

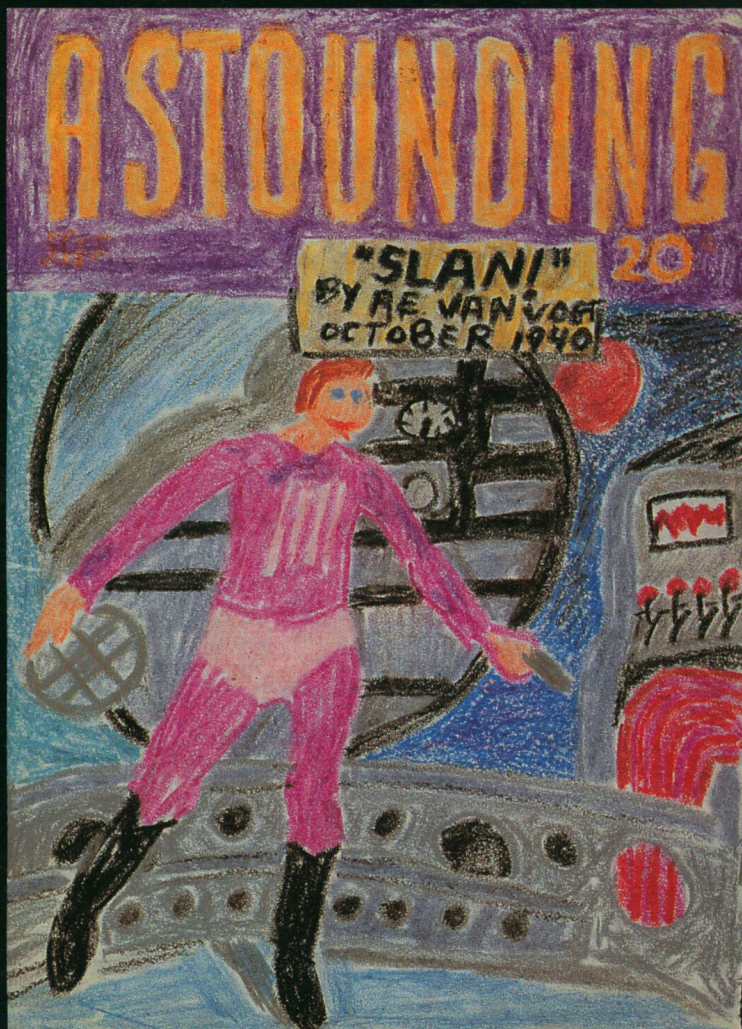
CRANK

SCIENCE FICTION • FANTASY

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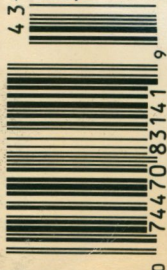
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CRANK!

SCIENCE FICTION • FANTASY

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BUY AND READ GOOD BOOKS

Recently read and recommended by the editor of CRANK!:

RANDOM ACTS OF SENSELESS VIOLENCE

JACK WOMACK

If you're reading this magazine, then you want to read this book. This is the fifth book to be published concerning the near-future New York run by Dryco, though earliest in the chronology of the story line. Incredibly intense, visceral and innovative, with brilliantly inventive use of language. After you read *Random Acts*, then read *Heathern*, *Ambient*, *Terraplane*, and *Elvissy*, more or less in that order. Should be on the shelves by the time you read this.

MEN INTO BEASTS

PAUL PARK

I can't claim to fully understand this book. It's a dark, strange, and complex tale of an alien culture transformed into a human one, but then again not. As with his previous novels, this one is full of the kind of sharp, stunning imagery that leaves powerful lasting impressions, but while the *Starbridge Chronicles* concerned the large scale motions of an alien society, *Men Into Beasts* is a more internal and personal story.

SOLIS

A. A. ATTANASIO

The prolog of this novel was published in CRANK! #1, so those of you who have been with me since the beginning should go out and read the rest of the story now. Ignore the poor quality construction and crummy cover art, just remember that Attanasio is probably the only true poet in science fiction. Currently available from HarperCollins in hardcover.

LET THE REST GO TO ROT

Lucre's Egg

A. M. Dellamonica

Hermes spotted Mona on her perch in the chestnut tree and spared time to wink at her as he flashed by on his winged, two-wheeled steed. Her great-great uncle, he had been a stinking old husk in a basement bedroom through most of Mona's childhood, but when the bike couriers began to sing his name he recovered overnight. Now he was barely recognizable, in his black bike shorts and shaved head, the tattooed and tongue-pierced guardian of a fast-living flock. "I'm lucky Dino's dead," he often joked, as though he didn't miss them, Dionysius and all the others. "He would've snapped up this crew in a second."

Mona waved a wingtip, and he burst past a red light and was gone.

She had risen that morning and stripped in front of her windows, staring down from the penthouse at a changing view of petitioners all over the world. She turned away and was confronted by her reflection. She frowned at the mirror, hating the colt-lankiness of her legs, the still growing swell of her breasts, the stray patch of red on her chin that might be a nascent pimple.

Hissing in frustration, she wriggled into a tight sheath of brown feathers with a low neckline and high skirt. She hung a fire-red amulet at her breastbone, slipped into yellow boots and started down the spiral staircase from the penthouse, keeping an eye out for her mother. She couldn't decide if she wanted to see her or not, if she wanted to go out or rekindle the fight they'd had the night before. "I'm nearly eighty years old," she had ended up screaming. "When are you going to start treating me like an adult?"

For a granola muncher, Mom could be damn smug, especially when she knew she was asking the impossible. "When you start acting like one," was

what she had said.

Right. How many times had Mona heard that one? A hundred? A thousand? *Well*, she told herself sternly, *you know what you have to do*.

It wasn't that Mona couldn't see her point. She knew she was hard to get along with. She could be spoiled and greedy. She brooded for days on end, fought with her sisters and brothers, made promises she didn't intend to keep. Two years ago she had been passionately in love with a mortal poet who had been dead for centuries, and she had raided his descendants' attics and gone abroad dressed in his molding clothes. She neglected her supplicants and rejected good advice.

She decided she didn't want another fight, began to tiptoe as she came down the stairs, and then froze when she realized that Father had spotted her. "Your mother's out, Darling" he said, with an exaggerated wave. "You'll have to track her down if you want to cause more trouble."

Her father had abandoned his rugged blond look for a dark and debonair brand of charm. A collage of magazine covers with his various faces covered the wall behind him. He was primping in front of a wall of television screens, his eyes inspecting hundreds of actors and dancers and singers as they rehearsed for the twenty-four hour service in his temple. It would be simulcast live to 201 countries next week. Fall sweeps were coming, his second biggest festival after the Oscars. All of the broadcasting bigwigs would be sacrificing.

Mona did not respond, and Father froze the screens and looked at her more carefully. "Ooooh," he crooned, reading resignation in the pitch of her shoulders. "Are we perhaps going to work today?"

Is everybody picking on me today? she wondered, but she shrugged. Getting into it with Mom again might be all right, but she was too cool to let a flake like her father get under her skin.

"You may think you're invulnerable now, young chicklet, but get lazy and you know what'll happen." He leaned back and an uncanny imitation of Hera's death rattle bubbled out of his throat. He kept one eye on his reflection in the screens.

"Jealous, darling?" Mona asked in an angelic voice. Entertainment might be the number two portfolio, but like it or not, money came first. All of his subjects offered to her.

Father scowled and thunder shook the building. He made a fist and raised it as though he might punch her, although she was twenty feet away, still on the staircase. Mona met his gaze and let her lip curl upward in a contemptuous half-smile, daring him. His glare grew fierce as the air between them shimmered, and then with a slam the portal to her father's

chambers was replaced by a solid wall covered with proofs from his latest photo shoot. A rush of displaced air lifted Mona's hair and it fell, warm and heavy, onto her bare back.

Mona produced a cherry-red lipstick from thin air, wrote "Remember Narcissus" across Father's black and white faces, and leaped through a shattered window that Hank had blown to fragments on his way out to the wars that morning.

She savored the sensation of falling for five hundred floors, smiled at the sharp whistle of air through her hair and the feathers of her dress. For another five hundred floors she wondered where she might go today, where she might choose to propitiate her worshippers. Her hair streamed upward in a black cloud. Her dark eyes watered in the wind but did not tear.

New York, she decided abruptly. She stretched her arms back behind her and they became wings. Mona flapped once, slowing her fall, then transformed herself into a robin. She dove away from Olympus Tower, out of the blinding morning sun, and landed on a scraggly tree near Wall Street.

If she had not been disguised as a bird, she would have sighed. Frivolous though he was, Father was right. Mona's favor was widely sought, but she still had to maintain a presence among the mortals. She had been neglecting her duties lately, feeding her growing dissatisfaction with lassitude. She had hoped that if she ignored things for awhile that her image might change, that her public would think differently of her, that she might finally be allowed to grow up. It had been a vain hope, and she had known it even while she sulked up in the penthouse. She knew what was required if she wanted a real change. She had tried twice already and chickened out.

A startled driver braked and honked in Hermes' wake, and Mona rose into the air, scanning the streets for opportunities. Her temple dominated the skyline, a round tower of golden windows that reflected the morning sun like a fat, blazing coin. She headed in that direction, planning to drop in and see how tight an operation the high priests were running. Then she spotted a bedraggled figure with a plastic coffeecup on the corner, a hulking blond with a bent head and plastic bags for shoes. He was standing with the cup out, accepting coins from strangers and thanking them softly in a rumbling voice. He stood quietly the rest of the time, his lips pressed together, refusing to call out to the passersby who looked away, sacrificing his stomach to his pride. Mona tucked her wings against her body and dove toward him, landing on the rim of his cup.

Surprise made him drop his morning's haul of pennies and nickels onto the sidewalk and into the gutter. Mona had to flap her wings and hover to

stay level. *I look like a hummingbird instead of a robin*, she thought, piqued.

He was a giant, nearly seven feet tall in spite of the slouch, long of both arm and of hair, with a shape that suggested he had been muscled once but now was starving that strength away. His clothes were all the dark green of a new dollar bill, all threadbare, all slightly damp from the previous night's rain. The cuffs of his pants were spattered with mud. Even the bags on his feet were green, strapped to his ankles with blackened shoelaces. Though his hair was blond, there were two streaks in his beard, one dark brown, one silver.

His eye followed his only quarter as it rolled toward a sewer grate, spinning and trembling at the edge of the long drop into the water below. Finally it fell, tails up, on the cement beside the grate, and he was able to turn his attention to Mona. He laced his fingers together into a basket, offering a place to rest. She dipped, as though she might accept the invitation, then conjured a wallet that fell with a slap into his grubby palms.

It will never be empty, no matter how much you spend, she told him. *But conduct yourself wisely. I will come back to see what you make of this boon.*

He bowed his head, never taking his wide blue eyes from hers, and he was not foolish enough to try to touch her. As she flew away, Mona was pleased to see him stooping to recover his cup and coins.

She resisted an urge to follow him, turning in the direction of her temple. She ducked through a revolving door, feeling a thrill as she ducked around the sweeping circle of glass and up to the roof, unseen. The sound of voices echoing down from the ceiling filled her with power. She found the bank humming with the activity of payday morning.

In the corner office, her high priest barked commands into a phone and typed notes on a laptop computer. Two acolytes stood by the altar where customers lined up to make their offerings, prior to approaching the tellers to deposit their checks. Heavily armed guards stood ready to protect her sanctum in the unlikely event of invasion by robbers or vandals.

Mona circled the vaulted ceiling and listened to their voices rising and falling, feeding on their purposeful chatter, their drive to succeed and enrich themselves. These were the people in whom most of her power lay, the ones who spent their waking hours pursuing dreams of wealth and influence. Those who had been but lightly touched by her blessings nevertheless prayed for more, dropping in at her temple at least a few times a year to ask her favor. The poor offered their copper, hoping to receive gold. Gamblers rolled dice with her face engraved on their lucky number. But the real zealots, paradoxically, were the ones who had least need of her, the ones who had the most wealth in the first place.

The crowd below her was representative of the type. It was primarily composed of men, men to whom wealth was a wanton teenaged girl in a tight dress, men whose feelings about wealth and power and sex were bound in complicated ways. They worshipped her image and would do anything she asked. If she were to light on the statue of herself in the centre of the bank, if she told them her purpose, every soul in the temple would offer himself to her.

And that was the core of her problem. As long as these damn mortals all saw her as a trophy girl atop some mythical car, she would be perpetually in the grip of teenaged angst, and she'd never be able to focus on her job properly. Sixty years of puberty was more than enough, as far as Mona was concerned, even if she had brought it on herself.

She had been on the edge of womanhood when she brought her family back to grace. They would have waited forever, debating humanity's readiness for their return without ever taking action. They talked and talked of nothing else, while Hermes coughed and rotted in the basement and the rest of them became ever fainter ghosts and the world below went mad. They would be up there fading still, Mother and Father and all the others, chatting about the proper time and strategy.

She had tried to tell them more than once that they were ignoring the way the mortals needed them. They wouldn't see the way they set their own kind on altars and then snapped them like twigs under the weight of adulation. Finally Mona had fled to Earth after a fight with Mother, and she had seen opportunity everywhere.

It took little more than a parlor trick. She appeared in midair in a shopping mall, offered to double the wealth of anyone who bowed before her. It took nearly all of her tiny store of power to perform the first miracle, and the second had nearly killed her. Then a crowd surged forward, screaming for her blessings, and a heady rush of strength had erupted through her. She had tripled the wealth of everyone in the mall below her and cried a triumphant wake-up to her family.

Now she was the first of the new Olympians, the most powerful of the entire pantheon, and the only thing she couldn't control was herself. It was fine for her whiny triplet sisters to be completely at the mercy of their whims, but Mona had responsibilities. She was supposed to be in charge of the family, every last obsessive-compulsive one of them.

She winged invisibly around the bank, examining the security, gauging the level of corruption, looking to see that the seals with her image were clean and new. She sized up the men, their sharp suits and slicked hair and their eyes as cold as cash. Finally she moved on, slipping through a blue vel-

vet curtain to the alcoves where instant money machines waited for the faithful.

The man in the alcove was just lowering himself to the floor, his knees popping as he knelt before the machine. Mona evaluated him as he produced three sticks of incense from his pocket and lit them, setting them in the edges of the brazier with care. He produced a crisp new twenty dollar bill, checked it for wrinkles, and set it afire with a silver lighter. He dropped it beside the incense and watched it burn with lowered head and eyes. He did not reach for his bank card until the bill was ash, and before he slid the card into the mouth of the machine he pressed his lips hungrily to the image of Mona's face on the front of the card.

He'll do, Mona thought, as her legs and wings shivered and froze. When he keyed in his code and asked for his cash, she fought down her reluctance and gave the machine the barest nudge of her power. With a whirr, it spilled money into his lap. She transformed herself back into human form and stood behind him, her hands on the hips of her tight dress, her cold lips parted and shiny red.

Sweat began to drip down the back of his neck, and he bowed again to the altar. He tucked the cash into his wallet and took his receipt with shaking hands. He twisted around to face her, still on his knees, hands outstretched in supplication.

Mona smiled down at him, hiding a surge of boredom and desperation which threatened to send her into screaming flight. She held out her hand and he seized it, attempting to pull her down beside him in the privacy of the worship alcove. She yanked loose and glowered. Arrogant wretch, she thought, watching him cower. He fell before her, his head on the floor, and she tried to gather up the nerve to touch him. After endless minutes, someone outside the alcove coughed, and Mona heard the restless shuffling of feet as the people lined up to get their money became impatient. The man before her twitched at the sound of the cough.

Are you going to do this or not? she chided herself. She reached out a hand to stroke his gel-hardened hair and changed them both into birds, falcons this time. He would like the image of feathered corporate raiders. She let him follow her out of the bank, flying up to the top of the round golden tower. Lust and greed lit his eyes as he wove upward on unsteady wings. He flew more like an albatross than a bird of prey.

Here it comes, she thought, as his shadow merged with hers. She felt the brush of one of his talons and shied away. She glided down a few feet, and he banked awkwardly and tried to follow. Mona changed him into a mouse. He squeaked once as he fell past her sharp beak, casting a pleading

glance upwards. Mona turned and followed, beak open, talons spread wide.

Somewhere around the fifteenth floor she relented, caught him on a gust of hot air and lowered him to the ground. *One mustn't torture the faithful.* She felt weary as she sent him on his business with a single feather of pure gold.

She prowled the world for the rest of the day, answering random prayers for financial relief, bestowing a winning lottery ticket on a woman who wanted her kids to come home to her, rupturing the fortunes of a deceitful evangelist. Word spread among her priests that she was abroad and taking care of things again. But for how long? Already she was bored and feeling a restless urge to run away again, to do something crazy. She thought of the others from the Golden Age, wondered how they had survived the centuries, the heady days of the golden age becoming a lingering death as their franchises eroded. The ages seemed to stretch before her.

If only I'd been able to go through with it, she thought, as the sun set and she returned to New York. *There was nothing wrong with that young man.* She knew she would lose this ridiculous sex appeal if she had a kid. *Not just any kid, either. A half-mortal who could bewitch them and distract them so I can get on with my work.*

She could see it all as clearly as if had already happened, how the child would take over the younger corporate crowd while she climbed into the devotion of a new target market. She would fly through the rest of her youth, grow into the image of an old-money matriarch. She would be middle aged, more mature even than her mother, and she would wear power dresses and strings of pearls. She would be true wealth rather than quicksilver riches, powerful and restrained, not unreliable as the giddy promises of a young wheeler-dealer. She could steer them out of the pattern of get-rich-quick and into the creation of financial dynasties, just as she would steer her family into an endless titanium age, one that wouldn't get conquered and fade and die. She could be a tireless worker, Mona knew, if she could just focus on her task without distraction.

She overpaid an ice-cream vendor for a dripping strawberry cone and sat under a streetlight, watching the sunset's reflection on her temple walls and thinking how unfair it was that she, Wealth, most powerful of the gods, should be so absurdly trapped between her followers' expectations and her own inhibitions. It wasn't her fault they had money all tied up in sex and youth. She didn't know what it was about her most devoted followers that made her skin crawl. The people she found attractive were the eccentric few who didn't even care if she existed, and she had learned they

were unsatisfying company, always obsessed with something esoteric like Knowledge or Art or War.

"Why me?" she sighed, and then she frowned. It was exactly the kind of juvenile complaint that she might be expected to make.

She slouched lower on her bench and scowled at the darkening sky, the trees with their cash-colored leaves, the pigeons gathered near a solitary old woman with her bag of bread crumbs. Her glare swept across the park and stopped when she spotted the man from that morning on Wall Street. He had washed and shaved. The gold mane of his hair was still well below his shoulders, but it was combed and trimmed and it shone brightly. He was still wearing dark green: a sweater now, new slacks, green shoes. He was meandering around Central Park like a man on an aimless stroll, letting the panhandlers make eye contact, answering their requests for change with ready fifty dollar bills.

