blood dripped into a bowl of white plastic, an open carrier bag stretched over a coat-hanger. The princess let it run down until she began to feel dizzy. She sprayed the cuts and dressed her arm, took the bag and poured blood down the toilet. It looked like her period. She flushed it away, and rinsed the bag in the handbasin.

The princess sat on her royal bed, and stared at the rich white silk coverlet, the real gold swan-necks that held up the monogrammed royal headboard, the pillow edged with the finest lace. The queen and king couldn't see this bedroom. They couldn't see themselves. Princess Jennifer was

beginning to be afraid for them. They saw nothing, and refused to talk about things that Jennifer knew were real. They knew that she cut herself. The cuts on her arms were real, but the king and queen were too caught up in state visits and making speeches on television: they never discussed pain and blood.

Jennifer found herself musing that if their own flesh were sliced, that might wake them up. She thought of her father's stringy wrists, the loose skin of her mother's throat, with professional interest. She decided, finally for certain, that this palace wasn't safe anymore. Of course, *she* was always safe, because no one could touch her, no one could get inside. But it was time to find a prince, an archbishop, a cathedral, a long shining oyster satin train. At last she smiled, that cold, mouth-stretching grimace which made her royal father shiver when he thought of it. She went swiftly to Their Majesties' private parlor.

"I've made up my mind."

"Yes, dear?" they quavered in unison.

"Don't be stupid. I'm not your 'dear.' Listen, I've decided. I want to get married. But I can make conditions, can't I? I want to marry the richest man in the world. I don't like changes. I don't want anything to happen to me, ever. I want money. I don't care if he acquired it by selling pork pies made of babies' brains. I don't care if he's ugly as sin, or has filthy personal habits. I'll marry him, I'll have the children. Any reasonable number, so long as I don't have to see them afterwards. Or screw the bloke more often than is strictly necessary for royal reproduction. Those are my terms. Are you satisfied?"

Now in this country, and at this same time, there lived a famous magician. He was semi-retired on a comfortable pension but he had started a small school of magic, just for amusement and to keep himself up to date with the latest developments. He lived on a cloud, which he had fitted up by magic with mystic gardens and thaumaturgical laboratories attached. It happened that one of this magician's valued proteges was an inveterate thief and liar. He stole everything. Even his name, which was Rayfe, was stolen. He had 'borrowed' it from his brother when he first set out to become the sorcerer's apprentice.

The mage knew he had the wrong brother. But there are no mistakes in magic, so Rayfe stayed and the brother had to be content with a polite letter. The elder magician knew from the first that Rayfe was a dangerous investment, but the boy had talent. He decided to take the risk. Rayfe made good progress. When he had been in school two years he could command the four winds at his whistle and conjour mountains of gold out

of the air. But he still couldn't eat his dinner with enjoyment unless it was someone else's. If he told you of any marvelous trick he had performed, you could be sure that of all the tricks in the book, that was the one he hadn't done. He had to steal even praise. When he couldn't satisfy his need any other way he would even steal blame, and own up humbly to crimes and stupidities that he had never committed. One fine morning – inevitably – the mage woke up with a crick in his neck and a stone in his back, in the middle of a field. The thief had stolen his master's magic – every last spell of it.

Meanwhile, back at the palace, the princess's search for a bridegroom was well on the way. Up to the palace doors came a stream of adventurers, charlatans, conmen, fantasists, fools, all of the claiming to be the richest man in the world. Princess Jennifer found none of them was quite what she wanted. She retired to the bedroom where the real gold swans watched over her, and cut herself over half-healed places that she'd cut last week. The bloodletting helped. It drained off some of the pressure. Something inside her was trying to get out. This way it escaped only in small installments, under control. Pain and blood.

"Is it my fault?" she asked her distracted parents, "if the world is so full of liars and fools?"

Then they brought in Rayfe.

The thief saw a thin girl with overbright grey eyes, very unattractively dressed. He thought she looked even less appealing than in the candidly unflattering royal photographs. He was not disappointed, for the girl scarcely figured in his plans. He was after her money. The princess whose parents were looking for the richest bridegroom in the world, must be worth a pretty penny.

The princess didn't see Rayfe at all. She didn't often look at people. She didn't like the eyes.

The first stage of the inquisition began. Three months later Rayfe and the princess were married. It was all orange blossom and archbishops, and the king could hardly believe his luck.

The bridal limousine bowled along through a wide sunny meadow. The bride was still in her wedding dress. It was a present from the groom, and he had asked for this romantic touch to the start of their honeymoon. "Stop the car," said the newly made Archduke Rayfe, suddenly. "It's so lovely here, we'd like to take a little stroll."

So they both got out, and strolled. Behind them there came an odd little sound, like a twig snapping underfoot. When they looked back the car, the driver, and the motorcycle escort, had all disappeared. Rayfe was astron-

ished. He had intended, on this little stroll, to vanish the ugly princess's dress, just to tease her: instead he's lost the whole motorcade. His concentration must have slipped.

The princess was staring coldly.

"What's the matter?" asked Rayfe.

The princess stood very still, and then she picked up a fold of her white lace gown and studied it closely. The inspection revealed nothing, but it gave her something to do. "It was all magic, wasn't it," she stated flatly. "The background the court detectives checked out, the financial records?"

Rayfe grinned uncertainly.

"What's going on, Jennifer?"

The meadow turned into a hotel room. Jennifer fingered her satin and lace nightgown. "You tricked me."

"I don't know what's going on, Jennifer," said the thief. "I thought you liked me. We were seeing each other, you took me home to your parents, you have this game about being a princess. Your parents seemed to like me. Everything seemed to move very fast, but I wasn't complaining. I'm in love with you!"

Jennifer looked at him with contempt. "I made you up," she said. It was the first time she had ever risked telling any of her puppets that: she was exhilarated and frightened. "I make up everything. And you're not in love. My father paid you to take me away."

