

FANTASY

Tales

A Paperback Magazine
of Fantasy and Terror



RAMSEY CAMPBELL
David J. Schow
Stephen Gresham
Jessica Salmonson

In this other-worldly issue of *Fantasy Tales*, you will discover:

A horror from beneath the earth reaches out to claim minds in Ramsey Campbell's swashbuckling fantasy 'The Sustenance of Hoak'.

Condemned to a living death in a subterranean labyrinth of the future, one man's humanity takes on a new meaning in 'The Embracing' by David J. Schow.

He discovered something in the old shanty that went beyond the imagination. . . in Stephen Gresham's nightmarish story 'The One Left Behind'.

Plus fiction and verse by Jessica Amanda Salmonson, Alan W. Lear, Charles Whateley and Jon Bye, illustrations by some of the finest artists on both sides of the Atlantic, and *The Cauldron* featuring news, views and Mike Ashley's comprehensive round-up of the autumn books.

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Four faces bulged at various heights on the pillar, identical except for blemishes and variations of size. (Artist: Jeff Salmon)



Ramsey Campbell

THE SUSTENANCE OF HOAK

(Ramsey Campbell will need no introduction to readers of horror fiction. In his twenty-five years of producing tales of terror he has become Britain's premier practitioner in the field. His stories have been described as "adult, bold and provocative" and with some ten novels and innumerable short stories to his credit, any attempt to do justice to his achievements in this brief introduction would be impossible. Newer readers will certainly be interested to hear that publishers Macdonald/Futura are issuing uniform editions of all his books, starting this year with Scared Stiff in hardcover (a collection of the author's more erotic short stories, which will include the J. K. Potter illustrations from the original Scream/Press edition) and the novel The Face That Must Die in paperback. All the books in the series will contain new Afterwords. Other recent titles to search out include his latest novel Ancient Images (Legend/Century Hutchinson) and Dark Feasts, thirty previously uncollected stories in one volume, from Robinson Publishing. His new novel, Midnight

Sun, is due to appear next year. Having described Ramsey Campbell as a leading exponent of horror fiction, the following story may come as a surprise. It is in fact a tale of sword & sorcery, which originally appeared in Andrew J. Offutt's anthology *Swords Against Darkness* (Zebra, 1977). The first in a series of heroic fantasy adventures, each linked by the character of Ryre, this is its first publication in the UK. Don't worry though, those customary touches of Campbell horror are still there . . .)

“If we ever reach the treasure,” Ryre said with bitter humour, “we’ll have earned it and twice again.”

Glode’s mouth opened, but nothing emerged except a thread of blood. He was trying to raise himself against the tree where Ryre had propped him; his fists crushed the earth, his arms trembled like trees, their thick veins swelled. “Keep down,” Ryre said as a flight of arrows tore through the leaves overhead. “I’ll get you in there if I have to stick the lot of them on their own arrows,” he said, gazing narrow-eyed though the trees at the gate of the town of Hoak.

And it might come to that, he thought, crawling through the undergrowth. Heat throbbed through the forest like blood, slow and viscous. He remembered how they’d decided to come to Hoak.

Like most of the mercenaries who’d helped win the war against the pirates on the Sea of Shouting Islands, they had been drinking their pay and complaining of its meagreness when talk had turned to the treasure of Hoak. The treasure was buried beneath the town; a now long-lost map showing its location had been found attached to the leg of a migrating bird; the people of Hoak (someone had said, trying to out-shout jeers) were willing to give the treasure to whoever found it; nobody who had sought it had returned. Silence followed that, quickly broken by bantering. Ryre and Glode had jeered with the rest, but later they’d agreed that the rumours felt more like the truth than did most tales of treasure. And they knew that unless they moved on they would have to vow allegiance to the local lords, or fight those of their companions who had done so. As for the vanished seekers—they must have failed and been too ashamed to return empty-handed. Ryre and Glode had smashed their wine-mugs in the street below the inn, splashing the boots of a cursing sailor, and had made their way to the wharves. Next day they had left the continent of Drobond for Thabbe.

Ryre was at the edge of the forest now, two hundred yards from the gate of Hoak. The trees around him were scraggy; the forest must once have been cut further back from the town. Peering across the parched grass, he saw that the gate beneath the archers had been patched with planks, leaving gaps. The town wall was of growing trees, the gaps plugged with logs. His lips pulled back thinly. It would be enough.

Once on Thabbe they'd bought steeds at the port of Zizir. The trader had smiled sadly on hearing where they were bound, but had told them the route readily enough. They had been six days into the forest that covers half of Thabbe, and less than a day from Hoak, when in a long avenue bandits had dropped like ripe fruit from the trees. Ryre and Glode had swerved between them, slashing them as they fell. The bandits must have been used to slower and meeker prey. But some had had blowpipes as well as knives; one dart had spilled the last of the water while another, finding a chink in the leaves of Glode's armour, had lodged deep in his guts. Since then he had ridden doubled over, his silence like a cry in Ryre's ears.

He was still propped against the tree, sitting bent low over his stomach, his fist clenched white around a fistful of earth. "I can break the gate," Ryre said, collecting dry twigs and grass and tying them in a bun at the head of a lopped-off branch. He untied their steeds and brought Glode's to him. "Bid him farewell," Ryre said. "He will help save you."

At the edge of the forest he lit the tip of the firebrand with a flint from the pouch at his belt, then slapped Glode's steed out into the open. At once the arrows responded. The few he had time to watch looked too high for an attack, more like a warning. Certainly he thought it was an inexperienced bowshot that spiked the animal's neck.

But he was riding, lying low behind his own steed's broad head. Air streamed smarting over his eyes; the brand dwindled into roaring fire at his shoulder. He was squeezing more speed from his mount with his thighs, urging the implacably distant gate closer as the archers swung toward him; he felt the grass beneath his steed's pads hindering him like water. He was there, and the song of the bowstrings had failed. He plunged his blazing club into the gate.

Here his plan was weakest. His steed was rearing now that the fire which had driven it had sprung before its face, dilating furiously. Above him he heard moving stone, grunts of exertion.

During the war against the pirates he'd learned how to coax his steed through fire, but this was another steed, *Hakkthu*, he swore between defiant blasphemy and plea, and covered the beast's eyes with his hands, its ears with his forearms.

It quieted uneasily. Overhead he heard the unmistakable sound of heavy stone poised on wood. Then, as a wave of heat surged out from the collapsing gate, Ryre's steed flinched back stumbling, yards clear of the protection of the wall.

He heard the first stones fall. It took him a moment to realize they had fallen within the gate. The defenders didn't want to kill him, only to keep him out. Why? He grinned and shrugged, snarling.

The gate sagged on the dropped stones with a shout of flame. The defenders were scrambling down from scorching branches. One of them was shouting, directing the others to fetch water from a well, to throw earth on the fire, to bring axes; now he was monkey-climbing down a trunk.

He saw Ryre coming at him through the frame of fire: all six and a half feet of him, reflected fire streaming over the predator's mane that widened in a V from his shaved crown to his shoulders, fire pouring down his long grimly grinning face and over his flexed muscles, tensed for an easy spring. The man twisted; his feet found a branch from which to launch him upward again. Ryre chopped the branch from beneath him and catching him as he fell, stunned him with his sword-hilt.

"Move again, any of you," Ryre shouted, "and I'll knock you down with his head." They were a sorry-looking lot, even the hostage: grimy, dull-faced, ragged. Their shuffling approach had been disordered, tentative. Behind him another tree snatched the fire, cackling. Their faces flickered like embers as they watched him, their gazes plucked fretfully at the fire; shovelfuls of earth drooped from their hands, narrow-necked vessels of water drained.

"My friend is injured," he shouted above the chorus of fire. "Have your best healer ready for him. I shall bring him in now. This man stays with me until my friend is healed. If I've reason even to suspect any of you, we'll see if this man can walk while he's holding his guts from tripping him up."

The growing crowd, fifty or so of them, now, was milling as if turned up from beneath a stone. "We'll help," a voice said just

audibly within the mass; then, as if drawing strength from its concealment, more loudly: "We promise. Don't take him out."

"He stays with me until my friend is well," Ryre shouted.

They were turning uneasily toward someone in the narrow dry earth street between the low square houses: their leader, Ryre thought—then saw that it wasn't a man at all. It was a stump of wood planted in the street, shaped near the top into a fat mouthless face; instead of ears, limp-looking branches hung. The black wood looked wet and was patched with white, as if stretched pale; specks of reflected fire burned in the wide whitish stare. Their god, no doubt.

"Please, not out," someone was muttering; others joined in. "Please."

Ryre had never seen such insularity, not even on the Sea of Shouting Islands. "I will protect him from anything out there," he shouted, riding toward the leap through the blazing gap, "keep your word and he is safe. If I think you haven't," (their paling faces showed he had found the words to command them) "I'll leave him out there."

Glode was lying beside the tree. His lips were so pale that Ryre couldn't distinguish the slit between them from their trailing threads of blood. He didn't move when Ryre supported his head. Ryre frowned; he had counted on Glode's being conscious and able to hold onto the hostage before him on Ryre's steed. He pondered, stroking the beast's neck. Heat sank thickly through the branches.

As he pondered, his hostage began to move. The man pushed at the beast's ribcage to raise himself. When he saw where he was, he started to flail his limbs and scream incoherently. He lay draped over the animal's spine, screaming and wriggling wildly, then he fell to the ground.

"Be quiet and listen." Ryre had to push the sword's point into the man's neck before he would stop thrashing about. "We are going back to Hoak now. You will ride this steed. You will carry my friend, who is injured. If you loosen your grip on him, or try to ride faster than I walk, I shall cut you down and leave you outside the wall."

Ryre had once seen one of the steeds set ablaze by the warriors of Gurj and sent screaming into enemy camps to cause injury and demoralization: he had seen its staring eyes, piteously rolling. He

had hoped never to see such terror again, but it was here, in the eyes of the hostage. The man's arms gripped Glode and his entire body shook as if caked with ice; he gazed in supplication at the distant wall pacing closer, at the gap where men were chopping away the charred section of the wall. Glode's inert body trembled with him.

Ryre felt himself to be a stretched rein, holding the man back from utter reckless panic. His sword was out and ready; its point winked a warning beside his hostage. He curbed his mind from pondering the source of the man's terror. *Hakkthu*, he thought, *if I'm going to know I'll know without tempting it nearer*. Behind him he felt the hot bright forest and plain, silently poised.

The healer was waiting in the street. He'd brushed away dust from a space and laid planks there. He was an old nearly bald man, scrawny as if he'd melted himself down in losing a long fight; grey hair made a tidemark around his skull. "Put him there," he told Ryre indifferently.

"Haven't you a house of healing?" Ryre demanded.

"Outside is better." Townspeople were clambering exhausted down the singed trunks. Ryre prodded his panting hostage into lowering Glode from the steed.

"Help him, some of you. Now you get down, slowly. And you, hold my steed." As the hostage dismounted the others were still holding Glode's unconscious body. "Give him to your healer," Ryre said with tight control. *Hakkthu*, he thought, *one day they'll forget how to dung until someone tells them*.

"What's wrong with him?" the healer asked.

"A dart in the gut. Bandits attacked us, half a day from here."

Dust eddied around the restless crowd and crept toward Glode. "Keep still," the healer shouted. Ryre felt the beginnings of trust. What he'd taken for indifference in the healer wasn't the apathy that weighed down the watching faces, but harassed weariness. In the man's eyes alertness still glinted faintly.

Someone was murmuring at Ryre, as if in sleep: a large-boned man with a face like a square slab of rock that might once have looked chiselled but now was less weathered than moss-smoothed by beard, and slackly bland. "That's who we thought you were," he was saying. "The bandits. They want our treasure. But you can't get at it from inside the town. We wish they'd take it. It's only trouble

for us. We're happy without it. We try to keep the bandits out so they'll search outside and take it."

"What is this treasure?"

"Jewels," another voice said. "A cave full of jewels."

"And how is it reached?"

"There are tunnels," the slab-faced man said. "They're easy to find. We can tell you where."

"You're so anxious to keep people out you've convinced me there's something in here worth defending."

Ryre turned his back, dismissing them all. The healer had parted the hard yet flexible leaves of Glode's armour, had lifted the shirt beneath and was probing Glode's stomach.

The crowd was fraying, wandering away; people plodded into the low houses. Ryre disliked the way windows were blocked with old wood. The kneeling hostage shifted gingerly beneath his sword. Ryre prodded him toward a house. "Knock the wood out of that window," he said.

The wood scattered clattering, and Ryre laughed grimly. The scene within seemed so typical of Hoak: a man lying on a plank bed in a bare room, drinking from a long-necked vessel, blinking timidly at the intrusion. Apart from the bed, and dust and tracked-in mud, there was nothing in the low-ceilinged room but a replica of the stumpy god from the street. About two feet high, it stood in a corner as if growing through the floorboards, its eyes closed in sleep. Ryre knew instinctively that nothing more sinister was happening behind the masked windows of the other houses.

A woman was carrying a vessel to the healer. Glode's head turned tottering toward the vessel. "Give me drink," he said, his tongue protruding weakly, dry as a sand-burrower's tail. The healer shrugged sadly, and rose.

Glode took one gulp, Ryre's hand behind his head. Then he coughed the liquor into the dust, mixed with what might have been a stomachful of blood. He fell back, unconscious.

For a moment Ryre dreaded that the healer had never intended to drink. He sniffed at the mouth of the vessel: a sharp vinous smell. The healer and the remnants of the crowd were watching him. He put the mouth to his lips.

He was tipping the vessel against his tongue-stopped lips, watching for their reaction, when the hostage knocked the vessel

from his hands. He scrambled after it on all fours, seized it and began to gulp, his throat working like a climber's hand on a parting rope. By the time Ryre had bullied it from him he knew it couldn't be poisoned. His own throat was chafing and pleading, but he pointed his sword to Glode.

"The dart's lodged deep," the healer said. "It's in his stomach, too deep to get out. All he can do is rest. It may work itself out before he starves."

Ryre felt frustrated anger mass within him. He knew from battles that if the dart had lodged so, there was nothing they could do. He tipped the vessel, gulping. Thick liquor spread through his throat. A warmth rushed through him, tingling his fingertips.

The healer turned away; he looked disappointed, somehow betrayed. Let him thirst, Ryre thought savagely. His mouth was full of a meadish taste; light sparkled on slow drops of cloudy amber liquid spilling from the vessel's mouth. The squat houses and encircling trees, the dust and dancing ash, seemed to have snapped into closer clarity, as if the light had hardened. "We need a room," he shouted, to halt the retreating crowd.

"We have one," a girl said. Like the rest she was dressed in shapeless rags, almost colourlessly browned by use and the sun; she was thin and stooped as if by an insistent gale. Only a trace of youth in her face, which was shaped like a starved heart, convinced Ryre she was younger than twenty. She stood beside the slab-faced man, no doubt her father. As she gazed at Ryre, he caught sight of a dull glint of desire.

The house was a dozen housefronts away up the street—more accurately, the trugged path. Each house was surrounded by twice its own area of earth, baked to a cracked crust, in which tufts of grass and weeds browned. Apart from the small procession behind which he was leading his steed, the hot flat blinded streets were deserted.

When they reached the house Ryre let the hostage go. If he needed to defend a room he could best do so without the hindrance of the man. He walked though the house, cursing loose boards, knocking the wood from the windows to admit light. Each room was the same: the plank bed, the sleeping god in the corner, the liquor-vessel, bareness. The first room, into which the sagging street door opened, was entirely bare.

Ryre chose the fourth room, which could be approached only through all the others. It could be a trap of sorts, but at least there was only one doorway to defend. He beckoned the bearers to lay Glode down, then gestured them out. He draped Glode's cloak and his own over his unconscious friend. He called for a bed to be brought for himself. He tethered his steed outside the window, and propped the wood he'd knocked down so that any attempt at entry though the window would send it clattering.

The girl, whose name was Yoce and whose father's was Vald, peered in while Ryre was eating some of the food his steed had carried. The second time, he held out a chunk of cheese to her. He'd seen no food or plates in the house. But she shook her head and went back into the next room. *She needn't think she'll come to me in the night*, Ryre thought, gazing anxiously at Glode. Later, in the twilight, he heard her sucking at her liquor-vessel.

Darkness muffled the houses. The dry ground breathed out thick heat. Ryre sat on the bed with his back against the door, gazing at the god in the corner.

Of everything he'd seen in Hoak he disliked that face most of all. It looked like the face a slow growth on a tree-trunk might have: fat and somnolently sated. Beneath the eyes it swelled featurelessly, like a bladder. The branches hanging limply looked obscene, as if flaunting their impotence. It summed up Hoak. He couldn't truthfully believe he would be attacked during the night. He sipped at the liquor-vessel, pondering the contradictions of Hoak. Before him the mouthless face sank sleepily into the embrace of night.

It was late next day when he awoke, and Glode was dead.

Glode's faded eyes stared into a glare of sunlight. His face was slack as melting fat. On his cheeks and beneath his head were the marks of a last bloody cough.

There was no mark of further violence, no culprit on whom Ryre could take revenge; he could only rage dully. Sweat had gathered within the leaves of his armour; they felt close and clammy, he felt closed in upon himself, his emotions muffled. He strained to mourn Glode. But as he gazed at the limp face his grief seemed dulled.

He grabbed the liquor-vessel. Glode would have a mercenary's mourning. Ryre laughed harshly, staring out at the desiccated

street. Sometimes an unwary passer-by would scoff at a mercenary's tears, and die for it; such deaths were a tribute to the mourned. Ryre hoped someone of Hoak would dare to scoff. He sucked the vessel, which someone had refilled.

He was still trying to drink grief into himself when footsteps sounded in the outer room. Vald and three other men appeared, peering warily; beside them Yoce gazed. Vald thrust the girl into the room. Ryre's nearness quickened her breath; her eyes were wide with awe of him. "They've come to bury your friend," she said too loudly, nervously.

Burial ought to be swift, in this heat. Ryre gestured brusquely to the men. They hefted Glode as if he were a heavy plank, and hurried him out; his sword lay on his chest. Ryre followed, gulping liquor to hasten his mourning. Yoce hung back, in the house.

He hurried after the bearers. Hakkthu, they were anxious to be done with the burying! Hot dust puffed up from their scurrying feet and settled over figures squatting beside the path. All the figures were blankly intent on their hands, which were whittling arrows. It was the only occupation Ryre had seen practiced here. Once, so the trader in Zizir had told him, Hoak has been renowned for the skill of its carvers.

None of the whittlers glanced at the burial-party. Ryre felt numb rage at their indifference, all the more because it seemed to have infected him: he stared at Glode, at the sword joggling on his friend's chest, and could feel nothing.

The town was infecting him. Everywhere he saw slumped apathy: in the parched streets, the senile houses, the whittlers like hollow-jerking dummies draped with sacking. Even the well from which water had been drawn to douse the fire was used as a communal cloaca. Yet once, the trader had told him, Hoak had been a station on a trade route between the coast and the interior, until its people had grown sullenly hostile.

It must be the liquor that had brought apathy. Ryre had seen no other food or drink. He supposed it was brewed from the trees in the town walls—there seemed to be no other healthy growth. No wonder the people were dull, if liquor were their only food. He would drink no more of it once Glode was buried. He'd need all his wits to find the treasure.

The bearers stumbled rapidly onward. They had carried Glode

almost half a mile; they were nearly at the centre of Hoak. Ahead Ryre saw a group of small figures scattered among the whittlers, dressed in torn knotted rags of larger clothes. He had to peer closely to tell they were children.

They were the only children he'd seen here—hardly three dozen of them. On their faces, which looked already pinched and old, apathy was set like identical masks. They sat or lay in the dust; one child stared flatly from a window. When their muddy eyes moved, it was always to a liquor-vessel standing near them. They drank mechanically. Beside a dull-eyed mother, Ryre saw an infant sucking at a vessel as though it were a breast.