He's giving it away? she thought, feeling anger well up inside her. She knew she should wait, give him a year or so, see if he would put the gift to some kind of serious use, but already she was reshaping her flesh. She added seventy years, tripled her weight, turned her feathers into rags and her perfume into the stink of nights spent on mattresses of garbage. She stepped into the path in front of him, held out a hand. He passed her a handful of crisp new money. "What's this?" she asked, her voice harsh, brittle with age.

"Bounty," he said.

Her eyes narrowed. "I seen you 'round somewhere, ain't I? I know ya."

He smiled back. "I know you too."

Furious, Mona changed back and glared. "I'm not the Goddess of Charity, you know."

"Is there a vacancy?" he said. Laughter rumbled in his giant's chest.

"No!" She glared as he continued laughing, and held out her hand. "Give it back, then, if you're going to waste it."

His laugh receded, but the mockery in his eyes remained. "Take it, then." He held it up to her, and Mona reached forward, only drawing back her hand when it was obvious he would let her have it.

"I can't take back a gift," she said.

"Oh?" he murmured.

"Precedents," she said. "Cassandra." She spit out the word, felt a surge of rage that she was explaining herself to a mortal who had greeted the dawn with no more wealth than a dead man.

"Well," he said, "King for a day, I guess." He tucked the wallet into the pocket of a girl who was digging in a trashcan beside them, and he turned

as if he would walk away.

"Wait a minute!" she thundered. He paused and met her darkening eyes with his sky-blue ones, waited patiently and apparently without fear. The girl, unaware of the treasure he had put in her pocket, fled from the terrible sound of Mona's voice. Mona's fury grew at his rejection of her gift. She let him see the images in her darkening pupils as she thought about sending him to some eternal torment, of cursing him with bad luck or disease, of bearing him to the top of her temple and flinging him to the concrete. He flinched but did not run.

He's bluffing, Mona thought, *he's been bluffing all along*. He was too stubborn to bend his neck, she realized. He would die rather than beg for her mercy like some coin chucked his way on the street. Her eyes narrowed and she sensed that his mouth was dry behind the tightly pressed lips. She could smell a betraying scent of fear in his new clothes. For all his outward calm, he did not wish to be cursed, or killed. He knew he was trapped, that there was no way he could resist, but he would not run or beg. He stood there, wide-eyed, controlled, waiting for her judgement. His eyes were open wide, and she could see herself in the pupils, her countenance furious, her arms raised as though to strike. She let her hands come down slowly and light on his shoulders, her fingers brushing the fringes of his hair.

When she transformed him, he did not fly straight for her like the man at the bank. He stretched his wings and practiced soaring, and she watched for awhile before she pulled up alongside and showed him how to fly. They dove and swooped together, their red breasts fading as the sun set and night closed over them like a blanket.

That night, already more sure of herself, she picked their feathers from the grass near a noisy stream and laid them in a nest in a willow on the streambed. She poked at the brown and orange softness fussily, mashing down her gold-streaked plumage, pulling the plainer brown and orange feathers to the top. Finally she snuggled in deep and rested, awaiting the arrival of motherhood. In the morning she awoke to find her breast warming an eggshell as blue as his eyes.

The Dark One:

A Mythograph

A. A. Attanasio

"Time is thingless," the old sorcerer told his last disciple. "Yet, you are about to see the source of it."

Tall, gaunt and completely bald, the sorcerer stood against the night dressed in straw sandals and a simple white robe. Narrow as a wraith, his raiment glowing gently in the starlight on the steep cliff above the temple city, he seemed about to blow away.

The disciple, a blue-eyed barbarian boy named Darshan, knelt before him on his bare knees, the hem of his kilt touching the ground. He lowered his face and closed his eyes. Whatever curiosity he had for why his masters, the priests, had awakened and brought him here stilled momentarily in the chill desert air, and he awaited his fate with expectant submission.

"Look at me!" the old man demanded, his voice resonant among the vacancies of the cliffs.

Darshan lifted his gaze hesitantly toward the withered figure and saw in the slim light that the sorcerer was smiling. He had a face as hewn as a temple stone, and it was a strange experience for the boy to find a friendly smile in that granite countenance. During the four years that Darshan had served as floor-scrubber and acolyte at the Temple of the Sun, he had seen the sorcerer often in the royal processions and ceremonies – but the haughty old man had always appeared in public garbed in cobra-hood mantle and plumed headdress. Now he was bare-shouldered, his skeletal chest exposed, reptilian flesh hanging like throat frills from his jaw.

"Why are you here?" the old man asked.

"The priests of Amon-Re sent me, Lord."

"Yes – they sent you. Because I ordered them to. Do you know who I am?" He peered at the boy, the whole immense dark sky glistening in his eyes.

"Lord, you are the supreme vizier. The man of the high places."

"Yes. That is who I am." He stood taller, stretched out his bony arms, and spoke in a flat voice: "Supreme vizier of the People, counsel to kings, master sorcerer." Without warning, he sat down in the dust, and Darshan's shock at the sight of the holy man squat-legged on the ground almost toppled him. He had to touch the earth with one hand to stay on his knees. The sorcerer's sagacious grin thickened. "And you are Darshan. I know, for I am the one who sent the ships to seek you."

Darshan leaned back under the weight of his puzzlement.

"Well, not you specifically," the sorcerer added, hunching his frail body under the night. He looked tiny. "Just a child, boy or girl, *any* child so long as it was wild and not of the People. The child had to belong to no one. You are the one they found."

Darshan thought back, remembering the few fleeting memories and scraps of idle speculation an old priest had once offered him of his young, insignificant life. He had been born on a moor in a northern land, in a bracken hovel with many mouths for the wind to sing through. His birth-mother had been an outcast from her clan, exiled for madness, but sane enough in the way of animals to survive on the wind-trampled heath.

His first memory was of her smell – a bog musk, creaturely, hot. Even now, he was fond of the fragrance of rain-wet fur. His second memory was of her telling him that she had never known a man. She had told him this many times, her simple speech gusty with fervor, saying it over and over again until she had become as redundant as the lamentations of the wind. To the day she died trying to cross an iced river, she had moved and talked in a frenzied rush. Ranting about never knowing a man, about beast eyes in the sky, about the smell of darkness in the sun-glare, and the thunder of hooves when the wind stilled, clearly she had been mad. He had realized this only years later, living among the People, though at that time, when he had first begun to reflect on his life, he knew nothing of madness, only that his mother had been true in her devotion to him, and he to her.

In his seventh winter, she fell into the river and vanished under the ice, all in an instant, right before his eyes. Standing three feet behind her, he had been attentive only to the twine net where she carried their next meal, a dead badger, the blood not yet frozen on its head where she had stoned it. That was the last he saw of her, the dead creature caught for an instant

at the broken edge of ice. He remembered clutching for it and it jumping from him, sliding into the black water as though it were yet alive.

After she was gone, he had survived only because he had pretended she was still with him, instructing him what to do. With the thaw, he had followed the river, looking for her body. He never found her. The corpses of animals still frozen or caught in the floods kept him alive. Moving with the river, he never went back.

He had stayed in the wilderness, avoiding contact with all people, and he had moved south to escape the winter that had killed his mother. For two years he had stayed hidden, and then on a rocky coast by a sun-brassed sea, he saw his first boats. He didn't know what they were. He had thought them to be great floating beasts. He could not see that they were carrying men until they had spotted him also. He had fled, but the men had horses and cunning, and eventually they found him hiding in a tide cave.

Taken as a slave and brought to this great kingdom of the south, at first, he had behaved like a caught animal – but his ferocity had been matched by the awe he felt for his captors. Their kingdom was a fabulous river valley of boats, armies, slave-hordes, and immense stone temples.

Many of the slaves were driven to labor like beasts – yet the boy himself was never beaten. He was employed by the priests as a floor-scrubber, and in return he was fed well, clothed, and bunked with the young students of the temple. They had given him a name, and eventually he had learned their language and their ways.

And now, four years later and a lifetime wiser, here he was under the smoldering stars with the kingdom's supreme vizier – a man too holy to stare at directly, too divine to touch earth – an old man sitting in the dust beside him and telling him not only that he was aware of the boy's lowly presence but that he had in fact ordered his capture! The thought filled Darshan with dread, for he had delighted in his anonymity. Being chosen implied a mission, and he had neither the desire nor the belief in himself to think he was capable of doing anything heroic for these great people.

"Do you know why I sent for you?" the sorcerer asked with a glimmering intensity.

"No, lord," the boy replied, peering at him from the sides of his eyes.

"You are to take my place." Another smile tautened the waxy flesh across the old man's skull-face, and he hissed with small, tight laughter when he saw the boy's look of utter incredulity. "Believe me, I am not toying with you. Nor am I mad. You will have plenty of time to get used to being a sorcerer. Time, that thingless word – there is plenty of that."

The boy's hands opened futilely before him. "I am but a slave –"

"So it seems to the present generation. But you will outlive them and their grandchildren and their grandchildren's great-grandchildren."

At the boy's gasp, another of the old man's smiles flickered in the darkness. "I am not speaking symbolically, Darshan. I do not mean your works will outlive them – for you shall do no works." His voice assumed a ritual cadence. "Symbols are a substitute for works. Works are a substitute for power. Power resides in the stillness. That is the secret of the universe."

Truly, Darshan thought, *the vizier is mad!* He dared not voice that doubt. Rather, he mustered his courage to say, "I do not understand, lord."

The sorcerer moved closer and put a dry hand on the boy's shoulder. A coldness flowed from it. "Speak to me about what you do not understand."

Darshan shivered. Words came quickly into his head but moved slowly to his mouth. "Lord, I am but a barbarian. I am a child, and from the Outside. I am nothing."

"And so power resides in you." The sorcerer's hand squeezed the boy's shoulder with a firm gentleness, and the cold brightened, "Speak."

"Lord, I do not understand what power would reside in a worthless outsider."

"The power you are made empty to receive." The hand on Darshan's shoulder became ice, and when it lifted away blue fire sheathed it.

A scream barked in the boy's throat, hindered by the benignity of the sorcerer's expression.

"You see?" the old man chuckled. "The power is already leaving me and going to you."

Rainbow light flowed like smoke from the upheld hand and coiled toward Darshan's face. He pulled away, horrified, and the spectral vapor shot at him like a cobra, striking him between the eyes.

Cold fire paralyzed the boy, and his vision burst into a tunnel of infalling flames and shadows. The rush stalled abruptly, and, in an instant, the desert skyline vanished and the span of night deepened. Sun feathers lashed the darkness, ribbons of starsmoke furling into the reaches of the night.

"This is the raith," the sorcerer's voice lit up within him. "This is the Land of the Gods!"

Together, wordlessly, they advanced among rivers of light that poured like bright fumes into a golden sphere of billowy energy. A dissolving sun, the sphere radiated pollen sparks in a slow flux against the blackness. Each spark was the surface of a mirror, the other side of which opened into a biological form.

"Touch one," the sorcerer commanded, and when the boy did as he was

told, he found himself inside the grooved sight of an antelope bounding through white grass. Touching another, he was among writhing fish.

"Life. All of it." The sorcerer's voice pulled Darshan away from touching another spark. "I am not taking you there. But once you establish yourself where we are going, all of this is yours." The weltering surface of the gold sphere spun serenely before them in the haze of its renderings.

They drifted away from it, across spans of darkness vapory with fire. Alternating ice winds and desert blasts looped over their raith-senses. For a long time, they soared, pummeled by brutal gusts, until they burst into a darkness set at the back of the stars.

Darshan's flight stopped abruptly, and stillness seized him. He floated, alertly poised at the crystalcut center of clarity, so still that empty space itself seemed to writhe like a jammed swarming of eels. Flamboyant bliss saturated him. This was the top of the eagle's arc, the fish's leap, the peak of noon extending forever.

Immovable as the darkness of space, Darshan exulted. His life had suddenly become too miniscule to remember. The life of the People, too, had become the fleetest thought. Even the stones of their temples and tombs were breathing, their packed atoms shivering and blowing against the gelatinous vibrations of dark space.

Awe pierced the boy with the sudden realization that the tumult of life, of existence itself, was far apart from him. He had become absolutely motionless.

Yet, with that very thought, the spell ended, and he found himself immediately back in his body on his knees before the aged sorcerer. With painful reluctance, Darshan peered about. The clamor of stars and the stink of dust nauseated him. He closed his eyes and groped inside himself for the eagle's poise.

"That stillness is your power," the sorcerer said in an urgent voice that made Darshan open his eyes. The old man's face glittered with tears. "It lies at the heart of everything." He gestured at the temples' torchlights and the lanterns and lamps of the city that shone in the dark valley like spilled jewels. Then, he looked up at the dangling stars. "Even the gods."

The barbarian boy gazed at the old man with unabashed amazement. "Then why is this stillness no longer yours?"

The sorcerer swelled closer, expansive in his joy, and he took Darshan's chilled hands in his icy ones and shook them with the emphasis of his words: "It *chose* me – as it now chooses you!" His voice hushed confidentially. "Ten thousand years ago, in a region that we presently call Cush, I too was an orphan, as you are, a savage, alone with the wilderness. Wholly

by chance, as happened to you, I was led to the master of stillness who had come before me. He was thousands of years old then, as I am now. He had found his fulfillment after millennia of grounding the stillness in time. That thingless word. Thingless for those such as we who have known the stillness. It is only the combat of the gods that makes time a thing for everyone else. Time is the dimension of the gods' battlefield. Their clashes for dominance stir people's hearts with dreams. Those dreams, in turn, frenzy into ideas: tools are discovered, animals domesticated, royalty invented, religion, sacrifices, war. Now, even cities are called into being." Tears gleamed silverly in the creases of his broad grinning. "Who cares? I certainly don't. My time is up. I have lived the stillness – right here in the middle of the battlefield! I have seen the gods aspire. I have seen generations sacrificed to their grand schemes. A great empire has risen from the red dust. The People think their empire will live forever. But I tell you, you will see all this as dust again and all the People forgotten. Only the gods will go on. The dreaming will continue. Other empires will appear and disappear among the battling gods. You alone, alone as you have always been, will live the stillness – an enemy to the gods. For you alone, time will be thingless, for you will know the source of it. You will have been inside the mother of the gods. You will have the power to live the stillness."

Darshan was thirteen years old that night when the sorcerer, sitting in the dust, spoke to him. Nothing in his four years of scouring temple floors had prepared him for it. The priests who had sent him to the sorcerer had wondered about that meeting; some had leered, suspecting lewdness. The sorcerer himself soon disappeared mysteriously. Yet the boy went on scrubbing floors. And the raith went on dreaming him.

After that night, however, the work became immeasurably easier. Body dazzling with a vigor he mistook for approaching manhood, Darshan excelled at sports. And he astonished even the arrogant lector-scribes with his mental stamina as he absorbed everything they dared teach him.

Several years later, the raith's dream shifted, and Darshan became a certifiable wonder, the countenance of the gods, the boy who never aged. The priests worshipped him. Warlords offered tribute. Every difficulty in the region required his assuaging presence.

For a long time, Darshan prayed to the gods to restore his former life. But his prayers had no wings. The King learned of him, and he was removed from the temple and taken upriver to the royal city. There, he became a child-divinity sent by the gods to affirm the ancestral sorcery of the Kings. Life became a ceremony of walled gardens, incense-tattered

rooms and banquets. Twice a year, he was portaged into the green of the fields to release a falcon that carried the prayers of the People to the sun god. Well-being clouded about him like an electric charge, and he was revered by the aristocracy even as the court aged and their tombs were built.

The years flowed by, and he grew wise on the dying of others. He took wives who bore his children, and he loved them all with sentimental delirium. His family shared riverboat mansions and superficialities, all of life's caprices, as they aged beyond him and shriveled away. He took younger wives and had more children. And all the while, he blessed the People and the riverland, and the kingdom prospered. He himself did not know how. He had forgotten the words of the sorcerer. He thought he was a child-god.

Three kings and a century later, with his first grandchildren's grandchildren older than he, he had aged a year. His body was fourteen years old.

Not until he was seventeen and two dynasties had risen and collapsed did he begin to remember. Dreams were ephemera. Families, kings, dynasties were ghosts, incidental to the emptiness in which they teemed. Another six hundred years of orchard gardens and ripening families and he saw through to this truth.

He gave up family life. Rubbed smooth like a river stone after spawning forty generations of sons and daughters, children who grew up to be wives, warriors, queens, merchants, priestesses, all fossils now, and even their children fossils, he felt carnal desire slide away from him. He wanted no more lovers or children, and the machinations of power bored him.

For the next thousand years, he retreated into anonymity, seeking unity with the People. In various guises, he wandered the earth seeking experience and knowledge. Eventually, the dreams themselves began to wear thin for Darshan. Experience turned out to be suffering. Knowledge was boundaries.

After long centuries of striving, Darshan finally accepted that he was no godling; he was a ghost. He returned to the river kingdom where the cursed gift had come to him. He searched for the sorcerer and after many years found him – not in the world but in his dreaming.

The sorcerer came to him one evening at sea. Darshan, serving on a freight boat hauling giant cedar timbers from the eastern forests back to the kingdom, dozed in a cord hammock slung between the prow and a shaggy log. Through half-lidded eyes, he stared ahead at the rinds of daylight in the west until sleep swelled in him and the raith uncurled.

All at once, his body unfurled and he found himself rushing headlong

through windy darkness and fuming leakages of light. A gold sphere swirled before him veiled in a misty flottage of sparks. His flight slowed, and he hung among the tiny pieces of light until he remembered this vision from hundreds of lifetimes back, from his one short interview with the sorcerer long ago.

The sun-round glare inside the starmist was Re, the god of his first learning. This was the creator immersed in its creation, each gempoint of the endless glittering a mind. The fulgurant light blazed with all being. And the drift of the sparks, stately as clouds, revealed the invisible spiral of time.

A religious hush thrummed to a droneful music in Darshan's bones. Here was deity! Here was the source of his own unreckonable fate. He knew that he had to keep his wits about him and remember everything of this great darkness fizzling with scattered light. This was the place that his teacher had called the raith.

Smoldering hulks of color and brightness fumed against the utter black. These, he recognized as the gods with their gloaming abstract bodies. All he had to do was stare at them to feel who they were: the crimson smoke and slithering banners of War, the green simmering vibrations of Plants, the surging floral hues of Sex, the ruffling blue flow of River, endless gods arrayed in smoky radiance as far as he could see.

All being burns! he marveled, drifting through the blaze, awed by the apparently random yet balanced pattern of the raith. Alongside the red feathered energy of War drizzled the violet realm of the dead. And above it all shone the blue depths of Peace.