Ralph was beginning to find that small cold voice definitely scary. He had never been much of a success as a cheat and a liar. He freely admitted (to himself) that he was one of the hopeless – incapable of holding down a job, and too scared of going to jail to succeed in a life of crime. Answering the princess's ad had been a risk. Marrying her had been an act of desperation. Guilty Daddy and Mummy make over income for life, to their crazy daughter's keeper. . . . Suddenly he realized what his life would be like, and his blood ran cold. He affected a light laugh. "Oh come now princess. Can't you take a joke? Nothing is beyond the dreams of avarice, and nothing is what you've got –"

She stared at him, in a way that made him feel sick.

"Now, now princess, don't be a sore loser. Besides, there's nothing to complain about. Magic's as good as any other currency –"

He made a few passes in the air and spread out his hands. Paper flowers showered onto the carpet. The princess stooped and picked up a jagged rock from the meadow grass. She flew at him. Rayfe yelled in panic. Pain and blood.

The meadow turned upside down and vanished.

The princess and the thief were hanging face to face in grey nothingness. It was very cold. "What's happening!" screamed Rayfe. The princess felt herself in the grip of magic that was not of her own making, for the first time in her life. "I knew you must have stolen your power from somebody," she snapped, improvising quickly. "Your master has caught us."

The greyness became the garden belonging to the magician who had trained the thief who had gained the hand of a princess by trickery. The magician, who knew everything, was there with them. Jennifer saw a stern, bearded male face, looking out of a cheval glass that had appeared standing on the lawn. The garden was not reflected in the glass. "He's going to kill us," she said. "Or worse."

"Oh God." Rayfe's voice was real but his body didn't seem to be all there. It looked like a cardboard cutout. "Get me out of this, somebody. I'd rather die than live out my life tied to the heels of a monster –"

The magician ignored Rayfe. "So," he said to Jennifer. "You expect me to kill you. You are an optimist, after all."

Jennifer looked into the eyes in the mirror, and wouldn't show that she was afraid. "You can do what you like, I suppose. You're in charge. But I'd like to know what my crime was."

"Your crime? Your perpetual crime is that you do not feel at home in your skin. Your latest crime is that you tricked this young man into destroying himself."

"He tricked himself."

"That's no excuse. You set a trap, using the king your father's money, designed to catch someone as worthless as yourself. I am aware that by doing so you saved your royal parents from an unpleasant fate. I will take that into account. Let me see. Your crime, Ralph, was the more cold-blooded. You have never tried to save anyone from anything. I will award the choice of weapons to the princess. Jennifer, whom do you hate most?"

Before her wedding the princess would have said: "I don't hate anyone," and meant it. She didn't even hate her parents. But she had changed, even in this short time. Her lip curled, in passionate disgust.

"Him!"

"Oh dear, that's unfortunate. For he's your husband, and you two are really very close. . . ."

As the magician spoke, Rayfe felt dizzy. There was a buzzing in his ears, he thought he was fainting. . . . His vision cleared. He looked around and with a heart-wrenching shock *saw himself* – standing, stiff as a board, a few paces away. Bewildered, he looked down at what felt like his own body.

The princess began to scream. She screamed and screamed, and

clutched her head and ran. Things grabbed her. The garden seemed full of grappling hooks, and there were walls in it that she banged into. She couldn't see the grass or the trees. She was wet and cold, and her head was full of something thick and cloying. She fought against the nightmare with all her iron will. She saw the edge of the cloud, looming up. She screamed in defiance. "No one can make me suffer!" and flung herself into space.

She fell and fell. She lost everything: the swan-necked bed, her monogrammed silks, her blind, but royal parents. She had lost her knife and the neatly laid out dressings, the ritual that kept her safe. She had lost the privacy of her own mind. The elder magician's voice came to her, calm and affable. "If the pair of you ever learn to like the arrangement, come back and see me."

She fell screaming, knowing there were worse horrors to come.

The princess's wedding dress grew drab and shabby. She lived like an animal in the wild wood. She who had taken her only pleasure in life from the softness of her bed and the delicacy of her food, now scrabbled for left-over roots in a turnip field and slept in ditches. Her hair hung in ratstails, her pale skin had turned the colour of earth from dirt and weathering. She stank. She never gave a thought to the way she lived, never a shudder. She couldn't, the pain wouldn't let her. It wasn't her pain. It belonged to the sharp-edged shadow that followed everywhere at her heels: night and day, sun and shade.

She made arrangements with the woodlands animals, who lent her their claws; and cigarettes. She hid herself away (there was a hollow treestump that was her favorite spot) and cut her arms, her thighs, her sides; and bled. At times, the shadow lifted itself from her feet. It sat opposite her and screamed without a sound. She had a feeling she was feeding it on her blood. Her blood kept it alive, and kept it screaming. Her shadow was a drug addict: she was the drug that destroyed. She no longer remembered that she had ever been alone in her head, so it was the shadow who really suffered more. She would have liked to put it out of its misery. Sometimes she tried to jump on it, and found herself scratching and tearing at the woodland earth, or the animals. The shadow always escaped her, and so she could not escape from it. In the end the fact that she was conscious of that presence was the only consciousness left in her mind.

She lived from night to night, stealing the pig's porridge and the dog's crusts. She survived well enough. But then the real winter came. The villagers who lived in a huddle of small grey houses on the edge of the wood became harsh and bold. She was driven off from her hollow tree with

sticks and stones. At night the dogs chased her. She couldn't find anywhere to hide. The blood, not fed to the shadow, began to build up inside. The pain which wasn't her own couldn't serve the same purpose as the old kind. She ran like a beast through the wood, a beast with sharp teeth and claws, that crept up on smaller beasts – and pounced.

The princess had blood and flesh in her mouth, the warm torn filaments coating her tongue. The rabbit screamed and she let it go. The princess retched, vomited bile. She knelt there and she thought, What am I to do? She knew she had to find some way to get rid of the shadow at her heels. Hate of the shadow kept bleeding through, making her conscious again; being conscious made her violent; being violent made the villagers torment her. There had to be a way out.

On the edge of the village, Ham the woodcutter lived all alone. He was a big, quiet man who had little to do with the other village folk or the dumb animals who did deals with the princess. Princess Jennifer had often seen him as he went about his work. She had watched him, and judged him. She knew that he would help her. Resolutely, she took the path that led to his cottage.