Fury swelled in him; he trembled. Behind the child in the window he saw a stump and its sleepy contented face, the flaccid branches dangling. Perhaps all the drinking was a religious tribute to their self-satisfied god. He would storm into the house and lop off the mouthless head—

He checked himself. However deplorable they were, gods were something whose revenge one couldn't fight. But he smashed his own vessel to the ground.

Some of the children watched the swiftly dwindling stain; a few of the adults gave him a glance like a faint sad shrug. The bearers were trudging ahead indifferently. He stamped angrily in pursuit.

Above the roofs he saw a shiny dome, swaying closer in imitation of his stride. Here at the centre the houses were even more dilapidated. Among them he saw bare patches where houses had stood. In each patch was a deep socket; had that housed a god-stump? the bearers had halted in a wider space. Ryre hurried there.

It was the old market-place. Remnants of stalls and tethering-rails poked from the ground, like bones from a boneyard. At the centre of the space a patch of dark moist earth, no more than twenty yards square, stood out from the dry surround. From this earth protruded a pillar whose crown was the shiny dome. The pillar wriggled with heat-haze. Ryre gaped at it, breathing harshly.

It stood twice his height, half again as broad as his chest. Its domed crown was a pale bubble swelling up through the black cracking mud of its bark. On the side nearest him, formed of the same lividly patched substance, was the flabby contented face, several times enlarged. Its left cheek was bloated out of shape by a

large fibroid growth, giving it a fattened cheek-pouched appearance. Ryre felt grubs of disgust crawling over him.

There were no branches sprouting beside the face, nor any room for them. Four faces bulged at various heights on the pillar, identical except for blemishes and variations in size. That on the north side—the one he'd first seen—looked to be encroached upon by the larger fibroid eastern face, which seemed to be eating into its cheek.

Ryre felt passionately that the entire festering thing ought not to be here in the sunlight, but buried beneath tons of earth. He had a sudden crawling notion that the substance of the thing had not ceased growing. He clutched his sword-hilt to feel cold metal amid the soft sticky embrace of the heat.

Vald and the others were digging. Glode lay in the dust. His loose face upturned. They meant to bury him beneath the bunch of swollen faces. Ryre felt harsh rage—but wherever Glode lay in Hoak he would be overlooked by the omnipresent stump. Better he should lie here in this rich tended earth than in the parched ground. He stood over his friend's body, sword bared in tribute, as they dug.

They were digging hastily, exhaustingly, near the foot of the pillar. Ryre had time to wonder at the size of the burial ground, which seemed bewilderingly small, before the diggers turned up a flat rock. The top of it looked like a fleshless hand. Peering, Ryre saw that it was indeed a hand, rotted at the wrist and stuck to the rock. One man scraped it off with his spade and threw it back into the hole. Then they grounded their spades and picking up Glode's body, carried him across to roll him, sword and all, into the hole.

"Not like that!" Ryre roared. His sword trembled between them, darting at their throats. "Make him a coffin!"

They gazed blankly. "A box for him to lie in!" he shouted, prodding them with their burden to the edge of the ground. "Make him a box," he said with cold fury, "and bring it here."

He waited, glaring at the introverted faces on the pillar. Heat rose from the moist ground, fluttering about them; the edge of the fibroid face seemed to bulge, creeping like a grub across its neighbour's cheek. As they had made to drop Glode into the hole Ryre had imagined he glimpsed the eyes of the northward face opening, a

blink, closing before he'd glared at them. It must have been the antics of the heat.

He gazed across the market-place. On the side which he had yet to explore stood a house full of piled timber. Some of the wood looked delicate. Crushed between stacked planks he saw elaborate ladles, stringed instruments, minute figures. One figure lay in a niche between planks, almost unharmed: the figure of a swordsman, poised in easy but assured defense. Its tiny perfect face, hardly the size of Ryre's smallest fingernail, was stern yet peaceful. Ryre slid the figure from its niche. Rough handling had crippled it; one leg was snapped off at the knee.

The burial party returned, carrying a crude box from which protruded bent and rusty nails. They lifted Glode into the box and nailed down a plank for a lid. Then they dropped the box into the hole.

Ryre's fury drained quickly. He saw how they must feel about death. He gestured them back and nicking his forearm with his sword-blade, held his fist above the coffin as his blood dripped. He lifted earth from the grave and sprinkling it over the wound, let the mud of blood fall on the coffin. When they had filled in the grave, he stood the carved swordsman on the mound and watched over it while they wandered away.

Still he had not mourned Glode. His mind seemed to have lost its grasp on his friend. When he managed to recapture a few of their exploits—Glode saving him from a knife-thrust in a dark temple; Ryre trying to swing himself onto Glode's shoulders to snag the ropes that were lowering them into a pit of snakes—they seemed flat, unconvincing. Now the liquor was making him feel light, unconcerned, unburdened. He would mourn Glode when he was free of Hoak—when he had made sure their journey had not been in vain. He must find the treasure.

The sun was low. The shadow of the pillar lay across the glistening patch, like the shadow of a cankered tree. It pointed toward the far side of Hoak. The treasure must be there, where he hadn't explored.

He searched, trying to outdistance night. The earth was grey and cracked as the skin of a senile corpse. Few of the windows were blocked; these he knocked open. He stared into room after room, at fallen planks, at the hole like a burrow in the corner of

each floor. The rooms were dimming; twilight rose in them like a mist with which the dark burrows merged. The twilight was heavy with silence, the silence of midnight in a dead and windless forest.

The heads of the surrounding still trees peered at Ryre over the nearby wall. Desolation waited silently behind him wherever he turned. His mind was chattering: it isn't here, not in these houses, there's nothing here, go back.

And this was all that was left of Hoak: scarcely a hundred people, isolated on this barren island amid the enormous forest. Then he realized something else. The vanished population must be buried in the square, all of them, piled up and rotting beneath the contented pillar. He shrugged off a shudder at the thought of the earth in which Glode lay, and hurried back toward the centre. He had words to scare the truth of the treasure out of slab-faced Vald.

The faces on the pillar were set in the twilight as in plush. Ryre spat in the dust. Corpse-candle of a god, he blasphemed the pillar. He glanced toward Glode's grave. At once he was striding across the yielding ground, clutching his sword. The mound had vanished.

The carved swordsman still lay on the earth. As he snatched it up he heard a faint muffled creaking. It came from the grave. Was Glode pushing his way out of the box, rising up through the soil to punish Ryre's negligence? Blotting out his terror with anger, he began to gouge out the grave with his hands.

The grave was shallow, but his progress seemed slow as the creeping twilight. As the soil squeezed through his fingers he remembered the hand that had been thrown into the hole. At last he reached the box. The lid had split open; soil had widened the split and fallen through. Cursing the makeshift coffin, Ryre lifted the pieces of the lid.

At first, in the twilight, he couldn't distinguish what was in the box. A mixture of earth and pale objects: the pale things were entangled—there were large glistening pale surfaces and paler forms coiled about them. The pale thick tendrils were dragging the larger object, or objects, through the bottom of the coffin. One extremity of the large object slipped an inch lower in the hole, amid a strained creaking and a rattling of earth. Although the large object was losing its form, as if melting, it had Glode's face.

Ryre screamed in fury and brought his sword crashing down on the tangle within the coffin. Tendrils parted and whipped into the



*At first, in the twilight, he couldn't distinguish what was in the box.
(Artist: Jeff Salmon)*

earth like pale worms. When Ryre had finished chopping, there was nothing recognizable in the hole. Weeping, ablaze with shame, he kicked earth into the grave.

The cancerous faces loomed above him, at his back. He rushed at the pillar, brandishing his sword. The faces waited, untroubled. Suddenly full of panic and nausea, Ryre fled toward the gate.

His steed waited outside Vald's house, chewing in its foodsling. Ryre reined back his panic; he must retrieve his satchel of food, which was lying beneath the plank bed. In the dim deserted street that throbbed wakefully with the sound of his heart, Ryre felt the need for stealth. Somewhere he could hear a slow muffled trickling. He shook his head impatiently and paced around to the outer door.

Vald was prostrate on his bed, fingers hanging limply to the floor. Ryre thought he was dead until his nails scraped the boards feebly. Padding softly, Ryre had almost crossed the room before he saw Yoce. She was standing with her back to him, in the corner where the face stood. As Ryre strode loudly toward her, she turned.

The branches dangling from the head were swollen, pale, almost transparent. They glimmered in the dimness. Yoce had been thrusting the neck of a liquor-vessel over one branch; now she pulled the vessel away. Snatching it, Ryre saw that it was brimming with liquor. A drop hung at the tip of the branch.

Yoce grabbed the vessel before he could smash it, and carried it to Vald. Ryre was less horrified by his discovery than by the yearning of his own parched throat for the liquor. "You do that!" he shouted through his nausea, hand at his sword.

"What else can I do for him?" Yoce said furiously. "Where's another food?"

When her words reached him, his hand slumped on the hilt. "What is this town?" he demanded thickly.

Liquor was spilling from Vald's mouth. She stood the vessel beside him, then she took Ryre's hand simply and led him into the inner room. Her fingers read the moist earth on his hand. "You've seen what it does," she said. "To your friend."

The face hung like a clot of the dimness, inscrutable eyelids swollen. "It can't hear us," she said reassuringly. "Anyway, it's dead. It died when my mother did. That's what happens when you die. This was her room. She died a few days ago, I think. I can't remember time very well."

Ryre sat on the bed, away from the face. He shook himself; this wasn't what he wanted to know. "That thing in the burial ground," he snarled.

"Nobody knows what it is. You know it's the same as the ones in the houses. They grow from it."

He felt the dimness closing about him as though it were the heavy exhalation of the faces. "Why do you need to drink that filth?" he shouted, then answered himself dully "Because you need more and more of it."

"I don't," Yoce said indignantly.

That explained her comparative vitality. "Yes. But there must have been a time once when someone could have killed that thing," he said impatiently. "When it first began growing."

"We could never kill it. It wouldn't let us."

He felt her words giving power to the face. Ripping a splinter from the wood beneath the window, he lit it with his flint. He thrust the flame into the corner, peering. But the face hung on the stump, slack and puffy.

He was about to shake out the flame when the eyes opened.

The lids rose heavily, with the faintest of moist creaks. The widening crescents of dull white looked to Ryre exactly the colour of the marsh-fungus he'd once seen growing on a corpse in a swamp. The eyes were open now, swollen globes of thick white in which he could see no life at all. They seemed to watch the flame. All at once he caught up a stick, lit it from the splinter and thrust it into the face.

The wood, if such it were, of the stump began to sputter. Threads of fire squirmed across it, and vanished. The eyes were still, but the lids shivered. Then the stump caught fire; a spot of flame grew and flared up across the face. The eyes burst. In a minute the stump was a dwarf of fire, twisting and writhing as it crumpled into ash.

Ryre kicked the ash down the hole in the floor, laughing harshly. Hot ash crawled on the sides of the hole, and he glimpsed a charred stump retreating, dousing itself with earth. "What can the rest of it do now?" he demanded.

Yoce was sitting unmoved on Glode's bed. "It won't do anything. It only does if you attack it in the burial ground. That one was dying, anyway. If it had anyone to feed it would have grown again."

He grinned into the darkness. He was the thing's master now.

He could destroy it whenever he wanted to, and he would. But first—"It must have made your people forget where they'd hidden the treasure," he said. "Do you know where it is?"

"There isn't any. There never was."

"There is. You've just forgotten, if you ever knew."

"I haven't! I remember that! They made up the treasure so people would come from outside. To kill the eater."

"Then why did your men try to keep us *out*?"

"Because you can't kill it from inside the wall. You have to go underneath. And when people came here they'd drink the milk, even if our people tried to stop them. Then they'd stay and not be able to go out. That's why the men keep people out. Only they've forgotten why. They think there really is a treasure."

Everything he'd seen confirmed her words. He felt too defeated by Hoak even to be angry. "If you managed to keep some people out," he said desultorily, "why didn't they kill it?"

"Maybe they didn't get far enough. Or maybe they were frightened. You have to go all the way under the burial ground. There was a map that said the treasure was there."

"Why can't you kill it from up here?"

"Someone tried, a long time ago," she had lowered her voice; the darkness leaned closer. "It ate his woman. He set fire to the one in her room. He was sleeping there, so it grew again for him. Then he tried to set fire to it at the burial ground, but it reached out of the ground and ate him while he was still alive."

"How do you know all this?" Ryre demanded.

"Trome the healer told me. He tries not to drink much, like me. He helps babies to come and gives them names, and he tries to teach people how to do things. The man you took out, he was one Trome taught. He helped me to remember all the things he'd told me, so I could tell you. He said you wouldn't kill me."

Ryre was silent. Heat and darkness and Hoak gathered on him like mud. Yoce came and sat beside him. "I'm sorry there isn't a treasure for you," she said. "I never liked stories that weren't true. Vald used to tell me when I was little that I'd be able to go outside the wall, to stop me crying." She took his hand and pressed herself against his side.

"Does your healer expect me to kill that thing for you?" Ryre asked, letting the disbelief of his words soak into him.

"You could do it for us," she said, gripping his hand. "For your friend."

Suddenly he grabbed her shoulders and threw her against the wall. "You called the men to bury my friend!" he shouted.

"I didn't," she said. "It calls in your head when it wants its food." She began sobbing like an exhausted child—exhausted perhaps by the effort of talking to him. Irritably he grabbed her and pulled her roughly to him until she ceased shaking. All of a sudden she was straddling him, her hips gulping. "Have me," she said plaintively. "Nobody else can."

His body was shouting yes, yet he hesitated. Had they reached the true reason why Trome had sent her? Ryre didn't object to even so meagre a bribe, nor did his feeling that she was still a child trouble him. But he felt insulted by her eagerness, in a sense; he could be any man except a eunuch.

"Please," she said. "I always used to wonder. I knew it made some girls happy, until they stopped feeling it. Trome said the milk did that. So I didn't drink much, only as much as I had to. But all the boys did, so they couldn't have me, they didn't work. Trome tried when I asked him, but he was too old."

Even with Yoce's clothing laid over them the floor-boards were harsh against Ryre's knees. But once she'd closed around him he felt nothing but their union. She was eager as a parched throat; his heart seemed to be pounding all his blood into his genitals. It was quickly over. Both of them cried out.

They lay together until dawn. "You weren't a virgin," he said drowsily; then, sensing her blankness: "Not sealed."

"I did that myself," she said proudly.

As they neared the gate Trome formally wished Ryre "Your day of triumph." At the gate Yoce said "Good fortune. What's your name?"

He was unwilling to leave his name where it might be at the mercy of Hoak. "You don't need my name. You want the deed," he said and, reaching into his pouch, handed her the carved swordman. "Say that was me," he said.

Waiting for Trome to wrench open the repaired wall, he felt a cancer of panic growing within him swiftly as fire. It was the effect of the liquor; it infuriated him. Yet it was only a taste of the panic

that ruled Hoak. He averted his face from Yoce as he rode out. He wouldn't betray his fear to her. She had enough of it already.

The baked plain drank his sweat avidly. The forest took him with a slow suffocating hiss of leaves. Foliage swayed like drowned tentacles, luring him in. When he closed his eyes he felt the cooler moist air settle over him like a clammy shroud. His breath racked his throat. He breathed harder to distract himself. By the time his steed led him to a stream he was a flayed tube of thirst.

The soothing drink felt distant, merely a concept separate from the dull unchanging panic. But the very dullness of the panic helped him by enraging him. He must act. He had dreaded tunnelling beneath the eater; now this seemed less daunting. He had come out of Hoak: he could do anything.

Even the sight of the tunnel entrance failed to daunt him. He passed it once, covered as it was by a tangle of green shoots. But a large mound of earth and a pile of timber showed its position. Beneath the shoots the tunnel descended for a few feet at a steep angle, eased by steps of wood driven into the earth, then levelled into darkness.

Ryre filled his satchel with faggots and dry grass. He lifted the two rusty spades from his steed. Strapping the satchel to his back, he gazed through the trees at Hoak. Trome had left the gap open. Ryre gazed at it, then he climbed down into the earth.

He had made tapers in Hoak. He lit one with his flint and peered ahead. The taper burned feebly, sputtering. At least the flame was slow. The light plucked at the tunnel: a quivering hole of darkness that drew the walls and roof into itself. The roof was roughly but adequately shored with a thick length of timber, supported by two others forced beneath it, against the walls. It was too low for him to stand upright.

He clambered out and began to collect shoring from the pile. Birdsong was scattered over the forest like light on water. His panic at leaving Hoak was ebbing somewhat, baffled.

He climbed down with an armful of props, grinning sourly. Whoever had opened the tunnel must have believed they were outwitting the guardians of the treasure. He would make sure, he vowed grimly, that they were among those who had outwitted the eater of Hoak.

He stuck a burning taper in the earth near the entrance, then

hefted his shoring. The burden hardly taxed him, but this was only the first journey. He debated taking off his armour. But it was light, though few blades could cut its flexible leaves, which grew harder under pressure. It might save him—from what, he refused to think. He pulled the taper from the earth and holding it before the pile of shoring on his arms, stooped quickly into the tunnel.

The taper was burning more steadily now, though feebly. He had to walk slowly for fear of extinguishing it. His view ahead was cramped by the pile of wood, which was almost as broad as the tunnel; he could see a dim box surrounding him and keeping pace, shaking as if crumpled by the weight of earth above. At least it was excellent wood, he reassured himself; neither the shoring around him nor the pile outside had rotted.

The dim box swung slightly about him. Its featurelessness lulled him, stealing his sense of time and of how far he'd come. He strained to look back. His shadow flickered forward from the blinding darkness. Within it he thought he could see a tiny point of light, the tunnel entrance. Then it was gone.

He drove himself onward, trying to measure his distance from Hoak by the count of his steps. He had to trust the judgement of those who had dug the tunnel. Assuming that they had followed the original map, the course of the tunnel should lead to a point directly beneath the eater—unless the thing had grown downwards since.

His back was beginning to resent its cramping. In the dim browned light his eyes felt as if mud were gathering on them. His hearing felt muffled, suffocated. Even his legs felt hobbled, for he had to tread carefully on the uneven floor.

He dreaded that the thing knew he was approaching. He felt its vast bulk somewhere above him, and it seemed impossible that it could not sense him. He was struggling so fiercely with his unease that he had almost touched the tendril with the taper before he saw it.

It was a limply coiled pale thread, drooping through a crack between the shoring of the roof. As the flame approached, the tendril drew itself up jerkily and flattened against the wood, groping about convulsively. Ryre flinched back, almost dropping taper and props. Surrounding him beyond his cage of faint light, he heard a muffled creaking whose rhythms imitated the convulsions of the

tendril. He lowered his pile of wood to the floor and kneeling, rested on it, willing the spasms of the tendril to subside.

At last they did so, and the cracking faded: but not until half the taper had burned. Ryre walked more deliberately now, his strained gaze urging forward the dim sluggish wave of light. Darkness swelled up solidly beyond it, but yielded only darkness. When something more solid loomed into the glow, he was prepared and hardly started. It was a white root, blocking the centre of the tunnel.

It had forced its way between the shoring, bulging itself a hole. Earth was sprinkled on the floor beneath, but the root had plugged the gap it had made. It spanned the tunnel, fat and glistening white.

He planted the taper. Then he slid the props past the root on their edges, letting them down gently beyond. He pulled up the taper and holding it beyond the root, inched himself past. The root might have felt him if he'd touched it. In any case, he couldn't bear the thought of doing so.

The darkness ahead bobbed closer, thickening, bulging between the props, refusing to give way to the advancing light. He had reached the end of the tunnel, a couple of hundred yards past the root. Ahead sloped a ragged wall of earth, somewhat smoothed by time.

He dropped the timber from his aching arms. After a while he took a taper from his pouch and lighting it from the first, stuck the latter in the floor. He glanced back at the light as he made his way toward the entrance.