He descended into the gray flutter of the dead with the image of the sorcerer firmly in his mind. Many familiar faces rose toward him through the trickling light, the shivering shapes of all his families, all the lovers and children who had lived ahead of him into death. They tangled like entrails, shifted like weather, speaking to him in hurt voices not their own. He recognized then the filthy fate of the dead. They were melting into each other! They were dissolving and being reabsorbed into the swirl of tenuous light.

Some of the dirty light drifted in a haze of limbs and faces toward the blue embers of Peace. Some smoked toward the red ranges of War. The rest dithered in human shapes.

Darshan lifted away, soaring over the gray pastures of snagged bodies. The sorcerer wasn't among the dead. The sorcerer had belonged to the dark spaces and not the light. Just as he had said.

Darshan expanded into the dark, and the gold sphere of Re in its aura of sparkling lives loomed into view. But now only the darkness enwombing

the light seemed real. He flung himself into the emptiness.

His eyes shattered, his atoms flew apart. He disappeared.

But the wind of the emptiness whirled all his parts together and blew him back into alertness. Stunned, he hung in the raith-dark before the fiery mist of Re – and the words of the sorcerer returned to him: ‘You alone, alone as you have always been, will live the stillness – an enemy to the gods.’

Darshan woke up. He was still a young sailor on a cargo boat freighted with cedars sailing into the night. He was still a man with a thousand years of memories. But the memories were weightless in the expansive silence. The night sea would become a dawn landfall. The cedars, faithful to their doom, already lived as rafters and pillars on their way to the termite’s ravenous freedom or an enemy’s torch. And the cargo boat would find its way to the bottom of the sea and give its shape to a vale of kelp and polyps. And the young sailor would weary of the sea and be forgotten. And Darshan, too, would be forgotten, swept away in the great migrations of Asian tribes that swarmed across Europe and North Africa a millennium before Christ.

He roamed among the different peoples, unseen, or seen in a peaceable light. The stillness threading through his eyes and pores and atom-gaps protected him: Its lack drew energy to him wherever he was, and the energy was health, ample food, treasures, and the fealty and love of others. Despite this abundance, he felt nothing for others. He felt nothing but serene emptiness. And when he did somehow fall in love with someone or a cause, the stillness vanished, and he was left hungering and at the mercy of others.

Sometimes even that was good. Though he had exhausted every kind of living during his first thousand years in the river kingdom, he was occasionally nostalgic for passion. And he was still aging a year for every century. Hence, even he was aware of his mortality. Pain and peril, too, had their appetites for him. More of the gods’ dreaming.

Darshan had never been seriously ill or injured. The stillness protected him. The mangling forces ignored him even when he was stupid with his passions.

As a wanderer, he never thought much about his fate. Often, he surged into trances, swooping through the abysses of the raith, trembling with the malice and insane love of the gods until he could stand no more, and then plunging into utter black nothing.

He cohabited with a dim awareness that he served some function for the stillness. The old sorcerer had spoken of grounding the stillness in time.

But at the time that he had heard this, rational thought had not been one of the gods feeding off of him.

Darshan lived his fate as a watcher, letting the ubiquitous nothing appear before him as anything at all. His personality changed with his name and place. For more than a century, he lived as a wealthy Phoenician purple manufacturer, hiring a complex of villages to harvest the banded dye-murex and create the most demanded color in the world.

After that, he dwelt alone on the barren, wind-cumbered coasts of the Orkneys for two centuries, living off nettles and fish, sleepy and holy in the amplitude of winter.

Then, yearning company, he went south and wandered through Europe as a seer with the Celtic hordes.

At the time of the Buddha, he was a twenty-eight year old warrior prince in Persia. Five centuries later, he wandered with the gypsies through the Balkans when Christ was in Jerusalem. Another three hundred years and he was among the gangs that toppled Rome.

Once, he sailed with a Palestinian crew across the Atlantic and lived for several more centuries as a nomad in the jungles, deserts and grasslands of the western continents. He was at the crestpoint of the falcon's dive, suspended in time almost wholly timeless.

The nothing became well grounded in him. His very poise within the seething temporality grew steady enough that it created a pattern in theraith. Over his twenty-five centuries on earth, his power in the hidden reality had grown sufficiently resonant to match the harmonies of the masters of stillness who had come before him.

Wrapped in the skin of a jaguar, shivering on a mountain scarp in the Andes, his sacrifice fulfilled itself. The mind of the dark spaces entered him, and his surrender became total. Now, he was the Dark One. Made of light slowed down to matter like everyone else, he had given all of himself to nothing like no one else. Given? More like taken. He had been chosen from among the rays of creation by the space that the rays cut. He had become the wound, the living nothing.

Curious about the old world, he returned to Europe with the Norsemen who had been sent by their Christian king to Greenland to spread the gospel, and whom a storm had carried west to Vinland. Europe in the High Middle Ages reminded him of the river valley kingdom where his power had begun. There, the temple of Amon-Re had competed with feudal lords for control of the domain. Here, the papacy served as the temple and the warlords remained the same, only the trappings had changed.

He wandered nameless for a long time as the power within him contin-

ued making its connections between earth and raith. He was a tinker, a minstrel, a carnival clown. His raith dreams fell into darkness. He entered the space between the enmeshing archons, the interstice of being and non, between the stars and the buried – where the Dark One watched.

When the dreams of the gold sphere in its mist of sparks began again, he was a Danish village's latrine ditch keeper, mulching the sewage with forest duff for use on the fields. The Dark One's thoughts began thinking him. Always before, there had been living and silence – the living given, thick with health and stamina, the silence bright with raith light and comfort. Now, there was something new. Thoughts began crystallizing out of the inner dark. He needed a wide space of time in which to simply sit and face the immensity of them, so he went into the mountains and let his dreams lead him to gold. Afterward, he settled in Italy, where he established himself as a wealthy nobleman from the north.

Sitting in his enclosed garden in Firenze, guarded from the outside world by courtyards and loggia, he opened himself to the clear music of thoughts emerging from the raith. The archons of precision and rational thought, simultaneously hampered and encouraged by the archon of war, had begun fusing into the complex of science.

Initially, he did not see the point of it at all. Advances in boat design increased his revenues as a merchant, but that wealth was offset by advances in weaponry, which intensified the civil wars and cost him several of his estates. Nonetheless, he remained opened to the thought-shaping patterns that the Dark One was thinking .

He was very good at being the stillness by this time. Everything floated through him: his body, his very awareness. The archons of protein synthesis and digestion, of ever-shifting emotions and thoughts, created him. The archons of wealth and poverty, power and impuissance, governed him. He was the battlefield of the gods.

The most powerful of all the gods was the Dark One – the uncreated and uncreating. More than a destroyer or death and its dissolvings. Void.

He began thinking about the Dark One. He wondered about its source and end, and who he was in that synapse, hemi-divine, living centuries as years, free of disease, protected from accidents. . . .

Over time, before the profound and absolutely immutable flow of generations, his memories and rationalities froze into constellations as coldly distant and immutable as stars.

Empires crossed Europe like shadows of the shifting stars. Science invented itself. By 1700, the Dark One had established a trading company in Lon-

don, and he called himself Arthur Stilmanne. Privately, he funded research in every branch of science. A way was becoming clear. After aeons, a way was opening.

The sorcerer returned among the black gulfs of the raith. Almost four thousand years after he had initiated Darshan as an embodiment of the nothing, the old man reappeared in a raith dream. His body loomed out of the astral dark bound in shroudings. That, Arthur knew from his years of symbol-gazing in the raith, meant his master's limbs, his extension into the four dimensions, were restrained – he belonged to the void. But the sorcerer's head was clear – his knowledge and intent were accessible. His bald head gleamed in the gray light like a backlit bacterium: His knowing shone radiantly, suffused with the living energy of the void.

Arthur willed himself to touch the specter. Immediately, a voice came to him whose familiarity twitched in him like his own nerves: 'Darshan, you have served the stillness well. The centuries have emptied you, and now you are full of your own power.' The sorcerer's face pressed closer in the dream, gloomy with sleep, his stare an aching wakefulness. 'Who are you?' the old visage asked.

Arthur responded instantly, "The Dark One."

A breath slipped from the sorcerer's pale lips, 'It is so.' And his countenance slackened with stupor.

After that encounter, Arthur's mind turned in on itself. The constellations of his long-thinking connected, looping into the veins and arteries of a body of knowledge. He saw himself finally as a response to the dialectic of life. Others just like he was now had existed before, randomly selected organisms, each metaordered not by life but by an intelligence equal and opposite to life.

Newton's work on vector forces inspired him. He had been given a shape by emptiness so that he might bring all shapes back to emptiness. Guided by Leibniz's exploration of the binary system of Asian philosophy, he began thinking of himself as a dot of ordered chaos in a world of chaotic order. His mission became clear. He and all the others who had preceded him had come to end existence. But how could that be?

During the nineteenth century, Stillman Trading Company flourished, and he kept himself moving around the continent to obscure the fact that he was continually succeeding himself as his own son. Arthur Stillman VI, of Victoria's Britain, poured vast sums into biological research, believing the insane rush of evolution could be ended by a virulent plague hostile to all forms of life. Not until Arthur Stillman VIII and the quantum research of the early twentieth century did he realize – with an authoritative irony –

that the weapon he sought was not in the world but in the atoms of the world.

Arthur learned more about himself and the nature of reality in the last forty years than he had in the previous four thousand. The means to exterminate life and end the four billion year old torment had emerged on its own. Arthur had done nothing to anticipate or promote it.

Reflecting on that, he came to see that he had never had any real influence on history. He was inert, like a stone time had swallowed; he would eventually be voided. Inside the stone was a secret silence. Some zen monks had alluded to it. But all others kept it hidden, even from themselves. He stayed close to that silence, and everything came to him.

In the mid-20th century, death itself came to Arthur Stillman, approaching closer than ever before. Accidents stalked him. A milk bottle teetered off a windowledge nine stories above his head and smashed at his feet. Lightning punched through the roof of his house and blasted the reading lamp at his bedside. On the highway, a tire exploded and sent him hurtling helplessly off the road and into a forest, where his car erupted into a fireball the instant after he was hurled through the windshield. During his six week hospital stay, mix-ups in medication nearly killed him twice.

Arthur understood that he had an enemy powerful enough to break the stillness that had protected him for several thousand years. Somewhere, lightworkers had begun working very hard indeed to destroy the Dark One. He knew why. Science had become his latest, most deadly weapon, and if the lightworkers did not stop him now, he would soon have the technology to destroy all of creation.

"Science," he became fond of saying as the apocalyptic promise of the millennium approached yet again, "is heavy enough to bend all paths toward it into circles. We'll never understand it all, never reach the center of omniscience. But we've circled close enough to science, to objective knowledge, to realize that all that we thought we knew about reality we can throw away. With science, the human spirit stands with the creator spirit in the grave of everything that came before, in the midden heap of religion and superstition, on the dunghill of all past cultures. Science reveals the truth of things as they always were, to the beginning and the end. Science creates with a beauty as ancient as we are new."

Arthur burned with a passion for science, because it explained to him his singularity and his origin. From biologists, who studied the DNA differences in the mitochondria of people from all over the world and who traced human lineage back to one female ancestress hundreds of thou-

sands of years ago, he came to accept the importance of his uniqueness. As Eve had mothered the mutants who would evolve into war-frenzied humans, he would father the energies that would return them all to nothing.

From physicists, who discovered that the four dimensions people experienced were actually projections of other compacted dimensions in a space smaller than 10^{-33} centimeter, he found the raith. The radii of curvature of all the dimensions except the familiar four of spacetime were smaller than atoms – in fact, smaller than the grain of spacetime itself. In that compact region, spacetime quantized, that is, space and time separated into realms of their own. That he knew had to be the raith, where ubiquitous archons floated timelessly and evolving beings extended into endless distances.

Science even explained his existence. He had emerged as a side-product of a symmetry event: Particles appeared spontaneously in the void all the time, leaking out of the vacuum, out of nothing, but always in pairs – electrons and positrons, negative and positive, existing separately for an interval, then annihilating each other. He was one of those particles, compelled into existence by the appearance of his opposite. The other was light itself, never still, energizing endless forms and activities.

He was the Dark One, yearning for quiescent timelessness. Light was the many. He was the one. Light was life. He was death.

To amplify his power in the raith, Stillman began creating power cells of human minds entrained to his will. He built a group-mind that he could control. There was no dearth of material. Authorized as a psychiatrist by the finest medical institutions in the States, where he had effortlessly earned numerous degrees in medicine, psychopathology, and neural chemistry, he used his multibillion dollar trust to found Stillman Psychiatric Hostels. The hostels were free of charge and open to anyone with a mental health problem, with or without insurance.

By the mid-Fifties, Arthur had a hostel in each state and dozens overseas, all of them packed. He hired the best qualified staff at competitive salaries, and many hundreds of people benefited. Hundreds of others were personally attended to by Arthur himself, who used drugs and hypnosis to open their psychic centers to his preternatural will. Once a subject had been treated by Arthur, that persona bonded to the Dark One in the raith. They never recuperated.

When the accidents began, Arthur knew that he was closing in on the means to destroy creation. He knew that by using his powerful group

mind to feed power to the archons of war and chaos in the raith, he had alerted lightworkers across time and space to the real threat of his presence.

His true archenemies, he knew, were the progenitors of the world's lightworkers – the cave masters. They were the first humans who, a hundred thousand years ago and more, had learned to enter the raith and identify with the radiant diamondshape of the original light, the creation fire in its first instant out of the singularity that had birthed the cosmos. Their initial link with this first force, when all things were pure light, spanned time. The cave masters' early spells had revealed the secrets of fire, songdances, healing, and – as their raith-work widened through the ages – stoneworking, planting and the wondrous mystery of metals with its powers of purity and combination. Their identification with the light and action pitted them firmly against the vacuum in which the light expanded and cooled into the shapes of all things and made them the natural nemesis of the Dark One.

Time, that thingless word, was an illusion. Arthur learned that in the twentieth century and began to use that potent knowledge to reach across time and strike directly at his enemies with his raith power. And they, in turn, strove to reach forward into their future and destroy him before he annihilated them and all the dreamwork humanity had made of the cold light in the void of space.

But subversive attacks against the Dark One in the raith were useless, for the Dark One was dark – he belonged to the black spaces, and no one could see him if he did not want to be seen. To be effective, the lightworkers had to focus their attack in the physical world. And so they employed zombies, humans already dead, lost to the world, whom they re-animated with their raith strength and sent to hunt down the Dark One.

Arthur had killed a dozen zombies in the last four decades. More than all he had killed in the previous four millennia. Always in the past, he had been protected. No archon could hold him for long without the reflexes of the Dark One intervening. Pirates, bandits, armies had ambushed him in every age, and his life had pulsed at the edge of a knife many times. Every time, he retreated into the raith, merged with the darkness, and left whatever archons were threatening him alone with their thunder.

In the physical world, furious minds suddenly became blithely becalmed, armies and ferocious gangs befuddled, confronted by the echoes of their own enmity, and left quivering together with drooling fear. He had almost always managed to get away without taking life. When he killed, it was strictly for advantage. Even the subtlest assassins remained frustrated by the Dark One's relentless awareness of the archons impinging on him,

especially the killing shapes in the raith that came with poisons and hidden weapons. He saw them all before they saw him. He was invulnerable – until the cave masters came for him.

The zombies – or, as the cave masters called them, the adepts – found their way to him in the world and then attacked him in the raith. By distracting his raith-self, they had several times come close to destroying his physical body. But with each assault, the Dark One grew more clever. He learned about the cave masters, and he discovered how to use their adepts as conduits into the far past, where he could strike directly at the extinct race whose intelligence continued fostering civilization through the raith. If the cave masters had their way, war, disease, even involuntary death would be abolished. The human genome project existed because of their hope to shape healthier, more intelligent people. With the help of the light-workers, humans could eventually carry their archons to the stars, and then the dreaming would never end. The torment for him and those like him who embodied the dark would be forever.

The latest adept began as an eighteen year old soldier killed in Viet Nam, restored to life twenty-five years ago by the cave masters and carefully trained as a raith-warrior in a fastness hidden in the Himalayas. He was a dangerous adversary. Yet this sword cut both ways. Here was another chance to push deep into the Ice Age when cortical complexity reached its peak with the large-brained Neanderthals, the first humans to enter the raith. Once there, he could kill the human drive before it began.

That, of course, depended on using this adept correctly. The Dark One had become proficient at sensing the vast power required to return a corpse to life. The symmetry law that had created the Dark One also allowed only one zombie to exist at a time, and there was never any doubt for Arthur when the cave masters selected that time. Usually a blur of dizziness cued him to the process. A mess of vertigo flung him into a chair the day this zombie was resurrected.

Before Arthur learned of the cave masters, he killed the zombies swiftly. With this one, though, he went to some trouble. Through the raith, he learned of the boy's former life in Indiana, and he cultivated a relationship with the zombie's old sweetheart, Eleanor Chevsky, a word-processor, divorced and with no children, whom he hired to work for his mental health foundation. She was five ten, a natural blonde whose gray eyes had a slight slant, as though she were part Asian or up to some mischief. Voluminously bosomed and globe-bottomed as any goddess, she caught the fancy of most of the men and the envy of many of the women in the main

office, who assumed her rapid promotion to Stillman's personal data manager had little to do with her computer skills.

In fact, Arthur's relationship with Eleanor was solely business, a job that situated her where Arthur could watch her and wait for her dead lover to return for her. Not that Arthur wasn't sexually attracted to her himself. Over the ages, his sex drive waned and flourished in long, arhythmic cycles. Lately, since the revelation of atomic weapons, his sexual appetite had been insatiable. But he denied himself Eleanor – for the time being. He needed her working in the world and accessible – a lure for the adept.

Arthur was sly enough not to make her too accessible. He used his powers to hide her from the imaging talismans that the lightworkers had given the adept to see views far from him – though, naturally, the Dark One was careful to first seed the boy's trances with a few glimpses of her. The foible of zombies consisted in their retraining many of their former memories and emotions. Arthur knew how to use that humanity against them. He knew that the zombie, properly stimulated, would be susceptible to nostalgia and the lure of his former lover. And his strategy worked with a precision that frightened even him.

One stormy night, eager to view his old lover, the adept secretly entered her townhouse and planted an imaging talisman, an icon by which to watch over her from the raith. Arthur sent around one of his men to retrieve the icon – a jade monkey – and to leave a substitute that would work as well for the adept without alerting him that the original had been taken.

Once he had it in his hands, a kind of anxiety shunted through Arthur. What if this were a plan of the zombie's – a double feint that had just placed a killing talisman in Arthur's presence? But no – after much scrutiny of the white jade monkey, he saw that the icon was harmless to the Dark One. The adept's sentimentality had provided the means of destroying not only the boy but some of the cave masters as well.