"I have been lost in the wood," she said, shivering, when Ham Cottar stood in the doorway. "Can you give me shelter?"

"I should hope so, at this season."

He took her in, and sat her by the fire.

The winter passed, the spring came. The woodcutter told princess Jennifer that she had attacked her husband with a hotel ashtray, and basically that was why she had been living in this wild place. He was glad that she had decided to come in from the cold, but as long as she continued to mutilate herself, he couldn't hold out much hope for her escape from the magic wood.

"I don't mutilate myself," said Jennifer scornfully. She held up her arm. "I don't live in my arm."

"Where do you live, Jennifer?"

The princess looked on the woodcutter with pity.

"The place where I live doesn't have a name," she told him. "No name, no time, no space. I make up all those things. There's only me, the thinking thing."

The woodcutter smiled slyly. "So that's what you've been doing all this time," he remarked. "The mind locked up inside that raving animal has been reinventing Descartes?"

Her shadow lay between them. It had no right to be there, such a steady black mannikin in the flickering firelight. The shadow always came

back. It was the same stuff as herself, dirty and dangerous. It came and stared at her with helpless eyes. It had nowhere else to go.

"I want to get rid of my shadow," she whispered. "It feeds on my blood."

"Jennifer," said the woodcutter, "I want to help. But you won't change the legal position by talking about a bloodsucking shadow. If you want to be separated from the person you call that, come further in, out of the wild. I know you can. Trust me."

He touched her. He couldn't take the danger seriously. He was only a peasant, his simple life had never touched the realms of great enchantment. She let him do what he liked. The princess thought she could settle down by the woodcutter's fire forever. She could be warm and comfortable again.

The shadow came, and she told him she'd found someone else to destroy, she wouldn't be requiring his appetite any longer. The cut-out of starless void was less sharp-edged than it had been: Jennifer noticed this with a stirring of inexplicable unease.

"We've got to get me out of here," she said, suddenly. "This place isn't safe anymore. You understand? Not safe."

Ralph the thief was used to the conversational style of his wife-in-name-only. He suspected that one of the doctors was fucking her. The man's life was probably in real danger and Ralph ought to tell someone. But he wouldn't. The way this place worked, Jennifer was the one who'd end up getting punished, though they wouldn't call it that. And for God's sake, she wasn't responsible.

"I don't want to help you," he whined. "I don't know why I keep hanging around. It isn't the money."

"I know it isn't," said Jennifer. "You stay because you're worthless, just like me. I'm crazy and I stink, but I'm still the nearest you've had to a steady girlfriend."

"You don't need me," said the blurred shadow, reluctantly. "You're not sectioned. That means they won't keep you against your will. You can walk out."

The princess understood that Ham the woodcutter had tried to tell her the same. Because she was not cut into pieces she could leave the wood. But her magic had been too strong for Ham. Fearing for him, she decided to leave anyway. The princess left the wood, in peasant clothes and shoes that the woodcutter had given her. A marketing farmer took her into town, and there she found work.

She had no money. The thief who had become the shadow had stolen it all. She had no interest in finding her way back to the kingdom of her

birth. Her royal parents must have given her up for dead long ago, they wouldn't thank her for reappearing. She decided to leave them like that: happy enough in an abandoned story. She found a bed in a hostel, became a cleaner; and then a shop girl. She was neat, quiet and hard working. But her shadow was a nuisance. In the town, people weren't used to seeing even their own shadows. There wasn't much space for them on the crowded streets. Sooner or later she would notice someone staring at it. She would notice people whispering: she would have to leave her job. There was always some excuse. She was given a good reference, and the shadow was never mentioned, but she had to go.

Her life came back to her piece by piece. She knew that the wood had not been real. She knew that the woodcutter had been in danger before she arrived; and that he was beyond her saving. She understood that the elder magician had arranged it all. He had stolen her safety, and thrown her into the wild wood, and given her a foul shadow, for reasons of his own; which he would explain in time.

She possessed her thinking self, and a shadow. The true horror of that companion was not that it was worthless and evil – like herself – but that it *was* the same stuff as herself. This is what happens to common people. It can happen to a monster princess. She looks out of her tower and sees another thinking thing, a being she hasn't invented. The citadel is broken, the world outside exists, nothing will ever be the same.

When the princess had worked this out she acquired a vegetable knife, lint dressings, antiseptic spray. Since she didn't have to think of her parents, she purchased a kidney shaped silver dish from a medical supply shop. She had always wanted one.

She cut herself. The nostalgia was intense.

As the days went by, she took to looking over her shoulder to make sure the shadow was there. No one in these streets knew how it felt to be the princess, the nameless, hating, terrified thing whose shell had been broken open. Only the shadow knew everything. But when she looked, she could hardly see anything: only a faint blur.

She became a clerk in an office. It was a big step up, for she had started off with no employment skills whatsoever, and a horrendous secret. Her immediate boss was a large, elderly lady with pernickety ways that didn't seem to fit her size. She was a dragon to the rest of the staff, but to the princess she became as much a friend as a princess like Jennifer could bear.

"What I like about you, Jennifer," she said – one evening when they were finishing up alone in the office – "is that you've never let anyone knock the corners off you."

“There’s corners and corners,” smiled the princess (she could smile now; quite convincingly). She tugged at the long wool sleeves of her dress. “A lot of people don’t like the way my shadow falls, and it gets on their nerves.”

“Shadow?” remarked the older woman, mystified. “What shadow? You’ve none in here, my dear.”

The princess touched whole skin through the wool, and recalled that she hadn’t cut herself for weeks. The last time, she’d had to stop because it had hurt too much. She looked, and it was true. She had no shadow.

She hurried through the crowds, she was crying in the street. She was making a fool of herself and behaving like a madwoman, but she didn’t care. She was alone again in the tower.

“I must get back!” she cried. She didn’t know where she had to get back to. But as she cried out, the busy street disappeared.

She was in the magician’s garden.