There he rested. Light lapped the swaying foliage above him. Should he have left the taper? Wouldn't a flame left underground starve the air? He was arguing himself out of going down again, he knew.

He saw himself spading out the tunnel, carrying back the earth, spading out, trying to prop the tunnel—But was he exaggerating the task? It might have been his fear confusing his feelings, yet he felt the tunnel had almost reached its goal. He'd lost count of his steps at the tendril.

He remembered the carving he'd given Yoce. But his words didn't require him to be like the carving. He thought of Yoce and Trome, trapped within the open wall. He thought of the children, and of Glode. If Ryre succeeded, he would have a tale in which to hold

Glode fast and give him power. Already Glode must feel nothingness closing about him as Ryre's words of him slipped away, dwindling to nothing. Ryre refilled his satchel and picked up the spades, then walked into the tunnel.

He'd hoped the taper he had left would look encouraging. But its glimmer swam forward like marsh-gas, emphasizing the enormous darkness. He set the two tapers at opposite sides of the tunnel. The darkness massed behind him, seeping into his brain, reminding him of the deceptive stillness of the white tendril, of the way the plump root seemed to have moved and swollen since the first time he'd passed it. He began to dig.

A taper burned down to the floor, and another. He filled his satchel with earth, which he scattered in the dark beyond the flames: again, again. His breath felt rougher than the earth; muddy sweat poured over him; pain clamped his muscles, tightening. He had been digging until the dark felt thickened by midnight when the creaking began.

It was all about him, muffled. It grew, a dull immense writhing mass of sound. Ryre felt as if the darkness were pressing down on him, as if the flimsy tunnel were sinking into depths where the pressure would burst the walls, flooding him with tons of earth, letting in the insidious source of the creaking.

This must be what had scared the dung out of his predecessors. As a youth he'd suffered the lightless hold of a ship for days; if this were the eater's defence it was already defeated. He dug.

The creaking trailed away, leaving the silence thick and close. There was no sound except a sprinkling of earth, ahead of him. The hard earth roof, which had held up uncomplainingly while he dug the softer earth below, was cracking.

He grabbed a length of shoring and swung it up against the roof. He ground his shoulders against it and reaching back, forced lengths of timber into place alongside him, propping the roof. Beyond it a shadow reached out for him, glistening with earth. He hurried back and brought the tapers forward.

He dug and shored another length of tunnel. Then panic flooded him. He was suddenly sure that the next thrust of the spade would touch the eater. It was waiting for that moment, to close on him. Or it might play with him, filling the tunnel with hungry tendrils, until it chose to block his way entirely.

Perhaps the thing was stealing these fears into his mind, or perhaps the darkness was thinking for him. He thrust the spade in furiously, but couldn't help closing his eyes. Glode and Yoce and the rest had fled his mind, leaving him alone.

The spade gouged the earth. Another spilling spadeful of earth for his satchel; another. Then the spade plunged into softness. Ryre fell forward, then threw himself back, wrenching out the spade. But a sliding of earth had already begun. The end of the tunnel was collapsing. He had turned to flee in case the props gave way, or before something emerged, when he realized that the wall was collapsing away from him. He had dug his way into a hollow.

When the sound of scattering earth had ceased he lit a new taper and held it low through the gap. Within was a hollow of moist earth, about seven feet in diameter. Its walls sloped up to a pale ceiling, a soil-smudged whitish object swollen with dozens of almost translucent veins. He was beneath the eater.

Appalled fascination paralyzed him. The surface was bloated like a great veined belly. Amber liquid coursed through some of the veins, others were empty and flabby. He forced himself away, back to his satchel. Emptying it of earth, he stuffed it with faggots and dry grass, and strapped it on.

He bullied himself into leaving the taper in the entrance to the hollow. If he took it in, the thing might act to defend itself. He scrambled down into the hollow, disliking the moistness of the earth. It was only ordinary good earth, he told himself, unlike the dry earth above, which the thing's hunger had drained. But he couldn't forget that the burial ground was above him. Liquor pumped through the whitish ceiling.

He piled the kindling at the centre, wondering uneasily why the hollow was there at all. It didn't matter. One last trudge to collect kindling, then he would lay a fuse to the hollow. At last all the effort which had led here would be justified; Glode would live in tale. Ryre was making for the taper, thinking of words that would preserve the power of the deed, when the tunnel collapsed.

There was a violent splintering, and a heavy fall of earth. When he seized the taper he saw that the walls of the tunnel twenty yards away had been crushed. Among the debris writhed thick whitish tubes. He kicked at the collapsed wall, and the tubes closed about

it, squeezing the earth. He knew that they would crush him even if he managed to broach the barrier.

Now that it was open battle the darkness lost some of its power. He felt it, solid on every side, but he could plan. The thing blocked the tunnel, but could he distract it? He grinned hungrily. He knew what the thing feared.

He slid down into the hollow, carrying a taper. He was about to throw the taper into the kindling—but no, the flame might not catch. Better to venture all the way in. He had almost reached the pile when he heard air moving in the tunnel, a hollow muttering. Suddenly the dim tunnel mouth was a black hole. Air swept across his face, and the taper he was holding went out.

The darkness rushed into his lungs, choking him. Above him he heard a vast creaking, no longer muffled. He scrambled in his pouch and found the flint. He struck it, struck it again; the creaking lowered toward him. The taper flamed.

When he looked up he saw why there had been a hollow. At some time the eater, perhaps not content to feed through its tendrils, had raised itself bodily toward the burial ground. Now it was descending on him, having trapped him at last. A few tendrils crept down from the edge of the dwindling hollow. The cold moist belly sank and touched his forehead.

Ryre roared wordlessly. He ran, cramped and stooping, to the fuel and thrust in the taper.

A flame groped over the pile. In a minute it was a mound of fire. The fire rushed at the white belly, which sputtered and crackled, blackening. What happened then, hideous as it was, filled Ryre with grim triumph. The thing was raising itself on its roots, which its haste exposed all round the hollow, as if it were a vast bloated spider raising itself on its web. But its retreat worked the fire like a bellows, and the flames followed it up, flaring higher, roaring.

Fire sprang out from the midst of the belly, snatching whitish fuel that writhed. Veins popped, hissing. A whole piece of the thing fell on the edge of the hollow, torn away by an arc of fire that had charred through its roots. Clods tumbled through the torn gap, smoking, blocking the gap as Ryre considered dashing toward it.

The thing had raised itself above the level of the tunnel. Falling earth had closed the tunnel mouth, but there was still a small gap, and the wall of earth looked weak. Ryre scrambled over the shifting

floor. Above him the centre of the belly was drawing up and in, trying to flee its agony; fire rushed into the drawn-in pit, splitting it open. Fire was dividing the eater along its veins, consuming each patch.

Ryre launched himself at the tunnel mouth, but slithered back. As he gathered himself to spring again the fire above him shouted, crackling and popping. It rushed above him, embracing a patch. He heard it give way, and the blazing chunk fell toward him. He tried to throw himself out of its way, but it fell full on him, smashing him into darkness.

He was buried alive. His face was full of earth. A crushing weight lay on him. He clawed at the earth, which squeezed beneath his nails, and the weight moved. His shoulders felt like an open sore, but when he raised them the weight toppled away. It was the fallen wood, quenched by soil. Propping himself on all fours, he looked about.

He was at the bottom of the hollow perhaps fifteen feet deep, open to the sky. Its sides had collapsed, and within it lay mounds of fallen earth and chunks of smouldering wood. Ash flocked over all; he beat away a settling cloud. Opposite him, where most of the earth has slid, leaned the central pillar. It was little more now than smouldering ash that retained its shape. Empty sockets smoked; a face of ash was crumbling in the wind.

Ryre dragged himself upward. His body throbbed with bruises, his mane was charred, but the fallen wood and his armour had protected him from the fire. He reached the lip of the hollow. The people of Hoak were milling about nearby, wandering blankly, halting, starting constantly as if from traps of sleep. He groped for a hold to pull himself up. Suddenly Yoce and Trome were lifting him.

The girl's left foot was bound—in a shirt patterned with swords, that Glode had worn. His fury faded quickly: Glode would have given it to her, and they must need cloth. "What's wrong with your foot?" he asked.

"Someone smashed it," Trome said.

"I broke all the milk vessels," Yoce interrupted, so swiftly Ryre could tell she didn't want revenge. "So we couldn't save any milk. Now we'll have to go outside." She saw Ryre's hunger for

vengeance, gleaming in his eyes. "You mustn't kill anyone," she said. "There are too few of us."

Trome hurried to fetch ointment. Ryre hobbled to a window and, knocking out the wood, began to chop brands. "Come here," he shouted at the wandering crowd. "All of you! Here!" He handed out the brands and lit them. The crowd stood gazing; nothing about them but the flames. "Wherever you find that thing's head," he shouted, "burn it. Let one live and by Hakkthu, I'll feed you to it in pieces. When I'm gone, Trome has a sword to rule you. Quickly!" he shouted as they stumbled away.

Trome was staring uneasily at him. "Haven't you my friend's sword?" Ryre demanded. "Then use it as wisely as he did."

Trome fussed about him, salving and binding.

"Enough, enough. I'll live, unless you smother me to death. Bring the children to the gate," he said to Yoce.

Ryre felt no qualms as he passed the wall. The power of the eater was dead. At the tunnel mouth he untethered his steed, then he filled his scorched satchel with fruit. Some hard-shelled fruit were as big as his head; the halves of the shell could be used to carry water.

Yoce was standing with the children just inside the gate. Adults stood nearby, restless and threatening; Trome was holding them back with the sword. Ryre piled the fruit a few feet outside the gate. He bit into the largest and juiciest fruit. Then he held it out to Yoce.

She stepped forward hesitantly. As she reached the wall fear clamped over her face like a mask. Behind it he could see her straggling. The mask's forehead puckered. Sweat streamed from it. Then she stumbled forward, eyes closed, across the boundary. She gripped Ryre's arm, bruising it, and opened her eyes.

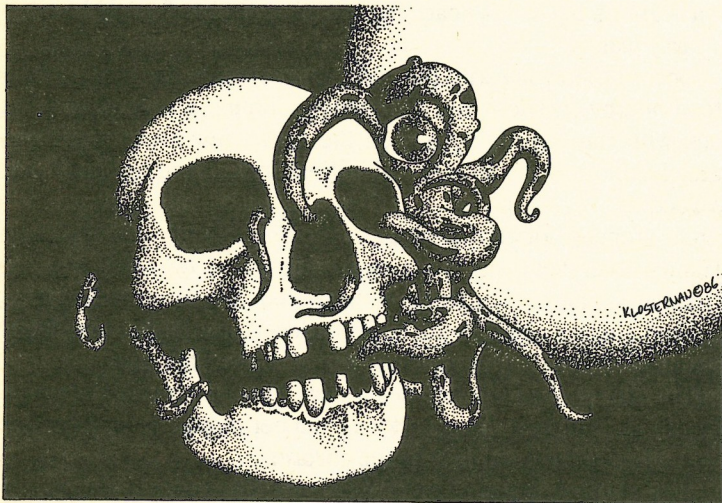
Fear still pinched her face like a claw, but she managed to smile. She bit into the fruit. Juice trickled from her mouth, tears from her eyes. She held out the fruit to the children.

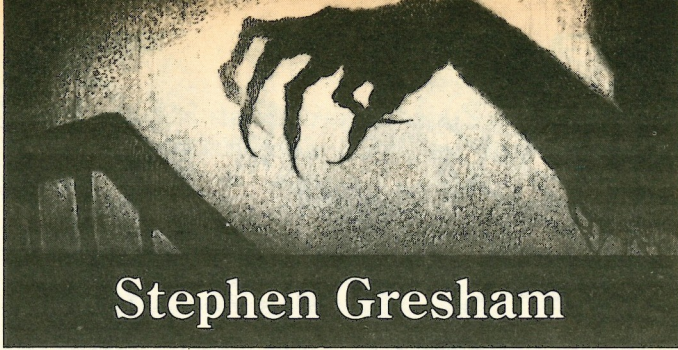
They shuffled, glancing away. Suddenly the youngest ran out and grabbed the fruit. Her sister ran to drag her back. The older girl halted abruptly, gaping, as she realized where she was. But Yoce stuffed a fruit into her open mouth.

Ryre showed Yoce the use of the half-shells, and pointed toward the stream. In time they would venture there. Trome forced himself

to emerge, breathing heavily, and exchanged swords for a moment with Ryre in farewell. All the children were out now; their parents were scurrying timidly to rescue them, glancing suspiciously at the pile of fruit, sniffing at it, snatching a fruit and nibbling like rodents afraid of a trap. Ryre looked at Yoce, but she was rounding up the children, who were laughing hysterically, discovering their voices. He rode away.

Just within the forest he halted on a rise. By a caprice of the heat he could see Hoak vividly, minute and detailed. A group of people were lustily smashing the pillar of ash, while near the gate the guardian stump was ablaze. Some old men sat obstinately by the burial ground, arms huddled over their heads, refusing to move. Yoce was leading the children into the town, pointing in the direction in which he'd ridden, showing them a small object. It was the carved swordsman. He turned and rode into the forest, toward the sea.





Stephen Gresham

THE ONE LEFT BEHIND

(American author Stephen Gresham has ten horror novels to his credit, all published by Zebra books with titles like The Shadow Man, Midnight Boy, Half Moon Down, Night Touch, and the latest, Demon's Eye. With that kind of experience, it shouldn't come as any surprise to discover that the short story that follows has a nasty sting in the tail.)

Even several days after Professor Hodgson assigned the difficult project, Tom Strawbridge remained confident that he would get the type of photos required. With those photos in hand, he could salvage his grade in Hodgson's photo-journalism course.

He was sitting in his favourite haunt of inspiration: the art gallery in McClellan Hall, which featured an exhibit of student work. His eyes roamed from piece to piece; here a freehand drawing, there an oil, or a watercolour, but his real interest was elsewhere. He rocked back on the bench, flattened his shoulders against the white



The girl eyed him with a mixture of fear and curiosity. (Artist: John Stewart)

pasteboard wall, and stared straight ahead. From a distance he looked like a dried, stiffened beetle pinned down in someone's insect display.

Just the right opportunity. That's all he needed. Hodgson's lecture drifted back:

"Now again, when I say I want a series of *grotesque* photos by next Friday, I don't want something merely odd or obscene. The *grotesque* is a subtle combination of the ludicrous and the repulsive. Your photos should convince the viewer that he is confronting something mysterious and fear-evoking. A certain spiritual deformity might also be present."

Challenging assignment.

So far, he had come up empty-handed.

Yesterday, he thought he had something: hot May afternoon in downtown Goldsmith, Alabama; moving along the sidewalk was a tall, emaciated old black woman carrying a *clear plastic* umbrella. He had been fascinated by her; she seemed a perfect subject for Hodgson's assignment. So he followed her as she picked her way in slow, exaggerated strides like a daddy long legs spider. Her skin glistened blue-black against her flower print dress.

She consumed an entire roll of film.

But when he developed the film, he was disappointed. Although not apparent to him before, the old woman possessed a natural grace that betrayed what had seemed a grotesque countenance. He had created the grotesque in his mind's eye; the camera's eye had captured something much different.

He told himself not to brood on failures, that more legwork was needed to find the perfect photo subject he sensed was close at hand. Freshly inspired, he began to meander through the exhibit.

Some of the work was crude; nothing, in fact, struck him as high quality until he happened to stop in front of a series of four water-colours, the work of Timothy West. Strawbridge had known West during their first two years at Goldsmith College, and now he recalled West's interest in art.

The photo-realism of this series caused him to linger, to savour their sharply defined lines and delicate mixtures of blues, greys, greens, and browns. Three depicted natural scenes, but one, the one that riveted his attention, was of a dilapidated shanty, the kind

of grimly-neglected shack that one might see along any dirt road in Catlin County.

The work was entitled, "*The One Left Behind*".

"That's it!" he exclaimed. His eyes pored over the painting to confirm his initial reaction. Yes, he thought to himself, there's something about this shanty that might just work.

He stepped back to let his eye view the shanty whole. It lost none of its attraction; indeed, the portrait captured a sorrowful holiness that was more evident from a distance. A few more steps back and he was convinced that he must visit this shanty, with its rough, irregular wooden shingles, crooked front porch, and darkly imposing crawl space.

He lost no time in searching for the model that had unknowingly posed for Tim West's fascinating watercolour.

"Glad you liked my watercolours, Tom. Hope my senior committee does. Yea, I remember the shanty. It's between Goldsmith and Soldier. In fact, I know a little about the people who used to live there—the Quirings."

"Tim, did you say 'Queer-ings'?"

"Well, it's spelled Q-u-i-r-i-n-g-s—some of the people out that way called them 'the Queer Ones'—maybe with good reason. My mom works for the County Health Department, and she and I made field visits out there several times. I got to know most of their seven kids by name."

"A white family?"

"Yea, though black families live in most of the shanties around there. They stayed clear of the Quirings."

His interest pricked, Strawbridge shifted the phone to his other hand.

"Tim, what in the hell was so strange about the Quirings?"

"Well, mainly it was the kids. You see most of them were retarded and had other horrible birth defects. Two or three of them died last winter. Mom was afraid they had smallpox. She never was allowed to check all of the children. Of course, she couldn't be certain just how many they had. We knew of seven."

"Where's the family now?"

"Don't know. Early in March they packed up and left. No sign of them since as far as I know."

"Listen, give me directions out there. The place looks like a great subject for my photo-journalism assignment."

"Okay, here's the easiest way to get there . . ."

After lunch, Strawbridge loaded his camera equipment into his VW and soon found that West's directions led him to a dusty, kudzu-lined driveway in an area isolated from the county roads.

There it was. Just like the watercolour.

"The One Left Behind", he muttered to himself.

He stood some twenty yards in front of the place, oblivious to the white-hot scorch of the afternoon.

He approached it carefully as one might approach a hideous wound. Satisfied with several shots of the front, he decided to explore. Up the rickety steps and onto the equally rickety porch, he paused at the sound of the shack straining forward to bear his weight. He walked through three stark rooms and mentally fixed what might have been the arrangement of kitchen and bedrooms, but nothing he imagined seemed to fit the layout.

And there was something not quite right about the weathered, pine-board floors. Not their somewhat decayed state—no, it was that they seemed very . . . *clean*.

These floors had been swept recently.

He felt a cool trickle of sweat run down his side.

He continued exploring, only now he stepped up his caution.

A partial room off what he guessed was the kitchen upset whatever equilibrium he had retained. Stacked in this closet-like area were baby food jars. He recognized the familiar *Gerber's* label on many of them. There appeared to be a hundred or more of these jars, but it was what was in most of them that gave him a nerve-rivening sensation.

Insects.

Dead insects of all kinds—flies, beetles, grasshoppers, cicadas—had been stuffed into the jars and arrayed there like a child's parody of grandmother's sealed jars of fruits and vegetables. On the label of a jar crammed with dead flies was a child's scrawled attempt to draw the head of the *Gerber's* baby. The young artist had evidently tried unsuccessfully to place a head just next to the baby's on one side of the label and thus had to try again on the other side.

Strawbridge smiled at the trio of heads. Nevertheless, the

storehouse of dead insects was unnerving. Unfortunately, there was not enough light for a shot of it, so he decided to take a quick look out back before heading home.

Walking around back, he couldn't dismiss the impression that someone else had been in the shanty in the last day or so. But the string of curiosities, he soon found, didn't end there.

When he first looked at it, images of a child's play area came to mind, and yet he had seen nothing quite like it. Angled from the ground to the roof was a mesh of rags, rope, and kudzu vines, lashed together to form a ladder of sorts.

But it wasn't exactly a ladder because it fanned out at the bottom several yards, giving it the impression of a huge spider web. His eye followed the ascent of the strange interwoven tangle to the edge of the roof where it led into a hole as big around as a bushel basket. Shingles had been carefully removed.

This was no child's playground.