By gently exploring the monkey icon with his raith senses, Arthur was able to see inside the adept's house, an old slender building that the lightworkers had used before. A Chinese smoke tree shadowed the door, and in the back a luxuriant garden and turtle pond flourished, shielded from the street by tall spires of poplar.

Inside, hand-painted wallpaper displayed the animals and blossoms of the Himalayas – purple land crabs and blue sheep, frangipani and cassia. And the woodwork swirled with intricately carved mountain creatures, including barbet and griffon, wolf, bear, leopard, and even a spiral fossil from the ancient sea. Everything looked much as it had the last time

Arthur had tormented a zombie here in an attempt to force a way through the creature's body to the cave masters. Unfortunately, the woman's brain had ruptured first. He remembered how she had slumped there in that very raven throne under a coffin of shadows cast by the blue glass skylight.

From the ceiling corner where his raith-senses hovered, Arthur spotted it – the stone head the size of a pear that had come directly from the time of the cave masters. He narrowed closer with a wolfish caution and inspected the time-stained rock, the carven features smoothed to a rude skull shape. This form was unique and ancient as the oldest of the first people. Through it, the Dark One would have no difficulty in traversing the hundred thousand years to the origins of the human mind.

On the evening Arthur planned to perform his killing ritual, he had dinner at an opulent restaurant with Eleanor. The idea was to symbolically celebrate the latest zombie's death with someone who knew him – even though she still believed he was an MIA, almost certainly dead somewhere in the jungles of southeast Asia. Arthur was fond of such rituals. They were the gestures of luck that rounded the razor-abrupt transitions in his relentless life. This was, after all, the culmination of a twenty-five year wait.

He selected this restaurant, with its indoor waterfall and arbors of hanging blossoms, especially for its allusion to temporality, which he liked to think of as the Ozymandius effect, an effect heightened by the restaurant's location in a somber, bronze-faced skyscraper. He ordered a meal of traditional depth- food: a timbale of bay scallops in green pepper sauce and paupiette of trout served in a hollowed blood orange – a minceur meal as sparse in calories as the last supper.

Eleanor dazzled in the presence of Arthur. Over the years, she had seen him numerous times at foundation functions and she had even chatted with him at his mansion during a diplomatic reception several years ago, but this was her first meal with the notable man.

He spoke a soulful poetry to her that moved her deeply: "All of us under the sprawl of the sun are such provisional bodies, Eleanor – and by that truth alone we can honestly say that we are true friends to the beginning and the end. I'm glad to include you in my circle and to share with you what Shelley somewhere calls these dreams and visions that flower from the beds our bodies are."

Charmingly, he had invited her to bring a guest to share their meal – a biddance he made her believe was commonplace between him and those who had worked as hard for the foundation as she had. Her intention was to bring her latest beau, but, at the last minute, he took ill. Not wanting to

show up alone, she asked her friends. All had other plans. Finally, through a friend of a friend, you were recommended. And though you knew her not at all, the idea of an elegant meal and a pleasant evening with new people and one of them something of a luminary appealed to you.

You arrived early and were seated at the table when Eleanor arrived in the company of a skinny man with a starved monk's face, wispy gray hair, and blue eyes. At your first sight of him, a wash of pity soaked you, for he seemed so frail a man. Gently, you touched the delicate fellow's pale hand.

Over the dainty fish dinner, while Doctor Stillman prattled on about mental hygiene and the usefulness of recording one's dreams, you kept noticing how his pink features seemed tremulous as a husked shellfish. Several times in his eagerness to make a point, the doctor went faint, his eyelids fluttered and his wide British vowels softened.

"It's too easy to get dispirited in this cruel and hazardous world," he said, looking at you tristfully. "Yet, we must carry on with our lives, and, more than that, we must find the strength to create. As I remind my patients, bitterness, depression, even shattering despair are the transfiguring powers that potentially accompany and corrupt every creative endeavor, because creativity is, as the mythologists insist, an intrusion into the inviolable realm of deity – of abstraction – where we with our spastic actuality can never fully go. How dare we grotesque notochords create anything in this frigid and entropic universe? It takes a lot of arrogance, don't you think? One has to give everything to create anything."

He gestured to the elegant dinner on the table. "Out of many grains, one bread; out of many grapes, one wine; out of many words, one story. The only important story, needless to say, is the one we tell ourselves. In our time, the story that science tells makes clear that our literal kingdoms are only shadows of an invisible reality. We ourselves are then but part of a much vaster totality. *Pars pro toto*, the part sacrificed for the whole – the grain, the grape, the word for the bread, the wine and the story that sustain us during our time in this wilderness of vacuum and gamma rays."

"You make it all sound so grim, Dr. Stillman," you said as you buttered your bread. "What then is the purpose of life? Just to endure?"

"Purpose?" Stillman shook his head grimly and a remote gaze entered his eyes. "Alone in the wind with our dance, humanity seems like an old medicine dancer on the sliding scree of a mountainside under the vacant swirl of the failing heavens, all of our soul hovering in our incantation. To what shall we dedicate the palsy of our dance? Hm? To God? Is there a God? Science reveals nothing of that. No, my friends. We dance under the eternal night of space. We dance on a rock spinning around a nondescript

star. We dance for ourselves alone. And by this solitude and pain, we learn the extremity of love.”

By the time the second course was served – a Thai vegetable roll in peanut sauce – you were far more interested in the food than in listening to Arthur discourse on the purpose of life. But he was just warming up.

“Epistrophe,” he acclaimed while pouring FUILLY-ROUX into a crystal glass. “That’s what psychiatry is all about. Art, too, for that matter. And madness.”

“Excuse me,” Eleanor interrupted, accepting the glass. It was her third. You were still lipping your first, and Stillman wasn’t drinking. “Epistrophe?”

“Multiplicity, correspondence, reversion –” He felt for the meaning in the air with his long fingers, the nails precise. “No thing is just a thing. It’s also a symbol, a sign for a complex of other things. So that everything that we know, everything we are, reverts to the unknown. Epistrophe is what keeps us running in circles.”

“What makes the world go round,” you quipped, not quite following him or caring. It was just an inconsequential evening in a formal setting, something to say you did.

While the waiter poured the coffee, Arthur excused himself and went to the restroom. Sitting in a stall with the door closed, he removed the monkey jade from his vest pocket and held it up before his face. His vicarious features hardened, took on the tautened fixity of a predator’s attention. In the rafters, the crystals of glare tensed into view, and the dark strata between the floating archons received him.

The adept himself floated in a trance when Arthur found him. The zombie appeared as a beardless, white-haired boy with solitary cheekbones and a clairvoyant glow in his wide-apart eyes. All the protective energies around him were so much airy gossamer to the Dark One, and Arthur glided effortlessly toward him.

The zombie sat on his raven throne in the secret room of his house. The cave masters’ fired icon squatted on a cinch-waisted tripod before him. A puddle of luminance rippled the space around it. Voices flashed from its depths, glittering with song.

Arthur smiled, and the Dark One swung in a striking arc through the ceiling shadows and down onto the adept’s skull.

Like a driven spike, the Dark One struck him through the thin plate of headbone, burst out the other side, and plunged into the radiance of the

icon. Blustery colors whipped past, and he flared through cold time and an outer space darkness that split open into the huge clarity of a noon sky.

A dozen men and women in animal hides circled with dancing a pole stuck through its shadow into the earth. Their graven faces frowned intent on this one instant – noon at the midpoint between equinox and solstice – while their arms frenzied and their quick footwork kicked up the long-suffering, earth-old dust and pebbles. Their song shimmered with their exertion and then broke off entirely as the Dark One's blur of stormlight gushed from the pole. Noon went black, and screams slipped in the air.

Killing was easy. With a raith-blade of electric shock, the Dark One hit the people at the back of their heads as they fled, and the jigsaw parts of their skulls flew apart. In the thundery, rolling darkness, barbed wires of lightning lashed, and the bodies scattered like petals. Moments later, the inksmoke darkness coiled in on itself and drained back into the wooden pole piercing its shadow. A dozen corpses lay in the thick sunlight.

A hungry shrike noticed and began to turn on the pivot of the wind.

Arthur bobbed out of his trance and noticed that the white-green jade monkey had turned liver red. The focus of raith energy on the stone had been strong enough to dent the orthorhombic crystal molecules of the jade into flakes of hexagonal red corundum. The geometry of the change displayed itself stereoscopically in his mind's eye as a serene psychic clarity permeated him. He had killed many of his enemies. To maintain the symmetry, it was time to make a new friend, to create an ally out of some mind in its squirrel cage.

The aftereffects of the power he had released accompanied Arthur back to the table, and both Eleanor and you remarked on the brightened vigor in him. When the dessert trolley came by, he selected a velvety chocolate mud pie, black as earth. You lifted your water glass to your lips; the ice clicked against your teeth and went still as a snapshot. Fear grabbed your heart as you realized you were paralyzed, as frozen as the air rays in the ice under your nose.

And in the next leaden moment, the room turned gold. By an alchemy you suddenly knew too well, you understood everything. Arthur's whole story entered your consciousness. In that one slow second, quick centuries of telepathy invaded you, and you knew all that Arthur knew. The swerve of terror that followed would have knocked you unconscious had you not been held firmly in the Dark One's superconscious grip, its power black, the nothing color, absorbing your horrified feelings and their children, the frenzied motes of thoughts seeking a way for you to escape.

But there was no escape. It was not Eleanor the Dark One wanted. She was only here to fulfill a whim. It was you he was after all along, though it could have been any stranger. Numb-edged, you understood how deep in your luck you had lived your whole life – until now.

The gold light snapped off, and colors abruptly found their way back to their places. The silence you hadn't noticed vanished in a clamor of conversation and dinner noise. You spilled your water, and Eleanor made a small embarrassed cry. A waiter rushed to lift the tablecloth and staunch the cold flow draining into your lap. You hardly noticed. Your eyes were fixed on him, Darshan, the Dark One incarnate.

He smiled back, a knowing, wicked smile, confirming the terrible truth. That had been no electrical misfiring in your brain, no hallucinatory adumbration of madness. He nodded with interest, once, to acknowledge his transmission of destiny, of the fate-bond that now and forever would unite you, and then returned his attention to his mud pie.

What did he want of you? You got up at once and hurried to the restroom. Your pulse knocked painfully under your collarbone as you stared at yourself in the mirror and saw the scream in your eyes. Why had this happened to you? Shock glazed your mind. What had you to do with the cave masters and the zombies and the apocalyptic yearnings of the Dark One? How could any of this mean anything to you? Its absurdity ravaged your mind, and you wept and laughed at the same time, not wanting to believe. You pressed your hands against the mirror and stared hard at the greedy fear you saw there. The lizards in your face coupled, and you knew you would go mad.

But you didn't. That, in part, was why he had selected you, or so you assumed when reason asserted itself. Later, back at the table, as he signed a credit slip for the meal, you expected more: a telepathic voice, an apparition from the raith, another knowing look – anything to reinforce the adrenalin-charged event that had carried you to a higher form of life.

Nothing.

At the door, Eleanor took his arm, drunk and amorous, and he offered you his hand. Everything in that firm handshake made you realize you were wrong to take pity on him.

Food Man

Lisa Tuttle

Dinner was the real problem.

Mornings, it was easy to rush out of the house without eating, but when it wasn't, when her mother made an issue of it, she could eat an orange or half a grapefruit. At lunchtime she was usually either at school or out so there was no one to pressure her into eating anything she didn't want. But dinner was a problem. She had to sit there, surrounded by her family, and eat whatever her mother had prepared, and no matter how she pushed it around her plate it was obvious how little she was eating. She experimented with dropping bits on the floor and secreting other bits up her sleeves or in her pockets, but it wasn't easy, her mother's eyes were so sharp, and she'd rather eat than suffer through a big embarrassing scene.

Her brother, the creep, provided the solution. He was always looking at her, staring at her, mimicking her, teasing, and while she didn't like it at any time, at meal-times it was truly unbearable. She honestly could not bear to put a bite in her mouth with him staring at her in that disgusting way. Her parents warned him to leave her alone, and shifted their places so they weren't directly facing each other, but still it wasn't enough. He said she was paranoid. She knew that even paranoids have enemies. Even if he wasn't staring at her right now he had stared before and the prospect that he might stare again clogged her throat with fear. How could she be expected to eat under such circumstances? How could anyone? If she could have dinner on a tray in her room alone, she would be fine.

Her mother, relieved by the prospect of solving two family problems at once, agreed to this suggestion. "But only for as long as you eat. If I don't see a clean plate coming out of your room you'll have to come back and sit with the rest of us."

It was easy to send clean plates out of her room. After she'd eaten what she could stomach she simply shoved the rest of the food under her bed. Suspecting that the sound of a toilet flushing immediately after a meal would arouse her mother's suspicions, she planned to get rid of the food in the morning. Only by morning she'd forgotten, and by the time she remembered it was dinnertime again.

It went on like that. Of course the food began to smell, rotting away down there under her bed, but no one else was allowed into her bedroom, and she knew the smell didn't carry beyond her closed door. It was kind of disgusting, when she was lying in bed, because then there was no avoiding it, the odor simply rose up, pushed its way through the mattress and forced itself upon her. Yet even that had its good side; she thought of it as her penance for being so fat, and was grateful for the bad smell because it made her even more adamantly opposed to the whole idea of food. How could other people bear the constant, living stink of it? The cooking, the eating, the excreting, the rotting?

When she could no longer bear the enforced, nightly intimacy with the food she refused to eat, she decided it was time to get rid of it. Before looking at it, she decided she'd better arm herself with some heavy-duty cleaning tools, paper-towels, rubber gloves, maybe even a small shovel. But when she opened the door of her room to go out, there was her mother, looking as if she'd been waiting awhile.

"Where are you going?"

"What is this, a police state?" Hastily, afraid the smell would get out, she pulled her door shut behind her. "I want a glass of water."

"From the bathroom?"

"No, I thought I'd go down to the kitchen and get a glass. Why, aren't I allowed to go to the bathroom?"

"Of course you are. I was just worried – Oh, darling, you're so thin!"

"Thin is good."

"Within limits. But you're too thin, and you're getting thinner. It's not healthy. If you really are eating –"

"Of course I'm eating. You've seen my plates. I thought they'd be clean enough even for you."

"If you've been flushing your good dinners down the toilet –"

"Oh, Mother, honestly! Of course I haven't! Is that why you were lurking around up here? Trying to catch me in the act?" She realized, with considerable irritation at herself, that she could have been flushing her dinner neatly and odorlessly away for a couple of weeks before arousing suspicion, but that it had now become impossible.

“Or throwing up after you eat –”

“Oh, yuck, you’ll make me sick if you talk about it! Yuck! I hate vomiting; I’m not some weirdo who likes to do it! Really!”

“I’m sorry. But I’m worried about you. If you can eat regular meals and still lose weight there must be something wrong. I think you should see a doctor.”

She sighed wearily. “All right. If it will make you happy, I’ll see a doctor.”

She was just beginning to feel good about her body again. She didn’t care what the doctor said, and when he insisted she look at herself in a full-length mirror, wearing only her underwear – something she had not dared to do for months – she was not grossed-out. The pendulous breasts, the thunder-thighs, all the fat, all the jigging flesh, had gone, leaving someone lean, clean and pristine. She felt proud of herself. The way the doctor looked at her was just right, too: with a certain distance, with respect. Not a trace of that horrible, furtive greed she’d seen in the eyes of her brother’s friends just six months ago. The look of lust mixed with disgust which men had started giving her after her body had swelled into womanhood was something she hoped she’d never see again.

“How long since you had a period?” the doctor wanted to know.

“About four months.” She was pleased about that, too. You weren’t supposed to be able to turn the clock back and reject the nasty parts of growing up, but she had done it. She was in control of herself.

In reality, of course, the control was in the hands of others. As a minor, she was totally dominated by adults, chief among them her parents. After the doctor’s diagnosis that she was deliberately starving herself, she was forced to return to the dinner table.

Resentful and humiliated, she pushed food around on her plate and refused to eat it. Threats of punishment only strengthened her resolve.

“That’s right,” she snarled. “Make me a prisoner. Let everybody know. Keep me locked up, away from my friends, with no phone and no fun – that’s really going to make me psychologically healthy. That’s really going to make me eat!”

Bribes were more successful, but her parents either weren’t willing or could not afford to come up with a decent bribe at every single mealtime, and she simply laughed to scorn the notion that she’d let someone else control every bit of food that passed her lips for an entire week just for a pair of shoes or the use of the car on Saturday. She didn’t need new clothes, CDs, the car, or anything her parents could give her, and she wanted them to know it.

Now that the battlezone was marked out and war had been openly

declared, food was a constant, oppressive preoccupation. She was reminded of food by everything she saw, by everything around her. Hunger, which had once been the pleurably sharp edge that told her she was achieving something was now a constant, miserable state. She no longer even controlled the amounts she ate; she ate even less than she wanted because she couldn't bear to let her mother feel that she was winning, that anything she put in her mouth was a concession to her. She couldn't back down now, she couldn't even appear to be backing down. If she did, she would never recover; her whole life would be lived out meekly under her mother's heavy thumb.

Lying in bed one night, trying to get her mind away from food, she realized that the smell which permeated her mattress and pillow and all her bedclothes had changed. A subtle change, yet distinctive. What had been a foul stench was now...not so foul. There was something *interesting* about it. She sniffed a little harder, savoring it. It was still far from being something you could describe as a *good* smell – it was a nasty smell, not something she'd want anyone else to suspect she could like, and yet there was something about it which made her want more. It was both deeply unpleasant and curiously exciting. She couldn't explain even to herself why the bad smell had become so pleasurable to her. It made her think of sex, which sounded so awful when it was described. No matter how they tried to make it glamorous in the movies, the act itself was clearly awkward and nasty. And yet it was obvious that the participants found that embarrassing, awkward nastiness deeply wonderful and were desperate for a chance to do it again. It was one of the great mysteries of life.

She wondered what the food under her bed looked like now. All the different foods, cooked and uncooked, pushed together into one great mass, breaking down, rotting, flowing together... Had it undergone a change into something rich and strange? Or would the sight of it make her puke? She had decided she was never going to clean under her bed – her refusal, although unknown by her mother, was another blow against her – but now, all of a sudden, she wished she could see it.

There was a movement under her bed.

Was it her imagination? She held very still, even holding her breath, and it came again, stronger and more certain. This time she felt as well as heard it. The bed was rocked by something moving underneath. Whatever was moving under there was coming out.

Although she'd turned out her lamp before going to bed, her room was not totally dark; it never was. The curtains were unlined and let in light from the street, so there was always a pale, yellowish glow. By this dim,

constant light she saw the man who emerged from under her bed.