The glass stood on the lawn, and in another moment the magician was looking out of it. “As I was saying,” he remarked. “If you start to like the arrangement, you must come back and see me. You are looking well, princess.”

The cut-out figure of the thief was still standing there. Rayfe was back inside. His eyes were agonised: a human being compressed into two dimensions and screaming silently.

“Let him go!” she yelled at the magician.

“Only you can do that.”

“I don’t understand,” snarled the princess.

The magician’s robes were embroidered with shining mystic signs, they billowed like dark and glittering smoke. He smiled. The princess turned to Ralph and shouted. “You can go! You’re not committed to anything!”

Ralph was now crying. The princess remembered that she used to believe tears were like an explosion: humiliating and horrible as pissing yourself in public. The thief’s mouth was wide and turned down at the corners, and his eyes were wet. But the cafe was noisy anyway. No one stared.

“This is the end of the arrangement. Your money’s in a bank account, I haven’t spent it for months. Fuck it, you don’t need me to cover your tracks and check up on you. You’re perfectly competent. I’m the one that’s the burden. I want you to give your address to your parents. I want you to get a divorce.”

“My child,” said the magician in the glass. “I must ask an impertinent question. Do you love this worthless creature?”

The princess frowned impatiently. “He was with me – you don’t know what he knows. He was always there. How could I not –?” She didn’t say the word. It closed up her throat even to think it.

“Indeed. Fire burns if you put your hand on the stove, even if you don’t believe in fire. Water drowns if you fall into it and can’t swim, even if you don’t believe in water. So love in substance is love in fact. He has stuck by you, because he couldn’t help it, because, pitifully, you were the best thing that ever happened to him. What’s the name for such helpless attachment, in the world you invented?”

“So let us go!”

“I will do so. There’s just a little test. Stand back.”

Jennifer was talking to the voices she heard in her head. She still did that. But she knew she was doing it, that was the difference. She didn’t need a keeper. Ralph knew that this was the last stand. The mad princess was at her last gasp. Jennifer would walk away from this meeting alone and sound. Ralph suspected what his life would be like, after today. He didn’t think of it. He wasn’t brave enough. He wanted to stay forever in this steamy cafe, with this crazy woman; neither of them had anywhere else to go.

The magician’s staff described a circle in the air. Where it passed a white line stayed. The circle enclosed nothing. It was the ultimate abyss. Up to the white line ran springy tailored turf: beyond its rim, a blank. No grass, no air, no light, no dark, no space. There was absolutely nothing there.

“Now then, Rayfe.”

The thief fell forward, stumbling and rubbing his arms. He hadn’t been following the conversation. Ralph never got the hang of magical conversations.

“I jump into the abyss, and she goes free?”

The magician looked doubtful. “Let me explain. I am what they call a natural philosopher. If you had studied your books, instead of stealing the knowledge out of them, you would know that a natural philosopher is bound to set tests for the world, and test most unmercifully the things that he most values. Does love exist? I do not know. But I know that if it were to exist it could have no limits. It could not have a beginning, or an end. There could not be a place where love was not, or a time when love had not been. If the princess’s love for you exists, you will pass through my circle without harm. But for it to be real now, (the magician smirked, with every appearance of arrogant malice); it must have been as real always. She must have loved you the moment she saw you. Step through, young man. Try your luck.”

Ralph watched the crazy princess, hopelessly.

“I don’t know what’s going on in the story now, Jennifer. I’m leaving because I’ve somehow grown some self-respect, and I can’t stand to hang around a smart-looking lady who doesn’t need me or want me. You can tell the elder magician thanks from Ralph. It must have been love at first sight – in the only, twisted way I could fall in love. Need is the same as love, when you’re really needy; it’s the best you can do. I just wish I could wipe out the first part. I despised you for being crazy, it was like despising myself. But you *hated* me. I wish I could lose that bit.”

“It was like hating myself. Step through.”

“If this gets you free, to a normal life –”

Rayfe stepped through, into the utter abyss. He was standing on firm green turf. The magician in the mirror looked smug. The thief was impressed. He had never dreamed of stealing a whole cosmos.

Ralph looked at Jennifer’s hands. They were holding his. She had never touched him before, except when she was trying to kill him. He stared in amazement. To his almost certain knowledge she’d never touched *anyone* of her own free will, not what you’d call consciously, in her whole life. The world turned upside down, and righted itself; totally different, exactly as it had always been.

“There is no door that shuts behind us,” said the princess. The elder magician vanished from the glass, the glass vanished too. Jennifer no longer needed to regard the part of herself that she respected as a separate person, nor did she need to call the part of herself with power male.

“The past changes constantly: it is something we invent from moment to moment. The thinking thing that is the only reality detested you then.” She shrugged. “So what. Time isn’t real. It loved you now. You heard what the magician said. If love is, it always was. If it has a start, as soon as it starts, immediately it always was. That’s the circle of protection. It works even for the most worthless.”

The green turf was the grass of the meadow. The road where the wedding car had disappeared was wider and less dusty than it had been. The trees beside it had grown in girth, and some of them had been chopped down to make room for new houses. The princess and the thief walked out of the meadow and into the noisy cafe. It closed around them. There would be no more Grimm fairytale illustrations in their story. Neither of them was quite capable of dealing with normal life, and they weren’t even young anymore. They would probably end up in cardboard city no matter how hard they tried: but they would be together. They took hands and set off down the road, to live happily ever after in the land where love is beyond the reach of doubt.

If one finds too much boring, stale, sf on the shelves, one can always turn to the fiction of Michael Blumlein for something fresh and different. Blumlein's new novel, *X,Y*, is to be published by Dell/Abyss as this magazine goes to press.