Despite trembling hands, he managed a half dozen shots of it, and then noticed still another oddity. Ten yards beyond the peculiar mesh was a mound of red-orange clay topped by a large flat rock. Standing next to the mound, he could see that the rock covered a hole a yard in diameter. He guessed that the hole might have been an aborted well or cistern, covered so children wouldn't fall into it. He couldn't tell how deep it was; the rock was too heavy even to slide.

Then, as he started to leave, he sensed that someone was watching him. Someone was eyeing his every move. He walked back to his car and turned for a last look at the shanty; he had some photos now, but he knew he would come back to this haunted shack—only "haunted" wasn't the right word—as he drove away, he thought of the shanty not as haunted, but as *inhabited*, for suddenly that word captured the mystery that surrounded the place.

Driving back to the shanty the following afternoon, Strawbridge felt like a gambler pressing his luck. He had gotten some intriguing photos, but he felt that the weird setting held something more—and he was determined to exhaust its possibilities.

Besides, the photos of the shanty had begun to look to him like amateurish imitations of Walker Evans' marvelous photo series of Alabama shanties in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Moreover,

the shanty did not quite conform to Hodgson's definition of the grotesque. On the other hand, that bewildering mesh of rags and vines, the baby food jars, the freshly swept floors . . . there *must* be something more to serve as a photo subject.

This time he parked several hundred yards from the shanty and crept through the underbrush, pines, and kudzu. He reached the shanty and was about to climb the front steps when he heard faint laughter and the sound of running as if children were playing tag out back. As he neared the corner, he called, "Who's there?"

Whispers echoed from just beyond his view. Once behind the shanty he noticed that the rag and vine mesh was dancing up and down and that the aborted well or cistern was uncovered.

He hated to admit it, but he was frightened. Too frightened to say anything more. His glance shifted back and forth between the mesh and the hole until he saw something emerging from the hole. One eye and the side of a face peered over the edge. For a few seconds he considered running for his VW. Then, with remarkable agility, something sprang from the hole; hunched and swaying from side to side, it hissed at him.

"What you want?"

The shock of the encounter sent him stumbling backwards. Fighting his way through a maze of emotions, he managed a reply.

"I, uh, I just want to take some pictures."

No response, but the momentary stand-off gave him time to view the source of the question: it was a young girl. He guessed she was perhaps eleven or twelve, barefooted, wearing a clay-caked dress of gunny sack. Her skin was pale, her eyes and hair wild and red, and her face pointed, giving her the image of a cornered opossum.

Two features overshadowed others. The girl was monstrously hunchbacked; it was as if someone had strapped a large sack of potatoes to her back. The weight of the deformity had bent her toward her left side, and as she stood swaying, he could see that her right arm was heavily muscled, while her left was drawn and withered.

The sight turned his stomach; he steadied himself against the side of the shanty.

The girl eyed him with a mixture of fear and curiosity.

More than an hour had passed. The afternoon inched along,

seemingly slowed by the oppressive humidity. Sweat soaked the back of Strawbridge's shirt as he changed lenses and inserted another roll of film.

He had never photographed anything like her; he knew nothing about her except her name—"Nandina"—she had volunteered that in their only other exchange. The misshapen little girl went about her business the way a stray dog will gradually lose its fear of people and then ignore them as it scavenges about.

Watching her catch insects was enthralling. Once, as he hunkered down to get a wide-angled shot of her, he likened it to being inside one of those outdoor cages at the Birmingham Zoo, snapping shots of some disinterested beast.

He hoped the camera would capture her dexterity, especially the way she wielded a huge, rusting frying pan as a fly swatter.

His better judgment told him to finish the present roll and get to the darkroom, but his curiosity about the girl overruled.

Although she wouldn't let him get close, she listened to his questions about her, her parents, and her brothers and sisters. She responded only to one query.

"Does that bump on your back hurt you, Nandina? Do you have a great deal of pain?"

She looked up from a successful attack on a three-inch grasshopper and answered with a matter-of-factness that startled him.

"No. It don't hurt," and then she added, "Momma say it spoz'd to be my twin sister. She say the devil touched me."

The comment rendered him speechless. He tried first to dismiss it as a teasing comment. She was being a prankster—just trying to shock him, put him in his place. But as he watched her close in on another grasshopper, he realized that this creature was not capable of that kind of deception.

Her afternoon's work had earned her a sizeable pile of assorted insects, and now she heaped them into the frying pan as if they were bits of hash and proudly displayed them to Strawbridge.

"Gone feed these to my babies. I take care of my babies." And she was gone, shuttling past him, disappearing around the corner like an apparition.

Strawbridge collected his equipment, started to follow her, and then backed away. This had been enough. His head was swimming, and he was eager to develop his rolls of film.

Back in his apartment, the girl seemed a dream. Something that his imagination had peopled the air with, the same way he had created the grotesque image of the old black woman.

He suddenly thought of Tim West. A phone call might clear up a few things.

The calm faded from his voice early in the conversation; he rambled as he described the events of the last two afternoons, and once his voice cracked in alluding to the strange girl.

In the midst of the call, Strawbridge became aware of West's silence. When he pressed for a response, West answered in a deliberate, perplexed tone.

"I . . . knew the girl . . . I remember Nandina. But Tom, she . . . *died* last winter." More silence. "I helped the family bury her."

Strawbridge had hung up with West's comments still buzzing in his ear. Minutes later he had driven to the college and was uncasing his rolls of film in the darkroom facilities of Birkman Centre.

"Simply a mistake of some kind," he muttered as he fished his negatives out of the developing fluid. He raised and scanned first one roll, then the other against the wash of deep orange light.

There was nothing on the negatives except the rough landscape behind the shanty.

His mouth went dry.

But he forced himself to make a few prints. Again, no girl—nothing except a faint outline—perhaps the residue of his imagination.

As he hovered over the prints, a literary allusion came to mind. Something he had read in Professor Hammersmith's American literature survey, something from H. P. Lovecraft, one of Hammersmith's favourite writers. Strawbridge couldn't remember the story or quote the passage verbatim, but parts of it filtered back: life is a set of pictures in the brain and there is no difference between those of real things and those of inward dreamings, and no cause to value one over the other.

He had no choice but to return late that next afternoon.

That old concept of camera as "witness" occupied his thoughts as, for the third time that week, he approached the shanty. The twilight's trio of colours, blue, pink, and gold, softened its outlines; shadows deepened and darkened around its east side.

He stood behind the shanty, grasping his camera as if it were a pacifier. Near the uncovered hole, he gazed about and then called the girl's name several times. There was no answer, but his eyes were drawn to a rustling in the brush growing thickly within a bordering stand of pines.

She was watching him. Her outline was indistinct; her face inscrutable, but she made no attempt to hide. Barely conscious that his back was turned to the shanty, he stared at her, straining to interpret her action.

Then suddenly something touched him. Something softly but firmly grasped the back of his pant's leg.

Terror coursed through him, and he wheeled around. Something was skittering up the rag and vine mesh. Halfway up it turned and hesitated, and then stopped climbing as if assured that it was safe. Its form visible to him, Strawbridge froze.

"My God . . . oh, my God, my God!"

The face of the boy was powder-pale and defined by red, sunken eyes. But the rest of its countenance defied description.

They appeared to be joined at the spine; for there was not one child—but three.

To Strawbridge, stunned and incredulous, the aggregate of six legs, six arms, and three misshapen bodies seemed a writhing nest of snakes.

Only the face turned his way seemed to possess life; the other bodies and limbs, biomorphic mergings of animal and human features, moved in coffle-like obedience to the main body. The creature, for he couldn't bring himself to call it a child, was naked and afraid.

This, he knew now, was what the ghost of the girl took care of—this must be the one left behind when the Quirings moved during the spring.

An epiphany followed. He realized that this was it—the *something*, the perfect photo subject for Hodgson's assignment. There was enough light remaining to get a series of photos that would rival the classic photos of Brassai, Gatewood, Michals, Tress, Uelsmann, Weston, and other masters of the grotesque.

He approached it and began snapping shots. The creature shrieked and cowered in fear, its mouth dropping open to reveal small, jagged teeth. Saliva dripped from its lips in long strings.

He had taken a half dozen shots when the *whop* of the frying pan echoed in his ears and the pain in the back of his head brought him crashing to his knees.

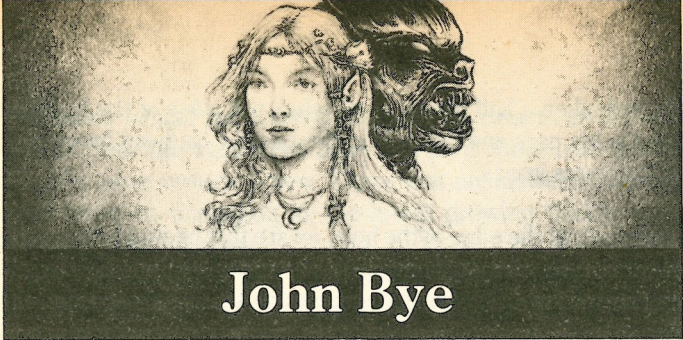
He came to at the edge of the hole, aware that he was being pushed downward. Pain shot through his head and the back of his calf, and he screamed at seeing the spider-creature sucking hungrily through his pant's leg.

Minutes later he struggled out of his contorted position deep within the darkness of the hole. Then for hours he tried to free himself, to push the heavy rock lid from the mouth of the hole. But to no avail.

Time passed, and sanity streamed away from him like a river of blood.

Tom Strawbridge held his camera tenderly; he had the photos, but there was no response to his desperate calls for help . . . except the droning night chorus of insects.





John Bye

WAYLAND'S SMITHY

High on smooth downs grey tracks meet
where breech boughs sweep in evening winds

the barrow growth
named with rifled abstraction

but here is a presence
real as memory's cloaked rustle

while the laden hill revolves towards night,
pressing dry stems to a cooling soil,

passage stones gather bleaker shadows
cold into their secret heart, for

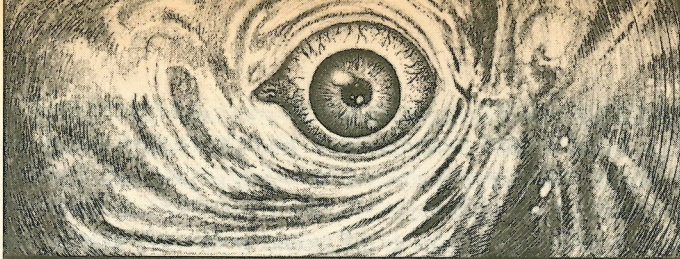
whatever is laired inside the mind
will in time erupt upon that mound



(Artist: Dallas Goffin)



Finally they came upon a rickety house made of branches and moss leaned up against a tree. (Artist: Jim Pitts)



Jessica Amanda
Salmonson

JOHN AND THE MAGIC SKILLET

(Jessica Amanda Salmonson has been a prolific and wide-ranging editor within the fantastic genre, from her small press publications Fantasy Macabre and Fantasy and Terror, to her Amazons! and Heroic Visions anthologies (DAW and Ace Books, respectively). Besides these series of heroic fantasy fiction, she has also edited two collections of stories by the noted Irish playwright and author, Fitz-James O'Brien—Collected Supernatural Stories and Dream Stories and Fantasies (both from Doubleday). Tor Books publish Jessica's Tales by Moonlight series and the Feminist Press issued What Did Miss Darrington See?: Feminist Supernatural Stories. Further collections under her editorship are due from Scream! Press and The Strange Company. Jessica's own writing includes many short stories, collected under such titles as Hag's Tapestry (Haunted Library), A Silver Thread of Madness (Ace Books) and The Blind Aviatrix (due from Zeising). Her novels include Tomoe Gozen, The

Golden Naginata, Thousand Shrine Warrior and Ou Lu Khen and the Beautiful Woman from *Ace Books* and The Swordswoman from *Tor Books*. Theater of Swords is her novel in progress. We should also mention her half-dozen poetry collections. The story included in this issue of Fantasy Tales is the second of Jessica's work we have published, and we are naturally proud to be able to include another new work by this talented writer.)

John took his hound into the bayou to hunt alligators. He hunted all day long and wasn't having much luck, on account of it was cold and all the gators was buried and sleeping. But John wasn't one to give up soon, especially since his family at home would go hungry if he didn't stock in some lizard meat for winter; and they wouldn't have no money unless he could sell a skin or two.

Deeper into the bayou went John with his hound. Finally they came upon a rickety house made of branches and moss leaned up against a tree.

"I wonders if some hermit or witch lives in that there lean-to," said John to his hound. The hound held his tail between his legs and whimpered. John took a closer look at the mouldy structure. He saw there was a hollow in the tree. The hollow made a nice dry room. Inside it was some humble furnishings. John saw this from outside the door, on account of he was kind of scared to step inside.

Sitting in the hollow of the tree was an old woman. When she realized someone was looking in at her, she hopped up off her crooked chair and came out with a stick. She looked madder than a plugged gator at first. But when she saw who is was, she said, "Why hello, John! What you doing in this neck of the swamp?"

Now John was surprised, on account of he didn't know this gnarly old woman and it didn't seem right that she should know him. He said, "You must be an old witch to know my name without us ever having met!"

She said, "Why John, you don't remember me! I's your old granny what used to rock you on my knee when you was just a little scamp!"

John scratched his head and kept a hold of his hound's collar. The hound didn't much like the old woman and kept whining. John said, "I remember a granny all right, but she wasn't as wrinkled up as you! I been told she died when I was six years old!"

“Well I didn’t die, John. I just got tired of civil’zation and came to live in this here swamp and practice some things I know without getting in no trouble for it. And I’s your granny sure enough, even though living out here might’ve changed me some, so as you don’t recognize me so well. You was kind of young back then, and I was a speck younger myself.”

John wasn’t too convinced. He thought the old witch might be trying to fool him. He said, “If you kin of mine, how is it you never once came to call, or to help out when me and mine was having hard times? Family is to help each other. So you can’t be no family I ever had.”

“What could an old woman in the swamp do to help a poor family like yourn? Don’t blame me for not helping out, John. I got little enough myself!”

“A granny is good help to a family, on account of she can watch the children so a wife can do laundry for richer folk. We got it mighty hard with just me to do outside jobs, and the wife only able to watch young ones. An old granny is always a big relief. So you ain’t no granny of mine, I know.”

“Well, John, you got a right to think that way, I suppose. You done made me feel guilty about the fact that I never did like young ones very much. I didn’t want to be a babysitter in my old age. You’re right that family ought to help each other out, though, so I should make amends. I’m gonna give you a present to take home with you a while. It will help you and your kin by keeping you well-fed in the coming winter.”

It was indeed mighty hard to get enough food in the winter, so John was very interested. The old witch went into her mouldy house and came out with a black skillet and handed it to John. He held it in one hand and said, “This skillet is kinda rusty and I got three or four better ones at home. How’s it gonna help us eat better this winter?”

“Well John, that there’s a magic skillet. I tell you, you don’t even need to put fire under it, and it’ll cook up eggs and pancakes just by cracking an egg on it or pouring on the batter. But if you ain’t got no eggs or batter, then you go ahead and put that skillet on the fire anyhow. Eggs will appear one time, and pancakes the next. And they’s mighty fine to eat, I tell you. They’s nourishing, unlike other kinds of magic which look good and smell good but ain’t nothing but a

trick on the brain. This skillet makes real eggs just like a chicken do, and real pancakes just like your wife could fix. You and your family won't get skinny eating that stuff neither, I promise you."

"Well then, granny, if what you say is true, I guess you must be kin of mine after all. This here magic skillet is gonna to be a heap of good help this winter."

"You're most welcome, John. And you come visit your lonely old granny now and then, you hear?"

"I hear, granny." Then John went home with his hound and the magic skillet.

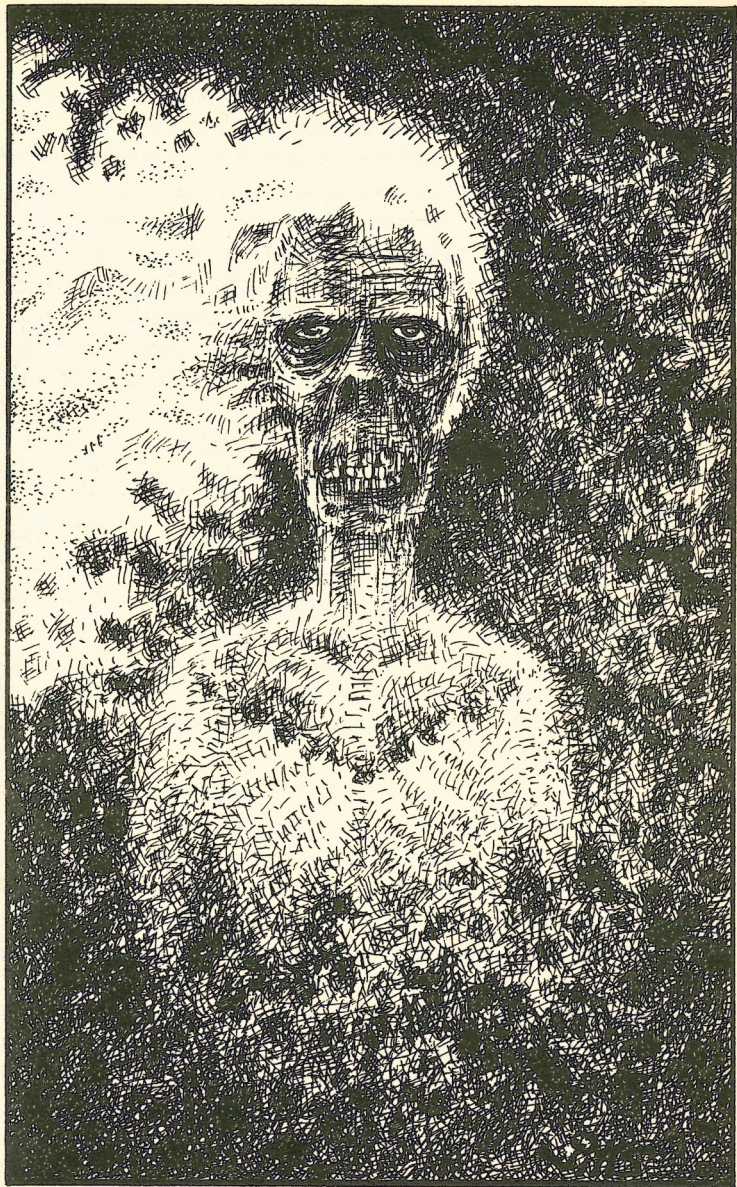
At home, John's wife said, "You ain't got no gator, John! We ain't got nothing to eat but a couple eggs and a little bit of milk and flour. What we gonna eat when that runs out? We can't even go buy something unless you get a skin to sell! Woe, John, woe!"

John hugged his wife and said, "Now don't you worry, honey, on account of we got this here a magic skillet." He done went to the ice box and took out some eggs and cooked them up for the family without having to put the skillet on the fire. The next morning, he poured pancake batter on the skillet, and cooked them up real fine for breakfast, not needing no heat.

Day after that, with no flour and no eggs, John just put that magic skillet on the old stove and heated it up. There was eggs in there all of a sudden, cooked just right sunny side up. "That a mighty good trick I can do with this here skillet, don't you think?" John said to his wife. And she replied, "It's true I ain't never seen a thing like that before."

The next day John put the skillet on the fire again and there was pancakes made up fresh and brown on both sides without his even having to turn them over. John's wife said, "You're a better cook than me now, John, ain't you." And he thought maybe she felt sort of useless, so he said, "No I ain't. I can't quite figure out where on top of the stove this frying pan ought to go." After that, John's wife made the eggs and the pancakes and fed her family, which was a happy family soon enough, what with plenty to eat and all.

Winter came and went. It was spring and hunting ought to be good, but John was sort of lazy now that he didn't never have to fetch any gators to eat and sell the skins. He was sitting on the porch one day when flowers was starting to bloom, and he was whistling a



*It was his old granny, but she was so skinny she just looked like bones with some kind of crinkled up paper stuck on the outside.
(Artist: Jim Pitts)*

nice tune. Then suddenly he saw something scary standing on the road in front of his place.