Her heart beat harder at the sight of him, but she was not frightened. There might not be light enough to read by, but there was enough to show her this man was no ordinary serial killer, burglar or rapist from off the street. For one thing, he wore no clothes. For another, he was clearly not a normal human being. The smell of him was indescribable. It was the smell of rotting food; it was the smell of her own bed. And, she did not forget, she had wished to see what her food had become.

He made no menacing or seductive or self-willed motions but simply stood there, showing himself to her. When she had looked her fill she invited him into her bed, and he gave himself to her just as she wanted.

What took place in her bed thereafter was indescribable. She could not herself remember it very clearly the next day – certainly not the details of who did what to whom with what when and where. What she would never forget was the intense, sensory experience of it all: his smell, that dreadful stench with its subtle, enticing undercurrent, that addictive, arousing odor which he exuded in great gusts with every motion, and which, ultimately, seemed to wrap around her and absorb her like the great cloak of sleep; the exciting pressure of his body on hers, intimate and demanding and satisfying in a way she could never have imagined; and her own orgasms, more powerful than anything she'd previously experienced on her own.

She understood about sex now. To an outsider it looked ridiculous or even horrible, but it wasn't for looking at, and certainly not by outsiders – it was for feeling. It was about nothing but feeling, feeling things you'd never felt before, having feelings you couldn't have by yourself, being felt. It was wonderful.

In the morning she woke to daylight, alone in her deliciously smelly bed, and she felt transformed. She suspected she had not, in the technical sense, lost her virginity; far from losing anything, she had gained something. She felt different; she felt expanded and enriched; she felt powerful; she felt hungry. She went downstairs and, ignoring as usual her mother's pitiful breakfast offering, went to the counter and put two slices of bread in the toaster.

Wisely, her mother did not comment. Her brother did, when she sat down at the table with two slices of toast thickly spread with peanut butter. "What's this, your new diet?"

"Shut up, pig-face," she said calmly, and, yes, her mother let her get away with that, too. Oh, she was untouchable today; she had her secret, a new source of power.

At lunchtime the apple she'd intended to eat wasn't enough, and she consumed the cheese sandwich her mother had made for her, and the carrot sticks, a bag of potato chips and a pot of strawberry yogurt. Sex, she realized, took a lot of energy, burned a lot of calories. She had to replace them, and she had to build herself up. Now that she had a reason for wanting to be fit and strong she recognized how weak she had become by not eating. She wouldn't have to worry about getting fat, not for a long time, not as long as the nightly exercise continued.

It did continue, and grew more strenuous as her strength, her curiosity, her imagination, all her appetites increased. She no longer feared getting fat; on the contrary, she was eager to gain weight. She wanted to be stronger, and she needed more weight for muscle. More flesh was not to be sneered at, now that she knew how flesh could be caressed and aroused. She ate the meals that were prepared for her, and more. She no longer had to be obsessive about controlling her intake of food because it was no longer the one area of her life she felt she had some control over. Now she controlled the creature under her bed, and their passionate nights together were the secret which made the daytime rule of parents, teachers and rules bearable.

Her nights were much more important than her days, and during the night she was in complete control. Or so she thought, until the night her creature did something she didn't like.

It was no big deal, really; he just happened to trap her in an uncomfortable position when he got on top of her, and he didn't immediately respond to her attempts to get him to move. It was something anyone might have done, inadvertently, unaware of her feelings – but he was not “anyone” and he'd never been less than totally aware of her every sensation and slightest desire. Either he'd been aware that he was hurting her because he'd intended it, or he'd been unaware because he was no longer so much hers as he'd been in the beginning, because he was becoming someone else. She wasn't sure which prospect she found the more frightening.

The rot had started in their relationship, and although each incremental change was tiny – hardly noticeable to someone less sensitive than she – they soon demolished her notion of being in control.

She was not in control. She had no power. She lived for her nights with him; she needed him. But what if he didn't need her? What if one night he no longer wanted her?

It could happen. He'd started to criticize, his fingers pinching the excess flesh which had grown back, with her greed, on her stomach and thighs,

and she could tell by the gingerly way he handled her newly expanded breasts and ass that he didn't like the way they jiggled. When he broke off a kiss too quickly she knew it was because he didn't like the garlic or the onions on her breath. The unspoken threat was always there: one night he might not kiss her at all. One night he might just stay under the bed.

She didn't think she could bear that. Having known sex, she was now just like all those people she'd found so incomprehensible in books and movies: she had to keep on having it. And she knew no other partner would satisfy her. She'd been spoiled by her food man for anyone else.

She began to diet. But it was different this time. Once not-eating had been pleasurable and easy; now it was impossibly difficult. She no longer liked being hungry; it made her feel weak and cranky, not powerful at all, not at all the way she'd used to feel. This time she wasn't starving to please herself and spite the world, but to please someone else. She went on doing it only because she decided she preferred sex to food; she could give up one if allowed to keep the other. And by promising herself sex, rewarding herself with explicit, graphic, sensual memories every time she said no to something to eat, she managed to continue starving herself back to desirability.

This suffering wouldn't be forever. Once she'd reached her – or his – ideal weight, she hoped to maintain it with sufficient exercise and ordinary meals.

But the sex that she was starving herself for was no longer all that great. She was so hungry it was hard to concentrate. His smell kept reminding her of food instead of the sex they were engaged in. Except when she was on the very brink of orgasm, she just couldn't seem to stop thinking about food.

And as time went on, and she still wasn't quite thin enough to please him, not quite thin enough to stop her killing diet, she began to wonder why she was doing it. What was so great about sex, anyway? She could give herself an orgasm any time she wanted, all by herself. Maybe they weren't so intense, maybe they were over quicker, but so what? When they were over she used to fall asleep contented, like someone with a full stomach, instead of lying awake, sated in one sense but just beginning to remember how hungry she still was for food. As for arousal – what was so great about arousal? It was too much like hunger. It was fine in retrospect, when it had been satisfied, but while it was going on it was just like hunger, an endless need, going on and painfully on.

She didn't know how much longer she could bear it. And then, one night, she went from not knowing to not being able. When her lover

climbed into bed with her, swinging one leg across her, holding her down as he so often did now, keeping her in her place, the smell of him made her feel quite giddy with desire, and her mouth filled with saliva.

As his soft, warm, odorous face descended to hers she bit into it, and it was just like a dinner roll freshly baked. She even, as her teeth sank into his nose, tasted the salty tang of butter.

He did not cry out – he never had made a sound in all the nights she had known him – nor did he try to escape or fight back as she bit and tore away a great chunk of his face and greedily chewed and swallowed it. She felt a tension in him, a general stiffening, and then, as, unable to resist, she took a second bite, she recognized what he was feeling. It was sexual excitement. It was desire. He wanted to be eaten. This was what he had wanted from the very first night, when he had pressed himself, first his face and then all the other parts of his body in turn, against her mouth – only she had misunderstood. But this was what he was for.

She ate him.

It was the best ever, better by far than their first night together, which had seemed to her at that time so wonderful. That had been only sex. This was food and sex together, life and death.

When she had finished she felt enormous. Sprawling on the bed, she took up the whole of it and her arms and legs dangled off the sides. She was sure she must be at least twice her usual size. And the curious thing was that although she felt satisfied, she did not feel at all full. She was still hungry.

Well, maybe hungry wasn't exactly the right word. Of course she wasn't hungry. But she still had space for something more. She still wanted something more.

The springs groaned as she sat up, and her feet hit the floor much sooner than she'd expected. She was bigger than usual; not only fatter, but taller, too. She had to duck to get through her own bedroom door.

She stood for a moment in the hall, enjoying her enormous new size and the sense of power it gave her. This, not starving herself and not having secret sex, was true power. Food and eating and strength and size. She knew she wanted to eat something more, maybe a lot of something more before the night was over. There was a smell in the air which had her moist and salivating with desire. She licked her lips and looked around, her fingers flexing, but there wasn't much of interest in the hallway. A framed, studio portrait of the family hung above the only piece of furniture, a small table with a wobbly leg. On the table was a telephone, a pad of yellow post-it notes, and a gnawed wooden pencil. The taste of the pencil was as imme-

diately familiar to her as the salty tang of her own dandruff and sloughed skin cells beneath a nibbled fingernail, and did about as much to satisfy her hunger. The shiny, dark chocolate coloured telephone wasn't as easy to eat as the pencil had been, but she persevered, and had crunched her way through more than half of it before the unpleasant lack of taste, and the discomfort of eating shards of plastic, really registered. She finished it anyway – it was all fuel – and then sniffed the air.

From the bedrooms where her brother and her parents slept drifted the rich, strong, disturbing smells of sex and food. Aroused and ravenous, she followed the scent of her next meal.

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All backlist Broken Mirrors Press books are now half price when ordered directly from the publisher. I've got to clear the inventory, so there won't be a better time than right now to stock up on the best in esoteric, literary SF:

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Tell Them They Are All Full of Shit and They Should Fuck Off

Terry Bisson

“Mr. President, you might want to take this. It’s that NASA fellow you met last month at the Kennedy Center Reception.”

“Good. What’s his name, Palaver? Put him through. Hello? This is the President speaking.”

“Tell them they are all full of shit and they should fuck off.”

“What? Hello?”

“This is Dr. Salavard, Mr. President. From NASA; the SETI project? Remember, we met at the Kennedy Center affair, and you gave me this number, and you said I was to call you directly, first thing, when we got some results, and not to wait until the entire scientific community had been...”

“Yes, yes, I remember, Dr. Salavard. So what do you have for me?”

“We have a signal, sir. What we call a specific. Nothing absolutely positive yet, but –”

“Do you mean extraterrestrial communication of some sort?”

“It would seem that way, sir.”

“Seem? Can you tell me something definite?”

“Tell them they are all full of shit and they should fuck off.”

“What makes you so sure it’s from an intelligent source?”

“The pattern, Mr. President. The signal we are receiving is not a cycling repetition but a series of super low frequency wave spikes in a numerical pattern known as an ascending logarithm. An almost certain sign of intelligence and intentionality. We’re pretty sure it’s a communication.”

“Sure enough to describe it to my Cabinet tomorrow morning, plus a few select guests from the Hill?”

"Tell them they are all full of shit and they should fuck off."

"You can do it by satellite phone-link. We're having a pre-breakfast meeting here at the White House. My staff will ring you in at eight a.m. sharp. I hope I don't need to tell you not to breathe a word of this to anybody."

"Gentlemen, ladies, we have surprise guest on the line by satellite – Dr. Bruno Salavard, who is in charge of NASA's new SETI project. You wouldn't be sitting here if you didn't know what SETI was all about, or the importance I attach to this endeavor. Dr. Salavard, go ahead and tell them what you told me."

"Tell them they are all full of shit and they should fuck off."

"We have time for a few questions. You can ask Dr. Salavard directly, since we're hooked up to a speaker phone. Senator?"

"Dr. Salavard, what makes you so certain this is a signal from an extraterrestrial intelligence? Couldn't it be a pulsar or even a reflected radio beep from one of our satellites?"

"Senator, we have corrected for all that. The signal comes to us from the system Gorodel 3433B, toward the center of this galaxy. Almost a near neighbor, you might say."

"Admiral, did you have a question?"

"Yes, Mr. President. Any idea what this n-near n-neighbor is trying to tell us, Professor?"

"Tell them they are full of shit and they should fuck off."

"I have a question. This is Congresswoman Elaine Longwood from Chicago. What's the procedure for converting this logarithmic math sequence into words? How long before we get a message in language we can understand?"

"That's our first priority, Congresswoman. Even as we speak, the signal is being run through NASA's 986-based syntax extrapolator. If we can come up with a *computable* formula, or what we call a friendly stack, then –"

"Speaking of friendly, do we think they are friendly?"

"Are we sh-sharing this information with the other N-NAFTA n-nations?"

"Any chance they might be human like us?"

"Tell them they are all full of shit and they should fuck off."

"Thank you Dr. Salavard. I'm going to have to cut off questions here, ladies and gentlemen, so Dr. Salavard can get back to work. You will be kept posted on further developments through my staff here at the White House. Dr. Salavard, thank you for joining us. I hope I don't need to tell you, I look forward to hearing from you soon."

"Tell them they are all full of shit and they should fuck off."

"Dr. Salavard, is that you? I have the President on the line. Can you hold?"

"Of course!"

"Hello, Doctor Salavard. The President here. Any progress? Are we any closer to actually deciphering the alien message, if it is in fact a message for us?"

"No question but that it's aimed at us, Mr. President. It's what we call double-specific, in both space and time. Extremely localized, and the signal is getting stronger; as a matter of fact, its intensity and frequency have increased by a factor of four since your White House meeting two days ago."

"Nothing your psychic exterminator can't handle, I hope."

"Syntax extrapolator, Mr. President. It works on the principle that —"

"I was making a joke, Dr. Salavard. But that's not why I called. I called to tell you that I'm speaking to the Security Council this afternoon, in closed session. As a matter of fact, I'm putting on my hat right now. I'm on my way to the UN."

"Tell them they are all full of shit and they should fuck off."

"This news is going to leak out sooner or later, Professor, and I don't want it to look like we are trying to hog this whole deal."

"Yes, sir. I only wish we had something more, well, definite."

"You will, and I expect you to call me as soon as your people come up with it. Night or day. I have you routed directly into the Oval Office; all you have to do is ask for me."

"Yes, sir, Mr. President."

"Tell them they are all full of shit and they should fuck off."

"Salavard, is that you? This is the President."

"How'd it go, sir?"

"The UN meeting? Pretty good. Great, in fact. I've got them all sitting on the edge of their chairs. But how soon can we give them something? I need a word, a phrase, even if it's just 'Hello, how are you.'"

"How soon? I don't know, Mr. President. It could be within hours, days at the most. The syntax extrapolator is showing 89 percent completion, and it's cooking right along. If we don't lose the signal before it finishes..."

"Lose the signal? Why should we lose the signal? Is there something you're not telling me?"

"No, sir. It's just that we've got the syntax extrapolator programmed in what we call a backspin mode, which means that it can only analyze a completed message. As long as the signal doesn't fade before it finishes, we're okay."

"I'm counting on you to see that it doesn't, Salavard. Meanwhile, I think

we better go public with this thing right now, before the tabloids beat us to it. I want to take it to the people. Tonight.”

“Tell them they are all full of shit and they should fuck off.”

“I’m the President, Mr. Salavard, I can’t go on talk shows. That’s what we have Vice Presidents for. But he hasn’t been briefed on SETI. That’s why I’m counting on you.”

“Tell them they are all full of shit and they should fuck off.”

“Letterman is bigger than Leno, Salavard. Just don’t let him bully you. Make sure you get your point across.”

“Tell them they are all full of shit and they should fuck off.”

“Welcome to the show, Dr. Salavard. Let me get this straight. This is your job, to talk to spacemen? Your day job?”

“Tell them they are all full of shit and they should fuck off.”

“And you get paid for this? I mean, like a salary? It’s our tax money, folks. Shouldn’t we know what they do with it?”

“Tell them they are all full of shit and they should fuck off.”

“Are these guys calling collect? Can we get one these spacemen on the show?”

“Our syntax extrapolation program is based on the completion of the rising frequency curve, Dave. Until the algorithm is completed, we won’t have anything. But we expect it to terminate within hours and then we will have the first message from an alien intelligence.”

“Dr. Salavard, have you checked your answering machine? Maybe something came in while you were in the green room.”

“Tell them they are all full of shit and they should fuck off.”

“There weren’t any little green men in the Green Room were there? I hope they’re not coming here to collect welfare.”

“Tell them they are all full of shit and they should fuck off.”

“Thank you for being on the show, Dr. Salavard. Taking off from what I am sure is a busy schedule on the phone with the President and so forth. Don’t touch that dial folks! We’ll be right back Lyle Lovett and his new bride, Demi Moore, right after a word from our sponsors.”

“Tell them they are all full of shit and they should fuck off.”

“Salavard, is that you? This is the President speaking. I caught you on Letterman last night.”

“Sorry I was nervous, Mr. President.”

“You were fine.”

“I didn’t sound repetitive to you?”

"Look, you didn't let him bully you and you got your point across. That's the bottom line. Why so gloomy?"

"Tell them they are all full of shit and they should fuck off."

"Is there something you're not telling me?"

"The signal, sir. It started its descending logarithm last night, while I was in New York. By the time I got back here to Huntsville, it had already started to fade."

"Fade? What do we have so far?"

"Ninety-six percent, Mr. President."

"So!"

"I know that sounds like a lot, sir, but remember I told you that our syntax extrapolation program is based on the completion of the algorithmic curve. If the sequence is truncated without completion, we get zip."

"Zip?"

"It's like a sentence where the last word is the one that explains everything. Noun, verb, everything. We're still getting a signal but..."

"That settles it! I'm going to go on the air and address the nation tonight, while we have a fish on the line, so to speak."

"Tell them they are all full of shit and they should fuck off."

"I'm going to tell them it doesn't matter what the message is; the exciting news is that there is a message. We are not alone. There is somebody out there. Somebody who wants to get in touch with us. And Salavard?"

"Yes, Mr. President?"

"Don't let them hang up. I'm counting on you!"

"Mr. President, I think you'll want to take this. It's..."

"Salavard, is that you? What did you think of my Fireside Chat? Do you have any more news for me?"

"Yes, sir. Bad news, Mr. President. The worst."

"Shit, I knew it!"

"We lost our signal before the extrapolation was completed. All we're looking at here is some math, which could say nothing or anything. I'm sorry, Mr. President. I should have —"

"Should have what?"

"Tell them they are all full of shit and they should fuck off."

"What? Hello?"

"I said, I don't know, sir. There's no way to make the program run any faster. If we had another shot we could articulate a compression sequence, and run it through a simultaneity compiler, which might give us a head start, but..."

"Then don't apologize, Salavard. You did your best. At least we have affirmed that the SETI program is not a waste of time. Right? I mean, hell, now we know there's somebody out there. Right?"

"Tell them they are all full of shit and they should fuck off."

"So why don't I get a good feeling about this, Salavard? Could we have missed something?"

"Missed something, sir?"

"Could they have been telling us something we weren't ready for? Something we just didn't want to hear?"


"I don't see how that could be, Mr. President."

"Well, maybe they'll call back. You'll have your program ready to go. Why wouldn't they call back?"

"I don't see any reason why not, Mr. President."

"What? Hello?"

"I said, I don't see why not, Mr. President."



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I Don't Care Who Keeps the Cows

R.A. Lafferty

Because of the trashiness of its origins, there has grown a sort of amnesia over the account of how we became as amazingly smart as we are now, and of how we were even smarter for a while there. This honest account should cut through the amnesia a little bit.

There were two clans of smart people in those days, the *Scar-Tissue Clan* and the *Necklaces Clan*. And then there was a smaller group, the *Little Red Wagon People*. All of these had somewhat cumbersome arrangements to be as smart as they were, and all of them paid a pretty steep tab for it. It cost a lot of money to be a smart person in those days.