Hymenoptera

Michael Blumlein

THE wasp appeared in the Salon that morning. It was early Spring and unusually cold. The windows were laced with ice, and there was frost on the grass outside. Linderstadt shifted uncomfortably on the sofa. In nothing but shirt and socks, he was fighting both chill and dream. He had quarrelled the night before with Camille, his favorite model, accusing her of petty treacheries for which she was blameless. After she left, he drank himself into a stupor, stumbling from one workshop to another, knocking down mannequins, pulling dresses from their hangers, sweeping hats to the floor. He raged at his own astounding pettiness, the poverty of his newest collection, the bankruptcy of life in general. Had he been cinched up in one of his own tight-fitting corsets, he couldn't have felt more constricted. Pinched of breath, of vision, blind to the most obvious truths. And this the man who just the week before had yet again been dubbed King, whose attention to detail, to sleeve, waist, and line were legendary, who transcendent gowns were slavishly praised, copied, stolen. Linderstadt the Genius. The Master. Linderstadt the drunkard, wrestling with his empire of taffeta, guipure and satin, flailing at success like a fly trapped behind glass.

Dawn came, and sunlight appeared along the edges of the heavily-curtained windows, penetrating the salon with a wan, peach-colored light. Linderstadt was on a couch at one end of the room, half-draped with the train of a bridal gown he had appropriated from one of the ateliers. The wasp was at the other, broadside and motionless. Its wings were folded back against its body, and its long belly was curled under itself like a comma. Its two antennae were curved delicately forward but otherwise as rigid as bamboo.

An hour passed and then another. When sleep became impossible, Linderstadt staggered off the couch to relieve himself. He returned to the

salon with a glass of water, at which point he first noticed the wasp. From his father, who had been an amateur entomologist before dying of yellow fever, Linderstadt knew something of insects. This one he located somewhere in the family Sphecidae, which included wasps of primarily solitary habit. Most nested in burrows or natural cavities of hollow wood, and he was a little surprised to find the animal in his salon. Then again, he was surprised to have remembered anything at all. He had scarcely thought of insects since his entry forty years before into the world of fashion. He had scarcely thought of his father either, preferring the memory of his mother Anna, his mother the caregiver, the seamstress, for whom he had named his first shop and his most famous dress. But his mother was not here, and the wasp most unmistakably was. Linderstadt finished his glass of water and pulled the bridal train like a shawl over his shoulders. Then he walked over to have a look.

The wasp stood chest-high and about eight feet long. Linderstadt recognized the short hairs on its legs that used to remind him of the stubble on his father's chin, and he remembered, too, the forward palps by which the insect centered its jaws to tear off food. Its waist was pencil-thin, its wings translucent. Its exoskeleton, what Linderstadt thought of as its coat, was blacker than his blackest faille, blacker than coal. It seemed to absorb light, creating a small pocket of cold night right where it stood. *Nigricans*. He remembered the wasp's name. *Ammophila nigricans*. He was tempted to touch it, to feel the quality of its life. Instinctively, his eyes drifted down its belly to the pointed sting that extruded like a sword from its rear. He recalled that the sting was actually a hollow tube through which the female deposited eggs into its prey, where they would hatch into larvae and eat their way out. Males possessed the same tube but did not sting. As a boy he had always had trouble telling the sexes apart, and examining the creature now in the pale light, he wondered which it was. He felt a little feverish, which he attributed to the after-effects of the alcohol. His mouth remained parched, but he was reluctant to leave the salon for more water for fear the wasp would be gone when he returned. So he stayed, shivering and thirsty. The hours passed, and the room did not heat up. The wasp did not move. It was stiller than Martine, his stillest and most patient model. Still in he windless salon than the jewelled chandelier and the damask curtains that led to the dressing rooms. Linderstadt himself was the only moving object. He paced to stay warm. He swallowed his own saliva to slake his thirst, but ultimately the need for water drove him out. He returned as quickly as possible, wearing shoes and a sweater, carrying pencils, a pad of paper and a large pitcher of water. The wasp was as he had left

it. Had Linderstadt not known something of insect physiology, he might have thought the animal were carved in stone.

By the fading light he began to draw, quickly, deftly, using broad, determined strokes. He worked from different angles, sketching the wasp's neck, its shoulders and waist. He imagined the creature in flight, its wings stiff and finely veined. He drew it feeding, resting, poised to sting. He experimented with different designs, some stately and elegant, others pure whimsy. He found that he had already assumed the wasp was female. His subjects had never been otherwise. He remembered Anouk, his very first model, the scoliotic girl his mother had brought home to test her adolescent son's fledgling talent. He felt as supple as he had then, his mind as inventive and free-spirited as ever.

He worked into the small hours of the morning, then rested briefly before being woken by church bells. In his youth he had been devout, and religious allusions were common in his early collections. But sanctimony had given way to secularity, and it had been thirty years since he had stepped foot in a church. What remained were the Sunday bells, which Linderstadt savored for the sake of nostalgia and a lingering guilt. He was a man who held to habit.

The morning brought no visitors, and he had the store to himself. It was even colder than the day before. The wasp remained inert, and when the temperature hadn't climbed by noon, Linderstadt felt secure in leaving. His drawings were done, and his next task was to locate a suitable form on which to realize them. He owned hundreds of torsos of every conceivable shape, some bearing the name of a specific patron, others simply marked with a number. He had other shapes as well, baskets, cylinders, mushrooms, triangles, all of which had found their way at one point or another into a collection. As long as an object had dimension, Linderstadt could imagine it on a woman. Or rather, he could imagine the woman in the object, in residence, giving it her own distinctive form and substance, imbuing each tangent and intersect with female spirit. He was a pantheist at heart and expected to have no trouble finding something suitable to the wasp. Yet nothing caught his eye, not a single object in his vast collection seemed remotely to approach the creature in composition or character. It was enigmatic. He would have to work directly on the animal itself.