It was his old granny, but she was so skinny she just looked like bones with some kind of crinkled up paper stuck on the outside. But that crinkled up paper was her dry old skin. John stopped whistling when this frightful skinny hag came up the path near his porch. She said in a whispery voice, "Grandson John, I's a hungry old witch all right, the winter being awful hard without my magic skillet. Now that it's good hunting in the swamp, I thought to come to fetch back my skillet afore I done wither away and starve to death."

John didn't think this was a polite request. He said, "You never said the skillet was a loan. You told me it be mine to keep, and I's keeping it."

"Family's to help each other out, John. You tell me so yourself. I remember you said that, so I gave you the magic skillet. This time it's your old granny what needs helping out."

"Ain't true you could be my granny!" said John. "Ain't no witch ever in my family, else someone would've told me about that."

"You ain't just trying to make excuses so as you can keep my magic skillet, is you John?"

"I can't hear what you're saying on account of you wheeze so much, you old witch-hag. You're so weak, why I ain't afraid of you at all! You get away from my house right now before I push you down or something!"

"Well if that's the way you feel, John," said the witch, and she went slowly away on her aching skinny legs.

Next morning John's wife done started to heat up the empty skillet as had become her habit. She was expecting good fresh eggs to appear on account of yesterday there was pancakes. But instead of nice fresh eggs there was rotten ones. They smelled so bad everyone had to clear out of the house while John hurried up and buried the eggs in the back yard. A neighbour boy came by and said to John's wife, "You got a skunk tied up in your house, ma'am?" And John's wife said, "It ain't no skunk but some rotten eggs."

Well that day everybody went hungry like they used to do before they got the magic skillet. Next morning John and his whole family was right hungry for sure. They was sitting around the table eager for a stack of pancakes put before their noses. But the only thing in the skillet was a bubbling mess of glue what smelled like sour milk.

The children started crying on account of they got out of the habit of being hungry. John had to dig another hole in the back yard to get rid of the stinking glue.

"John you better go get us a gator!" said his wife. So he got his big gun and his hound and they headed off to the swamp. Right away the hound run off in some direction and John didn't see him never again. He looked all day for a gator or his hound, but couldn't find either one. There ought to be a lot of gators seeing as how it was the springtime. But for John there wasn't even a swamp-rat he could shoot and take home to eat.

Before he was aware, it done got dark outside and he still didn't have nothing to feed his family. It was so dark he got lost and finally he found his gator all right. It was so big that shooting it didn't even slow the critter down. It started chasing John all over the swamp. John yelled and yelled and ran faster and faster as fast as he could go. Luckily he found his way out of the swamp before that big old gator ate John up.

After a week, John's family was looking kind of pale and sick, on account of they had nothing to eat but some rotten eggs and sour pancake batter. Finally John figured out what must be going on. He took that magic skillet with him into the swamp and started looking for his granny's hollow tree. He found it soon enough, but there wasn't nothing in the tree but a set of bones inside a wrinkled paper bag.

"Granny," said John, "Granny, John's sorry he let you die starving in the swamp! What can I do for you now, Granny? You want at least a decent burial? If you do, then take this curse off me so I can feed my family once again! Can you hear me granny?"

"I can hear you, John," said the ghost of granny, which was talking through the mouth of the big gator that snuck up behind John.

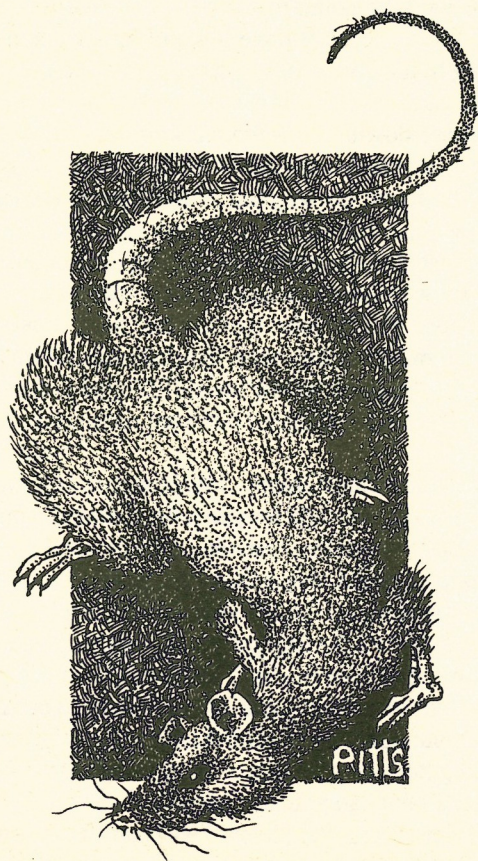
"Oh granny, don't eat me up!" said John.

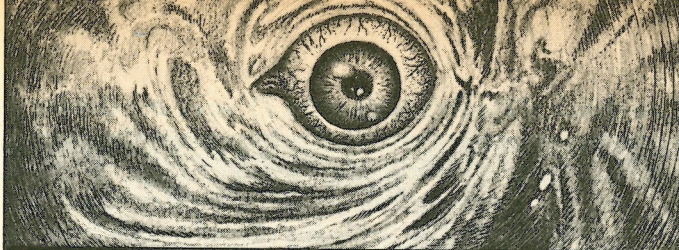
"I ain't gonna eat you up, John. Why, you more rotten than that old pan's eggs. Your spirit more sour than that rancid pancake batter. If I let this old gator eat you up, the poor thing'd probably die of food poison. That's how bad you are, John."

"I's awful sorry, granny! I know I was bad! What can I do to make amends?"

"You ask God's forgiveness, John. You ask the preacher to do an exorcism to see if that gets rid of me. You ask your

wife to run away and find someone new to take care of the family, on account of you can't do it anymore, John. You do everything you can, that's what you do. But I promise you one thing. You ain't never gonna have another thing to eat in your whole life, John! You gonna know what it's like to be a bag of bones!"





David J. Schow

THE EMBRACING

(David J. Schow is one of a number of rising young stars in the horror field. He created the term 'Splatterpunk' to describe those new Hollywood writers whose skills were honed by an environment of TV violence, Vietnam, movies, like Night of the Living Dead, rock 'n' roll music and such television series as The Outer Limits—the title of which is also the definitive, in-depth examination of this legendary SF series, co-written by Schow and Jeffrey Frientzen (published by Ace Books). In 1985 his story 'Coming to a Theatre Near You' won the Dimension award from Twilight Zone magazine and in 1987 'Red Light' won the World Fantasy Award in the Best Short Fiction category. His short stories can be found in the forthcoming anthologies Razored Saddles, Stalker, Book of the Dead, Architecture of Fear II, Psychos (edited by Robert Bloch) and in addition, the revived Weird Tales magazine will devote a special issue to his work. Late in 1989 David will see two collections of his work appear—Seeing Red (Tor Books) and Lost Angels (NAL), encompassing a decade of novellas and short stories. On the movie front, he has recently completed the screenplay for Leatherface: Texas Chainsaw Massacre

III, *an episode of Freddy's Nightmares TV series and dialogue work on A Nightmare on Elm Street V: The Dreamchild. The Shaft is his second novel, just completed. His first, The Kill Riff, is out in the USA from Tor Books and Macdonald/Futura has issued the UK hardcover. 'The Embracing' is the first story of David's to appear in Fantasy Tales (it was originally published in the US magazine Ares in 1984.) We will be presenting more work by this powerful young writer in future issues.*)

After Tillyard and Althea were injected with the drug, they were released into the labyrinth and no one heard their names again.

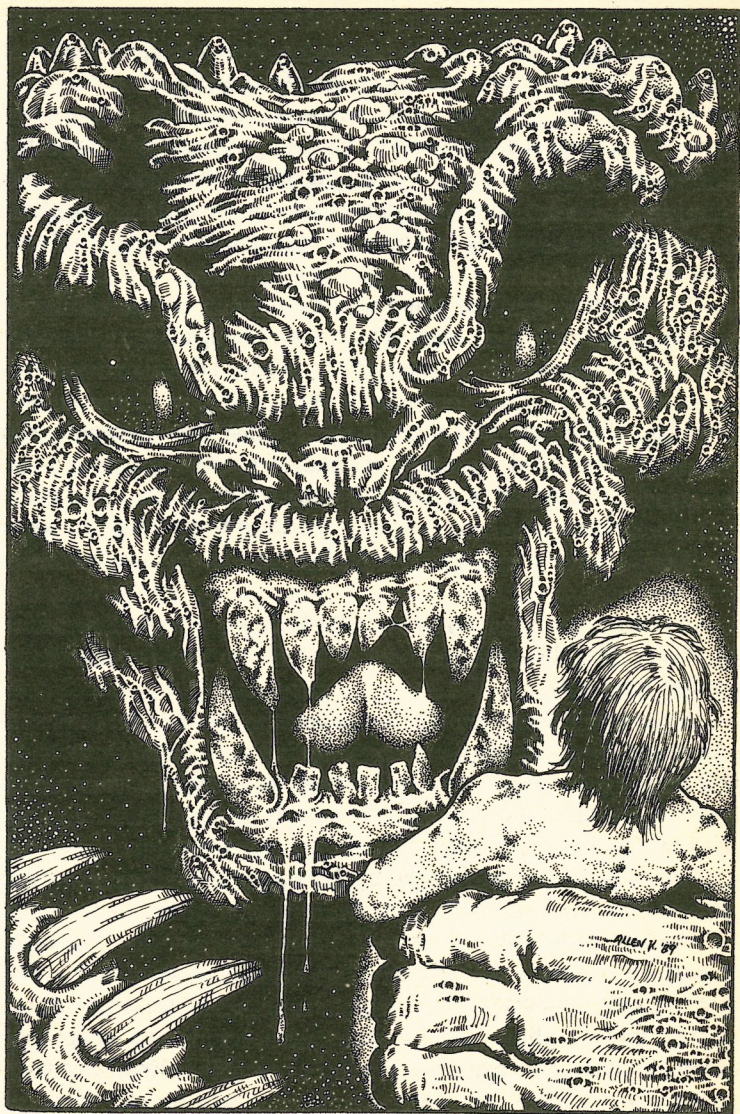
"I love you—oh *please*. I can sense you're here with me. Please be with me. Make love to me. Now, quickly, love me."

"Yes," Tillyard managed slowly. His voice, clogged and ragged with disuse, served him reluctantly—but then, the speech part was important. His nose prickled; his eyes, though sightless, darted about. "Yes. I want to make love to you so badly. It's been so long; I've been so alone." His voice cracked into a sob. "Touch me. Take me." He stretched his left hand out into the darkness. "Love me."

At the second of contact, Tillyard jacked his right arm savagely around, putting his weight and the piston force of his bicep behind the strike. The blunt, bullet-shaped stone in his fist impacted where he knew a skull to be; the wet crunch was amplified by the cathedral acoustics of the cavern. The thing that had briefly touched his arm had time for a single liquid squeal before its reflexes were severed. Tillyard knew how to time the swing, how to place the blow to kill instantly and properly.

The thing collapsed to the stone floor, its blood and brains rivuleting away into moist crannies of rock. Tillyard sensed where the corpse had fallen and straddled it, his legs registering the tingle of residual body heat. He cast quickly around and, assured that he was alone (in this chamber of the labyrinth, at least, and for the time being), he knelt and used the stone to puncture the chest of the creature on the floor. Its heart was warm and slick. Tillyard slipped the heart into his bloodbag; he could eat it later. The cavern here was too open and dangerous, and he had to get to close walls and narrow tunnels.

All that was in his mind was her face. The last thing he had ever seen was her face.



The creature gathered Tillyard up into its mitt-like forepaws. . . .
(Artist: Allen Koszowski)

A pair of burly Stockboys had whipsawed her against the courtroom wall to restrain her. She had always been more visceral in her reactions, while Tillyard—ever the artist, therefore removed from the fantasy existence most people thought of as the real world—had been defeated by his limitless capacity for rationalizing even the outrageous. He came to his feet but could not move; his very senses were stunned by the impact of the verdict. Across the room—they had not been permitted a single moment together since their apprehension—Althea was up and moving before Tillyard reacted

On reflection, Tillyard found woe even in his loving admiration for her more basic expression of humanity. She had known instantly the verdict would doom them both, while Tillyard's mind had to eliminate loopholes first, convincing itself. He stood frozen, thinking. She determined immediately, so fast that perhaps it was on a subliminal level of instinct or chemistry, that since they were doomed, the removal of a single Adjudicator from the world could not damn them any more seriously. She had leapt from her berth in fury, twisting around the guards dogging her, and went for him on the dais.

Of course, the Stockboys intercepted her—that's what they were there for. She thrashed as they restrained her and the Adjudicator smiled tolerantly.

Sentence passed, disposition was instantaneous. The medico of the court arranged his leather cases on one of the broad tables. He took great care in the inspection of his ampules, holding them against the light and nodding professorily at each while clucking absently to himself. Finally: "Which first, my Lord?"

The Adjudicator, nonplussed by Althea's aborted attack, cocked an eyebrow and said, "Him first. Force her to watch."

The last thing Tillyard had ever seen was her face. The high, round cheekbones that enhanced the value of her smile. The conscientiously formed lips, cool and soft. The expressive contrail brows arching above eyes a dark liquid brown, so deep they seemed black. Her features, the familiar topography of her face, were stressed now into anger, into sorrow, into heartbroken loss and utter frustration. But the spirit still burned there, in her eyes, even though it was the end.

They slammed her against the wall and vinyl gloves caught her

throat in a choke-hold, forcing her to watch as per command. To watch Tillyard.

He was efficiently immobilized by another Stockboy. The burly mutant held him fast as he struggled—the cords jumping redly out from his neck. Done now with his frittering and spot-checking, the medico of the court approached. Tillyard noted clinically that the medico had some sort of spinal defect that forced him to walk with a crablike shuffle, body averted sideways, and that his left hand seemed partially paralyzed. When not in use, it drew up against his chest, like the claw on a child's digging toy.

Across the room she was now silent, fighting to stop the tears that came involuntarily at first and then coursed down her face. Neither had done anything of which to be ashamed; that no one present in the court cared either way was more reason for emotion now. Of all the truths that might have punctuated this moment, of all of declarations Tillyard wanted to hear but did not require of her, nothing was heard. She had decided not to give the bastards any more. Tillyard felt a pang and tears generated in his own eyes.

He was watching her, cataloging the beauties of her face as he was jabbed. He felt the steel penetrate the crook of his arm; his muscles were tight against the hold of the Stockboy. The demon brew was, as he expected, hot and burning. He imagined his flesh scorching and blackening with its passage. Gritting his teeth, he did not take his eyes off her. Physically denied, they locked onto each other with lines of sight and caring. The chemicals mingled darkly with his blood and made the circuit of his heart once, twice, and in the very distant background Tillyard could hear the natter of the court officials but ignored it, with tears cascading freely down his face. He blinked them away to focus on Althea, and for that moment they were united. Neither said anything about love; it was not necessary.

And then the grey blotches blossomed on Tillyard's corneas. They were like patches of ice, with crystalline borders that expanded and began to bleed into each other, linking up like fibrous mesh. Stupidly, Tillyard attempted to peer around the patches slowly scabbing over his eyes, even as he felt his eyes die. He could still see Althea, but now she too faded to grey like a bad video image, becoming blurry and indistinct. At last she was obliterated from view. There was the palpable sensation

of something thin and nonporous *cleaving* to Tillyard's eyes, like decals, but that was ridiculous—it was the drug. And the drug was permanent.

And the picture of Althea he held in his mind was not the one he had just logged. Rather, he thought of how she looked just after they had made love—her eyes dark and sparkling, the relaxed, contented attitude of her face, the neat row of upper teeth visible as she purred in a deliciously low register. He could feel her body manufacture the sound, as he felt all the important and private sounds she made

The muscles in Tillyard's knees suddenly went to rubber and he crashed face-first onto the courtroom floor. He fell down the funnelling rabbit-hole of his own mind, swimming in alien colours, tumbling, his feet striking his face, into unconsciousness.

"Now her," said the Adjudicator, and Tillyard heard it before he passed out. Abruptly it seemed terribly important to show Althea they could not best him with their drug, to say *I love you* against its riptide of disorientation, and he tried to force the words out, past his inoperative vocal chords and numb lips. He marshalled his draining strength and *pushed*—she had to hear it as he was going down; she had to. Now it was important. He *pushed* and felt the words leave his body. His mind floated for a second, giddy with victory . . . and having succeeded, he let oblivion suck him down and away.

Althea watched Tillyard collapse in a heap, as though all the bones had been withdrawn from his body without ceremony. He crumpled without a noise, and for a second even the Stockboys holding her were stunned by the grotesque sight.

She wrested loose and managed to reach the huge courtroom doors before they battered her down with their truncheons. Blood flowed copiously from a split and swelling eyebrow, and the medico sprinkled some powder into the wound before jamming her with the needle.

The officials of the court had no way of perceiving the massive hallucinations that accompanied the prime function of the drug, the removal of sight. Almost like some sort of bizarre compensation, the show it provided was spectacular.

When she was gone, the Stockboys, *en masse*, looked expectantly up to the bench, like greyhounds awaiting a table scrap. The Adjudicator pondered a moment, then said, "You may run her

through the Stockboy barracks once or twice before taking her to the labyrinth." The mutants looked to each other and grinned.

Three hundred and five—no, six.

In a place where there was no day, no night, no time and no change whatsoever, Tillyard had a number. Three hundred and six. How many he had killed. Killed and eaten.

Crouched like a neanderthal man within a tight, secure niche of rock, Tillyard wolfed down the scraps from his bloodbag, the leftovers from the creature he had battered to death almost an hour before. A subjective hour, purely—in the labyrinth there was no time.

It had been long ago, an eternity ago he had come to consciousness sprawled on the rock floor. Water, from somewhere above, patted onto his forehead in tortuous syncopation *bap bap bap*. The water smelled like chalk. He coughed and the convulsion sent shockwaves slamming through his brain; the afterburn of the drug was agonizing—so agonizing that at first he did not realize something was feeding on his left arm. Something with evil little rows of teeth had torn the flesh and was busily lapping up Tillyard's blood with a cat-like sandpaper tongue.

Tillyard did not *need* to see it. Hearing it eat was too much.

"Aahhh!" He lashed blindly out in the dark and heard the thing scuttle angrily back. *Thought you were dead, mate, sorry . . .* It sounded too small to be a part of the genetic trash periodically flushed away into the labyrinth, and so possibly was a denizen of the harsh place, a native living in the tunnels before there were Adjudicators and medicos and mutant Stockboys.

Angry with himself now, Tillyard could only think that the first thing he had done in the labyrinth was utter a primitive noise, take a violent action. The essence of irony—wielded in terms of punishment and sculpted by the expert mind of an Adjudicator.

"Since your favorite term for us in your rabble-rousing is 'barbarian,' and you will not desist, you will become as one with us, a savage, that you may perceive the difference. You wrongly believe us cruel and primitive; this causes unrest and dissatisfaction. We will show you what cruel and primitive are. We will show you what it is to be a barbarian."

Tillyard had a following in the arts, and that was both dangerous and frustrating. Dangerous because it gave him an intelligent

audience; frustrating because it was an audience that could not be counter-propagandized—his followers would never buy a sudden conversion of viewpoint. The judgment became necessary because it was a personal coup for the Adjudicator; he had decided to make Tillyard a myth-object lesson. They would remember what happened to Tillyard.

And they would take a cue from what would also happen to his overly vocal companion, Althea. Yes. They would learn that association was as evil as provocation. The pair of dissenters were blinded in the prescribed fashion. They were consigned to the labyrinth according to law, to survive, barbarically, forever. There was no time in the labyrinth.

Tillyard licked the blood off his fingers. He had lost the last two of his right hand eight kills ago—number Two Hundred and Ninety-Eight.