The people of the Scar-Tissue Clan – now there was something stark and outstanding about all of them. It may have been their pop-eyes, what used to be called “weight-lifter’s eyes.” It may have been the scar-tissue itself, about the brows and temporals. It may have been the generalized protuberances, the bull-humps at the base of the old brain, the *pherea* or satyr-like growths at the throat, the *pareia*-pouches at one or the other sides of the head, these growths that the more advanced members of the clan usually had. Those things did make persons look peculiar, until the look became common. They were the things that set the people of the Scar-Tissue Clan apart.

(Jerome Blackfoot was getting a head start on the world during the early morning hours, but he wasn't one of the Scar-Tissue People, nor a Necklancer, nor a Little Red Wagoner either.)

All of the Scar-Tissue people were deaf in the ear of their selection. One ear had to be used as a vent and a drain and could no longer be used for hearing. This deaf ear was usually on the same side of the head as the *pareia*-pouch.

The whole business of the ultra-braininess of the Scar-Tissue Clan (and of the other clans also, but the Scar-Tissues had been the first of the burgeoning brain groups) had been a fall-out of a few quacksalvers and confidence persons trying to make a little money and have a little fun. Very many great discoveries and inventions have this quackish origin. There had first been those blatant advertisements:

"The Brain is a Muscle. Develop it as you would any other muscle. Slam the steroids to it and make it grow! Use our special brain-designed steroid implants and injections. One of our crews will be in your neighborhood *this month*. Sign and mail the coupon today. Our crew will call on you in a plain brown truck and they will perform all necessary micro-surgery and plugging and implementing in our own truck-clinic or in your own home. Your brains will begin to grow and develop immediately. You can notice the difference within thirty minutes. You'll be smarter, a lot smarter! Hear what H.H. Van der Rander of Ocean Bright California writes:"

And what H.H. Van der Rander wrote might be "I multiplied my brain power seven times in just eleven days. But the most amazing results were noticed right at the beginning. *I doubled my brain power in the first hour*. It was like opening a door into another and more spacious world. I am now four times as smart as anyone else in my neighborhood, and eleven days ago I would have rated in the bottom one-third."

Grotesque as it might sound to a man from Qualquimmerchock, the thing worked from the very first. Well, it had worked for weightlifters and wrestlers; why shouldn't it work for brains? The people who subscribed to the service did get smarter, amazingly smarter in a very short period of time, and they stayed smart. It was like opening the door on another world, yes. Even those early original steroid crews, coming in their plain brown trucks, did excellent work. There is no way that steroid plugs and injections cannot nourish and develop the brain. ("Be brain-starved no longer. Be among the first people ever to have amply fed brains.") The brain is a muscle, and all muscles develop rapidly and amazingly, geometrically and exponentially, by steroid injections. The brain so treated will grow in size and strength until it crowds all available space, and then it will look for more space, either interior or exterior, to spill over into.

And the intelligence also increased exponentially. People with husky and bulky and muscular brains are simply much smarter and intellectually stronger than are people with skinny and skimpy brains. "It's smart to be smart" was one of the advertising slogans that was very effective. All the injections and plugs did cause a lot of scar-tissue, of course. Probably this could have been removed. There were plenty of cosmetic cons to take care

of it, but for a while the scar-tissue was a status thing. The more scar-tissue that one had on his head, the smarter he was. And almost everybody was soon taking the steroids. Almost everybody, that is, except those most conservative people in the world, the confidence people themselves who had started this particular advancement.

"A paint manufacturer doesn't necessarily paint his own body with every paint he makes, good quality though it may be," Jerome Blackfoot said. "I'm not going to have any of this stuff injected into my own brains. Sure it's good. I invented it, didn't I? I designed types Alpha and Delta of the Brain Steroids myself, so of course they're good. But I'm fastidious. When I was little, I wore white gloves when I played in the mud. I'll stay with my natural brains, unbulged and unburst. But now we will have to develop and devise a few things for all these new muscular brains to occupy themselves with. Give them something to be smart about. There is something unclean about the vision of all those strong brains munching on themselves. We will give them 'Essence of the Compacted World' to munch on."

Well, Blackfoot and his partner did come out with a line of shape-modules or information modules that could be impressed into the new big brains which they had helped create. These modules contained details (more than details, whole constellations of persons and places and happenings and meanings and sights and smells and axioms), and their patterns and contents went directly into the brains in useable forms. Oh, for instance there would be a shape-module for a certain discipline or specialty of biology. No need to spend five years acquiring it. It was quite easy, after one of the quacksalvers had come upon the method intuitively, to put any and all information into a shape-module form that was ready for impressing. There was very little physical content to this absolutely massive information; it was all coded into impressed shape. Thus a person with a brain sufficiently fortified with steroids might absorb the entire corpus of a hundred thousand novels in one impressing session, and he would possess this information and emotion and experience intimately forever. A person could learn languages or philosophies or mathematics or art-experiences or histories similarly. Anybody could know anything now. Everybody did know everything (and you have no idea how big and finely grained this 'everything' is) almost immediately. It looked as if everybody in the land would become stunningly smart and informed. Everybody, except perhaps that small group of persons who had accidentally started it all.

Jerome Blackfoot the Black-Footed Weasel was one of no more than thirty prime quacksalvers and confidence persons who had first gone into

brain steroids. And yet the connection between the 'new age of brainery' and the quacksalvers couldn't be allowed to remain so blatant. Blackfoot and persons like him would give brains a bad name. So it was surely a good thing that the brain steroids as well as the information-modules were taken out of the hands of the quacksalvers and given into the control of professionals and scientists and governmentalists. Because this was a big thing. What had come upon the world, what had slipped up on the blind side of the world, by accident and without warning, was 'Controlled Explosion Day' itself, the day when the whole world got smart, the day that the world had been created for. Big strong brains now shook off their dubious and accidental origin, created themselves to further massiveness and capacity, and went to work on the mountains of information that was the world itself, interior and exterior, in impressed module form. These brains held the 'Essence of the Compacted World' and they spun intelligent judgements on it out of their own mountainous intellectuality. So there was joy and enthusiasm and high thinking in the land.

(Ferndale Whitehead was getting a head-start on the world in the early morning, and he wasn't one of the Scar-Tissue People, or one of the Necklace People, or one of the Little Red Wagon People either.)

Quite soon, with the intervention of the government with its professionals and scientists, the 'Mental Musculature Phenomenon' became a stratified and restricted benison. Everybody would still know everything, but not everybody would know everything to the fullest power. 'Big Brain Morning' was not to be enjoyed in its ultimate form by everybody. Or rather, there would be new and more ultimate forms created that would not be open to all. There would have to be stages to it. Bands of professionals and scientists *periti* made the selections of just who would receive the more ultimate forms of brain development, and who would have to be content with mere doubling or tripling of brain muscle and scope. There would be, for the common good, hierarchies of braininess. And it would be mostly the case of 'To those who have, let it be given.' So it would be mostly the case of the professionals and scientists forming the top hierarchy. The common people didn't really have enough brains to deserve ultra-brains. They would be better off than they had ever been before, but special states must be reserved for special persons. The special persons were in. Others were almost in. And lesser breeds would be forever outside by their lack of capacity or by their own sordid choice. And yet there were strange compensations in belonging to a lesser breed. Those of the lesser breeds, and some of those with hardly any breeding at all, just had to be certain that they would receive what was coming to them.

Ferndale Whitehead the Man in the White Hat, a sort of partner of Jerome Blackfoot the Black-Footed Weasel, believed that there would always be a place for a firm with fleets of plain brown trucks and with trained installers and technicians in those trucks. And so it was the case. Blackfoot and Whitehead had held bothersome patents on certain brain steroids. (And those steroids had had invisibly fine tendrils on them, of purpose not generally apparent.) And the partners had developed the techniques of impressionable information-modules, and later of gateway-couples. Though the government voided all such patents and rights-to-techniques, yet they did form a sort of trading basis. And those quacksalver gentlemen were good traders even after they had nothing left to trade with. They could even trade successfully out of an empty banana cart, so long as it still had the smell of bananas about it.

The quacksalvers became licensed applicators and installers, and their hundred thousand plain brown trucks seemed to be everywhere in the land. Their trucks would roll as long as grass grows and water flows.

After a while, only token numbers of their trucks still rolled, for steroids and modules and couples were soon made of instantly transmissible and mostly immaterial substance. But the Quacksalver Row people still collected for the full complement of services. That, somehow, had been built into the system without anyone noticing.

When the Necklace Clan, the other main group of smart people, had come along, Blackfoot and Whitehead and others of their small tribe were able to take advantage of this new development also. They were able to take advantage of it because they had, accidentally, originated it.

That was the day when Ferndale Whitehead had called up Kathrynne Klunke (she had been born plain Kate Klunk) who had more surplus electronic components than anyone else on Quacksalver Row.

"Say, Kate, didn't you have a few million junk miniature thermo-couples with a two-way couple feature? I'll try a million of them at a cent each. I don't know what I'll do with them, but this is one of those oh-what-the-hell days. Besides, I'd like to help you out of a hole."

"I'm not in a hole, Whitie," Kathrynne said. "I'm sitting on top of a mountain, and 'Queen of the Mountain' is the name of the game I'm playing. You are referring to those 'gateways of the future,' those 'gateways to the other realms,' those ultimate thermo-couples or category-couples, are you not? Whitey, I couldn't let you have them for a cent each. I will let you have them *two for a cent* though. There, I left you breathless with that one, didn't I?"

"Predictably breathless, Kate. And you also want the predictable —"

"Fair piece of everything."

"All right, Kate."

"You've found a way to make at-a-distance couples of information depots to brains?"

"We think so, Kate. We'll try it with a million or so if your couplers. How much will it cost to make more of the couplers when the stock is used up?"

"Oh, a cent each. Or a thousand dollars each. Or somewhere in between. It depends on whom we are talking to."

They had tried it then, and it had worked. And so the Necklace Clan came into being. People could hang the small gateway-couples around their necks like necklaces, and fifty or so of the gadgets could give them all possible instant information on every subject imaginable. By using the necklaces or strings of gateway-couplings, they would need brains only about half as muscled and massive as those of the prime Scar-Tissue People. They could get by with less brain bulk because the information depots they drew on were not inside their brains. Those information supplies might be in tabulated buildings as far as two thousand kilometers away. Because of this, the Necklace People were able to keep their brains mostly in their own heads, with very little exterior over-spill. This made it neat. But others preferred things more gaudy: the Scar-Tissue Clan reveled in their lurid scar-tissue. That was the entry-mark of brains.

The Necklace thing worked as the previous things had worked. There were now two major clans of very smart people. A choice was offered. People could be about as smart as they wished, in either of two ways.

The third way, that of the Little Red Wagon People, offered only a minor variation, and there was no basic discovery involved. These people pulled carts or coaster wagons behind them which were filled with their own overflow brains. It was better than having those protuberances growing all over the outside of the head. It was easier on the neck. But there was some danger of being separated by accident from important centers of their own minds. With the Necklace Clan, there was also the danger of power failure cutting them off from their information depots.

But these were the golden days and years, the "Era of the Golden Brains," the prime time of the people. The mood was "Enjoy it; it's fun to be smart; let's have the fun." But there was a darker mood running also and it said "If they don't want a piece of it, we'll carve a piece of them." There was also a movement running through the land to do away with all the people who didn't much want to be smart in any of the offered ways. But the bulk of the people *did* want to be smart, and they did become smart, so smart that it would scare you. For the safety of the land, guide-

lines then had to be set up for the whole complex of group braininess.

For the safety of the *land*, not of the *lands*, for there was now only one land, the United States. All other lands in the world had ceased to exist. There had been, you see, a lot of show-boating at the time of the appearance of the first massive braininess. Show-Boat exhibitionists had discovered that they could do such things as moving mountains by their new brain power alone. Then some of the more brash of them began to top each other in their ostentations. They began to destroy, or to consign to the outer darkness, whole countries and continents, till only one land was left. Here, here! A halt must be called to such doings.

So everybody received a jolt of a new admonition-module, a stern warning medication. As it happened, it probably wasn't necessary. Things were happening rapidly in the brain field. The "Show-Boat" impulse and manifestation passed as suddenly as it had come. The rapidly rising level of braininess had quickly left that early destructive phase behind it. But that didn't bring back the lost lands.

There were only a few people who did not go along with it all, who did not walk bright-eyed into "Brain-World" and all its glories. Suprisingly, the people who had started it all, the Quacksalvers and Confidence People, were among those minorities who didn't go along with it. They didn't use the steroids themselves. Nor the information-modules, nor the gateway-couples.

"I sure don't want to be burdened with any more brains than I have now," Jerome Blackfoot said. "Carrying too much of those things around makes a weighty burden. Sometimes I think I'd like to dump about half of the brains that I already have in my head."

"Sometimes I think you *are* about to dump half of your brains," Whitehead said. "I don't know anybody who comes as close to it as often as you do."

"A brain-glutton I don't want to be," said Thor Thorgelson ("A Square Deal from the Square-Head" was his business motto), one of the most accomplished of the Quacksalvers.

Ah, Blackfoot and Whitehead and Thorgelson and the rest of them didn't really have much brains. They just stayed ahead of things by getting up so early in the mornings. Drinking of the morning fountains before they are roiled is almost as good as having brains. "Joy cometh in the morning" it says in one place. "Make the morning precious" it says in another. "Men and morning newspapers" it says in still another place. Ferndale Whitehead would always pick up a morning newspaper from a neighbor's front step before that neighbor was awake, and this action was a

type of getting to the world before the world was awake. Then Whitehead would stroll to the Break-of-Day Donut Shop and be the first customer there right at opening time.

"The first cup of coffee out of your Reciprocal-Movement Coffee-Maker is always a little bit bitter," he would say conversationally.

"Yeah, I know," the sleepy-eyed waitress would agree. "I always throw the first cup out."

"Give me that first bitter cup," Whitehead would say. So, at no expenditure of coin, he acquired a taste for bitter coffee very early in the morning.

"The first tray of Long John Fritters in the morning will always have one fritter a little bit burned," Whitehead would say.

"Yeah, I know," the waitress would agree. "It's the one in the highest corner, before the grease really gets effective. I always throw the burned one out."

"Give me the fritter that is a little bit burned," Whitehead would say. So he would have coffee and fritter free, and a sociable place to read the paper. Then, after he had cut the usual free coupons out of it, he would re-roll that paper carefully and put it back on the neighbor's door-step where he had found it. There had been a chilliness develop between the paper boy and the neighbor from whom the paper was borrowed for a little while every morning. Neither of them understood how the paper had all the holes cut out of it when it was first unrolled.

But, by these simple movements, Ferndale Whitehead was able to get a head-start on the world every morning. And it was a rare day when the world ever did catch up to him after such a start. Kathrynne Klunque and Elizabeth Queen Mab and Thor Thorgelson were out early every morning also, as were almost all the other quacksalvers. It is always the "First Morning of Creation" when you get up early enough. Certain demiurges have always known this and have always risen early. But most of the people have known it not.

Whitehead's partner, Jerome Blackfoot, also got up early in the mornings, and he liked to walk in the countryside that is just on the edge of town. Jerome usually carried a basket and a toe-sack and a jug. "You have heard of the guy who went out when it was raining fish, and he didn't have anything to catch them in," Jerome said. "I'm not that guy. I'll always have something to catch them in."

Actually, fish were far down on the list of things that Blackfoot filled his receptacles with every morning. In season, he picked produce of various sorts. Sometimes a chicken or a duckling went into his toe-sack. Almost every morning he stopped by one of the places where cows were kept and

he always milked a jugful from one of the cows. "I don't care who keeps my country's cows," he would say, "so long as I have the milk free. A cow-keeper I am not."

Dogs sometimes harassed Blackfoot a bit, but he had a trick of slipping a muzzle onto the barking head of a dog and then stuffing the whole dog into his toe-sack. People will almost always advertise when a well-voiced dog disappears, and they will pay small rewards when he is returned.

The Quacksalvers were a bunch of inclined twigs and they grew from that into a profitably slanted forest. So Jerome Blackfoot, like his partner, like most of the other quacksalvers, got a head-start on the world every morning. In the very early morning there is always enough freshness to go around. And beyond that, the quacksalvers all did their best thinking on their early morning rambles.

Their best thinking? That? But let us go from the ridiculous to the sublime. How was it going with the people who could really think? How was it going with the brainy majority? Oh, it was going well with them.

What do people think about when their thinking power is many times increased? Oh, they think about the same things, but they do it with greater power. And they think about nothing new? Yes, they think about everything new. To think of a thing with greater power is to think of it new. And at top-thinking, things draw together so that sympathy and affection are all parts of the same thing, along with logic and exposition and excitement. The material problems of the land simply packed up and went away. They were solved automatically. Problems of weather proved amenable to solution. It would rain if enough people thought "rain" powerfully enough. The south wind would blow if enough people thought "south wind will blow" intelligently enough. There was successful problem-solving, and there was an activating peace of mind. Peace has nothing to do with inaction. It was a highly active, dynamic and kinetic peace-of-mind that prevailed. And there was a lot of love, of everybody for everybody, imbuing the whole life-weave.

"We make a stunning picture," said Hadrian Pigendo, a Scar-Tissue man and a painter. "Our whole land is now one single picture, and a scanning frame on it will be filled with nothing but masterpieces wherever it stops. A century ago, John Masterman said that there couldn't be a perfect picture until every element in it, animate and inanimate, was in thinking accord. Now everything is in thinking accord, and everything is a part of a perfect picture. This table here is thinking accord with me and with everyone else who enters the room. It resonates to us. So does the light that

breaks and spills through the window there. Ours has now become an intellectualized world, achieving the identity of intelligence with beauty. The two are the same, both being aspects of "perfect order." The only drawback to the perfect living picture that we form is the business of the invisible cob-webs. But perhaps that is not a drawback either when it shall be perfectly understood."

"There is no longer any difference between individual thought and group thought," said Felix Acumen, a Necklace-Clan man and a thinker's thinker. "At its apex of exaltation, thought merges everyone together. This is not to say that everyone will think alike. It is to say that the infinite variety of human thought, when it flourishes in its essential life-greenness, weaves itself into a single seamless (and limitless) garment every part of which is conscious of every other part. It may be that this seamless thought encompasses everything, that it is all inside and that there is no outside to it. Or it may be that there is a very slight outside to it. There are invisible and barely sensed tendrils of cobwebs that brush against the multi-surface of our thought, and they may be from outside the context."

The courtship rites of the super-intelligent clans were interesting. There was the "interlocking antenna" affect of the Necklace-Clan people, their gateway-couplings that made up their necklaces seeking their counterparts in those of the other person and rushing together with a great clattering. There were the double needles that the Scar-Tissue People used that resulted in highly intricate steroid sharing. There was the business of each lover placing his brains in the wagon of his loved one in the case of the Little Red Wagon People. And there were the non-standardized courtship proceedings when the courtships were between members of two different brain clans.