He returned to the salon and approached his subject. To a man so accustomed to the divine plasticity of flesh, the armor-like hardness and inflexibility of the wasp's exoskeleton presented challenges. Each cut would have to be perfect, each seam precise. There was no bosom to softly fill a swale of fabric, no hip to give shape to a gentle waist. It would be like

working with bone itself, like clothing a skeleton. Linderstadt was intrigued. He stepped up and touched the wasp's body. It was cold and hard as metal. He ran a finger along one of its wings, half-expecting that this own nervous energy would bring it to life. Touch for him had always evoked the strongest emotions, which is why he used a pointing stick with his models. He might have done well to use the same stick with the wasp, for his skin tingled from the contact, momentarily clouding his senses. His hand fell to one of the wasp's legs. It was not so different from a human leg. The hairs were soft like human hairs, hairs that his models assiduously bleached, or waxed or shaved. The knee and ankle were similarly jointed, the claw as pointed and tiny as a foot. His attention shifted to the animal's waist, in a human the pivot point between leg and torso. In the wasp it was lower and far narrower than anything human. It was as thin as a pipestem, a marvel of invention he was easily able to encircle between thumb and forefinger.

From a pocket he took out a tape and began to make his measurements, elbow to shoulder, shoulder to wing-tip, hip to claw, jotting down in a notebook. From time to time he would pause, stepping back to imagine a detail, a particular look, a melon sleeve, a fringed collar, a flounce. Sometimes he would make a notation; other times, a quick sketch. When it came time to measure the chest, he had to lie on his back underneath the wasp. From that vantage he had a good view of its hairless and plated torso, as well as its sting, which was poised like a pike and pointed directly between his legs. After a moment's hesitation, he rolled over and took its measure too, wondering casually if this were one of those wasps that died after stinging, and if so, was there some way he could memorialize such a sacrifice in a dress. Then he crawled out and looked at his numbers.

The wasp was symmetrical, almost perfectly so. Throughout his long career Linderstadt had always sought to thwart such symmetry, focussing instead on the subtle variations in the human body, the natural differences between left and right. There was always something to emphasize, a hip that was higher, a shoulder, a breast. Even an eye, whose iris might be flecked a slightly different shade of blue than its neighbor, could trigger a report somewhere in the color of the dress below. Linderstadt's success to a large degree rested on his uncanny ability to uncover such asymmetries, but the wasp presented difficulties. There was nothing that distinguished one side from the other, almost as if the animal were mocking the idea of asymmetry, of individuality, and by inference, the whole of Linderstadt's career. It occurred to him that he had been wrong, that perhaps the true search was not for singularity but for constancy of form, for repetition and

preservation. Perhaps what abided was commonality; what endured, the very proportions he held in his hand.

Linderstadt took his notebook to the main atelier to begin work on the first dress. He had decided to start with something simple, a velvet sheath with narrow apertures for wing and leg and a white flounce of tulle at the bottom to hide the sting. With no time for a muslin fitting, he worked directly with the fabric itself. It was a job normally handled by assistant, but the master had not lost his skill with scissors and thread. The work went fast, and partway through the sewing, he remembered the name of the order to which his was belonged. Hymenoptera, after ptera, for wing, and hymeno, for the Greek god of marriage, referring to the union of the wasp's front and hind wings. He himself had never married, had never touched a woman outside his profession, certainly not intimately. Some suggested that he feared intimacy, but more likely what he feared was a test of the purity of his vision. His women were jewels, precious stones to be admired like anything beautiful and splendid. He clothed them to adore them. He clothed them to keep them in the palace of his dreams. Yet now, having touched the wasp's body, having been inspired by a creature as unlike himself as woman to man, he wondered if perhaps he had not missed something along the way. Flesh begged flesh. Could such a lifelong loss be rectified?

He finished the dress and hurried to the salon. The wasp offered no resistance as he lifted its claws and pulled the dark sheath into place. The image of his father came to mind, deftly unfolding a butterfly's wing and pinning it to his velvet display board. The Linderstadt men, it seemed, had a way with animals. He straightened the bodice and zipped up the back of the gown, then stepped back for a look. The waist, as he expected, needed taking in, and one of the shoulders needed to be re-aligned. The choice of color and fabric, however, was excellent. Black on black, night against night. It was a good beginning.

Linderstadt did the alterations, then hung the gown in one of the dressing rooms and returned to the workshop. His next outfit was a broad cape of lemon guipure with a gold chain fastener, striking in its contrast to the wasp's jet-black exterior. He made a matching toque to which he attached lacquered sticks to echo the wasp's antennae. The atelier was as cold as the salon, and he worked in overcoat, scarf and kid gloves whose fingertips he had snipped off with a scissors. His face was bare, and the bracing chill against his cheek recalled the freezing winters of his childhood when he was forced to stand stock still for what seemed hours on end while his mother used him as a form for the clothes she was making. They had had

no money for heat, and Linderstadt had developed a stoical attitude toward the elements. The cold reminded him of the value of discipline and self-control. But more than that, it reminded him how he had come to love the feel of the outfits being fitted and fastened against his skin. He loved it when his mother tightened a waist or took in a sleeve. The feeling of confinement evoked a certain wild power of imagination, as though he were being simultaneously nurtured and freed. What he remembered of the cold was not the numbness in his fingers, the misting of his breath, the goosebumps on his arms. It was the power, pure and simple, so that now, even though he had money aplenty to fire his boilers and make his rooms as hot as jungles, Linderstadt kept the heat off. The cold was his pleasure. It was fire enough.

He worked through the night to finish the cape. When Monday morning arrived, he locked the doors of the salon, turning away the seamstresses, stockroom clerks, salesgirls and models who had come to work. He held the door against Camille and even Broussard, his lifelong friend and advisor. Hidden by the curtain that was strung across the door's glass panes, he announced that the collection was complete, the final alterations to be done in private by himself. He went to his strongbox and brought back bundles of cash, which he passed through the mailslot for Broussard to distribute to the employees. He assured everyone that the house of Linderstadt was intact and invited them all to return in a week for the opening of the collection. Then he left.

Back in the workshop he started on his next creation, an off-the-shoulder blue moiré gown with a voluminous skirt festooned with bows. He sewed what he could by machine, but the bows had to be done by hand. He sewed like his mother, one knee crossed over the other, head bent, pinkie fingered crooked out as though he were sipping a cup of tea. the skirt took a full day, during which he broke only once, to relieve himself. Food did not enter his mind, and in that he seemed in tune with the wasp. The animal signalled neither hunger nor thirst. On occasion one of its antennae would twitch, but Linderstadt attributed this to subtle changes in the turgor or the insect's blood. He assumed the wasp remained gripped by the cold, though he couldn't help but wonder if its preternatural stillness sprang from some deeper design. He thought of his father, so ordinary on the surface, so unfathomable beneath. Given the chance, the man would spend days with the insects, meticulously arranging his boards, printing the tiny specimen labels, taking inventory. Linderstadt could never quite grasp his father's patience and devotion. His mother claimed that her husband was in hiding, but what did a child know of that? By the time it

occurred to him to ask for himself, his father had been dead for years.