For three hundred and six kills he had been searching for Althea, yet in all that time had never once spoken her name, nor had he spoken his own—two shreds of armour that protected him from the things in the labyrinth and their devilish form of low-grade telempathy. They were not creatures of specifics, yet, for the total darkness of the labyrinth, and using some baffling furrow of their mutant brains, they were able to detect Tillyard's emanations. The love they registered for the unnamed female blanked out the more crucial message—that Tillyard was a carnivore, intelligent, cunning, physically stronger. The creatures absorbed the dominant emotion and assumed the persona of the female as bait. Tillyard reasoned that names meant nothing. He exploited his advantage ruthlessly; her face was in his mind as he bludgeoned and killed. He thought only of her laughter as the ichorous blood of the creatures crept past his elbows, drenching him. And he remembered her name, hoping that somewhere in the labyrinth she had managed to be as canny.

He bent to the trickle near his head and sniffed. The flow was clear; he drank first and then rinsed the dry and flaking blood from his arms.

There was a disturbance. Mentally he logged a heavy movement in the chamber below him and he froze like a pup on scent, listening. He recognized the wet slap-and-drag motions of one of the huge creatures he had indexed as Shufflers. They were dense and massy, almost impossible to kill with their reptilian plating and tusklike

teeth. Their leaden movements were misleading—when angered or frenzied with hunger, they reared up on their hind legs, using teeth and claws to shred. They fixed on motion to attack—theirs were keen, bestial senses rather than human capacities enhanced by mutation—and so Tillyard did not breathe, did not twitch.

Rather than actually *feeling* the impact of the blow, Tillyard heard the fat paw whistle through the air prior to the sudden strike that numbed his entire body to further sensation. The pain had no time to localize. Tillyard had been hit; he knew he was falling from his hiding place, but was aware of nothing except the white veins of lightning etched across his mind's eye, and the imperative to escape, to avoid contact.

Twisting and hitting the rock floor of the cavern caused the roar of blood in his ears to subside. He heard the phlegmatic respiration of the beast as it advanced on him, could smell the oily reptilian stink of it, could feel its bulk cutting across the thick atmosphere of the room. Agony lanced up his legs—landing on his knees, he had managed to break something and could only flop forward onto his face. He groped for the bone knife sheathed next to his bloodbag and found it had clattered away in the fall. One of the Shuffler's taloned feet slapped the damp stone inches away from his face.

The creature gathered Tillyard up into its mitt-like forepaws, rearing back on its hind legs and sweeping him up into the air. Tillyard braced his arms against the thing's hot snout, trying to push away in vain, for next would come the scrabble of paws that would open his guts up and then the slow leaking away of his life into the darkness.

A foreign object blasting through with enormous force almost ripped Tillyard's arm away—it seemed to be a pole or crude spear about four inches in diameter. By the sound, it had homed in on the Shuffler's throat and was imbedded well, but the creature did nothing to indicate the injury was anything more than an annoyance. It clutched its dinner, Tillyard, firmly. There was movement elsewhere in the room, but Tillyard was incapable of discrimination.

Abruptly the Shuffler lurched sharply forward, surprised or pushed from behind by its new attacker. It shrieked, hot saliva splattering Tillyard. He felt the sickening vertigo of its fall and realized he was sandwiched between the massive beast and the

floor. The air rushed. Tillyard gave vent to a shriek of his own, abrading his ragged vocal equipment with his own absolute terror. It reverberated in the cavern but he never heard it.

His shoulderblades crunched onto the floor and the Shuffler was on top of him. Its teeth sank into his flesh, and Tillyard mercifully blacked out.

The place to which he wafted dreamily down was pleasant; his pain was filtered out as he descended. He saw Althea's face, the perfect, timeless picture, again. He saw his own face as well, as he remembered it. Of course, he had no inkling of what his face might look like *now*, but it was in physiognomy yet unmarred by the changes obvious to his sense of touch, a face without the scrub of beard, or the scars, or the crusty pits of his atrophied eyes. A needle, a small puncture in the fabric of his existence, had removed everything from him, had made him a threat no longer to the regime that employed Adjudicators and Stockboys and the rest—or so it was designed. His art, his friends, his lover, his *vision* had been hacked rudely away. His sight remained. Totally blind, he was enabled to see the regime for the real monsters they were, could see himself as the barbarian they had forced him to become, and could *see* that as an enemy of that regime he had ceased being a pamphleteer and so might school himself in the more ancient, essential arts of killing and survival.

Of course he could lay down and die. Defeat their purpose. Althea was somewhere in the labyrinth. That was why three hundred and six had died so violently. He did not do it to perform for his jailors

He was a machine. One like him could evoke widespread terror. Ten, moving in total darkness, hearing with touch, seeing with sound, practicing their killing art, might cause enough panic to disrupt the regime's control; a hundred could topple the regime itself. Even the canine senses of the Stockboys did not allow stalking by air density, or detecting an oncoming blow by smell. Stockboys were not trained inside the labyrinth.

Tillyard awoke to the feel of a cool hand on his forehead. His body tensed like a spring and he made automatically for the knife no longer at his side. Then the pain gripped him, curling him up fetally, forcing a weak sound to bleed past his lips. The hand had been withdrawn; there had been no killing blow to follow its contact.

The air of the chamber was heavy with the odour of scorching meat.

Tillyard fixated on it and spent several moments meditating the pain down to a less sensitive level.

The hand returned, making no hostile motions, but offering a chunk torn from the Shuffler. Steaming juices dribbled down Tillyard's arm, making the meat almost too hot to hold. He ate and swallowed quickly. Back in an almost totally dead section of his mind, he felt the absurd urge to ask for salt.

When the food hit his stomach, Tillyard's brain swam blackly and he finally vomited onto the cavern floor with such force that he lapsed back into unconsciousness. Sickness or incapacitation of any kind, he thought as he was pulled down, usually cycled back to the only end product there was in the labyrinth—death. He cursed himself for his weakness, his inability to hang on. Escaping from the Shuffler's belly had most likely depleted any reserve of luck he had stored.

But when he came back up a second time, he found himself neither eviscerated nor dead. Wildly he thought that perhaps he *had* been killed by the Shuffler, and was in a state of fugue between hells or limbos or whatever awaited him past death in the labyrinth. It was highly possible; he was sick and in shock, reeling with disorientation—until the cool hand returned as well, to tentatively stroke his forehead, leaving cool little trails through the fever-sweat that had gathered there.

Tillyard's grip on the only concept of time available to him was lost during his achingly slow recuperation. He was fed. The remains of the Shuffler would last a very long time. Time stood in stasis at three hundred and six.

There were no cooing words of promise from his benefactor; no verbal bait. Tillyard could not escape the unease that came from the lack of a palpable threat. He waited, but he never relaxed—the very concept, like salt, was absurd. He was poised on a deadly edge, he felt, unwillingly submitting to some sort of game alien to the labyrinth.

Until he touched her for the first time.

The hand was gently swabbing his brow with a scrap of hide or cloth, when, totally on impulse, Tillyard reached out and found her shoulders. She was startled, and with a gasp attempted to pull away,

but he held her locked—not letting her free, yet bringing her no closer. She was smaller, more finely boned than him. His thumbs traced the line of her collarbones and distant memory slammed indecorously home in his brain. He broke the contact after only a few seconds and she retreated, not to come near him again until his belly growled from a lapsed feeding schedule.

Her.

The memory of her face and touch became sharp-edged and distinct, almost painfully clear. It never left Tillyard's mind now, and so it was only a matter of time before he took his life in his hands by speaking to her, alone for now in their dank pocket of the labyrinth.

"Come to me." It hurt to speak, as though his throat glands had modified to other purposes and would no longer permit the old way. "I can sense you're here with me."

When there was no verbal response, Tillyard felt relief. She came and crouched close, just out of reach—perhaps she was watching him.

And when he was able to walk, she led him. He did not touch her again. The picture like a mezzotint on the inside of his skull, burned. Once again, Tillyard's mind was convincing itself, working logically toward a reality.

The creature that led him had to be Althea. But she would not speak—perhaps the best argument for her identity. The hungry tunnel dwellers always talked to him first. Their route was a new one to Tillyard, which brought his caution rushing up quite unbidden. His automatic defenses were humming, like small, terribly costly mechanics or incredibly intricate dermal implants. His natural senses were better than machines.

The pathways through which she led him were uninhabited by any of the usual occupants of the labyrinth. Occasionally he recorded non-natural metal implants in the rock walls—possibly an abandoned industrial adjunct to the maze of caverns and tunnels. Their significance was noted but lost; she led him onward. Deeper.

Tillyard's left hand never lost contact with the haft of the bone knife she had returned. She rushed ahead of him, apparently unaware or unconcerned about the traps that might lie before them, and Tillyard grudgingly allowed a bit of trust—she had, after all, neatly dispatched the Shuffler that had intended to lunch on him.

His paranoia eased back a notch; just then the tunnel dead-ended out. She stopped.

Not quite; he registered a narrow cleft in the rock but she did not continue through it. Rather, she came to him and tugged his arm, indicating that he should precede her now. *So this is the game*, his mind nagged.

He jerked the knife free and with no hesitation whatsoever stepped through the split in the rock wall. She hung by it, not following. Waiting, it seemed.

There was no life inside. Instead, there was a gently upward slope scattered with shale chips that had cascaded down from above. Tillyard worked his way up the incline for awhile, sniffing for trouble. His leg-muscles, recently pressed back into service, stung in protest, and his back was soon lubricated with sweat. What he caught was no threat, but it stopped him short in surprise.

The air had changed, subtly. There was a greasy sheen to its odour, a tinge of metal, of solvents and moisture. He took a few more steps upward. Various carbons and a sweeter tang he did not immediately recognize. He cocked his head; there was an open space not too far up and the weighty moisture of the cave air seemed to dwindle behind him.

Tillyard's heart began to thump heavily and an icy sweat broke out over his entire body. He began trembling lightly and blew his breath out quicker to compensate. She had shown him the way out of the labyrinth; what was in front of him was topside.

But she was not behind him.

He could smell the air; air moved by breezes and carrying with it the forgotten smells of the outside world. It was like perfume, seductive, holding Tillyard in unmoving awe. He turned and picked his way with infinite care back down the slope, slipping on the shale chips and finally reaching the bottom in a noisy, ass-sliding scatter of loose rock. His scabbed legs did not seem to mind.

Beyond the cleft, she waited.

"It's the way out," he said in his hoarse, nearly useless voice. "Come with me; it's the way out!"

She moved, but not toward the cleft. Her hand traced lightly down his cheek in a caress that seemed to web his lungs in electricity; it became difficult now to breathe. She pulled him toward her.

"It is you," he said.

Touch me. Love me. I've been so alone.

His arms went around her and he found that one of her own was missing at the elbow. Like his severed fingers. You lost pieces of yourself in the labyrinth, and if you survived its denizens, it would consume you, absorbing your soul and being into the rock walls. It might rob you of your voice, even as it had spent endless, painstaking time robbing Tillyard of his, though he still retained that selfish remnant of speaking ability. It might rob you of other things

"Althea." He said it only once. It was a whisper, sucked quickly into the stone walls without an echo. She held him tighter, her face now buried in the hollow of his neck. He could feel her tears running down his chest. She made no sound.

Take me. Love me.

He forced it out, tears now welling up in his own eyes; "I love you." He said it quietly, his teeth clenched together as though he was in great agony.

His eyes were squeezed tightly shut as he buried the bone knife in her back up to the hilt. She stiffened in his embrace and he could feel her blood pumping out, slicking his fist. With a guttural rasp of air that sounded vaguely like a sigh, she slumped and he supported her. She was dead in an instant. Tillyard knew how to time the swing, how to place the blow to kill instantly and properly. He was a machine.

He laid her corpse gently down at the mouth of the cleft and spent some time squatting near her, touching her face with his calloused fingers. She had scars and battlemarks to match his own. It was her right arm that was gone. The eyes were still good, he thought crazily. They still made tears.

He had spoken her name once in three hundred and six kills, now three hundred and seven. He could whisper that, and the other things, to himself as he climbed, the evaporating tears streaking backwards in the dust coating his face, but he did not. Smelling the air, he decided he had no further use for speaking.

The wind was very cold, and the redly setting sun reflected off Tillyard's dead eyes as he crawled, at last, out of the earth to resume his work.



Charles Whateley

WORMS

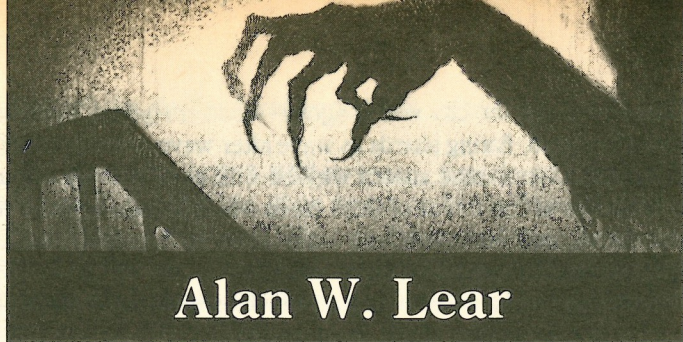
Lo! Death, the brutal calm, hath set
A seal upon the derelict,
That once reared as a man, and let
The winds of voyage solicit.

And *his* crew? A carrion crew,
Nimbly glide and grotesquely twist
The length of the sloop, sail of cerement blue,
Poisoned, ambling towards the west.

But lo! the sail is cast up.
The maggots wriggle on the deck—on an arm—
Fleshless for days—an eye socket a cup—
A goblet filled to brim of that writhing harm.



I began to search among them for an oblation suitable to the day of my death. (Artist: Harry O. Morris)



Alan W. Lear

FATAL BELLMAN

(Alan W. Lear sold his first story in 1982 and became a full-time writer two years later. In 1984 the BBC broadcast his occult radio drama, Why Not Take All of Me?, the stage version of which has since been produced by various amateur companies. Alan's short fiction has appeared in The 25th Pan Book of Horror Stories, The 18th Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories, Ghosts and Scholars and Winter Chills.)

It was a firebow which woke me on the morning of the day of my death.

Or rather—not the firebow itself, but the clamour raised by my small birds as they panicked in the firebow's flames. They were screaming like the tortured damned; the battering of their wings as they hurled themselves against the glass-domed roof of my tower was a fragmented apocalypse. I emerged from my shelter by the barricaded stairhead and was hypnotised in an instant by the fine savagery of the scene.

The sky above the city was in agony—shattering itself again and again into jagged, flaring shards as wave after wave of hard radiation bombarded it. Its insane aurora washed with ever-altering colours the branches of the forest of dead trees which stands beneath my glass dome, and converted my small birds to terrified, hurtling bright gems in the shrieking air above me.

Straddling the chaos, a blinding arc of white, solid flame stretched from horizon to horizon of the Western sky.

I have been told the firebow represents the second and final promise of the gods to Mankind. We have known for centuries that we were redeemed from annihilation by drowning. Now we know we will never burn. Never again . . .

Many of my small birds, striking their heads against the glass of the dome, had fallen senseless to the bracken-strewn floor. By the time the firebow faded, and the forest of dead trees was once more gaunt and black against the winter sky, I stood ankle-deep in a carpet of shuddering feathers: wrens and goldcrests, serins, bluetits, robins and sparrows.

I began to search among them for an oblation suitable to the day of my death. I had been planning to offer the rarest of my possessions: *merops apiaster*, the vagrant bee-eater from Southern Europe. But he lay broken, his vivid breast stained dull scarlet. In his place I chose a redstart, *phoenicurus phoenicurus*.

He had been caught in my nets when he passed near the city on his summer migration. Slightly smaller than a sparrow, the male of the species has blue-grey upperparts, a black face and russet tail. In winter he turns brown.

When he was conscious again in my cupped palms, I left the dome through the trap-door and made my way to an empty window-frame in the wall of the storey below.

It was a chill day, the sky above the city colourless and unsympathetic now the firebow was gone. Some previous owner of the tower, meaning to repair or redecorate it, had caused scaffolding to climb from the pavement to the storey below the roof. I walked out along one steel tube of the topmost level, taking my time. Things should be done deliberately on the day of my death.

Thirty storeys below me, the empty street glistened with frost. On the other side squatted a bank of low, grimy, graceless tenements. I reached the end of the slender tube, kissed the

redstart's fragile head and hurled him as high as I could into the sky.

He shook his brown winter wings, floundered clumsily for a moment in the thin air, then began to heave himself away over the rooftops. I wondered if he was flying to a frozen death in some gutter of this silent northern city. Perhaps not. The gods can be capriciously humane: perhaps my redstart flew on until he reached the sands of Africa at last.

Meanwhile it was time for me to look down and see who was watching me.

There were two. Women, if I could believe their shape.

The closer had cropped black hair. Her face was a narrow oval with cheekbones prominent. She was petite, insubstantial. The short tight shift she wore was of some furred material, grey-blue like certain lichens. She sat some fifty feet below me, four hundred above the street, half-sprawled in an angle of the scaffolding with her bare legs and feet dangling down.

The second girl was her sister, going by similarity of features. She was bigger, heavier built; she wore a shift of a milky orange colour, and her hair was bone white.

The sun was not shining on them; nevertheless, as they looked up at me, each sister was shading her eyes with one hand.

The black-haired girl spoke.

"Now it's nobody's."

Hunger in her voice.

"If you only wanted rid of it—" this was the white-haired sister, "—why didn't you give it to someone?"

I told her: "I did give it to someone."

"What do you mean?"

"Who did you give it to?"

"To my death."

A crash broke the city's silence. I looked up and out. One of the towers was gone from the skyline. Other towers are less lucky than mine: they have no scaffolding to lean against.

I said, "Today is the day of my death."

"You're making fun of us," said the girl with black hair.

"Am I?"

"Are you going to die today, then?" asked her sister.

"The redstart was an offering to my death. Are you born every time you have a birthday?"

I could not see the understanding dawn in their eyes; the hands still hid them.

"Is *that* what you mean?"

"You do this every year!"

"Last time it was a linnet I freed."

They licked their lips.

"A linnet . . . And the time before?"

"Let me think. *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*: a sedge warbler."

Almost I could hear them salivating.

"And before that?"

"And before that?"

"Could it be you are trying to find out how many days of my death there have been?"

"Don't you want to tell us?"

"Thirty-four."

Still they darkened their eyes with their hands.

"Thirty-four years?"

"You're lying!"

"That would mean that the first time—"

"The *first* day of your death—"

"—must have been the Day when—"

"Listen," I said, "I would like you to come up here to me now. Both of you. I would like you to see where my small birds live."

"I didn't think anyone alive could still remember *that* Day."

"I remember. Will you come?"

The black-haired girl looked down at her sister. I could not see the glance which passed between them. When she turned to me again, she had become the voice of both.

"You seem nice. Small and tawny, with big round eyes as if you're secretly scared of us. Perhaps we *will* come—not today, but some time. Perhaps, when we do, we'll bring our other sister along with us. Our big sister."

"Just as you wish," I said.

"My name's Galinthé."

"Just as you wish, Galinthé. And just as *you* wish . . ."

The white-haired girl remained silent.

"We have to go now," said Galinthé.

But they did not go. I had an inkling why; to oblige them, I started back along the slender metal tube to the window. I waved before I entered the building, and they waved back. Neither used the hand that was shading her eyes.

I waited in the shadows behind the wall. It was a long wait: the sisters were patient. But at length I heard the hiss of two bodies plummeting through air, two soft thuds when they landed five hundred feet below. I peered cautiously over the sill. Galinthé was crouched on all fours in the middle of the street, looking nervously about her. The white-haired sister was already darting across to the nearest tenement. A door opened to admit her.

Now I knew what danger I was in, I and my small birds.

I was waiting for the women when night fell, hidden in a dark doorway down the street. They did not guess at my closeness as they slunk from their tenement, crossed over and began to climb the scaffolding of my tower.