Other things enriched themselves. People no longer played three-dimensional chess. They played sixteen-dimensional chess, which is harder, but more rewarding. The music that they made now was an intellectualized music. Some people said that it was a computerized music. But it was not, somehow, the expression of the identity of intelligence and beauty. It was really bad music, considering that it was the music of an intellectual era. But it was not nearly as bad as the music of the preceding non-intellectual era had been.

And the super-intelligent people couldn't tell good jokes. Otis Ramrod, a Little Red Wagon Person and a social mores expert, explained it:

"No, super-intelligent persons cannot tell good jokes. There is no such thing as a good joke to a super-intelligent person. Humor disappears from the world now. There is no longer any place or purpose for it. Crocodiles

may shed tears over its passing, but I will not. Humor is a ridiculous bridge thrown across a chasm of maladjustment. In the super-intelligent world there is no maladjustment, no chasm, and no places to throw the bridge named humor. In our now almost-perfect-world, on career-course towards perfection, there are only slight and disappearing flaws where residual humor may still flicker faintly. There are, for instance the 'cobweb jokes' which most persons do not understand (I do not). And there are residual anti-brain people such as the Quacksalvers who still have humor and still have maladjustments. Our aim is totally to sweep away both the mysterious 'cobwebs' and the mopey Quacksalvers this very year."

The super-intellectual world could not allow maladjustment in itself. So it could not allow self-doubt. So it could not allow dissent. And something had to be done about the tendency of people to brush imaginary cobwebs away from their faces too.

The non-participating Quacksalvers represented dissent. Them at least you could get your hands on. Them at least you could obliterate.

A whole complex of surfacing questions represented self doubt.

The cobwebs represented the cobwebs themselves.

A small congress of ultra-super-intelligent persons was assembled to consider the three problems. They came quickly to the possibility that the three problems were all one problem. Here are bits of scattered conversations and comments from the "Self-Doubt Congress."

"Someone is kidding. It isn't really like this. This business of us being super-intelligent is all a put-on. Well, who's putting it on?"

"Are we indeed a Noble Experiment? And who is it who is experimenting with us? We know that Noble Experiments have a high incidence of failure."

"What is the mysterious 'Micro-X' element that has always been in all our brain steroids that we have never been able to take out of them? Does somebody monitor our brains by it?"

"Are we being milked? I ask *are we being milked?* What godly race is milking our brains and our persons?"

"Has there ever been a successful revolt of puppets against puppeteers? Is such a thing possible? How would puppets have any motion if it were not imparted to them by their puppeteers? No, I do not say that we are puppets. I merely ask whether there has ever been a successful revolt of puppets against puppeteers."

"What if it is fortunate that we are *not* able to brush the invisible cobwebs or tendrils away from us? What if they are our life-line or our light-line? What if we break just one of the invisible tendrils, the wrong one for

us, and the light in us switches off? I believe that this has been the true cause of deaths of a number of persons this year. Indeed, one doctor I know of wrote 'broken cobwebs' in the line for 'cause of death' on the certificates of several persons. He has since been barred from doctoring for persistent drunkenness."

"Is Quacksalver Row Olympia? No, no, consider that question unasked. It cannot be Olympia. It cannot even be Valhalla. It is something much else and much less. It is so less that it must remain beneath our notice, Quacksalver Row, I mean."

"We are met to solve these three problems. One of them can be solved within an hour by a little bit of bloody extinction. So let us solve that one problem now, and then inquire whether the other two problems have not somehow solved themselves with it. That's the way that super-intelligent persons would go about this. Agreed?"

"Agreed," said the other members of the small congress of ultra-super-intelligent persons. So they went out, it being evening now, with staves and swords and garroting ropes to effect the extinction of about thirty non-conformist persons.

The Quacksalvers of Quacksalver Row all maintained cluttered quarters which they believed to be elegant. These were all in three or four adjacent buildings on the Row. The Quacksalvers were really a "Beggar's Opera" of very gamey folks.

The people of the small congress that had been looking into the three problems, their numbers being about thrice the numbers of the Quacksalvers, came before their quarters and made an evening tumult in Quacksalver Row.

All the Quacksalvers tumbled out of their buildings and came to the confrontation in the street. One of the Quacksalvers, Thor Thorgelson who did business under the motto "A Square Deal from the Square-Head," drew his own sword and cut off the ear of the leader of the congress party. This leader began to cry with the pain and surprise and loss, and many of his companions began to cry with him. Super-intelligent persons have very close sympathies with other super-intelligent persons.

"Why all the fuss?" Thor Thorgelson asked. "It's his deaf ear that I cut off. Don't you think that I have any sense at all?" This was all the bloodshed, all the violence of any kind that took place at the confrontation.

"This is ridiculous," one of the super-intelligent persons said. "Why should we, the brainiest of all delegations, have come to parlay with you beggars? What compels us to do it? What strings are on us anyhow?"

"We don't know why you came," Kathrynne Klunque said. "We are all

agog about it ourselves.”

“You are like horrible caricatures of puppeteers,” the super-intelligent speaker said. “How do we come to be a-dangle on your strings?”

“What strings?” Kathrynne asked.

“He means the cobwebs,” the confidence woman Elizabeth Queen Mab guessed. “He thinks they are puppet strings. He thinks we manipulate them.”

“Well, do we?”

“I don’t know. A little bit, I guess.”

“Everybody dangles on several sets of strings and is manipulated by them,” Ferndale Whitehead tried to explain. “This could not bother you. Is what bothers you, brain-people, that the strings seem to be manipulated from an unexpected direction, that they seem to be manipulated by ourselves?”

“Why should we be at odds?” Jerome Blackfoot asked. “You are good cows. You feed and maintain yourselves, a thing that I wouldn’t like to do. Let’s keep it the way it is, you smart and us dumb. It seems to me to be a fair division.”

“No, no, this cannot be,” one of the super-brains protested. “We are not, we cannot be –”

“You cannot be clowns’ cattle?” Elizabeth Queen Mab asked. “Well, say that you are not cattle then, and we will agree that you are not. We will remain the clowns without any cattle. But don’t you quit giving milk!”

“We will revolt! We will overthrow you!” a super-brain threatened.

“Oh no!” Jerome Blackfoot swore. “Then in the turnover you would be dumb and we would be smart. Do not hang that on us! We’ll never accept that burden. We thought we had it fixed perfectly the way it was. We’ll take to the woods, we’ll take to the wastelands, we’ll never come back!”

“Except for the milk,” one of the super-brains jeered.

Believe it people, there was tension there for a long moment.

And never could you guess what broke that tension when it had stretched out longer and longer.

One of the super-brains laughed.

And another of them wailed. And one cried out in pain.

But then a second one laughed, and then a third one. They broke it when they did that. “You laugh too hard and I’ll turn your little red wagons over,” Elizabeth Queen Mab threatened.

But another of the super-brains laughed. There was a chasm, and there shouldn’t have been. There was maladjustment, and a ridiculous bridge was the best that could be thrown over it.

They broke it, and they lost part of it when they broke it. The whole apparatus of being so smart crumbled, even though a lot of the smartness would remain. The top of the mountain of it was gone.

We'll never be that smart again.

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The Alzheimer Trajectory

Malcolm Beckett

Day Twelve: In Earth orbit still. It's not bad enough that they keep you waiting on the pad so long you think they're *never* going to light the damned thing; now we wait in LEO until the gurus decide the time is right to initiate Transfer Insertion. I keep myself occupied with the Mission Objectives schedule and the daily task assignments and routine reflex-testing, but it is as if I will never see the surface of another planet unless some unknown button-pusher reading chicken entrails or something decides I may finally hook up with Dawn and the automated fleet in High Orbit, and leave.

I *know* their reasons, of course. I'm part of the precious cargo this trip, (my last mission – feels funny, that) and Blain, far below us, is worried about the Sun again. They say it's supposed to be on the down side of its activity-cycle, but there have been enough spots and smaller flares this past week to make them consider reeling me back in. I want to head out, where the effect of flares and discharges will be dissipated by distance anyway.

I know, I know, Mum. Better safe than sorry. Right now I'm becoming safe and sorry both.

Day Sixteen: We had to restock the stores of water and they also replenished the stuff I've use up in the two weeks I've been here. It was good to see the group again. I think Annie is still jealous that Dawn and I got to go. I played up the 'poor me stuck here forever' angle, and I do feel that, but I'm glad I'm the one, even if I sit here for another year, like the Russians in the old days.

Day Sixteen continued: I'm off! Suddenly, sixty-nine minutes and...seven seconds ago, they told me calmly to prepare for Transit Insertion. Just like that, as if it were a routine sort of thing. I'll never understand that flat Con-

trol voice they all try for.

So this is it. Well, it must be better than sitting in orbit, but so far I can't tell the difference. The burn was really short. Thirty-eight seconds at less than a gee. What a small effort! Still, I'll be burning again soon enough.

I had got so bored I'd forgotten to check the windows for today, and so was surprised when the sequencing order came. I did it as if I were sleep-walking, though. I've learned these things better than I thought an old man could! They're reflexes, now, and a good thing, too, because I wasn't ready. I won't tell them that until I'm safely aground. Old Doc Williams was already concerned about some of my psych. and physiological tests. Took a week's convincing and a bottle of Glenlivet to get him to stop talking about grounding me.

The transit should take sixteen months. Lots of time to set in order the fleet of idiot robots that will do the actual work of surveying for the Colony. Lots of time to read. I have a downlink to UserNet, and my own ID and so on, so I can read whenever and whatever I want. That ought to occupy most of the free time for the next little while! I think I'll access the med database quite a bit. Williams worried me a bit, too. But he finally gave me a clean bill. I'm as good as any of the youngsters. Even Dawn.

In four hours I link with Dawn in the Landing-Module-half of this odd craft, and then we're off. Shepherds to a flock of metal *idiots-savants* that won't need either of us, really, until we're aground. Eyes for the eyeless; brains for the free-of-judgement.

Always providing nobody Earthside decides that the Ring Nebula is too green, or the Moon too full, or my stomach too empty. No, this time I feel as if we're really going.

Day Seventeen: Linking went well after a couple of tries. I don't know why Dawn had trouble making the docking manoeuvre. I finally had to abort my half of the adjustments, and then she was able to line up the craft okay. She still seems to be having difficulty learning the new two-body procedures. I'll have to be patient.

I just reread what I wrote! Not that kind of two-body procedures. I make this correction for the benefit of the dirty old man I will be when I read this someday. Really, Dawn and I are well matched. We'd better be!

In High Earth Orbit now, and waiting for the word to hit the trail. Then another short burn, and we'll be right in the groove for Transit Orbit!

Day Eighteen: We made Insertion perfectly, on the first burn. I handled that, of course. Dawn seemed a little nervous after yesterday's fiasco. I

haven't told anybody in Control about her...what shall I call them? 'Lapses' is probably the best word for what I'm seeing. She loses track of what I'm saying, and dithers. Then I get a little testy, and handle things on my own. Then she cries, then we make up. Something about us is different. Could the compatibility-tests have been wrong? What a question. Everything else has been; why not those, too?

Day Sixty-three: We are well up Earth's gravity-well, now. Essentially out of it, I guess. Seeing the home-planet recede into the distance was a bit of a shock for Dawn, I think. She is down, and I can't tell why. It's as if she worries about *me!*

Anyhow, we're compatible again. And we're lovers now. Not just ship-mates, as the Mission specs prescribe, but lovers. I didn't expect that, although I think Dr. Williams did. I found a person as well as a teammate, and we compensate for each other's weak areas in personal as well as professional ways. It's strange to have so young a lover, though. A bit hard to keep up, sometimes. Nah – strike that. I'm as good as I ever was. Williams said so.

It bothers me that she seems to be slowing down in her work. Her reaction-time seems off a little, although, when I ran her through standard tests, she came out better than I did. I'm afraid I got a little annoyed with her. She kept thinking *I* was the one who was slow, and giggled at one point, when she thought I had started the test protocols in the wrong order. She was right, of course, so I apologized, and we remain friends.

I wonder if she senses anything happening to her? This is a private journal, so they tell me, so I'll note my suspicion that she may be showing signs of PMS, although she never has before, that I know of.

I had to correct her about procedures several times today, even though I didn't like to. She calculated the burn for the orbit-compensation wrongly *twice!* Finally got it right, though. And the idiots follow well enough.

Day One Hundred!: That's what the calendars, this journal, my chronometer and Dawn all say but it seems like yesterday to me that we set out from Earth. Dawn, however, is edgier than I about the passage of time. Perhaps it's because she's younger.

Huge party, including the people back at Mission Control. They are mostly new hands, though. It must be that the budget wouldn't allow for the retention of the same ground-crew throughout the mission. Too bad.

It continues to worry me that Dawn has lapses in attention and concentration. She may be confabulating a little. She claimed to know two of the

people at Control who were congratulating us over the radio. People I know were not part of the original team. At least... I think I know it. Don't remember them at all.

I worry about my lovely lady; she is weepy part of the time, and seems unsure of herself, especially with me.

But we partied most of both our watches. Long after the groundhogs had gone to sleep. What a thing it is to be loved, out here where the stars are hard and the loneliness grows inside like a cancer!

day two hundred-and-one: We forgot to party. I guess Dawn's memory is even poorer than I'd thought. She completely forgot to remind me, as we had agreed she would, that today was an important anniversary. Oh, well, we partied later. It's all a little fuzzy, so I guess she got out the corn-licker or something. Maybe she has some illegal juice in that stuffed pack in her locker!

Day Three Hundred: We didn't celebrate today. Dawn had to go out instead. I'm not sure what she had to do, but something about adjusting the antenna pointed back toward Earth. And something else for the ones that follow us.

I'm getting scared. She was quite unreasonable about it, and EVA's are supposed to be *my* territory! Oh, well, she can use the practice. I'm spending most of my time with my flute, and Dawn joins in with hers sometimes. She is more and more distracted and distant, except when we make love. Then things are back to normal, so I chase her around the ship as much as I can. It's good exercise, and it keeps her cheerful! Otherwise I spend most of my time watching the stars. I have found more than fifteen nebulae and clusters that I can see naked-eye when our one little non-electronic port comes around their way. What a sky! Have to tell the International Dark Sky Assn. to come here!

Dawn forgot my breakfast today, and cried when I reminded her. Said I'd already had breakfast, when I knew damn well I hadn't. Maybe I was a little harsh, but damn it, I need to eat. Can't keep going at my age without eating. I'll be fifty soon.

I wasn't very hungry, in the end. Found breakfast too filling.

I worry about Dawn all the time, now. She says complex sentences that have little or no meaning, except to her, and I have to prevent her from repeating them into the radio. Don't want Control to know what's happening to her. They might abort the Mission, and that would never do, would it?

Day Three-Hundred-and-Sixty-Five!: We are more than halfway there, and had a huge party to celebrate our first anniversary together. Some of the people on the radio also seemed happy for us. We have a world to our own here, and I shall be sorry when it ends, in another...what will it be...about another year, I guess.

Time is not a variable here. It seems to matter less and less. To ~~Ellen~~ Dawn, though, it still is important. She worries, now, about many complex things, and spends a great deal of time outside. I offer to help her, but she won't let me. Says I'm getting slow. So she perceives some changes in me, too. Maybe. I'm not sure. The stars are pretty from here.

I can see a large one ahead, and it's growing! Day by day it is closer and bigger. Soon we'll be there, maybe. Sometimes I have trouble realizing that we're going to a new world!

Day Five-Hundred-ten: She won't let me land! She wants to do everything herself, now. This is my last trip Out, and I really wanted to land, but she said I couldn't, and I have to let her have her own way some of the time, or she gets testy. Women!

Day Five-Hundred-and-eleven: We're down, somewhere. She won't tell me where exactly. Or she tells me quickly, or mumbling, and I don't remember. She wants me to sit here and eat my supper, she says, while she goes outside for a look around. She talked on the radio to Blain, she said, and he told her she should do it.

A while ago, she went out into the desert. What a lovely desert! It's sort of reddish-rown all over, and there are no birds, no reptiles that I can see, and no plants at all.

It seems to me it's been a long time since she went. I had my lunch, of course, I did have my lunch. I think I had my lunch. I couldn't open the tin of sardines, though. There didn't seem to be a key on the bottom of the tin, the way there used to be. So I had some of the mush in the little plastic bags.

The radio is squawking at me, but it isn't ~~Ellen~~ Dawn, so I don't listen much. The last time I did the man on it told me things I couldn't understand, and made me feel foolish. She has done that lately, from time to time too. Trying to get the idiots down all alone, she said. What is that? Radio keeps saying it, too.

I'll answer it when I'm ready.

Next day: The man on the radio says I ought to go looking for Dawn. That's silly. She's a big girl, and she could just follow her own tracks back,

couldn't she? Besides, somebody has to listen to the radio. Dawn told me that, and wrote it on the wall in chalk so I wouldn't forget. She worries too much. I had my lunch.

Next day: The Sun is small from here. I wonder where we are? It looks so funny. Ellen...no, Dawn isn't coming back today. Maybe tomorrow.

I talked to the man in the radio again. He finally got less insulting, and talked slowly enough to understand. What an excitable man he is! He thinks something might be wrong with somebody, but it isn't me. I have to do something, I guess. I'll do it right after lunch, if he tells me exactly what to do. But I won't do anything I don't understand. She told me that: make sure I understand before I do anything.

I think I'll have lunch.

Next Day: Where is Ellen? The radio says she's dead, and I should look for the dawn. I'll wait until dawn, then, and then I'll do something about it. I'm quite capable of doing something about it, you know. I told them that several times, and they cried. Beautiful meteors last night. Big ones falling all around me. I watched five of them hit.

I think I'll have lunch, and then go for a little stroll.

Get away from the man in the radio. He just screams or cries, and tells me the dawn has broken her leg. What a stupid thing to say. What does it mean?

Time for lunch! I wish I knew the name for... this place. It's pretty.

This From-Far-Up-There-Missile Worry

David R. Bunch

This from-far-up-there-missile worry that used to send me down to the night-black pit, that too often would set my panic thoughts a-teem with fear-plans for evasive action – in street crowds, in store crowds, on the ball-room floor – and more than should be was pushing my mind, mad and screaming, to the headblasting Wall – how was it? BAD! really bad. – And it finally came down to my wearing my battle-stations helmet not just at battle-stations time, but every bit of all my public time....