The weather held, and on Wednesday Linderstadt wheeled one of the sewing machines from the atelier to the salon so that he could work without leaving the wasp's side. Voices drifted in from the street, curiosity-seekers making gossip, trying in vain to get a glimpse inside. The phone rang incessantly, message after message from concerned friends, clients, the press. M. Jesais, his personal psychic, called daily with increasingly dire prognostications. Linderstadt was unmoved. He heard but a single voice, and it kept him from distraction. He wondered why it had taken so long to hear.

He stitched a sleeve and then another. Forty years of success had brought him to this, needle, thread, tubes of fabric fashioned together like artifacts for a future archeology. Barely a week before, he had felt on the verge of extinction. Ghosts had begun to visit, ghosts of past models, of deceased friends, of his parents. The more he had tried to capture his vision, the more it had eluded him. Juliet in satin, Eve in furs, the nameless Queen, arrogant and imperious in stiff brocade. Sirens of impossible beauty, triumphs of yet another man's muddled desire. Success, it seemed, rested on vanity. Such was the sad lesson of his career. And after forty years he had tired of the pretense. He had seen too many Camilles, too many Martines and Anouks. Seen and not seen. He was better off with no one at all.

But now there was the wasp. The wasp was different. The wasp added a twist. Chitin was not flesh, six not the same a two, six legs and claws, six declinations of angle, line and force. And wings, wings that were stronger and finer than the angel Gabriel himself, a painting of whom Linderstadt had used to model his '84 collection. Eyes too, compound eyes, able to see god-knows-what. And antennae, to sample the world's invisible delight. Linderstadt tried to imagine Camille as an insect, crawling down the runway, striking a pose. Camille on four legs, Camille on her belly, inching along like a caterpillar. From that vantage his gowns were no more than cocoons, pallid reflections of a more vivid reality. His life's vision had suffered from being too petty. It was flawed by arrogance. His adoration of women was an insult, his lofty ideals of grace and beauty, sophistry. The way of his heart was simpler and more direct. It was rooted inside, just as the wasp was rooted there in his room.

Linderstadt thought again of his father. He was dressing for work, buttoning up his navy blue postman's jacket with the yellow stripes around the cuff. He was talking about a moth he had found whose body looked exactly like a woman. Was he talking to Linderstadt's mother? Linderstadt

couldn't remember. There was tension in the air, he remembered that. And something else. Rapture?

He finished the last seam and held up the dress. The shimmering *moiré* reminded him of a sea; the six-legged gown, of a creature delectably adrift. To a lesser talent the sleeves would have been a nightmare, but in Linderstadt's hands they flowed effortlessly into the bodice. Each one sported a ruffled cap and was zippered to aid in getting it on. Once the gown was in place, Linderstadt stepped back to have a look. The fit was uncanny, as though some hidden hand were guiding his own. It had been that way from the start. There were five gowns now. Five in five days. One more, he thought, one more to complete the collection. The bridal gown, his signature piece. For forty years he had ended every show with such a gown. Brides signified life. They signified love and the power of creation. What better way to signal his own rebirth?

The dress took two days, which Linderstadt knew only because he had paused at one point to listen to the Sunday bells. He was working on the veil at the time, a gorgeous bit of organza that looked like mist, sewing and thinking what a pity it would be to cover the wasp's extraordinary face. And so he had devised an ingenious interlocking paneled design that simultaneously hid the face and revealed it. After the veil he had started on the train, using ten feet of egg-white chiffon that he gathered in gentle waves to resemble foam. Where it attached to the skirt, he cut a hole for the sting and ringed it with flowers. The main body of the dress was made of brilliant satin with an Imperial collar and long sleeves of lace. Queen, Mother, Bride. The dress was a triumph of imagination, technique, and will.

He finished Sunday night, hung the gown in the dressing room with the others, then wrapped himself in overcoat and scarf and fell asleep on the couch. Early Monday he would get up and make the final preparations to receive his public.

That night the cold spell broke. A warm front swept in from the south, brushing away the chill like a cobweb. In his sleep Linderstadt unbuttoned his coat and pulled off his scarf. He dreamed of summer, flying a kite with his father at the beach. When he woke, it was almost noon. The room was thick with heat. A crowd had outside the store for the opening. The wasp was gone.

He searched the workshops, the stockroom, the offices. He climbed to the roof and looked in the basement. Finally, he returned to the salon, bemused and somewhat dazed. Near where the wasp had stood he noticed a paper sphere the size of a small chair. One side of it was open, and inside

there were many tiers of hexagonal cells, all composed of the same papery material as the envelope. Linderstadt had a glimmer of understanding, and when he discovered that his gowns too had vanished, he realized his mistake. The wasp was not a Sphecida at all, but Vespida, a paper wasp. Its diet consisted of wood, leaves, and other natural fibers. It had eaten its own gowns.

Linderstadt surveyed the remains of his work. The nest had a delicate beauty of its own, and briefly he considered showing it in lieu of the collection. Then he caught sight of a bit of undigested material peeking out from behind the papery sphere. It was the bridal veil, and he followed it around the nest, where it stood on the floor like a fountain of steam frozen in air, unattached to its gown but otherwise intact. Outside, the crowd clamored to be let in. Linderstadt drew back the curtains and lifted the gossamer veil. The sun seemed to set it aflame. Like the smallest fragment of a memory, it recalled every memory. He placed it on his head. A smile played across his face, the first in months. His eyes shone. With everything gone there was nothing left to hide. A single thread would have sufficed. Drawing himself up, proud and erect, Linderstadt went to open the doors.