A black shape, the length of my forearm. A white shape, slightly larger. And a third. So huge, it seemed amorphous against the night sky as it climbed, like a creature whose size had been won at the expense of definition. In colour tawny: my own colour, but paler.

I felt a momentary qualm for the door to the dome against that monstrous weight; but I had spent most of the afternoon reinforcing it. I crossed the street and entered the tenement.

Their room was on the ground floor. Scent led me to it at once. In the thick darkness I found the remains of a fire with three soft rugs stretched about it. Three corners of the room were piled with droppings; the fourth with cracked bones, feathers and maggot-crawling fur.

It was cold and achingly damp. The air was full of ammonia—a sexual smell, a smell twitching with impatience for something to happen within it.

Sampling the odour I smiled nostalgically and murmured: "Grishkin in a drawing-room . . ."

Reverie: self-invoked, inescapable. I stood transfixed, remembering the day of my first death, the Day we all died, when fire had come in through the walls of our homes like a ghost, colourless as water, to strip Mankind naked of flesh and all the adornments of conceited civilisation.

I thought of a story I once heard. On that same Day, only moments before the cataclysm, the Face of God was seen in the sky above the city. And he was just as Mankind had always imagined Him: serene, white-bearded, sorrowing. But when the fire began to fall, that Face was seen to rip apart like a paper mask, and behind it there were suddenly a hundred faces leering down, each one grotesque, sadistic and bestial.

People have spoken of what befell the few survivors of that Day as a punishment on Mankind for having chosen, over the centuries, the way of the beast in preference to a true, achieved humanity. But standing there in that room, I was not convinced. For I have seen Mystery return, like a flight of dark eagles, to the world.

I thought of how city life had been before the ghost-fire came. Of car parks, life insurance and quartz-driven clocks. And then I thought of blue-black air buffeting beneath my outstretched wings, of the moon forever fleeing out of my reach as I soar towards it singing, of how the sky screams as I plummet through its darkness to meet the earth and my prey below . . .

I might have stood enchanted in that room till dawn; but a sound from the floor startled me back to myself. Something small had ventured out from a hole in the wainscot and was scurrying for the open door. I moved instinctively.

As I left the tenement, a heavy pellet was churning around in my guts, demanding to be expelled. My own foolish fault. I had been gorging myself on small birds all afternoon, in preparation for the evening's work. Swooping upon a mouse had been inexcusable greed.

I crossed the street. I dared not take time to cast the pellet now, not with Galinthé and her sisters in my tower.

I thought of that monstrous third creature. What if she was cunning enough to find my hidden trap-door? Was she even now glutting herself on my small birds, spraying the dome with geysers of their blood?

I raced up the scaffolding. The hard, bright stars, each one a separate alien god, ogled their images in the pavement frost. I reached the top-storey window; my anxiety faded as I caught the sound of scratching claws from the stairway leading to the roof.

I whistled and stamped my feet as I crossed the floor, to let them know I was coming. The scratching stopped.

When I got to the foot of the staircase they were already halfway down, smiling bashfully. I felt a spasm of disquiet. Only Galinthé and the white haired sister were there.

Looking beyond them, I saw that the wood of the door to my dome had been wrenched entirely away from its frame. Even the featureless granite slab I had laid across the doorway was deeply and savagely scored by claws.

They approached me in woman's shape, naked and pale blue-white in the stairway's gloom. A triangle of ermine, another of sable.

"Only two?" I said.

Galinthé giggled. Small breasts which hardly stirred.

"There was a third," she replied.

"She went away," explained the white-haired girl.

"Don't worry, though."

"No, don't worry about *her*."

"I'm sure we'll be enough for you."

They advanced upon me, one on either flank, their slim bodies swaying to an unheard rhythm. Within their pink mouths, the tongues furred around on themselves, soft tubes of flesh.

"Come and see where I live," I suggested. "I have wine. We can drink together."

"We'd like that," they said.

"We'd like to drink wine."

"And afterwards we'll sleep."

"*You* will sleep."

"The sleep of delicious exhaustion."

I was thankful, then, for the discomfort of the pellet in my guts; without it, I might never have resisted their hypnotic murmuring.

"You'll sleep through tomorrow until the night that follows."

"Then perhaps you'll meet our *other* sister."

"Although you may not like her."

"She isn't like us, poor dear."

They were unafraid to let me see their eyes now: not here in the darkness of the corridor. The pupils were widely dilated, glistening black lakes within islands of yellow-brown.

"This way," I told them.

I climbed through the hidden trap-door and pulled them after me, both together, holding on to their hands when they were through. The scent of ammonia insinuated the air of the forest of dead trees, causing my small birds to stir on their perches and chirp without waking. At the sound, the women's bodies quivered, and I felt their nails extend sharply into my palms.

"Later," I soothed, leading them to my shelter. "I will show you my small birds later. The wine first. Come."

Three hours have passed. Now they lie sleeping at my feet, their white bodies stretched on the bracken floor of the forest of dead trees. I am happy to let them sleep their fill.

It was no prowess or stamina of mine which put them to sleep. I am not a drake or a cockerel. No—it was the golden wine that they lapped so greedily with their pink tongues as they sprawled naked in my shelter. The sisters were too blithe and too secure to register that I, as I bided my time with them, was sipping from a different bottle.

Their case is like the history of Mankind writ elfin and languorous. For we, too, before the Day came on which we all died, never ceased to toy with our annihilation like a kitten with a ball of twine, too avaricious for the flesh of wrens and bramblings to think about the consequences of our greed.

"Surprising how you never wondered," I told the sisters as they drank, "that so small a man as myself could have survived thirty-four years in this world of ours—a world where the vulnerable are destroyed as inevitably as my small birds are snared in the nets I lay."

The sisters exchanged uneasy glances.

"You," I continued, "who know that yourselves would never have lasted an hour without the protection of your other sister. Did you think she was the only creature in the world who grew gigantic when she metamorphosed?"

Slowly, warily, the white-haired girl lowered her wine glass to the bracken. I saw the muscles of her hard flanks begin to contract.

"You must often have looked up in the night and beheld a huge, raptorial shape blotting out the stars above the city. Did you not shudder to imagine its monstrous talons transfixing your flesh? And yet you let yourselves be lured up to my lair, and you drink my wine

in arrogance as though you and your sister were the only hunters left alive in a wilderness of prey."

The white-haired girl's spine arched. I struck a match.

Two pairs of round, black pupils snapped shut into vertical slits down the burning yellow of the iris. Galinthé's glass spilled on the bracken. As one, the sisters yowled and sprang for me . . .

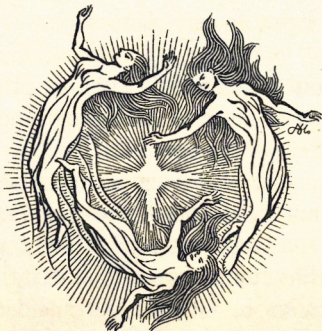
I am happy to sit in my forest and wait until they wake again. Galinthé already is beginning to shift and moan in her sleep. The unpleasantness will all be over before dawn, before my small birds wake. I would not wish them to see what I mean to do to the sisters. It would upset them.

The girls' claws never reached me. I had timed things to a nicety. They lost consciousness in mid-spring and fell to the bracken; then I dragged the two smooth bodies out into the starlight. Once I had expelled the pellet of bone and feathers from my insides, I undressed and waited for the metamorphosis to come.

Tomorrow I must return to their tenement. I must make sure that the third sister did not escape the trap I set there. I am troubled by the thought of her. Am I strong enough, old as I now am, to prevail against her in a fight? And what would my small birds do, if they lost their protector?

The glass dome is almost too small to hold me, now that the change has come to my body. My wings brush the glass. My talons are like razors, and long as the sisters' thighs.

Sleep tight, lovely ladies. The horror will not commence until the moment you wake.





THE CAULDRON

Readers of *Fantasy Tales*, during the ten years it was published as a small press magazine, will already be familiar with the range of fiction to see print in these pages. This has always been a major part of our editorial policy. Newer readers of this Paperback Magazine will also know, if they have bought both our first two issues along with this one, that we provide a mix of horror, sword & sorcery, psychological terror, high fantasy and science fiction in the stories we publish, embellished by a selection of artistic styles as diverse as the prose they illustrate. Our first three volumes from Robinson publishing have showcased that combination of written and pictorial fantasy in what we hope has been an entertaining and attractive format. It's not expected that everyone will enjoy every story, but we hope that for the modest cover price you have all had a good read. Let us know if you haven't, and why; and let us know if you have, as well!

'The Cauldron', our regular letter column, provides an important function: to allow our readers to tell us and others what they think about *Fantasy Tales* and its contents. With the wide readership we currently enjoy, your views are as important as ever, and the comments of our new readers are especially welcome. So please keep those letters and your best story votes coming.

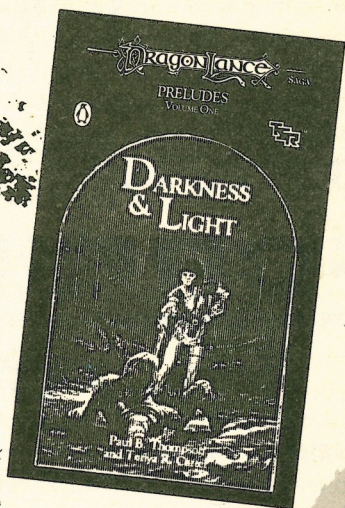
Those readers who remember our lead story in the Autumn 1988 *Fantasy Tales*, Charles L. Grant's 'Now and Again in Summer', may be interested to know that it has been chosen by editor Karl

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Edward Wagner for his annual collection *The Year's Best Horror Stories XVII* (DAW Books), along with selections from such other British publications as *Interzone* and the World Fantasy Convention anthology *Gaslight & Ghosts*.

And for those of you interested in learning more about the history of *FT*, you might like to check-out the tenth issue of the British fanzine *Critical Wave* (£1.50 per copy or £5.00/\$10 for six issues from 33 Scott Road, Olton, Solihull, West Midlands, B92 7LQ, UK) which includes an interview with yours truly, a complete bibliography of our first twelve issues, and comments by Dennis Etchison, Ramsey Campbell, Karl Edward Wagner and intrepid publisher Nick Robinson.

This issue is in its way a watershed. *Fantasy Tales* 3 firmly establishes us within the marketplace and we confidently expect that your support will, over the next twelve months, enable Britain's premier fantasy fiction periodical to become even better. At the time of writing, future plans are proceeding which will allow *FT* to reach an even wider readership (but we'll keep you guessing about that until next issue's editorial) and, needless to say, there are many notable stories from some of the biggest names in the realm of the fantastic due in upcoming issues. We hope you'll stay with us . . .

Now, let's see what you thought about issue 2:

REAL POETRY!

New reader Ian Creasey writes from Withington, Manchester: "I picked up *Fantasy Tales* Vol.10 No.2 the other day in Athena. I'd never seen it before, so I thought I'd give it a try. . .you are reaching new readers.

Briefly, I thought it was pretty good. I'll buy it again, anyway, and cash is the highest form of praise! My favourite piece was the poem *Vampire Sestina*, which was simply brilliant and an inspired choice for your magazine. It was *real poetry*! A traditional form (I hate free verse), genuine iambic pentameter (many people seem to think it sufficient to stick ten syllables on the line, but *Vampire Sestina* scans properly) and meaningful content too! What more could one ask? Please publish more poetry of this quality in future.

Second best was *The Man Who Felt Pain* — an original idea well executed. I have not read Brian Lumley before, but I will look out for him in future.

Thirdly, I enjoyed *The Cure*, a gripping story with a good ending. But the first sentence was too obviously designed as a narrative hook — I prefer a bit of subtlety in a story opening.

The other stories were OK but nothing special. *Ice and Fire* was too conventional; *Stepping Out* lacked an explanation of why the demon was suddenly able to break free; and *The Dispossessed* was too obscure.

I realize that your title *Fantasy Tales* implies an emphasis on fiction, but I do think you could include some articles as well. After all, fiction is readily available in books — I like to see profiles, interviews, essays etc. as well as fiction in a magazine.”

MORE REGULAR SCHEDULE?

From Doncaster, South Yorkshire, Bill Congreve asks a question: “Congratulations on your magazine’s new deal with Robinson Publishing. As an Australian, this is the first issue I’ve paid a lot of attention to. Your distribution Down Under is limited to specialty shops; this issue I bought shortly after arriving in the UK.

A question: When are you going to publish more regularly than twice yearly? The present schedule, going by the contents of this issue, seems to particularly suit name authors amusing themselves between novels with stories they know won’t sell to *F&SF* or *Twilight Zone*.”

ARTIST WRITES

Regular FT illustrator Dallas Goffin comments from King’s Lynn, Norfolk: “Many thanks for the complimentary copies of the new *Fantasy Tales* and for finding space to print my drawing therein.

Along with other correspondents, I lament the passing of the old ‘Art Nouveau’ look which made the magazine so attractive, but it’s great to have a publication of this sort on display in W.H. Smith and the contributors getting wider exposure.

Once again, congratulations for creating such a vital outlet.”

WOW!

Another new reader, Stuart J. Hughes, praises us from Burton-on-Trent, Staffs: “The only word I can think of to describe *Fantasy Tales* is brilliant: 104 snappy pages of short stories, illustrations, poems and letters, all in an impressive paperback format. Wow!

Having just read *FT* for the first time I was impressed immensely. A nice balance of stories on different subjects, not all horror, not all fantasy; I liked that. The illustrations were all good, especially the cover. Congratulations.”

ENJOYED ASHLEY

From Radford, Coventry, John Carter writes to tell us: “Fantasy Tales Vol.10 No.2 was a fine issue, and the three best stories in my opinion were: 1) The Man Who Felt Pain; 2) The Cure; 3) The Dispossessed.

I also enjoyed Mike Ashley’s column — the man is a mine of information, and I’ve always had a lot of respect for his opinions and reviews.

I must agree with Brian Lumley’s observations in *The Cauldron* concerning the logo and the story headings. So far in the new format the cover art has been stunning, but the actual logo doesn’t ‘smack ya in the face’ as it should do (as the old one did!). Not to worry too much though, 99% of all new projects (in any walk of life) develop ‘teething troubles’. Just keep pluggin’ away, I’m sure the plan will come together in the end.”

ACHIEVING NEW HEIGHTS

Peter Tennant, from Thetford, Norfolk, likes our new look: “Congratulations on the new format and regular publishing schedule for Fantasy Tales. It’s nice to see the magazine on show in bookshops at last.

Hopefully under the aegis of Robinson Publishing you’ll achieve new heights, both in terms of distribution and quality of work presented. The opportunity is well deserved and long overdue.”

YOUR FAVOURITE STORY

Reactions to our second paperback issue were slow coming in. Please keep sending us your letters of comment about what you like or dislike in *FT* and list your three favourite stories in each issue. We really do appreciate your views. According to the votes received, Brian Lumley’s *The Man Who Felt Pain* was your favourite story in No.2, closely followed by William F. Nolan’s *The Cure*, and a tie in third place between *The Dispossessed* by Joel Lane and *Ice and Fire* by Ken Bulmer.

Future Fantasy

by Mike Ashley

With over a hundred books to cover, not much room for chat, but first two immediate items of news which will interest horror fantasy fans. The publisher Victor Gollancz is launching a new horror line, VG-Horror. You may have seen the first book out in August, *The Island* by T.M. Wright. The series will become monthly in January and Gollancz are actively seeking new horror novels. From Pan Books comes a new sf/fantasy line, in both hardback and trade paperback, to be launched in February 1990. As I write the initial line-up is still to be resolved but there's much promised from such writers as Charles de Lint, Melanie Rawn, Pat Murphy, Paul Preuss, Judith Tarr and others.

Right, on to the new releases. As always publication details may be subject to change. I've used the abbreviations: hb for hardback, pb for paperback and tp for the large format trade paperback. I've also used a rating system as follows:

- ***** Essential, don't miss it
- **** Very promising, look out for it
- *** Worth considering, depends on your taste
- ** Not so sure, check it out first
- * Up to you, I won't bother with it

TOP TIPS

- ***** Prentice Alvin Orson Scott Card (*Legend* hb, December). Third in the Prentice Alvin series set in a magical colonial America. If you've read *Seventh Son* and *Red Prophet* you'll need no further urging.
- ***** *The Dragonbone Chair* Tad Williams (*Legend* hb, August). You may already have seen all the promotion

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**THE DARK
TOWER**

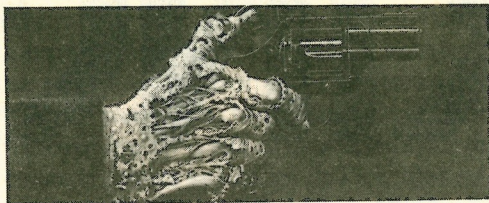
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given this title but you'll have to wait till August 1990 for the pb. It's a giant of a book, the first in the *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn* trilogy, and might be the ultimate fantasy-world series of the eighties.

**** **Guards! Guards!** Terry Pratchett (Gollancz hb, November) The latest (No.8) in the Discworld series, without a doubt the best humorous fantasies around. No.6, *Wyrd Sisters*, is a November Corgi pb release. Pratchett fans may also want to check out *The Unadulterated Cat* with cartoons by Gray Jolliffe from Gollancz in September.

**** **The Great and Secret Show** Clive Barker (Collins hb, August). This is a retitle of *The Art* reported in the last column, and you won't want to wait for the pb. It's the first of a trilogy chronicling the battle between the forces of light and evil.

LOOK OUT FOR

*** **The Archivist** Gill Alderman (Unwin Hyman hb, October). A first novel from a promising new talent. A richly-textured work set on a distant planet ruled by a matriarchy and where science is banned.

*** **The Fairy of Ku-She** Lucie M. Chin (Collins pb, February). A delightful Oriental adventure full of dragons, gold, fairies and wonder.

**** **Moonheart** Charles de Lint (Pan hb/tp, Spring). One of the lead titles to launch Pan's new fantasy line from this talented Canadian writer. De Lint's fantasies are stylish and inventive. Also lined up are his *Greenmantle* and *Yarrow*.

*** **Prince of the Blood** Raymond E. Feist (Grafton hb, September). A new Midkemian novel set 15 years after *The Rift War* trilogy. According to the author "It's Feist coming out of the closet and wanting to be Rafael Sabatini." His previous novel, *Faerie Tale*, was a Grafton September pb.

*** **Here Be Daemons** Esther Friesner (Sphere pb, February). First of a new humorous fantasy trilogy with

demons banished from hell causing havoc on an African archeological site!

*** **Down River** Stephen Gallagher (NEL hb, February). Latest horror novel from the author of *Valley of Lights*.

*** **Disagreement With Death** Craig Shaw Gardner (Headline pb, November). Another humorous fantasy very much in the vein of Terry Pratchett, but American-style.

*** **Glitterspike Hall** Mike Jefferies (Collins tp, October). New fantasy series by the author of *The Loremasters of Elundium* trilogy and set in a neighboring kingdom.

**** **The Dark Half** Stephen King (Hodder & Stoughton hb, October). King's name should be enough. This new psychological horror novel is the first of a four-book deal which earned a reputed advance of over \$36 million!

*** **The Wolf's Hour** Robert R. McCammon (Grafton hb, November). McCammon is one of the best of the new breed of horror writers with an inventiveness and skill which at times puts him ahead of the rest.

**** **A City Not Long After** Pat Murphy (Pan pb, Spring). One of the promised new line-up for Pan's sf/fantasy line. More sf than fantasy this is a strong novel of a visionary future.