You see, the from-far-up-there-missile worry had to do with my concern for the very topmost part of my head, which was actually a little crater, if you care to concern yourself with how a topmost part of something can be a little crater. Well, it CAN. Take my terror-bonded word for it. Structurally what was anatomically the topmost part of my head had actually fallen from its place of summit to become a little indentation over the brains. Now, whether this was caused by my mind thinking so much along lines of direct hits at that point that the bone and cartilage had buckled a little, had become a tiny swayback there due to nature's natural evasive action, or protective flinch of the target part's trying to get the farthest possible distance between it and its potential attacker, I do not know. Or was it caused merely by my constant probing and feeling at the target part to assure that all was yet well, though certainly vulnerable, at the "high" point's sticking most exposed toward danger? Or was I pressing harder than I thought, at such times, unknowingly really trying to rub myself out, push myself down toward a lower posture and consequently less danger? Maybe I was really just trying to push myself into the ground completely to let a hastily

prepared earth bunker, caused by my fast punch through the crust, protect me from EVERYTHING! Maybe I wanted, with some deep dark part of the mind watching from shadows and directing from safety, merely to go back to my ancestral dust while still quite alive and stand there eye-deep in the great soil and watch slit-eyed and safe and meaningless the eternal meaninglessness of it all. (Maybe I just wanted to avoid the FBS, Final-Battle-Stations.)

I know KNOW at such times, if such times were, I would not have wished to go completely under the soil to that night black, that NIGHT BLACK! NO! I would have wished to be under no farther than about bottom-eye level and really, on thinking! not quite that unless I had brought with me two flexible tubes for my nose, to poke up to the good light and air, to breathe yet. And I would have wanted to hear. YES! hear the great wind's roar as well as the easier, gentler sounds, the murmurs of the small things of Earth – innocent things, I believe – seething and writhing, rolling, floundering, crunching and flapping things moving through the air, water and soil. Surely on some Journey of Meaning. So there I should have stood, a twitching hulk gone to ground and now but six tubes showing, two eye tubes, two nose tubes and two ear tubes – for my last fling. Tasting I should have done without just then as I stood there and died and dried, wanting to “touch” everything!

But how could there be a Journey of Meaning here, with the small things, when man, the most endowed of all the things, had stuck his onion, brain-damned head up high out of the earthskin to Go and Know and cause, with his Going and Knowing, such vast amounts of stark terror in the world? Sometimes, in those days, I felt like speeding on my hands and knees across the whole world's soil to tell the small things there, “Don't change, DON'T CHANGE!” And coming to the coasts, after all the soil was warned, I'd strike out to caution all oceans, seas, bays, lakes – all the waters finally, even unto the tiniest streams and ponds – to warn the smallest to the greatest, all the natural swimmers, that where I had gone to carry my onion head up high was really only TERROR. Oh, far worse than simple TERROR; it was the stark Void's moving verge that lured man to pursue wider, farther and deeper into some Vortex of Doom. (So I felt – when I was scared. In my great missile fear I was dead-set convinced – quite irrationally, of course – that all scientific advances should be cancelled.) SO – I'd warn all creatures: “Stay in your own waves, stay in your close clods, stay in your home air, STAY in your MEANT places. What terrors you must finally own if you answer the URGE to KNOW! As I have done!”

But of course I was going on no Journey of Warning, except in speculation. (How could I, a Big Bangdado, a Commandado, a High Man in the Bangs? And besides, I was convinced – when I was rational and not scared halfway out of ALL my senses – that the “urge to know,” and responding to it, were almost holy things.) So I invented in my mind this way to go to Dormancy when the Great Fear had me by the head. Oh, yes! I’d “run away” – in my own clever manner. I’d sink into the soil up to the bottoms of my eyes. I’d have breathe-tubes for my nostrils to project these lifelines just above the crust. My ears, with the soil kept back by screens, would be held open for the sounds I loved. And maybe I could sink even deeper, have longer breathe-tubes; and small periscopes whirling would twirl the scene topside in to me and keep me posted through the eyes. Which thought gave rise unto a larger vision. Maybe some miracle of the wind’s blowing right, a small animal digging, an earthquake disturbance to help, a sudden squall to wash some soil just so – ah Something, some Help, would cover even the topmost part of my head. My head, that ached so to danger, covered by Natural Help! It was too much; it was a Dream! Also, I have thought of rigging a piece of turf, tough turf, with strings and pulleys, guy-wires and guiding rods just so, to deposit upon me at my planting this natural cover for my head. Then with small and quite feasible legerdemain I’d sneak the hand back in, but only after I’d blown, with the planned destructors, all the evidence of the turf-lifting rig. Or maybe a Friend – But NO! no friend, nor anyone, must know. Only I must know how I am and that I have this scheme to take it all back down to ground for a planned withdrawal.

Dreams are fine, but no solutions. So it’d be back to serious worrying again about the topmost part of my head. Sometimes, on blue Sunday evenings, at high noons on the big battlestations-simulation days, at clear mornings on the most routine of days – all days – ANYTIME! – I might be seized by this not gentle thought. First leaps into my picture the horrid object of destruction, not large but swift-moving, pointed and terrible, shaped like a very slender, stretched-out-thin version of a child’s string-spun top, one flung from its cord to twirl forever. And down it comes spinning from far above any region that might be imagined as the location of the Paradise Valleys of Heaven. And the worst part was I’d see this object as something started a long long time ago from far far up in the sky and aimed just for me for centuries, my very own special, individual head-demolisher. I’d hear first the whine and buzz, like a dozen bags of rattlesnakes talking their warnings, and then the strange thunk and I’d SEE the red splatter! I’d feel my mouth roof go as this invader tore spinning on down toward my throat, and being aimed as it was by this horrible Never-

Misser who hated the contents of all men's heads now (and especially the contents of MY guilty head, now) this object would drill right through everything in its path and continue down one of my legs, splintering bone and severing tendons, muscles and ligaments as it spun so destructively along. It would, very near the end of its crunchy crashing journey through my now-demolished body, execute a strange and miraculous turn of direction, (maneuvered by the great Never Misser having put that miraculous just-enough off-spin to it centuries and centuries ago, from far far up in the sky, aeons and aeons before I was born), to travel along one of my feet. Then it would come bursting out from the longest toe on that foot to fashion a little dahlia, or a rose, or a strangely decorative red-and-white radish-carving of horribly torn scarlet bloody meat-and-bone, where once had been a perfectly good and serviceable big-toe. The spinner then would lie very still and spent in the vicinity of where I had fallen and now howled in my body-wreck and guilt, and the terrible fact of having been completely, from head-to-toe, drilled through.

Remember, I lived in a stark real world then, no dream world of any kind. And no working resolutions. Men were not yet metal-everlast machines. Men were not yet even metal-and-people people, for no implants had yet been put in in new-steel. When I rubbed the topmost part of my head then, it was all fleshy gristle and meaty bone. And to them in flesh I was merely thinking hard. When my eyes glazed and the lips lined thin to the vised teeth and it was all I could do to keep from screaming of this danger whirling toward the little crater on my head, no one thought that the great Captain was showing more, or less, than indomitable determination toward, at all costs, "larger victories in the fields tomorrow." For YES! I, with all my secret hidden fears, was still one of the Captains, a Head Man in the Bangs.

Sometimes, alone in my quarters, with all the tattler eyes gone home and turned to sleep, I would sit with my boots off, my power stars all scattered, my hair tossed wild, and I would wonder just how much it would shake them should I appear at reveille early next morning on the great Parade Gound, all naked to the skin and say to them over the largest of all the bull horns in the compound: "This is your Captain speaking. Listen, please, to your Captain." Then I would go on to make a full confession of the fears I owned, the stark frights I carried with me night and day and knew in horror through all my waking times. I would not confess to cowardice, because I was firmly convinced that cowardice was not one of my problems. Bravery was hard, as hard for me, I sometimes thought (with all my thinking), as carrying a full mountain up some very sheer, ice-armored

cliff might be, but I always made it! somehow.

And NO, I never got around to the naked-standing on the great Parade Ground and the full confession. AH, NO! I got around to appearing day-on-day with my tall boots on and they all polished to that high cold gleam, that look of slick black glass, all my rank-stars pinned on like many white hot eyes of angular silver, and all my braid, ribbons, belts, straps and swagger gear as neat as they could be. For I, for better or for worse, was to all appearances still the Commandado, the High Officer, the Big Bangdado, Chief-in-Chief of my part of the Bangs. And weren't the Bangs, all over the world, Protectors! gunshooters, bombdroppers and missiledeliverers to protect – well, to protect... WHATEVER it is in every country that cries, screams, PLEADS to be protected? Ah, well... I owed Them (my men and my country) something – a good show, if nothing else. And I was not quite as false in all of this as it may seem. Who knows how many Captains have been weak water, really, but somehow held together by a chill something for a glittery show, a larger-than-life resolve that allowed them to manage day-on-day the ice-in-the-veins they needed? And perhaps from these have been rated many of our greatest and most imposing Captains. Oh yes! I was a great Captain (so rated) and a tall one (when I stood), and, to be sure, I was ready when we went for each the other's throats and stoutest fortresses that spring that saw all the world turn flame and flaming ruin....

How much better perhaps had we – all of us in the Bangs – stood naked on some vast Parade Ground of our Feckless Pride that spring before the Storm, and confessed each to the other a few things past the decorations on our bright tunics, past the high gleamy dark polish on the tall boots we firmly set toward danger, past the cool sophistication we had achieved on the slick shells of our fears. Perhaps if we each and everyone, worldwide, had made that full revealment of the old and mouldy frights that stuffed the gleaming hulls of our poise, we should all have felt so scrawny, so sorry, so remorseful each for the other and for ourselves, SO ASHAMED AT HOW IT WAS! that we should all just have wandered away, unable to look each the other in the eyes anymore, incapable of any Made-in-Pride confrontation. And we should have gone idly and sweetly then, addled, like strayed children in some Paradise Dream, among the giant monitoring stations, across the lids of the underground launchers, through the “shell game” missile shelters and the Death Watch rocket catapults, all the games gone silly now... Seeing, and clearly, that our Knowing had taken a bad turn, an incalculably dangerous one, but one that did not have to be, we would change. (There is even some argument for thinking that if we could have managed even the smallest of transformations in ourselves,

human-wide, then the great “going and knowing” that had filled our world with such terror and such wonder must surely have filled our world only with Splendid Wonder.)

But it is not that way! not that way...for men. Not yet and not yet and may never....

We shored up our bravery as best we could that year, overcompensated for any weaknesses that might break through, put command stars where the holes could show to embarrass us and moved on up with *élan* (and false *élan*) for the Final Battle's join – to function with the gunships and our Pride amidst all the death-hungry flames, all the killer chemicals, beams, explosives and blades and all the high-prideful flags contending. And (when one side started to lose) the world-wreck missiles, as had for a long time been predicted, fired a worldwide terrible Fall.

It was, perhaps, the best that we could do...the inevitable Best Try to be our Brave-Man Selves...at the time...for all that we had been...were...and Long Were.

(All the small things deserved better where they played their natural play, and loved and lived – that year when we wrecked them and the World....)

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Willing It Over the Wall

or The Nine Billion Names of Babe Ruth

Jonathan Lethem

Merly Blaw loved the home run. He loved the tape-measure round tripper, the dinger, the four-bagger, loved Aaron, Canseco, Foxx, Killebrew, Maris, Mays, loved 49, 60, 61, 660, 714, 755. Oh, he loved the whole game, defended its slow, subtle unfolding; those minute struggles dilettante fans missed entirely, the stolen base, the suicide squeeze, the intentional walk, but what thrilled him soulwise if he confessed it was the slugger bullying the sphere into the distant bleachers. The moment of stillness, announcer's voice rising as the ball clears the fence, the outfielder's perfunctory jump or helpless glance, and the hitter's cocky or humble stroll around the three bases to return home with the score. The homer.

Blaw worked in a post office, at a sorting desk, where he could switch the communal radio to the games of his beloved team, the Altamont Aureoles, when Raymond and Delia, his sports-hating shiftmates, left him there alone. Otherwise, by common consent, the radio stayed tuned to WDOZ ("rock without elbows"); so he caught the games in stolen moments, snatches and fragments of innings. The Aureoles were loaded this year with sluggers, and devoid of pitching or defense, so their games were a riot of scoring; errors, singles, doubles, triples and enough home runs to threaten the league record for a single season. More often than not, as Blaw rushed the dial of the radio past the blur of stations between WDOZ and WFAN, which broadcast the games, he arrived just in time to hear as one lug or another bruised a ball into the sky and over the fence.

It was when he'd tuned in and heard a ball thusly clouted for the fourth time in a row that Blaw began to indulge the generic sportsfan's fantasy

that his attention altered the outcome of events. What fan hadn't? Blaw himself had once attended, in person, four successive losses by the Aureoles and imagined that he was the cause. That streak, however, ended, where five or six home runs later, this still hadn't.

Indeed, Blaw began to seek proof that he wasn't involved. The next time he was alone he switched the radio back and forth from music to game four times: the result was that three Aureoles successively hit home runs, and the first batter up for the opposing team hit one to lead off the next inning. He considered the possibility that this remarkable outcome was his private hallucination, but as he listened the announcer raved about it repeatedly, and the next day's sportspage provided final confirmation.

At home on his weekend, he tuned in a day game on television. An Aureole had, the moment before, lofted a high fly ball to center. "— the centerfielder's circling under it," the announcer said, "but wait, the wind's got a hold of this one — and it's gone! A home run! Coming off his bat you would never have thought —"

So, his power proved, he diligently set to work. The key was in timing the arrival of his attention, by radio or television, to coincide with the Aureoles' halves of the innings. His grossly wish-fulfilling talent didn't discriminate between teams, but rather gratified his appetite with a home run every time he tuned in. If he wasn't careful it would gladly shower good fortune on the opposing batters, and bestow ruin on the Aureoles' already hapless pitching staff.

For a while it worked, and he filled the skies with leather and cork, and set the Aureoles on course for more than the record, but respectability, possibly even the pennant. The papers talked of juiced up balls, somehow inserted by conspiring umpires into the opponent's pitcher's hands. The Aureoles' skipper, an ancient mariner of fathomless innings, had seen it all in his time, and chastened the pressmen for their sensationalism, their hysteria, urged them to 'give the boys their due.' Several of 'the boys' veered onto a course to threaten Maris' single-season record. Blaw, when surprised by an oddly-timed inning, long or short, gave out accidental homers to the Aureoles' opponents; he was no friend to the hurler. But the team won and won.

The peak came when he attended a home game in person, and caused an unprecedented homer-an-inning game by taking trips to the bathroom and concession stands. At every return the ball was smited. Feeling his oats, he bore down with his attention on the next batter after a homer, and that man hit it beyond the limit of the fence too, without Blaw's having stepped out. It was that act of hubris, however, that doomed him.

He'd overdeveloped the muscle, and now it flexed on its own. The next

day, in front of the his television at home, every batter hit it out until he switched channels. When he checked again, they resumed. His philistine appetite for homers had overwhelmed his ability even to observe, let alone appreciate, any other play.

As he sat, musing on the implications of his discovery, an odd thing transpired on the Midday Movie Special, where he'd landed by default: Cary Grant and Eva Marie Saint had been bantering, then necking, in a private berth on a train. Now they were more than necking. Blaw couldn't recall this scene from an otherwise familiar film, nor had he ever seen such untrammelled lewdnes on the local television channel.

Nor – and he was sure of this – had Cary Grant ever performed in a – what was the term? – a 'money shot'. Yet here he was.

Blaw quickly turned the television off, and thrust the incident out of his mind.

At work the next evening he cautiously switched to the game, and three batters – Aureoles, fortunately – hit it out before he switched away. Delia came back from her break, and expressed surprise that he was listening to WDOZ instead of baseball; he smiled weakly and said nothing.

Something had gone wrong with the song that was playing, however. It had progressed through chorus and verse with the same unassuming blandness that characterized all WDOZ's fare, until the break for the guitar solo. In those measures, in place of the tedious, saccharine recapitulation of the melody that memory and tradition called for, the guitarist unleashed a squealing torrent of notes, wreathed in feedback and climbing mercilessly up the scale.

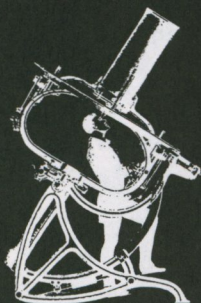
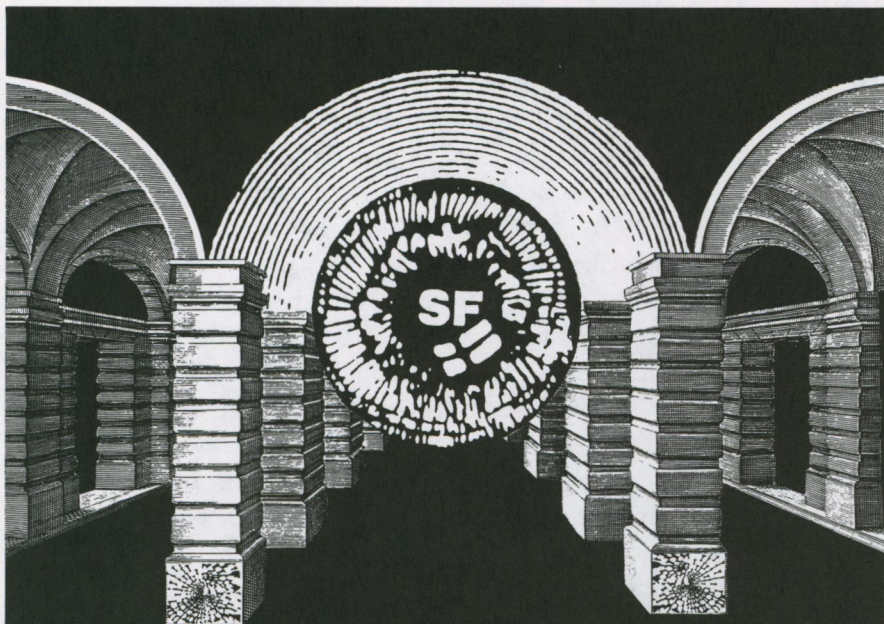
Raymond walked in at that moment. His break was invariably a few minutes longer than Delia's. "Wow," he said, "is that Hendrix?"

Blaw clicked the radio off, and there was blessed silence. For a moment. Then Delia picked up a cardboard mailing tube, and Raymond lobbed a rubberbanded bundle of International Reply Coupons her way.

Delia swung, with her wrists crossed, like Aaron in his boyhood. Her expression was equal parts determination and dismay. The bundle cleared the front counter and crashed through the window of the P.O. and out into the street.

Horrified, Blaw rushed outside to retrieve the Coupons. As he rescued the bundle from the glass-strewn concrete he heard a woman's scream. He looked up. Something very odd was heppening in the sky: the sun was rapidly growing larger, and was just as rapidly dipping down towards the horizon. Blaw dropped the Coupons and joined the nearby screamer in her activity.

One' by one, the nine spheres – one for each of the starters in the Aureoles' lineup – were leaving the park. That the third from the sun was a spitball didn't fool Blaw's talent for a minute.



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