AVAILABLE FROM BROKEN MIRRORS PRESS

SPACETIMEWARP

RICHARD POWERS

A portfolio of sixteen lithographic reproductions of artwork by Richard Powers. One of the most influential science-fiction illustrators in the history of the genre, Powers established the 'look' of paperback SF in the '60's. Each print measures 10.5 x 13.5 inches, and is suitable for framing.

Sixteen prints in folder. \$10.00

MONOCHROME: the Readercon Anthology **ed. by Bryan Cholfin**

Originally published as a sampler of fiction from some of the participants at Readercon, MONOCHROME contains original fiction by Gene Wolfe, Martha Soukup, David Alexander Smith, Esther Friesner, and Darrell Schweitzer, poetry by Ellen Kushner and Thomas Disch, and two hard-to-find stories by Paul Park and James Morrow. Features an introductory essay on reading by Samuel R. Delany.

Trade paperback, \$9.95. Hardcover, \$25.00. Receive a free paperback copy with your subscription to CRANK!

Broken Mirrors Press

AVAILABLE FROM BROKEN MIRRORS PRESS

OKLA HANNALI

R.A. LAFFERTY

Lafferty's greatest novel is back in print! The story of the Choctaw Indians in the Nineteenth Century, *Okla Hannali* chronicles the near-century long life of Hannali Innominee, a 'Mingo' of the Chuckling Choctaws.

"The use of epic form is unusual and effective, and Lafferty's humor is both subtle and boisterous: he writes with warmth and sympathy for the Indian." – *Library Journal*

Trade paperback, 221 pages, \$10.00

SUBSCRIBE TO CRANK!

YES, I want to subscribe to CRANK!

- \$12/year (four issues)
- \$20/two years (eight issues)
- \$18/year (outside the U.S.)

FREE BOOK!
 Subscribe now and receive a
 copy of MONOCHROME
 Free! See other side!

Broken Mirrors Press book order form

quantity	item	price	total

Mass. residents please add 5% sales tax.

Add \$1 for the first book, \$.50 for each
 additional book to cover postage.

tax
 postage
 total

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____

STATE/PROVINCE _____ ZIP _____

COUNTRY _____

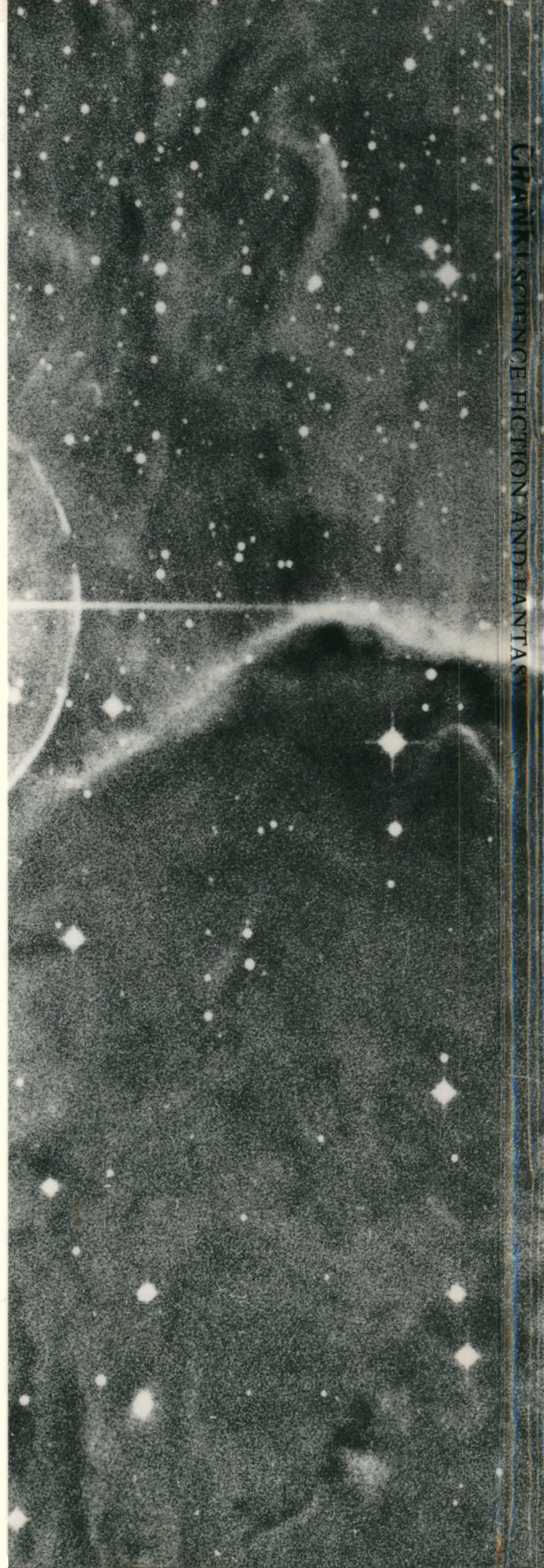
WELCOME TO REALITY:
The Nightmares of Philip K. Dick
ed. by UWE ANTON

MICHAEL BISHOP
ROBERT SILVERBERG
RICHARD LUPOFF
THOMAS DISCH
NEIL FERGUSON
RONALD M. HAHN
GERO REIMANN
THOMAS ZEIGLER
NORMAN SPINRAD
MICHAEL SWANWICK
JOHN SLADEK
UWE ANTON
PHILIP K. DICK

An unusual international testament to the legacy of Philip K. Dick, this memorial anthology includes fiction inspired by or featuring Philip Dick as a character, before or after his death. Several of these stories appear for the the first time in English or in a U.S. edition, and the anthology includes a story treatment by Dick for a never-made episode of the TV series *The Invaders*, which is not included in the *Collected Stories*.

Trade paperback, 208 pages, \$12.95

Broken Mirrors Press



broken mirrors press

This photo of the Horsehead nebula shows an unusual amount of detail in the surrounding molecular cloud. Photograph from a UK Schmidt plate by David Malin. Courtesy of the Anglo-Australian Observatory.