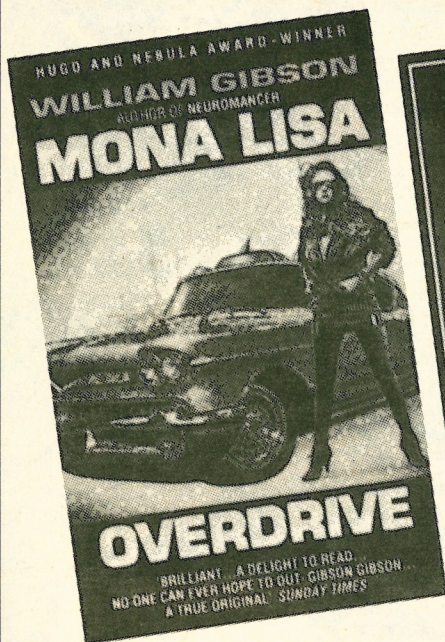
**** **Dragon Prince** Melanie Rawn (Pan hb, February). Major new fantasy series to launch Pan's hardcover fantasy line, set in a complex *Dune*-like world where the dragons are part of both the nation's economy and ecology.

*** **Sadar's Keep** Midori Synder (Unwin pb, November). Book 2 of *The Queen's Quarter* trilogy where an evil queen's rule blights the land of Beldan.

*** **Grass** Sheri S. Tepper (Bantam Press hb, October). Tepper gets better and better. Her characters and stories are believable and convincing. This latest is a science fantasy set on a distant planet. Her earlier *The Gate to Women's Country* is a Corgi February pb.

*** **The Rainbow Gate** Freda Warington (New English Library hb, November). A new novel not part of the Blackbird sequence. Her childhood fantasies become reality.

Your Future Reading



William Gibson
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SUNDAY TIMES

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- *** **Caught in Crystal** P.C. Wrede (Futura pb, December).
A strong feminist quest-fantasy with good characterisation.
- *** **The Age of Chaos** Jonathan Wylie (Corgi pb, October).
The third in the *Unbalanced Earth* trilogy.

FOR THE CONNOISSEUR

Like fine wine these books are rare and for the specialist. Always, of course, a limited selection.

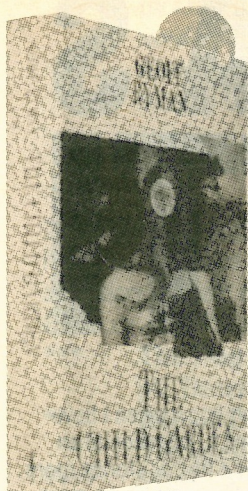
- **** **The Harrowing of Gwynedd** Katherine Kurtz (Legend hb, December). The start of a new Deryni trilogy set between *The Legends of Camber of Culdi* and *The Chronicles of the Deryni*. If you've not read any of the Deryni books check out the earlier ones first. Well-written, complex and rich, these are premier fantasies.
- **** **The Child Garden** Geoff Ryman (Unwin Hyman hb, October). In a future semi-tropical London children are raised in Gardens and educated by viruses. SF in the style of Henry James.
- *** **Fastyngange** Tim Wynne-Jones (Hodder & Stoughton hb, February). A Somerset castle takes a strange hold over a young woman who starts to lose touch with reality.

SEQUELS II

I've already listed a number of trilogies and series. Here are some others for those trying to keep track.

- ** **Magic Casements** Marc Alexander (Headline pb, October). Volume 2 of *The Wells of Ythan*.
- *** **Man From Mundania** Peirs Anthony (New English Library hb/tp, February). Latest in the pun-ishing Xanth series.
- ** **The Labyrinth of Dreams and The Shadow Dancers** Jack L. Chalker (NEL pb, January & March). Volumes 1 and 2 of *God Inc.* trilogy.
- ** **Thief of Dreams** Adrian Cole (Unwin Hyman tp November). Volume 2 of the *Star Requiem* series, a Moorcockian mixture of ancient science and fantasy.

- *** **Troika** Louise Cooper (Unwin Hyman pb, October). Volume 5 of the *Indigo* octology. Volume 6, *Avatar*, should follow in February.
- *** **The Glass Salamander** Ann Downer (Futura pb, November). Volume 2 of *The Spell Key* trilogy.
- *** **The Sorceress of Darshiva** David Eddings (Bantam Press hb, November) Volume 4 of *The Mallorealan* series. Volume 3, *Demon Lord of Karanda*, is a Corgi December pb. Also Volume 1 of his new series *Elenium: The Diamond Throne* is a Grafton October tp.
- ** **Blood of the Tiger** and **Brother to the Lion** Rose Estes (Bantam pb, October & February). Volumes 1 and 2 of the *Saga of the Lost Lands* set in Earth's prehistory.
- ** **The Dracula Caper** Simon Hawke (Headline pb, February). Volume 8 in the *Time Wars* series.
- *** **Ship of Dreams** Brian Lumley (Headline pb, December). Second in the *Dreamworld* series set in the fantasy world created by H.P. Lovecraft.
- ** **Conan the Defiant** Steve Perry (Sphere pb, January). The latest in the long running additions to Robert E. Howard's original muscles & magic series.
- *** **A Pride of Princes** Jennifer Roberson (Corgi pb, December). Volume 5 of the Cheysuli series.
- *** **The Third Book of Lost Swords** Fred Saberhagen (Futura pb, October). Above average series set in a magic kingdom.
- ** **Godbond** Nancy Springer (Futura pb, January). Final book in *The Sea King* trilogy. A talented writer not at her best.
- **** **Piper at the Gates of Dawn** Mary Stanton (New English Library hb/tp, November). Sequel to the original and delightful *The Heavenly Horse from the Outermost West*. For all lovers of horses and fantasy. [Can you recall where the title comes from? Answer at end of column.]
- ** **The Third Chronicle of Hawklan** Roger Taylor (Headline pb, December). Third volume in this tetralogy, readable but unremarkable.
- ** **Doom of the Darksword** Margaret Weis & Tracy



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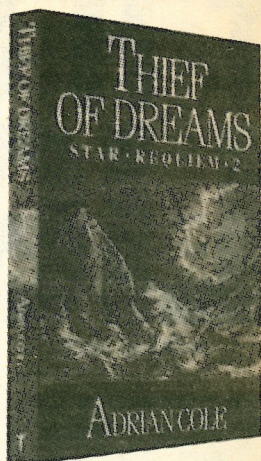


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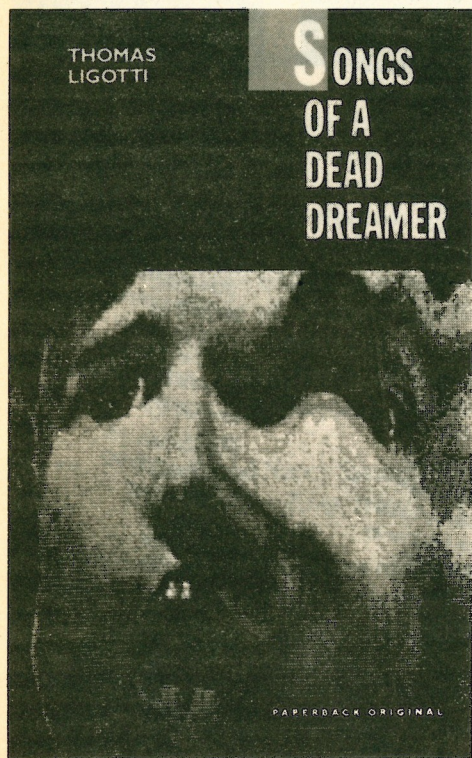
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FANTASY
REVIEW

October
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Robinson Publishing

Hickman (Bantam pb, October). Volume 2 of *The Darkword* trilogy from this prolific team of fantasy-quest writers. Also forthcoming *Rose of the Prophet* (Bantam pb, March) the first in *The Will of the Wanderer* series.

ARTHURIAN & CELTIC FANTASIES

The exploits of Arthur and his knights continue to provide inspiration for many fantasies and there are enough books this time round for a section of their own together with associational books set in the Celtic or post-Roman British Isles.

*** **The Dog and the Wolf** Poul & Karen Anderson (Grafton pb, December). Volume 4 of *The King of Ys* series.

** **Isle of Destiny** Kenneth C. Flint (Bantam pb, January). The latest of his Celtic fantasies.

**** **White Raven** Diana Paxson (NEL pb, October). If you missed last year's hb or tp you must buy this beautiful retelling of the Tristran and Iseult story.

**** **White Nun's Telling** Fay Sampson (Headline pb November). Second Volume in the *Daughter of Tintagel* series (volume 1, *Wise Woman's Telling* out in June if you missed it) about Arthur's half-sister Morgan Le Fay.

*** **The First Long Ship** Keith Taylor (Headline pb, December). Second in the *Bard* series; a good mixture of realism and fantasy.

**** **The Blind Knight** Gail Van Asten (Fontana pb November). A highly original Arthurian fantasy set in Norman-ruled Saxon England.

*** **The Pendragon Chronicles** edited by Mike Ashley (Robinson pb, October). An anthology of Arthurian stories including two short novels and many rare items. Modesty forbids me to say more!

SHORT FICTION

If your fancy turns more to short stories there are several new anthologies and collections due in addition to those mentioned elsewhere.

*** **Sword & Sorceress IV** ed. Marion Zimmer Bradley

- (Headline pb, October). 18 fantasies with work by Charles de Lint, Diana Paxson, Jennifer Roberson and others.
- *** **Night Terrors** ed. Charles L. Grant (Headline pb, October) 12 horror and fantasy stories from authors, David (Rambo) Morrell, Joseph Payne Brennan and Karl Edward Wagner. First published as Volume 2 of the prestigious *Night Visions* series of which volume 5, with brilliant stories by Dan Simmons, George R.R. Martin and Stephen King, was issued as a Gollancz hb in August as *Dark Visions* and is well worth checking out.
- ** **Casablanca** Michael Moorcock (Gollancz hb, November). A miscellany of Moorcock's new and recent short works plus a revised version of *The Great Rock-and-Roll Swindle* called *Gold-Diggers of 77*.
- **** **Arrows of Eros** ed. Alex Stewart (NEL pb, November). Anthology of erotic sf/fantasy stories.
- **** **Crown of Stars** James Tiptree Jr. (Sphere pb, February). Final collection of brilliant stories by the tragic Alice Sheldon.

NOTABLE REPRINTS AND FINAL ROUND-UP

- *** **Battle Circle** Piers Anthony (Corgi pb, November). Omnibus Volume of Anthony's early trilogy about Sos the Rope. Two other Anthony trilogies are also being reissued in omnibus format in November, **Of Man and Manta** (Corgi) and **Tarot** (Grafton).
- *** **Wizard at Large** Terry Brooks (Futura pb, December). Mass market pb of the third of Brooks's *Magic Kingdom* series, more original than his *Shannara* books.
- ** **Eden's Eyes** and **The Cartoonist** Sean Costello (Pan pb, October and January). New horror novel and sequel.
- ** **Madblood** John Farris (Gollancz pb, October). A retitling of this author's early popular horror novel *All Heads Turned as She Went By*.
- * **The Lemurian Stone** Stephen Hickman (Fontana pb, January). This looks another run of the mill fantasy-quest novel, but I hope I'm wrong.

- ** **Steel Ghost** Christopher Hockley (Grafton pb, November). Intriguing title.
- ** **The Lurker at the Threshold** August W. Derleth & H.P.Lovecraft. (Gollancz pb, December). Classic 1945 novel by Derleth written from brief notes left by Lovecraft.
- ** **The Tommyknockers** Stephen King (NEL pb, October). Mass market edition of one of King's weaker novels.
- *** **The Face of Fear** and **Midnight** Dean R. Koontz. (Headline pb, November & February). The first is a reprint of Koontz's 1977 pseudonymous novel (as Brian Coffey) about a clairvoyant who 'sees' a murder committed. The second is the first mass market pb, edition of Koontz's latest blockbuster. Koontz's enchanting fable, *Oddkins*, is also now available as a Headline tp (October).
- *** **Dragonsdawn** Anne McCaffrey (Corgi pb, January). Mass market edition of last year's welcome new Pern novel set in the early days of colonisation.
- * **Creature** John Saul (Bantam pb, November). Saul's a good writer but I'm always put off by these one-word horror titles.
- * **The Slime Beast** Guy N. Smith (Grafton pb, November). Mind you, these three words aren't much better!

Finally, for the non-fiction enthusiast:

- *** **Bare Bones** ed Tim Underwood & Chuck Miller (NEL pb, March). A collection of revealing interviews with Stephen King.
- *** **Faces of Fear** Douglas Winter (Pan pb, Spring). A collection of interviews with leading horror writers by one of the field's most perceptive critics.

[And the answer to who originated the title *Piper at the Gates of Dawn*? King Crimson may have used it, but it was Kenneth Grahame in *The Wind in the Willows* who coined it.]

1989/90 FANTASY CALENDAR

- OCT 6-8:** FANTASYCON XIV. Midland Hotel, Birmingham. Guest of Honour: Thomas F. Monteleone, Special Guest: Stephen Laws, Master of Ceremonies: Brian Lumley. Membership: £14/\$25 attending; £5/\$10 supporting to: Fantasycon XIV, 15 Stanley Road, Morden, Surrey, SM4 5DE, UK.
- OCT 27-29:** WORLD FANTASY CONVENTION 1989. Sheraton Hotel & Towers, Seattle, Washington USA. Honoured Guests: Ursula K. LeGuin, S.P. Somtow, Robert R. McCammon. Toastmaster: Ginjer Buchanan. Membership: \$75 attending; \$30 supporting to: World Fantasy Convention 1989, P.O. Box 31815, Seattle, WA 98103-1815, USA.
- NOV 17-19:** NOVACON 19. Excelsior Hotel, Coventry Road, Birmingham. Guest of Honour: Geoff Ryman. Membership: £12 attending to: Bernie Evans, 7 Grove Avenue, Acocks Green, Birmingham B27 7UY, UK.
- APR 13-16:** EASTCON. Cobden Hotel, Birmingham. Guests of Honour: Iain Banks, Anne Page, SMS. Membership: £20 attending; £9 supporting (until December 1st) to: Unit 28, Metropolitan Works, Enfield Road, London N1 5AZ, UK.
- AUG 27-29:** CONFICTION. 48th World Science Fiction Convention. The Netherlands Congress Centre, the Hague. Guests of Honour: Joe Haldeman, Wolfgang Jeschke, Harry Harrison, Andrew Porter. Toast Master: Chelsea Quinn Yarbro. £40 attending; £16 supporting (until December 31st) to: 28 Abbey Road, Cambridge, CB5 8HQ,

UK or Box 95370, 2509 CJ The Hague, the Netherlands.

(Please remember to enclose a stamped addressed envelope or two International Reply Coupons from the Post Office when writing for details about the above events.)

COVER ARTIST: ANGUS MCKIE

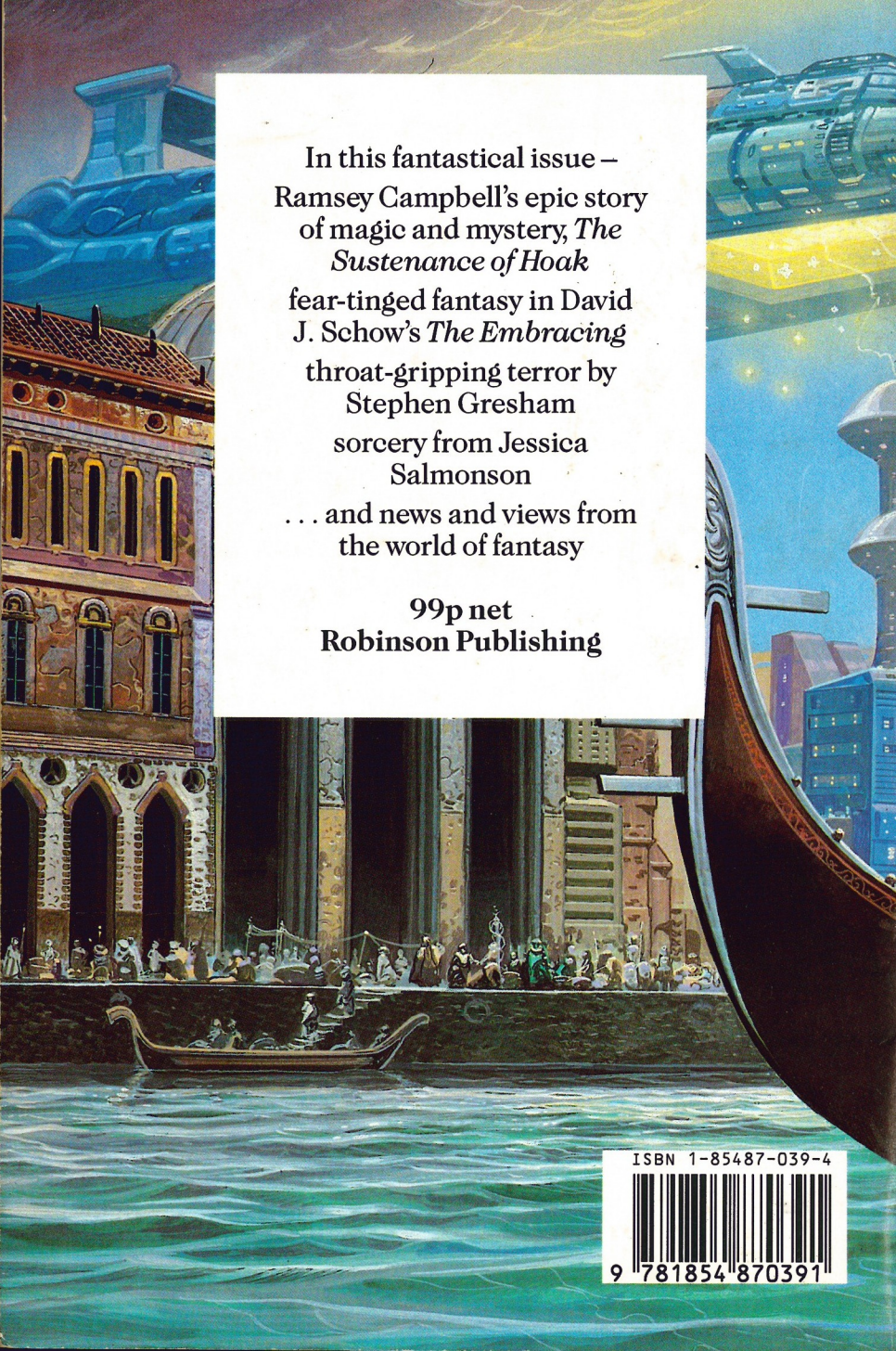
Angus McKie was born in July 1951 in Newcastle upon Tyne, where he still lives. At school his favourite subjects were Art and Physics and he admits that "a career as a science fiction illustrator was probably inescapable. The bizzare imaginings of science still fascinates me more than the imaginings of fantasists."

Angus missed out on the 1960s ("all the fun was had by everyone else") and in 1969 he attended Newcastle College of Art to study Graphic Design. There he learned typography, photography and printing, as well as studying comic books. He left college in 1974 with a Diploma in Art and Design, and after working in a Tehran art studio for a month, he returned home on the Orient Express ("Not a single mysterious murder in six days journey").

In the mid-'70s an illustrator friend told him about the Young Artists agency: "I sent them my specs and they haven't been able to show me the door since." While hitching around the South of France he discovered a copy of the now defunct French comic magazine *Metal Hurlant* in a street market in Aix-en-Provence. "I visited them in Paris, and after arriving home I sent them a colour comic strip done in a style influenced by Frank Hampson and Frank Bellamy. I've been involved in drawing comics since.

"I used to paint in Gouache, but after receiving a piece of artwork back with a big bootprint on it, I decided to change to acrylic. Now I also use oils. Sometimes I get very confused about the differences between oils, gouache and acrylic," confesses Angus, "but since this is basically the problem of drawing versus painting—and artists have been arguing about this for centuries—this is probably par for the course."

He admits that he finds drawing difficult—both fulfilling and frustrating at the same time—and only feels he has succeeded with an illustration if he can look at it and feel that somebody else created it. However we are sure that his fans will agree that only Angus McKie could have created the science fiction landscape that graces the cover of this issue of *Fantasy Tales*.



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